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Wit and wisdom of female comics

- Wendy Tuohy
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Funny girls rule: Maria Bamford, Cal Wilson, Claudia O'Doherty, Caroline Rhea and Jennifer Wong (clockwise from left) are all performing at the Melbourne Comedy Festival.

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Comedian Cal Wilson.

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SOME people reckon women can't be as funny as men. Are they having a laugh? Wendy Tuohy talks with five females riding high on humour.

CYNICS, such as tart Vanity Fair columnist Christopher Hitchens, may claim women lack the "genetic ability" to be funny, but you do tend to wonder what cave or burrow they've been living in.

Obviously one with bad TV reception: the work of Lucille Ball, Ellen DeGeneres, Whoopi Goldberg, Lily Tomlin, Joan Rivers and our own Gina Riley and Jane Turner (aka Kath and Kim) - to name a few - can't have reached them yet.

Granted, the rough-and-ready world of stand-up has traditionally been a male domain. But even in that most risky end of comedy, women have been cranking out almost as many laughs in at least the past decade and a half.

In Australia, comedy festivals - especially Melbourne's - have supported women since they started a quarter of a century ago. Stars such as Wendy Harmer, Magda Szubanski, Jean Kittson and Judith Lucy all cut their teeth in live comedy, and don't forget Denise Scott or Kitty Flanagan.

Alice Springs mother of five and reformed bad girl Fiona O'Loughlin is now one of the country's favourite stand-ups, with sell-out seasons every year, and RocKwiz darling Julia Zemiro also made her break on Melbourne's stages with her Spontaneous Broadway crew.

For the past 16 years, budding female comedians have had a friend in Melbourne International Comedy Festival director Susan Provan, who says audiences are just as happy to check out funny women as they are the blokes.

"In Australia, there have always been strong women stand-ups -- our audiences support them particularly well - though they were always a small percentage compared with the blokes," Provan says.

"In the early days, there were only a handful - Wendy Harmer, Magda, Denise Scott and (the late) Lynda Gibson - but it has certainly grown and it's been something I've made it my mission to support."

Whether due to the waves of hilarious women coming through TV sketch comedy shows or the willingness of audiences to go along and see them, the appetite for female comedy keeps growing.

Provan notes women have been nominated for at least one of the festival's awards most years she has been there. Recently, the gender split of the winners of the major prize, the Barry Awards, has been about 50-50.

And though some women's comedy falls into the more feminine "whimsical" category, many have demonstrated they're willing to be as risque as men.

Big overseas names such as ventriloquist Nina Conti (who is returning to Melbourne this year) are as cheekily blue as any of the men.

And artists such as eccentric US stand-up Maria Bamford are as ready to paint themselves in an unflattering light and be the butt of their own jokes.

New Zealand-born Melburnian Cal Wilson has a ready reply to the old "women can't be funny" line, albeit a borrowed one.

"Nelly Thomas, a lovely comedian here in Melbourne, has a great response to that question, 'Why aren't women funny', " Wilson says. "The question isn't, 'Why aren't women funny', it's, 'Why don't you find them funny'.

That kind of sums the whole thing up. "I've had people walk out of a comedy roadshow because they didn't want to hear a Kiwi talk! There's always going to be something some people don't like."

The festival does its bit to create extra opportunities for people who do want to go to see funny women with its annual Upfront variety show. Provan says her only challenge is choosing between the talented candidates. "It's really, really hard casting that," she says. "There are so many fantastic women, we try to mix it up every year."

Among the female artists she is excited about bringing to Australia this year are New York's Caroline Rhea and Britain's Zoe Lyons and Roisin Conaty (described as the darling of last year's Edinburgh Fringe Festival).

And as for Hitchens and his take on female funniness, Provan dismisses his claim as the ravings of "a loudmouth". Perhaps the curmudgeonly writer should take a seat at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival.

MARIA BAMFORD
Eagle Rock, California

HER voice sounds like something from a cartoon, her eyes are often bugged and her body language is as dorky as that of a timid teenager on her first date. First-time audiences must wonder where the crazy character ends and the real Maria Bamford begins.

The goofy gesticulations, the tide of humbling put-downs (to herself), the stream of uncomfortable family vignettes and take-offs leave you with the feeling that surely this woman must be making it all up.

After all, who'd have the guts to talk about their anxiety being so bad and their thoughts going into such spooky territory that their therapist thought it might be an idea to get a security guard to come along next time?

Replying to Weekend's questions via email during a US tour, the woman whose astute observations and frankness have led to comparisons with Lily Tomlin and Carol Burnett insists what you see is what you get.

"Yes! It is real!" Bamford says of the misfit feeling she's had since high school, and which she has mined for her comedy. "I wasn't totally odd in high school, but I felt totally odd - as most people do. There is mental illness, depression, addiction in my genetic history and so I've had my fair share of negative thinking and I like to talk about it - because it's meaningful to me and if people laugh, then it might mean I'm not alone."

Bamford's family, from Duluth, Minnesota - including a grouchy, obsessive-sounding sister, eccentric clean-freak mother and heavy-snoring father (who "alternately mumbles and yells") - support her work, even when it involves using them as fodder.

"I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings and have definitely modified jokes to make them less hurtful," she says. "I try to 'sell' the joke to my family and they have been unbelievably supportive."

Bamford has a soft spot for Australia, where she has a solid following, and has used her attempt at an Aussie accent in her shows. There's been practice on the accent since her last visit: "I have been listening to AA speaker podcasts from Melbourne and hope to wow crowds with my dead-on voice of a woman with two years' sobriety."

Once again, it's hard to tell if Maria Bamford is joking, or just being her slightly cracked but very human self.

JENNIFER WONG
Sydney

IT TAKES the eye of a natural comic to find something funny in a room full of people madly bandaging each other's arms on a first-aid course.

But for Sydney-based Jennifer Wong the sight of a bunch of people doing that, or learning how useful a towel can be in an emergency, was perfect stand-up fare.

Wong, 30, is one of the up-and-coming faces, having come to comedy via a degree, Bachelor of Asian Studies. She plucked up the courage to enter Triple J's national Raw Comedy competition in 2005, despite the fact she had not seen live stand-up.

"I didn't even know there were stand-up clubs in Australia," Wong says. She was egged on after winning a special mention, and

decided to enter again.

Stand-up comedy is notoriously fickle, though, and a disaster the following year almost derailed her. "I made the classic newby mistake of chastising the audience for not laughing at me," she says. "I thought, 'This is really awful, I'm really bad', so I went to Melbourne and booked myself into the (annual) Jeez Louise women's comedy workshop."

After a few days of comedy sessions and stage wisdom from more established women, Wong never looked back. She has since made a living from working in various arms of Australia's thriving comedy industry, including stints writing for Good News Week and work on Rove Live.

Wong's is a comedy festival success story, as one of the aims of the 25-year-old event is to nurture new talent. The young comedian says the advice she has received from successful working comics has been invaluable.

"A lot of people are very generous with their advice," she says. "You learn the importance of stage time and getting up as much as possible, and being diligent about your joke writing, and pace or that kind of thing."

Like all the best comics, Wong mines her life and the world as she experiences it for material -- even a first-aid course.

"I did a first-aid course last year for the first time and I just thought it was comedy gold -- there's something really funny about a room full of 35 people bandaging each other with pens on their arms to simulate stab wounds; it's silly and childlike and fun and it feels like you're playing dress-ups," she says.

She learned that, as a first-aider, one of your best friends in an emergency is a towel, which can function as a cushion, a pillow for the patient or even a bandage if there is nothing else.

Sitting in a room that looked like "a towel explosion had gone off in it", dotted with people lying in various weird positions, Wong wondered what a passer-by would make of it all.

She'll elaborate on this in her gig at the festival's Comedy Zone - and hers may be the one show where you accidentally learn how to save a life.

CAL WILSON

Melbourne via New Zealand

PROCRASTINATION is not the most attractive habit, and one that most of us would prefer to keep in the closet. It's all down to the "shame element", Kiwi-born comic Cal Wilson says. But rather than hide her little aversion to action, Wilson is making it work for her.

In fact, there seems to be a touch of the group therapy to her 2011 Melbourne International Comedy Festival show, *The Great Intender*.

"I am a champion procrastinator, the greatest procrastinator of all time," the popular radio and TV comic says. "I still have my wedding thankyou's from my wedding - three years ago. They are written and in the envelopes. Some are addressed; some are not even addressed!"

Wilson is up-front enough about her little problem to produce the thankyou's in her festival warm-up shows -- to the great dismay of some.

"One woman physically recoiled when I pulled out my thankyou cards, she was disgusted and appalled; laughing, but appalled," she says.

Thankfully, she has discovered through her audiences that she's not alone. Having invited people to confess their own delaying tactics, Wilson's spoiled for material. "One woman at a trial show had had someone's clarinet for 20 years. She asked for it back 10 years ago," she says.

Wilson is now a familiar face around the Melbourne comedy traps, having married Australian Chris Woods (hence the thankyou's), and become a permanent resident.

She still holds her home town, Christchurch, dear and had trouble putting on a happy face for two television tapings soon after the city's tragic earthquake last month.

"I've been glued to the internet and Skype, but everyone (in my family) is OK," she told me about a week after the quake. "I have an aunt and an uncle staying with my parents -- their place was badly damaged -- we've lost houses, but we're all alive. But I'm heartbroken for my home town."

Wilson was warming up her show when the earthquake news broke and says though she struggled to be light-hearted, the stage was separate enough from real life to help the show go on.

Audiences will know Wilson from her work on shows such as SkitHOUSE, Rove Live, Thank God You're Here, Good News Week and Spicks and Specks. But she dug her Australian comedy foundations at the Melbourne comedy festival, winning the Best Newcomer award in 2001. Since then, she's played to acclaim at the competitive Edinburgh Fringe Festival and sold out Melbourne comedy festival shows such as 2006's Up There, Cal Wilson.

The secret, she insists, is all in the (delayed) preparation. "When I'm preparing for a gig, I inevitably leave it quite late. My motto is, 'It's not Red Bull that gives you wings; it's fear that gives you wings'."

And judging by the positive feedback from The Great Intender warm-up season, Wilson's wings are still in fine - last-minute - form.

 CLAUDIA O'DOHERTY
 Sydney

ABOUT halfway through last year's Melbourne International Comedy Festival, the buzz about a show with an unlikely name - Monster of the Deep 3D - hit fever pitch.

It wasn't an IMAX movie but a one-hander by Sydneysider Claudia O'Doherty, who created an entire underwater world for her debut solo show.

Not only that, she took her audience with her, and by the end of the show had them all wearing her handmade, under-sea dioramas on their heads.

Such was the success of the quirky show, O'Doherty, 27, won the festival's Best Newcomer award.

O'Doherty is the daughter of Mental as Anything's Reg Mombassa, a musician and accomplished artist. "I think having a creative father makes you feel like a creative career is not a crazy idea," she says, "because you can see somebody else doing it. He's probably got a similar, odd, immature sensibility to me."

The title of her 2011 show? What is Soil Erosion?. Really.

"The idea of the show is that I, or a ridiculous version of me, want to make a TV show called What is Soil Erosion? but no one will put it on TV because it's so bad," explains O'Doherty. "So I've decided to stage it in 26 episodes in one hour."

O'Doherty picked the subject and the title simply because it sounded "so boring". She has every reason to believe people will come along anyway, given the riotous applause she garnered last year.

"I couldn't have been happier with how it went when I did my first show," she says. "I was just hoping that it wouldn't be an immense failure. So, for it to have been anything but a big failure was exciting and miraculous."

O'Doherty says it helps to have lots of comedy industry friends, including the much-loved Irish musical-comedian, David O'Dougherty (no relation), with whom she wrote the quirky but hilarious book 100 Facts About Pandas. Really.

 CAROLINE RHEA
 New York via Canada

SHE doesn't mean to, I'm sure, but Caroline Rhea can turn even a long-distance phone interview into an impromptu stand-up routine.

Today she can't take all the credit, though - her two-year-old daughter, Ava, is providing plenty of material.

Rhea, who Australian TV audiences will recognise as Hilda from Sabrina, the Teenage Witch, talks in a stream-of-consciousness wave as she tries to chat with Ava, and me, simultaneously.

Ava is not interested in getting out three books to read, having her milk or doing a drawing for her mother. But nice try.

"My daughter is exceptionally chatty. I'm not a braggy mother but she is gifted - with the personality of a Russian gymnastics coach," Rhea says. There is a nanny in the house, but the Canadian-born comedian is too much of a softie to ask her to take the toddler away. "I put more time and effort into my relationship with my nanny than with any other person," she jokes.

Like most comedians, she's quick to use the quirks of her family, and her late-in-life motherhood, in her shows. "I remember I was so crabby in my third trimester - I got gestational diabetes because I'd been acting like I was in a one-woman pie-eating contest," says Rhea, who was just shy of her 44th birthday when Ava was born.

She began her career as an actress and still does movie roles, but is best known for her humour. She even managed to bring some to the gruelling job of hosting the US Biggest Loser for three seasons.

Rhea takes a disarmingly simple approach to stand-up.

"I always like to think I'm having a dinner party, and I'm the host, and the audience are my guests," she says.

"I am conversational - I just like to engage and talk about things."

Everything in her act is true, including material about her mother's "demented" bridge friends. "They all love each other but they have these crazy names; they call each other things like Head Cow and Poisoned Dwarf. When I started on stage I just used to talk about (her mother), not realising what a loon she was."

- www.comedyfestival.com.au

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