

Local comedian Charles Demers stars in hit web series

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Comedian [Charles Demers](#) has long been a mainstay of the Vancouver live comedy scene, but he's recently moved into entertaining audiences online with a new web series, [Will Power](#).

The show stars Demers and fellow comedian [Sean Cullen](#) as a pair of quirky brothers whose father has died. The entire series is set in the office of their father's lawyer, played by [Ryan Beil](#), who is explaining the details of the will to them, which triggers all sorts of strange memories and repressed feelings. It's a black comedy of the best kind, written by Demers, who also manages to bring a surprisingly physical kind of comedy to a character that rarely gets out of his chair.

The series is five episodes long, with each episode running three or four minutes, but Demers and co-stars Sean Cullen and Beil pack more laughs in per minute than most network, big-budget sitcoms. It's all the more impressive considering that Will Power is free to watch and was made for only a few thousand dollars, most of which was raised in a comedy show and spent on flying Cullen out to Vancouver to take part in the series.

Will Power isn't just a labour of love — it also reflects a kind of creative indie sensibility that seems inherent to the comedy scene, especially in Vancouver. Demers was kind enough to take time out of his stressful day dealing with a flooded home and a baby with chicken pox to answer a few email questions. We talked about the Vancouver scene, working with Cullen on the show and whether or not there might be a sequel.

PD: How did the Will Power web series come about?

CD: For a long time, when I would see him at shows or festivals or what have you, Sean Cullen would say to me that we should do something where we play brothers. Of course when one of your comedy heroes says that to you, you keep it front of mind. I also teach [writing for new media in the creative writing program at UBC](#), and so I've been very excited in recent years about web series, and am always looking for chances to put stuff up online. Last year, Sean Devlin, from [ShitHarperDid.com](#), was giving a guest lecture to my class, and at one point touched on the voyeuristic quality of a lot of what we see online. And that was sort of the last piece, for me — Sean and I would be brothers, and what could be more voyeuristic than watching us grieve, or fail to grieve, as we went through our late father's will?

I talked to Ryan Beil, who is one of my favourite and most frequent collaborators on stuff, and he was into making it. So was Sean. I started writing the scripts and we arranged a weekend to fly him out to start filming. It was last Thanksgiving weekend that we did it — so my aunts, uncles and cousins were also treated to a slightly starstruck Thanksgiving dinner with Sean Cullen.

When I was writing the scripts, it was at a low point in my own father's — and I should point out that my wonderful real life dad is nothing like the crypto-fascist father in the web series, played by [Bob Robertson](#) — fight with lymphoma. It was at a really dark time, and I have to say there was a lot of catharsis in writing something as dark as this, so explicitly about death. Happily, my dad has been responding very well to his treatments and is doing a lot better now, too.

[Will Minsky](#) was our incredible director of photography, and he did an absolutely terrific job, as did our editor [Peter Hadfield](#). These guys did yeoman's work for a totally symbolic amount of money because they were into the project. And our friends in [Mounties](#), Canada's latest and most kick-ass supergroup, gave us a wonderful theme song because they're friends, not to mention giant comedy fans.

Ryan and I co-produced the whole thing, with me doing the writing, the two of us sort of co-directing, and him supervising all the editing, post-photography stuff.

PD: Are there plans for any more episodes? I'd love to see the funeral episodes....

CD: I'd love to make some more. Part of the thinking behind the scripts was to write something that could stand alone and just exist as its own little thing, but with characters we could also revisit if we wanted to. I think there's potential for us to see the brothers interacting with other family members — and your funeral idea is totally amazing! Right now, I think we're waiting to see what the reaction is to what we've made, if people want to see more. I would be over the moon to do the whole process over again. We had a ball making these.

PD: What was it like working with Sean and Ryan?

CD: I used to listen to Sean's Corky and the Juice Pigs albums religiously when I was in high school, so when I first started getting to work with and hang out with him, it was pretty wonderfully surreal. Our first time working together was on an episode of *The Debaters*, during the season that it filmed for TV. We were doing the special CBC 75th anniversary show, so we got to dress up in tuxedos together and debate David Suzuki versus Don Cherry. Will Power was a lot more involved, of course, which was great. I love working with Sean — in addition to be a mensch, he is one of the country's great talents. And Ryan Beil, who is one of the best actors, comedic or dramatic, that you will ever meet, is also one of my very favourite people. And we had a ton of fun working with Double Exposure's Bob Robertson on his guest star role as our dad.

PD: How did you raise money for the series?

CD: I was actually really proud of how we raised the money, because it was fun and felt very old-fashioned: we put on a show. We flew Sean in on Friday afternoon, and then Friday night we did a live show, with the proceeds from the door going to the production. A whole bunch of our favourite Vancouver comics donated their performances — it was one of the best live shows I've ever been a part of. In addition to the door, we had envelopes on the tables that people could fill with more donations and write their names across the front of if they wanted to be mentioned in the credits. If I remember correctly, it was ten bucks for first name only, fifteen for first and last, and for twenty we'd call you Dr. So if you watch the credits, you will see that we have many doctors who donated. I'm all for Kickstarter and Indiegogo too, of course — especially for projects like this, that the audience gets to watch for free. But I also think that various levels of government should be increasing support for stuff like this. In ten years, in some way every show will be a “web series,” even if they're an hour long. We should be developing the talent pool in front of and behind the camera now. We were able, though, to raise what we needed for this project pretty easily — our budget for all five episodes, close to twenty minutes of screen time, was about \$2,000. The single biggest line-item by far was Sean's ticket out to Vancouver.

PD: Are you making any money off the show in any way?

CD: It's funny — on YouTube, there's a box you can click, an option to “monetize.” It makes it sound so easy! Of course it's just the option that runs commercials before your videos. Maybe that's something we'd look at down the road, but for this particular project we sort of approached it as just something we wanted to do, creatively, and just didn't want to lose any money on. Ryan, Sean, Bob, and I are all actor's union members, and we made *Will Power* under the Ultra-Low Budget language of the Union of B.C. Performers (UBCP), which is actually an ingenious and really progressive bit of contract language in this new DIY, digital age. For years, stage actors have been allowed to form “Equity Co-Ops,” where they can come together as performers and put on a show where they don't have to pay themselves nearly as much as if they were hired by someone else to do it. And that's essentially what the UBCP has created provisions for on-screen performers to do together. So Ryan and I started *Robin's Egg Comedy* as the “producer” of this web series, and ideally I'd like for it to function as a co-op for future stuff. Don't get me wrong, we'd all love to be making money on this sort of thing. I'm in a pretty good place with it, because of teaching at UBC — I mean I think that's the ideal way for teaching to work: as a place that keeps you plugged in, creatively, and thinking about stuff and getting the juices flowing, and of providing you a paycheck while you do your creative work. But of course, not everyone has a teaching job, so that's not exactly a solution going

forward...

PD: Tell us a little about the comedy scene in Vancouver? What's it like? Is a video series like this something new or are there other people doing it? There seems to be a real indie vibe with other comedians, even stars like [Louis CK](#) and [Aziz Ansari](#). Even [Seinfeld's new coffee comedy show](#) is kind of breaking ground in that he's delivering content in a new way, with a new model of distribution and financial support. Is that something inherent to the comedy scene?

CD: Vancouver, which is in some ways so far from the centres of industry decision-making, has always had that outskirts-of-the-empire sense of freedom and experimentation. [Jason Bryden](#), when he was here, was doing web series like [The Staff Room](#) before almost anybody else that I can think of. There's a real I've-got-a-barn-let's-put-on-a-show-before-the-barn-turns-into-condos ethos out here that I really love. As for the second part of your question, I think the answer is multi-faceted. What it comes down to is a major technological shift, which is necessarily going to bring along cultural and aesthetic changes with it. So on the one hand, and to a certain extent it's almost become cliché to comedians at every level are realizing the power of the internet as an unmediated, or less-mediated, means of reaching their audience. And they're figuring out that it's not just TV with email, it's its own thing, and will have storytelling methods native to it. So Seinfeld, in a recent interview, talked about the importance of the fact that a web series episode could be as long or as short as he wanted it to be. For anyone who knows how rigidly a medium like television is timed out, you realize what a massive change that is. Finally, you also have a certain "web" aesthetic creeping into conventional media — I would argue that "Louie," with its non-linearity and willingness to let certain vignettes be as long or as short as they need to be, is an example of that.

PD: What's next for you?

CD: Next week, workshops begin for the return of the East Van Panto at the York Theatre this Christmas, which I'm super excited about. This year, we're doing Cinderella. I'm also working on a script for a one-person show about politics with Newworldtheatre, which will be up next spring at the Shadbolt in Burnaby and that I'm very pleased to be taking to the Winnipeg Comedy Festival next year. I'm also working on a book of humour essays for Douglas & MacIntyre, which will be out in the fall of 2015.