

Rich pickings in comedy

Richard Wiseman, Professor of the Public Understanding of Psychology at the University of Hertfordshire, talks to comedian **Richard Herring**

Richard Herring has spent a lifetime creating and performing comedy. After graduating from Oxford University he teamed up with fellow comedian Stewart Lee to co-write several critically acclaimed shows, including *Fist of Fun*, *Lee and Herring* and *This Morning With Richard Not Judy*. During the 2000s, Herring has written and performed a new stand-up show almost every year, including the controversial 'Hitler Moustache' and 'Christ on a Bike: The Second Coming', 'What is love, anyway?', and he is currently on tour with 'Talking Cock 2'. He has made regular appearances on *Have I Got News For You*, and is described by the *British Theatre Guide* as 'one of the leading hidden masters of modern British comedy'.

I have an interest in the psychology of comedy (for example, see www.richardwiseman.com/LaughLab), and I caught up with him to discuss the topic.

There is some research suggesting that professional comedians were funny even when they were children. Was that true of you?

I certainly tried to be funny from a very young age, and really loved making people laugh. When I was just three or four years old I can remember doing a finger puppet show for my mum and my grandma, and them really laughing. I can vividly remember that wave of laughter and loving it.

Also, I was interested in comedy from a very young age. I am not sure why – perhaps it was because I was the youngest child – but I was certainly obsessed with both sex and comedy when I was a child. I was also very inquisitive and I questioned everything – including love and religion – and I think that also helps people be funny.

As I grew up I was obsessed with comedy. I was a big fan of *Tiswas* because it was so anarchic. Coming across *Monty Python* was an epiphany, and I also loved *The Young Ones*, and Dudley Moore and

Peter Cook, especially when they performed as Derek and Clive. Looking back, I guess I was into comedians doing sketches, rather than stand-up.

You know lots of comedians. What psychological traits do comedians tend to have?

I have noticed that the best and the worst performers have the same psychology – whatever happens, they seem to think they are brilliant. The genius comedians will go on stage, no one will laugh, and they will still come off and say 'I was fantastic'. The worst comedians will do exactly the same. They seem to have an innate confidence.

Comedians also tend to be control freaks. There is a real autonomy to stand-up and you get used to controlling everything.

It is difficult to generalise, but some comedians are very insecure. In my experience, there is no relationship between being funny onstage and offstage. Lots of comedians are competitive with each other, and want to be the funniest person in the room. I believe that Frank Carson never turned off, but to me that sounds like a nightmare.

Are there any rules of comedy?

There are some formulas. Surprise is very important. Like a magician, you misdirect your audience. There are different layers of it. If you are Stewart Lee and doing a whole routine about a packet of crisps, throwing in a 'knock knock' joke at the end will be surprising and so might work well. There is the rule of three – two normal things followed by something unexpected. And also the 'pull back and reveal'.

What is the 'pull back and reveal'?

That's where you describe something and then reveal that the situation is not what people would expect.

Like the joke about the guy that goes to the doctor and the doctor says 'You have to stop masturbating'. The guy says 'Why?', and the doctor says 'Because I am trying to examine you'.

Yes! But as a comedian you don't consciously think about these sorts of rules. If you over think it, it doesn't work. It is like the old idea that analysing a joke is like dissecting a frog – no one laughs and the frog dies. You just go with what works. It is far more about technique and the performance.

Can you talk a little more about technique?

Technique is the way you say things, the words you use, timing, volume, and so on. Again, there are no rules. Often it is scatter gun approach. I just tell stories and then slowly refine them over time. It is a question of doing it again and again. Even changing a word or a pause can make a big difference.

I enjoy talking to Barry Cryer about comedy, and he often mentions the

'comedy K'. 'K' is simply a funny sound, and so if you are going to tell a joke, calling a character 'Kevin' or 'Keith' is funnier than 'Simon'. Similarly, 'hammock' is a funny word.

But again, there are no absolute rules. I could come up with rules and then someone could come along and do the complete opposite and that would be funny too.

How do you come up with your material?

You can't force it. Dara O Briain talks about it being like the section in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, where you fly by falling and being distracted. If you go out looking for things to be funny, you won't see it. You just have to let go and allow your brain go blank. And give it time. Sometimes it just pops into your head.

One day I was just walking along and I thought of the line 'It is difficult to live by mottos. They say "Your enemies' enemies are your friends"'. That is a problem for me because my enemy is his own worst enemy.'

Often the lines come as part of a stream of consciousness either when I am writing my blog or talking on stage. If you stop and try to think about the rules it simply won't be funny.

Other times good material comes out of an onstage slip. In my latest show I have a line where I say 'I had been together with my girlfriend for a while,

"much comedy is about dancing on the edge of the abyss of madness"

and we went back to Cheddar in Somerset to meet my parents for the first time.' One night I added 'To be fair, I had met them before' and that got a big laugh. So I kept it in the set and it always goes down well.

When you think of a joke, can you predict whether an audience will find it funny?

It's tricky. I guess I know when I have hit something really good. After you have been in comedy for years you simply know when something is going to be very funny. But most of the time it is really difficult.

Sometimes I will really like a piece, but it won't get a great response. For example, in one of my stand-up shows I used to come out with a very arrogant line, and then say 'I don't know the meaning of the word hubris.' Then I would follow-up with 'Which is a shame, because straight after this I am taking part in a "Define the meaning of the word 'hubris' competition" – I don't care because I am going to win anyway.' I always thought that was a great bit, but it often didn't get anything. It still doesn't get the laugh it deserves. Maybe the audience don't know the meaning of the word 'hubris'.

What is the role of offence in comedy?

Handled in the right way, I think anything can be funny, it is all about context. A bad comedian will just tell the joke, perhaps to shock people, but for me there it has to be more than that.

In one routine I talked about the parents of Madeleine McCann praying to God to ask where their daughter is, and I talked about what kind of God would know where a girl is, but not tell her parents until they prayed. So there is humour in the ridiculous logic. I had another McCann joke, but I worked on

finding an interesting way of doing it in the show. In the end I asked the audience to vote on whether they wanted to hear the joke, even though it was sick. Almost everyone wanted to hear it. It was interesting – it could have been the most horrible joke ever – and they wanted to hear it. But my point is that the vote changed the context for the joke, and made the situation more interesting.

It's the same with Jerry Sadowitz. I don't mind when he uses certain 'offensive' words because there is more to what he is doing. But there are no absolute boundaries. To some Nazis, machine-gunning Jews in a pit might have been funny.

It's odd though, people will happily laugh at 'offensive' material, and then hear a joke that touches them personally and suddenly get upset. I used to do a joke about wound fucking and then some material about the Stockwell shooting.

Once, someone complained about the jokes about the Stockwell shooting and I thought 'What about the wound fucking material, was that OK then?'

You can't laugh at all of the stuff that offends other people, and then get upset when the comedian does something that you find upsetting.

Do you see overlaps between what you do and the subject matter of psychology? What interests me and slightly terrifies me about comedy is the way that much

of it (for me at least) is about dancing on the edge of the abyss of madness. In accessing the subconscious and trying to deliberately think about everyday things from unusual and unexpected angles there is occasionally an overlap with what would be considered mentally ill behaviour if it wasn't being done on purpose.

In the last year I have been improvising a podcast based on my childhood habit of playing myself at snooker and commentating upon it. It's a slightly crazy thing to be doing for many reasons, mainly because snooker does not work that well as a spectator sport in an audio-only medium. But also I am an adult now and this is an odd way to behave. But it goes further, as largely by accident the two players of the match (both me remember) have taken on quite different personalities. Me1 is a bit of a slimy goody-goody who likes to think he is modest and sporting, but is transparently self-serving and obsequious. Me2 is more of a maverick, prone to fits of temper, who doesn't like to play by the rules, but has some innate decency.

And those characters are both yours?

Yes, they are both aspects of my own personality, but without thinking I can separate them and inhabit them as I play. It's the old idea of the angel and the devil on either shoulder with a bit of a twist. In some ways I see Me1 as the image that one would like to project to the world and Me2 is the man I would secretly like to be if society didn't impose its morality and pressure to conform.

I am doing this for humorous effect and am largely in control of the situation but as the game and the podcast are improvised I find they often say things that I am not expecting. I take on multiple personalities (all me) in the podcast and am aware that there are parallels with schizophrenia, albeit playful and pretend ones. Though I fear that by playing with madness I might tip over the edge, like in the classic Tweedledum episode of the TV series *Colditz*, in which a prisoner fakes mental illness on order to get sent home, but actually succumbs to it over months of pretence.

Most comedy involves inhabiting a false or exaggerated character of some kind and sometimes comedians do fall over the edge of the cliff (or at least seem to be affected in reality by their fantasy persona). I'd be interested in seeing some research into this, as well as having someone check that I am still sane. And yet I fear that tampering with the delicate balance might throw off the funniness. I don't know if I want to be cured.



Comedian Richard Herring is currently touring – see www.richardherring.com/talkingcock2