

Secrets of the funny business

Leigh Parry reports on a crash course in comedy appreciation that will have you rolling in the aisles.

WHAT is the secret of a good gag? Does slapstick make you snicker? Do verbal gymnastics evoke a guffaw?

A crash course in comedy appreciation at Melbourne's Centre for Adult Education seeks to uncover what tickles our funny bones by exploring how we laugh and the culture and history of comedy.

Sydney comedy writer and reviewer Dom Romeo will steer participants through the five-week course, titled (Don't) Make Me Laugh.

Working comedians will also share their "war stories" and participants will be assigned different performances to see in the 2006 Melbourne International Comedy Festival.

Romeo is known as the "hanging judge" of the NSW heats of Raw Comedy, the festival's national open-mic stand-up competition, and also hosts *Radio Ha Ha* with Tammy Tantschev on digital station 2GB Sydney.

He says that like any art form, comedy is not purely subjective and people can learn to appreciate different styles.

"Can you teach people to appreciate painting? The comment might be 'I don't like this modern art rubbish', but when you look into it, you can appreciate it."

Romeo says he has a "grudging admiration" for some comedians he did not find funny, such as England's Roy Chubby Brown.

Who does he rate as Australia's shining stars of comedy?

"That's such a poisoned-chalice question. The thing about Australia at the moment is we are spoilt for choice."

His list of favourites include Wil Anderson and Carl Barron ("hilarious"), and from the female ranks, Kitty Flanagan, Rachel Berger, Corinne Grant and Terri Psiakis.

Two relative newcomers to the industry he tips will have a big future are Christina Davis, an original *Big Brother* housemate who is doing a show at the Comedy Festival this year, and fellow radio host Tantschev.

He prefers not to attribute a "brand" of humour to Australia but says our sunny dispositions appeal to audiences overseas: comedians such as Adam Hills

and Kitty Flanagan are popular examples.

"What really shines when Australians (comedians) go to London is that we are really happy. We brighten people up."

This is why, Romeo theorises, Australian comedians are so brilliant at sending up characters, pointing to Chris Lilley's housewife-turned-rolling-athlete Pat Mullins, and

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Don Romeo believes Australians do pathos so well because they are happy.

PICTURE:
REBECCA HALLAS

DOM ROMEO

aspiring actor Ricky Wong in his ABC "mockumentary" series *We Can be Heroes*.

"Australians do pathos well; maybe because we are so happy we can explore pathos," he says.



He would like to see more support for aspiring comedians — "there are times when I see great talent not taken up by television" — and financial backing for comedy feature films.

He says Australian comedies have tended to be built on the same template of "little battler against powers that be", which is part of our film heritage, but there are opportunities for writers to come up with new ideas.

St Kilda's Rebecca Lee, 26, is hoping to find some inspiration from Romeo's comedy appreciation course from an academic and enthusiast's point of view.

Ms Lee is doing a professional writing and editing diploma in comedy at Victoria University, following a three-year degree in creative arts.

She is a regular audience member on the stand-up circuit and has booked tickets to 20

acts at this year's Comedy Festival.

She hopes the course will give her some first-person insight into the workings of the comedy industry — something she felt was lacking in her academic studies.

"It was great theory but didn't include speaking to people in the industry. I'd like to learn the difference between writing comedy for radio and television and hopping up on stage and doing it live."

She says it will also be interesting to learn how newcomers got their start in the business and where they draw their inspiration.

The five-session course will run on Mondays from 6-8pm from today to May 1 at the Centre for Adult Education, 96 Flinders Street, Melbourne. For more information phone: 9652 0611.