

Judah Friedlander on maintaining creative control



January 22, 2018 -

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2741 words.

Tags: [Comedy](#), [Film](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [First attempts](#), [Independence](#), [Politics](#).

You recently released your first official stand up special, *America is the Greatest Country in the United States*, which seems like a rite of passage for most popular comedians. Why did you wait so long to do it? You must have had lots of opportunities before now?

Well, first of all, I don't like most stand-up specials. I don't like the way they're produced. I've been doing stand-up since 1989. I think almost every time, or maybe every time I've done stand-up on TV, it was such a different experience than being at a regular stand-up show. They create such a fake environment. If I was gonna do one, I wanted to do it my own way.

I've acted in a lot of TV and a lot of movies. When I was a kid I used to do my own animated movies, short movies, whether it was drawing animation or doing clay animation. I would make short movies when I was in my late teens and 20s on super 8 as well as 60 millimeter, then later I would do things on video. So as an actor, as a comic, and then as someone who's a filmmaker, I've done many different jobs over the years and I found that there's many different ways to make a movie or TV show. But typically the way show business works, they all do it the exact same way. There's very little creativity in the actual filmmaking process, in general. In independent films, you're more likely to find some different styles of filmmaking that are outside the mainstream, but even then not so much.

This stand-up special I made is basically a performance film. That's what it is. I made it on my own, I had no deal in place when I made it, I just made it. I filmed over multiple nights and I filmed with small, semi-professional cameras. The industry would not call them professional cameras. I tested out different cameras and for what I wanted and the look I wanted, professional cameras were not the way to go. They were out of my budget, but also they were not what I wanted to use. They were too intrusive.

Usually when they make these specials, they have it set up for camera first, performance second, maybe even third. They take out audience seats for the camera and camera crew and dolly track. They'll change the lighting and the sound and generally they don't check with the performer on any of that. They often get a fake audience. They have professional audience gatherers who get the audience together. It's all a fake thing. It's not like a real show.

As a result, most professionals look fake. It doesn't present a real stand-up comedy show. It's some type of a performance, some type of a film performance, but it's not a real stand-up comedy show. I've turned down specials over the years for these kind of artistic reasons. I've also turned things down due to content reasons, when there were things they wouldn't want you to talk about, or words they didn't want me to say.

Also, the contracts for these things generally favor whoever's in power. The contract I have for this one isn't great, but I just wanted to get it out there. One thing that's cool about Netflix is that they have a 24/7 platform, and it's also an international platform, so I'm glad they picked it up.

One thing fascinating about your special is that it calls attention to its own process. For example, you show how the same bit get a totally different response on a different night with a different audience.

I ask a lot of questions of the audience, so maybe their answers are exactly the same but each night I have a different response for them. I show the same question, different night. Over the film's credits it's basically me responding to some of the same audience questions that you already heard, but with different jokes.

From an outside perspective, that feels like a true glimpse into what it might be like to do stand-up. The same material can land so many different ways depending on who's in the room.

That's for sure. Stand-up is a combination of a monologue and a dialog. To be honest, not every stand-up works the same. Some stand-ups really do start from point A and then they go to point B, etc. and it really is the same every night. Some nights the audience responds more than others. I don't work that way. My show is very interactive.

Has it always been that way?

Yeah. My show's a mix of jokes and stuff I'm making up 100% on the spot. I kind of run a mock town hall. When I tell the audience to ask me questions, I don't know what questions they're going to ask me. I have no idea, but over a period of time, when I get the same question, I always try to mentally file it away. The first time I hear the question I come up with some kind of a response and joke on the spot, immediately. A few nights later, if I get that same question again, I will try to do that same joke I created that week before but try to make it better. I'll also try to build off of it and add more to it on the spot.

After a short period of time, something that might have at first just been a one-word or one-short-joke response, is now a two or three-minute response filled with seven jokes. The healthcare bit that you see in my special, that's a culmination of something that developed over many nights. That's material that I essentially wrote over a period of time on stage. I didn't write those off stage, I wrote those on stage, in front of people, and over a period of time I created a long-extended bit out of it. Some people are different. Some people write their whole act off stage and then they go onstage and they do the act. I never worked that way. Mine is a mix of writing off stage and onstage.

When you are shooting a TV show or a film, is it important to still always be doing stand-up wherever you are?

Yeah, I don't take many breaks. Usually for Christmas and New Years I take off and just don't do anything. That's really about it. Otherwise, I don't really take breaks. I generally work seven nights a week. Sometimes I'll take a night off but I usually prefer not to.

If there's a time when you're forced to take a break-maybe because of other work-does it feel weird? Is comedy like a muscle that you need to constantly be exercising in order to be good?

Yeah. I think stand-up is something that theoretically you can improve at. The hope is that you can always be getting better. Theoretically, if you work hard, you should be able to keep getting better for a long time. It's not like athletics where you have a short window and your body gives out. Athletes generally go about 10 years and then they start fading off. With comedy, you should theoretically keep getting better forever.

Still, sometimes taking breaks is good. We're not robots. Sometimes you have to take time off and just live life and you can then create material off of that. When I was doing *30 Rock* I was still doing stand-up all the time, but I couldn't do it as much. Even when you're not actually filming, you've still got to learn your lines for the next day or for the next two days, you've got to be ready. Generally, when you're filming, I think it's great to be a couple days ahead if you can, or maybe even three days ahead with memorizing all the lines and stuff. Often with how fast paced things are, you have to learn things quickly. Sometimes you have zero days to remember things, sometimes you have a day. So with *30 Rock* even though I was still doing stand-up all the time, I did have to cut back. It almost felt like, "Okay, maybe I'm not progressing all that much, but I'm just maintaining and staying where I'm at."

Does it feel important to have control over your creative output as much as possible? And is that a hard thing to maintain, even as a stand-up?

Sure. The reason why I turned down some of these special offers for years is because stand-up is the main thing I do. It's the most personal thing I do, and I don't want anyone to fuck with it. There is so much you can't control in the world, why would you hand over your personal art to someone else? It's one thing of you make that decision to go on a late-night talk show, or one of those types shows where it's one comic hosting and then three comics doing short sets, when you make the decision to do that, you're on someone else's show. When you go on a late-night talk show, you know what you're getting into. You know there's going to be a certain amount of censorship. If you know that going into it, then I'm comfortable with

making the decision, yes or no. When a network presents you with, "Oh, we're going to give you your own special! You can do your own stand-up comedy for this." And then afterwards you find out, "Oh, there's actually all these restrictions," then I don't want to do that. It's always presented as something without restrictions, but then that is almost never actually the case.

I wanted to protect this thing that feels important to me. I wanted to do it in a way that didn't feel compromised. I probably filmed my own sets for a year before I figured out how I wanted to film them, so it just looked like a natural show that you're watching. After about a year of filming shows almost every night, I finally figured out, "Okay, here's where I can point the cameras and the styles I can do of this filming." Then with editing, I just spent months figuring that out.

When you are making something that forces you to closely watch yourself, how does that feel? It seems like it could be both an illuminating look at your own process and kind of a nightmare of self-consciousness.

It was a mix. Another reason I hadn't just made my own special before had to do with my own mental hangups with listening to and watching myself. If you have certain mental issues, as I do, having to be all alone just watching and listening to yourself can make those mental issues worse. I can also be too much of a perfectionist. I could film and film and say none of it's quite right and then just never put it out. I had to attack that feeling so that I could finally be like, "Okay, this isn't perfect but I need to just get it out there show people." That was a big hurdle for me.

Because it always feels like there are things that I've done better on other nights, but that's just the way it is. If you just keep waiting for it to be perfect, you're never going to put anything out and that's the way I was for way too long. So I'm just like, alright, I've got to move past this mental block that I have of not putting anything out there. Once I finally did that, I'm back in the place now where I can start filming things again and making another project.

Your work handles politics in what feels like a very smart way. It's something that everybody feels like they should be talking about it, but perhaps don't know how to talk about in a way that's not heavy handed or preachy.

A lot of things we can't force. I think there's a lot of political art right now that's just not well done, whether it's in comedy or in other things. In my stand-up act I've been satirizing not just politics but a lot of cultural stuff, but I always try to do things in a non-preachy way. I also try to do it in a way that's not preaching to the choir because I don't find that challenging at all. Even though a lot of this stuff is very heavy and serious, being hilarious is always the number one priority. I'd like to have them naturally be both at the same time. That takes a lot of work. It's not easy to do.

I probably first started doing material about the Presidential platforms, different human rights issues, government oppression and government hypocrisy around seven years ago. When I first started comedy in 1989 and early '90, I was doing some political jokes, but back then they were more like your trite, late-night talk show monologue jokes. There was no depth to them, really. When I was a kid, when I was 10 or 11, I used to do political cartoons on Reagan and Lech Walesa, the Polish workers' rights leader. But then for years I stopped doing that kind of stuff.

Basically what I do now is satirize U.S. domestic and foreign policy and its stance on human rights issues. If you want to call that political I guess you can, but sometimes I think what passes for "political" is just mocking what some specific politician said or being viewed as a spokesperson for one of the parties, which I'm not.

It takes a while to get enough material together to make a special. When I started making mine I knew I had enough stuff to make a movie out of it, but I wanted to get it out there as soon as I can. Still, it came out a while after it was ready but that's just the way the business works. I just didn't want it to feel dated, which I don't think it does. I'm mostly talking about larger issues, not about someone's physicality or what they said at this one particular speech. I'm talking about racism, sexism, white supremacy, mass incarceration, healthcare, pollution. These are all things that aren't getting better any time soon. These are issues that have been with us throughout humanity and feel particularly important right now.

Your style of Q&A with the audience asks people to examine their own identity and their own relationship to power in a way that transcends just making a joke about, say, Trump's hair or something. It's about much larger ideas.

One thing that always saddens me about society—particularly online society—is that people take too much glory in putting someone down. Let's say one politician says something nasty or has horrendous policies. The way people get back at them is just by saying something snarky about them, like a middle school-level put down but nothing of any depth. And then everyone just gloats about how that person got owned or destroyed on Twitter or whatever. By acting that way you're not doing anything to help the cause. That's like eating a Snickers to make you feel good. You know what I mean? Okay, you're having an ice cream cone, that's going to make you feel better for a minute but it really doesn't do anything to make you really feel better or healthier or more nourished in the long run. So every day I see that stuff—there is this person who is doing something bad and someone "destroys" them on Twitter or whatever—but you didn't actually destroy them, you just came up with some snarky putdowns. And that has its place, I'm not saying that there's no place for snarky put downs, but so often in our society, that is as deep as any kind of analysis goes. Ultimately it's just people hating on other people. I want people to think a little harder than that. And also laugh.

Judah Friedlander recommends:

- Eating baby food.
- Watching [Easy Rider](#).
- Reading about [Harriet Tubman](#).
- Reading [Chris Hedge](#).
- Watching [New Japan Pro-Wrestling](#).

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