Ted Ray, Billy Connolly and Bertolt Brecht: Characterisation in Stand-Up Comedy

Acting and stand-up comedy share many qualities, but what divides them is not as obvious as it might seem. The definitive difference is that stand-up comedy always involves the intention to provoke laughter[[1]](#endnote-1), whereas acting only sometimes does. Another important distinction relates to stage identity. John Harrop, writing on acting, defines it thus:

'At the simplest level, the muscleman, the Miss Universe contestant and the stand-up comedian are projecting themselves. They may be making adaptations to the conventions of the performance, but they are not playing a character…only the actor is both present on stage and yet at the same time absent, replaced by the illusion he or she creates.'[[2]](#endnote-2)

This view is shared by David Marc, writing on stand-up:

'Without the protection of the formal mask of a narrative drama, without a song, dance, or any other intermediary composition that creates distance between performer and performance, without even, necessarily, some remarkable physical trait or ability to gratuitously display, the stand-up comedian addresses an audience as a naked self, eschewing the luxury of a clear cut distinction between art and life'[[3]](#endnote-3)

The view that comedians present themselves on stage as a 'naked self', whereas actors present characters is a widespread one, but it does not hold up to sustained examination. There are many aspects of stand-up which do involve characterisation, and perhaps the most obvious is the kind of quick-fire acting which takes place in the course of a joke or routine: the working men's club comic tells a joke about an Irishman, momentarily taking on an Irish accent whilst reporting what the Irishman has said; the political comedian, discussing the Prime Minister, lapses into an impression of him; the observational comedienne, citing the way young women make themselves seem stupid when talking to a man they find attractive demonstrates what she is describing, twiddling her hair with hilarious accuracy.

In order to examine this momentary characterisation, this element of acting contained within stand-up comedy, I am going to compare routines by comedians of different generations: Ted Ray and Billy Connolly. There are several reasons for choosing them, not least the fact that their approach to this aspect of performance is so starkly different. Both epitomise in some respects the style of their generation, while also exhibiting extraordinary individual characteristics. By examining their contrasting approaches to momentary characterisation, much will be revealed: the similarities between stand-up comedy and certain forms of acting; the relationship of both of these two types on performance which occur in everyday life; and the extent to which the whole concept of stand-up has changed since the 1940s.

# **Ted Ray**

Ted Ray was born Charles Olden in Wigan in 1906, but grew up in Liverpool. After working in cine-variety in and around Merseyside for several years, Ray made his London debut in 1930, progressing to the bottom of the bill at the London Palladium by 1932. He quickly became a headline act on the variety circuit. After the Second World War, he expanded into broadcasting, notably in the series *Ray's a Laugh*, which started in 1949 and ran for 12 years. He died in 1977.

The routine I will be examining is the opening monologue from an episode of *Ray's a Laugh* which was originally broadcast on the BBC Home Service at 8.30pm, 21 September 1950, between the Amadeus String Quartet and the news. Lasting just over two and a half minutes, the routine begins with four short jokes, followed by three longer gags which include momentary characterisation:

'I was down in Whitehall yesterday- I like to be near my money *[laughter]* and, er, I saw a member of the Cabinet coming out of the House of Commons. I said, "Hello sir. How's things?" He said, er, "Oh, shocking." I said, "Go on, what's the trouble?" He said, er, "Same old thing- Steel." I said, "Steel? What's up?" He said, "Derby County won't let him go." *[laughter and applause]*'

The second longer gag is set in the British Museum:

'There was a workman in there putting the finishing touches to a wooden statue of Shakespeare. He was just nailing the nameplate at the feet, when the hammer slipped and he hit his thumb. Well, the language, honestly! Well I, I used to be a bit of a ventriloquist you know, so er, I threw my voice as if it came from the wooden statue, and said, "Thou art not so unkind as man's ingratitude.' *[laughter]* Well, this bloke with the hammer, he nearly passed out. He said to me, "'Ere guv, d'you 'ear that?" I said, "Yes- old Shakespeare doesn't seem to like that sort of language." He said, "I can't understand it- on Monday, when I shoved a six inch nail through 'is ear'ole, to 'ang me bowler 'at on, 'e never said a flamin' word!" *[laughter and applause]*'

The third is about a restaurant which has just hired a new Parisian head waiter, Alfonso:

'First night he arrived, he was inspecting the kitchen when he saw two chefs carrying a steaming pot. He said, er, "Just a moment, please. I would like to taste that." One of the chefs said, "Taste it? You don't wanna bother about that!" He said, "Please! Everything must be tasted by me, person*ally*." So he got a spoon, ladled some out, sipped it and said, "Ah! Exquees*eet*! Serve it!" The chef said, "Serve it? We was going to chuck it away, it's the washing up water!" *[laughter and applause]*'[[4]](#endnote-4)

The first thing that strikes me as I listen to this routine is the extent to which the momentary characterisation is separated from flow of the narrative. There is a definite change of gear in Ray's voice as he leaps from 'he said' into the actual dialogue; indeed there is often a pause, or a vocalised 'er' as Ray makes the mental leap which transforms him from a 'naked self' into a character.

This rather unrelaxed approach is entirely in keeping with a style of delivery which from today's perspective sounds very precise and formal. Ray has a fast-talking, rather declamatory style, his intonation suggesting the influence of American comics like Bob Hope. His patter betrays nothing of his Scouse upbringing. Furthermore, it is far neater than everyday conversation: hesitation, mangled words and false starts to sentences are kept to a minimum. This reflects the hard work that Ray put into his act. In his autobiography, *Raising the Laughs*, he describes how he prepared for his London debut:

'Every night, hour after hour, I would stand in front of the mirror in my bedroom, grimacing, smiling and winking with the idea of getting the most effective expression for putting over a joke…Every inflection of voice and every shade of emotion as reflected in a comedian's voice do count tremendously and I was determined that if hard work and ceaseless rehearsal would help, no trouble on my part would be too great.'[[5]](#endnote-5)

 This diligence was typical of the variety comedian. A useful snapshot of the conventions of variety comedy can be found in Lupino Lane's 1945 instruction manual *How to Become a Comedian[[6]](#endnote-6)*. Lane (1892-1959), who came from a line of comic performers which stretches back to the 17th Century, had a long and varied career, working as a comic actor in stage musicals (most famously in *Me and My Girl*) and as an early silent film comedian. In giving advice to budding comics, his book provides a useful picture of what was expected of a stand-up, and one of the things he recommends is clear diction and neatness of delivery. He advises comedians to undertake 'a short study of elocution'[[7]](#endnote-7), warns against 'the continual use of phrases such as: "You see?"; "You know!"; "Of course", etc.'[[8]](#endnote-8) and advises, 'Avoid those terrible syllables "ER" and "UM".'[[9]](#endnote-9)

The second thing that strikes me about Ray's momentary characterisation is that it is not always necessary. The well-spoken, genteel old buffer voice he puts on in the first joke is not needed to communicate its basic comic mechanism, a simple wordplay using 'Steel' to refer to both the steel industry and a Derby County footballer of that name. Similarly, the second joke is based on situation and comic misunderstanding, and neither the Shakespeare voice nor the archaic, vowel-mangling voice he adopts for the grizzled Cockney workman are strictly necessary.

Only in the third joke is the characterisation vital. It is about punctured pomposity, and without the bossy, pretentious voice he gives to the Frenchman, the unmasking of his ignorance at the end of the joke would lack the required comic kick. The voices Ray uses for the chefs are distinctly working class, and although this is not vital to the joke, it does heighten the comedy, contrasting with Alfonso's pretension and sharpening the class conflict.

If Ray's momentary characterisation is in most cases unnecessary to the joke, we might ask what purpose it serves. One answer might be that the characters he creates are funny; but only the stagy, elegantly strangulated voice he uses for the ventriloquised Shakespeare statue in the second joke gets a laugh in its own right. Even if we consider relevance to the joke and funniness as potential reasons for Ray's characterisation, two of the six characters he plays, the well-spoken MP in the first joke and the Cockney workman in the second, are characterised for no obvious reason. Given the effort suggested by the pauses and 'er's which separate narrative from dialogue, this is puzzling. As we have seen, convention decreed that comedians should avoid that 'terrible syllable' 'er', and Ray was fastidious in preparing his patter, but in the first joke, 2 out of the 3 lines the MP utters are preceded by an 'er'. As the plummy voice is unnecessary to the structure of the joke, and not there to get a laugh in its own right, why did he make such a tangible effort to produce it?

Perhaps the answer lies in the overtly theatrical nature of stand-up comedy in Ray's era. Variety comedians were expected to do more than just tell gags. Lupino Lane recommends: 'It is just as well to have at least half a dozen songs in your repertoire [and] several dancing routines'[[10]](#endnote-10) (directly contradicting David Marc's assertion that the comedian works 'without a song, dance, or any other intermediary composition'). My instinct is that Ray used the voices just as he might use a song or a soft-shoe shuffle, to show his range. They strike me as purely decorative, a gratuitous display of performance skills, a demonstration of the tricks he has up his sleeve.

This fits with a quality which all his characters share: they sound like standard types rather than real people. When momentary characterisation gets a laugh in its own right, it can be for two reasons: it might be exaggerated and cartoonish, perhaps evoking a stereotype which is considered intrinsically funny; or it might be well observed, recalling with startling accuracy a particular type of person we recognise from our own experience. The Shakespeare voice is distinctly in the first category, a version of a stereotype of pretentious theatre folk which still has comic currency today.

The other characters are similarly stereotypical. Interestingly, Lane's book includes a list of dialects and characters which he suggests that comedians should study and concentrate on, and most of Ray's characters can be related to types included on this list. (*Table 1*, below)

| ***Item in Lane's list:*** | ***Character(s) in Ray's routine:*** |
| --- | --- |
| Cockney | Workman, first chef |
| Yorkshire | Second chef |
| Oxford and Cambridge | Government minister |
| 'The Broken English Accents and Variety of the Foreign Types of all nations. French. Italian. Spanish. Chinese. And among the etceteras "German"' | The head waiter |
| The sanctimonious and the pompous | The head waiter |

*Table 1: Dialects and characters*

It seems that Ray decorated his gags with recognisable character types because that was what was expected of skilled comedian like him. However, it is interesting to note that he sometimes gets this character work wrong. He makes a minor error in the third joke: when the chef first speaks, he has a distinct Cockney accent (pronouncing 'taste' as 'tighste'), but in the second line, the accent has changed to Yorkshire (pronouncing 'chuck' as 'choock'). He has established that there are two chefs, so perhaps the idea is that the first line is said by one of them, the second by the other (that is the assumption I have made in compiling the table); but this is not indicated in the surrounding narrative. The fact that this confusion in no way diminishes the impact of the joke shows the extent to which the characterisation is purely decorative. In this, and in just about every other aspect, Ray's approach to this aspect of his work contrasts sharply with that of Billy Connolly.

# **Billy Connolly**

Billy Connolly was born in Glasgow in 1942. After a serving an apprenticeship in the shipyards and a spell in the Territorial Army, he became a folksinger in the 1960s in a group called The Humblebums. He began to include comic patter between the songs, and as he moved into a solo career, this quickly became the main focus of the act. After progressing from spots in folk clubs to full shows in theatres (like *The Great Northern Welly Boot Show* in 1972), and becoming a major cult figure in Scotland, a series of interviews on the BBC's *Parkinson* chat show established him as a national star. His reputation continued to grow throughout the 1980s and 1990s, making him arguably Britain's most successful contemporary stand-up.

This routine comes from a performance at the Usher Hall, Edinburgh, and was broadcast on an episode of *Billy Connolly's World Tour of Scotland[[11]](#endnote-11)*, a TV series which interspersed concert footage with a travelogue of the tour.

'When I was a child, we used to go to Rothesay on holiday. And my father would turn up with a camera. A Box Brownie. Right? I dreaded it, I could never take a decent picture. [As father:] "C'mon, here we go, it's dead easy. Right? Now- that's the viewfinder. That's the lens. You forget about the lens. Don't, just forget about it. Hold it under here, right? You look in this wee window till you see me and Florence your sister, you remember her, right, don't you, *[laughter]* right? You'll see us in there. When you do, just press that down. What could be easier? Right, on you go, Billy." *[laughter]* [mimes himself as a small boy, holding Box Brownie, looking up and smiling] *[laughter]* [looks down into viewfinder, looks up. As young Billy:] "No' in it yet." *[laughter]* [as father, sternly] "Look in it- *properly!*" [As young Billy, mimes holding camera, stares down into viewfinder] *[laughter]* [As Young Billy, looks up and shakes his head] *[laughter]* [As father, angrily:] "For Christ's sake! *[laughter]* It's easy enough, you big bloody Jessie! *[laughter]* Now look in it! You see me and Flo- push the lever! Nothing could be easier! Don't make me come over there!" *[laughter]* [As young Billy, looking intently into viewfinder, quietly to himself:] "Oh no! *[laughter]* Here we fucking go! *[laughter]* Not be long now till I'm skiddin' across the floor!" *[laughter]*'

As the routine continues, the pressure gets too much for young Billy, and Connolly demonstrates his yodel-like crying, then how his father strides over, beats him across the head and shouts, 'Now, take the fucking picture' Then Connolly demonstrates how the crying changes as he goes into 'Buddhist chanting mode'. He describes how when his father hit him, 'something has melted in my brain, and it's coming down my nose.' The final image is of the snot dripping down his nose, and his father shouting, 'Don't let that touch the fuckin' camera!'

Whereas Ray's jokes make sense on the page, Connolly's routine looks dead when reduced to cold print. Without being able to see or hear Connolly, the jokes become inexplicable; furthermore, the routine sounds complicated, the narrative difficult to follow (even though I have tried to keep the number of explanatory brackets to a minimum). Connolly's approach to momentary characterisation contrasts starkly with Ray's. Most obviously, whereas much of Ray's characterisation is purely decorative, Connolly's is funny it itself.

His characters are very different from Ray's readymades. The routine does not work when transcribed, because the humour lies in the richness of the characterisation, the vivid plausibility of the situation he conjures out of thin air. The father is a child beater, but the characterisation is multi-layered. His first lines are kind and paternal. It is only on the line 'Right, on you go, Billy' that we sense the violence that lurks below, and we laugh in recognition. We laugh at young Billy's smile, recognising his pleasure in being given responsibility. We laugh at the inevitability of the way the situation develops: the father gets sterner and starts to threaten; under the pressure, young Billy becomes increasingly unconfident with the camera. We laugh at young Billy's knowing weariness as he mutters under his breath about the beating that is to come. Finally, we laugh at the brilliantly realised crying of the young Billy, the ugly yodelling through which he is unable to articulate himself, followed by the pitiful, guttural, rhythmic grunting.

It is difficult to say quite why such a graphic reenactment of the gratuitous beating of a young child is so funny. Partly, the laughter is in recognition of the injustice of the situation. Most of us can probably think of times when we got into trouble because we could not explain ourselves clearly enough. Speaking personally, I laugh because I feel that the performance is truthful, that the characters are well-observed. I may not have suffered the kind of brutality evoked in the routine myself, but I have seen enough parents mistreating their offspring to feel that what is performed corresponds to something in my own experience. The characterisation of the monstrous father and the vulnerable, wailing child is very different from that of the plum-voiced Shakespeare statue in Ray's joke: Connolly presents characters which strike us as plausible, whereas Ray uses established comic types.

Another contrast is the way Connolly moves from narration into dialogue. The effort suggested by a pause or an 'er' when Ray launched into a character is not there. The transition is smooth and effortless. Characters converse without the necessity for 'he said's. Transitions between the father and young Billy are even effected without a change of voice: the father barks an order and a new stance tells us we are now watching young Billy's reaction. This ease and effortlessness fits with Connolly's conversational style. In contrast with Ray's neat, formal delivery, Connolly is deliberately sloppy. His native accent is thick. The sentences are as messy as everyday speech, with false starts, pauses while he thinks of the right word, even laughs at his own jokes. The whole structure of the act is conversational, meandering from subject to subject apparently on a whim, suddenly reincorporating something from half an hour before. He even jokes about the structural looseness of his routines. When he steps into character, it is apparently spontaneous and effortless, lacking the premeditation implied by Ray's strained 'er'.

It is like a brilliant version of the kind of acting which occurs in everyday conversation, a type of performance which appealed to Brecht. The leap from Bertolt Brecht to Billy Connolly is perhaps not as unlikely as it sounds: Brecht stressed the importance of fun (*Spass*); was a big fan of Charlie Chaplin; and worked with and was influenced by the German beer hall comedian, Karl Valentin. In a footnote to 'The Street Scene'[[12]](#endnote-12), Brecht describes the kind of everyday comic impersonations which Connolly's characterisation resembles at some length, focusing on the example of a next-door neighbour taking off 'the rapacious behaviour of our common landlord'. While he describes such imitations as 'rich and full of variety', he points out that, just as a witness acting out what has happened in a road accident will only include details that are relevant to understanding exactly what happened, so a comic impersonator will be 'summary and selective, deliberately leaving out those occasions where the landlord strikes our neighbour as "perfectly sensible".' He goes on to discuss how this extra level of complexity is handled:

'Next-door neighbour and street demonstrator can reproduce their subject's "sensible" or his "senseless" behaviour alike, by submitting it for an opinion. When it crops up in the course of events, however (when a man switches from being sensible to be senseless, or the other way round), then they usually need some form of commentary in order to change the angle of their portrayal.'

Not only does this sound like a good description of acting in stand-up comedy (characterisations linked with some form of commentary), this very structure, in which a change of attitude is played out, is not uncommon in stand-up routines. Ben Elton provides a perfect example:

'I mean we can't tell the truth can we, the British, we can't just say it straight. I mean, you're a restaurant saying, "This is the worst meal I have *ever* had, the worst meal…" Up comes the waiter, "How was your meal?" "It's very nice, lovely." [laughter]'[[13]](#endnote-13)

By the same token, in Connolly's act, the brutal image of his father in this routine is juxtaposed with a much softer portrayal in another sequence, which sees Connolly senior as a comparatively vulnerable old man, taken in by a passing joke about car windscreens being made to fit his glasses prescription.

Furthermore, the emotional effects of the child beating routine bring to mind Brecht's advice on emotion in acting:

'This does not mean that if he [the actor] is playing passionate parts he must himself remain cold. It is only that his feelings must not at bottom be those of the character, so that the audience's may not at bottom be those of the character either.'[[14]](#endnote-14)

Here we see an extreme example of this. While acting the role of a child who is in the throes of deep misery, Connolly is clearly amused: he breaks out of the demonstration of the yodel-like crying to laugh at the absurdity of the situation. The audience has a similar reaction, laughing harder and harder as the child portrayed on stage becomes increasingly heartbroken.

Such an emotional effect can be achieved because Connolly is unknowingly following Brecht's advice to 'show that you are showing'[[15]](#endnote-15). Just as Brecht required, 'that the actor appears on the stage in a double role, as [Charles] Laughton and as Galileo; that the showman Laughton does not disappear in the Galileo whom he is showing'[[16]](#endnote-16), so, in this routine, when Connolly shows us his father and himself as a child, he remains visible as the comedian, never disappearing into the roles. This means he can make the suffering of the child distant enough to be funny, whilst the quality of the acting makes it plausible enough to seem real.

# **Personas**

This leads us to another question. We apparently see two Billy Connollys: himself as a child, and the current self showing us the child. But we might ask to whether the current Billy Connolly we see onstage is really a 'naked self' (as David Marc asserted), and to what extent he is merely a persona, requiring a subtler kind of characterisation. What is certain is that there are many stand-ups who do not appear as themselves. The most obvious example is character comedians: when we watch Steve Coogan do stand-up as Paul Calf, the costume, wig, make-up and the use of different names allow us to clearly differentiate between character and performer. Other cases are trickier. Frankie Howerd, Tommy Cooper and Harry Hill all present exaggerated stage personas, and it is difficult to imagine them being sustained in the performers' private lives: Howerd saying 'Oo no, missus' whilst buying a bus ticket; Cooper wearing his fez to the pub; Harry Hill kicking his leg and shouting 'Goal!!' whilst opening a bank statement. However, quite where the boundary between the onstage and offstage self lies is left to the audience's imagination.

Moreover, the idea expressed by both John Harrop and David Marc that comedians simply play themselves onstage is a comparatively modern one. Certainly, when Ted Ray started his career, there was no truth in Marc's assertion that stand-up eschews a 'clear cut distinction between art and life'. The distinction was all too visible. The average contemporary male comic working in an alternative comedy club wears no make up; his female counterpart tends to wear only what she might on an average night out. Variety comedians, on the other hand, had to wear heavy theatrical make-up because of the size of the variety theatres: even those in the most distant seats had to be able to see their facial expressions. Lupino Lane dedicates a whole chapter to advice on make-up, half a page of which is taken up with describing the elaborate preparation needed just for a 'straight' (i.e. neutral) make-up. This includes lining the upper lids of the eye, tinting the cheeks and even using foundation on the ears[[17]](#endnote-17).

Furthermore, whereas many contemporary comedians wear on stage pretty much what they would wear off stage, variety comics tended to wear outlandish costumes: Tommy Cooper in a fez; Ken Dodd in a full-length red fur fabric overcoat, extended bowler hat on head, tickling stick in hand; Stainless Stephen in a stainless steel waistcoat, with illuminated buttons and a revolving bow tie.

The use of comic costume separated comedians from their audiences. Max Miller continued to wear his gaudy, floral-patterned, outrageously baggy jackets and plus fours (sometimes enhanced by a jewel-encrusted cane) throughout the austere years of the Second World War, when cloth rationing as much as aesthetic considerations would have made such clothes impossible for the men in the audience to wear. Those comics who eschewed such colourful costumes wore evening dress, which again highlighted the distinction between them and their more casually dressed audiences.

Ted Ray was one of the few comics of his generation to try to blur the division between art and life, to appear onstage as an ordinary person, and this was quite an innovation. He started his career in a variety of guises and outlandish costumes, working initially as Hugh Neek in a white suit and white, enamelled bowler hat, and later as Nedlo, the gypsy fiddler, an act which required him not to speak. Then he decided to take a different approach: 'Forget all about comic make-up, the white bowler hat, those fantastic, ridiculous props. Why, there's no need even to bother with a dinner jacket. Just be human.'[[18]](#endnote-18) His idea was that by coming on stage as if he had 'walked in from the street', he would be closer to his audience. The strategy was immediately successful:

'From the moment I made my entrance I felt a warmth I had never known before. I was one of them. I told my stories casually and intimately as though they were in on the joke. I wore my best lounge suit and, as far as my appearance went, I might have just climbed up on the stage from the front row of the stalls…I got laughs and earned them just by being *myself*.'[[19]](#endnote-19)

Ray was aware of the risk involved in taking such an approach as early as the late 1920s: 'It was, for me, a break with all the traditions I'd ever known, one of the big gambles of my life. My heart was in my mouth.'[[20]](#endnote-20)

Even given his innovative bravery, there is a world of difference between Ray and Connolly. Ray presents a formal, rehearsed self, whereas Connolly apparently shows us a conversational, apparently spontaneous self. The difference between these two stand-ups, who in their different ways both present themselves as naked selves, is due to the context in which they worked. John Harrop places little emphasis on 'the adaptations to the conventions of the performance' which comedians make, but these are crucial. Ray was clever enough to reject most of the existing conventions of variety comedy, but still adhered to the idea that performers should speak neatly and clearly. As we have seen, he rehearsed endlessly in front of a mirror to perfect 'every inflection of voice'.

Connolly grew out of a very different context. He was one of a small wave of comedians that emerged from the folk music circuit in the 1970s[[21]](#endnote-21), who rejected both the theatricality of variety comedy and the formulaic bigotry of the working men's clubs in favour of a more anecdotal, observational, autobiographical style. Together with isolated individual comics like Dave Allen and, later, Victoria Wood, the folk comedians helped set the scene for the much more revolutionary redefinition brought about by the emergence of alternative comedy in the 1980s.

Comics like Connolly helped to promote a new set of performance conventions, and one of these is the kind of apparently spontaneous, conversationally messy approach we see in his work. It might seem that this is not a convention, that Connolly behaves onstage exactly as he would off, that there is no distinction at all between his art and his life. Early in his career, he claimed that his comedy was the placing onstage of the banter he used to hear and generate as a shipyard apprentice:

'I always wondered why the guys in the shipyard made me laugh more than the comedians at the theatre, with their jokes about honeymoons, Pakistanis and the Irish. The yard talk was always about human beings and their functions and malfunctions. So I went off and took that kind of talk to the stage.'[[22]](#endnote-22)

However, more recently, he has talked about the hard work and years of experience that lie behind the apparent spontaneity of his work:

'It's the most misunderstood thing about comedians- is that after you see him, he has to leave you and go and do it again and again and again and again. And people who think they're funny because they did two funny lines at their daughter's wedding really don't know where it's at. You know, when you get the big light on you and three thousand bodies all staring at you, that's when comedy really kicks into life. And it takes a long time, and that is the main aim: to get into a position where you can do it to order.'[[23]](#endnote-23)

Whether this adaptation to performance convention constitutes a form of characterisation in itself (making the onstage Connolly is effectively a stage character, quite distinct from the performer) is open to question. Speaking personally, when I worked as a stand-up myself[[24]](#endnote-24), I never consciously constructed a stage persona, nor was I aware of a tangible transformation from an offstage to an onstage self as I stepped behind the microphone. However, I was adapting to the conventions of the performance, perhaps most obviously in making myself sound as spontaneous and relaxed as I would in everyday conversation when I was actually delivering prepared and much repeated lines and suppressing the tension which is a normal part of performance.

Whatever their significance in terms of persona, the adaptations to the conventions of the performance which stand-ups make are vital. They explain the vast differences between Ted Ray and Billy Connolly, both of which ostensibly present themselves onstage as naked selves. Significantly, the changes in these conventions have allowed Connolly to achieve the kind of relaxed, easy momentary characterisation which occurs in everyday conversation, where Ray could only produce established comic types.

1. In fact, in the early days of alternative comedy, there were comics (like Keith Allen) who deliberately tried to *not* make the audience laugh. However, this does not contradict the idea that the intention the provoke laughter is a definitive feature of stand-up. The point is that Allen was deliberately unfunny as an act of rebellion, an attempt to disrupt the audience's preconceptions (or perhaps just to annoy them). Such rebellion would have been meaningless if funniness was not a defining feature. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. John Harrop, *Acting* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p.5 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. David Marc, *Comic Visions* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p.13 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ted Ray, *Ray's a Laugh*, BBC Radio Collection, ZBBC1117, 1990 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ted Ray, *Raising the Laughs* (London: Werner Laurie, 1952), p.69 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Lupino Lane, How to Become a Comedian (London: Frederick Muller, 1945) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Lane, p.14 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Lane, p.15 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Lane, p.71 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Lane, p.135 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *Billy Connolly's World Tour of Scotland*, BBC1, 16 August 1994, 10.25pm [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. John Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre*, London: Methuen, 1978, p.123 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ben Elton, *Motormouth*, Phonogram, 1987, BENLP1, side 1 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Willett, pp.193-94 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Bertolt Brecht, *Poems* (ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim), London: Methuen, 1976, p.341 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Willett, p.194 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Lane, pp.128-29 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ray, p.66 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ray, p.67 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ray, pp.66-67 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Other notable folk comics include Jasper Carrott, Max Boyce and Mike Harding [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Jonathan Margolis, *The Big Yin*, London: Orion, 1995 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. *Billy Connolly's World Tour of Scotland* [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. See Oliver Double, *Stand-Up: On Being a Comedian*, London: Methuen, 1997 for more details on this. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)