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# Reports of the death of British theatrical comedy? Greatly exaggerated or sadly accurate?

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## COMEDY STUDIES

Reports of the Death of British Theatrical Comedy? Greatly exaggerated or sadly accurate?

by

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### **Abstract:**

*Are the twin masks of Tragedy and Comedy in the process of transformation?*

*I am seeking in this paper to address challenging questions concerning the increasing disappearance of the 'serious' comedy, especially the satirical play on the UK stage and ask why:*

*Has the UK audience deserted comedy in general and satire in particular?*

*Is it too difficult to write? Why in the context of a troubled world is contemporary theatrical comedy not more popular?*

*Controversially, is it something to do with the inverse relationship between the increasing benefits of a multi-national, multi-racial UK society and a declining national consensus on shared symbols concerning issues of humour and satire?*

An early draft of this paper was presented at the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) conference in Stockholm in 2016. The author would like to thank Fiona Gasper and Neil Murray for their time. Their agreement to be interviewed yielded invaluable original insights without which this article would have not been possible.

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**Reports of the Death of British Theatrical Comedy? Greatly exaggerated or sadly accurate?**

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University of Salford, UK**

‘We should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality’ (Oscar Wilde 1895, *The Importance of Being Earnest*)

In this paper I am seeking to address challenging questions concerning the increasing disappearance of the 'serious' comedy, especially the satirical play, on the UK stage. Even a casual reading of the present-day theatre listing pages will reveal the paucity of comedies presented in UK theatres nationally. True there are musical comedies a-plenty, not to mention the plethora of seasonal pantomimes, but there appears to be a diminishing number of 'serious' comedy plays, and even less that can be described as comedy satires. I define 'serious' comedy as drama dealing with contemporary complex issues, 'but with laffs'.

That theatre comedy is disappearing is a bold assertion and is primarily inspired by anecdotal reports. So is it true and if so why? And does it matter? As a pre-requisite for drafting this paper, I conducted original research by interviewing the commissioners of new writing – the artistic and executive directors of two of the UK's most celebrated theatres: Neil Murray, <sup>(1)</sup> formerly the Executive Producer of the National Theatre of Scotland (2005-17, now director of the Abbey Theatre, Dublin) and Fiona Gasper, <sup>(2)</sup> formerly the Executive Director of The Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester ( 2009-15, now executive director at the Manchester International Festival). I discussed the following questions with them:

Has the UK audience deserted comedy in general and satire in particular?

Is it too risky to commission?

Is it too difficult to write?

Why is contemporary theatrical comedy not more popular, especially as comedy has always been traditionally considered as the cathartic balm in a troubled world?

And controversially, is the decline something to do with the inverse relationship between the increasing benefits of a multi-national, multi-racial UK society *and* a diminishing national consensus on shared symbols and familiar reference points, essential for the construction of the mechanics of comedy and satire?

Is this part of the national (and international) rise in concerns over personal 'Identity Politics' at the expense of Shared Collective Experience?

Is this disconnection magnified due to an ageing theatrical audience demographic?

This latter question was prompted by Andy Medhurst's assertions in his book *A National Joke* (2007). Although many of his observations concerned television and stand-up, I believe his conclusions are equally relevant to theatrical performance. Medhurst claims that (popular) comedy is '...about achieving collective delight through communal recognition' (202). Are we now a nation of many communal recognitions (plural) replacing one agreed national recognition (singular)? And is this sociological shift part of what Steven Vertovec in a 2007 article in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, coined as 'Super Diversity'. Or is that a euphemism for a 'Fractured Society'? This is especially relevant in the context of the 2016 referendum debate that saw the UK vote to leave the European Union and return to what many have described as 'Little Britain' with the possibility of the break-up of Britain itself.

Neil Murray and Fiona Gasper agreed that new comedy, unlike new drama, is more of a risk to commission. Why? Drama inspires engagement in the text, sub-text and meta-narratives, provoking engagement and debate in its audience. 'Serious' comedy (as I have defined) inspires engagement in the texts, sub-texts and meta-narratives, but also demands laughter. No laughter, no comedy. And the critics appear much more merciless in condemnation of comedy rather than straight drama. My complementary research into the 'Death of Television Situation-comedy' that led me to discussions with a senior executive producer of BBC Comedy, reveal a similar story with the way theatre comedy provokes critical response. Drama is allowed to bed down – take its time to find an audience. Contemporary comedy is judged from episode 1 – if there are no 'laffs', the show is axed. ITV gave up producing sit-com in the eighties. According to the executive, the BBC is not even training crew to shoot sit-com any more.

Neil Murray confirms that a show he commissioned for Theatre of Scotland, a dark satire entitled, '*Yer Granny*' (based on the Argentinian classic '*La Nona*' by Roberto Cossa in a new version by Douglas Maxwell) with Gregor 'Rab C Nesbitt' Fisher as the lead, was received 'sniffily' by critics – even the title prompted disdain despite it being a precise translation.

Exceptions to my hypothesis in the recent past would be The National Theatre's lambasted '*England People Very Nice*' (2009) by Richard Bean, described by Susannah Clapp (2009) of *The Guardian* as: 'not very nice. There is nothing fine-textured in it; there is everything coarse-grained.....The play has been denounced as a display of racial stereotypes. Actually it is a pageant about prejudice'. Other important comedies worthy of mention: James Graham's *This House* (2013, National Theatre), *The Duck House* (Patterson and Swash 2013) and Red Ladder's *Big Society* (2012). But these are rare examples and they tend to combine comedy with other performance forms, for example, *Black Watch* by Gregory Burke (2006) and are difficult to pigeon hole, although it was described by Paul English of *The Daily Record* as Scotland's 'most successful modern play'. Neil Murray identifies *Black Watch* as part of a long tradition of the Scottish thirst for satirical music, song, movement and comedy that deal with dark/serious subject matter – the war in Iraq.

Murray traces this back to variety/music hall that inspire the Joan Littlewood Theatre Workshop company (1953-79) to produce 'Oh What a Lovely War', that inspired John McGrath and 7:84 Scotland to produce 'The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil' (1973-ish) a play who's power still resonates with (or is that intimidates ?) writers/directors today. Importantly, John McGrath's textbook *A Good Night Out* (1981) is still held as the 'manifesto' of criteria for constructing engaging, inclusive popular entertainment with comedy and satire at its core, especially tailored for local audiences and communities. The Localism issue is one that I will return t later. But where are the John McGrath's of today? (Footnote: Murray suggests possibly Lee Hall, of 'Billy Elliot' fame might have similar status - ballet, music and the miner's strike. Discuss).

Although there has been no shortage of political theatre over the past few years, thanks to venues such as the Tricycle theatre in London, the trend has been towards Verbatim theatre rather than comedy satire. This is puzzling, especially against a back-drop that has seen UK satirical stand-up and solo performance flourish. 'Stand-up comedy' is still seen as the new (or is that old?) rock and roll. As Honour Bayes, freelance arts journalist at *The Guardian Newspaper* wrote:

'Are satires on issues as large as racism or class considered too intimidating for new playwrights who are already accused of never thinking

big enough? This could be a valid reason, albeit a disappointing one. Perhaps they simply don't feel that comedy is a serious weapon any more. But as it stands, one thing is certain: for a nation so proud of its famed quick wit and irony, the British seem to be continually losing out to the Americans on this one' (Bayes 2011).

Since Bayes wrote these words in her 2011 article: '*Stage fright: why is theatre afraid of satire?*', and despite the scantiness of research in this area (a telling fact in itself evidencing the lack of concern), it appears that original, contemporary satirical comedy has even further diminished on the UK stage. Even the huge West End hit *One Man, Two Guvnors* by Richard Bean, is an adaptation of the Goldoni hit 'A Servant of Two Masters' written in 1743.

This comedy-free syndrome has been exemplified by the nominations for the 2016 and 2017 UK Olivier Awards. Martin McDonagh's black comedy *Hangmen* wasn't even in the running, nominated instead in the Best New Play category. It's almost as if "comedy" is now for the also-rans. Indeed, between 2011 and 2014, the category vanished from the awards altogether. *Our Ladies of Perpetual Succour* which won the 2017 Olivier award for Best New (*sic*) Comedy is in fact a Lee Hall adaptation based on the 1998 novel *The Sopranos* by Alan Warner. Where are the original comedy plays?

Dominic Cavendish, *The Daily Telegraph* theatre critic in an article commenting on the 2016 UK Olivier awards, entitled: 'Is the Great West End Comedy Dead?' (2016) wrote that:

'...have we been witnessing, unawares, the slow death of the West End comedy? Let's face some home truths. Are we still kings of stage comedy or is a foreign usurpation under-way? When the awards were launched in 1976, the comedy prize was a big deal, and the art form was vital to theatreland. It was a time when a comedy could run for years but could also be mould-breaking. In the Sixties, we'd had Joe Orton lacing the creaky conventions of farce with the arsenic of subversion and Harold Pinter revealing deadpan verbal repartee as a form of high-stakes existential survival. Alan Bennett began his career with a play-within-a-play, *Forty Years On* (1968).

According to journalist Charles Spencer (2014) playwright and director Alan Ayckbourn likes to quote the woman he once overheard in his Scarborough theatre who, after watching one of his plays, remarked: “If I’d known what I was laughing at when I was laughing, I wouldn’t have laughed”. In short, stage comedy mattered to us and, to a large part, it was about things that mattered.

Acclaimed comedy satire *Noises Off* by Michael Frayn (1982) was, in a sense, a “goodbye to all that”. The edgy Eighties culture, represented by ‘alternative’ stand-up comedy, plus the march of ‘political correctness’, pushed an easy reliance on stock-types into the past, and made the middle class more self-conscious than ever. However, *Noises Off*, in which a touring rep company perform a farce with disastrous results, is not just about collapsing props but imploding lives, something its nostalgic imitator *The Play That Goes Wrong* currently playing in the West End, (in 2018) barely registers. As Cavendish notes,

Terry Johnson remains a leading light but his comedies look back to an era we are (implicitly) fools to cling on to – that of Benny Hill in *Dead Funny*, the *Carry Ons* in *Cleo*, *Camping*, *Emmanuelle* and *Dick*. Indeed, as much as McDonagh’s *Hangmen* points a way forward, it still smacks of a Sixties homage, plainly influenced by Orton and Pinter. Where did we lose the knack for creating original comedy theatre? (2016)

In partial explanation, I reproduce part of a dialogue by Victoria Wood in her sit-com *dinnerladies* (BBCTV 1998-2000). With Alan Bennett, Wood was one the country’s greatest comedy commentators on parochial, everyday behind the net-curtains domestic life utilizing the ‘comedy of language to surprise with unexpected juxtapositions of words from different linguistic registers’ (Medhurst 183). Consider the following exchange that Medhurst picks out (183) from two gossipy dinneradies:

Dolly: Hey Jean, who has sex on Christmas morning?

Jean: The Dalai Lama

Dolly: Well he must peel his sprouts the night before.

Comedy is a conservative medium with a small ‘c’. To make someone laugh both joke-teller and receiver need to share a common set of reference points and accepted targets of agreed ridicule. As Roger Silverstone states,

Ontological security is sustained through the familiar and the predictable...expressed and supported by a whole range of symbols and symbolic formations. The symbols of daily life...and our attempts, as social beings...to manage others, and to manage ourselves (1994: 19).

Comedy demands instant recognition to instigate a laugh. Therefore, to find Wood’s joke funny you need to be aware *instinctively* of a large number of British stereotypical pre-conceptions, such as: traditionally Brits have a large Roast Turkey meal on Xmas day; that women traditionally prepare the meal; that Brits rarely eat sprouts; sprouts are a comedy vegetable – they make you fart; however, Britons expect and suffer sprouts on Xmas day; sprouts are difficult to prepare as they need a lot of peeling; sex is a boring chore and goes on too long like peeling sprouts; ‘funny foreigners’ have sex a lot and seem to enjoy it which makes them even funnier; Xmas is a sacred day so sex is not appropriate - unless you’re a foreigner with a funny religion.

Now some of those assumptions are true, some are semi-true and some are (mildly) offensive, stereotypical nonsense. But that doesn’t matter as all those notions and clichés are *familiar* to a UK audience and true enough (and importantly, inoffensive enough) to be recognised and accepted by the joke receiver as part of a contract of mutual connection and trust with the joke giver. And when we recognize those connections, it makes us feel good like a warm blanket thrown over us by our collective mothers. What Medhurst calls ‘the knowability of Home...(that)...offers real comforts’ (33).

But all those accepted notions (and more I haven’t mentioned) are delivered in three carefully crafted lines - Brevity is Genius in comedy-writing. They are made funnier because of the juxtaposition of three unlikely subjects - the Dalai Lama, sex and sprouts - but also the dead-pan performance delivery of the actors that I cannot reproduce here. They are funny because they are relevant to our lives and we feel the collective ‘warm blanket’ of recognition. ‘To belong is to understand the tacit codes of the people



you live with...is to understand without having to explain yourself. People in short 'Speak Your Language'. (Ignatieff 1993: 7).

This tacit, learned shared understanding is even more crucial in comedy as I have demonstrated: You cannot explain the joke – the more you explain, the less funny the joke becomes. It could be argued that the reverse is true when related to drama: that the more explained the narrative, the more interesting it becomes. It may be also true that drama tends to explore universal and international themes, and comedy – especially in class-obsessed Britain - often references the peculiarities of the national, the local and the regional rather than the universal.

As Medhurst, states 'Popular comedy is a practice founded on *embedding* on knowable locality, on the recognition of shared and familiar reference points. It is a discourse of demarcation, of drawing lines rather than erasing them, it operates on an imperative of *unification*, of sealing its reciprocal participants ...into tight networks of manageable parameters' (my emphases) (196).

And some would describe this as the essence of a shared cultural Nationhood. And *contentiously* this is why these concerns overlap with the UK referendum of 2016. This could be a partial explanation as to why leaving the European Community – 'Brexit' - appeared very attractive to those who wish to maintain, or rather recover some idealised, romanticised vision of Britishness: such as Fish and Chips, nagging wives, impotent husbands, drunk vicars, funny foreigners, double entendres, strange foreign habits and languages and the love-hate relationship with funny food, including the Brussel sprout - all the beloved baggage of the glory of the British Empire before the Suez crisis. It is the enduring narrative of thirty or so *Carry On* Films, and still counting. The paradox is that most of these shared references probably did not exist in reality but in some way has been imagined as part of some collectively shared false memory syndrome, but shared affectionately none the less. As James Donald puts it: 'Nation defines the culture's unity by differentiating it from other cultures, by marking its boundaries' (167). To reinforce this sense of cultural loss and crisis of confidence, Cook, drawing on costume film drama, argues that nationalisms 'which depend on a retreat to cultural

purity, to unchanging ethnic identities and boundaries, appear to be a manifestation of cultural crisis, a last refuge of social change' (1996, 2).

I agree that one of the consequences of increased globalization - virtual, digital or actual - may be that the 'quest for authentic identities is doomed' (Cook 1996: 2). As Anthony King observes, '...it is not just that, increasingly, many people have no roots; it is also they have no soil. Culture is increasingly deterritorialised' (1997, 6).

So running the risk of being accused as a Brexit fellow-traveller, or even a closet nationalist xenophobe, I conclude that perhaps the price we pay for a more civilized, socially inclusive, multi-cultural, cosmopolitan society are that the old (outmoded and possibly racist) shared national reference points are changed and discontinued. The mass of people in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain have many more varied (some would argue, much more interesting) signposts that result in originally written comedy (in theatre, film and television) being unable to connect with the *traditional* signifiers - unless they are performed and directed at niche, local audiences; (3) OR until the mass of audiences learn the *new* signposts introduced by young people with *new* cultures. For a theatre commissioning new comedy work, this may appear too risky a venture. Indeed, look at the backlash to the National's satire *English people Very Nice* which was misunderstood by many reviewers.

The danger is that a cultural space is created for the non-liberal backlash, seen in comedian personas such as Cubby Brown, (and before him Bernard Manning) who use humour to stigmatize 'the other', the minority - 'them not us' - by deliberately providing the alternative voice to the politically correct liberal consensus. Indeed the stance of the disrespectable outsider has a long and honorable tradition in British comedy with the likes of Max Miller and Frank Randle in the 20s, 30s and 40s. However, today that anti-consensus humour can be manifested as racist, homophobic and sexist at best, and incitement to violence at worst. In collaboration with Dr Sue Becker, I have written about when comedy slides into racism in an article entitled: *Racism in comedy reappraised: Back to Little England?* (Published in *Comedy Studies Journal* 2010). In that article, we examine how even popular mainstream comedians can be guilty of stigmatization for example, would Little Britain's Ting-Tong's bride be as 'funny' if she was French rather than Tai?'

Learning new shared cultural signposts take time. It would be natural to expect that a new generation of comedians and comedy writers will engage more with the new generation of young people – an issue that traditional theatres will need to consider in their commissioning strategies. But will they be inclined so to do if the genre is not wanted because it has a track-record of failure (little audience demand)? This prompts more questions than answers as to the future prospects for comedy theatre. Is this purely a matter of economics – a demand and supply issue? Has the ‘pure’ comedy play (as opposed to the musical-comedy) had its day? Is the ‘death’ of ‘serious comedy’ a symptom of the much-discussed extinction of ‘pure’ genres, a legacy of the post-modern destruction of strict form? <sup>(4)</sup> Is it also a symptom of the (welcome) destruction of social hierarchies – hierarchies that comedy depends on, especially in the class-obsessed UK? Is this actually now a heritage issue which we should be concerned about? What price a ticket to see comedy in a museum?

### Notes

1. Neil Murray interview with author Lloyd Peters 5 June 2016.
2. Fiona Gasper interview with author Lloyd Peters 5 June 2016.
3. This may explain the popularity of Geordie comedian Cubby Brown, revered by many on Teeside.
3. See Chuck Wendig's blog ‘Terrible Minds’: ‘The death of genre: drifting towards a post-genre future’. <http://terribleminds.com/ramble/2012/09/05/thedeath-of-genre-drifting-toward-a-postgenre-future/> or Scott Smith's ‘The Alan Review’: ‘The Death of Genre: Why the Best YA Fiction Often Defies Classification’. <https://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/v35n1/smith.html4>

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