

FAST COMPANY

The first feminist comedy club is ready to bring the funny

L.A.'s The Ruby was founded on the ideals of intersectional feminism. It joins the movement to upend an industry still dominated by men.

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On Los Angeles's Sunset Boulevard, a street bursting with comedy clubs and live acts, lies a small theater devoted to a new kind of entertainment: inclusive comedy. The Ruby is a self-described comedy theater and school "openly founded on the ideals of intersectional feminism."

On a late Friday night in May, a showcase at The Ruby features a medley of women putting a humorous spin on difficult topics ranging from a parent's death to childhood racism to tokenism in Hollywood. After each set, presenters are handed a bat and given free will to bash a number of archaic '80s electronics. It's meant to be cathartic.

Soon, it's time for a thirtysomething Asian-American comedian to take the stage. (For privacy reasons, the theater requested that we not use the comics' names.) "I am what you call fat," she says, before launching into her stand-up origin story.

At an open mic night some years prior, she went on right after a male comedian whose set dripped with sexism. The man told one "joke" that went, "If a girl says no, it means yes, and if she says hell no, that means I'm gonna follow her to her car." The audience ate it up.

Already nervous, the young woman was now alarmed. She got on stage and started her act. She poked fun at her size, insinuating that she eats too much or confuses eating a rabbit dish with consuming an entire rabbit. A few chuckles and snickers were thrown her way.

Following her set, the male comedian who made the rape joke came up to her. "You really shouldn't do jokes about your weight," he said. "It makes the audience uncomfortable."

She responded the way society expects women to: with a polite nod and a meek thanks. The experience was so humiliating that she was sure she was done. Tonight, at the Ruby, she tells the audience, "That was the last stand-up comedy set I tried [for years]."

From there, she walks over to the corner of the small black stage, picks up goggles and a bat, and eviscerates a VHS tape. Beyoncé's "I'm Feeling Myself" blares over the speakers as pieces of plastic zip across the room. The crowd erupts into cheers.

“We couldn’t have done this five years ago”

Comedian Jen Curran performed and taught sketch comedy for over 15 years, having previously served as the managing director of the Peoples Improv Theater in New York. She’s no stranger to a scene dominated by men. A recent report by Bitch Media found that female comics represented just 20% of the lineup at New York City’s iconic club Caroline’s, and only 8% of headliners were women.

Jesse Suphan, creator of Impride, a LGBTQ Pride Comedy Festival in its second year, says openly gay, queer, and trans comics are “vastly underrepresented,” accounting for less than 10% of onstage acts.

This trend plays out on the national stage as well: Of 2017’s top 10 highest-earning stand-up comedians, only one was a woman: Amy Schumer. She is also the first female comic to make the *Forbes* top paid comedians list.



The Ruby cofounders (from left) Randy Thompson, Jen Curran, and Lindsey Barrow onstage. [Photo: courtesy of Nicolle Villela]

In April of this year, Curran, along with fellow comedians Lindsey Barrow and Randy Thompson, opened The Ruby, named after the precious stone known for its beauty, value, and strength. “It’s something that can cut you,” Curran says. The founders envisioned an Upright Citizens Brigade, but built on the ideals of intersectional feminism, which takes into consideration the multiple facets of women’s identity, including race, class, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. Curran, Barrow, and Thompson wanted a theater and school for people who were fed up with the standard comedy model, “which tends to, perhaps just by default, cater to a straight white guy who probably has a little extra money in his pocket,” says Curran.

The founders used the tenets of *The Feminist Organization’s Handbook* for The Ruby’s hiring process, teaching methods, and programming. Curran says it accentuates the need to be communicative, transparent, safe, tolerant, and open-minded about all groups and genders. “Our goal is to lift up and support and carry and represent underrepresented voices in comedy,” Curran says.

More than 50% of The Ruby’s teachers are women or minorities, and in-house performers are evenly split between men and women. (When Curran performed elsewhere, she says it was closer to 20% women.) Roughly 80% of The Ruby’s visiting groups of performers are led by women, LGBTQ, or persons of color.

There’s also transparency into which board members approve house teams — crucial in a medium as subjective as comedy. “If you don’t have representation across the board at these places, you’re probably only having your staff and your leadership and the people who are the gatekeepers respond to a certain type of comedy,” says Curran. “A woman of color might have a very different sense of humor than a white guy.”

There is zero tolerance for bullying and sexual harassment at The Ruby. Anti-harassment policy guidelines hang all over the theater. Curran notes that female performers and writers are drawn to the club because they haven’t felt safe in traditional theaters where, they say, sexual assault accusations are swept under the rug. “I would say in the last few years there’s really been a groundswell of women not willing to put up with it anymore,” Curran says. The explosion of the #MeToo movement made the need for female-centered spaces all the more urgent.

As for the comedy, The Ruby doesn't focus exclusively on feminist or progressive topics, though it often swings that way. A show called *Headscarves and Durags*, for example, is described as a "one-hour comedy show featuring 'woke' comedians with an emphasis on legitimate diversity." But there's also a show about "all of the things people ignore in pop culture classics." The only way the theater influences content is by ensuring that jokes punch up, not down.

"You want to make jokes about people who may oppress us," Curran says. "We don't want to make jokes about people that we are in a system to oppress."

Curran doesn't find all traditional stand-up clubs to be anti-feminist; in fact, she applauds recent efforts to add more female-focused showcases and inclusion initiatives. UCB hosts more than a dozen shows featuring underrepresented groups, as well as Improv Jams specifically open to women, LGBTQ, and diverse backgrounds. But prior to The Ruby's founding, no one theater was devoted to these ideals.

"Something we kept hearing over and over from women in the comedy scene is, 'Wouldn't it be great if we had a space, a community, an idea that we could get behind, that was for us?'" Curran says. "I think that is something we probably could not have even done five years ago. I don't think it would have been welcome."

No boys allowed (jk)

Women in comedy have long felt the need for female-centric spaces. Last year, comedic writer Erika Abdelatif founded *Late Night with Jimmy Fallopian Tubes*, a late night-style show written and performed entirely by a diverse group of women at UCB in L.A. Like its namesake, the ongoing series features a monologue and pokes fun at current events from a female perspective.

Abdelatif started the mock program after realizing that late-night TV was still essentially a boys' club. Women have made progress in late-night—with Samantha Bee and soon Busy Phillips joining the ranks—but they still make up less than 20% of writers' rooms on these programs.

"Women needed a place that was accessible for them to go and learn, where they could grow in their practice," Abdelatif says. "Every single month I

have women come up to me and say, ‘Thank you—I never thought that I would have this opportunity.’ I can relate to that.”

Comedian Emily Heller took the idea one step further by jokingly requesting that men refrain from purchasing tickets to her taped comedy special in Seattle. Heller, who also serves as a writer on the HBO series *Barry*, has performed stand-up for 10 years, with appearances on *Conan* as well as a Comedy Central Half Hour.

“NO MEN ALLOWED!” Heller tweeted last month, adding “This policy will not be enforced, but I’d love to get as much publicity as Wonder Woman for this.” She tells *Fast Company* that the tweet was not meant literally, but rather as “just sort of a joke about how difficult it is to create women-only spaces when it’s technically illegal.” (Last year, comedian Iliza Shlesinger was sued for discrimination after a man was turned away from her “Girls Night In” show at the Largo in Los Angeles.)

“There are jokes in my act that women like more than men, and I want my comedy to do as well as possible when I’m recording it,” Heller says.

“There’s a joke in my act about wanting to take my bra off as soon as I get home. There’s just there’s no way men are going to understand that joke the way women do.”

Heller recalls the instrumental women-only open mic nights she attended in San Francisco, whose camaraderie and communal support encouraged individuals to rally for representation. “Women have had to build these spaces for ourselves,” she says. “I think that that is true of any other group that’s seen as not the norm in stand-up comedy.”

Tokenism, bye

Supporting inclusivity is more than just hosting a one-off women’s showcase or adding a person of color to a line-up. Abdelatif says she’s witnessed numerous writers’ rooms hire one woman or person of color to satisfy management. “But is that really sufficient?” she asks.

Tess Paras is an Asian-American actress and comedian who now teaches regularly at The Ruby. She’s appeared on popular TV shows such as *Grimm*, *Crazy-Ex Girlfriend*, and *Take My Wife*, and she’s experienced tokenism, even now as the industry claims it wants to be more minority-friendly. “We’re in a messy place,” she says.

It's not enough to cast underrepresented groups here and there, Paras says. They need to be in leadership roles: in the writers' room and in the director's chair. She points to the quote by activist and scholar Dr. Su'ad Abdul Khabeer: "You don't give a voice to the voiceless—just pass the mic."

"If we want better shows, better content, better stories, it's got to come from the folks who haven't had the opportunity to share their experiences," Paras says.

Heller also takes issue with the overwhelming amount of press coverage female comedians receive regarding their gender status. "It seems like the only thing people want to write about us sometimes," she says.

She wishes the focus would stick to what these comedians are doing: working on being funny. It's what male comics get, no questions asked. "We don't want the shit we're up against to define what we do," Heller says. At the same time, she says, in a follow-up email, "If the only media requests I get are to talk about this stuff, you can bet I'm gonna use it to talk about my special."

Financial barriers and accessibility are also overlooked. Women in Comedy, a Chicago-based volunteer organization and accelerator, offers free or low-cost events and resources for women seeking paid careers in comedy. It's a donation-based network of six chapters across the U.S. that partners with established theaters like Second City, coworking spaces, and local community shows. It currently has 1,000 registered members.

"Paying \$400 to take a comedy class can be a financial barrier for a lot of women," says Women in Comedy founder Victoria Elena Nones. "We're breaking down those barriers so they can connect to each other without feeling like they have to pay to take a class to do that."

Despite the growing pains in this industry, Paras is optimistic about what Hollywood might look like in the next few years. She points to a recent casting call in which the sign-in sheet asked actors to write their preferred gender pronoun. "I feel like the fact that people are being more vocal about trying is imperative and inspiring," she says.

The Ruby, for its part, is in growth mode. The theater launched a podcast network and is contemplating opening a location in New York. At the school, most classes are full, with women making up 70% of students.

The cofounders envision spreading The Ruby format to more cities across America—not just with a physical concept, but through partnerships and collaborations. It’s about “comedy using tolerance, open-mindedness, and representations to build itself,” Curran says. “The Ruby is helping forge that trend ahead, and potentially, inspire fellow industry leaders and comedians.

“It’s encouraging women and underrepresented people to create comedy that they find funny. We want to inspire you to say, ‘I am funny, I’m enough—my voice is good enough.’”



The Ruby is a feminist and inclusive comedy theater and school located at 7518 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90046. Contact: Jen Curran jen@TheRubyLA.com

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