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OVERVIEW OF AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO STAND-UP COMEDY

This paper dwells on the interdisciplinarity of stand-up comedy by discussing several authors who have made a great contribution to its understanding as a phenomenon. Though the main vehicle of delivery of the humorous in stand-up comedy is speech, historically and culturally, it involves a lot more. From the era a joke is spawned and told through the pauses between utterances to the topic the joke broaches, everything plays part in evoking an audience's laughter. In order to more successfully grapple stand-up comedy, a wider approach that involves fields such as sociolinguistics, theatre studies, anthropological linguistics must be considered.

Keywords: humour; stand-up comedy; linguistic aspect of stand-up comedy; audience response to stand-up comedy.

This article looks into four dissertations which discuss stand-up comedy and points out their significance and contribution to the field of humour research. Humour theory is primarily an interdisciplinary field and the authors consider stand-up comedy through their respective disciplines. Each of them introduces their own knowledge and experience which produce tools to be used in further research. Humour theory is a field explored since Plato and Aristotle laid the foundations of the Superiority theory of humour, suggesting that we laugh at the weakness in others, their inferiority to us in some way or laughing at former states of our own selves. Later, the idea of superiority and aggression as the root of what is humorous was taken up by Thomas Hobbes stating in Human Nature, "we triumph when we laugh" (Hobbes 1650/1969, cited in Rutter: 10). This, too, is not done by scholars specializing in humour theory, but rather by researchers who have studied other mechanisms of thought and have transferred their knowledge and expertise to the field of humour, shedding some light on its mystery. Some significant insight on the subject has been given by stand-up comedians who, having the experience, can more easily tell what goes on in the kitchen. One of the most prominent comedians who have made a great contribution to the understanding of stand-up comedy and the principles that govern its familiar, peculiar format is Oliver John Double, senior Lecturer and Head of Drama in Drama and Theatre Studies at the University of Kent. He has courses teaching students how to become stand-up comedians. He delves into the

history of British stand-up comedy in order to explain its evolution into what it has become today. His dissertation titled "An Approach to Traditions of British Stand-Up Comedy" provides a very detailed and insightful history of the development of stand-up comedy in Britain.

What Is Stand-up Comedy?

Stand-up comedy has been defined in numerous ways. Nathan Andrew Wilson, for example, adopts Lawrence Mintz's definition of stand-up comedy that it is "an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience, unsupported by very much in the way of costume, prop, setting, or dramatic vehicle" (Mintz 1985: 71). This is quite a restricting definition and still leaves out some known comedians. What if they were not standing? What if the performer isn't alone on stage? What if they use their microphone stand as a prop? And what about costumes, since most comedians do employ a persona, and oftentimes the stage persona incorporates a particular style of dress? On the other hand, John Oliver Double improves Mintz's definition to something much more useful. In the beginning of his dissertation, he offers a very comprehensive definition of stand-up comedy saying that "a stand-up comedy act usually involves a solo performer speaking directly to an audience, with the intention of provoking laughter, within the context of formalized entertainment, but it is an entity in itself, and is not contained within a larger narrative structure" (Double 1991: 4). Thus, he narrows down the definition to a most unambiguous understanding of the term and Music Hall/Variety performances are excluded since they often employ stage props, instruments or stage characters. In this way, the definition of stand-up comedy is limited to a very specific phenomenon, a type of performance which, at first glance, might seem like a comedic monologue but is in fact a dialogue.

Double discerns three major traditions of British stand-up comedy – the Music Hall/Variety, the Working Men's Club and the Alternative Comedy traditions. Out of them, in my opinion, the tradition of Alternative Comedy seems to have been the most influential to the current concept of stand-up comedy in Britain, since it is closest to what we recognize as stand-up comedy today. Admittedly, stand-up comedy's roots in Music Hall and Variety may not have yet died out, some comedians remain that gather a large audience with acts resembling those in Variety, e.g. Bill Bailey in Britain or Bo Burnham in the USA.

Double outlines a theoretical frame which he uses throughout his dissertation in order to distinguish between the different social influence the different traditions may have had on their audiences. In his description of the different traditions, Double also gives significant insight into how public opinion as well as political influence has changed the tone of the acts performed by comedians from abusive and sexist, maintaining a distinct note of racism, to a milder and considerate version where such offensive material is cut or significantly reduced.

In his dissertation, Double pays closer attention to the cultural aspects of stand-up comedy and uses several criteria to establish the offensiveness and subversiveness of the comedian's material. He also points out that Incongruity Theory (Double 1991: 19) is better suited to analyze the social effects of humour since it takes into consideration the differences between mindsets of people raised in different communities. "The Incongruity Theory implies an intrinsic link between humour and culture, because different cultures will have different ideas of what is incongruous. This is because for something to be incongruous, it must be unexpected and inhabitual, and this implies a deviation from systems of expectation and habit, which will differ from culture to culture" (Double 1991: 33). Since it is culturally bound, it would seem to follow that humour can heavily influence social trends and opinions; however, it is rather the opposite. Instead of being highly subversive, humour is rather conservative (Double 1991: 37). It reinforces opinions and beliefs that are popular at a certain time and sustains current morals, as they gradually change, and so does the concept of what is funny and what is not. In order to support the claim that humour is conservative rather than subversive, Double lists ways humour's subversiveness can be reduced. These are framing, repetition, aggressive humour and observational humour and perspective. Viewed this way, humour is not subversive, if it is considered non-serious discourse – the unexpected from a joke is removed, either by greater familiarity to the joke itself or simply the structure; hostile jokes are seen as exaggerations or blatant deviations from the norm; and observing some aspect of the world which is seen as normal to a minority group through the perspective of a majority group.

Double applies these theoretical frames to the different traditions of stand-up comedy in Britain starting with Music Hall/Variety. In this tradition, comedians were expected to sing humorous songs on stage often containing some type of comedic patter between verses. Important to note here is the development of a stage persona and the decline of the stage character. Discarding an already overused image in favour of creating a new one which the audience would associate with a particular act is a major move forward. This enabled the performers to come up with material better suited to themselves personally. It also made them more recognizable in a crowd of many other performers. Even though discarding stage characters in the evolution from Music Hall to stand-up comedy, comedians adopt stage personas, personalized stage characters with which they identify in order to provide a way to be remembered easily. This allowed a uniqueness to the act and the comedian themselves, as well as giving the audience a warning as to what they might expect to see in a certain show. The audience in Music Halls preferred familiar jokes, familiar stage personae, familiar topics. "Without that monotony there would not be the same air of general enjoyment, the same constant guffaws. That monotony is the secret of the success of the Music Halls. It is not enough for the public to know that everything is meant to be funny, that laughter is craved for every point in every 'turn.' A new kind

of humour, however obvious and violent, might take the public unawares, and be received in silence. The public prefers always that the old well-tested and well-seasoned jokes be cracked for it. Or rather, not the same old jokes, but jokes on the sane old subjects" (Beerbohm 1970: 214).

The audience recognizes familiar conventions and sticks with them to laugh at the jokes presented. The stage persona is an important addition to the stand-up comedy act because, from my personal experience and observation of stand-up comedy in various types of establishments in the USA in the 1970s and 1980s, this holds true – comedians would use the same sets of jokes over and over at different establishments for years on end, probably because of similar reasons, lack of attention and the audience not really being there for the comedian per se but rather a whole programme of entertainment planned for the night. They would drink and talk with friends rather than closely follow a continuous monologue. An example would be Rodney Dangerfield, who despite gaining great fame, partly from his career as an actor and partly because of his career as a stand-up comedian, still took 10-15-minute slots in Variety shows and recited more or less the same material.

Another important feature for comedy acts in Music Hall/Variety, as well as Working Men's Club and Alternative Comedy, was that performers more or less used the same material week in and week out. "Club agent Mike Tunningley claims, 'If you see one comedian one week, and you saw him six months later, you'd see exactly the same comic say exactly the same gags;' and Mansfield club comic Wee Georgie Wheezer admits that his act has been fixed for years" (Double 1991: 185).

A further point that emphasizes the lessening of humour's subversiveness would be that as stand-up comedy evolved from various traditions, so did the moral fibre of the audience. No longer were there racial slurs, abusive words and sexism allowed at venues. This type of censorship was imposed upon them not solely by the state but also by audiences and venue owners. An act that could offend the audience would drive them away and cost the venue owner money. Comedians belonging to the Alternative Comedy tradition, however, dared experiment with their audience, they used political humour and rather than reinforce, they challenged dominant ideas. Furthermore, unlike performers belonging to the other traditions, Alternative comedians tended to write their own material. "Whereas previous generations of stand-up comics tended to rely on joke books, recycled old jokes, or standard packs of jokes written by scriptwriters, Alternative comedians write their own material. In addition to this, the predictable stereotypes which are widely used in club comedy have been satirized by Alternative comics" (Double 1991: 204).

Linguistic Aspects of Stand-up Comedy

In her dissertation "Linguistic Aspects of Verbal Humor in Stand-up Comedy" Jeannine Schwarz looks into stand-up comedy from a linguistic point of view. She uses Attardo's description (Attardo 2001: 62) of stand-up comedy as "a highly

artificial, scripted genre." It represents a genre in which a single comedian comes on stage with a microphone and starts a performance in front of an audience. The comedian's performance principally consists of a succession of short joking stories and one-liners that are usually presented in a monologue without interruptions by the audience" (Schwarz 2010: 81). She discusses the stand-up act from a linguistic point of view, considering the way comedians deliver their jokes on stage and the techniques they use. She lists linguistic devices which stand-up comedians employ in order to make their jokes funnier or, rather, to make jokes. Hyperbole (Schwarz 2010: 133) is used to overstate common everyday events thus making them humorous. Stand-up comedians usually take their material from their own lives and apply a different perspective to make them seem incongruous and funny. "By using hyperbole, the stand-up comedians render the situation funnier because they claim more than they have evidence for and can objectively justify" (Schwarz 2010: 133). She also notes repetition as a commonly used technique which allows the comedian to set up a sort of structure or even a build-up to their performance. "Repetition is a means to dramatize situations and to make people laugh, which is the reason why it is practiced in many forms of jokes. Humor mainly derives from 'the tension created by some kind of a series being established'" (Berger 1993: 46). "Repetition can help to strengthen the rhythmic pattern of a joke telling session" (Schwarz 2010: 138). Repetition may create a formulaic appearance of the act. Since rhythm and timing are very important in the stand-up comedy act, enhancing them further could only be in the performer's best interest. Consider in this context "The Rule of Threes" common in many jokes – whether they refer to people of three nationalities, three religion groups, three age groups or others. Though comedians may rather apply a punchline three times to three different set-ups rather than talk about a priest, a rabbi and a minister. This sort of repetition creates structure and rhythm in the performance and allows the comedian to build up their jokes later in the act for even more appreciation from the audience. Timing, as part of interaction with the audience, gives them time to assess and appreciate a joke as well as time to react to it, whether positively or negatively. Neglecting a part of the performance such as this could potentially spoil the entire act. Not letting the audience express themselves and robbing them of their input to the show impairs the comedian's image.

The formulaic structure of jokes used in the act helps create better rapport between the person on stage and the audience in the seats. Formulae and catch phrases usually involve vocatives which "not only have the function of signaling the audience that the author is about to present a new joke but also to address them directly. Most of the vocatives are spoken with a distinctive intonation as a strategy of getting the audience's full attention before starting with the actual joke content" (Schwarz 2010: 78). In this way, the bond between performer and audience is strengthened. The comedian invokes the audience's attention and presents them something with which they may be familiar. Not only does this further establish a sort of intimacy

and friendliness but it also gives the audience a chance to have a short break from the previous joke in order to move on to the next one.

Another important linguistic technique employed by stand-up comedians is the use of puns. "Eastman (1922: 68) defines a pun as 'a verbal absurdity,' whereas Koestler (1969: 64/65) provides a more detailed definition when he states that a pun is 'the bisociation of a single phonetic form with two meanings – two strings of thought tied together by an acoustic knot'" (Schwarz 2010: 126). Puns and other plays make use of double meanings and homophonic words and phrases to create an incongruity in the listener, thus having a comic effect. Certainly, phrases need not necessarily sound exactly the same but they may bear slight changes in order to fit the set-up.

Structure of a Stand-up Comedy Routine: Social Aspect

Nathan Andrew Wilson, in his doctoral thesis titled "Was That Supposed to Be Funny? A Rhetorical Analysis of Politics, Problems and Contradictions in Contemporary Stand-up Comedy," pays attention to audiences as well as to how a stand-up comedian can influence their opinion on current issues. Wilson notes that comedians do have the power to speak for the people. "While there are some comics who push for absolute humor, always going for the laugh, many comics don't just tell jokes; they sometimes inform, instruct and/or preach. They present solutions to everyday problems. Sometimes these lectures and sermons are the set up for a joke, but sometimes not. Sometimes their solutions are unusable, but not always" (Wilson 2008: 26).

Wilson points out that stand-up comedians, along with their audiences, are a power for change, that not only does the audience have the power to modify the performer's act but also what is socially acceptable and what is not, as the scholar gives proper examples through the performances of Bill Maher, Lewis Black, Margaret Cho, Sarah Silverman and Stephen Colbert. The backlash against Sarah Silverman's racial slur shows that comedians are important social figures whose position on certain issues matters to society. It could be argued, however, that any famous person would be under strict scrutiny by the public eye if they happen to do something considered inappropriate by societal expectation. What differentiates them from other public figures, however, is the fact that their expression is widely considered non-serious or humorous. Thus, even when mentioning offensive words or perpetuating negative stereotypes, these acts should be downplayed. Not unlike the immunity granted to court jesters. On the contrary, Sarah Silverman's "chink" mishap in 2001 put her in focus of the public eye and she was ostracized for it. This shows that, though expected to be non-serious and rather unimportant people, stand-up comedians can influence social views and concepts.

It should also be noted that Wilson turns his attention to the stage persona of the comedian. This is not a widely spread concept, i.e., the layman is usually not familiar with the idea that the person on stage is different from the one on the street.

"We should not confuse the comic's onstage persona with his or her offstage person. The former is a narrator, "an instrument, a construction or a device wielded by the author" (Abbott 2002: 63), a vehicle for the comedy; the latter, for all intents and purposes, is the author implied via the text, or in any case inferred by the audience" (Wilson 2008: 40).

Differentiation between onstage and offstage persona can sometimes be difficult. It is important to know, however, that there could be quite a significant misalignment between the two. A rather suitable example would be Stephen Colbert's stage persona. "Colbert's [stage persona is] of a confirmed republican inspired by the conservative political commentator Bill O'Reilly and his show makes a parody of *The O'Reilly* Factor, a news program on the Fox News Channel. In reality Colbert implicitly criticizes republicans and the humour resides in the gap between the stated and the implied" (Genova 2015: 198).

In turn, audiences also play an important role in stand-up comedy. They are the ones who decide whether something is funny or whether it isn't, whether something is offensive or merely playful. It is in the audience's power to criticize a performance and ruin the image of the comedian, it is up to them to decide whether a material is worth to be performed again. Once the person appears on stage they are at the mercy of the audience, further noted in Jason Rutter's thesis. "Audiences play an equally active role in judging, in determining what, for them, the humor means. Similar to the comics, the audience may determine that the humor operates in one (or more) of the conventional modes, or they may take it up in new and potentially activist ways" (Wilson 2008: 53). Hence, the audience may decide to discard the non-serious mode of communication that is usually adopted when comedy is performed and take up a serious one if they consider the material to be too sensitive. Apart from criticizing the performance post factum, members of the audience are free to interfere with the ongoing show and heckle the performer while they are on stage. To the comedian this is the more dangerous option since the heckler might be the only one who perceives the act to be inappropriate at first: however, once such a disagreement is brought to light more and more members might agree with this, thus disrupting the entire performance. "As opposed to critics like Aoki and Drudge, the heckler threatens the comic's ability to be perceived as humorous by the immediate audience – which serves as a microcosm for the rest of society. Hecklers don't just dissent; they interject, interrupt, attempt to steal the limelight, rob the thunder, and regardless of their intent, destroy the jokework – the careful buildup of the joke" (Wilson 2008: 68).

Certainly, such interference does not necessarily entail negative feedback. Hecklers might sometimes only wish to be somehow part of the show and interrupt the performer, seeking attention or creating a playful atmosphere (Borns 1987). The audience is a powerful force which, by agreeing with what the person on stage says, prolong their career as well as promote the message they convey.

Stand-up Comedy as Interaction

Moving on to Jason Rutter whose doctoral thesis "Stand-up as Interaction: Performance and Audience in Comedy Venues" pays closer attention to the audience. Rutter distinguishes the audience as a member of a dialogue rather than a viewer of a monologue performed on stage. In his thesis, not only does he distinguish a structure upon which stand-up performances are based, but also promotes the role of the audience. It is the comedian's duty to engage the audience and provoke their laughter and positive responses to their humour. The comedian must also give the audience a chance to respond, "although simplified in form, stand-up still involves the taking of turns between performer and audience to build up the flow of the performance and are organised to a large extent following the same rules laid out by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) for the organisation of conversation" (Rutter 1997: 92). Rutter closely follows the structure of the stand-up act determining its building blocks, thus bringing to light the greater importance of the role of the audience in a stand-up act, "the laughter of audiences watching stand-up comedy is arranged into recognisable patterns and that these show that meaningful interaction and negotiation takes place between audience and performer and among members of an audience" (Rutter 1997: 103). He draws parallels between stand-up routine and conversational structure to prove their significant similarity. This resemblance is crucial in assessing the influence a comedian could have on social opinions. If the proper structure of the act is not followed, i.e., proper turn-taking as with conversational structure, and the audience do not receive their turn to either approve, disapprove or argue what the person on stage is saying, their message might not be accurately delivered. Failure such as this may cause the audience to be offended, miss some of the material and the whole act might lose some of its funniness because members of the audience could fail to hear or understand jokes. Thus, any implicit or explicit messages the performer wishes to express might be lost in the noise or be overlooked because viewers have lost interest. Rutter stresses the importance of considering the audience as a crucial member of a conversation-like act, "a new system must both recognise and have a set of tools for understanding the interactive nature of live stand-up. That is it has to be able to account for behaviour in comedy audiences which effects the delivery of the comedian rather than assuming that the effects run solely from performer to audience" (Rutter 1997: 90).

Rutter describes a structure that needs to be followed in the opening and closing of a routine in order for the audience to properly greet or send off the person coming on stage, as well as the comedian's appreciation of the audience itself. The steps through which a performer going on stage must go through are Compere's introduction, audience applause, greeting of audience by the comedian, comment on the setting, request for action, response to request by audience and first canned joke (Rutter 1997: 145–146). Indeed, some of these are omissible: however, in order for a show to begin smoothly, some sort of introduction must be made, the audience

need to welcome the comedian and the first canned joke has to be delivered. Failure to follow one of these steps could lead to a bad opening which could influence the audience accepting the entire performance negatively. The closing of the routine, however, is mostly done to show appreciation of the audience by the performer. Rutter describes the structure of closings as follows: pre-closing, audience laughter, comment on audience, re-introduction, appreciation, exclamatory closing, audience applause and Compere's outro (Rutter 1997: 250–251). Not all steps are compulsory for the proper ending of a routine: however, the performer needs to inform the audience the show is about to end and not just walk off stage abruptly. As noted by Levinson, in order to end a conversation "a closing down of some topic, typically a **closing implicative**" (Levinson 1983: 317, emphasis in original) must first occur. Only after all participants are aware and agree the conversation is about to end can it truly end. Hence, the turns needed to be followed here are: pre-closing, audience laughter, comment on audience, appreciation and exclamatory closing; audience applause before, during or after the performer leaves the stage is not compulsory but rather is a comment on the entire performance. Thus, by noting the importance of the audience and how a stand-up act in structure is close to a conversation, Rutter further emphasizes the role of stand-up comedy in modern society.

In different cultural contexts, stand-up comedy has developed differently. In Britain, it emerged from variety shows; in the USA, it stems from vaudeville, which are ostensibly the same type of performance. Stand-up comedy has existed by other names throughout history but only recently has it become recognized in the way that it is now. Stand-up-type performances can be found worldwide, arising semi-independently and making use of culture-specific humour and mores to achieve laughter, e.g. in Japan, they prefer to have two comedians on stage and employ slapstick comedy. Bulgaria has also had a stand-up-type comedy tradition though it has changed quite a bit. There are still recordings of performances from the late 1980s and early 1990s of comedians gathering large crowds with topics usually touching on daily life and impersonations. Nowadays, this tradition has shifted to a more Westernized model employing more off-colour themes and less large venues. Much research has been done on stand-up comedy in Britain and the USA; however, in Bulgaria, Dafina Genova is the only author who has done research into stand-up comedy. In her article on the matter, "Stand-up Comedy between Entertainment, Humour and Sociopolitical Commentary" (Genova 2015), she looks into the development of stand-up comedy in Bulgaria. She provides significant insight and points out that comedians "target politicians, public figures, current political and social events, but there are two topics that predominate in their performances: sex and gender relations" (Genova 2015: 199). She also notes that stand-up comedians in the Bulgarian context tend to be more offensive. This is a technique used to shock the audience but it could also divide it. The comedians analyzed in the article are all male, for lack of sufficient female representatives, and their jokes typically are concerned with topics mostly men

would understand and appreciate, topics that alienate the women in the audience. The use of offensive language also provides to this effect.

In this article, I have shown that researchers have put forward significant contribution to the better understanding of stand-up comedy as a phenomenon, ways stand-up comedians use to achieve laughter and their ability to change or maintain values and opinions. Though there are many definitions that could be given to describe stand-up comedy, it cannot be properly explained without including an understanding of theatrical performances or the historical/cultural background of the audience. Hence, merely looking at language is not enough. A comprehensive understanding of what is funny requires a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach. The audience needs to be considered an important part of the stand-up act, not merely a recipient of the humour but rather one that forms it and moulds it into what is socially acceptable and what is not, whether that be in a wave of change of moral and political values or condemning the performer on stage for going over the line, being offensive or backward. It is in a stand-up comedian's power to influence the current social reality, to comment on what is really happening without excessive censorship. This potential of humour to be subversive is what drives its evolution, what gives it power to change, intrinsically it is in the hands of the audience whether such an attempt will be successful. They are what backs the performer's words and give them the ability to alter social and political reality.

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