

# SERIOUS ABOUT COMEDY



the  
Rep



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM



UK Research  
and Innovation

**A theatre director and a professor walked into a wine bar and decided to be**

***Serious about Comedy.***

Sean Foley, multi-award-winning Artistic Director of Birmingham Repertory Theatre, and Professor Ewan Fernie, award-winning and multiply published author, had a whole lot of questions. 100 people came to The Rep on April 1st, 2022, to think and talk and laugh and answer the questions and ask some more.

Why is comedy so under-valued when those who work in it take it so ferociously seriously? Why do artistic careers gain more status from work

in "serious" drama? Why have we evolved to find humour funny if it isn't seriously important to being human? Can Birmingham raise its profile by raising its comedy profile? Can The Rep be a National Theatre of Comedy and can the University of Birmingham work with it to understand and promote Comedy?

Speakers and audiences included those who write comedy and those who write about it, those who perform it and those who research its impact on our lives. A day of discussions and presentations ended with an evening of stand-up comedy demonstrating that the rigour of academic research is matched toe to toe by the craft and discipline of standing in front of an audience and making them laugh.



*Make 'em Laugh*, song written by Arthur Freed and Nacio Herb Brown for MGM film *Singin' in the Rain*, 1952.

***Now you could study Shakespeare and be quite elite  
And you can charm the critics and have nothin' to eat  
Just slip on a banana peel  
The world's at your feet  
Make 'em laugh Make 'em laugh  
Make 'em laugh***

## Shakespeare

**How influential is Shakespeare on the comedy theatre of today?**

Shakespeare's plays are generally categorized as tragedies, comedies and histories, but in practice they frequently mix up the most tragic and serious of dramatic moments – those concerning death, war and grief - with bawdy double entendres and physical tomfoolery.

In Shakespeare's time the Globe Theatre might mix serious drama with a demonstration of competitive eating and a spot of Morris Dancing.



## The tragedies are hilarious.

The Shakespeare Collection at the Library of Birmingham contains examples of Victorian playbills advertising *Othello* on the same bill as a comic opera and a selection of songs. *Hamlet* looked at as a comedy can be as enlightening and moving as any other version: the hero's 'antic disposition' makes him a comedian. The most violent of Shakespeare's plots – *Titus Andronicus* and *Richard III* - are often the most (wittingly?) hilarious. Shakespeare amplifies humour at the most tragic of moments. The Gravedigger at Ophelia's grave, or the Clown bringing the asp to Cleopatra as she prepares to take her own life, make risqué jokes.

Shakespeare's plays-within-plays constantly play with the way comedy and tragedy get mixed and muddled up in experience.



## Are the comedies lost to us?

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* there's a man on stage called Bottom – and that's the joke. Watch it with kids and you remember how joyful it is.

In any academic edition there will be a footnote saying he is a Weaver, and Bottom is the slang term for a piece of weaving equipment. Well, yes, but that's probably not the main thing at issue.

The TV comedy *Upstart Crow* exposes that assumption that Shakespeare is always "high art" and reveals him as a "baldy bloke from the Midlands". Encapsulating much of the rationale behind the day's symposium – aspiring too high from the Midlands must be impossible and wrong! Or rather: the high aspiration must be positively based on and not exclude the lower or lowlier origin....



## Comedy on the NHS

Is comedy important to our health?

Angie Belcher runs comedy workshops with people who have conditions such as PTSD, postnatal depression, anxiety and grief, and those who might be at risk of suicide.



*"We're all comedians. And when we go home from work, we think about the funny things that have happened. And we think I can't wait to get home and tell my partner, my friend, and we inflate our parts, we make the thing that happened funnier. If we bring out the inner comedian, in our real lives, we bring a sense of joy and playfulness to our situations. This is how and why it is important to mental health."*

*Tony Allen, the godfather of alternative comedy said that standup comedy is the act of telling the truth for entertainment's sake. And I think when we tell the truth, we get more support for what's going on in our own heads. And it has a ripple effect across our communities to make us all mentally more resilient.*

*Comedy is a powerful art form. Comedy is a political act"*





## Funny Girls

Where is the academic research examining theories about men being funnier than women?

Some seek explanations based on psychological theory, evolutionary theory, genetics, all asserting the scientific basis for men being funnier than women. But there are many studies exploring the social factors: the social stereotype that men are funnier than women perhaps prevents women from developing their capacity for humour and makes them less likely to be regarded as funny.

In 2020 a review involved 5000 participants, 70% of whom were women, evaluating sex

differences in humour-production-ability, defined as the ability to produce funny remarks, create funny ideas and make others laugh. The study's conclusion was that men's humour was rated as much funnier.

Women have more often been the butt of humour while notable comedienne have exploited self-deprecation as their comic stance. Some are exploring anger and aggression. The canvases for female humour are widening and diversifying. Gender diversification in the comedy industry is increasing not only in numbers but in types of laughter-making – what's going on?



## Cancel Culture

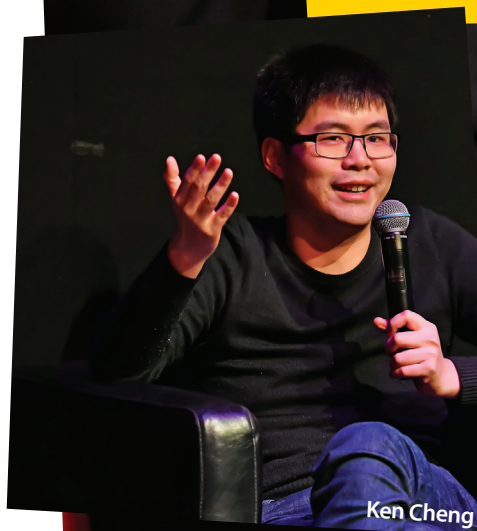
What is the limit of the license of comedy?

Cancel Culture is a major theme for comedy and comedians. A reaction against changing attitudes? A weapon against offence? Is it really a culture? Or is it a myth?

*"It's the democratisation of outrage. And it's people who have normally have been used to being the only people heard ..... shocked!"*

*"I think people only ever bring up freedom when they're just about to be a prick."*

*"People should be free to say whatever they want but they're not free of the consequences ... they have to face the fact that others can say quite loudly that they don't like it, and we're going to stop listening to you, if you say those sorts of things anymore."*



## Gender, Class and Satire

Are comedy's gatekeepers still a male and white Oxbridge network? Has TV become atomized – with little comedy tribes watching their own stuff?

Did the alternative scene in the 70s change that? After the red bricks gained a foothold in the 1980s a few leading comedians of our time have broken through without a degree at all. Of course, comedy from Plautus to *Would I Lie to You* has thrived on the inherently comic nature of class identity, but the power to commission is still far from democratised.

The gradual inclusion of women on panel shows leads us to the all-male panel now being known as a "manel". But 12 years ago an Asian muslim working class woman from Birmingham was alone in the business and often remains so.

*"Terence, writer of Roman comedy and actually an African, says, I am human. Nothing human is alien to me. Does that include prejudices, hateful impulses? Can those be included and then disarmed or judged negatively by the humanism of comedy?"*

*"White supremacist capitalist patriarchy is trying to survive. It's like, how can we discredit these really valid attacks on this structure? Okay, we'll just call it "cancel culture". We won't call it the truth. We won't call it progressiveness. We won't call it fairness. We won't call it reparations."*

*"We're talking as if it's a culture. It isn't, it's an entirely elite journalistic discourse. Only journalists and comedians really care about it."*



Most television producers literally only know one female comedy writer and it is the same one.

Some breakthroughs are happening...

*Lady Parts* are bringing these different worlds that exist in London to the screen, showing a wider range of comedy.

*"It's how you find your people, if somebody says, they like a certain comedy that you don't like, you go, we're not going to get on because it's such a shared thing."*



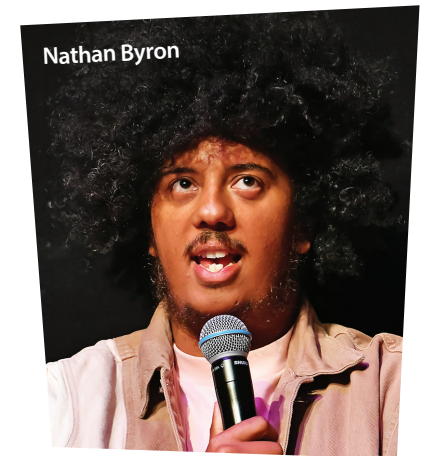
## Death Sex and Britishness

**What is a British sense of humour and how has it changed as British culture opens up to the diversity of our culture and history?**

Could the plays of Joe Orton – a playwright whose works were all about death sex and Britishness – be revived today? They were highly controversial in their time but today might a production in fact be "cancelled"?

*"Could The Rep endure the impact of putting on Orton's 1967 play, What the Butler Saw, or would Orton's private life, his advocacy for sex and underage boys and his travels to Tangier put him beyond the pale for any theatre today?"*

Terry Johnson's 1993 play *Hysteria* depicts the difficulty of comedy translating beyond its time and place. His central character, Freud, finds the 1926 play *Rookery Nook* (a quintessentially English farce) incomprehensible. Some comedy is so embedded in its community that it cannot travel or translate. The fictional comedy duo – **Aynuk and Ayli** – are so rooted in the Black Country, through dialect and geography – they cannot even travel across the border into Birmingham and that is their point really.



## The Happy Brain

**What's going on in the brain when we experience humour?**

*"In the most basic sense, when you laugh, you inhale more oxygen, so your blood gets more oxygenated, and you become a little bit better functioning."*

*"Fundamentally we're recognizing and resolving incongruity. One thing guaranteed to trigger a stress response in the human brain is uncertainty. When you recognise it's harmless and resolve incongruity it brings a sense of relief, and that relief is what causes laughter. It's an impressive cognitive feat and is a crucial aspect of human brain power."*



Humour is a vital social lubricant potentially combating loneliness and even currently being looked at in relation to dementia.



Dean Burnett

## Funny Bones

**Is Comedy innate? Can you develop funny bones or are you born with them? What can theory learn from practice?**

It's a mixture of craft and talent. You watch it and learn from it. Craft is incredibly important and incredibly important to learn.

It's a lot of hard work.

There are some people who have funny bones – innate talent – but professionally you need to learn the craft.

*"You have to be quite dexterous; you need precision, but you also need to be able to embrace the silly and not see it as inferior."*

*"A director can nurture that trust in the text and encourage that permission for silliness."*

*"You have to learn so much when doing comedy - to be sharp on your cues, to listen to an audience. If your laugh undermines something else going on or the storyline – that can ruin the rest of the show."*

*"Funny Bones on their own are not enough, nurture and opportunity is crucial."*



## Is Birmingham Funny?

### Is Comedy entwined with its context?

Liverpool humour is renowned – it specialises in put-downs and surrealism. Geordies self-identify as "good at being daft". Brummie and Black Country humour revels in self-deprecation – with the Black Country proudly outdoing Birmingham on that score. The favourite football chant of West Bromwich Albion supporters being "We'm crap but we'm beating yow".

The most important identity that the City is embracing is its position as the most culturally diverse and youngest city in Europe. Maybe carving its role as a Capital of Comedy can offer an identity beyond Birmingham being a joke?

Reviewing the feedback from this first Serious About Comedy event, the University of Birmingham and The Rep are planning a full programme of further events and projects.

### Their joint aims are:

- To highlight Birmingham as a comedy research destination and The Rep as a National Theatre for Comedy.
- To celebrate and expand Birmingham's special role in nurturing comedy practice and practitioners.
- To expand opportunities for learning about the importance of comedy across numerous themes particularly relevant today – understanding its relationship to mental health, civic engagement and inter-cultural understanding.
- The first events will surround the forthcoming production of *Tartuffe*, in the 400th anniversary year of Moliere's birth. A re-imagined *Tartuffe* set in Birmingham's Sparkhill becomes a wickedly funny Brummie comedy about faith, family and #fakingit. [www.birmingham-rep.co.uk/whats-on/tartuffe/](http://www.birmingham-rep.co.uk/whats-on/tartuffe/)
- A rehearsed reading of a new play about Moliere and Racine – kings of French comedy and tragedy.
- And the first live version of Spitting Image all at The Rep. [www.birmingham-rep.co.uk/whats-on/spitting-image-live/](http://www.birmingham-rep.co.uk/whats-on/spitting-image-live/)
- Look out for a refreshed new version of Shakespeare, emerging from both Serious About Comedy and The Rep's collaboration with the University on the 'Everything to Everybody' Project – <https://everythingtoeverybody.bham.ac.uk/>

Watch this hashtag **#seriousaboutcomedy** to find out more.



**Conference Compere:**

Shazia Mirza

**Conference Chairs:**

Sean Foley, Professor Ewan Fernie

**Speakers:**

Dean Burnett, Nathan Byron,  
Ken Cheng, Professor Michael Dobson,  
Sophie Duker, Jo Enright,  
Tim FitzHigham, Beth Granville,  
Professor Charlotte Hempel, Jon Holmes,  
Athena Kugblenu, Dr Annie Mahtani,  
Shazia Mirza, Helen Monks,  
Felicity Montagu, Olivia Nixon,  
Professor Graham Saunders, Jon Simmit,  
Kirsty Patrick Ward, Dr Rose Whyman

**Performers:**

Steve Day, Jay Droch,  
Jo Enright, Annette Fagon,  
Gráinne Maguire, Shazia Mirza,  
Mrs Barbara Nice, Josh Pugh

**Producers:**

Robin Rayner and James Quaife  
for New Frame Productions

**Comedy Consultant:**

Beth Granville

**Photographers:**

Jas Sansi and Simon Hadley

**Rapporteur:**

Kate Organ

**Film Documentation:**

Andrew Smith

**Produced by:**

Birmingham Repertory Theatre  
and University of Birmingham  
with thanks to Research England.

**Mrs. Barbara Nice**