



ELAINE TALLAS-CARDONE

photo by Gal Blown

FIGHTING FOR EQUAL LAUGHS

Elaine Tallas-Cardone is on the front line of the comedy/gender war

There are women in high places. We're on the Supreme Court, in the board room; we're the attorney general and the CEO. But we're not there yet. Women are still fighting for equal opportunity, equal pay, equal rights... even equal laughs.

Humor as we know it has predominantly come out of the mouths of males, been seen through male eyes and conceived in male minds. Elaine Tallas-Cardone, who books comedy clubs across the nation, including The Ice House, says out of 600 headliners she has on her roster, only about 15 are women.

"And this isn't because women aren't funny," says Tallas-Cardone. "It's because it has been so difficult for them to excel in this male-dominated world of comedy."

But lately, women have been giving male comics a firm elbow in the side. There's a demand for humor from a female perspective. So much so, that The Ice House, just about the most prestigious, career-launching comedy room in the nation, is dedicating Monday nights to "shows with specific appeal to women," says Tallas-Cardone. "We're recognizing the need for women to have something for them—their own alternative form of entertainment. It's always been a Tupperware party or Chippendales, and nothing in between."

And so comedian Diana Jordan's "for women only" show at The Ice House has been drawing sell-out crowds. She and others like her are

proving that women can deliver a baby and a punchline (though probably not simultaneously); that you can be feminine, feminist and funny. "Elaine talked them into putting this show in here," says Jordan. "Now male club owners are calling me who, before, didn't think I was funny enough to carry a show on my own."

Tallas-Cardone says when booking rooms through The Ice House-based Independent Booking Network (IBN), she always reminds club owners that women are as entertaining as men. "But I have found opposition when sending females into some rooms. Club owners are more scrutinizing about women comics—it's still hard for them to accept them."

Jordan has been slapped with the gender gap on her climb to the top. "Some club owners will say, 'We can't have a woman headliner. Well, maybe we'll just put you with another woman, since you all talk about the same crap.'"

One of the things that has stood most boldly in the way of female comedians is male egos. Ever since vaudeville, when a missile-breasted nurse wiggled on stage to be taunted by the male lead, women have been the butt of sexual jokes.

"If women get up there and rag on men, their little testicles just shrink right up inside their bodies," says Jordan. "Isn't it time we can make light of what men do, without being labeled bitchy?"

"Male-dominated comedy shows have always been subject to female bashing," adds Tallas-Cardone. "It's still not socially acceptable for women to do the same to men, all in fun."

And although there have always been male-exclusive clubs and organizations, it's also not acceptable to have a female-exclusive night of comedy. As soon as The Ice House advertised Jordan's "women only" show, the Men's Liberation Organization was whining about discrimination. So Tallas-Cardone says although they're discouraged, men can attend the Monday night comedy clutches. But Jordan says only if they promise to behave. "If they come to learn something, or because they're curious about the female perspective, great. But if they just want to raise hell, or have a babefest, trying to pick up on women, I don't want 'em. That's not what my show is about."

What it is about is eroding the gender walls, and answering to the demands of a major audience. Tallas-Cardone says these shows are bringing in the people, so more and more clubs are booking female headliners and "women only" shows.

"This is really opening up a field for women performers to excel in, and an opportunity to create their own market," she says. "Women are supporting their own."

As a woman, Tallas-Cardone says she is naturally more open-minded to having women headliners, and that she and Ice House owner Bob Fisher share an open-door policy for good female comedians. "It's because The Ice House has a reputation for recognizing talent," says Tallas-Cardone. "We have to book the best there is, and the best includes women." ■

—by Debbie Beyer