

# A Room of Their Own

The Writers Behind *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*

BY  
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**“A Room of Their Own”**

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2012

**There is a nondescript brick building on West 52<sup>nd</sup> Street in New York City, where 150 people form a line around its corner. Jean Lau is in from Ann Arbor, Mich. At 83 years old, she stays up much later than my grandmother. Today, she is giddy with excitement to see the man she sits with each night—Jon Stewart—up close for a taping of his Comedy Central show.**

Amy Pines, a younger friend of Lau's, won their VIP tickets at an auction for Leukemia. Jenni Glysson, their third companion, says they left the wanting kids at home. An awkwardly swaying 18-year-old from Westchester, N.Y. stands behind them. Alex Neier is crammed next to two girls his own age. He has been a fan since 14. He gets his national news from Stewart's commentary every night—and he's not alone. Some 35 million Americans rely on television comedians to stay current on the country's politics and happenings.

Inside the studio is a dark auditorium with 216 seats set against three walls. There shines a single rim of bright oval light around an empty desk. Behind it there are blue and green neon lights simulating dials of a production room. The elusive host is nowhere in sight.

Stewart, whose profile has risen so drastically since coming to Comedy Central in 1999, will not appear for another hour when the taping begins around 6 p.m. The figurehead of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, arguably the beacon of insight in our time when it comes to the troubled mix between news media and the government, is still backstage. What he is doing or thinking on this day is any audience member's guess. Raring his verbal engine, watching his lips enunciate "the teeth, the lips, the tip of the tongue" to tune his comedic delivery—not likely. Being fed last-minute fuel about some new slipup in the Republican primary by the faceless group of writers that provide the basic content for his show—maybe. Taking the stage as the future of

democratic ideology inside a system that desperately needs perspective on the media, the government and the charade of American elections? According to his writers' room—"God, no."

If any of the staff writers who arrive to work each morning to an expansive second-floor office space above *The Daily Show* studio believe themselves to be the engine behind the segment's continued ingenuity, timeliness or success, they certainly won't tell you so. Head writer Tim Carvell, deferring to Stewart as most of the writers do, recalls a quote from the host after watching some poorly handled reporting moment on cable news: "I remember a couple of years ago Jon said at the office that at the most self-important moment, the most grandiose claim that we could make is that we're fundamentally serious people doing a very silly thing and often times on cable news there are very silly people engaged in a very serious thing."

While they may be the anonymous envy of struggling comedic writers everywhere and a real threat to graying news producers at Fox and MSNBC, the writers at *The Daily Show* are all ultimately nerds with inferiority issues. Or so says Elliott Kalan, who has been employed there for nine years.

"None of us fit the Hemingway, Fitzgerald-type—the moody writer, banging away on his typewriter at night and drinking to escape the pain," he says over chicken pad seal soup at an over-lit Thai restaurant in Chelsea. "But there are definitely a lot of the stereotypical writers here. I know that I think about things too much, or I feel things too much."

For a man of shorter stature and a nasal-based voice, Kalan has a hearty laugh that he's ill-afraid to use, whether to cue me into the fact that he's just made a joke or cover up his so-called personal insecurities. It's a Friday just after 7 p.m. when Kalan arrives from the studio, wearing a striped shirt, glasses and an overstuffed backpack. At 30 years old, he could pass for a freshman

in college—until he opens his mouth, offering superior wit, despite a relatively scattered thought process.

While I've interviewed a number of his colleagues in pursuit of some insight about what it is like to work on the show, Kalan speaks most candidly. "I would say not all, but most have a certain percentage of [nerd] in us. We are all damaged." When I ask what is damaged about Kalan, the boyish man remains general and smart. "Every person has different levels of emotional vulnerability, anxiety issues, under confidence, over confidence, lack of tact, shyness. Mine is a combination of lack of confidence and worrying too much about what other people think of me."

\*\*If you're interested in reading more, please contact me directly.