

Part 3

You are going to read a magazine article. For questions 13–19, choose the answer (A, B, C or D) which you think fits best according to the text.

A career in comedy? It's no laughing matter!

At one time the notion of a career on stage may have been frowned upon by certain sections of society, but nowadays parents would be well advised to actually push their offspring into the safe and lucrative world of comedy. If the number of awards, the profusion of clubs and the amount of lucrative broadcasting work available are anything to go by, comedy is the new accountancy. Where once a stand-up comedian would have to endure years on the circuit of small-time venues and get paid in free drinks and curled-up sandwiches, comedians can now work in several media and even be paid a regular salary for writing jokes for TV and media. The live comedy circuit has mushroomed and the general public seem to have an insatiable appetite for comedic talent both in front of and behind the camera.

'The advent of multi-channel TV is behind this comedy revolution', says William Burdett-Coutts, artistic director of one of the top venues for comedy during the famous Edinburgh Festival Fringe. 'I put it down to when television programmers at Channel 4 created a new interest in comedy. That's what sparked it off, and now with so many channels there are hours of airtime to be filled. There is a fairly constant demand for new talent.' The festival sees the culmination of five comedy awards that are regarded in the industry as one long audition for lucrative TV work. 'The eventual winners will possibly get guaranteed runs at the prestigious Montreal and Melbourne comedy festivals but the ultimate lure for many, though, is the thought of being snapped up by a top agent', he says.

Edinburgh is only one of the many comedy festivals in Britain where comedians can ply their trade. Several other British cities have festivals but Burdett-Coutts cautions that it's not all milk and honey for those seeking fame and fortune. 'Manchester struggles to keep its venues going, Newcastle has closed them all, and London is a hard one to crack as there is so much going on there all the time. There are many, many comedians who have been around for years without a breakthrough.' Nevertheless, he still maintains that there's room for another comedy festival

in a seemingly overcrowded market and points out that October sees the opening of the Brighton Comedy Festival.

Despite the risk of obscurity, the openings for talented funny people are many and varied – and it's not necessarily performers that TV wants to lure. As Lisa Thomas, director of an agency which handles several top comics, says, 'Not so long ago, TV producers would want to see someone up there performing live, and audience reaction was the bottom line. What you have these days is a concern with the comic's creative potential. They may think someone doesn't quite have it on stage, but has a talent that could be put to better use coming up with ideas for sketches in established TV shows or even for editing scripts.'

While Thomas welcomes the extra money and audience interest that awards attract, she believes they are hardly an automatic guarantee of well-paid comedy life, but rather they act as an industry 'shop window'. 'They are definitely the foot in the door', she says. 'The awards do secure work for newcomers and a lot of them feel they have to pay their dues and do live performance for a couple of years before they can call themselves a comedian. It certainly helps in terms of knowing whether a joke is "sayable" or if the timing's right when they go into writing or production.'

One comedian who made the deviation from delivering the jokes himself to writing for others is Phil Whelans. Although he does the occasional live performance and voiceover work for commercials, he now considers himself a writer and made the career change in the late 1990s after his comedy act with a partner broke up. 'I couldn't face starting over, doing try-out sessions', says Whelans. 'The scene is so diluted now – there are hundreds of competent, blandish, slightly uninteresting stand-ups who I would be up against and my heart sank at the thought.' And the money? 'The rates vary wildly', says Whelans, who is currently devising an improvised sitcom for TV. 'I've seen writers turn ashen with jealousy when they hear what others can earn, but believe me, it's a very decent living for most.'

- 13 What does the writer state about a career in comedy in the past?
- A Comedians used to expect a reasonable salary.
 - B There was a range of awards comedians could aim for.
 - C It offered a longer career than most comedians achieve today.
 - D It was not always regarded as a respectable profession.
- 14 According to William Burdett-Coutts, comedians often take part in the Edinburgh Festival
- A to challenge current notions of comedy.
 - B to secure more work in the future.
 - C to appear to as diverse an audience as possible.
 - D to compete with each other for money.
- 15 What does Burdett-Coutts state about the current opportunities for comedians?
- A A career in comedy may not always be rewarding.
 - B Comedians should avoid venues in large cities.
 - C There are many inadequate comedians seeking work.
 - D The launch of another festival is fairly pointless.
- 16 According to Lisa Thomas, TV producers are looking for comedians who
- A are capable of producing material for others.
 - B come across as confident in live performance.
 - C enjoy a good rapport with their audiences.
 - D are realistic about their chances of success.
- 17 What does Lisa Thomas say about comedy awards?
- A They ensure comedians gain experience before entering comedy festivals.
 - B They usually mean that comedians will enjoy a successful career.
 - C They lead to opportunities where comedians can experiment with material.
 - D They help comedians decide which branch of comedy they are suited to.
- 18 Why did Phil Whelans choose to become a comedy writer?
- A He felt he was no longer at competition standard.
 - B He believed he would earn a regular salary as a writer.
 - C He had found it difficult to work as part of a team.
 - D He did not have the enthusiasm to develop a new act.
- 19 The writer's overall purpose in writing this text is to
- A dissuade people from taking up a career in comedy.
 - B explain the steps necessary to gain success as a comedian.
 - C highlight the positive and negative aspects of being a comedian.
 - D illustrate the kind of comedy which will have most public appeal.