

## Stand Up and Deliver



**M**y wife doesn't know I'm here," a stranger admitted to me: "It's like a fetish." We weren't embarking upon an affair, mind you: we had both signed up for a weekend crash course in stand-up.

People take up comedy for many reasons. Me, because work had fallen off a cliff for us journalists and media types: after so many rejected job applications in a broken hiring system, I thought I might have some good material. I already had the same surname as one of the most successful US comedians, although with Kimmel's suspension it seemed Jimmys were on shaky territory. Would I be the last Fallon standing, thanks to a felon?

My new friend had just spent four years on a pediatric cancer ward with his young son. They're doing better now, fortunately, but the emotional rollercoaster encouraged him to conquer his fear of public speaking. It's a similar story in Bradley Cooper's new film *Is This Thing On?* – in which Will Arnett's protagonist Alex stumbles into a New York comedy club and finds surprising catharsis in his first open mic.

Comedy often comes from darkness – in Alex's case, a mid-life crisis and separation from his wife Tess (Laura Dern). His stand-up veers into public therapy, and at one point he breaks down on stage. The movie is based on the life story of English comedian John Bishop, who recalls being told early in his career: "the bit where you started talking about divorce and started crying? Don't do that next week." One wonders whether working out life issues on stage always has great comedic value: is it fair on the audience, or good for the comedian?

If the movie's main character were a woman we might also see a completely different story. I've performed across the UK and Hong Kong, and am often the only female on the roster. After travelling for hours to make

it to one gig in the middle of nowhere, I was stood up by the organisers – and told not to walk past the guy performing on my way out, as he didn't like anyone blocking his line of sight. As I was leaving, he launched into an original song titled 'Big Titted Woman'. *And you're worried about me blocking you?* The venue was lit by candles because there was no electricity, so no one could see that well, anyway. Someone did give me a free drink (often a comic's only pay) and kindly drove me to the station (don't say comedy doesn't take you places).

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Unfortunately, for a film about stand-up, *Is This Thing On?* isn't laugh-out-loud. The screenplay might have benefitted from more input from Bishop himself, who is in fact funny. For me, where the film succeeds is in conveying the excitement of finding a pursuit that challenges but fulfills you. "It's amazing and terrifying and I love every aspect of it," Alex tells his friend Balls (Cooper). Although he bombs out at times, there's always another gig around the corner, which is also how I look at comedy now.

The film also serves a purpose when we're questioning whether comedy matters. Jonas Skogstroll is an ex-Jehovah's Witness and a new comic friend, who insisted to me the other day that "eventually everything will be taken down by satire". Melbourne-based comedian Justine Sless, who teaches comedy to people at risk of homelessness, told me that humour is one of the most democratic art forms: "social prescribing", as she calls it. *Is This Thing On?* reminds us that humour has some value. At a time when comedians around the world are under attack, perhaps we needed this. ■

*Is This Thing On?* is in cinemas now.

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