



Stand-up guise

From doctors and pig farmers to psychologists and maths whizzes, comedy attracts all sorts. **John Elder** meets four uncommon performers.

DID you hear about the constipated mathematician trying to write a comedy routine? "He works it out with a pencil," says Simon Pampena. He then tells me: "I don't actually tell jokes. I work with concepts."

For six years, Pampena was a well-paid statistical analyst for the Fosters Group, constructing models of future wine sales: a dry job for a man who talks to the universe with pieces of chalk on a blackboard. He believes there is no greater truth to be found than in pure mathematics.

In his spare time, the 34-year-old Pampena has been trying with some style and much enthusiasm to turn the world on to mathematical concepts via stand-up comedy.

"Maths ideas are really cool and amazing, and comedy is amazing and abstract," he says. "So it seems natural for me to find a way to link them up."

He was, when we spoke, in the middle of preparing for his latest Melbourne International Comedy Festival show: *Super Mega Maths Battle for Planet Earth*.

The show is built on audience participation: Earth is under attack from the planet Calculus! Every audience member must help Pampena learn as much maths as possible for a showdown with a thought machine.

At one point he does a rave about the inherent fairness of a Toblerone chocolate bar (with 12 pieces, it can be shared equally with two, three, four, six or 12 friends) and the fundamental selfishness of a packet of Tim-

Tams (11 biscuits, can't be shared equally with anyone else but the owner). "What you're really getting here is a lesson about prime numbers," he says cheerily.

It's a bit late to say "don't give up your day job" because a few weeks ago Pampena did just that: abandoning his secure six-figure career in a failing economy to devote himself full-time to sharing the uncelebrated hilarity of trigonometry.

How are the crowds adding up? His 2008 festival show, *The Maths Olympics* played to 60 to 80 people a night. "It used to be around 20 to 30 . . . I remember one gig where there were six people and I was doing a numbers joke that needed seven people."

In the past year, Pampena has had a number of breakthroughs. The ABC and the Federal



Government funded a national tour of *The Maths Olympics* during national science week. The highlights were two sold-out shows at the Darwin Entertainment Centre.

Pampena has three things going for him:

1. It's a concept so wild and crazy it just might work. After all, there is something deliciously ridiculous and improbable about a man on stage going: "What are we here for? Maths. Yeah. Come on."

2. He's very likeable in that he moves and talks with the manic energy of a Muppet. It could be argued he looks like one, with his wild afro and beard and black-rimmed glasses. "My character is me," he says. "Pretty much a rocket packed full of maths enthusiasm.

My performance energy is the heart of the act, it brings everyone to life so the audience will take the ride with me."

3. Australian kids are having such a bad time with maths that someone has to come to the rescue. It's his potential as a touring classroom comedian — his mother was a teacher — that makes viable Pampena's departure from the corporate world.

"The Federal Government is backing me for another tour this year (of *Super Mega Maths Battle for Planet Earth*), schools want me to come and inspire the kids and the ABC is interested in doing maths TV," he says.

MARYANNE CAMPBELL is another comedian with

M an evangelising mission based on her day job. Campbell is a psychologist who once worked in Goulburn jail and ran one of the country's first alternative detox programs in the early '90s. Her humour takes a chainsaw to traditional psychiatry and the practice of labelling people with disorders.

Campbell has little confidence in talk of chemical imbalances and genetic disposition. Her view is that anxiety and depression are natural defences to the dangers of the outside world — and that psychiatry merely numbs people to their reality.

"How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb? Who





cares? They turn everyone's lights off anyway," she says.

Her festival show *Psychiatry, A Cure for Sanity* builds on that theme via a series of raves soaked with scorn. "It's a natural leap from psychology to comedy. We study pain for seven years. It's a great motivation to tell the truth . . . because I think the comedy space is wasted on tits and bums. It's the most democratic space in the world. Sometimes with the comedy I wonder if I'm doing counselling on a big scale."

Campbell, based in Canberra, uses humour with her clinical patients "to help them get enough distance from their pain and understand why they are so scared of the world". She won't be going full-time with comedy any time soon.

"It's a difficult balance," she says.

"Seventy per cent of my time is taken up with the practice . . . I do about two gigs a week. And I'm getting a few speaker gigs on the corporate scene."

Does she need to take a pill after a bad night on stage? The short answer is no. The long answer is a story about Robin Williams — the comic superstar who no longer takes cocaine but forever talks as if he's on it — coming to one of her disastrous gigs.

She says: "It was shocking. He came up and said, 'You were crap. Good on you.' It was great."

For the last word, she offers this professional view of Williams: "He doesn't exist unless he's doing comedy . . . I think he's an extrovert who has never come to terms with sitting with himself and learning what the introverts get out of life."

"I think we need balance."





STRUGGLING to find balance in his work/life is Beechworth-based Adrian “Drongo” Osborne, a father of two whose dream was to work as little as possible and who now juggles many jobs — including pig farmer, caricaturist and performer with the musically comic Bongo Brothers.

Says Osborne: “I was mainly making a living from drawing people. And then I married a farmer’s daughter.”

Pig farming, he says, “is a hobby that got out of control . . . a few years ago I was given a pet pig named Crackles. She was two years old and cute, now she’s 150 kilos. Once she had piglets we went from there . . .”

It’s a small operation, for gourmet consumption. “The pigs are well loved and Crackles herself is not destined for the pot.”

Life could have been quiet if not for Osborne’s other hobby, playing with the Bongo Brothers. “It’s threatening to become a real job,” he says of the 30,000

kilometres travelled last year, playing school gigs to children aged six to 12.

It was a canny age group to target. “The nappy-fillers are well catered for but there’s nothing for the older kids until they become teenagers. We play a lot of musical styles . . . and for many of them it’s their first live musical experience. The great thing is, the show’s over at 3pm and you’re not dealing with

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SIMON PAMPENA

drunks and late hours, no pub crowds falling all over your gear.”

Of course, the comedy arena isn’t something you fall into. As Campbell admits, it feeds a need. Not to get into labels, but for some it’s akin to narcissism. “We’re as vain as peacocks,” she says of the comic fraternity.

Pampena baulks at the idea of egotism being at the heart of what he does. “I just get giddy when I’m around funny people. I’m excited by what other people do . . . But it’s true that comedians can be very competitive . . . and some of them will try and outdo you.”

He talks about various comedians who tried developing maths-nut characters. “They missed the point. For me, it’s all about the maths itself.”

For some comics it’s about blowing off steam.

DR SEAN FABRI is a medical adviser. He helps doctors from overseas get up to speed. His motivation for comedy is “thrill-seeking . . . and thinking on your feet. It’s an addictive activity.” And given that his arena is ensemble improv, “it isn’t about ego at all. You need your fellow performers to do well. It’s not all about you.”

A member of *Late Nite Impro*, Fabri, 36, has performed in the US and considers his troupe to be world class. But he doesn’t feel he could make a living from it. And he

doesn’t want to go full-time anyway.

“I want it all,” he says. “I love medicine and biology and solving problems, and I love performing with other people. Medicine is a right-brain activity. Comedy is a left-brain activity. I started doing both at the same time and those two parts have integrated. When you’re a doctor, you’re communicating with people . . . sometimes about very difficult things.”

Rather than taking his day job to the stage, like Campbell and Pampena, it’s more the case that Fabri’s improvisation skills come in handy teaching the young doctors how to break the worst news.

He says: “It’s pretty confronting to have to tell a patient they have six months to live. Especially if you’ve never done it before. The best way to work up to that is role play . . . I can play that patient and we can work through it in a safe setting. I know what the patients are likely to say and how they will respond.”

Another advantage of improv is, if Fabri’s medical duties make him run late to a performance, the rest of the troupe can carry the slack. “Because nothing’s scripted. If I’m not there, or if I’m off the boil, the show goes on. Which is the important thing.”

Super Mega Maths Battle for Planet Earth, April 3-19, The Bosco, City Square; *Psychiatry, A Cure for Sanity*, April 7-18, Northcote Town Hall, Studio 2; the Bongo Brothers present *Surf Safari*, April 3-25, The Bosco, City Square; *Late Nite Impro*, April 3-25, The Bosco, City Square. For further details go to comedyfestival.com.au/season/2009.



Clockwise from above: comic malts while Simon Pampena amps up the volume; improv king Dr Sean Faber is all heart; Arthur Osborne with his pig, Crackle. PHOTOS: SHARLA HENCKS (OSBORNE); CHRIS SULLIVAN