

COMMENTARY

IU prof's documentary explores the world of road warrior comics

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Frequenting comedy clubs and pulling the comics aside to chat does not sound like work — or scholarship — to some people.

But for a student of communications and culture, stand-up comedy, and the road warriors who work the circuits, offer an outstanding perspective of both communication and culture.

“Humor is one of the ways we manage to talk about things that sometimes we can’t talk about otherwise,” says Susan Seizer. “The things we find most uncomfortable today are the things we hear about on the comedy stage. And that’s such a good cultural gauge.”

Seizer is an associate professor of communications and culture at Indiana University. Her first documentary film, “Big Work on Small Stages,” premieres in a free screening at 6:30 p.m. tonight at the IU Cinema.

One would hope that a film on comics would be fun and it is. Seizer

chose three veteran comics, followed them to various locations and filmed them on stage, in their cars and over drinks or coffee. For a film that comes in just under an hour, it takes you places, including the insides of the performers' heads.

Longtime local comedy MC Brad Wilhelm said the IU professor made wise choices. Kristin Key, Tim Northern and Stewart Huff are all good ones, he said, and Huff "might be a genius."

"That's one of the great things about anthropology as a discipline," Seizer said. "You can choose what you like to study, and who doesn't like humor?" she asked.

Seizer doesn't really care for overtly juvenile humor, potty jokes and the low-brow stuff. "I picked three people I like," she said.

All three performers offer the kind of observational humor and storytelling that fit Seizer's desire to illustrate how comedy communicates with its audience. "Taboo subjects are often first broached on the comedy stage," she said. "In 1963, the topics were things like Irish ethnicity and divorce, things that were edgy then, but now we say, huh?"

"Same-sex marriage will be that same sort of thing in another 50 years. We'll look back on the beginning of the 21st century and say, really? People were making jokes about same-sex marriage and transsexuality?" Seizer asked.

It all depends on the culture, of course. A decade ago, the IU professor studied an Indian form of entertainment called "special drama" that included elements of the humor and cultural observations she sees in American stand-up. "Domestic violence is treated very differently on the Tamil stage, and it's still considered a way to make things work out well

in a household or family. It was shocking for me as a viewer. They're laughing at domestic violence? We don't do that here. We don't think it's funny at all."

The experience did reinforce the concept that humor is a lens through which one can view a society.

Outside of the jokes and stories, "Big Work on Small Stages" does include some unexpected and endearing humor. Underscoring just how tough life on the road is, Huff talks about his own neat trick to shower on the road when you're too broke to rent a room and you have to sleep in your car. Spoiler alert — he waits from a distance at small motels in the morning, watches for the cleaning personnel to open up the rooms for sheet-changing and other cleanup, and then sneaks in for a quick, in-and-out bathing.

Every now and then he gets caught, berated or even beaten with a broom.

"It's a hard life, really hard, being on the road 45 weeks a year," Seizer said. "You wonder how they can do it and why they do it, but it really becomes their way of self-expression and their art. And they're so passionate about it, they make these sacrifices."

Comedy audiences might not realize these things when the comic is on stage, killing it, as they say in the business. But after seeing Seizer's film, they may well have a better understanding and a lot more respect for the folks who do "Big Work on Small Stages."



Comic Stewart Huff is shown in action in a scene from the film “Big Work on Small Stages: Road Comics in America.” Courtesy photo



Comedian Tim Northern and filmmaker Susan Seizer share a laugh from a booth at Bear’s Place. Courtesy photo

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