

No more tears of a clown

by Ryan Torok

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A man walks into a shrink's office and says he wants to commit suicide.

"What you need is a good belly laugh," the shrink says. "Go across the street to the circus. There's a clown there who makes everybody laugh."

"Doc, I've been to the circus across the street," the man says. "I'm the clown who makes everybody laugh."

The above is just a story, but it explains the reasoning behind what might initially seem an unlikely program recently unveiled at the Laugh Factory on Sunset Boulevard: free on-site therapy for comedians. The idea was born out of the deaths of two comedians — Greg Giraldo, who died in September 2010 of a prescription-drug overdose, and Richard Jeni, who committed suicide in 2007.

"Greg Giraldo hit me really hard," said Jamie Masada, owner of the Laugh Factory. "Most of the comedians go on the stage, they make a thousand people laugh and at the same time, you see them behind the scenes — they're bleeding, they're in pain."

"It's painful for me to see it," Masada added.



It's appropriate, perhaps, that the troubled-clown story is printed onto a painting that hangs in the office on the top floor of the Laugh Factory, where Tom Cohn, a psychotherapist, and Ildiko Tabori, a psychologist, meet with comedians.

Four nights each week, comedians can come in (they call in advance to schedule appointments) to sit down one-on-one with Tabori or Cohn, on a red antique sofa that comedy icon Groucho Marx once gave Masada.

Approximately 80 comedians have seen the therapists since Masada started the program in February.

"They're coming in and talking about the issues that brought them to this place," Tabori said. "This is a program that probably needed to occur for quite some time. They're unloading."

"Their lives are so up and down. You're getting onstage; you're getting offstage; you're going to another show; you're traveling."

Comedian Marc Schiff, who writes for the humor blog Jewlarious, said he's optimistic about the potential for therapy at the Laugh Factory.

"I think it's a good idea," he said. "I think it's a very nice thing that Jamie and the group are doing."

But he also cautioned that therapy is only effective when it is approached with commitment; comedians will have to continue to go.

Schiff performs regularly at the Laugh Factory but hasn't had a session with either of the therapists.

"When he starts shock therapy, then I'll go," Schiff joked.

Likewise, it will take a lot to get comedian Richard Lewis, co-star of "Curb Your Enthusiasm," to get on the sofa at the Laugh Factory.

"Being [on] Groucho's couch could be a hex," Lewis said, adding that he has been undergoing psychotherapy for 40 years. "And," he said, with "the money I spent, I could be living in a villa in Rome, but instead I learned that I'm going to die screwed up."

Skepticism aside, Lewis said that therapy has helped him with sobriety and in finding happiness.

Or "bouts of happiness is more like it," he said.

Comedian Paul Rodriguez, a Laugh Factory regular, recently went to sessions with therapists at the club, his first time seeing a therapist.

"I saw enough of 'The Sopranos' to know how to conduct myself," he said.

Tabori and Cohn work nights at the club, two nights a week each, while they continue running their own practices. They're having to adjust to the new experience of treating comedians, finding that it can be hard not to laugh at what the comedians say during sessions and to keep them focused on their issues rather than, say, enjoying their talent.

"I like comedy a lot. ... I like to laugh at their jokes," Cohn said. "So when they use that as a mechanism, I think it's something for me personally to be aware of, that it can be used to distract, can be used to deflect, and can be used to just, you know, 'Let's pass the hour, let's not talk about the real issue, and let me get out of here.'"

The free therapy service at the Laugh Factory joins a list of ongoing charity programs initiated by Masada, including free Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners, free annual High Holy Days services and a yearly comedy camp for underprivileged kids.

"I think it's part of our [Jewish] tradition," Masada said of why he offers these services. He grew up in Israel before coming to Los Angeles at age 14, and he opened the Laugh Factory in 1979, at the age of 16.

The charity services at the club are a way for Masada to repay a community that has helped him. He opened the club with a loan from Hollywood writer and producer Neal Israel, and Richard Pryor, one of the first comics to perform at his club, gave Masada money for rent instead of taking a payment for his performance.

Helping others is just a way of life, Masada said. "Most of us, as [a] Jewish tribe, we all try to help other people," Masada said. "This is part of [what's] engraved in you from the time you are a kid. To do mitzvah, to help other people."