

# The Catalyst

The newsletter of the Illinois State Bar Association's Standing Committee on Women and the Law

## Legal comedy: 101

BY JENNY R. JELTES

**This is not an article about how to improve your trial skills** by taking an improvisation theater class. It is also not an article about how to use icebreaker games for teambuilding in the workplace. Although these things are useful and fantastic, I want to talk about something else. In the legal profession, women deal with a lot of pushback and diluted sexism.

I am a family law practitioner. In other words, I deal with extreme stress and drama on an almost daily basis. This is the reality of being a divorce/family law attorney. I did not choose this profession; rather, it chose me. Do I like it? Absolutely. I genuinely love helping people move on with their lives and helping them get back to a place where they can find happiness again. The work is absolutely stressful. But at the same time, I am meant to do this kind of work. The reward is that I help people move on, I do it with compassion, and I genuinely feel good about it. The downside? Feeling drained and depleted. Cynicism. Burnout. I did not go to law school for those things! So how does one cope? Women lawyers deal with these concerns for their entire careers.

At the age of 35, I was lucky to find something that truly helped: Comedy. I'm not talking the "Let's sit down and watch Anchor Man" type of comedy, I'm saying the "Let's take a class, tell jokes, discover our voice, and embrace vulnerability." That is where there is power! I had no idea that

signing up for an improv class, and then standup classes, would help me in my profession of being a lawyer. The reality is that it has helped immensely. The other day, I was standing in the elevator on my way up to the office. With my coffee in hand and mind focused on my upcoming potential client consult, I was looking at my phone to see if I missed something on my to-do list. I had forgotten to push the button to my floor in the building in which I work. The assertive gentleman next to me took it upon himself to exclaim: "M'am, it seems you forgot where you are going!" This was not said in a respectful, friendly, or even flirty manner, by the way. It was said in a condescending, sort of: "I'm better than you and you are an idiot, kind of way." Come on. Us women know the difference.

The old me would have awkwardly giggled, said "Silly me," or even apologized. Now that I've been out a few years I have realized that women can be viewed as inferior, especially if they are shorter in height or younger in age. Wow, I WAS naive! (I do admit that.) I was naive in the sense that I thought I would be treated fairly and equally- especially when standing in an elevator. Comedy taught me something: Women need to change their approach. Some men, especially in this profession, expect us to apologize, awkwardly laugh, and realize our "silliness." You know what we need to do? Flip the script. That particular

moment in the elevator was memorable for me. In response to this gentleman, I simply said: "Wow, I've been so busy lately! This is what happens when you are such an awesome lawyer!" Was that an exaggeration? Probably not! Did it do the trick? Yes! It put his sour attitude in place, made me feel amazing to start my day, and it made the rest of the elevator ride much more tolerable. When I exited to my floor, he simply said: "Have a nice day." You know what? I had a fantastic day. His day was probably not as swell. What a bitter man. Maybe he'll be calling me for a consultation soon.

If I had not taken improvisation or comedy classes, I am not sure I would have handled this elevator situation the same way. In 2014/2015, I completed 15 months of improvisation classes through iO theater in Chicago, Illinois. The tenet of improv is "Yes, and!" (Example: "Wow, you were kind of ditzzy in forgetting to push the elevator button." Response: "Yes! And it gives me more time to think about how I'll get this next big client!") How does one go down from there? They do not, In February 2016, I decided to veer from improv and REALLY find my voice: standup.

Standup is terrifying. But so is being a lawyer. If I've already done one, why not try the other? Stand up is like nothing I ever experienced. To be funny, one must be vulnerable. To be vulnerable, this means to share one's weaknesses, doubts, and

insecurities. This is the antithesis of being a lawyer. Lawyers are strong. They know everything. They succeed. To do standup, you risk losing everyone and everything. It's possible you will go on stage and no one will laugh. You may put all of your work out there and you may receive nothing in return. You may fail. This is scary! However, by putting oneself out there, one grows. One learns to handle disappointments and respond to a less than ideal situation. Stand-up puts these skills front and center.

It is scary for a reason.

No one likes rejection. For example, what if I diligently prepare all of my jokes and no one laughs? I will walk off stage and move on, I guess. And do better next time? In the law, we are too hard on ourselves. We do our best, but still beat ourselves up. What if that's not who we are? What if it means we need to simply tweak some things and do better next time? What if next time everyone laughs and I feel amazing? What if next time I win for my

client? If anything, putting oneself on stage helps one realize that one's humanity. We may fail. But we may also make the entire crowd respond. And that is what keeps me doing comedy. ■

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If anyone is interested, Feminine Comique is a standup comedy class for women, taught by Chicago's Kelsie Huff. Information can be found at: [www.femininecomique.com](http://www.femininecomique.com).

**THIS ARTICLE ORIGINALLY APPEARED IN  
THE ILLINOIS STATE BAR ASSOCIATION'S  
THE CATALYST NEWSLETTER, VOL. 22 #2, OCTOBER 2016.  
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