



Paula at Parties

By M. Faust

If comedy is ever outlawed, I don't know what alternative line of work Paula Poundstone might go into. Presumably she wouldn't want to go back to her old job at IHOP. One thing she probably wouldn't be good at, through, is spying. Sure, she's good at noticing details about things, that being the prime tool of the kind of observational comedy she's been doing since the 1980s. But if she were captured by the enemy, they wouldn't have to torture her to get her to tell them everything she knows. Ask her about any subject and she'll happily expound on it, albeit from her own skewed perspective.

Fortunately, it's still legal for her to use this skill for our entertainment. She's at a career high point lately with her regular appearances on the popular NPR comedy quiz show *Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me*, which airs on WBFO-FM Sunday mornings at 6am and 10am (It's worth skipping church for, but don't tell God I said so.) And she'll be in Buffalo this Friday night (October 16) at Buffalo State's Rockwell Hall, the occasion for which I spoke to her recently.

AV: The panelists on *Wait, Wait* have to answer questions about recent events that can be political or ridiculous or both. Do you guys cram before each show by reading lots of newspapers?

Poundstone: I'm ashamed to say that I do. I find that I can do pretty well just by reading the *New York Post*, which I hate, but you do what you have to do. Most of us know when the answer is Afghanistan or Iraq, but when the question is about a robber who held up a store using a watermelon, the *Post* is going to have that information.

It's the greatest job, and the hardest thing about it is that I don't always know when to jump in if I want to say something, cause there can be five or six people at one time trying to say something. I'm not good at that at parties either, knowing when the right moment is to jump into the conversation.

AV: At your live shows you always seem to like to interact with the audience. What proportion would you say is prepared material versus extemporized?

Poundstone: I like that word, "extemporized." I would say on a good night, and I like to think that most of my shows these days are good nights, maybe about a third of it. To me a show is like a cocktail party. You get there, you talk about how you had trouble parking and other routine chit-chat. Then someone says, "Hey, tell that story," and you tell that story you've told a hundred times. Then someone comes along that you don't know and you talk to them for a little and ask them who they are and what they do, then you tell another story...Actually I'm more concerned with the people at my shows, because they're going to see me again. These people at parties, I'm never going to see them again. So the audience is my friend, I go to them for support, and they're who sets the tone for the show.

AV: Who made you laugh when you were young?

Bill Cosby—my parents had all of his albums. Carol Burnett, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, Mary Tyler Moore, Lily Tomlin. I originally really wanted to be a comic actress, I guess it could still happen...Oh, and Bob and Ray! I was at a home for a while for kids they didn't know what else to do with, and I had a book of their radio scripts, which I used to read to the other girls. I was able to mimic their voices and their cadences perfectly, and they thought I was brilliant—they didn't realize that it was pure theft.



AV: You have three children you adopted in the 1990s. Are any of them nearing the age of leaving the house yet?

Poundstone: My oldest is a senior in high school. She's not going to college, and the thing with that is, how do you know when the day they leave is going to be? When they go to college, you get a schedule that says what the first day of class is, so you know when they'll be leaving the house. She still has a year of high school, but I don't see any kind of sign that she's even given any thought to the idea of someday leaving the house. I guess she still has some things to learn about living on her own.

I always remember with them that when I was their age, I never paid any attention to the things it turned out I needed to know. I would drive around with my parents. But when I got out of the house and had a car of my own, I never knew how to get anywhere because it had never occurred to me that I needed to pay attention.

When I had just moved away from home and had my first paycheck, I went to the grocery store to stock up on groceries. Because I figured that was the responsible, grownup thing to do. So I got everything I thought I would need, and it was like six bags. It didn't occur to me that I didn't have a car. So I had to stash them in the corner while I made three trips home.

AV: It's important to share those life lessons with your kids.

Poundstone: My 15-year-old asked me the other day, "Mom, do you have any dreams you're trying to achieve?" I told her, "Yeah, honey, I do. My dream is that the three of you kids will grow up to have choices and opportunities as adults." And she said, "I have a dream too. It's that I'll get to watch *17 Again* again, and that I can get *Orphan* when it comes out on DVD."

AV: You're a famous cat lover—

Poundstone: Oh, not so much today. I take pride that when people come over they say, gee, you would never know that you have cats [*latest count: 13*] except when you see them. I had this one chair that was just being the target of cat pee, so I dragged it out in the yard for a while to get it away from the cats. We just brought it back in, and within a day one of the cats had peed on it again.

AV: How many litter boxes do you have?

Poundstone: Just two. We just got another one because I'm going on this tour and just in case my assistant forgets I don't want the cats going crazy.

AV: Two boxes for 13 cats?

Poundstone: Yeah. I've gotten real good at sifting. It's the first thing I do in the morning and the last thing I do before I go to sleep. [*Sighs.*] When I was a kid my family had a couple of cats and it was my job to have to clean the litter box. And I always thought, when I get to be a grown-up I'll never have to do this disgusting job again. Little did I know. But at least I get a lot of material from my cats.

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