

CHRISTIAN FINNEGAN

When Christian Finnegan was trying to arrive at a title for his first DVD release, he rifled through the punchlines in his comedy act, looking to find the right snappy, snarky one-liner. “But they all seemed a little too standup comedy-ish to me,” he explains. “Then I thought of *Au Contraire*, which is just a throw-off phrase that I used in the middle of a joke. It was very indicative of me, in the sense that it’s a little foppy-sounding, but also a little bit defiant. Because that’s a major element of my comedy: ‘You are wrong. And now I’m going to tell you why you’re wrong.’”

But maybe *Au Contraire* also fits as a title because Finnegan is a bit of a self-contrarian, when it comes to having a comedy style that’s not easy to pin down. He’s highly recognizable to the TV-viewing comedy cognoscenti for being a regular on VH1’s *Best Week Ever* and Keith Olbermann’s MSNBC show. Yet when it comes to his standup act, he chucks purely topical humor out the window in favor of getting personal. And as you watch the opening minutes of *Au Contraire*, it may not be easy to peg right away exactly which vein of comedy gold Finnegan intends to mine. Is his comedy sophisticated, or does he work blue? Will he go for the lowest common denominator, or take the comic high road? The answer to all of the above would be... yes.

“Sometimes I find that I’m too dirty for the people who want to hear really highfalutin comedy, and too highfalutin for people who really want to hear about boobs,” Finnegan notes. “But I kind of like that, because the people who can relate to both are the people I’m trying to reach. That’s sort of my sweet spot: If you’ve ever read a philosophy text and yet you also have the iFart application on your iPhone, you’re the perfect audience member for me.”

But that mix of tone and subject matter is not to say that Finnegan goes in for completely random comedy. “It’s cool now to be kind of a one-liner comic, or do a neo-Borstch Belyt or neo-Steven Wright thing. But I really enjoy people who have something to say—even if it’s stupid; it doesn’t have to be political or socially responsible. I like people who are willing to explore a topic for a long period of time—Bill Cosby,

George Carlin, Doug Stanhope, Louis CK, Greg Geraldo, people like that. And it just feels natural and fits better for me.”

Finnegan first found a measure of TV notoriety with a short but indelible appearance in a sketch on Dave Chappelle’s old show (playing the only white guy in an otherwise all-black parody of *The Real World*). But he really came into his own a few years ago as a regular on VH1’s *Best Week Ever*, where he riffed on gossip and pop culture. So it may come as a surprise to anyone watching *Au Contraire* that he goes in more for relationship humor. “I always worry when somebody says ‘I love *Best Week Ever*— I’m gonna come to your show tonight!’ I’m always like, ‘Just so you know, I’m not going to be talking about *Dancing with the Stars*, and I hope that’s okay with you.’ I love throwing pop culture references into my act. I’m a massive trivia geek. I won a car on a game show a number of years ago for knowing ‘80s music videos. But that’s not really where I want to exist as a standup.”

He’s relishing his current fortnightly-or-so appearances on Keith Olbermann’s show, which exercise completely different comedic muscles. “It’s fun, but very pressure filled, because I get called to do it that day and don’t know what we’re talking about until around 5:30pm. I spend an hour or two trying to write jokes, and then you say them once and they’re gone—which is so different from standup, where you might do a joke 50 times before you really get the wording down and find out what works and what doesn’t. But I love that I can work at the absolute top of my intelligence, being as obscure as I want to be or making an odd historical reference. It’s nice to kind of not have to worry about some drunk down in the front row being like ‘What the f--- is this homo talking about?’”

And Finnegan does get some of that. Early in the new DVD, he lets the audience know that, despite what they may be thinking—au contraire, indeed!—he is married, and she’s not a beard. “When I got up on stage, I could see it in people’s faces: that dude is sure I’m gay, and he’s totally not buying this whole wife bullshit. And I decided to address that. Until a few years ago, I used to be a lot heavier—I was up in the upper 270s—and one of the consequences of having changed my physicality is that hopefully I won’t die soon. But I also found that

after I lost weight, people saw me very differently onstage. When I was bigger, I had more of a schlubby, everyman appeal, but when I got in shape, I was looked at more as poncey and girly. I've always really been as wussy-ish as I am now, but I also started to get more effete with my manner of dress. So it all happened organically out of that." (Don't expect any weight-loss jokes in his act, though. "There's nothing less interesting than watching a comedian talk about actual accomplishments!" Finnegan maintains. "I would give myself the finger if I were doing that material.")

Au Contraire, which is arriving on DVD days after its premiere as a Comedy Central special, was filmed in October 2008 at Philadelphia's historic Trocadero Theatre. "I always have good sets in Philly, and I find the professional people who live in the city to be very smart—and a little bit mean," he cheerfully adds. "There's a heart of darkness to Philadelphia which I like." Finnegan also wanted to find a venue less antiseptic than the comedy clubs or amphitheatres used in other standup specials. "This place was an opera house in the 19th century before becoming a burlesque house early in the 20th century, and now metal bands play there. I think of what I do as being smart takes on stupid topics and stupid takes on smart topics, so there's something about the dichotomy of the Trocadero that appealed to me."

Au Contraire includes some unusual bonus features—including a replay of the entire special with the camera focusing on just one audience member, accompanied by Finnegan doing a subsequent running commentary with that very attendee. "I was thinking about directors' commentary tracks on DVDs, and there's nothing about standup that would lend itself to such a thing. Who wants to hear someone talking over someone talking for an hour? But I had this other idea. When I'm watching a show, I love fixating on a random audience member. It's fascinating to watch exactly what makes a person laugh and what doesn't, whether he's trying to force a chuckle, or if he's holding back because he's worried he might offend his date."

Another DVD bonus has Finnegan, in character as a supercilious interviewer, chatting with some guests whose real-life professions or hobbies mirror subjects he discusses in his act—from an ex-pole vaulter

to a female sex-store clerk. If you think these bits are scripted, guess again: All his “guests” are real people he found through Facebook or MySpace queries. “We did edit those interviews to play up the awkwardness as much as possible—which was not terribly difficult. I’m a big fan of the extended pause in comedy, where, if someone makes a joke, you cut to someone being silent. Just complete dead air—that, I’m a fan of.”

Fortunately, outside of that particular oddball DVD supplement, there’s no such pregnant silence in the main comedic body of *Au Contraire*. The legit laughs accrue as Finnegan goes for the populist jugular. “I love catharsis in comedy,” says the 36-year-old New York native—“that laugh of recognition, of ‘Yes, that’s what I’ve always felt, and why hasn’t anyone said that before?’” That might apply to Finnegan’s wry take on the ineffectiveness of lingerie past a certain point in a long-term relationship (“Oh, now your boobs have lace on them”)... or, conversely, to the eternally orgasmic qualities of the Playstation 3. “A lot of comedians talk about videogames, but usually in very tacky or very standard mainstream terms. They don’t really get into the sensation of what it feels like to really *love* videogames and how much it can really run your life.”

“I’m also proud of dumb little words and phrases. I love the fact that I got a Sha Na Na joke on this DVD, and that, of all things, it’s part of a joke about the Wii. I’m pretty certain that no one has ever made that connection before. And I love working in a word like ‘shan’t’ or putting in a phrase like ‘in excelsis deo’ for no reason whatsoever. I think it’s pretty obvious for anyone who watches that I’m a little bit pretentious with my vocabulary choices. But I like that—especially when I’m talking about something that on the surface that looks very dirty and R-rated. I like being able to talk about a guy with a ‘Certified Muff Diver’ T-shirt and break it down into pompous, analytical terms. That sort of dichotomy is what I enjoy—and if I can find some fluffy, foo-foo word to describe some base sex act, then that’s a good day for me.” Finnegan’s faithful audience shan’t disagree.