

# Pete Ludovice

## *Cillian O' Neill speaks to that rare thing – a chemical engineering comedian*

**BY day he is a mild-mannered lecturer at Georgia Tech, but by night, Pete Ludovice becomes Dr Ludicrous, the self-proclaimed “only comic in the world with a PhD from MIT”. Pete performs in a number of Atlanta comedy clubs and also in front of chemical engineering and other technical crowds. Still fresh from a successful gig at the Carpet Recyclers of America conference, he tells all about his dual life.**



## LIFE

Pete Ludovice always knew what he wanted to do with his life. “I think it’s something you always know you want to do. I became interested in chemical engineering in high school, but I think comedy was always my real passion. I had the singular distinction in my school of being on both debate teams: the extemporaneous speaking people are the ultimate nerds of the speech team world, and the original comedy team is the complete opposite. I was proud to be on both teams.”

An inspirational chemistry teacher awakened Ludovice’s interest in chemistry and when it came to selecting a university course – it was a straight choice: “I just looked at average salaries for chemical engineers and chemists, which is probably how a lot of young people make their decision. I’m certainly glad I made the choice, but when you’re 17 you’re an idiot.

But then I ended up as an academic, which is not the highest-paying career, it’s quite ironic”.

After undergraduate study in the University of Illinois and a PhD from MIT, Ludovice ended up as an associate professor in the School of Chemical and Biochemical Engineering at Georgia Institute of Technology. Does he think that comedy has a place in the way students are taught?

“To that, I say an emphatic yes. At any major research university in the US, despite what they say, teaching is not their first priority. It’s about big money, big research and big incentives and a lot of academics don’t want to slum it and teach incoming freshmen. And I think we have suffered because of that, it’s quite scary how much our enrolment figures have gone down in the last five years. We decided, myself and

a colleague, to teach a chemical engineer-only introductory class. Instead of making it very generic and boring we said we would try to give the students an idea of what chemical engineering is, what to expect from a chemical engineering curriculum and what kind of things you can do with that career. And there is no doubt that humour is a huge part in how I teach that course. To begin with, most people think chemical engineers are all boring nerds and they also have no idea what you can do with the degree. It’s very versatile – you’re not going to just work in a huge refinery any more. There’s bioengineering, there’s food production, lots of non-traditional areas that a freshman would never have thought of. That is our goal – to get them excited about the subject.”

## DAY

Ludovice puts his decision to start performing in comedy clubs down to a self-diagnosed mid-life crisis: “It definitely is a mid-life crisis. I made a deal with my wife, we contemplated two mid-life crises – one was a motorcycle and the other was comedy. I chose comedy because my wife liked it better. Or, as I put it in my shows: “My wife likes it as a mid-life crisis because it’s cheaper than a sports car, safer than a motorcycle and she finds it infinitely preferable to me chasing co-eds.””

And a career in education is certainly good preparation for the comedy world. “The problem is that students at 8 o’ clock in the morning just don’t laugh at your jokes as much as people in clubs. It’s funny, my issue was trying to write funny material everyone could understand, while I think most comics have to get used to performing in front of crowds of people, feeling comfortable and making good transitions. I had no problem with that – I have talked to more than a hundred people on microelectronics

materials simulation, after that I can handle anything.”

Ludovice has to make subtle changes to his act depending on the audience, but not as many as you might imagine. “I think my humour is very general because I talk about the college experience and professors and nerds and most people can relate to that – if they weren’t one themselves they certainly knew a nerd. I don’t do well with the 20-something audiences you find at a lot of comedy clubs. I do a lot better with audiences 35–65, hopefully college educated. I write general stuff but I also do technical humour.

“For example, I go through the ingredient list of a McDonald’s milkshake, in a bit usually entitled “There are no bad chemicals, just bad chemical names”. The average consumer reads the ingredient list of a product and is completely horrified when they see names like guar gum or carrageenan. Carrageenan? I don’t know why they don’t just call it seaweed extract

because anorexic models in California will eat anything with seaweed extract in it.”

When performing for chemical engineering audiences, Ludovice can get as technical as he likes: “One of my favourite jokes is one that only works for chemical engineers. I accept engineers are a very classy audience who would not appreciate vulgarity or strong language. I sometimes have to violate that, though, because as a comic the f-word has a certain shock value that really gets people going and it is certainly a word that strikes fear into the heart of any red-blooded chemical engineer. Of course you know what I’m talking about – fugacity. The Shroud of Turin of thermodynamics – no-one really knows if it’s real or not. Every chemical engineer remembers fugacity.”

In the end, it all comes down to Ludovice’s personal philosophy: “People always claim that engineers can’t be funny. But I always say if you can’t be funny, at least you can be funny looking.”