

my funny valentine

They might be hilarious on stage but do comedians start to wear a bit thin, day in, day out? Five partners of Comedy Festival stars spill the beans.

Comedian Charlie Pickering and producer Claire Hammond

(he says) "I still make her laugh. There are times when we'll go out to dinner and come home and she'll repeat something that I've said and say, 'You should write that down, you can use that.' At the same time, I'm sure she's sick of my material – all the jokes she's heard many times before.

"If I'm going to talk about something in our relationship, I have to be the butt of the joke. I genuinely hate comedians who get up and do jokes about how stupid their wives or husbands are because it shows a lack of respect for the other person. Claire is far funnier than I am. She has much better ideas than I do, she just doesn't have the disposition to show off the way I do.

"Claire and I were best friends at kinder. One day, she announced we were going to be married and I remember feeling totally comfortable with that. We lost touch and got together 20 years later when I was performing at the Comedy Festival and Claire was a festival publicist.

"Everything's going your way when you're on stage. You're the only person in the room talking. You appear through this artificial construct to be the alpha male of the room because you're the one talking.

"Claire makes me try harder across the board. She knows comedy so she knows if I'm not trying hard enough, or if I'm throwing out the easiest joke possible, and I can tell when she thinks something I've done isn't good enough. She's very good at allowing me a little bit of time to wallow in the fact that I just had a bad gig or something in my career hasn't gone right, but then, very soon, she says, 'Come on, it's not that bad, you could be a lawyer (Pickering trained in law before becoming a comic) so put a smile on your face and get on with it'. She knows that sometimes I need an honest opinion, sometimes I need space without asking for it, and sometimes I won't be home for dinner."

(she says) "When Charlie finishes a show, I never know whether I am going to get happy Charlie, angry Charlie or confused Charlie. It depends on the gig. He can be very hard on himself. Charlie tends to look at things in a skewed way. That's one of the joys of living with a comedian. I've become more observant just being around him. Seeing the wonderful effect he has on a room full of people is a real kick, too. I was a little nervous when Charlie first told the story of how we met (in a show), but there's the truth on stage, and then the bending of that truth, and I think there's safety in knowing, as the partner of a comedian, that no one else knows exactly what is real and what isn't. There's never been a moment where he's said something and I've needed to say to him, 'That's not OK.'"

Charlie Pickering is appearing in Thirteen Ducks until April 13.





Comedian Terri Psiakis and accountant Adam King

(she says) "Female comics don't get groupies. You don't get the guys who try to pick you up. You get weird guys. Adam was my first serious relationship. I did this show, a corporate gig, finance workers who work in the health sector – a room full of accountants, great. But the gig went well and at the end the woman who booked me introduced me to Adam and we hit it off straight away. I like the fact he has nothing to do with stand-up. People are in awe of comedians way too much. He's not fazed by it. Imagine if you had someone sitting around blowing sunshine up your arse all day. I let the stand-up slide for a bit and spent a year getting our relationship right. Once I made it safe, I could challenge it. Last year's Comedy Festival show, *Unavailable*, was about him. It was me going, 'I know I said I was quite happily single, but this is a different kind of happy. This is happy that I never knew I could have.'

"Adam has a really bad memory so a lot of things that I said in the show, when I was running that material past him, he was like, 'When did I say that?' and I'm: 'You said that and I wrote it down'; and he's like, 'OK, yeah, that's funny – yeah, use it.'

"We're getting married in May so the race is getting the wedding planned so that I can write a show about it, not getting the wedding planned so we can actually have a wedding. My biggest challenge is not to make him feel like comedic fodder."

(he says) "The fact she did stand-up intrigued me. I am amazed at how she can take any situation, spin it around, make it funny, and then have the guts to stand up and present it on stage. I knew her doing a show about us was on the cards when she asked me what I was thinking about after sex one night, and when I said, 'Bacon', she turned on the light and wrote it down. She calls me 'the bloke' in the show. It could be any bloke. I think it would be a bit confronting if she said, 'Adam did this the other night.' In her private life, she's very relaxed. In that comedian circle, there's a few people who like to get the punchline in before anyone else but Terri's not like that at all. That's part of the thing that attracts me to her."

Terri Psiakis Has Pending Nuptials runs until April 13.



Comedian Jo Stanley and producer Darren McFarlane

(she says) "All our married life, people have said, 'Oh my God, Darren, how do you feel about Jo telling jokes about you?' and he says, 'Unfortunately, they're true'. If he doesn't want me to tell stories about him getting spastic at our wedding, then he shouldn't have got spastic at our wedding. It is a rare night when I've done a show and Darren's not there. Even if he is the only one laughing, it will bring the rest of the audience along. We're very much a team."

"If I'm planning to talk about an issue we may have had, I'll always ask if it's OK. I am intensely private about the things that to me are absolute no-go zones. If there's anything that's hurtful, I won't exploit that. I don't take the fact that his life is played out in public for granted because he didn't sign up for that. It's not his dream to be a comedian. I think that is extraordinarily brave and generous. When I met Darren, it took me years to work him into the act because I didn't know what to say. 'Oh, I'm really happily in love' – that is so not funny. It was really liberating to realise that a happily married woman can be as cynical and bitter as a single woman. Darren and I have a wonderful relationship but there is that hilarious, calamitous, endless source of material that comes from two people cohabiting."

(he says) "I can have a serious conversation with Jo if it's one-on-one, but if there's a group of people, it's like her big platform shoes are a stage and I can't get a word in edgewise. There are times I almost need someone on a loudhailer to go, 'It's your husband's turn to talk'."

"I have no issue with being part of Jo's show. I trust her judgement. When people say, 'I can't believe she's talking about that stuff', I'm like, 'What can I do? It's true. I did get punched by a midget and I probably deserve to be lampooned.' I wonder how people perceive me, whether they see me as this hopeless buffoon of a husband or whether I'm just a guy that weird stuff happens to. She's only once crossed the line. I told her something that I had never told anyone, and then she did a gag about it. Now we say to each other, 'I'm going to tell you something and you can't tell anyone.'"

Jo Stanley's Prettier in Person runs until April 12.



Comedian Tom Gleeson and lawyer Ellie Parker

(he says) "I use humour to diffuse a situation all the time, to a fault. When Ellie is angry, it is a perverse challenge to see if I can make her laugh. I didn't realise that you could be good mates with a woman until I met Ellie. I didn't do 'relationship' stuff when I started out in comedy. I was determined to be original. Now that I've been in comedy for 10 years it seems that the truer things are, the funnier they are.

"Ellie liked my last show. I said, 'Well, if you liked that show and you saw how I talked about that, can you trust that I will talk about us in a similar way?' She's like, 'Yeah, sure.' But to be fair, I'm not sure that I asked her as much as told her. I've talked about my parents and my brothers before in my shows, and the deal for me is that they have to find it hilarious. I wouldn't talk about our sex life because I was brought up Catholic and I'm repressed.

"Being with Ellie has made my comedy so much better. I take more risks. There is a certain confidence that comes from being with someone you really love. There's a lot of doubt in being a comedian, a lot of questioning whether things are funny or not, and being in a stable relationship eliminates a big part of that."

(she says) "We met in 1996 at an arts review cast party at Sydney University and talked until dawn. He was doing a science degree, I was doing law. I have always been very clear that, under no circumstances, was Tom to refer to me in his act, but we got married in January and somehow, now, it just feels right. My mum rang me with a wedding idea for a tiara. It was to be made out of South Sea pearls, cake forks and teaspoons ... because I liked cooking. I started telling my friends about it and then I thought, well, if I'm going to tell a dinner party story, surely he can.

"One-on-one, he is ridiculously silly. Being a lawyer, it is great coming home to a partner who cracks me up. When we are out in public, he can be very serious. Being at a dinner table with another couple is not a gig. He is not funny-ha-ha on tap."

Tom Gleeson is appearing in Tom-A-Thon until April 13.



Comedian Damian Callinan and teacher Jo Leech

(he says) "I was originally a primary school teacher. I constantly morph in and out of character at home. In bed, I had this seductive Russian submarine commander character. Then there's a litany of Irish or Yorkshire characters. Jo enjoys it. To a point.

"There's always an expectation when we're out socially that it's my job to be the funny one. I celebrate it, when people see how funny she is. She has a dark and brutal sense of humour. When she found out I was infertile, she nicknamed me Spaznuts, which ended up being the title of my last show. I've never been particularly autobiographical in my work. I'm not really the kind of comic who talks about leaving the toilet seat up, and the difference between men and women. My stand-up is largely fictional. *Spaznuts* was written for a very specific reason. I had never really dealt with my infertility and with 10 years' hindsight, I was able to make it right. It was a difficult show to write because I was mindful not only of Jo, but also my ex-wife. During festival time, Jo usually comes to a few shows. I like knowing she is there."

(she says) "Damian is a storyteller. He creates characters. Personal relationships are not usually on his comedy agenda. We met while we were teaching together. The thing I love most about his comedy is that it pulls at the heartstrings and often makes me cry. There is warmth in the characters he creates. The only thing I try to curtail is his dance style. He is a ridiculous '80s dancer. He has no sense of space on a dance floor; he just bumps into people. A couple of weeks ago, we went to a wedding and he elbowed a pregnant woman in the face.

"There's a line in *Spaznuts* where he says that when his partner first found out he was infertile, she said, 'Don't worry, Spaznuts, you'll be right' – which is pretty much true but he paints it much darker than it was. If I'm ever in the audience, everybody's silent, going, 'Oh my God, how could she be so heartless?' and I'm roaring with laughter. Occasionally, because there's only one person laughing, he'll go, 'And that's her laughing now' – and then the audience laughs too." **(m)**

Damian Callinan Calls 'Last Drinks' runs until April 13. See www.comedyfestival.com.au