We might assume the stories stand-up comedians tell us are true, or at least contain a grain of truth – something their partner said, their kids did. But of course they’re often personalising their stories to build a sense of shared experience, and inviting the audience to laugh along.

In his Fringe Festival show, Tell Me Lies, comedian and broadcaster Paul Verhoeven tells stories I sincerely hope are not true. This is Verhoeven’s first solo show, and the fact it’s launching at the Fringe – at Melbourne’s Portland Hotel – is presumably based on his success in other genres, namely his sketch-comedy group The Lords of Luxury and his work as an online and radio commentator on games, technology and pop culture.

But there’s a reason comics normally start in dark pubs and university open mic nights: it takes time and painful hours of practice to test material and refine its delivery.

Verhoeven has an exuberance and warmth that makes the audience want him to succeed. And I think he will in time. In the meantime, his show – last night at least – was disconnected and continually detoured down random paths before returning to a long lost punchline. This may be a carry over from Verhoeven’s sketch-comedy days, but for his one-man show it just doesn’t work.

Often, jokes trade on the incongruity between what we expect and what happens, creating a tension that is released as laughter. Verhoeven’s comedy is full of incongruities – but the mismatch is too great or too peculiar to be funny. He told a story about Kim Basinger visiting his school – and then admitted it was actually his mother visiting his school. This produced silence from the audience and a query from Verhoeven: “Is that weird?”.

The content is an odd mix of sophomoric puns and over-intellectual references. Verhoeven tells a number of rambling stories involving awkward, sexual references – not particularly offensive or racy references, and not particularly funny ones. In instances where he tries to intellectualise his content, he gets it wrong.

In one joke about epic historic lies, Verhoeven takes the role of a modern-day courier trying to convince Diomedes to come down and sign for package that is too large to be brought up – a giant wooden horse. But Diomedes was in the Trojan Horse, not the guy who let the horse into Troy.

Verhoeven certainly seems comfortable on stage. He had a list of content taped to the floor and continually referred to it. At one point he clearly lost his place. Instead of getting flustered, he made a lighthearted joke about it and moved on. There were a number of lead balloons, and recognising this he calmly quipped: “OK, that’s not going in tomorrow night”.

He was not particularly funny, but this wasn’t the painful, cringing, pitiable experience that is common with budding comedians.

The set-list gave the impression that he hadn’t really rehearsed the show – and yet some of his attempts at spontaneous revelation felt over-rehearsed. A number of times when he made a pun, he asked the audience whether we got it.

Verhoeven’s alertness, noting miscues and dud jokes and planning changes, signals he could – in time – become an excellent comedian. My colleague commented that she felt like Verhoeven’s bedroom mirror, and it did feel as if we constituted a practice run. For a paid show at the Melbourne Fringe, I would have liked to see much more rehearsal, practice and refinement.

Verhoeven has three more shows at The Portland Hotel and it’s entirely possible that each will be better than the last. Launching at Fringe is too big a step for someone’s first solo act, but there he is. Get behind our local, emerging talent. Comedians need feedback (not heckling) to figure out what works and that is very difficult to do with an audience of nine.
Maybe one day, when he’s made it big you can say: “I saw him starting out at Fringe back in 2014.”

*Tell Me Lies plays at the Melbourne Fringe until October 5. Details [here.](#)*