

Standing Up

David Letterman's Comedy Booker Eddie Brill Turns into a Teacher at Gotham Comedy Club

By Jim Bessman
Special to New York Resident

He's David Letterman's warm-up comedian and comedy talent booker, Robert Schimmel's favorite opener, and an estimable stand-up here and abroad in his own right. Indeed, New York native Eddie Brill is set to appear Aug. 6 on Comedy Central's new *The World Stands Up* series of stand-up comedy performances in London.

But on July 17 and 18, Brill incorporates his comedy into one of his favorite stateside pastimes — *teaching*. Returning to his semiregular educational gig at the Gotham Comedy Club, Brill will conduct an intense one-day workshop limited to 12 participants and aimed at advancing the careers of midlevel comics, plus a seminar for any stand-up looking to host and emcee.

"In college, I taught a program of comedy improv mixed with interpersonal communication — which is very important for performers because it helps you learn who you are and what makes people tick," said Brill, who double-majored in communications and speech, with a focus on psychology and

"But the thing that separates me is the fact that I'm *me* onstage — and no one else can be me onstage. And that goes for every comic: Once you realize it, you grow by leaps and bounds."

Brill would eventually excel in comedy such that aspiring comedians approached him for private guidance.

"It was great, but it took up so much time," he recalled. "So the best way to do it was through a workshop."

But Brill, who also holds workshops in Boston and Vancouver, brings his students into his act.

"I make them teach as well, because that's how you really learn a lot," he said. "I also have everyone go up for five minutes and have the rest of the class give criticism. You can tell a lot about a person's intelligence and emotional levels by the way they help others, and when it's their turn you can see how they become a different person than the one who was teaching."

The workshops, Brill continued, offer participants "the one chance in a lifetime for us to be honest with each other."

"People just kissing our ass doesn't help us as performers," he explained. "A lot of times in this industry, people just bulls--t you, but at my workshop it's time to be honest. It's tough, but it's the way you have to learn."

But comedy really can't be taught, Brill emphasizes.

"You either have it or you don't," he said. "The only thing you can do is give direction. But I also stress that this is really a long haul: You can't just do a couple years and be great. There's a lot of bulls--t, a lot of rejection — people who don't know what they're doing. If you can't handle that, this isn't the business for you."

But it's incumbent on the business, Brill asserts, to help steer young people down the proper comedic path.

"We've trained people to laugh at easy sophomoric comedy, trained them to take the easy way out," he said. "What I try to do teaching — and also as booker at *Letterman* — is to bring back the art of stand-up comedy where you go onstage and tell jokes or make observations, and it all comes from the heart and brain, makes people think and feel — and laugh." ■



Professor of Punch Lines: Brill teaches at Gotham club

creative writing, at Emerson College in Boston. Although he didn't enroll to become a comedian, he fell in with the likes of Steven Wright and Denis Leary and ended up with his own brand of off-beat comedy.

"I talk a lot about language because it's always fascinated me," Brill said by way of example. "For instance, we impose names on other countries: Spain, for example, is really Espagne. But we call it Spain, and not only do we call it Spain, but we force people from Spain to call it Spain — which isn't its name! Or look at the letter c: It doesn't have its own sound. It uses k's sound and s's. If you don't have your own sound, get out of the alphabet."

More information on Eddie Brill's (eddiebrill.com) classes at the Gotham Comedy Club (34 W. 22nd St., 212-367-9000) is available at gothamcomedyclub.com. E-mail responses to editor in chief Mark Rifkin at markr@resident.com.