

Funny world

Local stand-up comedy takes a bow in Hong Kong, writes **Natasha Stokes**

The funniest place in Asia just might be Hong Kong. Not for Chinglish mistranslations or culture shock hijinks – but for the comedians who expound about them on home turf. Stand-up comedy with its inherent irony and sarcasm isn't quite in line with the punny, physical humour of traditional Chinese comedy, but times are changing with the opening of another comedy club.

The TakeOut Comedy Club opened in SoHo four years ago, and on April 1 is expanding over the harbour with its first shows in Tsim Sha Tsui. What once catered to a largely expat audience now holds three stand-up or improv shows a week, in Cantonese and English, with open-mic nights for each language and a far more diverse crowd that crucially includes plenty of Chinese faces.

"It's great to see more than 160 locals laughing in one room," founder Jami Gong says. "Our last two Chinese shows sold out and we have a bigger Chinese audience than four years ago. More and more people want to do stand-up, which is what we've always wanted."

Though Gong says his motivation isn't the money, the club has been taking in more revenue year on year, with a recent feature on TVB Jade drumming up awareness and larger crowds.

"Three things unite the world: sport, music and comedy. TakeOut was born in 2002 to hit

the local market. That's why we're expanding to Tsim Sha Tsui. Many locals don't come to our SoHo club as it is a Western area. So now we will go to them. We are growing, and I hope to break even one day," Gong says.

Many of the names on the TakeOut bill are amateur comics who have day jobs to pay the bills, although some are well known enough to draw income from being funny – such as Vivek Mahbubani, 28, a Hong Kong-born Indian who performs American-style stand-up in Cantonese and English. "I really think local audiences are getting into the style of stand-up the way we do it," he says. "People are slowly warming to the idea that non-celebrities can do comedy too. The goal is six laughs a minute."

Audience interaction, rapid-fire punchlines and sets that last just five minutes defy the traditional local comedy model where Hong Kong celebrities perform once a year with a two-hour monologue on a topic – money or the price of housing, and so on.

"People now come to shows early, sit in the front row and they're like 'Oh this will be fun, please talk to me'," says Mahbubani. "A bald guy who came up to me after one show, and told me that he'd just shaved his head and it was glowing and he was like, 'I hope I'll get picked on'."

Mahbubani teaches the Chinese stand-up workshop run by TakeOut Comedy, while Gong does the English ones. The club also organises improv workshops that have been successful enough to land many of its students on the tiny venue's stage.

Take Pete Grella, who performs with the People's Liberation Improv. The 43-year-old New Yorker arrived in Hong Kong four years ago. After a round with the improv and stand-up workshops, Grella now does both for the comedy club, including writing and performing with bilingual variety show Comedy Dim Sum.

"All of us here are starting out

with four or five years' experience tops," Grella says. "As far as local inspiration goes, it's seeing someone who's just a couple steps ahead of you are and going, I can be there."

TakeOut Comedy is also behind the Hong Kong International Comedy Festival, now in its fifth year and still Asia's only organised regional laugh fest. The line-up comprises Chinese- and English-speaking comics, with competitions held for the best in each language.

Last year's Chinese winner was Christopher M, a 32-year-old expat comic who performs in Cantonese as Kwan Ho-yin. One of his jokes introduces himself as an egg – consider the colour composition of the hard-boiled sort – and he is one of the many examples of the everyman comedian that local Hong Kong is laughing with.

The other show in town, Punchline Comedy Club, has a different approach. Rather than a venue, it's a comedy evening that

plays out once a month at a restaurant – Duetto, in Wan Chai's Sun Hung Kai Centre. Fifteen years ago, founder John Moorhead was working at Star TV when he decided to start a comedy night "for fun".

"I started Punchline rather along the lines of TakeOut Comedy, using local expats as the comedians – so it was more of an amateurs' night," he says. "That didn't have a long life span. I decided the best thing was to find professional comedians."

That was in 1994. Since then Punchline has offered triple-bill shows boasting veterans of the British circuit. Yet Moorhead doesn't see the same growth possibility for Hong Kong's comedy scene. "I've never made an excuse – my target audience is expatriates," he says. "I think that scene has been around long enough and it hasn't really gotten any bigger."

Instead, he is focusing on the growing expat enclaves on the mainland. "Its comedy scene is





getting bigger and bigger ... The expat community is growing, and it's not just in Beijing and Shanghai, it's the same in Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Suzhou and the second-tier cities, which is great."

In Hong Kong, the demand for professional acts is keeping Punchline in business. But Moorhead likens it to much of the local arts scene, where there are audiences for overseas productions, but not much for homegrown stuff. As is so often the case, the elephant in the room is money. Though the international comics who headline at TakeOut are paid, not all of Gong's local comedians enjoy the same. Of course they have day jobs, but it's both a blessing and a curse—comedians are able to perform free or cheap for cash-strapped venues, yet without money going round enabling artists to go full time, can the scene grow beyond what it is today?

Mahbubani isn't convinced the

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Vivek Mahbubani, comedian

money is the issue—yet. "The comedy scene hasn't matured enough to be a multimillion-dollar market," he says.

"It's one thing to say there's no money—but try to find an investor willing to put HK\$100,000 on a comic now. There's so much more potential for it to be big, and when it is ... compared to a year ago, there's been a big leap in quality of comics. The money will slowly come in—but is the supply [of quality comedians] going to be there when the demand comes in?"

Hong Kong comedy is still in its early stages. But with Gong making it his personal mission to develop local talents and engage local audiences, the opening of the TakeOut Kowloon branch could be a springboard to more. As Grella says: "We're building a scene that's so new. We have much more influence in building the platform for the next generation to take it even further."

Whatever happens, Moorhead,

Gong and Mahbubani agree that Hong Kong can be one of the strongest centres for comedy in Asia—Moorhead from the point of view as a hub for international headliners; Gong and Mahbubani from the perspective of local talent.

"We've been given one thing a lot of countries don't have," Mahbubani says. "We actually have a venue to perform in. It's a comedy club and that's all it does."

From next weekend, there'll be one more, and perhaps before much longer, our local comedians will be laughing all the way to the bank.

TakeOut Comedy Club, B/F 34 Elgin St, Central, and (from April 1) Fat Angelo's, Shop B, B/F, The Pinnacle, 8 Minden Ave., Tsim Sha Tsui, inquiries: 6220 4436; Punchline Comedy Club, Duetto, 2/F Sun Hung Kai Centre, 30 Harbour Rd, Wan Chai, inquiries: info@punchlinecomedy.com

Whether expat or local, laughter is serious business to bilingual Hong Kong-born comic Vivek Mahbubani (above); comics at the Punchline Comedy Club (left). Photos: Kenneth Lim, John Moorhead