

# It All Comes Down to the Gravy

When Comedy Needs a Pitcher

By Denis Grignon

Illustrations by Frederic Serre

I'm not quite sure why I became a standup comic. Though I'm guessing my high school truancy officer in Cornwall, Ontario, might have an answer to that. So, too, would my English teacher,

Peter Cazaly. I may have always had a love of language and the desire to spin it in a humorous fashion, but they were usually goaded into action by my innate desire to goof off. The stuff of standup comics, that.

In my early days as a "grownup," I moved to Ottawa and soon found myself stealing stage time at every amateur night and charity fundraiser I could find. Though gruelling and often demoralizing, those years paved the way to a quasi full-time comedy career. I have played too many roadhouses with an apostrophe in their name—O'Tooles, O'Gradys, O'Mallys—plus a few network TV appearances and lots of comic work with CBC Radio, including *Madly Off in All Directions*. (Yes, I DO have a face for that medium).

But even during those early years of honing my craft in urban centres, I knew I was always better suited to the rural crowd and its sensibilities. Hip I am not. Or maybe it's my wardrobe (or lack thereof). It only seemed fitting, then, that small-town church basements and arena banquet halls would become my comedy venues of choice.

And now, after 22 years of performing standup comedy to rural audiences from fair boards to pork producers to curlers, I'm sometimes asked to account for my success as a country comedian.

The secret? It all comes down to the gravy.

But seriously, folks.

Even I expected something a bit more learned. But I can't tell you for certain what makes for a successful show. And I've graced literally hundreds of stages of from Drayton, Ont., to Duncan, B.C.

Actually, scratch that.

Good luck finding any stage in these venues. Even the portable kinds are too heavy to haul up from the Zamboni room. And Kenny, the arena guy, has a wonky back. Screwed it up when he drove truck for the township.

"Ya could stand on a couple tables," he'll offer. "But we'll have to duct tape 'em together . . . for insurance purposes."

Duct tape, I've learned, is a verb in rural Canada.

Thankfully, I'm tall. It means finding appropriate accommodations in these small towns are tough—B&Bs usually feature beds so short my legs hang over at the knees—but at least people in the back row at the gig (the one closest to the kitchen and the silent-auction table) can comfortably see my mug above a sea of sensibly dressed women and men in ironed plaid shirts.

Lighting isn't an issue, either. I've bombed under the fancy spots the Moose Lodge purchased after getting that grant from the province (or was it the led's?).

And I've earned ovations in halls so dim a flashlight on the end of a pitchfork would have been a blessing.

No, my comedic success at these gigs comes down to the gravy.

You see, I'm almost always a bit player in these events—a cushion, of sorts, between the meeting and the meal. A buffet buffer, if you will. Something to do before the night's emcee reads the minutes, hands out the door prizes, and a fresh set of presidents and directors is elected—or, as is often the case, playfully ambushed and appointed "C'mon, Myrtle! It's your turn this year!"

The real headliner is the half-dozen banquet tables, each loaded with the requisite roast beef and/or pork, corn, diced carrots and mashed potatoes. And gravy.



Ah yes, the gravy.

If it's served in a tiny gravy boat, I'm in big trouble. "Should I even bother rehearsing while everyone's finishing up with Jell-O and pie and coffee?" I'll wonder. An omen of comic hell, that tiny and oddly pretentious dispenser is.

But if the gravy is in a pitcher—a wonderfully enormous pitcher—those cosmic/comic stars will align. Yes, that Jug o' Gravy means even the 88-year-old great-grandmother will laugh so hard, she'll spill her gravy—once she adjusts her hearing aid, that is.

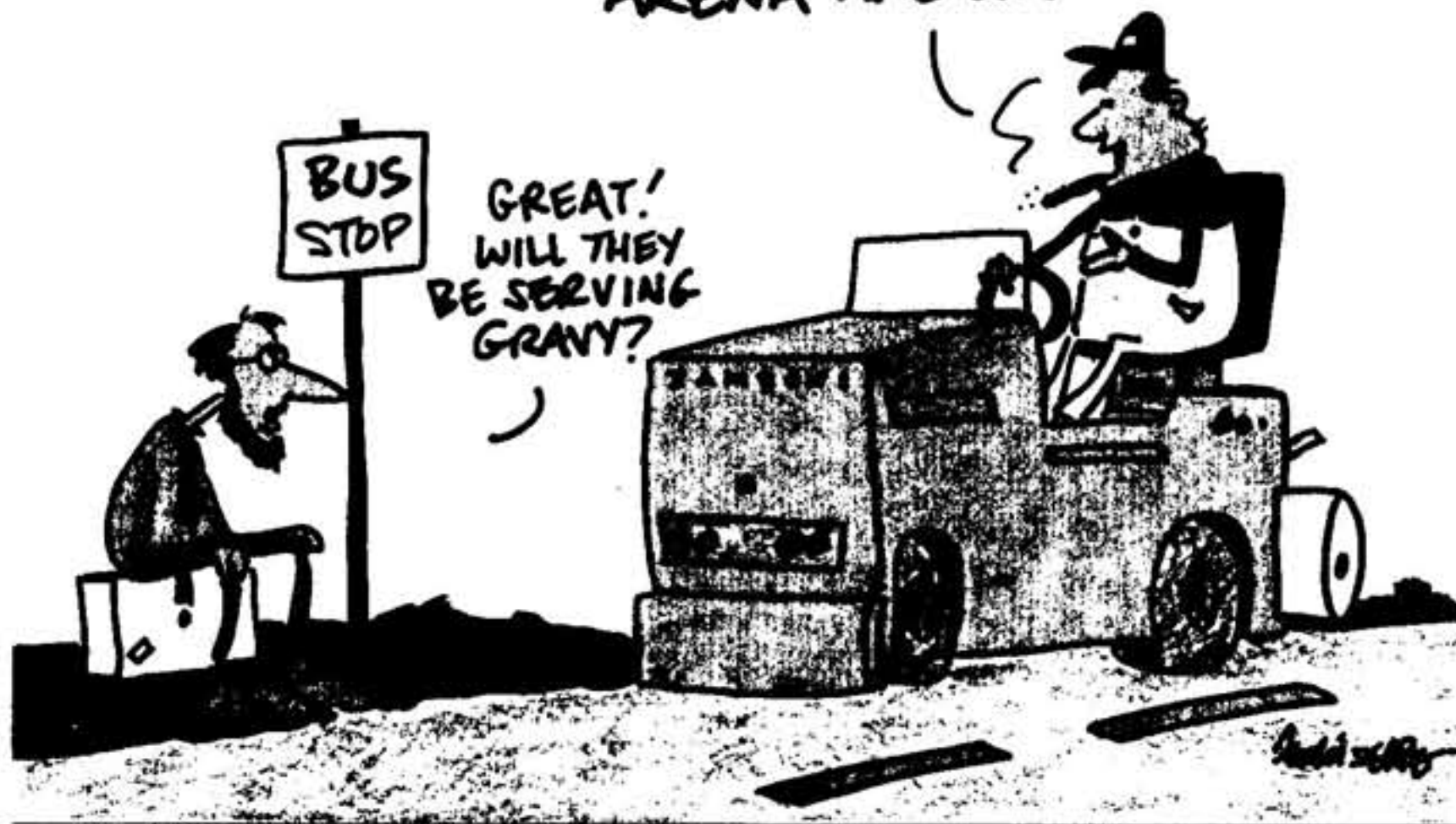
But, alas, then there's the Crock-Pot full of gravy. The caveat of comedy. The swing vote of slapstick. That symbol so gelatinously messy that only the tips of

your fingers can grasp the dry part of its clunky ladle. There's a metaphor there, I'm certain; because a Crock-Pot can be a harbinger of comedy doom, or a beacon of standup triumph. Three parts beef stock, one part flour; seven parts fickleness.

It was, in fact, a Crock-Pot that ruined my act at that men's farm dinner near Stratford, Ontario, recently. "If I had to put down an animal," I started, confident that I'd struck a common chord with my brethren, "I'd get my sister-in-law to bore the beast to death with her vacation slides." Brief silence, then a retort from the guy with the John Deere cap: "You're sure doing a good job of boring us."

Sigh.

HOP A BOARD,  
MR. COMEDIAN.  
THE FOLKS AT THE  
ARENA ARE WAITING.



Damn that Crock-Pot, I say. Damn that gravy.

But it is my only true comedy yardstick. And I do mean yardstick, since the metric system is often shunned 'round here.

It's certainly not that these folks are unworldly rubes who just can't appreciate my city-bred hilariousness. Indeed, the stages where I perform are often only a short drive to the metrosexuals and fashionistas of The City. (Yes, capital letters, here. The nearest urban centre is always referred to as The City.) But in terms of comedic sensibility, well, let's just say the two are worlds apart—for one, my rural audiences are infinitely more polite and down-to-earth than the urban ones I once appealed to. This takes some getting used to.

I now live in rural Ontario, on a lot severed from my wife's family farm. I even raise chickens and help with the summer haying, which provides fodder for my act. But truthfully, I still sometimes feel like the outsider at these country events. I guess it goes with the territory—how many other comedians out there specialize in hog humour? I'm a beast most people haven't seen (or heard) before.

And there are some unique challenges, too.

"Whatever," the Person-in-Charge will tell me, over the phone, as I do my best to explain the difference between a typical guest speaker and my métier. "Our guest speaker last year was some guy from the Ag ministry and he was horrible. Just be funnier than him, okay?"

It all depends, I'll tell her. "How are you serving the gravy?"



Denis Grignon is one of the country's most sought-after entertainers for awards nights, retreats and conventions. Clients range from the International Fabrics Association to the Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs. He's also one of the few comedians who can switch back and forth between English and French. Covering subjects as diverse as growing up in a bilingual home, life in a small town, federal politics and parenthood, Grignon's comedy is a hit with crowds who appreciate—and demand—clean, clever humour that appeals to those of us with a little life experience. Simply put, it's comedy that works above the neck, not below the belt. He has settled down in east-central Ontario, where he tends chickens and spends as much time as possible with his wife, Nancy, and their two young sons. For further information, you can reach Denis via his website at [www.denisgrignon.com](http://www.denisgrignon.com) or call him at 705-328-2622.