



Dr. Ludicrous

Professor gives humor circuit a nerd's-eye view of comedy



By Gary Goettling
Photos: Gary Meek

When Peter J. "Pete" Ludovice was a graduate student in the 1980s at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, there was a special name for women on campus.

"We called them visitors," he deadpans.

An associate professor of chemical and biomolecular engineering at Georgia Tech, Ludovice's irreverent observational humor has been his trademark among students for the past dozen years.

Over the past two years, he has sought a wider audience for his "nerd comedy" as a stand-up comic at nightclubs and corporate meetings. This second career has earned the professor a special name of his own: Dr. Ludicrous, a stage name purportedly bestowed by students over unrealistic expectations on a statistics test.

"Teaching and comedy go hand in hand," Ludovice explains. "I like to teach, and I think anyone who enjoys teaching is probably also a natural-born ham."

It also could be argued that anyone who devotes research time to computer simulation to elucidate the relationship between atomic-level structure and the properties of synthetic and biological macromolecules, as Ludovice does, needs a good laugh now and then.

Ludovice's dozens of performances include headlining at annual meetings of the American Chemical Society and the American Institute of Chemical Engineers and stints at clubs throughout the Southeast, including the Punchline in Sandy Springs, Ga.

He is a regular at the monthly comedy show at the Academy Theater in Avondale Estates, Ga., and at The Funny Farm Comedy Club in Roswell, Ga.

Ludovice is a fixture on Georgia Tech stages as well, performing at campus events such as FASET and hosting the "Funny Girls: Women of Atlanta Comedy" show at the

Student Center. He is working on a lecture for incoming President's Scholars titled "Your Professor: Human or Alien Spawn?"

"You scratch and claw for every single job you get," he notes. "I send out demo tapes and press packets, and I work with local bookers in Florida and North Carolina."

One of Ludovice's best-known routines is called "Pocket Protectors and Other Fashion Statements" — despite the fact that pocket protectors have pretty much gone the way of slide rules.

"There's only one faculty member at Georgia Tech who wears them: Jim Powers in organic chemistry," Ludovice says. "The first time I used one in my act, I borrowed one from him because I didn't have any of my own. I actually have to special order them."

He adds wistfully, "When I worked for IBM in San Jose, California, they had bins of them in the office supply closet."

A 1984 graduate of the University of Illinois, Ludovice received his doctorate from MIT — which he says stands for "Mutants In Training" — in 1989. Post-doctoral positions at IBM, NASA and Eidgenossische Technische Hochschule-Zurich preceded his return to academia.

Ludovice says his second career as a stand-up comic represents a midlife crisis compromise with his wife, Jennifer. "It was either this or a motorcycle."

As one might expect, some of his most receptive audiences are fellow chemical engineers, who, according to Ludovice, "can't really fix anything. All we can do is write differential equations to explain why the pipes burst and then hopefully keep from giving ourselves a hickey with the wet/dry vac when we clean up the mess."

Although self-deprecating nerd humor is his stock-in-trade, Ludovice will perform just about anywhere. In fact, one of the most >>>

Ludovice loves his alter ego as a stand-up comedian. But that doesn't mean "I'm going to quit my day job anytime soon."



difficult aspects of stage comedy is picking the right material for the audience. He learned that tough lesson while performing at Under the Couch, a student-run cafe in the basement of the Couch Building.

"I got up and told a George Bush joke," he recalls two years after the fact. "It was a relatively innocuous joke. It wasn't even all that insulting. And I got booed by 19-year-old college students — that's just not supposed to happen!"

"Comics are going to make fun of whoever is in power, and right now the Republicans are in power," he says. "I'd write jokes about the Democrats' platform and policies — if they actually had some."

Another time, at a club in St. Augustine, Fla., "some guy from Georgia wanted to kick my butt in the parking lot because I was telling jokes about Georgia," Ludovice says, still bewildered by the encounter. "Heck, I like living in Georgia."

But such instances are increasingly rare as experience teaches Ludovice how to accurately gauge his audience.

His "Pocket Protectors" routine went over well with the MIT Alumni Club of Atlanta, but a week later at Gypsy's in St. Augustine, he found a totally different audience. "You can't tell any nerd jokes. You can't

say you're a professor or even a chemical engineer because sometimes they turn hostile on you.

"You need to get the audience on your side," he adds. "If the audience thinks of you as snooty and condescending, they don't always get on your side."

Thick skin is a prerequisite for a comedian, Ludovice observes, as well as for professors.

"As a comic you get immediate feedback from the audience, and sometimes some people don't find part of your act particularly amusing," he says. "That's not so bad considering that when you send in a paper or a proposal, the reviewers for the paper or the reviewers for the funding agency assemble their criticism in writing. Your editor or your program director puts it all together and mails it to you, then calls to say, 'Did you get all the horrible things people said about you?' There's a parallel, so maybe bombing on stage isn't as bad as sending something to the National Institutes of Health."

Ludovice keeps polishing and delivering his comedy wherever there's a stage and a microphone, hoping for the day he'll get a call from Exxon or DuPont asking him to perform at their shareholders meeting. But in the meantime, he says, "I'm not going to quit my day job anytime soon." **GT**