

Make me laugh

Elaine Tallas-Cardone is the person Ice House comics really have to impress

BY BRUCE KOEPEL

Do you like to laugh? There are few of us who don't. Laughter is therapeutic, cathartic and just plain fun. Since the late '70s, a major laughter boom has been underway in the United States and Pasadena's own Ice House has been both a main staging area for and catalyst of this laughter boom.

The woman who makes much of the laughter possible at the Ice House is Elaine Tallas-Cardone, a friendly Canadian who books the acts. Actually, Elaine books acts not only for the Ice House, but for eight other comedy clubs throughout the United States. Through a service known as the Independent Booking Network, Tallas-Cardone controls the flow of wise guys (and gals) through clubs in Indianapolis, Cincinnati, Honolulu and two other California cities (Oceanside and Monterey).

Everybody probably has at least one friend who is a "character" or a "cut-up," somebody who is repeatedly told by his or her friends that he or she ought to do a stand-up comic routine. But how would he or she get started with the Ice House? What sort of a process does a person have to go through to get Tallas-Cardone's attention and make it onto the Mentor Avenue club's main stage? Well, the only real entree position into the Ice House's cavalcade of comics can be gained through the Ice House's all-star variety show which is held Sunday nights at 7 p.m. Unlike many comedy clubs, the Ice House does not have an "open mike" night and so to get into this most elemental of shows, an aspiring yuckmeister must get him or herself video-recorded, with only a few exemptions. "Unless they're established and working other L.A. clubs," says Cardone, "but by that time, we pretty much should have heard of them." Of neophytes, though, Tallas-Cardone says, "Basically, we won't look at them until they have at least 15 minutes of material, because that's how much you need to open." What sort of tapes have been submitted to her? "The video tapes that I get have been filmed in anywhere from somebody's basement to their living room with curtain and/or a comedy nightclub," Tallas-Cardone reports.

The Ice House divides comedy acts into three categories, Tallas-Cardone explains: the opening act, the middle act and the closing—or headliner—act. The opening act can be a new comic just beginning to feel his or her way through a routine (but he or she should be able to warm the audience up and get them laughing), the middle act needs to be someone with experience who can hold an audience's attention, but to gain the headliner position, only veterans need apply. And in a way the headliner act by its very nature necessitates someone with experience, as Tallas-Cardone says it requires at least 45 minutes worth of material to succeed. And, Tallas-Cardone says, because stand-up comedy has been the main thing over the past few years, there is no shortage of those who can effectively do it. "There are a lot of people who can do stand-up," Tallas-Cardone explains, "because that became the thing. It has become a saturated market. So now we're looking for somebody who has something totally unique and different. The monologist is actually having a more difficult time right now. I think this has to do with the fact that the television market is saturated. And the cable market has saturated the viewers, I think, with stand-up comedy. In the theme of the Ice House, [in] which we've always had either music or comedy, we're looking for



Elaine Tallas-Cardone

Photo by Gail Brown

Name Elaine Tallas-Cardone

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comedy and variety. Generally there will be one type of varietal act in each show; if it's not a magician-comedian, it will be a comedian who plays the guitar or juggles. There will always be one act to break up [the evening], so you don't have three progressive straight stand-ups. We are particularly keeping our eye open for anybody who can offer variety, too."

What happens if you've run the gauntlet of becoming the opening act and have survived the purgatory of being the middle act? How does one advance to become the Ice House's headliner? "Cultivate more new material," Tallas-Cardone advises. "People don't realize how difficult it is, but the very, very best comedians in the business are those who continually update their material—they're constantly writing and keeping their material contemporary." She cites comedians Rich Jeni and George Wallace as being artists who constantly update, revise and improve their material.

Tallas-Cardone's working day starts out looking for what she terms "fires that need to be put out." These include cancellations, comedians who have missed their plane, comedians who have suddenly hit TV paydirt and have been signed to do a pilot (January through April is the worst time for this, says Tallas-Cardone) and schedules that have to be switched at the last minute. "During pilot season I've had people the day before they were supposed to fly out tell me they have an audition," remarks Tallas-Cardone. "They have a call-back on a TV pilot and I have to call about 40 comedians trying to get somebody to fly out and perform." She also interacts with owners of other clubs to make certain that there are no scheduling conflicts and also to receive other clubs' evaluations of comedians she may be considering for a re-booking. And she shares information with other clubs on how certain acts work together. "I think a lot of people don't appreciate that it does take a certain amount of skill putting together that show, that well-balanced show where one act complements the other. Sometimes you can have a feature act that is so strong that it will blow the headliner off the stage. Which you don't really want to do, but then that's basically how the middle then gets upgraded to the headliner—he's proved that this headliner can't follow him, so he's pretty much ready to headline."

Then as her day progresses, Tallas-Cardone finds herself answering and screening calls. "The phone is constantly ringing," she explains. "There are some days that are quieter than others—Mondays are horrendous, because basically that's the day that all the comics are in town, they've come off the road and so they're calling me to let me know that they're available and sometimes they may have just played or they've had last-minute cancellations and I want to take note of their availability in case I have a cancellation."

Life has been made easier for Tallas-Cardone by the fact that much of her appointments scheduling has become computerized. "The computer system that I have is pretty good. I ended up finding a whiz-kid programmer who was looking to market this system and he's pretty much given me an inventory system so that, even though I manually keep a schedule in a calendar book, I'm able to track my comedians. I know exactly where they were, exactly how much they got paid. And when they're invited to return and for how much."

On a good day, Tallas-Cardone says, her day ends in the early evening. Monday nights are her showcase evenings, when she reviews neophyte acts or acts that have been recommended to her. "These are people that I may have seen on tape or they may be regional acts that my club owners have used before and I've never had a chance to see and they would like to try to get into our other network. So Monday is the night that I schedule anybody that is trying to get into our network and I need to see live to make sure that I know that they can do the job."

One of the highest accolades given Tallas-Cardone comes from her boss, Bob Fisher. He notes that a natural conflict often exists between comedians and bookers. As with many bookers, Tallas-Cardone is the recipient of multitudes of audition videocassettes every week. But unlike many bookers, Fisher says, Tallas-Cardone actually takes the time to view every video audition, critique it, and, if it isn't selected, to explain why to its sender. This, reports Fisher, has made her very well-respected throughout the comedy community. "She's a main contributor to the Ice House, that's for sure." ■