

Night of laughs

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Humour Seán Cullen hosts Canadian Comedy Awards taking place at Saint John's Imperial Theatre next week

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One of the challenges of hosting an awards show is that most of the people there want to get it over with as quickly as possible.



"Although it's fun to get together and celebrate, I think the celebrating for the comics takes place afterwards," Seán Cullen, host of the 2009 Canadian Comedy Awards taking place Oct. 2 at Imperial Theatre in Saint John, says recently.

By evening's end, Cullen says, about four-fifths of the people will be disappointed, "so they're just happy to go to the bar."

He'll keep this top of mind in his role as MC.

"My philosophy has always been be swift yet humorous if you can be, and get the awards distributed as quickly as possible."

For those lucky few who will take home statuettes, though, the honour is very real.

"It's a great thing because it's voted on by your peers," he says.

Cullen, himself a three-time Canadian Comedy Award winner, knows firsthand the rewards and challenges of a comedy career in Canada.

"It's a tough market to work in. There's not a huge amount of money, there's not a huge population to sell what you do to, so I think it hones everyone's talent," he says.

"I think being a Canadian performer, you have to be able to diversify to survive. You have to learn a bunch of different skills and be able to do a lot of different things just to keep yourself afloat."

He's a case in point: he started off a comedian, touring and performing since 1988. He is no musical slouch. The three-time Gemini Award-winner's film credits include *The Love Guru* and *Saint Ralph*. He has toured with *The Barenaked Ladies*, writes young adult fiction, and is thinking of trying his hand at his first adult novel after he wraps up his run at Stratford.

Anyone who knows Cullen from his early days in the comedy troupe *Corky and the Juice Pigs* or, more recently, as a finalist in the NBC reality series *Last Comic Standing* or behind the mic hosting *Simply Seán* on CBC Radio One, might be scratching their heads.

Seán Cullen? At Stratford?

It's not such a stretch.

Trained as an actor, Cullen has tread the boards before, perhaps most notably in the role of Max Bialystock in a Canadian production of Mel Brooks's *The Producers*. Plus, the Stratford show, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, is a comedy, a bawdy farce set in ancient Rome. And, like his earliest forays into comedy, it is, of course, live.

"The thing about theatre that's interesting is it can't be downloaded. It's an experience you have to have live," he says.

"I think that live performance will never go away. It's always going to be important, and that's where everybody gets their first taste of comedy and the industry, performing live in front of human beings.

"That experience of an audience reaction will really make you understand what you need to do to make people laugh."

There are differences, too. A theatre audience tends to be more passive than the typical comedy club crowd, he says.

There's no heckling at Stratford.

"Nobody gets up in the middle of *Hamlet* and says, 'I don't believe that bit about your parents.' "

While hosting the awards show is more structured and scripted than Cullen's one-man shows or stand-up, he hopes to colour the evening's proceedings at least a little with his absurd brand of humour.

"When you're doing a show, like hosting an awards show, I think you always have to be ready to keep it flowing, but you also have to be ready for the weird things that have happened and to comment on the night, and that's where that comes out."

Cullen isn't sure where his off-beat, associative and, at times, outrageous sense of humour comes from, but he suspects his voracious, lifelong book habit helps explain it.

"I read everything, non-fiction, history, science fiction, all kinds of stuff, so I try to fill my mind with things and then shuffle them around and let it coalesce into what I do as a comedian."

For Cullen, whatever the project, there is a constant.

"I'm always trying to be funny," he says. "That's the one thing I try to stick with."

Tickets to the Canadian Comedy Awards at Imperial Theatre, Saint John, 7:30 p.m. on Oct. 2, are \$30, available at the box office or by calling 674-4100 or 1-800-323-7469. The show will be recorded and televised at a later date.