

PREFACE

I have a few things to say about comedy people. The first is: you know if you are one of them.

Years ago, if you had asked a small handful of folks in my life—parents, relatives, childhood friends, or maybe even the high school teacher who told me that joking around in class was not a solid career path—whether my writing about comedy was a wild future proposition, I am pretty sure the answer would have been a solid “no.” (Well, to be clear, the topic of silliness would not be surprising, but maybe the book-author part would be.) When I look back and put the various pieces together, this book feels predestined. I was, after all, what some southerners would call “a spirited child,” a euphemistic way of saying I was too silly for my own good—just deviant enough to not entirely blend in. There are a few stand-out moments. I distinctly remember making my mom and aunts fall over laughing at my character impersonations of relatives (it sounds mean, but I promise it was motivated by affection). I insisted on the red ballet shoes instead of regulation pinks while I wiggled my way through a solo comedic dance instead of the rehearsed serious one at the recital. Then there were the requisite exasperated parent-teacher meetings—kindergarten through twelfth grade—because nothing (and I mean *nothing*) could stop me from talking and telling jokes to the kids around me.

And so, some years later, it felt like a small wink from the universe when I landed in legendary comedy TV producer Norman Lear’s office for an unplanned half-hour meeting that became a three-hour one, followed by a job offer and a nearly decade-long stint working for and with one of Hollywood’s greatest comedic minds (so, as it turns out, disrupting class with a steady stream of jokes *is* a decent professional route, thank you very much). Norman, however, is so much more than the words he penned for countless sitcom episodes—he is a very funny, kindhearted, everyday human. A comedy person. In the office, I was able

to watch and learn on a daily basis as his deviance and bright spirit—his regular funny, not the fancy kind on TV—motivated all kinds of people to be better, to be authentic, to make impossible things happen, to embrace their vulnerability on the way to deep human truths, all of which, of course, pave the way to pathbreaking creativity and innovation (as you shall hopefully learn from this book). He also appreciated fellow deviants, so he was the first successful adult person in my life (not related to me, that is) to make me feel as though it was okay to proudly fly my silliness flag.

Jump a decade ahead to my inaugural adventures as a somewhat accidental professor. I was three classes into the gig when I realized how much air needed to be let out of seminar rooms that felt bloated with anxiety: first-year students in fresh college classes, me nervously teaching them for the first time, and the general potential for pomposity within the Ivory Tower. Humor was immediately part of my toolbox as an educator, and to this day, comedy changes the space every time I invite it in—for me and the students. We connect more, we learn from each other, we talk and listen differently. And dare I say it? We have fun. (And despite being shamed for my chattiness in high school, I am still the person to avoid during a serious work meeting that drags on a little too long—especially faculty meetings, always ripe for humor. The impulse to make someone laugh is too strong. Find a different seat, or risk trouble by association.)

To be clear, I am not a professional humorist. I am, however, a comedy *person*. I understand comedians (or I like to think so, anyway), including everyday ones. They do not exactly blend in, and hallelujah for that. Around 2013, despite (because of?) my proclivity for the daily silly, I began a serious route to researching and making comedy for social change, partially inspired and informed by prior professional experience and an abiding commitment to social justice, but also based on instinct. I marvel at the many avenues and adventures that have opened up since then. Working with comedy people has enriched my life in ways that far surpass mere professional ambitions and interests.

So, here, finally, is what I want to say about comedy people. For many different reasons, they seem authentically free in what they choose to display and how they connect, in how they use confession and acceptance to deal with things that are hard or confusing or just ridiculous.

There is pain and resilience and absurdity, but their willingness to say it out loud, and to play with others in order to “yes, and” their own ideas is powerful, and, yes, courageous. They are kind and generous in their support for one another. They are radically open and in touch with human vulnerabilities and failures; they use this clay to mold and create, rather than discarding taboos to sweep under the rug. Culturally, we need comedy people more than we might recognize or care to admit, beyond the ways we encounter them through the formal entertainment marketplace. We need the release valve of humor to regularly let the proverbial air out of rooms that are divided and hostile and self-important. We need to laugh in order to heal, find resilience, and arrive at revelations about topics we had failed to consider beyond our own calcified opinions or tunnel-visioned life experiences.

I have learned a great deal simply from being in the room with comedians, watching how they play and improvise together, how they deeply listen, how they accept terrible ideas and build on them, and how they call out egregious wrongs that deserve lampooning. These are tiny acts of radical kindness and resistance. And so, in the spirit of comedy people, this book begins here, with my own authentic offering of “aha!” understanding about whatever destiny led me from naughty little girl to the pages that follow. It was inevitable.

