

Laughs are here, no joke

From religious venues to tattoo parlors, comedians find some unexpected places to practice their acts

BY MEREDITH DANIELS
Special to Newsday

Keith Godwin, 42, of Northport, took a seat on stage and began talking to the rubber chicken in the seat next to him. It was a prop he "plucked" off the wall, back in November 2008, while performing comedy at Starry Night Café, in Hicksville, a meeting place for adults with disabilities.

"How ya' feeling today, Mr. Chicken?" he asks. He presses the chicken and it squawks. The audience starts laughing. "You

don't say, Mr. Chicken? All your eggs?" he adds. He turns to the audience, "Does anybody know the chicken's name?" "Rooster," shouts a man in front.

At the end of his set, Keith was awarded the proverbial chicken for his great comedy performance that night. He's been using it in his act at Starry Night ever since.

When "Sparky" Drakonis Schneider, 49, takes the stage at Starry Night, the crowd laughs and yells for more. It's not a typical stage for a comic. However, the Port Jefferson Station man says it's one of his favorite performance places.

George Gallo, 41, of Medford, who was arrested on a disorderly conduct charge almost 20 years ago while doing comic stunts at the Smith Haven Mall, has performed at out-of-the-ordinary venues since that time, including Starry Night Café.

Uncommon venues

Although Schneider and Gallo make a part-time career out of comedy, they both continue to do the unpaid, often unpromoted shows at odd venues — sometimes for the practice and sometimes for "the challenge of the room." It's not uncommon to see seasoned (and not-so-seasoned) comics performing at places such as bookstores, fast food restaurants and even at a tattoo parlor / cafe.

Joe Giarratano, 24, of Seaforth, has been doing comedy for almost two years. He tries to perform at various open-mic nights in New York City but also hosts a weekly comedy open mic (Wednesdays at 9 p.m.) at Wyld Chyld Tattoo Café in Merrick. Before Wyld Chyld, Giarratano, who also appears at the Holiday Inn in Carle Place, had been hosting a weekly open-mic night at Chicken Holiday, a fast-food restaurant and bar in Westbury, until they ended a few months ago.

"The first time I did Chicken Holiday was one of the best sets I ever had in my life. There was a crowd of about 30 20-somethings in a horseshoe standing around me and I did really well for close to 20 minutes," he recalled. "However, like most smaller, open-mic type venues, once people see you a few times they no longer find the same jokes funny. To

me, that is the biggest challenge with smaller venues."

Gallo, who tried a set at Chicken Holiday some months back, described it as "doing comedy at a KFC with beer." While he admits he had fun, he noted that these venues often get filled with more comics than listening customers. "It could be a false gauge of which jokes are working and which aren't, because some comics may either give you a big, supportive laugh or they are thinking deeper and darker and don't laugh at all."

The comedian, who has had his video shorts featured on Comedy Central, is also a regular at Caroline's and Comic Strip comedy clubs in Manhattan as well as the Long Island Comedy Festival and

Governor's Comedy Club in Levittown.

Paul Anthony, who hosts the annual Long Island Comedy Festival, says when he books shows he tries to find places with a "living room" feel rather than a harshly lit club or a crowded bar.

Anthony, who says Martha Clara Vineyards in Riverhead is one of his favorite venues for performing, learned that comedy and alcohol aren't always a good mix. Anthony hosted two shows on the Martha Jefferson paddle boat out of Port Jefferson in the summer of 2005. "The earlier cruise was a great show, but the 10 p.m. show had a bunch of people who wouldn't stop heckling for 90 minutes. Now, you've got this rowdy, ridicu-

lous crowd AND you're stuck on water," he said.

Baby-sitting the audience

"When you're at a bar or club you often end up baby-sitting for alcoholics," said Schneider, quoting comic and former "Simpsons" writer Dana Gould. He added, "Any venue can be a challenge, but when you're doing it for a long time [since 1983] you adjust and adapt to the situation."

"I feel like these types of places can be both good and bad for my development as a comic," Giarratano said. "If you want to work in clubs it is important to have a consistent set you've already mastered, but sometimes you have to

See COMEDY on G6



Les Degen's Jewish humor had the audience laughing on Squeaky Clean Comedy Night at Samantha's Li'l Bit of Heaven in East Northport.

PHOTOS BY DAVID FORRESS



You don't Shea: Pat Shea performs her comedy act on Squeaky Clean Comedy Night at Samantha's Li'l Bit of Heaven.



Roslyn Harvey, right, and Rich Rocco find something to laugh about at Samantha's.

