Friday, June 11, 2021, 7:30 PM

**PAULA POUNDSTONE**

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Anne and Ellen Fife Theatre
Shop, Dine, & Play in Downtown Blacksburg

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PAULA POUNDSTONE

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Biography

 Appearing on stage with a stool, a microphone, and a can of Diet Pepsi, Paula Poundstone has one of comedy’s most nimble and disarming comic imaginations. In a review of Poundstone’s show for The Boston Globe, Nick Zaino III wrote, “Her talent for creating humor on the spot has become the stuff of legend. She improvises with the crowd like a jazz musician, swinging in unexpected directions without a plan, without a net. You know that she is a great comic the way you know any fine performer when you see one—there’s a disarming ease in her craft, an immediate sense that she’s so quick on her feet you need never worry about the possibility of something going wrong.”

Poundstone grew up in Sudbury, Massachusetts, and began nurturing her standup comedy talent just out of high school as part of the Boston comedy scene. At age 19, eager to expand her comedy experience beyond Boston, she climbed on a Greyhound bus with only a package of Oreos and a portable cassette player in tow, and traveled across the country, stopping in at open mic nights at comedy clubs as she went.

She then moved to San Francisco where she built a name for herself at The Other Café in Haight Ashbury. The Other quickly earned a reputation among comics for smart, aware audiences who booed blue humor, connected with political references, and who could ably follow a conceptual comic’s intricate imaginings far out onto any limb. It was a perfect place for Poundstone to flourish.

Like many comics of the day, she went back and forth to L.A., because “L.A. was where it was at.” Friends Robin Williams and Dana Carvey kindly arranged for their management to come see her perform at the Improv and they signed her. It was the ‘80s and the comedy boom took flight. The discos of the ‘70s transformed into comedy clubs. The glitter balls disappeared into the ceiling, café tables covered the dance floors, and a brick wall became the backing for a cheaply erected stage. Going out to a comedy club became the new popular evening entertainment. Comedy clubs sprung up across the country. Even comics no one had ever heard of were getting work.

Poundstone went on the road and became known. There were three acts a night: an opener, a middler, and the headliner. They played each club for a week, Tuesday through Sunday, with two shows on Saturday. She stayed in the “Comedy Condos” with whoever was on the bill that week. The condos were being bought by the club owners to save money on having to put the comics up at a hotel. She was one of the few women. The headliner got the bedroom. The accommodations were not luxurious. The other two got what was left. There were nights when
Poundstone ended up sleeping next to a fellow comic because that was the only choice.

Poundstone began getting television exposure: her first sets on Carson and Letterman turned into repeated bookings. HBO had a big foot in standup comedy. In 1982 they booked Poundstone on their Young Comedians special; 1987, Women of the Night; 1989, One Night Stand. When the network launched Comic Relief in 1986, an annual live three-and-a-half-hour comedy, music, and celebrity event to raise money for the homeless, Poundstone was included in the line-up. In 1989 she won an American Comedy award for Best Comedy Club Stand-Up Comic – Female. In her usual self-deprecating style she said about the win, “It’s not that special. They give the award out every year. There’s not that many of us.” When the comedy boom ended, Poundstone was one of the handful of comics still standing.

In 1991 HBO offered Poundstone her own one-hour standup special. It was hard to convince the people at HBO to let her talk to the audience as part of the show, but they finally agreed. They thought talking to the audience didn’t work on television and was boring. One of the first people Poundstone talked to was a woman who told a story about her mom’s face getting torn off by a lube rack! “Arghhhh!,” Paula yelled in response, all the time thinking, “These guys at HBO are gonna kill me.” But the “lube rack” story became a classic, and the special, Cats, Cops and Stuff, went on to be award-winning. In March 2020 it was listed in TIME magazine’s “Best Of” issue on comedian Tig Notaro’s list of The 5 Funniest Stand-Up Specials Ever. In 1991 it won the Cable ACE award for Best Standup Comedy Special, marking the first time, then in its fifth year, a woman won the award.

By the early ‘90s, Poundstone had shifted her performances from comedy clubs to performing arts centers and theatres where she had more control of her performances and the timing of her shows was no longer determined by when the waitresses dropped the checks. She wanted to get off the grueling Tuesday through Sunday schedule the comedy clubs required. Now, she only played one show in each city and only went out on weekends. She wanted to have a life. She became a foster parent and ended up fostering eight children, adopting three.

By 1992 Poundstone was growing frustrated with the lack of personal connection she had with the audience in the traditional five-minute standup set on the late night talk-shows. She wanted to do more than just “stand on stage and tell my little jokes,” as she described it. She asked pal Jay Leno if she could file live reports from the Democratic National
Convention to his Tonight Show. Her appearances were so successful that she went on to cover the Republican convention and the inauguration for the show as well.

The 45th Emmy awards followed in 1993 with a request for Poundstone to do standup on the show, but she wanted to do live behind-the-scenes coverage. The producers questioned why she would risk ad-libbing when she could be in control of her material with a comedy set. They finally said yes to her request, but were doubtful enough about her success that they restricted her pieces to 30 seconds each. Poundstone couldn’t help but smile during the middle of her first piece when she overheard the director yelling through the stage manager’s headset, “Let her go! Let her go!” After the show he likened Poundstone’s performance to when Michael Jackson debuted his moonwalk on the Motown 25 special, considered “career-making,” the director said. Poundstone had set the standard for live, behind-the-scenes coverage for those to come.

At the tail end of 1993 and the George H. W. Bush presidency, Poundstone marked another first when she became the first woman to host the White House Correspondents’ dinner (it was nine years after the tradition of comedian performances began in 1983). Her material had never been from a female point of view, and through her stand-up specials on HBO and her political commentary on The Tonight Show with Jay Leno, she’d trailblazed a path for politically-minded women comics. Yet despite her many digs during the dinner, when she woke up the next morning, news reports focused on her choice of clothing—a white tuxedo—rather than the content of her remarks. “I think that might have been the one time that I ever thought about the fact that I was a woman,” she was quoted as saying. “Because would they have done that for any other performer?”

ABC went forward next with a guarantee of 13 episodes for a variety-type show staring Poundstone, aptly named The Paula Poundstone Show. The network was hoping to find success by doing something different in a troubled Saturday night time slot they had yet to successfully fill. Poundstone did a primarily unscripted show with satellite hookups across America and musical guests. The show was canceled after four episodes. It was original, and Poundstone was proud of the product.

She continued to perform, racking up on average 92 dates a year.

In 1996 Paula went on to another first with her second special for HBO, Paula Poundstone Goes to Harvard. It was the first time the university allowed its named to be used in the title of a television show.
Poundstone has filed commentary for *CBS Sunday Morning*, *NPR’s All Things Considered*, and *Morning Edition*. She has written articles for several major publications and from 1993 to 1998, she wrote a monthly back page column for *Mother Jones*. It took her eight years to write her first book, *There Is Nothing in This Book That I Meant to Say*, with a forward by Mary Tyler Moore (Harmony Books, a division of Random House, 2006). A self-proclaimed terrible student in high school, Poundstone is an avid reader. In 2008 she became the National Spokesperson for the American Library Association’s “Friends of Libraries”—a grassroots organization with chapters across the country that work to support their local libraries. It is a role she continues to this day.

In 2006 Poundstone did her third one-hour standup comedy special, *Look What the Cat Dragged In*. She also wrote three math text books for children with her high school math teacher, Faye Ruopp, in a *Math with a Laugh* series: *The Sticky Problem of Parallelogram Pancakes* (grades 4-5), *Venn Can We Be Friends?* (grades 6-7), and *You Can’t Keep Slope Down* (grades 8-9), all Heineman Press.

In 2017 Poundstone released her second book, *The Totally Unscientific Study of the Search for Human Happiness* (Algonquin Books). The book was recognized as one of eight semi-finalists for the Thurber Prize for American Humor, the highest recognition of the art of humor writing in the United States. It was also one of five finalists for the 2018 Audie Award for Audio Book of the Year.

Poundstone has released three performance CDs: *North by Northwest: Paula Poundstone Live!*, a two-CD set (Highbridge 2016); *I HEART JOKES: Paula Tells Them in Boston* (Lipstick Nancy 2013); and *I HEART JOKES: Paula Tells Them in Maine* (Lipstick Nancy 2008); and she was the “reader alouder” on both of the books she authored. She also voiced the character Paula in the first season of *Home Movies*; Judge Stone on the ABC Saturday morning series *Science Court* (a.k.a. “Squigglevision”) for three years; and Forgetter Paula in the Academy Award-winning feature film *Inside Out*.

In 2019 she released her first rap song, *Not My Butterfinger*, which she co-wrote with famed producer Jae Dael. It is a social justice rap song.

When COVID-19 hit, Poundstone began making *RX Laughter* videos to keep people entertained. They can be viewed on her website by clicking on the *RX Laughter* videos tab at the top of the page.
Poundstone continues as a panelist on NPR’s Wait Wait…Don’t Tell Me! She is recognized in innumerable lists, documentaries, and literary compendiums noting influential standup comedians of our time, and in 2010 she was one of a select group voted into the Comedy Hall of Fame.

Poundstone can be heard weekly on her comedy podcast, Nobody Listens to Paula Poundstone, an out-of-control adult education class that meets in a treehouse. Poundstone, Adam Felber, Captain Crinkle, Toni Anita Hull, and a gallimaufry of characters have dropped the rope ladder down for you to climb on up, and sit around the fire with them. Uh-oh.

This is Poundstone’s first performance at the Moss Arts Center.

Go Deeper

In a 2018 interview for Bellingham Alive, Poundstone stated:

“The great thing about our sense of humor—not just comics, but human beings in general—there’s no question in my mind that it’s a healing device that nature has given us.”

How and when has humor served as a healing device for you, especially over the past year?

Special thanks to Dominique Benjamin, Greg Fansler, Amanda Hoefer, Annie McCallum, Jessie Richards, John Torget, and Glen van der Molen.
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Clay Burnette
All Screwed Up, 2014 (detail)
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Courtesy of the artist
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We also acknowledge the university’s historical ties to the indentured and enslaved whose labors built this institution. We pay respect to these people for their contributions to Virginia Tech.

As you engage with one another and the arts we present, we invite you to reflect on the history of this space and its possibilities for reconciliation, truth, and humanity. In the spirit of Ut Prosim, let this acknowledgment be but a single step in the Moss Arts Center’s commitment to these values.
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