

Ted Tremper On: Life On The Daily Show With Trevor Noah

KAREN WEATHERMON: Good afternoon, and thank you so much for coming to today's conversation with WSU alumnus Ted Tremper. It's such a pleasure to host Ted's virtual return to campus. As you know, he worked for two years with the author of this year's common reading book, Trevor Noah, on The Daily Show. And he also brings deep experience in the realm of social and political comedy. So we're so pleased that you could join us this afternoon.

I'm Karen Weathermon, director of first year programs at WSU. WSU's common reading program is one of those that is in my area, and it's my delight and honor each year to be able to focus the tremendous resources of our campus and community on topics of importance. This year, our year long conversation is centered on topics related to the book, *Born a Crime*. And in partnership with an array of WSU units, we offer one or more events around these topics each week.

In fact, one of the silver linings of our COVID lives is that, because all our events this year are remote, we can share events across all six of our campuses. And I especially want to welcome those of you who are joining us, well, from all our campuses, actually, and that we can include speakers like Ted, who is not physically here in Pullman, but in Los Angeles, I believe, today.

I encourage you to consult the upcoming events on our calendar on our common reading website. And I want to bring one especially to your attention. On November 12 at 6:00 PM, the Office of Equity and Diversity is sponsoring a nationally acclaimed performance of *The Deformation Experience*. It starts with a 70 minute courtroom drama that explores issues surrounding race, class, religion, gender, and the law. And then it has the twist that all of us who attend as audience members will serve as the jury.

So I encourage you to think about attending that event. You have to register by November 9, and if you go to our common reading calendar, you can do that. You can see the common reading calendar for the links to our events, as well as to see the full array of upcoming events. And if you are attending for course credit, at the end of today's events, we'll be dropping into the chat a link you can use to verify your attendance. I also want to let you know we're accepting nominations for next year's common reading book at our website, as well.

So now to get to our invited speakers. Along with Ted Tremper, I'm being joined today by Buddy Levy, a longtime faculty member in the department of English. In addition to teaching creative writing, screenwriting, and technical and professional writing, Buddy is himself a freelance journalist and the author of eight non-fiction books on topics of adventure, history and the outdoors.

He was also a cast member for two seasons on the History Channel show *Decoded*. For today's purposes, however, the important thing about Buddy is that he was Ted's teacher and mentor in the creative writing program while Ted was a student at WSU. They've maintained their connection and

friendship as Ted's career has taken him to Chicago's Second City, The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, and more. Buddy is going to start off our conversation with a brief intro of Ted, and then lead into our first questions.

Thanks to those of you who submitted questions ahead of time. We also welcome your questions that occur to you during this event, and invite you to post them to the chat. And we'll get to those toward the end of our time together.

BUDDY LEVY: Hey, Karen. Thanks so much for the introduction. And I wanted to thank you also for all the great work you do with the common reading program. I also want to thank everyone out there in Zoom and YouTube land for joining us. And of course, I want to thank Ted Tremper just for being Ted Tremper.

I wanted to give you just a brief introduction about him. I met Ted back in the early 2000s in a classroom in Thompson Hall on the WSU Pullman campus. And he took a few writing courses from me. I was immediately struck by Ted's humor, his intellect, his dynamic personality. And it became clear very early on that not only could he be teaching the class, but that he was going to go places.

Ted's resume and accolades are impressive, of course. He's an award winning filmmaker, a writer, producer, and improviser. And two of the projects that he worked on impressed me really deeply, and I got to see them fairly early on. And both of them he wrote and directed. They were called Break-Ups and Shrink series. They're hilarious and tragic at the same time, which I think much great comedy is. And you can find these and much other of Ted's work at TedTremper.com. I encourage you to check it out.

But the two gigs that he had that have most impressed me, I suppose, were these [AUDIO OUT], which I'm sure makes for great storytelling and characters. And he also performed improv comedy on a cruise ship while sailing through the Panama Canal. And maybe he'll talk a little bit about that. Pretty interesting character building jobs.

Just a quick anecdote about Ted that I think says a little about who-- the kind of guy he is and how much he puts into his work. One time he showed up in my classroom, and he had an aggressive mullet. I mean, it was serious. And I asked him about it, and he said that he was in a play at the time, and to really get into the character, he wanted to not just wear a wig, but just to go full mullet. And after class, he invited me to walk around campus with him and see the kind of reactions. Apparently, mullets weren't really de rigueur at the time, but we cruised around campus and kind of did a sociological experiment on the way people responded to him.

And it was very amusing. Some people were just perplexed, and others were sort of bemused, and others were kind of aggressive about it. And I think that sort of immersion speaks a lot to the kind of work that Ted has gone on to do with Sarah Silverman, and Trevor Noah, and, of course, the new Borat movie. So thanks for being here, Ted, and just to get rolling, I wanted to ask you if you'd talk a little bit maybe about how your experiences at WSU informed your early career and sent you on your career trajectory.

TED TREMPER: What perfect timing.

BUDDY LEVY: There he is.

TED TREMPER: That was really-- I think that end up going. I don't want to forget. What was the first job that you mentioned? Because it blanked out for a second.

BUDDY LEVY: Shoeshine.

TED TREMPER: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. That was my first job ever was shining shoes at the Nordstrom in Bellevue. Nordstrom store number four, which is still, to this day, probably the-- I wouldn't say it's the best job I've ever had, but it's the best job for a young person to have, because you make \$5 every five minutes when you're working. And when you're not, you're sitting on two leather sofas watching two different TVs. And I also want to mention-- so the thing about the mullet, my mom died while I was at WSU. And I had had long hair because of a play, and I realized that I wasn't going to be in a place to date or to really be sociable for a while, so I cut that mullet for this play.

But also I referred to it as the great mullet that liberates upon seeing, because Buddy is referencing-- basically every person that saw it would either get really happy or really angry. And it was great. I don't have a picture of it, but I wish I had.

Yeah so, your question, Buddy, about-- I guess it's experiences at WSU that kind of got ready for doing other stuff is kind of the deal. A lot of the questions, I think, we got in advance are about how to get a job at The Daily Show or whatever. And kind of the odd question is-- I don't know, because things have obviously changed quite a bit since I was around.

But from WSU, I was dating somebody at WSU that I loved very much. And so she was an entomology major, and I was an English major. And so we both knew we were probably going to go back to grad school. So we decided to teach English in Japan for a year. And then she was accepted to Yale while we were there. So then I lived in New Haven, and then I was accepted to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago for an MFA in writing.

So I moved to Chicago. And I had chosen that school pretty much only because I wanted to study improv, but I had taught playwriting as an undergraduate at WSU, and I knew that I loved teaching at a college level. So I figured, if I got an MFA early, I could go and try to do a bunch of cool things.

And then when a global pandemic would hit in 2020, then I'd be able to go back to teaching. And so yeah. So in Chicago, I started doing improv at the ImprovOlympic, which was then called iO, which now I think no longer exists because of the pandemic. And then I also performed at the Annoyance Theatre and the Second City, which also, The Annoyance is doing well. The Second City is-- you can Google what's been going on with them. But I think they are also having a hard time.

But yeah, I was on 11 different improv teams at the same time for about seven years. Shout out to Joey Romaine and all everybody on my teams that are watching this now. And I started making short films, because basically improv is the greatest-- it's the greatest joy that I think I've ever had. But it's also a very difficult thing to transmute into anything else that you can really show someone and say, hey, hire me to

do X, Y, Z. So in 2000-- I think '08 or '09, I started making web series. And really, the goal was just, how do I make someone who doesn't care about improv feel the way I do about these performers that I knew and loved?

And so I started directing basically my improv heroes, and that led to me making-- in Chicago, I made something like 31 short films and then a TV pilot. And the total production cost for all of that was, I think, \$211, because everybody wanted to work all the time. So I had spent my life savings at that point buying a Canon 5D Mark II, and two lenses, and two wireless microphones. And that was about \$11,000.

And then I had sought out work at two different non-fiction production companies, because I knew that, if I was nice to the production manager, they would probably let me borrow equipment, which they did. So basically, for the entire time I was in Chicago, I was working 40 hours a week in production, and then about 40 hours a week doing improv. And that basically just-- that was seven and a half years straight of doing that and making things.

And then eventually Shrink, which is the show that Buddy mentioned, won the New York Television Festival as a pilot, and that got me agents. And then the agents-- you go on these things called general meetings. So I went in a general meeting at The Daily Show in 2000-- it was like 2013 or something. And by that time, I had a bunch of hard news documentary stuff on my reel, but then I also had a bunch of comedy stuff.

And the guy who would later become my boss, Tim Greenberg, basically said, well, we would hire you right now, but we just hired a guy that we don't really like that much. So kind of hang in there, and just keep watching the show, and maybe we'll figure out a way to get you on board. And it wasn't until three years later that Jon left the show. Or I guess it was two years later.

Jon left the show, and a bunch of field producers went off to go work with John Oliver, or work with Sam Bee, which left enough vacancies for me to reapply. And then that's how I got the job there. So basically, in answer to all the questions of how do you get a job at The Daily Show, it's basically work very, very hard on things-- on your own things with the people that you love, with no expectation of doing those things. It's a kind of-- I think Thomas Jefferson's quote that luck is what happens when opportunity meets preparation. It's essentially focus on who you love, what you love doing, and what you love making, and then one way or another things will work out, I think.

BUDDY LEVY: So it sounds like you're talking about constantly creating content, so that, when an opportunity does arise and you maybe have a meeting, creating content and also nurturing incredible people who you want to work with.

TED TREMPER: Yeah, and I think that-- in terms of-- I've come back to WSU I think two other times to teach. And the really big things-- I always think about what I wish I had known. And I think the biggest things that I wish I had known were to focus on process and not product, meaning that you should be developing habits that are solely focused on bringing sort of joy, and energy, and curiosity into your daily life and what you're making. So developing a habit of writing, rather than saying, I'm going to write this

one thing, or developing a habit of rehearsing and performing improv, and developing the relationships that will make you love doing that.

There's a saying in improv why-- so Chicago improv, New York improv, and LA improv, and they're different in different ways. There's a saying of Chicago improvisers that, in Chicago, you do improv hoping you can do it for the rest of your life. And in LA, you do improv hoping you never have to do it again. And a lot of that is because people-- Dave Pasquesi is one of, I think, the two greatest improvisers that ever lived. He said that that's a justifiable thing in LA, because someone could be in the audience who can take you away and give you all the toys-- is the way he phrased it.

And I think, if you think that way, it really is a thing where, if your end goal is to use what you're doing to do something else, there's absolutely no guarantee that that something else will ever happen. So I think the more important question to ask yourself is, what do you enjoy doing? And I should make a clear point that I don't mean what's easy to do and sort of what-- nothing is-- I mean, none of it is easy. Being a farmer isn't easy. Becoming a doctor isn't easy, and becoming a screenwriter or a comedian isn't easy. It really requires an amount of dedication that's borne out of your passion and your curiosity to do the thing.

Or what's lucky in comedy is that typically you're able to surround yourself with people who are so much funnier than you are that it becomes a sort of redoubling experience all the time. And sort of improv hubs like what Chicago was, and what New York was, and what LA was, really the benefit and the thing that I wish I'd known when I was starting out was really the only thing that's important about that time is failing as often as possible, and developing the relationships with the people that you're going to keep your whole life. I think in Amy Poehler's book she says, it's basically do improv, be nice, and in nine years, one of your friends will give you a job, or something like that.

BUDDY LEVY: I think you need to be a little patient, too.

TED TREMPER: Yeah. Well, Buddy, you and I were talking earlier today. And I remember being at WSU, and asking you in class how you get an agent and things like that, when I had never really, I think, completed a story that I think was worth publishing. And I think a lot of that is-- it's very odd. I think about the same thing with stand-up, and with authors, or whatever. I think if you pulled a regular person out of a mall in Tulsa, Oklahoma and asked them how many stand-up comedians they can name, they maybe could name five. Or how many authors they could name, they maybe could name 10. And there are tens of thousands of people who are doing both of those things all the time.

So I think each one of them probably started with aspirations of becoming one of those 5 or 10 names. The important thing to remember is, if you're not enjoying that, then your life is going to be a living hell, regardless of what level you matriculate to. On these shows, there are people who are satisfied with what they are doing. And there are people who are very wealthy or very successful who are working on the shows who think they're complete failures, because they didn't do the thing that they wanted to do.

BUDDY LEVY: Right. A quick question about some of your recent work. I mean, obviously, we're in a moment right now. And you had worked in socio-political comedy with The Daily Show with Sarah Silverman, and, of course, I love saying Borat Subsequent Moviefilm. But you said something in a recent

article here in the Lewiston Trib that struck me. And I wanted to get your take on it and maybe a little elaboration. And here's what you said.

I felt that-- this is after Trump was elected. I felt a lot of fear that the way Trump supporters had been satirizing-- I felt a lot of fear that the way Trump supporters had been satirized only served to create more polarity. The biggest fear that I have, not only for this election, but for our country in general, with social media polarizing us more and more, is that, at a certain point, we'll tear each other apart at the edges. And I'm assuming that you mean that metaphorically and not sort of guns and pitchforks, but that's happening, too.

TED TREMPER: I mean both. Yeah, I absolutely mean both.

BUDDY LEVY: Yeah.

TED TREMPER: Yeah, I mean, I think we've entered this really interesting period where we-- I mean, just my family history, my dad had been a Republican his whole life, and my mom had been a Democrat her whole life. And it just wasn't a big deal. And so things like politics and discourse, they were discussed with as much passion as differing sports teams. And I think that that can be the case for a lot of people, but then again, if you get into a Yankees-Red Sox situation, there are people who are willing to beat the hell out of each other because of those differences.

And obviously, I come from a sort of extraordinarily privileged background, both racially, but sort of was raised middle class, and then-- it's a long insane story, but basically, shortly before my mom died, my dad-- basically, he and four friends, they worked at a construction company that built the Space Needle, and a bunch of other skyscrapers, and stuff. And they'd worked there for a combined total, I think, of 120 years. Each of them had worked there for 30 years.

And then they were bought by-- the company was sold to a multinational conglomerate, and then they were going to sell it off for pieces, but basically they leveraged each of their collective life savings to buy it back from them. And then they ran it and did really well at that. And it's also just being a sort of mostly straight white dude. The stakes of this election, or really any election, are not as high for me as they are for other people.

So sort of prefacing all of that in terms of I think that it's basically-- I feel like there's an absolute value of energy on either side. You can take people who have a lot of passion, and that can be leveraged into really interesting discourse and sort of spirited disagreements where people actually find mutual ground. But then there's sort of the negative side of that number line, if you will, that only seeks to kind of destroy. And the thing that becomes terrifying to me is that it seems like the politicians who are in control, certainly on the right-- I'm not really a conspiracy theory minded person, but every once in a while I think about those studies that ExxonMobil did in the '70s basically knowing that global warming exists.

I just think about in the '80s, essentially, white Republicans-- no offense to white Republicans, but the white Republican hierarchy essentially realizing we've got about 40 years left at best, so we may as well get while the getting is good. Because I can't think of a way that the things they're making-- specifically

with the Supreme Court confirmation yesterday-- it really just sort of-- they're acting the way that I would act if I was trying to rob a mall before a zombie apocalypse took over.

And so to me, the thing that scares me is it doesn't really seem like-- Democrats I feel like sort of get stereotyped as being kind of spineless when it comes to making power moves and things like that. And I certainly think that's valid. But what I'm hoping with this election is that, if Joe Biden wins, which I don't think at all is a certainty, his kind of message of being Uncle Joe who can bring the country back together will hopefully push the factions that are far enough right that the Republicans themselves are embarrassed by them, kind of push them off really back into the fringes. And then you'll just end up having a bunch of people who only want to take all of the money and sock it away. And then you'll have other people who want to take some of that money and give it to people who need it.

BUDDY LEVY: So I'm wondering where comedy fits into this milieu--

TED TREMPER: Yeah. Yeah, [INAUDIBLE] talk about politics.

BUDDY LEVY: --because can it-- is it possible for socio political comedy to not be polarizing?

TED TREMPER: Well, so it's interesting. When I was on The Daily Show there's a-- he was an editor at the time, but was so brilliant they made him the head of the whole field department. It was a guy named Eric Davies. And I had just come back from a piece in 2015. And Trump had just announced that he was running for president.

And he turned around in his chair. And he said, basically, do you ever notice that people don't feel shame anymore when they're wrong? And I said, what do you mean? And he'd worked there for years. And he explained that it used to be that, if you caught somebody in a lie, or you caught somebody with bad information, they would sort of get flummoxed and be embarrassed because they had been proven wrong.

But what he was describing was the beginning of sort of the delegitimization of journalists and fake news. And so now the problem with doing comedy sort of in the current-- I don't want to-- it's odd. I'm tempted to call it pseudo fascist, but I also don't want to alienate people. What I mean is the current administration obviously has put a lot of effort into delegitimizing all media, including places like Fox News when they released their own polls, et cetera, et cetera. So what's happened is you basically have somebody who's enabled people to choose what they want their reality to be. So what becomes difficult is comedy, at that point, gets politically stratified to a point where there is no more discourse anymore. It's just one side making fun of the other.

And I think I was-- we didn't have TV growing up because I lived out in North Bend, Washington, and my dad lied to me and told me that the cable didn't reach as far as we were and the trees were too tall for satellite. So my mom was a teacher at Woodridge Elementary in Bellevue. And they had Comedy Central. So every day after school, I would take my bus to her school and then record on a VHS cassette tape for six hours, and watch The Daily Show every night as like a 12-year-old.

And it inspired me so much later on when Republicans would come on The Daily Show with Jon Stewart. And there was a time where John McCain was the most frequent guest on The Daily Show, and this is before he ran for president the second time. But seeing that and understanding that essentially we are really at our best-- at WSU, I learned about the notion of Mill's marketplace of ideas, where, if everybody is contributing sort of their thoughts and ideas, then the marketplace can kind of choose what works and what doesn't work out of there.

But what we've devolved into is a situation where I don't think that really any ideas are being conveyed anymore. What we have is just sort of name calling, blame shifting, vitriol, and emotion. So I think it still is very easy and, perhaps, easier to be a hack political commentator, because all you have to do is make somebody on the other side look stupid. But I think what becomes much more interesting is what Sarah Silverman tried to do, which her show, I Love You, America, which I was a field director on was all of it was about, how can we bring people back together and laugh together?

So we went to-- one of the pieces that is my favorite. We went to Mineola, Texas, which had been the-- I believe it was the precinct with the greatest number of Trump voters. And we went there. And the whole piece was-- the first minute and a half was us trying to find-- she interviewed 20 different people. And it was us trying to find some kind of political common ground, and we couldn't find that. And then at the end of that, she just asks, well, have you ever shit your pants?

And every single person, without a doubt, and this was totally based off of Sarah just had this inclination that everybody on Earth has a really great story about either shitting their pants or almost shitting their pants. And it was completely bare truth. And it was to have people who had said really horrible things, I mean, from any kind of perspective you would imagine, then completely open up because they had this shared experience of shitting their pants-- was one of the most-- it's sort of this transcendent thing, where you realize almost every single person, at the end of the day-- specifically Americans, they're very open people if you can kind of side door your way into something where you're pointing out that you have more in common than you do, sort of rather than what divides us. So it's a very long winded answer.

BUDDY LEVY: No, it's great.

TED TREMPER: The short answer is, yeah, I think it's easy to be bad at it, but it's tough to be nuanced. [? I think the point... ?].

BUDDY LEVY: Yeah, I was wondering, because I know everybody wants to know a bit about it, what did you learn from Trevor Noah, from working with him? Not only the sort of on the ground field producer stuff, but about comedy and about social commentary?

TED TREMPER: Yeah. I think the thing about Trevor that's just transcendent-- I mentioned that article, as well-- that he's essentially exactly-- on screen or off screen, he's the exact same person. And he's just infinitely curious. Not as a person. He has infinite curiosity.

And that really is the thing that is transcendent-- is basically him being a citizen of the world and sort of being able to look at America objectively is really fascinating, because he'll be able to point things out. I

remember one of the first pieces that we had that went viral was pointing out that Trump-- essentially that Trump was America's first African president. And he pointed out all of these different things that these African dictators had said that, in some cases, were sort of verbatim plays out of Trump's playbook.

And it's been this really interesting experience with him in the first-- running up to the election, he was the first person that I ever met that said he thought not only that Trump had a chance, but he was the first person that said, I think Trump will get the nomination. And he did. And then that he would have a chance, because he had seen these kinds of people, these kind of strongman tactics net out with people who feel disenfranchised.

After he left South Africa, he came here. And he went all over the United States touring and went to Nampa, Idaho, and all kinds of different places that stand-up comics go to. And you really get a chance to meet lots, and lots, and lots of Americans. And I think that he was able to ascertain that generally it's interesting to say. I think a lot about the kind of Occupy Wall Street movement sometimes when I think about the media, where here was a situation where you had a massive grassroots sort of swell of people who were protesting against a very specific thing. And then when the media went to cover it, it's all just a guy jumping around in a Spider-Man suit, or like whoever the weirdest person is, because that's the easy way to cover the story, and that's the way that you can kind of-- I mean, people tend to see really nefarious tactics and things like that.

Somebody from that movement will say, oh, the media is trying to delegitimize what we're actually doing. Or sometimes if, as The Daily Show, we would go in and satirize a specific protest or whatever, the perspective of The Daily Show-- and I think regardless of ideology-- has always been to elucidate hypocrisy, because that really is-- it's just the worst. And I was trying to find a more elegant way to put it.

When I applied for the show, Jordan Klepper, who's a correspondent, he was a Chicago guy. And so I texted him and asked what advice he had. And he said, the advice that Jon had given him was find the story that makes you the most upset and use that emotion to make it funny, basically. So it's a thing where, regardless of what your perspective is, if you can find people or a subject-- going back to the previous question, kind of rambling a little bit. But one of the things that makes it very, very hard about being funny with people who are hypocrites is that we don't have really shame anymore, that Lindsey Graham can say, in 2016, use my words against me. We should not confirm a Supreme Court appointee in the year of an election.

It's so insane. It truly doesn't matter because we've sort of been consumed by the notion of winning. When I start talking about that, that's the stuff that actually kind of scares me-- is that, when you have people who are shameless, then there's no kind of soul there, I guess. And then you have sort of winning at all costs. And then you devolve into that sort of tearing apart things at the seams.

BUDDY LEVY: Right.

TED TREMPER: Which, yeah, spooky, scary stuff. Happy Halloween.

BUDDY LEVY: Yeah. Thank you. Yeah, so just to touch on this notion of what Jordan Klepper does, and I think it's connected. I'm wondering how-- when you announce yourselves as working for The Daily Show, how do people not see you coming? And not understand that-- do they want to be on TV so much that they don't care how they come across?

TED TREMPER: Yeah, well, so it's interesting. I remember finding out that, by the time I was there, there was a guy who I don't even want to say his name because he's a real piece of-- he's a bad guy. And he's a bad guy and backed out of an interview. And one of the things that my boss-- he was basically saying we were going to take him out of context or whatever. And my boss pointed out that, by that time, The Daily Show had done about 18,000 interviews, and that in the entirety of-- at that time, I think it was 17 years that The Daily Show had been on the air-- exactly two people had sued them or complained about how they had been portrayed. And only one of those lawsuits were lost, which is a whole separate very funny story.

But I find that, in my case, there was a guy that we did a piece on with-- Ronny Chieng and I did a piece about tri-faith mosque that was being opened in Omaha, Nebraska. So it was literally a Muslim cleric, a rabbi, and a priest walked into a bar and decided to create a church together, and they did. And there was this guy who basically was an immigrant from Egypt who had converted to Christianity, and he was convinced that this church was a conspiracy that the Muslim Brotherhood had cooked up as a way to infiltrate the American heartland.

And so we interviewed him, and he was able to espouse these different things. And it was this very interesting thing, because he was very, very anti-Muslim. But his wife and entire family were Muslim, except for him. And we made fun of him, his perspective on the show, and his only complaint was that the piece wasn't longer.

And it's typical that basically people who have these far out beliefs, if they see what they are saying on TV, then they will be happy because they know that somebody else-- that they're spreading their message. And of course, the irony is that there are other people who believe that exact same thing. And so it's a net positive for them, as far as they're concerned.

BUDDY LEVY: I had one question from the-- a question that's been sent in. And then I wanted to kick it over to Karen and also audience members who I know have a number of questions. And this one is related. It wonders whether you're required to use journalistic standards in comedy news.

TED TREMPER: Yeah. Yeah I think-- so the entirety of the time that The Daily Show has existed, as far as I know, they've only ever had to issue one retraction, which was under the Jon era. And I remember seeing that, and he was so crestfallen that they had made a mistake. You could just tell it-- he had this unimpeachable integrity. And there's a whole-- there's a guy named Adam Chodikoff, who's sort of this encyclopedia of all knowledge, who is more or less in charge. He's the lead researcher-- he's the senior researcher or lead researcher.

But a lot of it's like, if you're just making stuff up, it's not funny. I think Sam Bee put it-- Sam Bee or John Oliver used this metaphor, that essentially, unless you're building your satire on bricks-- if it's sand, the

whole thing just falls over. You have to be building it on the foundation of truth, or else someone can just poke holes in it and say, oh, well, none of this is real.

So in fact, I think it's actually-- I think it's incredibly important, and I think the training that I had at WSU was really important in terms of understanding what those ethics are. But moreover, for comedy, it's like there is no purpose in taking shortcuts other than being lazy. It's the same thing with stand-up. If you say something that's almost true, then it's almost funny. If you want to just make things up, then you should just be writing fiction, because then you can use satire in the case of fiction to make something really interesting.

But the reason I like sort of Adam McKay's movies *The Big Short* and *Dick* are really fascinating because those stories are true. We didn't make up that Dick Cheney shot a guy in the face and then the guy apologized to him. You know, it has to be true, or else you should just write fiction.

And so to answer the question directly, I think it's important, one, but also, it should be known that the lengths to which-- I mean, looking at the stuff that John Oliver, or Trevor, or Sam Bee, or any other specifically news or political satire show-- they have whole departments of people that fact check these things not only so they don't get sued, but because it has to be true, or else it's not funny.

BUDDY LEVY: And are you still watching these shows currently and--

TED TREMPER: And what?

BUDDY LEVY: And how often are you?

TED TREMPER: I took a big long break after I left *Daily Show* of not watching it, partially because-- it's a long story, but I left because the show that I created with my buddy, Tim, *Shrink* was greenlit to series. So I left that show, and then went to the writers room, and then I actually came back. My last gig at *The Daily Show* was the RNC and DNC in 2016. So I did those gigs, and that was the last time that I worked for it.

And I took basically, a year off, because watching it just made me really sad because I love it so much. I still miss it every single day, because it's the greatest institution, but also the greatest work environment I've ever been a part of. Every single person there only cares about the show, only cares about getting it right. And there's this bottomless sort of passion and energy about the place. It's just wonderful.

So it was at least a year since-- I didn't watch it for at least a year, and now I'll sort of watch it sparingly, because, again, it does make my heart hurt. But I watch-- I think we watch every episode of *Oliver*, just because I feel like, you know, he sums things up, I think, in a very funny way. And it's odd.

I will go on periods of very long, what I call, news vacations, where essentially I have enough people who are incredibly well informed friends politically and otherwise that I find that-- it's something out of Tim Ferriss's *4-Hour Workweek* book that I'd rather have an hour conversation with a brilliant friend about what's going on than to follow the news an hour a day for a month. I tend to put blinders on a little bit more probably than I should.

BUDDY LEVY: Well, for our aspirational students out there, what's the climate like currently? And couldn't you just give them a call and get back into the mix?

TED TREMPER: Well, so Daily Show has what they call a strict no revolving door policy, because they have so many talented people that these people could literally get hired away to go do things left and right. So they set, early on, this principle that, once you leave, you have to go, which is heartbreaking. But I still enjoy my life. I still am very happy with things, but it's always kind of a Before Sunset, Before Sunrise kind of thing with that institution.

BUDDY LEVY: Yeah, I do think it's important to follow your dreams, and if you're going to go off and do a show that you co-created and are going to get to write and direct--

TED TREMPER: Yeah.

BUDDY LEVY: --that's sort of what you had worked all this time for anyway, right?

TED TREMPER: Yeah, I think so. And I think a lot of it-- my odd career has been kind of defined by trying to do things that I've never done before. So it started by trying to show that improv can be interesting in a short film. Then it was trying to show that improv can be interesting in a pilot. And then it was try to focus basically everything I'd been doing in hard news. And then at Second City, I'd be writing political satire and things like that. And I should say to people who are interested in getting jobs at places like Daily Show, you should watch every single episode.

I think that, like I said, since I was 12 years old to the time that Jon left, I think it's a fair bet to say I probably only missed four episodes of The Daily Show. So we're talking about 16 years of not missing a show. And a lot of that's useful for learning how to write in the voice of the show, but also, when it comes to something as specific as political satire, places like Second City, or UCB, or other places that seem to kind of deconstruct the form, there's a lot of useful kind of tricks that you can utilize.

Some, I think, kind of can become detrimental, where-- I always think of the episode of South Park where they satirized Family Guy, where it literally was they were making fun of them is that the way that Family Guy writes their shows is they just have sort of reference manatees that poke a ball into a hole, and that's where they decide to do their cutaways.

And I think it's really important to be able to look at what shows are doing and understand that almost as sort of a musical form, the way that blues has eight bars, and it has a one, four, five progression or whatever. Understanding that those different things, those are just tools for storytelling. So if you can understand how those things are working and be able to write within those constraints, then you're going to be more sort of employable. And I think as a journey person writer or creator, it's both important to be able to generate work that is original, and that is inspirational, and that breaks constraints as it is to then be able to write within those constraints.

BUDDY LEVY: Awesome. Hey, man, it's always great catching up. I know that our audience wants to have some questions. So I'm going to shut up now.

TED TREMPER: OK.

KAREN WEATHERMON: Great. Thank you so much, Ted, for your conversation...

TED TREMPER: I feel like the answers are not funny and are very, very long and boring. So if I need to be shorter, let me know.

KAREN WEATHERMON: So some of the questions from students are back to thinking about the process that you went through as a student and entering this field. And one of the questions is from Quentin, who asks, when wanting to create great content, do you think it's more important to put out more content or only creating a few good pieces over a couple of years time period?

TED TREMPER: That's a fantastic question. I think that the importance is to constantly be generating content, but only share the things that you are proud of. And to constantly be reassessing what that is. There's a thing that-- I didn't coin this, and I don't remember where I got it. But there's a thing that's called the YouTube problem in casting, which was there were a lot of times when I'd be trying to get a friend of mine a job. And I would say, oh, you really-- to a casting director or somebody, so-and-so is the funniest person in Chicago. And then I would send a link to a specific thing that they had done maybe-- or maybe I wouldn't have time to do that.

And then that casting director or a person looking to hire them would Google them, and then would click videos, or go to their YouTube channel. And the first 12 things that came up on their YouTube profile were just terrible because they were things that they had done very early on in their career that never go away.

So I think, as a performer, it's hard, because as a performer, you should be taking pretty much any job you can get just to kind of get the reps in. But if you're a filmmaker or a writer, one, I think focusing on habits is more important than either of those things. Focusing on the habit of creating things and getting into a place of constant generation is really important. And enjoying that. But in reference to that specific question, I think you should be constantly generating things, but only sharing the things that actually deserve to be seen, I think.

KAREN WEATHERMON: And as a follow up question, one of our viewers asks where you posted your first pieces of work. Was it via websites or film festivals? And sort of aligned with that, another question about what is your advice for creating connections?

TED TREMPER: So I started-- when I started, I posted all my stuff to Vimeo, which still exists, which was sort of-- at the time was as a higher quality and sort of more associated with filmmaking video sharing site. I think it sort of still feels that way now. But back in the day, they actually-- they were just sort of much better. I think that YouTube has kind of superseded them in terms of the ways you're able to upload things, et cetera. But at the time, there was a really tight community of Vimeo people.

And oddly, so Break-Ups was the first web series I made-- won the first ever Vimeo award for best original series. And I went to the awards to present the next year, and most of the people that I met there

not only became good friends and lifelong friends, but when I moved to LA, there are two filmmakers named the Daniels, who made a movie called Swiss Army Man that everybody should watch. Those two guys I met at the Vimeo awards, and I ended up moving two blocks away from one of them and two blocks away from the other one, so we sort of live in a row.

And all of their friends-- since they were the first people that anybody knew that moved to LA, asked them, hey, where we should we live? And they just said, oh, well, move to Highland Park. So now basically every single person that I know in LA lives within a mile and a half radius of their houses. And all of their friends have become my friends. And that's kind of-- from a filmmaking perspective, that's how I grew a community.

And I think, as far as a performance thing, really the way it used to be-- and hopefully, if and when the pandemic ever sort of ends, I think improv is by far the best way to meet other people who are performers. And those people are still-- literally, I mean, I had four of them over yesterday. During the pandemic-- we have a backyard, and I built a 18 by 12 foot deck and made an outdoor movie theater thing.

So I had three or four of those people over yesterday who are still my Chicago improv friends. So I think a lot of it's the same way that you'd make friends if you joined an intramural softball team. Those are all people that are interested in softball. So you have to ask yourself, OK, where do people who are interested in comedy go?

And the answer that, for me, was Chicago, specifically. There was a saying, you go to Chicago to get good. You go to New York or LA to get famous. And I think, for me, Chicago was essential, because I had so many things that I needed to screw up and learn, so that way, when I actually did go to New York or LA, I would have had 20,000 of those mistakes under my belt, as opposed to making those 20,000 and the other 20,000 that I probably made since then happen in places where they actually kind of counted, if that makes sense.

KAREN WEATHERMON: No, that does make sense. And in fact, one of the questions that just came in sort of relates to that. What is your best advice for when you bomb on stage, when you misread an audience or misread a situation doing comedy and it just falls flat?

TED TREMPER: So honesty, I think, is the most important principle in comedy just generally. And so I show ran-- showrunning is a job that's basically-- you're like the CEO of-- every production is kind of like a mini corporation, and the showrunner is kind of the CEO. So you're doing every job and supervising everyone. And I was the showrunner for three seasons of a show called This Week at the Comedy Cellar, which was basically we had six days to make a half hour documentary about all the stand-up that was happening at the Comedy Cellar, and sort of put it within the skeleton of that week's news.

And so I saw-- those are some of the greatest comics on Earth. And I saw quite a few people bomb, and my advice specifically is don't turn on the audience, because that never really works out. If it's a heckler or one person, then you can develop, over the course of your careers, different ways of dealing with that. But I would say two secrets. One of them, which is really wonderful-- my friend Mary Kate studied under a

really famous French clown. She went to literal clown college in Europe, and she said that, when you take the stage in any scene or if you're doing stand-up, every person is feeling tense for you, because they want you to do well, or they want you to not do well. But regardless, there's a tension as to whether or not-- what you're going to do.

And what the clowns do is-- there's always a moment where a clown notices the audience and then takes a deep breath. And what happens is that forces the audience to take a deep breath and then to settle in. And then they feel more relaxed, and they're more ready to engage with whatever you're doing. So I'd say that's one thing. And also just silence is a position of power generally. If you come in and you're sort of going wackadoo, that's sort of expected. So if you take the stage, and you take a moment, and then you say what you want to say, that's going to put you in a position of power.

And then the other thing is just being honest. If a joke bombs, or if you say something terrible, if something doesn't work, then just talk about how that didn't go well. And then that will release the tension in the audience, as well. Laughter-- I mean, everything in life is entirely about contrast and tension, I think.

KAREN WEATHERMON: To turn us back to The Daily Show and your work with Trevor Noah just a bit, one of our attendees today asked if you would comment on the notion that The Daily Show has a liberal agenda.

TED TREMPER: It's interesting. I think that-- it's weird. I mean, what I would point to is the time during the Clinton era and during the Obama era, I think Jon-- after George W. Bush and sort of the birth-- as Fox News sort of came to power, a lot of Jon's agenda that time was just pointing out that these are supposed to be news shows. If you look back at-- Jon Stewart did a very infamous appearance on Crossfire I think in the late '90s. Yeah, I mean, it's interesting.

I don't think I could ever tell somebody who is conservative that they don't have a liberal agenda, because I think, from that perspective, their agenda is liberal because they're speaking at it from a conservative perspective. But I remember there was a guy at the RNC who essentially jumped in front of the camera when we were filming at the Republican National Convention and claimed we were fake news, and da da da da da, and then threatened to assault me and Hasan Minhaj. And I just talked to him for a while.

And what I pointed out was like I'm from the Mark Twain school of thought, which is the only thing that artists and specifically comedians need to be doing is speaking truth to power and making fun of people. There's a George Orwell quote that I love, which is I think every joke is a mini revolution.

So when it comes to whether or not they have a liberal agenda, I would say, from a conservative perspective, sure. But I would also say, from a very liberal perspective, those people probably want that show to be farther to the left. So I think the answer is entirely subjective. What I can say from the perspective of making it, usually they just look at what is happening and where the holes are in terms of what people said that they were going to do and what they're doing. Or who people claim to be, and how what they're doing undermines the sort of claimed identity.

So I'm not trying to dodge that question. I think, from the perspective of the person who would ask that, the answer is probably yes from their perspective. From the show's perspective, I think they're just trying to find who is in power, what they're doing, and point out how it contradicts who they pretend to be.

KAREN WEATHERMON: Well, and that ties into maybe a final question. You know, since we're looking at Trevor Noah's book this year as our common reading-- and of course, that leads up only to really his early adulthood. So he's growing up in apartheid South Africa. And I wonder what insights you've gathered from your time at The Daily Show about the process that he brings to his work on The Daily Show and what sense of responsibility he brings as a conveyor of news for a large segment of the population, for whom that is their source of news?

TED TREMPER: Well, it's interesting, because I think you get this in the book, as well. Despite-- it would be very easy for Born A Crime to be a very sad and sort of Angela's Ashes style deconstruction of growing up in apartheid. But it's not that way, because Trevor is not that way. He's a guy who, first, he just wants the show to be funny.

Jon talked a lot about this, as well. The reason Jon left the show is that it wasn't fun anymore. And I think that the thing that Trevor is great, and I think shares-- the enthusiasm that he has for being funny, and for loving laughter, and things like that, and that being a life perspective-- he is the embodiment of comedy being somebody's life's work and soul, sort of desires to kind of be funny. I mean, this is a guy who he was famous enough before he took The Daily Show all over the world that he essentially was semi retired, that he was rich and famous enough that, if he wanted to make a quarter of a million dollars or a million dollars, he could just call a manager and say book a show in Dubai, and then fly there and sell out an arena. He was a very, very, very rich and famous person.

But as many foreign comedians find, success abroad-- America is still the biggest pond, you know? So I think that one thing that's really inspiring about him is one doesn't get a sense that The Daily Show was an aspiration to him at all. It's mostly just, how do I do comedy and be funny? And this is an opportunity to reach more people. And not only reach more people, but empower other people within the show to be better, sort of get better, and then go off and do their own things.

And it's a thing where I've never had a boss that was proud of me for leaving a show or was really even fine with me leaving in the way that he was, because I think-- I can't really speak for him, but he has a spirit where-- in his book, he talks about really the only thing in life to aspire to is to have no regrets. So I think that, from his perspective, we're only haunted by the roads that we don't take.

So if you have an opportunity, then you should go for it. And I think it tells-- in regards to him having a middle school romance with a girl that he didn't ask out. And I think learning that lesson very early on was sort of essential for him. And I think that that advice, I think, is the same advice that I would give anybody, which is essentially find a way to live your life with no regrets. Yeah. I don't really remember the context of the original question, but I hope that that makes some kind of sense.

KAREN WEATHERMON: Yes, with the one follow up that there's a different responsibility, though, in something that has a news focus than just straight stand up. It's a little bit different than just being booked into arenas to do your stand up gig, to have a show that also has this news sort of component.

TED TREMPER: Yeah. And I think, to me-- I can't speak for Trevor, but I honestly think that he looks at it as an instrument that he's able to play in the same way that Jon Stewart, before he was a political satirist, was a stand-up who would do autobiographical material. And I think the thing that's wonderful about Trevor is that he's-- I would say it's as succinct as that he's a multi instrumentalist.

I honestly don't know whether he loves-- I would surmise, based on the material that he does in his specials, that he actually probably enjoys doing autobiographical stand-up more or differently than he likes doing political satire. But initially, I believe that he turned Jon down for the role for The Daily Show job. And Jon sort of convinced him to come and look at how the show is made.

And it was in seeing the show and how the show is made that really made him want to do it. Because as I said, it's an environment of about 60 people who are all functioning at the height of their intelligence, completely selflessly, to put together a show four times a week. And it's fun. And people laugh. They make it seem so effortless, and a lot of that is because of the infrastructure that Jon put together, but also Trevor has found different ways to innovate and do more things with sort of sketches and whatnot, and the way he's utilized the correspondents.

But it's a thing where, if I had to speak from his perspective, I would say it's a part of his psyche that he's able to look at society and deconstruct it from a political perspective, as much as he is able to look at his life and use the same kind of filtration to write a funny book about his childhood, as opposed to a tragic book about his childhood. It's not often that there are funny books where your mom gets shot by your stepdad.

And so I think that that speaks to a perspective. And it's also just-- he's a guy that you can have-- he talks about this a little bit. He's just a person you can talk to for an hour about anything, and who would want to talk to you for an hour about anything because of that kind of curiosity. So I would say I can't really speak to his sort of the weight that he bears in being a broadcaster. What I can say, though, is that I would say the comedic parts come from a place of joy, but then going back to the other question about journalistic integrity, one of his big heroes is Ted Koppel, because Ted Koppel came to South Africa to cover apartheid.

And they've since become friends. I watched them speak on a panel together. And really a lot of it is just sort of-- so much of comedy and so much of all of that is truth to power, but just sort of truth in general. You really can't be funny if you're not resonating with other people. And the truth always resonates, I think.

KAREN WEATHERMON: Well, thank you, Ted, so much for spending an hour with us here at WSU. And to students who are watching, I really want to encourage you to think about Ted as an example of somebody who delved into the possibilities that WSU offers. I believe from one of the comments you wrote at the Evergreen, I know you did Nuthouse comedy. I know you pursued classes that really spoke

to you in a way that it wasn't just about earning a degree here. It was about building an experience of being at WSU.

So I really want to encourage those of you who are students to think about what fuels your passion and what opportunities are available in your college experience here at WSU to pursue those. For those of you who are here for common reading credit, I'm going to have our tech person--

TED TREMPER: Oh, wait, hold on. Before you send the link, I just want to say, also, so if anybody-- my email address is just my name at gmail, so if anybody has specific questions I didn't answer, let me know. But then also, I wanted to say-- what was I-- oh, I wanted to plug Buddy's book. Labyrinth of Ice just won a big award at the Banff, I think, Book Festival. It won, I think, best travel writing. Is that right, Buddy?

BUDDY LEVY: You're very kind. It was the adventure travel award.

TED TREMPER: The adventure travel award. So yes, so this is Labyrinth on Ice. Get it on audio book or wherever books are sold. And yeah, if you have any other questions I didn't answer, my email address is just Tedtremper@gmail.com, and I'm very happy to help with whatever.

KAREN WEATHERMON: That's very generous. Thank you so much, Ted.

TED TREMPER: I truly have very little to do.

KAREN WEATHERMON: So the link is for an anonymous survey. And anyone who has...

TED TREMPER: I was hoping they had to wait till you gave it so that way we'd still have a captive audience.

KAREN WEATHERMON: Any of you, whether you're students or not, who'd like to give some feedback about the event today, we would welcome your feedback. If you're a student needing credit, at the end of the survey, it will take you to a place where you can enter your name, and ID number, and WSU email so we can have you in the list that verifies attendance.

So with that, I want to thank both Buddy and Ted so much for your time and our partners at the global campus who have made the tech for this possible tonight. Thank you always for partnering with us. We look forward to seeing many of you at future common reading events. Thank you so much.

TED TREMPER: Bye. Thank you.