

# An Odd Way of Looking at Things

Mary Walsh

## Abstract

In this interview, actor, writer, and comedian Mary Walsh discusses how comedy is part and parcel of Newfoundland's social fabric. She recounts her early days in theatre, which soon led to her forming comedy troupes with performers who would become lifelong collaborators. She outlines the basic skills for becoming a comedian as well as the challenges of being an older woman in comedy. In conclusion, she poignantly connects comedy to the importance of knowing one's history: "A bit of comedy helps the truth go down . . . they always say the truth will set you free. It'll make you mad first, but it'll make you free . . . We found right across the country that people were very open to the *message* because they got it with a laugh . . ."

*When did you first know you had a penchant for comedy, and how did that translate into a career?*

There is something about the Newfoundland character that is very funny, and some people are very witty and dry here. My family—my parents and my older brothers and sisters—really valued comedy being funny, and coming back with a witty and fast remark. Basically, you could get away with anything as long as you were funny. And if you weren't funny, you might as well go and hang yourself because there was every possibility you wouldn't even get fed. Comedy is a very important part of the whole structure of our culture and people who have a fast wit generally, which I didn't really have. I grew up with my two maiden aunts and an uncle who also were not the same as my parents, but when I would visit my parents, I would say something that I thought was funny and the entire family would kind of dismiss it and then carry on.

I knew the value of comedy for sure, but what we dealt with mostly in my large family was sarcasm and that kind of thing—the fast and witty put-down. I just wasn't very good at that. Not very fast in all that. Anyway, I wanted to be a journalist. That's what I really wanted to be. After a certain point, after a certain age, I started to fail very badly. I really didn't have the marks to get into school. And I decided I would marry this American guy from Colorado. So I went down there with him—that was a complete and utter disaster—but then I wouldn't go home. Everybody wanted me to go home, but I wouldn't go home because I thought, "Well, what else am I going to do? Dear God, this is my plan and now I'm screwed!"

Anyway, I came home, got very depressed, I guess, which seems to be fairly common in the 18 to 20-year-olds. And I fell into a job. I was watching *Coronation Street*, quite depressed on the couch at Aunt May's, and they said they were looking for a summer replacement for a morning show at CBC, which just happened to be across the street from us. I went down and I was so sure that I wouldn't get it—I don't even know why I went. Anyway, I got the job and was a complete failure at it, too.

Meanwhile, on the radio, Dudley Cox was starting a theater company, an amateur theater company in the basement of the arts and culture center. And he heard me on the radio and he called me up and asked me to do it. And then I got in with a crowd, you know, the way you do, and Tommy Sexton was in it. Then we started to do semi-professional theater. We all went off to Toronto and I went to theater school at Ryerson. Everybody else was working. And then Tommy and Diane got some money from Theatre Passe Muraille—Paul Thompson, God love him. Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto seems to be at the basis of so much that is good in theater in this country. He gave them \$300 to do their own auditioning for him.

And so I didn't really want to do it because you weren't allowed to do theater when you were taking theater—for fear you'd get the wrong idea. So, we did a show called, "Cod on a Stick." Greg Malone, Diane Olson, Kathy Jones, Tommy Sexton, and Paul Sametz were with us at the time, and Andy Jones and Bob Joy were in England. But we used a couple of Andy's pieces that he'd done, just funny things that he'd been doing. And so he was in the show, though he wasn't really in the show—his material was in the show. And I was terrible and I just was so ashamed. Having gone to the nuns and all the other things, I had a very high level of shame.

I don't even know why anybody would ever want me in the thing, but I would act towards the back of the stage. That's how bad I was. Anyway, we did a big tour of Newfoundland, and Andy and Bob came. Bob joined us to be part of that tour, but he was at Oxford at the time. And then the tour was longer, so he wrote back to them and asked if he could have an extension on his holidays. And they wrote back to him while he was at Christ church college—I guess he was a Rhodes scholar—and said, no, he couldn't. And so he quit Oxford and his Rhodes scholarship, something his mother really never ever got over and really blamed us for . . . She was very bitter about that for a long time.

But anyway, I went on, and Andy came home, took me aside, and really helped me by working with me on things. We stayed together as a company, and I found myself getting better at it. When I was around 27, I kind of realized that my dream of being a journalist was passing me by. And then, of course, I came up with the idea for *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, where I got to pretend to be a journalist on TV every week. So it was perfect for me.

*What kinds of things were you coached on that really helped?*

I've had an awful lot of insecurity and shame. Andy would just say, "Stand there, don't move around, and say the line like you believe in the line." I think that was basically it. It's a long time ago now—it was 1973 or 1974. And then we did very well as *Codco*, and Kathy and I joined the "Wonderful Grand Band." And then I had a TV show called "Up at Ours," where I had a boarding house with Ray Guy.

I just kept going, and then the idea to do *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* came to me. When I was a youngster I loved that British show, "That Was the Week That Was," and they had a folk singer on there who would perform a weekly song. I asked Ron Hynes at the time—it was 1992—if he would do it, and he couldn't. His album was just taking off, and stuff like that. But I had always wanted there to be a music component.

And now years after, there is, because Mike, the executive producer, and Mark Critch are both so musical that there always ends up being musical numbers.

*What are basic skills needed for an aspiring comedian?*

I heard someone on Seinfeld's *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee* say, "Comedians can be actors, but actors can't be comedians. Because comedians have a thing. They see things in a funny way." And I think because I came from the family that I came from, and because I'm a Newfoundlander, I do have that weird way of seeing things, or that comedic way of seeing things, which you have to have to be a comedian. You have to have an odd way of looking at things. I know that there are a lot of really great comedians who are also great actors, but I'm not sure that any great actors can really be comedians. There's just a certain way of looking at the world, right?

*Can one acquire that or is it just kind of natural?*

I don't know if one can acquire it. There are courses in Humber College to teach comedy. But I think that if you're attracted to comedy, no doubt, you already have that on the go. You know what I mean? It's not like it's an easy life . . . people are so angry with comedians now. And now there's the new comedy, which is not funny at all, where people cry all the time. I'm for the old comedy really, because there's lots of things to make us cry. Years ago we came up with two things, comedy and drama. We can still have comedy, but the new comedy seems to be all about pouring your heart out.

And it's not that it is bad. I mean, it's good. There are so many good new comedians, but they don't make you laugh. And I like the old comedians, like Richard Pryor, who make you laugh until tears run down your face. And then people are mad at comedians for saying the wrong thing. This is a time where people take offense very easily. I'm doing stand-up at the Halifax Stand-Up Comedy Festival in April, and I'm very nervous about it. I was watching Richard Pryor last night. Those early things that Andy said, "Just stand there and say it like you believe it." That's all Richard Pryor was doing as these terrible people were heckling him. They weren't heckling him about his material. They were going, "Tell us about your mom, Richard," but he was so comfortable. He would just go, "Don't you talk about my mom. You shut up. I'm dealing with this guy." I don't know if I ever could get to that level, but I do find that, over the years, once you do stuff enough, if you are devoted to being a comedian and you do it enough over and over again, I guess just like the craft of acting, you just get better.

*What challenges have you faced in your career as a comedian?*

It isn't easy to be a woman in comedy because people are still asking that question, "Are women really funny?" Meanwhile, I grew up with Lucy who sort of invented sitcoms, and Mary Tyler Moore, Carol Burnett, and so on. And my mother was funnier than everybody else in our family, though apparently my father was supposed to be funny too. My mother said that, but I just never saw him. He never really got the chance. Women being funny seemed perfectly reasonable to me, but there's still a general kind of sense that we're not, for some reason. And that's difficult to fathom.

And then, of course, it's like Ursula K. Le Guin said in her work: "I have failed. I have failed completely. I'm not a man, number one. And I never could become a man, though. I've tried as hard as I can. And now I'm old. I'm an old woman. What could be more failed in the world?" It's called "Introducing Myself" and it's just the funniest piece. I don't know where it came from, or what publication it was, but it is so perfect.

*Is it fair to say that women still face a challenge in comedy, particularly older women?*

Absolutely. I think older women face a challenge in the world generally, but I've been playing older women for a long time. So, the great thing about being an older woman, or even playing an older woman, is you don't care as much. That is what helped me get through that terrible stage paralysis: when I stopped trying to be the object of somebody's desire, and became the subject of my own life by playing an older woman or a granny or something. And then I could speak freely. It's probably not going to work for others, but it opened me up and freed me up to be able to be myself as I was playing. I still find it hard to be myself. I find it easier to be someone else, but, of course, they're all me anyway. But I'm still hiding behind that little facade.

*What can we learn from comedy and how might this be translated into the elementary and high school classrooms?*

First of all, we have to start telling the truth about who we are and what we've done. Canadian history in no way reflects that we didn't discover Canada, but we, in fact, invaded Canada. A Cree Chief said, not long ago, "It's hard to discover a country that's already fully populated." And then he said, "It'd be like if I went over and discovered England now." We have to stop that nonsense and tell the truth because when we accept that this is what happened, then we can start to change. But while we're in denial, while we're saying, "What is *wrong* with them?", change is that much more difficult.

I wrote a show with a lot of people, some of them Indigenous People, and we took young Indigenous and Settler People on the road. And we did a show called, *Canada, It's Complicated*. We talked a lot about the broken treaties and about how we just came over. My favourite is when the Americans landed during 9/11 in Gander, and the Gander crowd took care of them. There's even a Broadway play about it called, *Come From Away*. But imagine if they stayed 500 years, do you think the Gander crowd would still be feeding and taking care of them or . . . Came from away and never went back. That's what we did. We depended totally on this country's Indigenous People to help us through those first 200 years.

What good was the wheel? The European wheel was no good for us. We had to learn how to use it new—all the things that made people who lived here know how to live here. We found that people were very open. We did song, dance, and comedy, and the message, it's like Mary Poppins said, "a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down." So a bit of comedy helps the truth go down. They always say the truth will set you free. It'll make you mad first, but it'll make you free. And as we go around constantly using all our energy to deny what the truth is, then we never get a chance to move forward. We found right across the country that people were very open to the *message* because they got it with a laugh. Laughing opens your heart and sometimes things get in that wouldn't be there. They wouldn't be allowed in if you weren't laughing.



**Mary Walsh** is a Newfoundland actor, writer, comedian, activist and mother. Among her many awards and doctorates, Mary is the recipient of *The Order of Canada* and the Governor General's *Lifetime Achievement Award* in the Performing Arts. Her work in television and film is extensive; she may be best known for *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, a show she created and starred in as many of its various colourful characters. In 2017 Mary wrote her first novel *Crying For The Moon*, a coming-of-age story set mostly in

Newfoundland in the 1960s.

