

Comedy Studies: A Twenty-First Century Reader

Comedy Studies

It may come as something of a surprise that the study of comedy has only one journal dedicated to the topic – and, as of 2020, for the last ten years, that has been the one whose back-catalogue you are currently perusing. Nonetheless, the twenty-first century has seen a growing appetite for the study of comedy, with academic interest emerging across university departments worldwide. In the new millennium, in the UK alone, dedicated comedy conferences have sprung up at universities including Kent, Salford and de Montfort. Growing media interest in how comedy affects public consciousness about how the world works means that mainstream and online outlets increasingly seek scholarly commentary on comedy themes in relation to popular cultural, political and social trends as they emerge. With signs of an interest in the study of comedy as a self-contained entity arising, the establishment of an academic field seems, finally, to be underway and this Reader is a response to that growth. Back in 2010, Chris Ritchie, having already initiated the first BA degree in Comedy at Southampton Solent University, saw the need for a journal to be created in order to capture the increasing cross- disciplinary interest in the topics, substance and related interests of comedy, and thus, the journal *Comedy Studies* was born.

Comedy Principles

But in terms of any studies at all, what, actually, is comedy? Received wisdom posits that comedy, as we understand it, emanated from the theatre, at first informally in Ancient World representations of ‘ritual [and] revolt’ (Weitz, 2016: vii). This would suggest that comedy has always contained a strongly performative essence in which comedy is something that is ‘done’ to people and is received by them in a specialised form. The formalisation of comedy as a form of dramatic art in the fifth century B.C. Athenian festivals and competitions opened up opportunities for a new genus of criticism by the philosophical thinkers of the day. Subsequent scholarly writings on the subject of the nature of comedy have reduced the activations that prompt laughter to three essential principles, those of Superiority, Incongruity and Release (Morreall, 1987; Provine, 2000; Raskin, 1985 et al).

These principles operate in terms of cause and effect in terms of the 'do-ing' and reception of comedy. The principles of Superiority and Incongruity can be seen, in this way, as drivers in the creating the causes of laughter, while the effects can be measured in the Release response of the audience, spectator or reader. Thus, Release in an emphasis on the effect as an activation that is cued by comedians and can be seen as the physiological laughter in the comic principle of Relief, most decisively described in the work of Sigmund Freud as 'an outlet for psychic or nervous energy' (1905, 1964: 111). Indeed, the 'Holy Grail' for many comedians is the belly laugh of Relief/Release, which might look something like this description:

The phenomena all comedy entertainers want to achieve. The audience were literally out of their seats and were on their hands and knees, rolling in the aisles!! Some banging the floor with their hands – rolling onto their backs, screaming with laughter – they were helpless (Sales in Hudd, 1993: 151).

Comedy's relation to the physiologically cathartic effects of laughter has long rendered it as something that appeals, somehow, to a lesser human response. It places comedy as something that appeals to baser instincts and, so, comedy was categorised in the lower order of creative arts from the beginning as dictated by those (perhaps too) influential Ancient philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. This, along with comedy's early associations with revelry, drink and debauchery that emerged from the subversive rituals and rites meant that *the komos* has always been perceived, at heart, as a vulgar and undignified form of human activity. The early classifiers also fixed the Superiority principle as being central to comic expression, allocating comedy as something predicated on an apperception of inferiority:

Comedy is...an imitation of characters of a lower type, - not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the Ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive (Aristotle, 1997: 9).

The Superiority theory of comedy held sway as the go-to critical lens to apply to comedy pretty much until the eighteenth century. Another way of viewing the way Superiority operates in comedy is in Thomas Hobbes' notion of the way in which feelings of Superiority are triggered by the 'getting' of a joke or by seeing something happening within a comic activation of which the doer is unaware. The receiver of the comic moment is thus in the superior position of being aware of a 'sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves' (1840: 20).

The novelist Henry Fielding wrote of the way in which Superiority and Incongruity coincided, in that 'the only source of the true Ridiculous...is affectation...from the discovery of this affectation arises the Ridiculous, which always strikes the reader with surprise and pleasure' (1742: 2). More recently, Incongruity has become the preferred and favoured principle for evaluating comedy. New theoretical angles that emerge tend to be variants on the 'oddness' theme. Comic Incongruity is essentially defined as 'the familiar as if it were strange' (Morreall, 1987: 2) in that something:

Does not match up with what we expect things of that kind to be, or because it is out of place in the setting in which we find it. Something amuses us if it somehow violates our picture of the way things are supposed to be, and if we enjoy this violation (ibid: 216).

Charles Darwin summarised how all three major hypotheses work in conjunction as a 'cue' for laughter in humans. Laughter, he claimed, was precipitated by:

Something incongruous or unaccountable, exciting surprise and some sense of superiority in the laugher, who must be in a happy frame of mind, seems to be the commonest cause (in Enck, 1872, 1960: 31).

Analysts of comedy have historically often been further drawn to the Russian scholar and critic Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of comedy's locus in 'carnival', which is 'an officially sanctioned holiday from the usual order of things' (Weitz, 2009:186). The subversive, rabble-rousing and debauched reputation of the carnival's spirit of revelry has also added to comedy's classification as something dangerous to orthodoxy as well as to it being a lower form deemed unworthy of serious scrutiny. As the playwright Friedrich Durrenmatt concluded more recently, 'the comic is considered inferior, dubious, unseemly,' (in Corrigan and Rosenberg, 1964: 272).

Finally, critics of comedy often reject but return, strangely drawn, to the work of Henri Bergson and his ideas of the Release afforded through laughter as having a primarily 'social function' (1900, 1994: 117). In his 'automaton' or 'mechanical inelasticity' theory (ibid: 108 and 117), Bergson posited that whenever a man acts most like a machine that the laughter of Relief is provoked. He stated 'the attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine' (1900, 1960: 49). This way of thinking about comedy provides scholars of comedy with a visual metaphor

for the Incongruity principle while also encompassing the idea of comedy's role in pointing out human wrongness as it operates within an inflexibly prescribed social rulebook.

Whatever means of analysis that are adopted, these different ways of looking at how comedy works firmly place comedy (and perhaps as distinct from humour) within the realm of the 'doing' and the response to that activation. Comic theoreticians often base their analyses on these essential mechanisms for creating comedy and you will note that these influential theories will feature in many of the varied studies of motivating the 'funny' that follow in the Reader.

Comedy Problems

So, how do you solve a problem like comedy in the Academy? Comedy's low status in society, and consequently, within the institutions of serious study, can be attributed to a number of factors. Firstly, as seen, before formalisation in the fifth century Athenian Drama, comedy, too 'grew gradually out of something more primitive' (Potts, 1966: 12). However, while the drama slowly gained respectability and became legitimised as a creative art, comedy remained stuck in its perceived dubious, carnival-esque, low, popular and trivial origins. Comedy has become viewed, at best, as a craft and it has seldom achieved high creative or artistic reputation or achieved proper status as a subject fit for critical scrutiny.

Another problem that comedy has in getting taken seriously is that, as Eric Weitz notes, it is strongly linked to 'play' (2016:6). Albeit that the notion of 'play' is very helpful in thinking about the essentially ludic nature of all comedy, play brings with it a preconception of an essentially childish – and thus ignorable - form. As Susanne Langer suggests, 'we often laugh at things in the theater that we might not find funny in actuality' (1953: 85). Freud has, moreover, described the sensation of 'feeling ashamed over what one has been able to laugh at in a play' (1905, 1964: 219). This cognitive dissonance is perhaps partly triggered due to comedy's strongly childhood associations. As we argued in the very first issue of *Comedy Studies*, comedy is located in the primal caregiver interactions between those who engage in play with their babies and infants (Wilkie and Saxton, 2010). The first stand-up comedians that we all encounter are, in fact, our early carers who create a blueprint for the

doing of comedy. Child Directed Speech (CDS) employs a consciously entertaining and distracting mode of communication that uses many of the same mechanisms as comedians' doing of comedy and it follows very similar pattern in the ways in which responses to these interactions are encouraged.

Containing some element of play at its core, the doing and reception of comedy assumes a super-communicative agreement between performer and audience in whatever form it might take. The comedy audience recognises and accepts highly manufactured, manipulative conventions, designed (often solely) with a specific view to making it laugh as being crucial to the rules of the engagement. Paradoxically, perhaps, in the doing of it, comic play is not recognisable by the audience as being 'real' or 'true' but must simultaneously still 'ring true' in order to register as being properly funny. Comedy, in performance, requires both creator and recipient to be 'in on the game'. In that this game involves a negotiated mode of playfulness at its core, defining comedy becomes even more difficult to pin down. Play is a ludicrous and quicksilver form, notoriously resistant to fixed rules or inflexible rubrics. Play's exceptional status along with the need to consider the audience's vital role and engagement within the prescribed game makes rigorous analysis even more difficult to articulate. In operating firmly in the ludic mode, comedy, moreover, is often completely non-verbal. This bypasses the essentially literary and textual methods of analysis that are adopted in more traditionally sanctioned scholarly modes. Thus, comedy rarely gets taken seriously and is generally viewed as being immune to any serious critique. Whenever scholars do attempt to define comedy, the American writer E. B. White's notorious (and normally truncated) quote bedevils their analysis – 'humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind' (in Enck et al, 1954: 102). While accurately describing the undoubted difficulties of critiquing humour (treated as the same as comedy), the dissected frog analogy suggests, oddly, perhaps, that analyses of the phenomenon should also themselves, perforce, *be* funny. Nonetheless, White's remark does, at least, still allow that comedy is a subject worthy of serious scrutiny. Adopting a scientific study does accurately characterise Humour Studies' sometimes attempts to explain the phenomenon of eliciting laughter. It is, however, true that taking an overly-scientific approach within the discipline can indeed lead to what the humorist George Mikes described as the deployment of

‘terrifying graphs’ (1980, 2016: 24) that feature in academic conferences dedicated to the topic.

In fact, Humour Studies are generally more interested in the individual’s response to the activation, whereas Comedy Studies seem to be geared more to considering the response of audiences or multiple spectators. While both interests are concerned with comedy/humour’s causes and effects, their critical emphases also tend to concentrate on different key players within the engagement i.e. comedy more generally seeks the perspective of the teller and what she is trying to do, while humour focuses more on what the receiver(s) make of the engagement. The other major difference between comedy and humour is, very roughly speaking, an emphasis on, respectively, performance texts and literary texts. Nonetheless, comedy, humour and laughter studies do tend to appear as defining terms that are lumped together and appear somewhat interchangeably, as you will note in the various usages of the vocabulary that are made in the Reader.

Moreover, in the Anglo-American Western tradition, thinking about comedy currently tends predominantly to trigger thoughts of Stand-up, a form described by Oliver Double as ‘a single performer standing in front of an audience, talking to them with the specific intention of making them laugh’ (1997: 4). As a form of modern comedy, the concept of the ‘stand-up’ did not appear until World War One at the earliest (Double, 2018). Stand-up is, perhaps, the purest form of comic performance. A doer, in the form of a joke teller, transmits the comedy. Receivers, in the shape of an audience, process that interaction and actively respond in the creative act through their laughter reaction. As a format, stand-up encourages critical thinking about how comedy makes its meanings and how those messages are received. The form can be boiled down to the delivery and the ‘seeing’ of the joke – itself a unit of analysis that generally works through the obviousness of its structure, the constituents of its text and the manner of its performance. Basic jokes, with a formulaic beginning, middle and end, contain a build that culminates in some element of surprise. Jokes mainly operate through Incongruity - ‘most jokes arise through transference and the arousal of false expectations’ (Aristotle, 2007: 33). As Carr and Greeves further note, ‘the punch line works by resolving the suspense of the story in an unexpected way (2006:22). Effective joking relies on fairly sophisticated performative conditions and techniques of

delivery to succeed fully in prompting laughter. As the catchphrase of the Northern Irish stand-up comic Frank Carson (1926-2012) expressed this mastery of delivery, 'it's the way I tell 'em'. The way the 'story' is told, using some or of all of the comic principles, is an under-researched imperative in thinking about the way comedy relies on effective signalling for creating the conditions for effective reception of comic meaning. As mentioned, it is, crucially, the performative 'doing' of comedy that differentiates it from humour which generally tends to approach analysis from a more socially intercommunicative, literary, linguistic, pictorial or textual angle. The joke as a unit of analysis, however, is naturally limited in its scope for explaining comedy as a whole. Attempts to apply the same joker/audience formula across modes (parody, satire, lampoon); let alone across myriad mediatised forms (radio, TV, film, animation, podcasts, vines, blogs, mash-ups); or even to other live forms (clowning, farce, puppetry) can often come a cropper. This is partly due to audiences' increasingly sophisticated post-post modernist appreciations and understandings of how comedy makes its multi-layered meanings. Furthermore, the possibilities of increasing counter-examples that a globalised, multi-platform, twenty-first century comedy landscape can throw up, renders the joke form too narrow a tool for evaluation of comedy.

The audience's response and its role within the creation of any successful engagement of stand-up event are also insufficiently taken into critical consideration in the main, and whatever the future of comedy study, still more attention to the audience is required. Giving equal emphasis to the effects of the doing will mean that comedy studies (read from whatever disciplinary angle) will consider further the 'effect' part of the cause and effect equation. As Durrenmatt also noted, 'through comedy...the anonymous audience becomes possible as an audience, becomes a reality to be counted on, one to be taken into account' (in Corrigan and Rosenberg, 1964:286).

Comedy Reflections

Comedy's, possibly unique, problem of being fatally subject to serious analysis is an attitude that is also mirrored by its practitioners. Those who do comedy themselves often see their practices as not fit for deeper appraisal. As a hugely popular British comedian once noted, "if you try to find out what makes us tick", Eric Morecambe once said, "the watch stops"

(in Griffin, 2005: 235). Despite the acceptance of a certain degree of reflexivity within live comedy (which requires an audience and the presence of the laughter response to measure its effects with any validity), those who actually do it are often reluctant to unpack the process. This reluctance to consider cause and effect can block any research in which performers are integral to understanding the mechanics of comedy. As Brockbank notes, 'actors have traditionally been suspicious of theory or analysis, ascribing the creation of character in performance to decisions instinctively made, perceptions unconsciously arrived at, fine discriminations mysteriously achieved' (1988: 3). However this reluctance to deeper reflection is also, perhaps, due to the lack of available vocabulary to quantify comic practices properly or to find meaningful terms to give any real voice to what is, often, a tacit knowledge base. Critical vocabulary to study comedy as a concept in, and of, itself is diffuse. It is never a particularly easy matter to critically evaluate the production and reception of comedy, or to analyse comedy's form and function within culture and society, or to scrutinise comedy in relation to emerging contemporary performance practices. Moreover, how it might emerge in the study of other domains, those, say, of text, sociology, education, politics, satire, history, culture, the social sciences, psychology, communication or science studies, raises still more problems of terminology. Umberto Eco notes that the 'comic is...an umbrella term *like "play"*' (1986: 275, italics mine). Eco's 'umbrella' notion acknowledges that comedy can be taken seriously as something fit for study and that its practices inculcate and inform many other fields. Nevertheless, Comedy's overarching and multi-disciplinary nature means it cannot escape from the facts that it emanates from playful, often ephemerally performed, nebulous modes of human activity and that these elusive conceptions are often antithetical to the set definitions that prevail within the different scholastic subject domains with which comedy becomes associated.

Despite these challenges, research into comedy provides an endlessly fascinating area for scholars to explore. The study of comedy also offers endless possibilities for new and original research perspectives. The Reader that follows largely locates comedy within performed modes, but suggests much about the widespread range of disciplinary angles that can be taken. Indeed, it excitingly illustrates the sheer scope of analyses that comedy studies allows. We are, moreover, hugely grateful to those practitioners who have provided their reflections on the doing of comedy and interviews with experts of comic practices such

as Chris Rock, Ross Noble and John Lloyd are interspersed among the theoretical perspectives that are published here.

Comedy Academy

Paradoxically, comedy studies in the Academy has never become fully legitimised, albeit that comedy as a concept has featured within the frameworks of a western, liberal arts education since ancient times and has proved the, sometimes almost obsessive, object of analysis of leading philosophers and thinkers, from Plato to Schopenhauer, for over two thousand years. Comedy has been tackled by most of the Big Thinkers, even despite Dr Johnson's caveat that 'comedy has been particularly unpropitious in definers' (1751:370). Comedy in the Academy operates like Lear's Fool. Presenting low status socio-cultural capital, the Fool Comedy is a vital, sometimes tolerated, unrecognised member of the King's Court, forced unofficially to present his important critical insights, at times, under the radar. The shoots of comedy as a field of study in the UK started to emerge in the modernist scholarship of the twentieth century in the dawn of the mass media age. Popular culture studies emerged as a field, prompted in turn, by the interests of literary scholars and class historians such as the Leavises, Richard Hoggart and Eric Hobsbawm. In the UK, the Centre for Contemporary Studies was established in 1964, signalling the start of a cultural and social sciences trend within the Academy which, in turn, encouraged a growth in writing about new genres such as mass fiction, film, music, advertising, cinema, comics and the radio. By the 1970s, social scientists such as Stuart Hall legitimised the study of the media in the realm of higher education. Meanwhile comedy study *per se* was being promulgated in the latter half of the twentieth century due to the excellent work of expert amateurs such as John Fisher or Roger Wilmut. By the 1980s, the alternative comedy boom brought about a culture of more radical critical thinking about issues such as race, class, gender and sexuality as explored through stand-up comedy and this interest was translated into the strictures of the Academy. By the 1990s, official interest in comedy as a field of study had started to formalise. Events such as a comedy festival in Leicester co-hosted by the university, alongside a number of dedicated comedy conferences at universities and international publications on comedy from academics marked the very beginnings of a field.

Indeed, in the new millennium, comedy-badged degrees have been offered at a handful of universities. To illustrate the current place of comedy in the Academy through a snapshot portrait of the contemporary UK scene, a typical BA degree with the word 'comedy' in the title would resemble the University of Salford's BA Degree in Comedy Writing and Performance. For this three year undergraduate award, student numbers typically averages 15 -20 per academic year. The emphasis is on students gaining skills in performing, writing and theorizing comedy. Students undertake a blend of core and optional modules across the degree. In practical areas these tend include modules in topics such as stand-up, physical comedy or acting for the camera. In theoretical areas, a range of modules in film, theatre and textual studies, all with an emphasis on comedy, are forwarded. The overarching aim of the mixed practice and theory BA degree level courses is to enable undergraduates to build their creative skills for application across the comedy industry spectrum post-graduation. During their education, students can participate in relevant in-house opportunities, are encouraged to generate their own local platforms for the dissemination of their comedy writing and performance, and there are possibilities to take part in outside, industry-facing activities. In gradually establishing itself as a player within the growth of the study of comedy in H.E. over the last ten years, the University of Salford hosted an early comedy studies conference in 2007 which attracted a huge diversity of papers on different ideas on comedy. This period also saw the birth of the journal *Comedy Studies* which is currently housed within the university. The first *Women in Comedy* symposium was hosted by the university and research projects, including the University of Salford's *Sound of Laughter Project*, have involved a number of colleagues and students alike. The Mike Craig archive is housed in the university. It contains 600 hours of digitised comedy tapes, including many items thought to be lost. Moreover, a partnership with the Comedy Writing and Performance degree at Humber College, Toronto has been instituted, allowing students exchange possibilities between the two countries. From providing the only complete comedy degree in the UK, as of 2018, this offer has expanded to four other institutions who now offer their own badged Comedy degrees. At the time of writing, the named comedy degrees available at BA level are through Winchester, Bath Spa and Goldsmiths universities. The National Film and Television School also offers a degree in Writing and Producing Comedy. Previous degree offers at Canterbury Kent in Comedy Performance and Production and at Southampton Solent in Stand-up Comedy have, however, been discontinued. Nor is

Kent offering its, hitherto unique in the UK, MA route. That university, however, hosts an extensive digitised Stand-up archive, while Brunel University has a Comedy Studies Unit which acts as an incubator for research projects but currently offers no discrete degree in comedy. The growing suite of comedy degrees and the different departments' interest in hosting international conferences in comedy and providing quality publications on comedy has happily broadened comedy's presence within the Academy. The distinctive work going on marks a clear trajectory for the growth of comedy as a separate field in the UK. Writing on comedy at postgraduate level and beyond is illustrated by the selection of articles that are published in the journal and in this Reader.

Otherwise, HE providers in the UK (and in the US and Canada) overwhelmingly tend only to offer discrete comedy modules that are embedded within Performance or Theatre degrees. Most commonly these take the form a stand-up comedy module and are taught by external practitioners, perhaps establishing the reductive wider mindset that 'comedy' means stand-up comedy. This can mean that the myriad other forms that comedy enjoys become somewhat overlooked or sidelined in existential discussions about what comedy is. The vital collaborative group work and ensemble elements of comedy production, for example, are not particularly addressed within Stand-up. Conversely, in terms of Humour Studies, there are no degree options whatsoever available in the UK, while Laughter Studies tend merely to be an *ad hoc* adjunct arising within the science departments at providers such as Birkbeck and UCL.

Taking a degree in comedy as a separate discipline offers the potential for students potentially to progress into the comedy industries. Comedy also affords the acquisition of wider skills:

Such skills include problem solving, finding solutions, forming relationships, logical thinking, choosing appropriate tools, interpreting results, drawing conclusions, evaluating data, and analysing opinions and instructions (Wilkie, 2015: 39).

Graduates can also take up higher level study into comedy related matters. Continued study of comedy at postgraduate level offers rich opportunities within the Academy, as the

subject of comedy provides an incomparable basis for developing the critical questioning and reasoning skills that are applicable to a wide range of disciplines.

Comedy Journal

As comedy studies started to emerge from the shadows and was becoming an area that spawned interest from academics and practitioners alike, there arose the need for a dedicated journal for the study of comedy as an entity which could encompass ideas about classical comic performance traditions; review comic principles and theories of form and genre; raise questions about the production and consumption of comedy; examine the wider meanings contained in comic expression; and deliver a forum for original perspectives on previously unexamined objects of laughter. In 2010, Chris Ritchie and his team set up *Comedy Studies*, the first UK-based academic journal solely dedicated to comedy. It followed on from the very first BA in Comedy (at the University of Southampton Solent) and was in response to demand from the comedy conferences that started at the Universities of Kent, Salford and elsewhere. In the introductory editorial Ritchie wrote:

With comedy studies, a forum is bring created for the discussion, analysis and critique of comedy...we welcome all attempts to theorize intelligently about why comedy is as it is. Yet there is also a strongly practical bent to our endeavours ...we are keen to investigate comedy as a global phenomenon (*Comedy Studies*, 2010 Editorial, 1:1)

The rationale for the journal attempted to legitimise the study of comedy and intended to help place it as a discrete academic discipline. Through rigorous analysis, comedy would become less nebulous as an entity. Whilst it fully recognised and embraced the increasing cross-disciplinary and global interest in the phenomenon, the journal would aim to detach itself from the conventional way of thinking about comedy i.e. only how it pervades other more established disciplines. Over the ten years of its operation the journal has covered an eclectic range of topics and themes featuring such considerations as comic form in performance and writing practices; histories of stage and screen comedy; literary and popular comedy; comedy and its traditions across cultures and societies; satire, taboo, controversy and offense; and comedy and new media. All of these areas have been analysed using the various principles and philosophies of comedy and established humour and laughter theory to ask such questions as 'what is comedy? What is humour? What is

laughter? What, moreover, does the element of 'play' - a defining feature of comic engagement - mean for the messages and meanings conveyed through all of these different areas of study? In attempting this, the scope of the journal mirrors Alan Gowans' characterisation of the main relationships between the data and socio-historical trends as are used in art history criticism, i.e. similarly defining comedy ' by an aesthetic line of progress, as cultural expression, and by social function' (1981: 3-4).

Special issues of the journal have included a celebration of Women in Contemporary Comedy, edited by Katy Shaw (3:2); Comic Improvisation, edited by Brainne Edge (4:1); Comedy and Seriousness, edited by Nick Holm and Carolyn Veldstra (6:1); and Laughter in the Digital Age, edited by Peter Kunze (6:2). Articles from each of these special issues appear in the Reader. Issue 2:2 was a key cross-disciplinary edition. Edited by Sharon Lockyer, Brett Mills and Louise Peacock, it took an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of one stand-up comedy performance – that of Joan Rivers' routine on hosting *Live at the Apollo* (BBC 1, 2010, series 3, 10 December 2007, available on YouTube). Adopting different perspectives on performance study, Jewish cultural studies, socio-cultural, semiotic, discourse analysis, humour theory and politeness the edition analysed the same piece of comic text from a fascinating series of cross reference points. Three articles from that issue are reproduced in the Reader.

The overarching purpose of the Reader is to present a representative back-catalogue of the Journal's content over the past ten years. The Reader is intended as a collection that, in itself, illustrates the multi-perspective means that are available to analyse comedy. The Reader presents an array of critical approaches from interdisciplinary scholars, all of whom evaluate the comedy from various, and different, angles and who also adopt a range of writing styles to explore the phenomenon. The selected articles offer a contemporary sample of general analyses of comedy as a mode, form or genre, which will, hopefully, prove of interest and use to students, scholars and lovers of comedy alike.

The content of the Reader is broken down into eight sub-sections, as follows:

Section One is entitled *Back to Basics: What is Comedy and Where Does It Come From?* It begins with some thoughts from Chris Ritchie on comedy's essential nature, in its low status, subversive and performative quality. Peter Marteinson then applies some influential, philosophical theories to the phenomenon of comedy. The articles by Wilkie and Saxton and the Addymans that follow locate comedy in the communicative mechanisms involved in earliest human interactions.

Section Two, *Old Comedy: Taproots and Tropes*, discusses the histories and performance bases of comedy. The two articles by Rachel Kirk and Louise Peacock evaluate comedy's earliest propensity towards 'laughing at' in its favouring of stereotypes and violence, while Richard Talbot and Barnaby King muse on the traditional form of clowning as a basis for Practice as Research.

Section Three, *Class, Gender, Race: Reading Comedy's Issues*, contains three articles which concentrate on comedy's reflections in society and culture. Isaac Hui looks at class as a meaningful driver in comic text, while David Huxley and David James consider the appearance of comedy's 'issues' within the Music Hall genre. Gilli Bush-Bailey introduces the question of gender issues as something often rendered problematically in comic representations.

Section Four, *Doing Comedy: Giving, Receiving, Causes and Effects*, tackles aspects of the doing and reception of comedy in performance. Hannah Ballou considers the nature of the feminine in the practice of comedy. Tim Miles looks at the audience's position in the creation of live comedy, while Lloyd Peters considers the watershed moment of the Alternative Comedy boom and how it adopted a novel and critical viewpoint on the material of comedy. Christopher Molineux looks at how comedians document and self-reflect on their process.

Section Five, *New Comedy? Interviews with Practitioners* comprises a selection of interviews with comic makers that have featured in the journal, including conversations with Ross Noble, Stewart Lee and Tiffany Stevenson.

Section Six, *Critical Angles: Essays on a Joan Rivers' Routine*, groups the different perspectives on the same comedy set as provided by three eminent scholars in comedy, Sharon Lockyer, Louise Peacock and Brett Mills.

Section Seven, *The World of Comedy: Culture and Satire*, provides some global overviews of issues of place; politics and seriousness in relation to comedy. Debra Aarons and Marc Mierowsky discuss *Obscenity, dirtiness and licence in Jewish comedy*. Grant Julin considers *Satire in a multicultural world: A Bakhtinian analysis* while Mark Harmon, Barbara Kaye, Amanda Martin explore the interface of *When Silly meets Serious*. Meanwhile, Ian Reilly in *The comedian the cat and the activist* and Cate Blouke in *Borat, Sacha Baron Cohen and seriousness of mock documentary*, evaluate comedy as provocation and review the power behind the politics of laughter.

Section Eight is called *New Comedy? Emerging Platforms and Forms of Expression*. This section looks at comic expression across new outlets and its adoption of these evolving modes - by adaptations (Kyle Meikle), using social media (Peter Kunze, Rebecca Krefting and Rebecca Baruc, and Jillian Belanger), by animations (Lucien Leon) and through vlogging (Matthew McKeague). This section brings twenty-first century perspectives firmly to bear on the study of comedy and concludes the Reader's intention to provide a collection of emerging contemporary readings on the study of comedy and its myriad theories, practices and concerns.

For the many excellent critical evaluations of the work of individual makers of comedy (e.g. The Coen Brothers, Sarah Silverman or Bridget Christie) that have featured in the journal, we would refer you to the journal itself, available by subscription through Taylor & Francis.

Whatever the model adopted by the scholars of comedy that are featured in this book, we suggest that the study of comedy and its workings demonstrates critical thinking of a high order. We are very grateful to all our contributors. They continue to show how comedy impacts across multiple social and cultural contexts and their work illustrates how the study of comedy is truly located in the examination and evaluation of both ancient and cutting-edge conceptualisations. The work of our contributors illuminates the many ways in which

comedy works to question orthodoxies and how thinking critically about comedy's trends, practices, developments and current concerns 'gives license to violate the rule' (Eco, 1986: 275).

Like comedy in the Academy, our *Comedy Studies* journal has occupied and maintained a small but resolute niche. In 2020, however, with the publication of this retrospective Reader, there is a sense that comedy is starting to grow up. Ultimately the Reader aims to present a range of informative, current scholarship and research for the furthering of in-depth knowledge and understanding of the field of comedy as it looks in the early twenty-first century. As the editors wrote in the very first issue of the journal 'such an endeavour can only enhance a sense of the longevity and significance of comedy as a part of life' (*Comedy Studies*, 2010 Editorial, 1:1).

Hopefully you will be able to judge from the selection that follows whether this aspiration has been realised.

REFERENCES

- Aristotle (1997), *Poetics*, London: Dover Publications Ltd.
- Aristotle (2007), *Rhetoric III*, Accessed online at: <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/a8rh/>.
- Bergson, Henri (1900), "Laughter". In Sypher, Wylie (1994), *Comedy*, London: John Hopkins University Press. Also in Enck, John J., Forter, Elizabeth T., and Whitley, Alvin (eds.) (1960), *The Comic in Theory and Practice*, New York: Appleton-Century Crofts.
- Brockbank, Philip (ed.) (1988), *Players of Shakespeare 1*, Cambridge: C.U.P.
- Carr, Jimmy and Greeves, Lucy (2006), *The Naked Jape*, London: Michael Joseph.
- Comedy Studies*, (2010-) Oxon: Taylor and Francis
- Corrigan, Robert W., and Rosenberg, James L. (eds.) (1964), *The Context and Craft of Drama*, San Francisco: Chandler.
- Double, Oliver (1997), *Stand-up: On Being A Comedian*, London: Methuen.
- Double (2018) The origin of the term 'stand-up comedy' – update, *Comedy Studies*, 9:2. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/2040610X.2018.1428427>
- Durrenmatt, Friedrich (1958), "Problems of the Theatre", in Corrigan, Robert W., and Rosenberg, James L. (eds.) (1964), *The Context and Craft of Drama*, San Francisco: Chandler.
- Eco (1986) *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality*, London: Vintage
- Enck, John J., Forter, Elizabeth T., and Whitley, Alvin (eds.) (1960), *The Comic in Theory and Practice*, New York: Appleton-Century Crofts.

Fielding, Henry (1742). Author's preface to 1948 edition of *Joseph Andrews*, New York: Rinehart & Co. Inc.

Freud, Sigmund (1905, 1964), *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. London: Hogarth Press.

Griffin, Stephen, (2005) *Ken Dodd*, London: Michael O'Mara Books

Gowans, Alan (1981) *Learning to See: Historical Perspective on Modern Popular/Commercial Arts*, Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press

Hobbes, Thomas (1840), "Human Nature" in Molesworth (ed.) (1840), *English Works* Vol 4. London: Bohn.

Hudd, Roy (1993) *Roy Hudd's Book of Music-Hall, Variety and Showbiz Anecdotes*, London: Robson.

Johnson, Samuel (1751), *Rambler*, No 125, in *British Essayists*, vol. Xxi, May 28, 1751. London.

Langer, Susanne (1953), *Feeling and Form*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Mikes, George (1980, 2016), *English Humour for Beginners*, London: Penguin Random House.

Morreall, John (ed.) (1987), *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, New York: Albany.

Potts, L.J. (1966) *Comedy*, London: Hutchinson and Co.

Provine, Robert R. (2000), *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*, London: Faber and Faber.

Raskin, Victor (1985), *Semiotic Mechanisms of Humor*, Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company.

Weitz, Eric (2009), *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Weitz, Eric (2016) *Theatre & Laughter*, London: Palgrave MacMillan

White, E.B. (1954), "Some Remarks on Humor". In *The Second Tree from the Corner*. New York: Harper & Brothers. In Enck, John J., Forter, Elizabeth T., and Whitley, Alvin (eds.) (1960), *The Comic in Theory and Practice*, New York: Appleton-Century Crofts.

Wilkie, Ian (2015) "Too many actors and too few jobs": a case for curriculum extension in UK vocational actor training, *London Review of Education*, Volume 13, Number 1, Spring 2015 (pp 31-42)

Wilkie, Ian and Saxton, Matthew (2010), "The Origins of Comic Performance in Adult-Child Interaction". In *Comedy Studies*, Vol 1, Issue 1. Jan 2010, Intellect Ltd.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all Taylor and Francis editors for Comedy Studies for their patience and their support of our journal over the years, and particular thanks to Ben Piggott for agreeing to the publication of this retrospective collection.

AUTHOR DETAILS

Ian Wilkie has been articles editor of *Comedy Studies* since 2013, becoming main editor of the journal in 2015. His PhD was on comic acting. He is a Lecturer in Performance at the University of Salford, specialising in the Comedy Writing and Performance degree. He is the author of *Performing in Comedy: a Student's Guide*, Abingdon: Routledge. As Ian Angus Wilkie he still occasionally works as a comic actor.

CONTACT DETAILS

I.Wilkie1@Salford.ac.uk