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Comedy and politics

Some topics she prefers to avoid: “Politics are trouble,” Rice said. “It’s a very personal thing, not to be shared with an audience at large.”

“If challenged, though, I can hold my own,” she assured.

But the intersection of politics and comedy is an intriguing topic in her field. Rice is skeptical of the claim that political satire fosters complacency in its fans.

“Children and young adults are introduced to the political arena by shows like ‘The Daily Show,’” she said. “Well-informed comedians reveal hypocrisy. That’s important. Political comedy is an entry point to political engagement, especially for young people.”

Rice is an advocate for women’s rights. When she began touring in the 1980s, she could count perhaps 20 female comedians in the business.

“Women’s comedy has blossomed,” she said. Comedy now gives voice to both male and female issues. “It’s really empowering. I champion women whenever I can. As long as they’re funny.”

Stand-up heaven

As the arts colony’s director, Andrew Tonry has brought music, poetry, dance and literature to the community, but Friday’s comedy festival at Tolovana Hall is the first in recent memory.

Tonry used to cover entertainment for the Portland Mercury, where he developed an enduring appetite for stand-up. A favorite venue was Suki’s Bar and Grill, beneath a Travelodge on Southwest Fourth Avenue, where comedians often played Saturday nights for no one but other comedians.

“A tough venue,” said Tonry, who followed comics at scores of venues up and down the West Coast.

Comedians who make it big often move to Los Angeles, and when circumstances landed Tonry there, too, he luxuriated in stand-up heaven. “Five free shows a night,” he remembered.

Then he landed in Cannon Beach, where there are no shows. “I’m missing it,” he explained.

The limits of taste

Inspired by the success of the Comedy Arts Festival in Aspen, Colorado — which funded its

first seasons with grants from real estate transfer tax funds — Tonry applied for an ambitious \$6,500 grant from the Cannon Beach Tourism and Arts Commission.

“They gave us \$286,” he said. “But it got the ball rolling.”

Another grant from the Clatsop County Cultural Coalition got plans off the ground.

Tonry booked the Rice-Frost-Ricketts set with its coastal audience in mind — to offer a diverse lineup without testing too hard the limits of taste.

“Don’t expect late-night pop comedy,” Tonry said. “What you’ll hear is comedy about the human condition.”

Those limits of taste may be explored, however. “Don Frost is very improvised and unhinged,” Tonry said. “He rants and shrieks; he traffics in outrage.”

Ricketts, on the other hand, is untraditional: “a meta-comedian,” an “avant-garde who explores strange creative angles,” Tonry said.

“It’s a fallacy that stand-up comedians are dark and self-loathing,” he explained. “A lot of comedians developed a comedic sense to defend themselves as youngsters through difficult times.”

An American art form

According to Rice, “stand-up comedy is an American art form,” like rock and roll.

It began in Greenwich Village in the 1960s, reaching Portland in the 1980s. In the City of Roses, Rice joined other aspiring local acts at The Leaky Roof in Goose Hollow. She relished Lenny Bruce, Bill Cosby, Bob Carlin, Richard Pryor, and their frank, revealing, spontaneous comedy that didn’t rely on set-ups and punch lines.

“Over the years, comedy’s rhythm has changed. Kids now are telling stories,” she said. “It’s wonderful.”

Tonry hopes to introduce stand-up comedy to folks who may be unfamiliar with its appeal. “I want to get people in the door who may not know that they’re missing out on comedy in their lives,” he said.

Rice is looking forward to it. “No one’s going to get hurt,” she said.



Don Frost

WHAT: CANNON BEACH COMEDY FESTIVAL

WHEN: 7 P.M. FRIDAY, MAY 12

WHERE: TOLOVANA HALL, 3779 SOUTH HEMLOCK ST., CANNON BEACH

WHO: COMEDIANS SUSAN RICE, DON FROST AND CHRISTIAN RICKETTS

ADMISSION: \$5 AT DOOR.



Christian Ricketts