

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Minnesota Now - Jon Savitt comedy writing
01GCA07E0F5QQ6HJ24JW84DBT2

HOST: Twin Cities-based comedian Jon Savitt has been told his whole life that he'd have to move to places like New York or LA to pursue a career in comedy. But despite that advice, Jon moved back to Minnesota as the pandemic started. Because of lockdowns, it was impossible to do live standup, so here he is performing alone in a room for the spiders in his apartment.

JON SAVITT: Thanks for coming out. Eight legs, huh? That's a lot of shoes, must be expensive. But I guess you can afford it when you're living somewhere for free. Rent, what's that? You know? You know? Any daddy long legs here tonight? Yeah, one. See a couple. Why do you look like that? I hate it. Sir, no cell phones, please. I think that cobwebs are kind of like dentist offices. I hate walking into them.

HOST: Yes, Jon Savitt's work has been featured on Funny or Die, College Humor, and TIME. And now, he's trying his hand at teaching high school students the art of making people laugh. MPR producer Aron Woldeclassie had a conversation with Jon about his new teaching initiative, called the Minneapolis Writers' Room.

ARON WOLDESLASSIE: Jon, I'm curious. You've been writing comedy for years. What made you want to teach writing, especially to high schoolers?

JON SAVITT: Yeah, it's a good question. I mean, and it kind of comes from a little bit of a unique background. It really started with summer camp for me. And that was really critical in not only developing my writing skills, but also kind of those interpersonal skills where you get to be taught and teach others. And so what I started to discover was while I love writing, what I love equally or even greater is that kind of community that you get, and being able to fail together and have breakthroughs together and teach each other and learn together. And so that was really a driving point in wanting to make sure I'm kind of giving back and helping people the same way other people have helped me early on in my career.

ARON WOLDESLASSIE: People tend to think comedy is just for the class clowns or wise guys. What sort of personalities does it take to be a comedy writer?

JON SAVITT: Yeah, I think that's a really good question. And I think that's spot on that a lot of people think you just have to be able to make people laugh or tell a joke on demand. But really, when you talk about going from thinking about anything creative, whether comedy or something else, as something beyond a hobby and as a career, you really have to start thinking of it from a different perspective. And for me, that's kind of like the business and strategic side of things.

And so I come from nearly eight or nine years working at an ad agency in Washington DC. And I started thinking, well, if this isn't for me, I can certainly apply a lot of what I've learned here, pitch in, and making pitch decks, and talking with clients, and being able to write really concise copy and scripts, and I can apply that to something more creative, like comedy.

And that's really where I had that light bulb moment of like, oh, now I have those tools, those building blocks, those puzzle pieces that I can put the creative and business side together and hopefully, turn it into something that maybe I won't become a millionaire, but something that I enjoy and makes me happy, and that I can make a career out of. So I think that's definitely true that you need to have those skills and that love for comedy, but there's also so much more that goes into a career in writing.

ARON WOLDESLASSIE: So you're telling me that the ability to make people laugh can help you communicate with other people in other ways, is that what I'm getting?

JON SAVITT: Yeah, absolutely. I think I've always kind of viewed humor as more of a tool than anything. I've never felt like I'm the funniest person in the room, or the one that's going to rattle off the spontaneous improvised joke. But where I've found my footing over the years and staying true to myself is using humor as a way to bring people into the conversation. A quick story, I developed a show about my experience with anti-Semitism throughout the years, which I've ran into.

And the way I wanted to deliver that message was using humor, taking something that's a little more complex, maybe a little darker, something that doesn't necessarily get people out of their house and be like, let's go to a comedy show about anti-Semitism. But I wanted to use humor as that lens to really almost soften it and bring people into the conversation, so they're getting educated through experience, but it doesn't feel like learning. Yeah, so totally. I think humor is such a critical way to communicate with other people.

ARON WOLDESLASSIE: Comedy can come in multiple forms, be it sketch or stand up or improv. What is your class's curriculum look like?

JON SAVITT: Yeah, that's a great question. Part of this workshop, or this program, is to introduce people to the different avenues in comedy. Myself, personally, I used to grow up and think I could only be a standup. I could only do standup comedy. And then I had other people tell me oh, you're a comedian, you must do standup. And while I did for a bunch of years, and I still do, I started to realize that's not really where I'm the strongest. And so it kind of felt like I was always swimming up the current, up the river.

And so I wanted to explore other paths. And I found out you know you can do exactly, you can do sketch, you can lean into the political commentary. You can do cartoons or drawing. You can do musical comedy, which I've done before. And so there are so many of these different areas, and I think it's not my place to tell someone this is where you should go, this is where you should explore. But rather introducing people to the wide variety of paths you could take and hopefully, participants in this program will latch onto something and say, oh, I didn't even know that I could do a show like this, or that I could go perform an hour-long musical comedy set. That's a win-win, and I hope that through the breadth of these different fields within comedy, that people can really find something that they're passionate about.

ARON WOLDESLASSIE: Traditionally, performers in the Midwest, when they get to a certain level, they will move out to Chicago, New York, or LA, but you stuck it out in Minnesota to pursue your career in comedy. I'm curious, why did you decide to work in the Twin Cities comedy scene exclusively?

JON SAVITT: Yeah, it's a good question. And honestly, I'm kind of a hypocrite, I must admit. Because I did-- I was in Washington DC for a few years in my early '20s, and that was while I was exploring. And yes, when I had those different voices in my head saying, you have to go to x place, you have to go to y, you have to do this, you have to do that. And then really during the pandemic, what I started to realize was that entertainment and comedy and writing specifically is kind of been democratized a bit, where people are much more open to remote work.

And while the physical proximity of being in a big hub like LA or New York obviously has its benefits, and I won't claim ignorance that I that I doubt that, I understand that. But what I'm personally starting to see are people in those markets are much more open to wherever the talent is. And so I thought if you can be in a great place like Minnesota and the Twin Cities, and you can live that Midwest lifestyle, which I love-- I went to school in the Midwest. I grew up in Minnesota in Saint Louis Park.

So the dream was always like, if I can do what I love in the place that I love, why not? Minneapolis is, by no means, a unknown comedy market. I mean, it's still one of the best, in my opinion, in the country, and I think we've seen that. But I think we're starting to see a more openness to people from other places participating in the entertainment industry in a little more meaningful way, and so I just hope to really, along with others of course, just keep pushing this momentum, and keep inspiring the comedy writers and comedians of Minnesota to keep leaving their mark.

ARON What kind of topics will you be teaching in your class?

WOLDESLASSIE:

JON SAVITT: I mean, it's everything from how to build a pitch deck, or how to build a proposal, how to get your idea off the ground once you have it in a very tactical way. Then we'll teach them the other softer skills, as they call it. Like how to collaborate in a writer's room setting, how to provide feedback, how to deal with rejection. So there's going to be a really good mix of getting a feel for what it's like being in an environment like this, which very well may be people's first time in an environment like this.

But then also more tangible, tactical things, like building portfolio pieces, so you can-- when you're applying to jobs or internships or building your YouTube channel, whatever it may be, you have those actual pieces that you can show to people, even if it's not published per say in a big name magazine or whatnot. It still is part of your portfolio and something you made, and so I think it's really important to not just give my kind of thoughts and feelings about things, but actually provide people with concrete portfolio pieces that they can carry to get them started and off the ground when it comes to pursuing a career here.

ARON Thank you so much for your time, Jon.

WOLDESLASSIE:

JON SAVITT: Cool, awesome, I appreciate it so much. Have a good rest of your day.

HOST: That was MPR producer Aron Woldeclassie, who is also a comedian, speaking with Minneapolis comedian Jon Savitt.