

Stealing jokes isn't really bad, comedian declares

Following is a stand-up comic's view on joke stealing

By GARY DEVINE

So many people admire fresh and innovative entertainment, and yet so few entertainers are in fact original.

Take comedy. Robin Williams, star of the show "Mork and Mindy," is probably the biggest star to hit television since Henry Winkler.

Critics and the public marvelled at Williams' ability and originality. After the show's enormous success, there were articles circulating nationally saying that a number of Los Angeles-based comics accused Williams of

stealing their material and using it on his television show.

Loyally, these great admirers of Robin Williams were surprised and many sprang to his defense.

THE QUESTION I ask is: Why were these people surprised? Stealing material, or "lifting lines," as it is so quaintly called, is a common element in comedy.

Just ask Don Rickles or Milton Berle.

Jack E. Leonard used to say Rickles stole his entire act from Milton Berle will not deny he stole from everybody's material.

I hasten to remind the public that entertainers in centuries past were an unsavory lot, including con men and la-

ies of the evening. They applied their own well-developed shady practices to their new careers.

Even long-time entertainers that I have come to know since I've been in the business have told me everybody involved in comedy steals material — which means everybody.

There exists a fine line between actually stealing from another comic or emulating a comic, however. But is it sheer coincidence that most of the new comics are doing "wild and crazy" things in their act since Steve Martin became immensely popular?

These comics might not be using Martin's material per se, but they wish to pattern themselves after Martin. This, of course, is altogether different.

George Carlin will admit he patterned himself after Lenny Bruce. Surely Carlin doesn't act like Lenny Bruce, but there are similarities. It is natural for one professional to watch another professional at his craft; and if the observing person is interested in the craft, he might want to be as good as the performer but not necessarily like him.

REGARDLESS OF the choice of profession, coaches, teachers and parents have always told youngsters: "Watch the pros; watch how they do it." I will admit I admired George Carlin, Bill Cosby and David Frye. I don't know what similarities there are between those comics and myself, but those

were the three I watched intensely. Of course, I would not be so foolish as to try to use their material because they are so well renowned. There is nothing worse for a comedian than to stand up and tell a joke when the audi-

ence already knows the punch line.



Gary Devine specializes in political satire and in impressions of such personalities as Kermit the Frog, President Carter, Sylvester Stallone and Mayor Coleman Young.

Writer fell into stand-up comedy

By ETHEL SIMMONS

Gary Devine of West Bloomfield backed into stand-up comedy.

"In 1974, I never thought I would be a stand-up comedian," said the 6-foot-tall, curly haired entertainer who has a master's degree in English and speech communication.

"I knew what the trials and tribulations of a comic were," he said. "I spent a summer at Pine Knob as an

usher in 1973 and saw what these performers went through.

"I talked to the talent backstage. It was a rough road for a lot of them."

When Devine was out of a job, however, after cutbacks by the magazine distributor who employed him as a marketing representative, he decided to try comedy.

That was when the Comedy Castle in West Bloomfield and the Delta Lady in Detroit (now defunct) first began book-

ing local comics.

"I'D WRITTEN a sketch about Jimmy Carter and Coleman Young and a political convention. I've been writing skits like that ever since, for one and a half years," he said.

Devine writes all his own material, as do other local comics who are his friends. In contrast to some, who want to make it as big-name comedians, he centers his efforts on the writing.

"I would like to be known as a comedy writer, for TV, stage or screenplays," he said.

"Performing offers a different perspective," Devine said. People's reactions to jokes can be surprising, with

them rolling in the aisles over not especially funny ones and looking deadpan at jokes he thinks are boffo. "It baffles me."

Only recently, Devine was pinkslipped from his job as a teacher's aide in Birmingham. He worked at the main office and then Berkshire Junior High School before the cut.

But the performer keeps up his comedy capers at the Comedy Castle and also at Doug's Body Shop in Ferndale.

IN ADDITION, he has worked as an actor in television commercials. Mostly, he has been an extra, earning from \$50-\$100 for his stint.

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