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Comedy live – creativity in stand up

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LISA MOORE -paper

The open university

Writing Funny - language, creativity and comedy

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What's so Special about Stand-up comedy here? I ponder on the notion that for many, if not most Stand-up comics, their performance /their act starts its life out as a script. The stand-up comic often approaches the exercise of sitting down and writing the piece based on their Particular genre of comedy, be it observational, surrealist, physical and so on.

The creative process of putting an act together differs from Comedian to comedian with no set format, and seemingly a myriad of methods. It is in this regard perhaps that the process lacks the Stricter, more formulaic forms of comedy writing practices more associated with comedy genres Such as Sit Com, Sketch shows and comedy drama. Without doubt, some comedians are natural born writers, and will craft word for word each aspect of their set. Others will Work out material 'in the moment' Simultaneously working it by writing and editing I front of a crowd.

The surrealist comic Ross Noble for example has been referred to by critics as a 'randomise' Since much of his set is based around heckles and conversations with audience members.

When interviewed by the guardian some years ago he described the planning and writing of his set as "about four bits of words on a piece of paper. Admittedly, the non-planning can open up too many tangents and can be risky he asserts - by comparison, comics like Peter Kay and Jason Manford will work from carefully crafted and well-rehearsed Scripts.

Techniques may seem quite different on the surface but are really just different means to the same end, that of LAUGHTER: as described by oxford dictionary

Spontaneous sounds and movements of the face and body that are the instinctive expressions of lively amusement.

I'd like to begin by focusing on the writer of the Set since that enquiry probes into the creative Process with relation to comedy writing and Performances practices, we can perhaps explore the creative aspects of improvising comedy later during our discussion.

Let's assume then, that- we're dealing with a naturally funny person, one that is in the habit of Penning an original set, a new script –one designed around her/his particular shtick. The type of humour typical of a comedian someone who is Confident that the material will evoke laughter. So, once the set is written, the creative process then becomes about rearranging

and crafting the structure, he/she will possibly work in terms of analysing this as form of writing practice - So far, so good. It Seems simple enough?

To recap then.

The writer/comic writes a funny script with the Intention of moving the audience toward laughter, or to be more precise, to move them toward an Instinctive expression of lively amusement. He or she will then likely test the material by playing to a small audience, and then editing as required later and according to noted audience reaction-as in- did I get? Laughs here, did they laugh a lot there, and so on. However, it really isn't that simple - even those of us who are not practicing stand-ups know only too well that stand-up comedy is not hailed as the most difficult gig in the business without very good reason. So why then, one might ask, is stand-up so often thought of as the bastard of all gigs?

The answer to this question lies in part, in the nature of the beast that is live comedy performance, that of creating smooth, seamless links, by allowing the comic to glide from one subject to another - Other fine-tuning might include fluency, confidence, diction, volume, microphone technique and comic timing – essentially though, once the comic has rehearsed the script, either in front of a mirror, or friends, (or both) it is then deemed ready for the ultimate testing ground, It becomes worthy of showing to an audience -and all that the risk of that means but it's also how that form is perceived by its consumer that aids in defining it's ultimate success.

By comparison, one watches a comedy film in the cinema and the audience is neither impressed or amused by the Content of the piece the celluloid will continue to roll in the same way it would have regardless of ANY reactions – moreover, the actors and producers /writers will not be immediately made aware of any reaction unless they are in the room- any fail factor is unknown until the review . Similarly, if we watch a live sit-com and consider it somehow Unfunny there will be no showdown in the studio, no heckles within listening distance of the artist –we Simply get on and watch and the performers carry on often wholly unaware of any negative, spontaneous responses.

A Stage play will continue to play even if the audience are sleeping –certainly the actors might feel that it's a bad audience that they (the audience) aren't enjoying or engaging with the performance, but rarely will it result in anything too catastrophic for the Performers - Certainly not in the very moment of their performance anyway.

It should be noted that comedy audiences are not typically, difficult or hostile since there are already certain measures in place as regards publicity-In terms of ensuring the right kind of audience. However, it would be foolish underestimate the Influence that the audience has in such a situation.

In her paper containing the audience in stand-up. Sophie Quirke is succinct in her analysis of the Power of an audience

It is the audience's co-operation, which allows the act to succeed, and they retain the right to undermine the interaction by withdrawing that co-operation.

According to the oxford dictionary;

stand-up comedy is

A performer who stands alone on a stage, as in a nightclub, and delivers a comic monologue

*that seems confusing though since a monologue implies a singular speech and the performance of a comic is based on much more than a speech. In his book **getting the joke** Oliver Double argues that:*

Stand-up comedy is not a monologue, but a conversation. The primary aim of any stand-up performance is to make the audience laugh. For the performer, stand-up comedy is really about crowd control; causing a group of strangers to behave in a certain way.

Clearly then, Double is suggesting that the audience' exchange -their role in the conversation arrives at best, in the form of belly laughs.

Guffaws, and shrieks giggles and titters at worst in the form of shout groans, murmurs, nervous coughs shouts of boo or perhaps worst of all ABSOLUTE SILENCE! Which would possibly be tantamount to a one-sided conversation where upon the comedian is then deemed to have failed, to have died on stage though only metaphorically so, since there is ZERO conversation.

*In their book **the naked jape** Jimmy carr and Lucy Greeves describe the comedy gig as rather brutal environment, a kind of battle ground where;*

The audience is an intimidating beast who decides the ultimate fate of the performer. It's no accident argue Carr and Greeves That the language of a professional comedians is filled with violence and death-'he died on his arse tonight" being the nadir, and he really killed it out there, being the pinnacle of achievement. It's as though the comedy club is the chosen arena for a fight to the death, where either the comic or the audience gets out alive but never both'

The following quote taken from a review of a relatively new comic's act at the Edinburgh festival. Serves as an example of such language as described by MCarr and Greeves, but it also points rather markedly towards complexities around

audience control and indeed the lack of it.

Hildebrand died awfully; it's fair to say. The laughter in the room never got beyond a murmur. The most impassioned noises were groans, as audience members finally clocked the meaning of a pun that had been aired the best part of a minute previously. A partial cause of Hildebrand's death was his unfortunate time slot. Half past ten at night is not a good hour to deliver complicated gags (due not so much to the low levels of natural light, but the high levels of booze in the collective bloodstream).

Despite the fact that this comic clearly had a bad gig, it is obvious that the odds were stacked against him, in so much as, well as being allotted a dodgy Slot for his complicated material, the audience were also, too drunk – aspects of audience control which the comic has no control over, such variables can amount to a metaphorical bombing on stage in spite of any potentially brilliant set. Many comics can cite examples of a gig being overshadowed by the layout of a venue, the Size of a venue the bright lighting, the lack of bar, the low-level seating the noise levels outside, the running order the previous comic and so on. There are countless factors involved in the producing the gold of all gigs on the giggling circuit. Suffice to say, it's certainly not the hardest job in the world (I can think of many) but as a comedy art

form, it's got to be at the top of the tough list and it must feel amazing when it's a success or, as Jack Dee puts it

When stand-up goes well, it's almost as if you can fly.

Refs

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