



Nicole chilling at a rooftop bar in New York City last year.

Nicole Ng Min

Please introduce yourself to us.

I graduated from NUS in January 2020 and dabbled in project management for some time before settling into a career in sales. When I'm not working, you'll find me performing improvisational theatre (improv, for short) and stand-up comedy, playing board games, eating brunch, working out, playing sports, or catching the hottest new play and/or musical in town. I started learning improv in 2020 after I read James Clear's "Atomic Habits" and learnt how I shouldn't self-reject and deprive myself of the opportunity to create and share the art I have in me. It turned out to be the best decision I've ever made; not only did it make me a more interesting person, it also gave me valuable friendships and a lovely community to surround myself with. (...without having to join a cult. Haha.) I did my first stand-up show in 2021 and have been performing ever since!

Can you tell us more about your stand-up comedy work?

Many people (especially Singaporeans) think it's cool to do stand-up, but reality is often less sexy - the average stage time most comics get in open mics is about five minutes, and you have to recycle your jokes a lot in order to refine them. Stand-up is also just as much about good writing as it is bravery on stage. However, the validation received when jokes succeed makes it worthwhile, and it's the greatest feeling ever when someone gives me compliments or says I made their day or night.

Apart from performing, I also produce and host my own comedy show which blends improv with stand-up comedy. I conceived LADYBO\$\$ Comedy Night when I saw a need for more openly-supportive spaces for queer and women comics in a male-dominated scene. It started out as just a stand-up comedy show, but after a while I realised that I could spice up the show with something new and refreshing each time. That was when I decided to mix in improv comedy since it can only happen once and never again. Since then, we've had returning audience members and better yet - returning audience members who bring more people to the next show.

What sparked your interest in stand-up comedy?

I grew up watching improv comedy shows like Whose Line Is It Anyway? and comedians like Ellen DeGeneres on YouTube and always wanted to give it a try! So I started with improv first, since there weren't any classes for stand-up comedy at the time.

After performing improv for two years I felt like I had to do something different like stand-up, as a challenge to myself. While improv is a team sport where people work together on stage, stand-up is a one-person act, and that terrified me. So I decided to leave my comfort zone to see if I'd have any success.

How has your time in NUS shaped your career journey and hobbies?

During my time in NUS, I organised a few events such as 2017's i.Volunteer (under Red Cross Youth), 2018's Green Bazaar (under NUS SAVE), and Operation S.T.A.R (under NVAC). It made me realise I love organising events and meeting new people, which led me to organise lots of improv and stand-up comedy shows. This realisation led to my current job in account management and customer success.

Do you have any advice for anyone looking to pursue similar after-work hobbies?

Definitely just jump right into it, even if you're scared to try. Your first time isn't going to be glamorous, but it only gets better from there. Most importantly, it will allow you to meet other people! Being a working adult doesn't mean you stop making friends and meaningful connections, it's how you can continue developing yourself.

You can learn improv under The Improv Company (class schedules are on www.improv.sg), and if you're afraid of signing up for classes right off the bat, I highly recommend attending one of their weekly taster sessions first.

Currently, I co-organise introductory stand-up comedy workshops with my comedy bestie Steph Chan. There's no website for it yet but you can let me know your interest to learn on Instagram / Facebook at @ladyboss.comedy!

What is your favourite memory in NUS?

I have lots of fond memories in NUS, so this is hard to choose. I guess it would be drawing random doodles on Dr Georgiou's whiteboard while discussing classes each week and him never erasing them for years, because he considers them valuable art.

When did you start stand-up comedy and what led you to it?

My first exposure to stand-up comedy was a Chinese comedy show called "Tonight's 80s Talk Show". I tuned in every Friday night to get a good laugh. I started performing freelance stand-up comedy during the summer of my freshman year but my first attempt at stand-up was during my high school prom. Prior to the prom stand-up, I always enjoyed doing impressions of teachers and impersonating them with multiple English accents. My classmates were always entertained by these little sketches. One day, I was doing an impression after P.E. class in the changing room, and my classmates enjoyed it so much that they forgot to change their clothes. It was at that moment that I realized my potential to be a performer, so I signed up for the talent show section at prom immediately. For my prom set, I compiled some jokes told between my friends, and some jokes about our high school classes. It was quite well received and it really boosted my interest to try stand-up in university.

How do you usually prepare for your gigs?

I note down the joke ideas I come up with every day and compile them into 3–5-minute joke sets. I then bring these sets to open mic events to test them out. Many jokes are funny to me or my friends, but you never know whether a wider audience will get them or not. So, it is essential to try my joke sets out a couple of times among different audiences before using them for a formal gig. By repeating the same joke sets through different open mics I can also refine and improve my delivery of them.

Who are your role models in stand-up comedy and how have they influenced your comedic style?

My role models in stand-up are Chris Rock and Trevor Noah. I really admire how Chris Rock can indirectly reflect on social issues faced by minorities in the US through his jokes. On the other hand, Trevor Noah's comedy material is friendly to all types of audiences and he is great at mimicking different accents.

What are some challenges you face as a stand-up comedian?

The biggest challenge as a stand-up comedian is actually learning to reuse jokes. When I first started, I always wanted to do new jokes at each performance. This mindset is very common among new comics and it makes sense because repetition usually is boring. It took some advice from several veteran comics and my own reflection to overcome this mindset. And it has helped a lot! Almost all of my best jokes wouldn't be as well-paced and structured if I hadn't worked on them repeatedly.

What is your favourite moment as a stand-up comedian and why?

I would pick two moments. The first one is my last open mic in Singapore in November. Before going on student exchange to California, I performed one last time at the Lemon Stand Comedy Club in Queen Street. My friends came to support me and my jokes were very well received by the audience. It was an amazing night and a meaningful capstone to my one year development as a stand-up comic in Singapore. The second moment came in early January this year when I had a very good performance in Shanghai. I managed to improvise some jokes through crowd work and absolutely killed it that night. As someone who spent all his life in Shanghai before university, I always wanted to introduce more laughter and positivity to my community. I am pleased to take my talent to the audiences back home and put on a good show.

Has your journey in stand-up comedy shaped your perspective on life?

Certainly! Stand-up comedians turn everything into jokes, so stand-up has affected my attitude towards many aspects



Mengxiao enjoying his moment in the spotlight.

Ren Mengxiao

of life. Seeing everything through the eyes of a comedian brings much more positivity to my life.

Are there any skills from your economics studies that you found surprisingly useful in stand-up comedy, and vice versa?

In economics we deal with a lot of quantitative problems that require the use of mathematics to solve. Surprisingly, in stand-up comedy, you can also use mathematics to optimize your set. For example, a good joke set needs good "word economy", that is, you need a good number of jokes per minute to keep the audiences engaged throughout your set. You never know if audiences will actually laugh at one joke, so you would need to think about the probability and risks of each joke, and plan your set accordingly.

How do you find the capacity to balance studying and living out your passion?

I think doing stand-up and taking university courses actually complement each other quite well. University coursework is not always 'fun', and sometimes can get stressful. Comedy helps me reduce stress and improves my well-being. Whether it is performing stand-up or being in NUS Comedy Club sessions, they all help me to take a break from studying and energize me for the next round of work.

What tips would you give to students who wish to start stand-up comedy?

(1) Write down your jokes (2) Try them out (3) Ask others for opinions (4) Improve your jokes (5) Repeat steps 2 to 4. And most importantly, enjoy the process and have fun!

Do you think it will be possible for you to do stand-up full-time?

I would certainly love if that opportunity comes. But to do stand-up full-time, I would need many fans across the world (currently I am very far away from that). Moreover, I would need to commit much more time to stand-up compared to my current commitment. So currently, it is more of a dream than a goal.

Do you have an economics-related joke to share with us?

This is not my joke but it's one of my favourite ones I've read online:

Q: How many economists does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Ten. One to screw it in and nine to keep everything else *ceteris paribus*.