

Bobcat Goldthwait's brand of comedy will make an appearance at TACAW

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For people of a certain age, when you mention the comedian Bobcat Goldthwait, the odd-mannered, loud, raspy voiced character Zed of the 1980s "Police Academy" film franchise comes to mind.

But for Goldthwait, that's just one chapter of a long career that began as a child, when he would host performances in school to make his friends laugh. When he was just 20, he appeared on "The David Letterman Show," which led to 40 years as a comedian, actor, screenwriter and director.

After a hiatus from performing live and missing it, Goldthwait has found renewed joy in doing standup and a passion for being a vocal advocate for what he believes is right.

This Saturday, fans can catch his act at The Arts Campus at Willits (TACAW).

I spoke with Goldthwait by telephone from his home in Illinois to discuss what he's been up to creatively, his thoughts on the current state of comedy, and why he doesn't believe in cancel culture.

Here are excerpts from our conversation:



Bobcat Goldthwait has had a 40-year career in comedy and entertainment. Courtesy photo

The Aspen Times: Have you ever performed in the Aspen area before?

Bobcat Goldthwait: Yeah, I did the comedy festival years ago downtown and it went over like a bad fart (laughing). I don't know why. Hopefully it will go over better this time.

AT: You have a successful career as a screenwriter and director. Why return to performing standup in small venues?

BC: I started doing comedy in clubs when I was 15 and got Letterman when I was 20. Now I'm 60. That was 40 years ago, and for a long time I didn't think I liked it anymore. After taking a few years off and especially because of the pandemic, I realized I missed it. Even though I am working on other stuff, I guess I'm a comedian before anything else and I'm enjoying connecting with an audience again. I go out every weekend and I do different

gigs from Alabama to Anchorage, and I'm just thinking, let's see how this goes. I like performing again.

AT: Well, you're kind of getting back to basics, right?

BC: My favorite thing is when you actually come up with an idea that you never had before while you are on stage and it lands. That's really it. I can't imagine another kind of performer that has that. Maybe a jazz artist might know that feeling, but nothing else can be compared to it.

AT: How are you finding being back out on the road again?

BC: You know, the country is very divided and weird now. I don't have the luxury of people knowing me as a comedian with a viewpoint one way or the other. I think if you go to see Chelsea Handler or Patton Oswald, you kind of know where their politics are going to be, or even someone on the right like Jim Brewer. But with me, people will get mad when I start doing political jokes.

AT: Well, you haven't seemed to be too political in the past. Was that a conscious decision you made?

BC: Well that's not entirely true. My early standup back in the '80s, there's a lot of political material, but I think people didn't want to hear it or they weren't aware of my act.

When my HBO special came out, I had a joke about Sylvester Stallone being a draft dodger, and making a few billion dollars off a little movie ("Rambo") for something he didn't go do. And I was talking to Robin

Williams, and I asked him, "Do you think I should take this out?" And he's like, "Oh no, go ahead. I make fun of Stallone all the time." And then when the thing came out, Stallone called and said he was going to tear my heart out. And I was laughing So, you know, so there was always like, it's not political, but just stuff that when I say it, it cuts through and people get mad.

But I do think people who come to my shows and think I'm just going to be this nostalgia act doing my character from the '80s — they seem to get upset.

AT: I bet. You've really distanced yourself from Zed, your character in "Police Academy." Do you still find that people expect that from you?

BC: Yes, because people that come to see me aren't aware that I've made eight movies or anything like that, or that I direct a bunch of TV shows and specials. They're not aware of that. A lot of them are coming because they know me from "Police Academy," but I think most of them leave having had a good time anyway.

AT: You have been doing comedy for 40 years, but it's recently gotten complicated. There are a lot of comedians complaining that they can't say anything anymore without offending someone. What are your thoughts on that?

BC: I don't believe in this idea of cancel culture. Bill Cosby is getting ready to do a tour, so you know what I mean? Cancel culture is just when people are held accountable

for what they say on stage or what they do, and they're not used to marginalized people having a voice.

"I've been canceled," says the guy on the podcast with his Twitter feed on his Instagram. "I have no freedom of speech," but you can see their pay-per-view special. Real censorship is this comedian in South America who's talking about his dad who was a radio guy with a sense of humor, and then just one day he goes to jail for cracking jokes. That's censorship. That's been canceled. These guys are all playing arenas, and they're doubling down on toxic views.

The thing is homophobia and transphobia are insidious. Going after those communities they know they're not going to be met with as much resistance, but it's just everything is getting chipped away is crazy, from from banning books and it goes on and on. Then when you do comedy and you don't reinforce those viewpoints, sometimes people get mad, but at the end of the night I got to be able to hit the pillow and feel like I've done an OK job.

Because no matter how this all plays out, if I have grandchildren someday and they say, "Well, what did Grandpa do when this was going down?" I want them to say, "Well, he was a pretty vocal antifascist."

AT: Do you think it's possible now to be a comedian and have no political views, one way or the other?

BC: There are a lot of comedians

that I really admire that don't say specific things, but every act is political. When Jim Gaffigan weighed in on some issues, people were attacking him, both people on the right and left. I say those kinds of things all the time, but Jim Gaffigan is putting way more on the line when he weighs in because he's got a bigger fan base. When you're known for not having an opinion and you weigh in with one, that takes a lot of courage.

AT: So what can audiences expect from your show?

BC: I'm going to do a lot of "Police Academy."

AT: Very funny. We know you're not doing that.

BC: I tell a lot of personal stories. One reason is so my act won't feel like the other people on the bill, or won't be similar to other people's sets, because these are my experiences. I started off as a guy making fun of standup comedy and then I became a comedian, but I still never had joke jokes. I always just make people feel awkward, and they seem to accept me for it.

But I do think people like the show. It does seem like they're happy when I get done most of the time.