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Context to the nugget

Atul speaks about how he derives inspiration from legends like Anand Bakshi and Kishore Kumar to ensure that he creates material that has value a few months down the line. He speaks about resisting the temptation to pander to the “flavour of the month”. He also speaks about the effort involved in creating a special show. He suggests that it takes about a year of work to create an hour of good quality stand up material.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): True. And the other thing about stand-up... I want to sort of wrap up talking about Covid in a couple of minutes Atul, but maybe before going there, one of the things I respect about stand-up is just the amount of refining that you have to do of material for it to find its way on stage, right. It's almost like you take some two hours of material and then in five minutes makes its way to the stage. So maybe to make it specific, if we took the Netflix special you had early 2019, give us a sense of the lifecycle of a joke for it to find its way into the stage. What is the extent of refining that one has to do?

Atul Khatri (AK): So just to let you know, to write I would say, if you have seen most of the comedy specials or comedians across the world, the big ones, like a Dave Chappelle, so they have a special every 1-1.5 year, okay. So, 1-1.5 is typically each special is around an hour. So, it takes them one-and-a-half year to write one hour of material, which if you break it down would mean like 3-4 minutes a month of jokes. And you will say oh, 3-4 minutes for just one joke, sorry one-month *mai* you will just get three 3-4 minutes of jokes. I said, yes, so that's a problem. So, what happens is, in India, what happens is that like you have a show, you do very well and a fan watches you for the first time and probably he is watching comedy, he or she is watching comedy for the first time. He said wow, she's blown away, and she's blown away by Atul Khatri. Then next week also you have a show, they again buy tickets and they come there and say... and after the show they are very disappointed. Sir, we are very disappointed, we feel cheated. I say what happened. Sir you repeated the same jokes. I said ma'am, if you see Dangal today, you see Dangal tomorrow, Amir Khan will still have two daughters, so he doesn't have a third daughter in the next week. So, it's like that. So, people don't understand the... sometimes to write a special would take like people two years to write one... so I will tell you journey of a joke. In my case, everybody has a different process. I have thoughts in my head, thought which I expand in my head; I keep on expanding in my head. The process which I use for me is I love to, as I told you earlier, I go for long walks alone, I keep my phone off and that is my time me time and I stay in Juhu in Mumbai which is close to the beach. So typically, you will see me on a non-monsoon day I will be on the beach, I mean, obviously not in the Covid because the beach was not allowed but now, they have opened up. But you will see me on the beach alone and talking to myself and so a person who doesn't know anything, this dude's gone mad, talking to himself

without any headphone. But I sort of rehearse my own jokes there, I build up my set, then one day I will probably sit in on a laptop and I will put everything down because when you put it on your laptop you tend to get more jokes out of it or more tags out of it. And then the only way to try out comedy is on a stage. So, I will probably go to a comedy open mic or within my main show I will try five minutes of new material and whether it will work or not work, it depends, and a lot of people have different procedures, processes. And that's how you build five minutes; you will take that 5 to 7 to 8 to 10 to finally 60 minutes, so you build up a new set. So typically, you have an old set, you keep on adding new jokes, try removing your old jokes out, add new jokes, remove old jokes, and finally after a year or year-and-a-half you have an entire one hour of new jokes. So, it's a very, very tedious process and in that time period it may happen that some topical jokes may just die. You had a joke on X guy and that guy just passed away, the entire five minutes' joke routine goes away or something could change which could that joke could totally you have to throw away that joke or that entire five-minute routine. So, yeah, it's all that thing and you write some new material or... so typically I tend to not write very topical jokes, if you have a topical thing, so if you have to write about, I don't know about anything like demonetization...

DJ: The shelf life becomes limited, right?

AK: Yeah, yeah so which maximum like people will remember it for like four or five months, even though it's a hot topic people will remember fine after that people themselves will say please move on *yaar*. You know, we have moved on, you have moved on. Like in the Covid now, I am sure when I go up on stage; I have not written one Covid joke. First of all a lot of jokes are already there and I don't want because I think once you get out, you don't want to hear Covid, I think you are sick and tired of Covid, you have heard all the jokes, it's not a positive experience that you want to hear about it again. So, I think, yeah so topicality I try to avoid. I always compare people like the old Anand Bakshi lyrics or Kishore Kumar songs, even today they sound so good because they were so well written. So I tell all comedians write your every joke should be like a Anand Bakshi lyric or a Kishore Kumar like a song with some other good like, who were the other good lyricist verbal are... Javed Akhtar or write your songs so... write your material so that after 10 years also people should listen to it, laugh at that joke and it should not get topical, it should still be fresh, it should still be may be relevant or not, it should still be funny.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This reminds me of something that Papa CJ (CJ), another stand-up comedian, said in my conversation with him.

CJ: "The best pieces of advice that I got when I was starting out was, it's very important for you to grow in the dark because the second you hit the limelight, you don't have the freedom to screw up, so I find that nowadays people are too much in a hurry to get famous or to get rich or to get opportunities, but if you get an opportunity that is too big for you and fail, it might be a while before people look at you again, so for me what I love doing is, going away back into the dark, experimenting, growing, trying to come up with something new and then coming out to present that. I find nowadays people are trying to learn the tricks of the trade before they learn the trade, it's very important for you to focus on your trade find the passion get involved in it become good at it like today for example I have comedians who says what's the secret how do I get ahead I tell them see if you want to compete as an international comedian you need one hour of bullet proof good material. Now a new comedian does five minutes, I tell them the second you have got five minutes as brilliant, you don't have to go to every show and be brilliant for those five minutes, you take those five

minutes and you stick them away in a bank, then you create another five, then another five until you got that bullet proof one hour, then you come out and announce yourself to the world”

DJ: In a way, I could connect with what Atul says. When I think about the content we are creating at the Podcast, we hope that it doesn't have a shelf-life of a few weeks or months. Hopefully, people will find some of this content of value even a few years down the line. This march is my attempt to build something of value for life. Anand Bakshi and Kishore Kumar are good benchmarks in this journey of building this labour of love, brick by brick.

Thank you for listening. If you are enjoying this conversation, you might also like my conversation with Papa CJ, another stand-up comedian who transitioned from a career in Management Consulting to discovering Stand up. You might also like the way Amish Tripathi transitioned from a career in Financial Services to writing or how Atul Kasbekar transitioned from studying Chemical Engineering to becoming a Photographer and subsequently a producer. You might also like the playlist reinventing self where several leaders speak about how they thought about their journeys when they were at cross roads. To access this, please go to playtopotential.com and curated playlists section.

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Papa CJ that is referenced: [Lessons from a journey in Stand-Up](#).

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Atul Khatri - Nuggets

- 61.00 Atul Khatri The Full Conversation
- 61.01 Atul Khatri - The mid-life angst
- 61.02 Atul Khatri - Seeds of a career in Stand up
- 61.03 Atul Khatri - Fertilizing a new possibility
- 61.04 Atul Khatri - Riding two horses
- 61.05 Atul Khatri - Finding your voice
- 61.06 Atul Khatri - Passion versus Pragmatism
- 61.07 Atul Khatri - Writing evergreen material
- 61.08 Atul Khatri - Coping with Covid-19

About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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