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Comics Get a Pipeline to TV

By REBECCA ROTHBAUM



Claudio Papapietro for *The Wall Street Journal*
Comic Leo Allen performing in Corporate Retreat at the Upright Citizens Brigade's new theater last Monday.

At most New York comedy showcases, comics flog material in hopes of catching the eye of a talent scout. The cable channel Comedy Central is turning that formula on its head with a new showcase aimed at road-testing and polishing the talents it has already discovered.

For audience members, the twice-monthly showcase, Corporate Retreat, offers glimpses at the comedians who the network is betting could become the next Jon Stewart or Stephen Colbert. For the cable channel, the Retreat provides a way for executives to catch new talent while also strengthening its connection with New York's improv and sketch comedy scene.

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Comic Leo Allen performing in Corporate Retreat at the Upright Citizens Brigade's new theater last Monday.

"It's a nice way for us to be plugged into the comedy community—at the least," said Kent Alterman, the channel's head of original programming and production. "And at the most, it can turn into a TV show."

The series, which kicked off Nov. 7, is held at the Upright Citizens Brigade's recently opened East Village outpost. So far, Corporate Retreat has featured up-and-coming comedians such as John Mulaney, a "Saturday Night Live" writer and producer whose first hour-long Comedy Central stand-up special, "John Mulaney: New in Town," airs on Jan. 28; and Amy Schumer, who just signed a development deal with the network.

The showcase isn't the channel's only talent incubator. For the past seven years, the Comedy Central Stage at Los Angeles's Hudson Theater, a program geared toward developing show ideas and nurturing writers, has spawned a number of hits, including the series TOSH.0, which features comedian Daniel Tosh's politically incorrect commentary on viral Web videos, as well as "The Mind of Mencia" and "Crossballs: The Debate Show," among others. (The New York-based cable channel usually shoots 20 to 30 pilots a year.)

Back on the East Coast, Corporate Retreat fills a void left in 2009, when Comedy Central held a yearlong series of live shows at a now-defunct club on the Lower East Side, said Lisa Leingang, the channel's senior vice president of original programming and development.

Network executives say Corporate Retreat will be a mixed bag, offering some themed evenings such as the most recent event on Monday, in which stand-ups recited from and performed bits inspired by *Found* magazine, which collects ephemera such as discarded notes and letters. The next Retreat, to be held on Dec. 5, will screen a pilot starring comic and former "Flight of the Conchords" cast member Eugene Mirman.

"A lot of the time all we get to see performers do is stand-up," Ms. Leingang said. "This gives them an opportunity to exercise muscles they don't necessarily get to use and gives us the chance to see them do something a little different."

Comedian Leo Allen, who has lately been spending time behind the scenes as the executive producer of Comedy Central's sketch show "Jon Benjamin Has a Van," performed at the *Found* night. Along with an excerpt from the magazine, he read a letter he had written from the perspective of a cancer, a bit that drew nervous laughter from the audience.

Comedy Central's scouts continue to visit clubs in search of talent, but Ms. Leingang said the channel benefits from hosting its own live show. For one, the series introduces a slate of performers to the entire network at once—rather than coordinating group outings to several clubs—with the added bonus of feedback from a live audience.

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“In a way, it’s like we have a mini focus group here,” Ms. Leingang said.

Ms. Leingang said the channel was set on working with the Upright Citizens Brigade, and had been waiting for the company to finish renovating the former Two Boots Pioneer Theater and open its second New York location.

“We held on to the idea of this theater,” Ms. Leingang said.

From 1998 to 2000, the channel aired the UCB’s eponymously titled sketch comedy series, which featured then-unknowns like Amy Poehler, who went on to “Saturday Night Live” and now stars in NBC’s “Parks and Recreation.” The UCB theater has been among the city’s most important springboard for comics in recent years, and as such represents another way for Comedy Central to maintain ties to an ever-evolving comedy community.

Ms. Schumer, 30 years old, who will appear in three films during the next year alongside Steve Carell and Parker Posey, used her recent Corporate Retreat performance to develop new material, a risqué bit about wedding showers that she plans to use in her series pilot.

“What’s great about Corporate Retreat is that you’re getting a look at people as their star is rising,” she said. “Every comic wants to be booked on that show.”