

What's So Funny? Mainstreaming Psychedelic Science Through Comedy

Brad Burge

On March 31, 2011, I had the unique chance to travel with my friend and colleague Berra Yazar-Klosinski to Los Angeles, California, to shoot a pilot television show with a production company that develops shows for major networks. The company, which I won't name since they haven't decided to publicize the episode yet, invited us to appear on the first episode of a new "exploratory science show," a cross between *The Daily Show* and *Bill Nye the Science Guy*, that would make science fun and accessible to a wider public through the insightful, playful, improvisational sarcasm of LA-based comedian Duncan Trussel. Between my eagerness to talk about the world of psychedelic research on television and Berra's razor-sharp wit and Ph.D. in molecular, cell, developmental biology, we made a good team.

It was a warm spring day when we got on the plane for LA. The episode was to be an "unbroadcastable pilot," meaning that the episode must pass the scrutiny of network executives before it is aired and before a network decides to fund additional episodes. Since this particular company has worked with Comedy Central, HBO, Showtime, and plenty of others, it seemed well worth the round trip. The production team decided to do their pilot on "the world of psychedelic drugs," based on their belief that doing the show on so controversial—and popular—a topic would stand a good chance of making the cut.

From the sound engineer and the key grip to the director and Duncan himself, everyone in the studio was professional, courteous, and intrigued about who we were and what MAPS does. As soon as we arrived we were offered coffee and breakfast burritos, introduced to Duncan ("the talent"), and subjected to some minor makeup.

Our interview was filmed in a tiny room made to look like a modern office: primary colors and IKEA furniture. Berra and I sat on opposite sides of Duncan for the interview. Once the cameras started rolling, Duncan asked us to introduce ourselves and say a

little bit about MAPS. Then he turned to us and said, "I'm a big fan of the work that you guys are doing, so in the spirit of science, I decided to do a little research of my own to help you guys out." Then he picked up a remote control and flipped on a television screen.

Before our arrival, Duncan and a production team had shot a segment of Duncan under the influence of *Psilocybe cubensis* mushrooms. Duncan, on screen, happily munching away on dried mushrooms out of a plastic bag: "I am currently consuming an unknown quantity of psilocybin mushrooms."



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The next shot is of a recognizably altered Duncan in a workout suit trying with all his physical and existential might to lift weights while a trainer (an actor) screams at him from behind reflective shades like a drill sergeant to "lift harder, push harder, stop laughing" while Duncan giggles and smiles and marvels aloud about how the laws of the physical universe are preventing him from lifting more weight.

The next shot is of Duncan sitting in the gym, connected to a real respirator device and cardiac monitor under the watchful eye of a man who appears to be some sort of medical professional. The setup was intended to gather data about Duncan's physical state as well as to demonstrate that adequate

medical supervision is important when using psychedelics. It was also effective punctuation between the rest of the scenes, which were comparatively action-packed.

"I was rolling around and laughing on the floor, and it was hard to stay focused on what I was doing and what I needed to get done," Duncan reflected. "A bunch of times while shooting the segment I felt as if I was doing something really far out and crazy by shooting this thing, and that there were maybe other, more important things I could be doing with my life, but I had to stay focused and get the job done."

The following sequences included the drill sergeant screaming at Duncan to throw baseballs, climb stairs, and lift weights—while Duncan visibly struggled to do as he was told and to pay attention to his tasks. Another sequence has Duncan marveling at a blank green wall and speaking aloud about the faces and "elves" that he sees projecting from it.

In yet another sequence, Duncan attempts to play the saxophone. He wails and wails and makes the ugliest sounds imaginable, prompting Berra to ask him whether he'd ever played the sax before taking the mushrooms. He responded that he hadn't, but that he'd heard of famous musicians talking about using psychedelics to enhance their creativity. Psychedelics, he had discovered, can't enable people to do things that they couldn't otherwise do.

At one point, Duncan is being told to run up several flights of stairs. He dashes up the first, hobbles up the second, and then collapses into a hysterical heap on the third.

"What's the matter? Why are you laughing? Get up! Get up!" screamed the sergeant.

"I was trying!" Duncan responded, "I was running, and doing OK, but then I looked down at my hands and I realized—I realized they were monkey hands."

At this point Duncan pushes pause on the remote and turns to Berra, who by this point in our interview had already established herself as a world-renowned expert on the neurobiology of psychedelics. “Berra, scientifically speaking, why did I see my hands as monkey hands?”

Stone-faced, Berra looks him directly in the eye and responds, “Because they are, Duncan.”

Between sequences, on camera we speak about the neurophysiology of the effects of tryptamines (like psilocybin and psilocin) on the serotonin system, the physiology of hallucinations, the difference between using psychedelics in hazardous recreational settings like gymnasiums and using psychedelics in controlled clinical settings, the importance of set and setting in the structuring the psychedelic experience, the importance of having medical help available, the methods of psychedelic therapy, the source of the drugs that MAPS uses in our studies, the complex mythology of elves and mushrooms, the cultural history of psychedelics, and the return of psychedelics to

mainstream science and medicine. We also discussed Charles Grob’s new pilot study of psilocybin for anxiety in patients with advanced, and highlighted our ongoing research on MDMA and PTSD.

In all, Berra and I stayed very much on message and on point, and we, Duncan, the director, even the technicians were all immensely pleased and entertained. Based on the conversations we had in front of the camera and on my and Berra’s immediate conversation after the shoot, I can confidently say that we all worked together to create some unique, educational, and at times hilarious material.

I remember especially clearly something Duncan said to us as we were getting our coats and heading out the door. It was about how beyond the slapstick and sarcasm, there was also something about the experience that seemed to invite—or even partially compel—him to explore something deeper.

“I was afraid of doing the segment because I thought I might go insane or have a

nervous breakdown, but when I stepped outside to get some air I felt as though the universe was composed of love and that it was pretty much impossible to do anything wrong in that sort of universe. You guys are doing really great things.”

Even if the show never gets broadcast, we succeeded in introducing MAPS to the LA comedy production community, and showing that, yes, we have some pretty good material. And most importantly, we found that comedy was not something that we needed to be afraid of when communicating what MAPS is all about. I guess in that sense, psychedelics and comedy are really similar: They’re both really powerful tools, as long as we’re careful and mindful of what we’re saying and doing.

MAPS is on camera and in the spotlight a lot these days. This experience showed that at this point in history psychedelics are at a point of transition, somewhere in between feared compounds to respected medicines. As it turns out, we can take psychedelics seriously while still having fun. That’s a pretty funny place to be. •

Check out MAPS on

You Tube

and listen to “Duncan Trussell and
Joe Rogan on the Importance
of Psychedelics in 2012.”

www.youtube.com/mapsmdma