

Comedy and psychology – a personal perspective

Rob Bailey with the latest in our series for budding writers (see www.bps.org.uk/newvoices for more information)

I'm about to do something that would terrify most people. I'm leaning with my back to the bar, guitar in hand, waiting as a compere warms up an audience in a central London comedy club. The punters have paid, bought themselves a drink, and now want to laugh. Once he's finished, I'll be up next, hoping to entertain the room with my first ever stand-up comedy routine.

Imagine yourself in exactly the same position. Does it make your hands go just a little clammy? In an online research survey we conducted via my workplace recently, it wasn't money, work or other horrors that came out as the number one stressor, but public speaking. Only a few years ago I might have felt exactly the same.

So how did I get here?

I'm a narcissist. Simple.

No, actually, the real answer is that I signed up for an eight-week comedy course with 18 other people, and here I am at the end of week eight, at my graduation showcase. Every Sunday, we've seen little sunlight as our six-hour meetings are held in the basement of a pub, which smells like a teenage boy's boxer shorts (on their third continuous day of service). At the beginning of each session, we push back all of the tables and chairs before attempting to find our comic geniuses. The group includes a lawyer, a couple of people working in finance, a tour-bus driver, a couple of actors, a 69-year-old comic, and me, a psychologist.

Jimbo – the older chap – explains that he's looking for love so has joined mature dating websites; he says it's called carbon dating.

Of all the group, I think I've probably gigged the most. For the last three years, I've performed a comedy mind-reading show at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. It wasn't originally meant to be a comedy show – I thought I would cut a

commanding, mysterious figure onstage, but on my debut show at the Oxford Fringe Festival, the audience laughed at my first joke, then continued to laugh throughout all the routines that were meant to be serious. To say I was surprised was an understatement, but thankfully, they weren't laughing at me. Well sometimes they were, but mostly they were with me.



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So it was the audience who told me that I'm funny, but I haven't always understood why, or how to craft and control the comic moments. Hence why I signed up for the course: to learn. And although I'm proud to say that I've had five humour books published, there was hardly a single joke in any of them, so I still feel like a beginner.

'Turn off your internal editor that makes you say the right thing; find your inner idiot and remember how to play again,' explains Logan, our course tutor, a professional stand-up himself. 'Don't try to be too clever. Don't try too hard to be funny... and knowing all about the theory of humour is unlikely to really help you all that much. Just muck around. That's what people want to see on stage. That's why they pay good money... to see you arse around.' So that's what we've been doing.

An instruction typical of the ones Logan would use to help us loosen up included, 'Wander around talking to others in the room, but make sure that you're the lowest status person here.' Not to be outdone, I found myself conversing with others whilst lying prostrate on the floor.

I'd say that understanding the psychology of humour has helped a little. It was only last year that I stumbled

across the book *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind* from 2011, by Hurley, Dennett and Adams. As I read the introduction, I couldn't have grinned much wider if I'd put a coat hanger in my mouth, because I finally felt that I was reading a true, unifying theory of humour.

Past efforts to explain humour had never really cut it for me. For example, those theorists that simply thought that humour was a way of expressing anger, or of social control, or of proving intellect, or plays a part in sexual attraction (of women to men) seemed to have only explained some, incomplete, aspects of motivation, not the mechanics of humour.

So at this point, here's where you might expect to find the obligatory '...and Freud said...' section. But honestly who cares about his inaccurate, half-baked, confused misconceptions about the human psyche? I think most of us

have now figured out that the mind and body don't act like a Victorian boiler system. Do I really feel the need to trot out the tired nonsense typical of a BBC online magazine article written by an aspiring media studies student who wouldn't spot a genuine theory if the Large Hadron Collider shot it up their bottom? I don't think so.

Any Freudians out there... feel free to write me a letter, to defend your outdated, erroneous waffle-waffle, but please don't strain your eyes as you scratch away with your quill in the candlelight. When you look up clearly from your missive,

you'll find that the rest of us have moved on. We've got genuine theory and evidence-based practices, so stick that in your cigars and suck on them.

Oh, and don't take what follows to be ironic confirmatory evidence for your silly beliefs. I'm ahead of you.

Just for you, here's one of the Freud jokes from my show...

'Discussing Freud reminds me of the time that I mixed up my haemorrhoid cream with my superglue and got anally fixated.'

Really, before I drop it, I ought to explain that one of Freud's assumptions was that humour is letting off repressed anger... well... you know what! That makes me want to travel back in time and teach him a lesson... I'd dance round his study, dressed as my mother, before slapping him around the ears with a giant cigar, whilst shouting 'Thanatos' at him. Grrr.

So back to *Inside Jokes*... The crux of their thesis is that any self-directed intelligent system will need to correct its own bugs. So think of it in terms of the human mind running software to understand the world around it. As it makes sense of things, there's a risk that the occasional error will be made (a bug), which will have to be debugged before long. Now if that process was tedious or onerous, we'd be less inclined to do it.

However, just like the joyous squelchy moments that consenting adults enjoy between themselves, evolution has conspired to make the decoding fun. Imagine if the former wasn't fun – I guess most of us might just find it a little ikky and the human race would cease to exist.

To make this all more concrete, here's an example, from the book:

Two fish are in a tank.

One says to the other, "Do you know how to drive this thing?"

The joke works on the principle that we have started to imagine one thing, and, just in time, the punch-line tells us that our first assumption was wrong. For correctly figuring out the contradiction we are rewarded with a pleasurable feeling. The joke is an efficient way of stimulating this natural reaction. Comics have become experts in tickling this mental funny-bone in order to make us laugh.

Since reading this theory, I've begun to wonder, too, whether or not the same psychological mechanism might underlie enjoyment of magic. After all, only the

most naïve audience member would think that doves really have appeared from nowhere, or that a spectator's watch was genuinely smashed into pieces and then magically restored. There seems to be pleasure in knowing that you've been fooled and that you may or may not figure out how. Perhaps willingly being tricked shares some commonality with experiencing contradictions: we simultaneously enjoy a fantasy which looks real and yet also know it to be untrue.

But the psychology of magic is a whole separate topic – there are a huge number of psychological reasons why magic might appeal, including escapist fantasy: people imagine what they would be able to do if they too shared the powers demonstrated by the magician. Which does beg the question... why if I had the power to morph and transpose physical matter at will, would I turn handkerchiefs into billiard balls?

So, returning to comedy, was Logan right when he said that even knowing the theory of humour wouldn't help us all that much as a stand up? I think he was. So much of what made our group laugh over our eight weeks of life-affirming mucking around would be very hard to

predict or script. During one improv exercise, four of us were told to perform an improvised opera. Whilst Susan and Caroline sang earnestly on either side of the stage, I'd spontaneously brought Henry to the floor,

where we wrestled each other like out-of-control brawlers in a pub fight. The rest of the group, sat in the audience, were in uncontrollable fits of laughter. As this moment was lost to the ether, and as a performer, I couldn't be an observer, I'll never appreciate just why it seemed so funny. But the point is, I would never have written this into a script. It was a joyous, found moment.

The other thing that I would never have predicted is just how happy I've felt during these few weeks. I might have expected some form of winter blues by now, but I've had none of it. It's difficult to explain just how much fun it's been to be amongst a group of people who will tolerate you saying or doing whatever comes into your head. We've all said and done things that would normally appear revolting or shocking, then looked up hesitantly to the group to find not derision or rejection, but howls of laughter. I would repeat some of what we said, but for the fact that I spent years training to become a Chartered then Registered Psychologist and don't want some humourless reader

taking umbrage and attempting to strip me of that. You know who you are, and frankly, I think your sort are so grumpy that even the bacteria in your yoghurt are unfriendly.

The courage to speak more freely has come back into my everyday life too. I've always been a little irreverent, but over the years I'd learnt to behave well. In doing so, I'd become more... boring. Now, I feel more likely to say what's on my mind and to be more playful again, even in a work setting. Perhaps because, through maturity, I'm more aware of where the line is, I've got the choice to tippy-toe around it, and again, instead of disapproval, I've tended to hear laughter.

So what have I learnt recently? Here's a brief list...

- | Even if people disagree with you, specific clear statements of your own opinions tend to be valued, on or off stage.
- | Remember to treat nerves like excitement; they feel so very similar, but one will make you very sick, the other is a thrill that can help you achieve peak performance.
- | Something about the whole experience of the stand-up course was life-affirming and liberating.
- | It is possible to have a unifying theory of humour.
- | Humour is more than a funny script; the mannerisms of a comic carry the laughter just as much as the wordplay. I almost wish I wasn't having to type this but instead I could be with you reading this to you in person, thereby introducing all the rhythm and inflections I hold in my mind. But there's a risk associated with that – humour is seductive, and before long, at the very least you'd want to cuddle me, and we can both think of several reasons why that would be wrong.

But, finally, how did my comedy routine go?

Well, the audience laughed at all of my jokes. Ones I hadn't expected to get big laughs got the biggest laughs. If I want even bigger laughs, I'll have to tighten up the script, get back out on stage and practise. I feel that I've only just begun.



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