

Charlie Demers always goes for a laugh, even in the classroom

Posted by Anna Lazowski, SCENE Producer | Monday April 8, 2013

CBC Radio has called him "one of the smartest comics out there". Which explains why, in addition to doing stand up comedy, Charlie Demers also teaches classes at two Vancouver universities and writes books.

He's in town for the Winnipeg Comedy Festival so *SCENE* took the opportunity to find out more about this favourite guest of *The Debaters*.

What's one topic you'd love to debate on *The Debaters*?

I'm not sure -- the honest, kind of sucky answer is that Richard Side, the producer of the Debaters, has given me the chance to do many dream debates: Karl Marx versus Tommy Douglas, wine versus beer, West Coast versus East Coast.

Okay, here's one I'd like to do: Whereas it is a naturally-evolved trait that can spur hard work and creativity, be it resolved that anxiety is a good thing. And then I'd argue against that.

You're a novelist and a comic, how much research do you do before you take on a topic for *The Debaters*?

It all depends on the topic. I don't think you want to go too crazy deep, though, unless you can think of a funny way to share that information with the audience. Like, if you're debating the big bang versus creation, and you tell a joke that requires an advanced knowledge of string theory in order to be found funny, you're probably in trouble.

You're also on the faculty in the SFU Continuing Education department, what do you teach and how does your comedy background inform your teaching style?

I teach creative writing at both Simon Fraser University as well as at the University of British Columbia -- at SFU, I work with students who are writing non-fiction, and at UBC, I teach a course on writing for new media.

In terms of how being a comic has affected my teaching -- I'd like to think it's given me a special insight into language, rhythm, storytelling, and knowing one's audience; but the biggest way it's impacted my teaching is probably that, in front of any group, it's hard for me not to go for a laugh. So far, nobody's complained.

Writing jokes to tell to a live audience and writing a book for an individual reader must require different strategies. How do you approach each undertaking?

As a comic, the feedback loop is so quick that the audience really become collaborators on the joke -- in the early stages, their reactions to a bit have an almost geological pressure on the shape it ultimately takes.

When you're writing a book, it's just you. The process of writing stand up comedy is more immediate and energetic; the process of writing a piece of prose is a bit more meditative, reflective and focused. The ideal would seem, to me, to be to let the two approaches cross-pollinate where appropriate, and try to get the best of both worlds.

Where do you physically like to write?

In my head, while I walk around. Then, inevitably, I have to hunch over my computer like a gargoyle, and that's usually at my dining room table.

If you could recommend one other comic to see at the festival, who would it be?

Oh, that's a really mean question. Honestly, there are so many of my favourite people at this festival that I couldn't give you just one. I can say this: though I love their work, I've never seen either Kenny Robinson or Pat Thornton perform live, and I'm really excited that I get to.