

Yes All Women's Comedy

2012 – 2017

I did my first solo comedy gig in December 2013 at the Comic's Lounge "New comedians night". I was going to the comedy workshops at the Comic's Lounge at the time, and a fellow comic there told me that Station 59 were starting all women's nights. That really sparked up my interest, so in 2014 I found this station 59 and went down to check it out. Keiran, the guy who ran the room, seemed pretty friendly and willing to put me on the bill for both the regular comedy nights and the Yes All Women's comedy nights, which were on once a month.

I had been trying a few venues, and the mixed gender open mic night at Station 59 seemed pretty much the same as any other open mic night (too new to the scene to get the subtle differences). But the Yes All Women's comedy nights were totally different! I can't remember my first Yes All Women's gig as such, but I remember being blown away by comedians like Nicky Barry, Sofie Prints, Sharon Andrews, Eurydice Dixon, Daisy Berry, Caili Christian, Lainie Chat, Jess Pearman, Eve Ellenbogen, Gamze Kirik, Tash Rubinstein, Anna Murphy, Melinda King, Megan McKay, Mimi Shaheen, Becky Steepe, Urvi Majumdar, Helene Murray, Lexi Simmonds, Rebecca Douglas, Mayumi Nobetsu, Angela Green, Deb Bland, Marilyn Tofler, Imogen MJ, Nat Malcolm, Sarah Hinds, Kristine Phillip, Cherie Smith, Kate Hanley, Jennifer Neal, Pauline Sherlock, Loz Dog Lee, Sue Jackel, Briggsly Edwards, and Emma Clowes. That's a lot of female comedians, and there were more.

Tamar Issa started Yes All Women's back in February 2013, at Station 59. In a response to the mainstream media uproar surrounding Angelo D'Costa's "There's nothing funny about rape" debate (Nov 2012) that portrayed the room as misogynistic, Tamara asked to stage a women only open mic in solidarity. She felt safe performing at Station 59 – in fact many women, including myself, found Station 59 to be the safest room to perform in in Melbourne. Tamara staged Twisted, all female comedy line-up in February 2013. It was a great success, so they stage another one in June 2013, and then again in early 2014. Kristine Phillip suggested that the night go monthly, it was renamed Yes All Women, and the rest in history. The first Yes All Women comedy night was in July 2014 and it ran on a monthly basis for nearly 3 years.

What was so different was the immense amount of support and warmth that the female comedians give each other, and it's contagious! The punters there picked up on it and everyone had a great time :) It was where we could go and know that we belong, friendly faces, supportive conversations and a knowing that we were all in the same boat, and we were all in this together. So fucking reassuring – very good for everyone's mental health and self esteem. And so different from the rest of the comedy scene here in Melbourne.

In stark contrast, you have most other open mic nights. Depending on the venue, up to 90% of the comedians on the bill are males. Some curated bills are 100% male. With the open mic sign ups it's no-one's fault, it just is that way. Still, we're walking into a blokey environment where we need to adapt to that environment purely because we're outnumbered. Again, no-one's fault, it's just what we're dealing with. We're also dealing with an audience who are used to seeing a man with the mic and are conditioned to laugh at male humour. This makes us women feel the need to adapt our material to that male style to get laughs from audiences who seem to respond to a more blokey approach (sorry, can't think of a better way to describe "male humour" - male energy?).

If we women start to adapt our humour to a more blokey approach to try to get laughs, it's such a loss! The world needs to hear the women's voices and what's important to us. But when you're on a bill and the other comedians are getting laughs about their dick, porn, some millennial social media stuff and being single, and you come out and do stuff on slut shaming, abortion and motherhood, you've stepped outside the expected. In Eurydice's case she did stuff on gender politics, suicide, sex workers and being vegetarian – she was way outside the average comfort zone. And if you've got any hope of taking that audience there with you, away from their current headspace, you have to work at it harder – that road has not been paved for you. You need a fucking machete.

But at Yes All Women's comedy we didn't need a machete. Nicky Barry was our fucking machete!! Nicky Barry often MC'd Yes All Women's, and she was a powerhouse! The nights was about women, and you knew about it from the word go, with no apology or playing ourselves down. Whether it was Nicky, or Sofie Prints, or Nadine Sparks, or Sharon Andrews Mcing, it was so fucking liberating! So inspiring! So fucking funny!!

It was also breaking big ground. Yes All Women's was the first place I heard a women say in public that she'd had an abortion – thank you Sofie Prints. It was the first place I saw a very voluptuous comedian tell us about her numerous sexual encounters – thank you Nadine Sparks. It was the only place I have ever seen an aboriginal female comedian, do really dark humour (pardon the pun) about her people, and got a phenomenal response – thank you Deb Bland. It was the first place I saw a woman talk about a sex worker in a positive light and later compare suicide rates to the gender wage gape – thank you Eurydice Dixon. This is all very risky material that can fall flat on it's face out there. But when we did our risky material that expressed who we really are at Yes All Women's, we got a great response! It encouraged us to keep going with our honest material. It gave us a chance to work up our "chick" material in an environment where we knew we were safe. No one died (OK, maybe one or two).

I called Yes All Women's the incubator. It's where we had the little chicks of female comedians came together and helped each other grow. And that first year or so of comedy is very raw – it's all new material – it's all new. And you need to find something in the scene to enjoy, even if the gigs aren't going so great, so that you keep coming back. If you're just doing gigs at open mics where it's mainly just other comedians in the audience, male comedians just sitting there waiting for their turn, you're going to end up giving up because it's shit! You need people in front you who are ready and willing to laugh! You need somewhere that you can give your material a chance to come out in it's raw form, before you've done any editing or shaping, and the audience is ready to go with you. Yes All Women's gave us that space, permission to 'fail', if you want to call it that.

It's incredibly important to have rooms that give you this permission to 'fail'. In my opinion comedy is here to voice the subtext of what's going on in this world underneath what we're told, underneath social norms, underneath the lip service. Alot of this subtext is dark and taboo, and with the right comedic angle and opportunity to shape the delivery, makes for brilliant comedy. It's how we get to talk about the dark shit going on in the world, and keep the audience with us. Comedy is the only medium where we can talk about really controversial stuff, what's under the surface, without having everyone tell us to shut up and go home. But this brilliant comedy doesn't just come out brilliantly – it needs a space where it can come out wrong, and the comedian won't be chastised and is welcome back for another gig. This is the only way to be able to work up this kind of comedy. The difference between offensive and brilliant can be as simple as the words being used, timing, slight change in comedic angle – and sometimes it takes an outsider to point that

out to the comedian – someone who can see what they're trying to say, but not quite getting it. But this needs to come from a space of acceptance and willingness to help and work with each other. If we are scared of being shut down and not allowed back to a comedy room because our material is perceived as offensive, then we are always going to play it safe with our material. All this does is promote and allow mediocrity to flourish. If we get to a point where comedians are only doing politically correct material in a non-offensive fashion, then mediocrity has won, and comedy is dead.

I used to perform musical comedy with my husband back in 1999 – 2001. There were far fewer women performing comedy back then. Dick jokes were all the rage, social correctness wasn't what it is today, and Chris Franklin's song "Bloke" was no. 1 on the charts. You had to be kinda tough as a female comedian back then. I was in a duo with music and a guy, it didn't apply to me. But I had a friend who was doing comedy back then, and she was doing a Comedy Festival show with Bev Killick. A fellow male comedian (headliner, big status, lots of dick jokes) asked Bev why she was doing a show with such a shit comedian, advising her not to. My friend heard him say that, and after that she gave up. She wasn't a tough woman comedian, her comedy was a bit softer, it was more from a hippy point of view. If she had been around now, and she had had the good fortune of being part of Yes All Women's comedy, she might still be going. And as her confidence improved, and her true voice developed, she would have gotten funnier. But we'll never know now, because some big guy comedian bad mouthed her and she gave up.

I remember the first time I saw Eurydice Dixon perform at The Three Crowns Hotel in West Melbourne, just down the street from the Comics Lounge. She did material about an insecure guy who was practicing calling out the word "Whore!" so that when he had an opportunity to do so, he would be ready. He was working on his diaphragm and breath to really get the word out there. Then when he was driving along, he saw a woman walking along the footpath and recognised his opportunity. But, with all the adrenalin rushing in the moment, he messed it up and yelled out "Are you a whore?" Eurydice described his disappointment in himself for ruining this moment he had been preparing for, for so long.

She also described how the woman heard him, and turns out she was a sex worker. So she walked over to his car (seems he had parked) and gave him her card. In Eurydice's comedy sketch the sex worker was confident, professional and not ashamed of what she did. It was the insecure guy who called her a 'whore' that was the butt of the joke. He was the one who was embarrassed at the end. I was riveted by her story. She didn't get a laugh that night, and neither did I. I never went back to the Three Crowns, but luckily I did see Eurydice again when I found Yes All Women's a few weeks after I first saw her perform.

She did that same material again at Yes All Women's and she got laughs. Her voice just needed to land in the right place, and Yes All Women's was the right place to start with. It was the same with me and lots of us who started out at Yes All Women's. It gave us somewhere to develop our true comedic voice as a female in the world. An incubator for women's comedy. And people enjoyed it. There were male comics who came along just for the show. They enjoyed the warm, supportive environment that they couldn't find when there are men on the bill. There were punters who also enjoyed the environment, and it was different to the usual comedy night.

While Yes All Women's Comedy was happening every month, I remember trying to savour every moment of it, because I knew it was wouldn't last forever. I was performing comedy in 2000 when Espy Comedy came to a halt. It was the most popular comedy room in Melbourne, packing out the Gershwin Room every Sunday afternoon to come and see a mix of pros and open micers (mainly open micers), and big crowds every Tuesday night. Then, out of nowhere the Espy management sacked Trevor who ran the room. It was such a shock to the comedy community – that's when I realised how ephemeral comedy rooms are. If Espy comedy could go down, then they all end up going down. And when you find a good one, go down and be a part of it, because it will not be there forever.

I knew that what we had with Yes All Women's was special, unprecedented, a new spark of a voice rarely heard. I put my name down every month. Sometimes I thought they might be sick of me, but I that was not enough to stop me putting my name down. I didn't ever want to miss out! This was the shit! These were my friends, my fellow female comedians – a brave, passionate, outspoken little crew who were all in the same boat together, all helping each other get more confident, helping each other speak our truth and most importantly, helping each other get funnier!! It was a privilege to be a part of it, and I am a better comedian today because of it. I'm sure that many of the women named above a better comedians today because of Yes All Women's. I don't know if I would still be doing comedy if it wasn't for Yes All Women's. I have very solid friendships with the other women from Yes All Women's – very valuable friendships.

In January 2016 the Yes All Women crew staged the "Mad Fucking Witches" Australia Day benefit for the Welcome Group, who raise funds to assist refugees in the community. Sofie Prints got the title from Peter Dutton and a post show auction of various items – including a portrait of a Mad Fucking Witch by a then 5 year old Sophia Butler, that one of Eurydice's friends inexplicably paid \$100 for! - raised over \$600. It was a neat encapsulation of the sheer joyful energy that existed in that room at Station 59 when ever there was an all female line up on stage. "I saw most of the shows because I facilitated the room for nearly 6 years" said Kieran Butler. "It was as unique an energy as I have seen in all my years in and around comedy. 2016 was when it was at it's peak. We staged a number of Yes All Women nights at the Adelaide Fringe that year and our Free Comedy Line ups at the MICF and the Adelaide Fringe had more women than ever.

Eurydice joined the line up in Adelaide for her first show "Urgh!", Bec Douglas was performing "The Optimistic Feminist", Sofie Prints was doing "Jesus was a Rape Baby" in addition to a whole host of shows from Yes All Women regulars. It was fantastic to be a very small part of it during that time."

I feel so fortunate to have been part of it – it popped up for 3 years, just when I was starting out in comedy. It also meant that we really got to know each others material, including Eurydice. We watched her grow, we listened to the amazing things she had to say – we got an insight into her brilliant, non-conformist mind. The timing could not have been better.

Thank you to all the women involved and to Keiran Butler for providing the space for us to do it, and for organising the admin. at the time – much appreciated.