



Me versus the gong

Ellyn Daniels on the brutality of the new act challenge

A talent manager once asked me how stand-up was going and I told him that stand-up was very much like an abusive boyfriend: it beats me down until I threaten to leave, then suddenly shows up and creates a 'rose' moment, where I am given flowers, adulation, approval and a giant orgasm and I decide to stay. And like this, the cycle continues; an emotional rollercoaster in perpetuity. That was before I had done a gong show in the UK

When I heard about the gong show at the Comedy Store, I vowed never to do it. It was definitely not going to work for me. I don't have traditional set-up punch jokes, I tend to ramble and improvise and I would definitely not stand a chance against somebody firing off one liners about airplane food. Anyway, fuck The Comedy Store. I had a weekly gig booked for the month I'd be in London.

Then, I was sacked from that gig. The booker had offered to marry me prior to firing me, and I had refused his offer, possibly too aggressively. Also, I bombed the first night I performed at his club. I should've talked about airplane food, not about how men demanding you lick their assholes is the new form of male entitlement.

I was depressed after my firing, so I went on a Tinder date to distract myself from the bitter taste of failure and ended up in bed with a man jerking off next to me whilst looking into my eyes, whispering: 'This is so much better when you have a pretty girl to look at.'

Oddly, that Dahmer-esque experience soothed me none, so I resolved to get back on the proverbial horse. I had traveled across the world to be in London doing stand-up and I would have to find a way to do just that. When I had trouble getting gigs in London, I decided I'd reach out to clubs in Manchester, including the Comedy Store, where they told me I would have to do the gong show to get any stage time.

Fuck! OK, I have to do this thing. It sounds like it's going to be awful and demeaning and potentially crush me so it must be the next logical step after the humiliation of being fired and then ejaculated on. Move towards the pain, not away from it.

I board a train to Manchester. I love trains, I love England, so this part was good. I even started thinking I might do well on this show. Maybe I can interact with the crowd the entire time and they will love it. Whatever happens, I shouldn't be afraid. I should just embrace this opportunity and go out there and be open and connected and try to bring light and love to the stage. Terrible idea.

When I arrive in Manchester, it's freezing cold and raining, which I love because I live in Los Angeles, a purgatory of sunshine, smiles and temperate air. I think the dismal weather is a good omen, but soon I realise it's always cold and rainy in Manchester so it likely isn't an omen of any kind.

I go to The Comedy Store and wait for the show to start. I walk over to the stairs and sit down at a table and look up at a picture of Robin Williams hanging on the wall. I stare into his eyes and I start to cry as I am reminded of his humanity, his sadness, his talent. Then I think I'm going to perform on the same stage Robin Williams once performed on. How lucky am I?

This is turning into an incredible adventure; the very thing that dreams coming true are made of. And let us not forget, nightmares are also dreams.

I walk into the room and it's a packed house. I sit by another comic, a lovely young lad from Newcastle who is kind and full of life. The MC explains to us that he will give a card to three discerning people (I soon find out this elite group consists of incredibly drunk, bloodthirsty men waiting with bated breath to expedite the carnage in the

gladiatorial arena that this room at The Comedy Store in Manchester on a Sunday evening has become) and those people will raise their card when they feel you should be removed from the stage. When all three cards have been raised a gong will sound and you will exit the stage while one of Ludacris's most nuanced songs, Move Bitch, Get Out Da Way, is played.

I watch comic after comic go up and be gonged off almost immediately. Sometimes after only speaking one or two words. This is so unjust! I mean, my God, they aren't even being given a chance. Then a little voice pops into my head,

'Wake up, Ellyn! This is a metaphor for life, you idiot! There is no justice. You must become an animal if you want to succeed! It's survival of the fittest out here! Forget sensitivity, forget love, forget that childlike lightness in your soul you want to share with the world. You must quickly come up with one-liners about airplane food or you shall die!'

Then I hear his voice, and I look up. A Filipino comedian, a gay man, has just started his set. He is hilarious! His jokes are coming out at rapid-fire pace and they are killing. Everyone is laughing. This is the man who is going to pass the gong! I watch in amazement as he continues.

My wonderment is abruptly interrupted by the voice of a drunk Mancunian man shouting, 'Card! Card! Card!' This man doesn't have a card himself, so he's trying to get the cardholders to put their cards up. Then more card-less men join in the chant, 'Card! Card! Card!'

I feel a seething anger erupting out of my belly. This is a disgrace! They cannot be shouting this man off the stage! He is doing this perfectly. He is beating the gong. Suddenly I hear myself shouting, 'Fuck you! Fuck all of you! He's amazing!'

The young boy next to me is taken aback. Sadly, my shouts are lost in the void of drunken, aggressive masculinity and do nothing to stop the inevitable conclusion of three cards flying up in the air, the gong sounding and that abominable song playing as this incredibly talented man saunters offstage.

The MC calls my name. I walk up on stage as I pray to be connected to all that is beautiful within me and every single person in the room. I begin my set.

'My bar for men is so low right now, that if a man doesn't show me his asshole the first time we have sex, I think, "what a gentleman."'

The crowd laughs. I point to a senior woman in the front row who's laughing and ask her if she knows what I'm talking about. She says she does. Then I move into my bit about how men don't pay for dinner anymore, and things start to go south, quickly. Soon I hear a loud 'Booooooo!' and look into the drunken eyes of the man shouting it

and say: 'Why are you so angry sir? Is it because I haven't paid you enough attention?' He replies, 'yes' with a lost look in his eyes that is immediately replaced with a devious one as he raises his card into the air while staring me down:

'I want to see you fail. Right now,' his eyes tell me.

His wish comes true as the death chant begins again: 'Card! Card! Card!', two more cards fly up and Ludacris begins to play. Oddly I don't feel embarrassed or nervous or scared as I prepare to march to my grave. I find myself astounded at the very obvious enjoyment these people are getting from throwing me from the stage, one of the only places I feel truly happy in life.

'You guys are a bunch of cunts!' I say, before putting the mic back in the stand. It feels good to say that. It feels empowering for a second.

But as I exit the stage to the poetry of Move Bitch, Get Out Da Way and sit back in my seat, I realise, we are all a bunch of cunts. What the hell are we doing discouraging people from exploring their talent for a mere five minutes, uninterrupted by our disapproval, our judgement and our anger?

What is the point of this kind of competition? It's supposed to toughen us up, right? If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen! I've been hearing those kind of ridiculous phrases my entire life from abusive ballet instructors, mentally ill acting coaches, perfectionistic parents, etc. All people suffering the wounds of similar abuses perpetrated on them.

This is insanity. Why am I seeking the approval of all of the people in this room who are clearly so keen to watch people be gonged off the stage? This is what they are here to do. This is good fun for them. Why have I done this to myself?

As I walk out of the club and up the street towards the train station on this dark, cold wet night I think of my friend Tony who came from Hull. I know it's nowhere near Manchester, but it's still in the North, right? So, let me have my moment.

I think of Tony and his razor-sharp wit, his biting sense of British humour and all the laughs I had with him as he died from a tumour eating away at his brain. I think of him telling me I should quit modelling and become an actor, because that was what I was meant to do. I think of his mischievous smile and his steel blue eyes staring at me with that knowing that only comes when people are so close to the other side, and I wonder if he would have gonged me off of that stage. And I think: 'He probably would have.'

And I look up to the black sky and I say: 'Fuck mate, this acting suggestion might not have been the best idea.'

But then I realise, it was the best idea. Because it led me here. To Manchester. To be gonged off of a stage doing stand-up comedy. Even Tony couldn't have foreseen this. Life is magical. It is full of mystery. And it is full of humiliation. But the more you fail, the more gongs you hear, the less they matter. And one day, a gong will sound like music to your ears, because it means you are alive. You are in the arena. You are growing, and you are becoming stronger and when you arrive at the point of crossing over you will be full of light, laughter and love, just like my mate Tony was.

• **Ellyn Daniels: Emotional Terrorism is at Just The Tonic at The Caves at 21:00.**

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