

It's not easy to make a living by making people laugh – especially when the audience includes Netherlanders, local expats and a handful of stoned tourists every night. But once you hear them laugh (or you find yourself laughing) you know you've struck gold. Just make sure you do it on the first try – because a joke is never funny the second time around.

## Comedic Stage Actor Rob AndristPlourde

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The big time is where  
**you make it**

‘Comedy is not an easy trade. It’s competitive. It changes all the time. Tastes change. Audiences change.’

Rob AndristPlourde (35) is sitting in the Boom Chicago lounge, sipping an over-size Coke, trying to make it clear that his life is not just about cracking jokes. ‘The best you can do is to be honest with yourself when you’re doing the comedy. When an audience sees the honesty, they appreciate it.’

Anyone who has seen a Boom Chicago show knows there’s a lot of honesty crammed into each night. For 13 years the troupe of sketch and improvisational actors have satirized, skewered and generally laid open Amsterdam life. AndristPlourde has been part of the fun for the past decade.

In the years since Boom Chicago opened its doors in a bar on the Korte Leidsedwardsstraat, the show has evolved from improvisational comedy to entertain an audience of tourists, to a mix of improv and sketches. The improv is still in the hands of the audience, who throw out suggestions that the actors then have to act out (a lesbian Elvis in a spaghetti western).

But the sketches are polished and sometimes not so subtle in their commentary about current events. They range from the dating habits of Dutch girls (just let me call my boyfriend before I hop into bed with you) to a sketch with a Palestinian suicide bomber and an Orthodox Jew waiting at a Jerusalem bus stop (complete with a musical number).

The Boom Chicago audience is as complex as some of the humour. It includes Dutch locals, English-speaking tourists and local expats.

‘What we try and do is hit them universally,’ says AndristPlourde. ‘When we bring out new actors – which we do all the time – we tell them to take all their American references and put them in a box and don’t open up that box until they get back on a plane to go back to America.’

‘If you’re going to make fun of an American reality show, nobody’s going to get it except the 15 college students who are here for winter break. If you’re writ-

ing just for them, you’re alienating the rest of the audience. And we want to hit everybody.’ He continues: ‘The kind of comedy we do is universal – international comedy.’

After ‘throwing out his box of American references’ ten years ago, what has AndristPlourde filled it with? ‘Ten years ago I would never have thought Belgians could be funny,’ he admits. ‘I would never know Germans needed to be punctual. I never could distinguish between a Scottish accent and an Australian one. I have a better handle on international politics, as well as geography.’

Boom Chicago has several shows running throughout the week: Bite the Bullet; Heineken Late Nite (and Massive) and the new Best of Boom Chicago – Director’s Cut. ‘In the Director’s Cut we throw the Boom Chicago archives wide open and add some new scenes,’ says AndristPlourde. In June they will add Kick This: A World Cup comedy show with balls.

It’s in the ‘Best of’ shows where Boom Chicago presents its parody news segments, where they take on such topics as the Mohammed cartoons and their aftermath. What do they do with a story like that?

‘I guess the same thing that the rest of the world is doing with it: Trying to make sense of it. Give a little levity to it. It’s a difficult thing,’ acknowledges AndristPlourde. ‘Tragedy plus time equals comedy. But the tragedy is still going on.’ (At least it was at the time of this interview.)

‘If you take one side, one group hates it.



If you take the other side, the other group hates it. So we try to present both sides and present them at the same time. I’d like to believe that’s what we’re doing.’

AndristPlourde came to Amsterdam ten years ago. His wife had heard about auditions from a co-worker in Chicago. ‘We talked about it and said wouldn’t it be fantastic to live and work in Europe? It had been a dream of my wife Cheryl’s for a while,’ he recalls. In the three years he’d lived in Chicago he’d worked as an assistant manager in a cinema, a bank teller, a telemarketing headhunter for computer people, and a master of ceremonies on a cruise boat in the harbor. On the weekends he’d perform at Comedy Sportz and Second City.

‘To perform comedy on a regular basis sounded fabulous. I auditioned and after callbacks and more callbacks, three days later they invited us to come to Amsterdam.’ Once they arrived, it was a team effort: ‘Cheryl worked in Promotions, then on the box office, then managed the box office. She brought computers into the box office, then was manager. Then we had our first daughter and she said she was going to concentrate on that for now – and has been ever since.’ A second daughter followed.

AndristPlourde is now performing four to six shows a week in Boom Chicago’s 250-seat Leidseplein theatre. Looking back, ‘It’s a big step up,’ he says. He has built his family life here in the Netherlands, living in what he refers to as the KLM Ghetto in Amstelveen, where all the KLM employees used to live near Schiphol Airport. (‘At least our windows are sound-proofed.’)

‘I love the luxuries that Europe affords me. Quality of life is important. Europe and this place allow that,’ he motions around the Boom Chicago lounge. ‘I get to spend oodles of time with my kids and my family. They go to wonderful schools that would be incredibly expensive if we lived in America. The healthcare system – even though it’s getting spookier – is far better than in our old town. The resources here are great. I still love America and still consider myself an American. But living here is fantastic.’

‘One thing that living in Europe has

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shown me is that any place can be home. I would call here home. Absolutely.' He continues: 'But nothing is permanent.'

Typically, AndristPlourde rehearses from 12.30 to 5p.m. Call time for a weeknight show is 7.30p.m., with the actual performance running from 8.15p.m. to 10.15p.m. Add to that schedule weekend shows that finish at about 1.30 in the morning. Still, he manages to get up with the kids, help prepare them for school, then it's on to the gym for a workout and then into Boom Chicago to do some work.

'We usually work around 30 hours a week. It's a very different schedule,' he admits. 'Whenever I hit a rush hour tram, I look around and think, 'You guys are tired. Some of you look okay, but most of you just want to go home and sit.'

It's more than the commute that differs for a comedic actor such as AndristPlourde. He compares his job to an accountant or consultant that's transferred to Amsterdam on a typical expat assignment: 'A consultant is brought over to do his job. They put in their 9 to 5 and then they leave. For me, I come in and do my job for two hours - which is basically making people laugh - and afterwards, people like me.'

'Consultants? I think they pay them and let them go,' he considers. 'I don't know any consultants who have people come up to them after work and go: 'Hey, good work on our CPU, let's go out and get drunk.'" (Maybe he doesn't know the right crowd of consultants.)

And consultants don't normally get to act in films or on television. AndristPlourde's career is broader than Boom Chicago. He recently appeared in what's called the Dutch Desperate Housewives, *Gooische Vrouwen*, with Linda de Mol. ('It was a small part.') and will play American DJ Wolfman Jack in the biopic of Dutch rocker Herman Brood, whose last act was to jump to his death from the Hilton Hotel in Amsterdam Zuid in 2001. That film will come out in November.

'I do voiceovers here and there for film and commercials and for the past year and a half I've been conducting comedy writing workshops.' He and the American writer Lisa Friedman will hold their sixth workshop in June.

'Everyone has the nugget within them, that compressed piece of comedy coal, that can be pressed a little harder and then buffed into a little diamond of comedy.' He sounds more like a poet than a comedian. 'Comedy can be taught.'

His latest project, along with Boom Chicago, is producing viral videos for Greenpeace to raise awareness and 'have a chuckle,' adds AndristPlourde. 'They make fun of the oppressors.' One video shows how Japanese whaling can help power digital clocks.

Amidst the family life and the comedy life and the teaching life, AndristPlourde also finds time to pursue his true passion: music.

'For the longest time, Boom Chicago and the Melkweg had a great relationship. We would give them pizzas and they would give us free entry. For ten years, I never paid for entrance, until about a month ago.' He seems dejected by the prospect of paying for what he loves. Still, he can't complain.

'There are bands who are huge in America, but nobody knows them here. So they play tiny venues and we get to go and see them.' Every once in awhile his concert reviews pop up in English language magazines around town, bringing less-known names to light: *Spiritualized*, *The Donnas*, *Solomon Burke*, *Heather Nova*, *My Morning Jacket*, *Kings of Leon*, *Daniel Lanois* and *Michael Franti and Spearhead*.

'This job in Europe affords me a slower pace,' he says. Slower pace?

But it's a life that he couldn't have just anywhere. 'There are two places in America where a comedic stage actor can exist: *The Groundlings* in Los Angeles or with *Second City* (with theatres in Chicago, Las Vegas, Detroit, Los Angeles, Toronto and Denver).' In Europe, there's only one location - Amsterdam.

'People flock to Chicago to perform improvisation, to go to *Second City*,' says AndristPlourde. 'Second City is this bastion of improvisation, a stepping stone to the big time. People get picked up by *Saturday Night Live* or the Fox. Boom Chicago can now be compared with *Second City* in Chicago.' Boom Chicago

alumni have also gone on to work for *Saturday Night Live*, as well as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* on Comedy Central and *MADtv*.

But being 'picked up' or using Boom Chicago as a stepping stone would mean leaving Amsterdam. AndristPlourde has a realistic attitude: 'The big time is where you make it.'

'There are many people in Chicago who would kill to get the job I have.' He pauses. 'Well, maybe not kill - but bribe.' He pauses to think again. 'No, they'd kill. Kill. Yeah.' <



Rob AndristPlourde is a comedic stage actor who writes and performs with Boom Chicago. A native of Massachusetts, he came to Amsterdam a decade ago via Chicago's Comedy Sportz and Second City comedy clubs. He can be seen in the Boom Chicago's Best of Boom Chicago - Director's Cut, Heineken Late Nite and Heineken Late Nite Massive. Boom Chicago, Leidseplein 12, Amsterdam. 020-423 01 01, [www.boomchicago.nl](http://www.boomchicago.nl) All performances are in English.