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‘What do you do?’: Stand-up comedy versus the proper job

Oliver Double

Abstract

Stand-up comedy is often seen as such an unusual choice of profession that it barely even qualifies as being a ‘proper job’. Because comedians are seen as existing outside the world of conventional employment, they have a unique position from which to view the everyday reality of work as most people experience it. This paper looks at a range of gags and routines from the early 1970s onwards that either reflect on the unusual nature of the job of being a comedian or cast an amused light on more conventional forms of employment. Theories about stand-up comedy and humour in the workplace will be used to explore the relationship between comedy *as* work and comedy *about* work.

‘I wish I had a proper job’

At the Edinburgh Fringe in 1984, Tony Allen – a pioneer of the British alternative comedy scene and an anarchist to boot – was watching a show featuring three American stand-ups, and disliked the way one of them was working the room.¹ Allen later recalled the kind of question that this comic, Larry Amoros, was asking: ‘Who’s that you’re with and how much did you pay for her?’. Alternative comedy sprang into life partly to challenge this kind of cheap sexism, and Allen found a way to wreak revenge on Amoros:

¹ For a definition of ‘working the room’ and a discussion of the purpose it serves, see Mintz (1985: 78-79).

He used to work his way across the front row and I purposefully sat down right at the end where he'd finish. Eventually he came up to me and said, 'What do you do?' I replied, 'I'm a comedian. What do you do?' (Connor, 1990: 11)

As well as being a clever put-down – having delivered his line, Allen left the show to the applause of the rest of the audience – this exchange is very revealing. The gag plays on one of the standard questions which comedians ask punters whilst working the room: 'What do you do?' This well-established ploy allows the comic to comment on the nature of the punter's job, often in the form of a ritual insult. Allen's joke plays on the convention by getting in first with a ritual insult of his own, which turns the whole thing on its head by suggesting that Amoros is too unfunny to actually qualify as a comedian.

This incident highlights two important points. Firstly, that a standard stand-up technique allows comedians to cast comic aspersions on forms of employment more conventional than their own. Secondly, their own job brings with it unusually specific requirements – the need to elicit laughter – without which it can hardly be said to exist at all.

Allen is by no means the only performer to make a joke based on the idea that being a stand-up comedian is unlike any other job. In the second series of his TV show *Alexei Sayle's Stuff* (1989), Sayle sends up audience participation by complaining about the way comedians go out into the crowd and start physically messing about with individual punters, all the while enacting the very behaviour he is complaining about. As if realising his mistake, he suddenly stops what he is doing and confesses:

God, isn't it a humiliating job being a comedian, eh? [laughter] My dad'd be embarrassed if he could see me now. Mind you, he used to sexually molest elephants for a living. [laughter] God, I wish I 'ad a proper job.

This cues a song, in which he fantasises about the 'proper job's he could be doing, including being a computer programmer, a dispatch rider or working in a cake shop. It concludes with the couplet: 'You'd turn me off like that if I wasn't funny / It's just as well that I earn far too much money'.

Around the same time, Ben Elton (1987) also had a routine which sent up audience participation, arguing that choosing a volunteer from the audience means 'the comedian has run out of jokes' and leads the first three rows to think to themselves: 'Fuckin' 'ell, I hope he doesn't choose me, I hope he doesn't choose me!'. Elton suggests another way punters could respond to this:

Why do you hope he doesn't choose you, you could tell him to piss off, couldn't ya?? [laughter] 'No, piss off, get on with your job, I've paid! [laughter] Fuck off, I'm not getting up onstage, I've been at work all day, entertain me! [laughter] Do I ask you to come down where I work and *polish my lathe?*' [laughter].

On the face of this, these jokes come from opposite angles. Sayle explicitly contrasts being a comedian with having a proper job. Elton, on the other hand, applies the logic of conventional employment to his own job, thus suggesting perhaps stand-up comedy should be viewed in the same light as the kind of engineering work which would involve using a lathe. Like both Sayle and Allen, Elton was part of the early alternative comedy scene which was strongly associated with left-wing politics, and he was particularly known for his socialist, anti-Thatcher opinions. With hindsight, comparing himself with a lathe operator could be seen as delusions of working-class grandeur, given his actual background as the son of a noted physics professor. Nonetheless, although the joke likens stand-up comedy to skilled manual labour, ultimately it works because the comparison is incongruous. In both cases then, the implication is that stand-up comedy is an unusual kind of employment, outside the category of the proper job.

This idea is reasonably common in stand-up routines, and continues to occur in more recent examples. In a routine from his 2011 TV series, Stewart Lee recalls moving to London in the 1980s to try and establish himself in the capital's alternative comedy scene, and having to get a job as a librarian to sustain himself. Once he is getting enough work to give up the day job, he hands in his notice, and tells the head librarian he is going to be a professional comedian. The first laugh comes when he recalls her reaction: 'Oh, you never seemed very funny'. He gets more laughs by playing on the very different demands of being a librarian and being a comedian, pointing out how impossible it would be to try and be funny in a library:

I know, I don't know what I was supposed to do in the, in the library, you know. [quiet laughter] In silence. [laughter] Put the books away in a funny way. [laughter].

Then he becomes characteristically self-referential, comparing being a librarian with the particular way that he tackles the job of being a comedian:

Funny thing is though, as I was leaving – the other librarian turned to her and said, 'I think he is a funny librarian, actually. It's just that you – have to 've seen a lot of other librarians to realise what it is he's doing'. [extended laughter] And the other went, 'No, you're wrong. [laughter] You're', she said, 'you're either a funny librarian or you're not. And he's not – a funny librarian'. [laughter] And the other one said, 'Well he is, because he's – he *is* a librarian. But he also, it's like he comments on what a librarian is'. [extended laughter]. (Lee, 2011)

Here, Lee is playing on his popular image as a comedian who comments on the very form of stand-up comedy itself by satirizing or subverting its techniques and conventions.² The joke works by transposing this logic to the world of the far more conventional job of a librarian, and it gains the incongruity necessary to provoke laughter precisely because stand-up comedy is seen as being unlike any other profession. If comparing being a comedian to having a proper job is funny, then comparing being a comedian's comedian to having a proper job is even funnier.

Stand-up comedians are self-employed as sole traders seeking contracts from venues and broadcasters, often employing agents to help them achieve this. Ultimately, their market value is based on their ability to make an audience laugh, as the venues which contract them are unlikely to offer future bookings if they send the punters home disappointed. As a result, by paying the ticket price, it is ultimately the audience that employs them in a commercial venture which trades laughs for money.

Tony Allen's joke works by suggesting that Larry Amoros was reneging on this basic deal, by being too obnoxious or unfunny to offer the audience the amusement they should expect, and the audience's response suggests he might have been right. Ben Elton's *lathe* joke makes the deal explicit. He has the imaginary audience member telling the comedian to 'get on with your job' because, 'I've paid!'. In Elton's eyes, audience participation is a scam, because it relies on the paying punter contributing to the work which will create the laughter he or she has paid for.

In a performance at the Old Birmingham Repertory Theatre in the late 1990s, Mark Thomas takes the point further, telling the audience 'this is my job, this is what I do'. A few punters laugh at this simple statement – probably for the well-established reason of stand-up comedy not being seen as a 'job' – and he picks up on their cynicism, saying, 'But – this is, this is how I earn my money, and, and this is how I've become middle class as well, thank you for paying for that. [laughter]' (Thomas, 1998). Here, stand-up is not only explicitly a form of trade, allowing the comedian to earn his money, it is also a vehicle for class mobility. Unlike Elton, Thomas came from a working-class background. His father was a builder, and he himself worked on a building site after completing a drama degree at Bretton Hall. Indeed, shortly after this gag he moves into a routine about the 'very fuckin' short period of time' he spent in the construction

2 For example, a 2004 review claims that, 'Lee's wilful sophistication will not stroke everyone's funny bones...it relies on your knowledge of the rules it's toying with' (Maxwell, 2004).

industry. Becoming a comedian, a trader in laughs, has given him the money to escape his background and become middle class.

Like most forms of trade that enable class mobility, stand-up comedy demands dedication and sheer hard work. Sarah Millican explains that it involves 'working your arse off', and contrasts comedians who 'don't necessarily have funny bones' but have a 'workmanlike' attitude, with others who 'are hilarious and put no work in'. The former, she believes, can make a good career, whereas the latter 'don't get anywhere'. The reason why 'brilliant' people don't make it is because 'they don't have the work ethic' (Millican, 2012).

Of course, although their profession may be seen as unusual, most comedians will have had proper jobs before they started their careers in stand-up. Their previous engagement in the world of conventional employment can become part of the act, as with Lee's librarian routine and Thomas's comments about working in construction. This kind of routine can help to cement the comedian's relationship with the audience. The fact that they once had a proper job means that they have something in common with the people they are performing for, and thus comics who have never experienced the world of conventional work can be at something of a disadvantage. Ross Noble, for example, who started doing stand-up in his mid-teens, says, 'I'm different from the people in the audience purely because I've never had a job, I've never had a normal existence, and all I've ever done is stand-up' (Noble, 2004).

Some performers play on the specific nature of other jobs they have had, and previous employment can form the basis of an entire Edinburgh show, like Alfie Moore's *I Predicted a Riot* (2012), which hinged on the comedian's long experience as a police officer. Moore presents what *The Guardian* has described as 'a comedic meditation on the sometimes absurd, occasionally dangerous and often misunderstood world of modern policing' (O'Hara, 2012), and he sees stand-up as a 'powerful medium' with which to share his cop's-eye perspective:

'What rank do you have to get to in the police before anyone will actually listen to you? Very high, I would suggest. [As] a comedian, people listen'. (in O'Hara, 2012)

For some, becoming a comedian is seen as an escape from conventional employment. When I was on the circuit, I remember a comic who had started in stand-up comparatively late in life regularly saying how glad he was that he had swapped the nine-to-five life for a job that only required him to work for twenty minutes every night. The hardworking Sarah Millican (2011) even tells her audience how stand-up has allowed her to escape:

I've only been doing stand-up for about six years and before that my life was quite substantially different. I was married – and I had a job that I hated so much, I used to try and get knocked over on the way in. [extended laughter].

'I'm the best in the business'

The position that comedians enjoy – being seen as having escaped the sphere of conventional employment – gives them a unique perspective from which to comment on the world of the proper job. Many of the critiques they offer particularly focus on issues of status and hierarchy in the workplace, sometimes relating this to the idea that conventional employment can ultimately feel rather pointless.

Josie Long provides an unusual example in her 2008 show *Trying is Good* in a routine which describes a job which is, if anything, even less conventional than her own. Whilst applying to join a gym, she finds herself waiting in an office which looks down on a swimming pool where there are 'lots of very little children, very tentatively trying to navigate their way across' a floating inflatable obstacle course. She continues:

And then at the side of the pool, there was a man – whose job it was – was to stand there – *with a powerful hose!!* [quiet laughter] Just picking 'em off! [laughter] *Getting rid o' the weak!* [laughter] Which is one fing, until you realise that's his *job!* [laughter] Like, at dinner parties, people can go, 'Oh sorry Ewan, what, what do you do for a living?'

She then adopts a smug, self-satisfied attitude and cod Morningside accent to act out his imagined reply:

'Me? Oh, I hose children off a floating assault course. [loud, extended laughter] That's what I do. [laughter] How long have I been doing it? Twenty five years, I'm the best in the business'. [laughter] 'Why do you do that?' 'Presumably to upset them, I don't know. [laughter] I don't enjoy my work!' [laughter]' (Long 2008)

On the face of it, Long is simply sharing her comic delight at discovering somebody with a ridiculously bizarre job. In fact, she is also sending up more general aspects of the world of work. 'Ewan' – her imagined version of the man with the hose – is exaggeratedly proud of his chosen profession when asked about it at a dinner party. The gag works by incongruously transposing middle-class pride over career status to a bizarre job, but by extension it also suggests that boasting about more conventional jobs might be similarly ridiculous. Moreover, 'Ewan' is proud in spite of the fact that he has no idea what the point of his job actually is, and admits that it brings him no fulfilment. Again, the

point can easily spill out to more conventional types of work which may be unfulfilling and seem to have no obvious point or purpose.

Generally, comedians get laughs by focusing on more conventional careers, and this often happens in the process of working the room. One comic who has made this a central part of his act is Al Murray, who performs in character as the Pub Landlord, an engagingly boorish Little Englander who regales audiences with plainly ludicrous opinions fuelled by misplaced pride and petty bigotry. Murray often starts his shows by asking a series of individual punters their names and what they do for a living. He establishes these people as characters, coming back to them throughout the rest of the show. Much of the comedy springs from how what each punter says relates to the basic dynamics of Murray's character. The Pub Landlord loves Queen and country, fry-ups, Formula One racing, the military, and anything typically British and working-class. He despises Europeans (especially the French), computers and new technology generally, anything effete and middle-class, and effeminacy – in spite of hints that he himself has suppressed homosexual desires.

Sometimes, the jokes hinge on the character's ridiculously old-fashioned sexism. He picks out a woman from the front rows, and asks her:

What do you do, my sweet? Bearing in mind the correct answer for a woman is of course secretary or nurse. [laughter] You're a teacher? Fantastic! Half secretary, half nurse. [laughter and applause]. (Murray, 2007)

Anything conspicuously masculine is instantly applauded. Discovering that a punter called John designs ships, he crows with delight:

You design ships? [laughter] That's more like it, innit, eh? [laughter and some applause] What sorta ships – mainly? Chris? Warships? That is even more like it, innit? [laughter].

Then he turns back to a punter called Jeremy – who he has derided for his job as a mobile phone designer – and sneers, 'All you can do is, like, "Well, let's put the buttons a bit higher up." [laughter]' (Murray, 2001). Even though the satire seems to be mainly aimed at the character's laughably blinkered stupidity, there are also sideswipes at our attitudes towards work. When a punter called Geoff says he has his own business, the Pub Landlord presses him for more details, and on discovering that Geoff's business is based on cleaning office windows, he openly scoffs: 'Yeah, we – n'yeah. I can see why you've thrown up this smokescreen, mate [extended laughter]'. He then acts out how he imagines Geoff to be at work, cleaning windows with a cloth whilst desperately telling himself, "I work for myself!" and "I'm my own fucking boss!" (Murray, 2007). Each pathetic statement gets a fresh wave of laughter.

Similarly, when a punter called Chris says he works in ‘logistics’, the Pub Landlord ruthlessly presses him for more information, gradually peeling away the layers of pretention implicit in that description:

Pub Landlord: Logistics? [laughter] Narrow it down, mate! [laughter] When I pop out for a pint o’ milk, I’m doing logistics, aren’t I? [laughter]

Chris: Food distribution.

Pub Landlord: Food distribution? [laughter] You still really haven’t told us what you fuckin’ do. [laughter] Yeah, when I sort out the peas and the carrots on my plate, that’s food distribution. [laughter] When I decide to eat the yolk last of my fried egg, *that* – [laughter] is food distribution. [laughter] What d’you mean, food distribution? Come on Chris – shit or get off the pot, what is it? [laughter]

Chris: We send food out to supermarkets.

Pub Landlord: You send food out – to supermarkets? You work in a warehouse. [laughter and applause] How long you been doing that?

Chris: Er, two years.

Pub Landlord: Two years? What d’you do before that, Chris?

Chris: Er, student.

Pub Landlord: Student? What degree did you do?

Chris: Computer Science.

Pub Landlord: Computer? And you ended up driving a forklift. [laughter]. (Murray 2001)

Of course, the contemptuous conclusions that the Landlord draws about what Geoff and Chris actually do for a living may well be wholly inaccurate. Geoff might spend his days behind a desk running a thriving business rather than working with squeegees and buckets of water; and Chris might work with a complex IT system rather than a forklift. However, although much of the character’s comedy derives from his conspicuous wrongheadedness, occasionally there is insight behind his ramblings. As with Josie Long’s routine about the swimming pool hose-man, Murray is satirizing the way people use language to disguise the nature of their work, and exaggerate the level of status their career affords them. Additionally, the ‘forklift’ punchline pokes fun at over-qualification, portraying Chris as somebody whose training in something as sophisticated as IT has led to a comparatively menial warehouse job.

Alexei Sayle (1989) – who joked about wanting a proper job – tends to joke about forms of pretentious language which are closer to home, within the artistic sphere he inhabits. He might, for instance, present a hilarious parody of a pretentious fringe theatre director:

‘Yeah. We’re gonna kind of like interface with the audience [laughter] in a demotic interrelation workshop mode, you know. [laughter] Co-related actors and performers and the audience together, in a workshop-moded situation, you know’. [laughter].

He then drops the character to make his own comment: ‘Actually, anybody who uses the word “workshop”, who’s not connected with light engineering, is a twat. [laughter]’.

This jibe debunks the pretention of fringe theatre by contrasting it with a more literal, down-to-earth approach to life found in less artistic careers. Just as Ben Elton’s gag likens him to a lathe operator, so the reference to light engineering aligns Sayle with the world of skilled manual labour. This reflects a political worldview influenced by his upbringing by working-class Marxist parents. An article in *The Face* from 1982 describes Sayle’s desire to attract a working-class audience to his shows as ‘tantamount to an obsession’, and highlights his distaste for the ‘self-serving social mobility of British comedians from working-class backgrounds’. However, Sayle was aware that being self-employed – a trader in laughs – put him in an ambiguous position within the class system:

‘I’m a member of the petit bourgeoisie and Marx said that the petit bourgeoisie could choose which class they have their cultural affiliations with. I chose to have mine with the working class’. (in Taylor, 1982: 18)

‘The biggest drawback we have, the Protestant work ethic’

In these examples, career-based self-aggrandisement and the general pointlessness of work are held up for ridicule, but some comedians make more radical critiques of conventional employment. Sayle’s gag might align him with skilled manual labour, but he was not one to romanticise the workplace. His ‘proper job’ song was clearly at least partly ironic, given that one of the careers he imagines pursuing in it is computer programming – the butt of more than one of his routines.³ In a performance at the Theatre Royal, Nottingham in 1983, he directly asks the audience to think about their experience of work:

3 For example, see ‘The Wine Bars of Old Hampstead Town’ (Sayle, 1982).

Actually, I'd like you to think for a minute, right, erm – right, those of you who've actually, er, got jobs, right, erm – not many of you probably, but erm – those of you who've actually got jobs, I'd like you to think for a minute about your boss, right. Think about your boss. Isn't he an *absolute fuckin' knobhead*, eh?? [laughter] Isn't your boss always a *total fuckin' dickhead*, eh? Isn't that a wonderful system where we got where the total knobheads always rise to the top, you know? [laughter]. (Sayle, 1983)

Although the terms Sayle uses might fall short of formal Marxist analysis, the last line suggests more than simple venting of individual workplace frustrations. He specifically derides the entire *system*, and as the routine continues he expands on the idea that incompetents rise to positions of power in the workplace, imagining the manager of a nuclear power station reacting to impending meltdown by ineffectually swanning around shouting, 'Five cups of coffee please, Sandra'.

In a 1970 show at the Village Gate in Greenwich Village, Dick Gregory – a contemporary of Lenny Bruce, and arguably the first politicised African-American comic to appeal to mixed-race audiences – starts his act by working the room in an overtly political fashion. He picks out an individual punter and enquires, 'Can I ask you, what kind of work do you do?'. Discovering the man is a trucker opens up a comic discussion of a recent industrial dispute:

You with the Teamsters? Oh, Teamsters, Teamsters mess y'all around in Chicago. You see the Teamsters got the big one. Did you dig that? One sixty five a hour raise, baby, did you dig that? Damn right! How much did y'all settle for? Eighteen cents more. Eighteen cents – [quiet laughter] Eighteen cents more, what the hell you mean eighteen cents more? Eighteen cents more than what –? Eighteen cents more than what you was *gittin'*! [laughter] Damn right! Them brothers, they took care of the *business* in Chicago, Jim. Yeah, they was *cryin'*, they said, 'If you get that raise, *baby* food gonna go up'. Cat said, 'We don't give a Goddamn, ain't no babies drivin' trucks anyway'. [laughter] Now you all gonna reopen up your contract, or you – you – you – y'all locked yourself in there? All right. And y'all might get in trouble – driving one of them trucks through Chicago. With them cheap wages y'all settle for. Matter of fact, I might throw a brick at you myself. [laughter]. (Gregory, 1997)

The dispute in question saw Chicago truckers holding out for a pay increase of \$1.65 an hour, as opposed to the \$1.10 agreed by the employers and the national Teamsters union. Around 800 Chicago trucking concerns locked their workers out to try to hold to \$1.10, but many other businesses agreed to pay the extra 55 cents an hour above the national deal (*New York Times*, 1970).

Like Al Murray, Gregory takes his time wheedling precise information out of the punter, keen to get the specifics of the deal his union branch struck with his employer. He carefully checks whether the trucker got an eighteen cent raise, or

eighteen cents above the national deal. His perspective is politically radical, siding with the strikers rather than complaining about any inconvenience the strike might have caused to the general public. Indeed, the baby food gag even ridicules the employers' attempts to use guilt to persuade the truckers to go back to work. He firmly aligns himself with the most radical strikers – the Chicago truckers who held out for the biggest raise – and against the national union who 'mess[ed] y'all around in Chicago', and even the man he is talking to who has settled for 'them cheap wages'.

Mark Thomas (1998) makes an even bolder statement, directly attacking the Protestant work ethic and portraying the world of the proper job as a nasty, dangerous place:

Because we automatically respect authority, we obey all the fuckin' rules. The – the biggest drawback we have, the Protestant work ethic. How, how many times do you ever fuckin' hear this, 'Well – hard work never hurt anybody'. Wrong! [laughter] Wrong! Fuckin' hard work – is fuckin' unpleasant! [laughter] What you mean, is a week on the sick never hurt anybody. [laughter] Hard work gives you stomach ulcers, angina, heart attack. Guess where fuckin' industrial accidents happen? [laughter] Work! [laughter] Fact – no-one has put their hand through a threshing machine in their own living room, and that is *true*! [laughter].

This leads into the routine about his experiences working on building sites, and an observation about builders' propensity to steal things from work cues him to ask the audience, 'What's the best thing anyone here's nicked – from work?'. The audience are quick to respond, with individual punters confessing to stealing a fridge, a computer and the bar takings from Butlin's holiday camp. Thomas gets the best part of ten minutes of improvised banter with these workplace thieves, congratulating them on their daring: 'A *fridge*? That is *very* good! Oh, fuck me, we've turned into *The Generation Game*, this is brilliant! [laughter]'. His joy is increased when it transpires that the fridge was stolen from a restaurant, but when he discovers it was an extremely small fridge, he becomes less delighted:

You had a fridge this big in a fuckin' restaurant?? [a few laughs] No, you fuckin' sold hot coffee and fuckin' burgers out the back of a caravan!!! [laughter] Worked in a restaurant, my arse! [laughter and some applause]

Once again, we see a comedian ridiculing a punter for talking up his career, but in this case his achievement as a workplace thief is also being called into question.

This is more political than a gleeful celebration of criminality, though. It follows on from Thomas's assertion that work is 'fuckin' unpleasant', and his criticism that we are generally too keen to 'obey all the fuckin' rules'. The suggestion that workplace theft is a tiny rebellion against authority becomes more overt when the

Butlin's thief explains that he stole the bar money to allow him to go grape-picking in France. Thomas congratulates him by saying, 'You are Birmingham's Reggie Perrin, you're cool! [laughter]'. The reference is telling, as the sitcom character Reginald Perrin escaped the rat race and the pressures of work by faking suicide and assuming a new identity.

'Conduct to be ridiculed and rejected'

Taken together, these examples suggest a subversive critique of the proper job. Career status is ridiculous and dishonest. Bosses are hateful and incompetent. Workers should fight for the best pay deal available, in spite of the advice offered by their employers and agreements made by trade unions. The workplace is unpleasant and dangerous and workplace theft is an acceptable form of payback. How might we judge the apparent radicalism of this comic perspective?

Theories of comedy tend to stress the importance of licence. Referring more to tribal clowns than professional stand-up comics, Douglas (1999: 158) suggests that the joker is 'a privileged person who can say certain things in a certain way which confers immunity'. Mintz (1985: 74) attributes the stand-up comic's 'traditional *licence* for deviate behavior and expression' to the fact that he or she is 'defective in some way' and 'presented to his audience as marginal' (emphasis in original). Similarly, Marc (1989: 18) argues that because comedians draw attention to 'deviant and deficient' aspects of their personality, they appear to be 'dangerously outside the boundaries of social control' and are 'capable of saying things that most of [the audience] would not consider saying in public'. When comedians joke about their profession scarcely amounting to a proper job, they are clearly setting up the idea that they are 'marginal' and even 'defective', thus giving them the licence to critique the world of the proper job, apparently from the outside.

Theories about the role of humour in the workplace mirror this idea, suggesting that just as the comedian is an outsider observing the world from without, so humorous exchanges are seen as being entirely separate from normal workplace activities. Joking represents a frame break, a temporary respite from the seriousness of work, within which we can be as subversive as we like before casting aside our reservations and getting back to the job. This idea is even echoed in a gag told by Henning When (2010), in which he typically plays on the stereotype of German hyper-efficiency:

But let me get one thing straight, we Germans, we like a laugh just like you Brits. The only difference is we Germans, we laugh – once the work is done. [laughter]

Whilst you laugh *instead* of – [laughter] a-ha! – doing any meaningful work. Yeah, and er – [laughter].

This tends to suggest that however apparently subversive comedy may be, it is ultimately conservative. Because joking is seen as, to use Linstead's (1985: 761) words, 'an aside from normal discourse', it acts as safety valve. Hansot (1986: 201) argues that

[O]nce we adopt a given frame to interpret our reality and ourselves, the shoe will begin to pinch, the fit will not be quite right, and we will again look for the temporary relief of a new frame-break...After a frame-break we seem to be able to resume activity within a frame with greater ease...after the joke...the social order persists.

Similarly, Mintz (1985: 74) argues that the comedian can be a 'negative exemplar' who reinforces the social order because '[h]e represents conduct to be ridiculed and rejected, and our laughter reflects our superiority, our relief that his weaknesses are greater than our own'.

These arguments seem to ring true in relation to comics like Al Murray or Henning Wehn, who adopt characters or personas which are more or less distinct from their true identities. Murray says that the Pub Landlord 'couldn't be any less like me' (2012), and it is reasonably well known that the performer is a middle-class Oxford-educated liberal, very different from the hectoring, reactionary working-class character he plays on stage. With Henning Wehn, the divide is less clear – he presents more a persona than a clearly defined character – but he still performs in a highly exaggerated version of himself. For example, earlier in his career he would theatricalise the stereotype of German hyper-efficiency by timing the act with a stopwatch.

With comedians like these, there does seem to be a clear 'frame-break'. It is signalled to the audience that the person they are watching on stage is not real, and that the views expressed are not sincerely held by the performer. The Pub Landlord and Henning Wehn are clearly 'defective' – the former an ignorant pontificator, the latter an eccentric overly concerned with efficiency – and they do seem to represent 'conduct to be ridiculed and rejected', as Mintz puts it.

In fact, comedians like Murray and Wehn are politically complex, with layers of ambiguity and occasional shafts of genuine insight. In a show at the Playhouse Theatre in London in 2001, the Pub Landlord encounters a punter called John, who says he works for UBS bank:

It's not a proper bank, is it mate? [laughter] You're a city boy, aren't ya, eh? [laughter] 'Is the market confident this week?' [laughter, some applause] Should

fucking well hope so, you get a million pound Christmas bonus, *I'd be confident, I don't know about you.* [laughter] Parasite, take us all down with you. [laughter]. (Murray, 2001)

Coming a few years before a major economic crisis fuelled by the recklessness of investment bankers and the bonus culture in the financial sector, such comments are surprisingly prescient.

In other examples, it is much less clear that the performance is 'an aside from normal discourse'. Many comedians adopt stage personas which are far less distinct from their offstage identities, and the opinions they express onstage are – whilst allowing for some degree of exaggeration – sincerely held. Mark Thomas, for example, acknowledges that his stage persona is a 'bigger version of me' (Thomas, 2004), but the anti-authoritarian left-wing stance he espouses in his comedy is absolutely consistent with the political campaigning he conducts in his offstage life. Given this, it is hard to believe that he is offering up his views simply to be 'ridiculed and rejected'.

However, Mintz (1985: 74) also allows for a 'fascinating ambiguity' in stand-up whereby 'to the extent that we may identify with [the comedian's] expression or behaviour...or publically affirm it under the guise of "mere comedy", or "just kidding", he can become our *comic spokesman*' (emphasis in original). Similarly, Linstead also acknowledges humour's 'enormous symbolic power' (1985: 762). The key to this is for humour to break out of its 'non-real' frame:

[I]f we were to look for a change in the organizational or social order to occur as a result of the demystifications of humour, these symbolic reversals must be transposed into a 'real-life' framework, and actualized in a real situation...Humour can have great impact in the world by having its content transposed and defined as serious, but also by transposing real-world content into the humorous frame, and defining it as humorous in an indelible and irreversible way. (1985: 763)

In Thomas's stealing from work routine, the boundaries between 'real-life' and the 'non-real' seem extremely permeable. The comedian talks to real people in his audience, and they admit to what we can reasonably assume to be real workplace thefts. Essentially, they are publically confessing to criminal behaviour, to the approval of the comedian, and – judging from the laughter and applause – the rest of the audience. There is little here to suggest such conduct is being ridiculed and rejected.

Work and non-work, employment and unemployment

In the 1990s, Mark Steel – a political radical, who was for many years a member of the Socialist Workers Party – used to perform a routine which suggests an

interesting model of the relationship between ‘real-life’ and the ‘non-real’. It begins: ‘Now what I want to talk about this evening is how we need a radical change in this country really, a change in the way people run their lives, and I mean a real change, and I think particularly about the way we work’ (Steel, 1996). Having stated his aim, Steel begins to justify it by arguing that ‘every person hates their job’, and proves the point with an observational gag in which he acts out lying in bed in the morning and trying to postpone having to go to work:

‘Oh, one more minute. [laughter] [yawns] Then I’ll get up’. Then the minute comes to an end, ‘Fifty eight, fifty nine – [quiet laughter] Right, on the count of three. [laughter] One, two, and one more – minute’. [laughter].

He then imitates ‘this little voice that’d creep out from the back of your head’ which says, “‘You could always take the day off sick, you know!’ [laughter]’. His solution to this problem is ‘just simply to make having a job illegal [laughter]’. He counters the objection that ‘nothing would get done’ by arguing that nothing gets done at work anyway. By way of illustration, he acts out being shown around the office at the first day of a new job, getting laughs for the detail of his characterisation, and his imagined supervisor explains the role he is to fulfil: ‘[Y]our job is to go through all of the newspapers, er, very carefully, one by one, and er, and colour in the Os [laughter]’.

As the routine continues, Steel rules out the alternatives to the tedium of employment. He sends up the idea of self-employment by imagining somebody simultaneously playing the role of employer and employee, telling himself off for getting to work late:

‘Morning! Afternoon! What time do I call this? I want to see me in my office in half an hour. Oo, I sound in a mood this morning!’ [laughter].

Unemployment is not an option, he argues, supporting his contention by satirising stringent government guidelines which make it hard to claim benefits. He likens this process to a TV game show, a version of the Yes-No game which concludes:

‘Were you available for work this morning?’ ‘I was!’ ‘Even when you were on the toilet?’ ‘Yes’. GONG! ‘No! You were on the toilet, so you can’t’ve been available for work!’ [laughter].

Steel argues that ‘most people love doing things [like] cooking and gardening and do-it-yourself, but they can’t do it because they’re at work all day. And so they can’t do anything constructive!’ The routine concludes with him imagining the perfect world that would emerge if having a job were made illegal, with

everybody cooking, gardening and doing DIY for each other and experiencing true fulfilment from the work they voluntarily engage in:

And people'd be out in the garden at one in the morning and they'd be tapping away and they'd be going, 'One more minute. Then I'll go to bed. Oh, I do love doing this underpinning. [quiet laughter] On the count of three, one two three. One more minute. [quiet laughter] Then I really will stop.

What Steel proposes is a kind of utopia in which all work would be done for its own sake, and thus – like stand-up comedy – not be seen as work at all. Paul Ricoeur (1986: 17) argues that utopias are escapist because

[n]o connecting point exists between the 'here' of social reality and the 'elsewhere' of the utopia. This disjunction allows the utopia to avoid any obligation to come to grips with the real difficulties of a given society.

Clearly, Steel is not suggesting a realistic plan for an alternative society. There might be enough cooks, gardeners and DIY enthusiasts to feed people and keep homes maintained, but how would they find enough sewage fans to keep the drainage system going? Nonetheless, Ricoeur suggests that utopias can serve a useful purpose because they offer a 'nowhere', an 'empty place from which to look at ourselves'. He argues:

What must be emphasized is the benefit of extraterritoriality. From this 'no place' an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted. The field of the possible is now open beyond that of the actual; it is a field, therefore, for alternative ways of living. The development of new, alternative perspectives defines utopia's most basic function. May we not say then that imagination itself – through its utopian function – has a *constitutive* role in helping us *rethink* the nature of our social life? Is not utopia – this leap outside – the way in which we radically rethink what is family, what is consumption, what is authority, what is religion, and so on? Does not the fantasy of an alternative society and its exteriorization 'nowhere' work as one of the most formidable contestations of what is? (1986: 15-16; emphasis in original)

Steel's comic utopia contests *what is* by offering a very real critique of the work that takes place in proper jobs. His examples may be exaggerated or whimsical – clearly nobody has ever been employed simply to colour in Os in a newspaper – but the experiences he describes reflect his actual experiences of the proper jobs he had before becoming a comedian. In his memoir *Reasons to be cheerful* (2001), he relates the experience of lying in bed saying 'one more minute' to a period working in the telephone department of the Post Office at Elephant and Castle. Later, he worked in an office at a London Transport engineering depot, where his work was almost as pointless as colouring in Os:

Each day a small pile of forms came in, and I had to copy the information on to another set of forms and return them to the office who'd sent them in the first place. The purpose of this was never explained. (2001: 95)

His solution may be unworkable, but it is clearly put in at the end of the routine for more than comic effect. The reincorporation of 'one more minute' is clever – both reversing the logic of the lying in bed gag and creating a circular structure for the routine – but it is not the funniest possible way of finishing the act. There are only two comparatively quiet laughs, and the final line gets no audible reaction whatsoever. However, the audience's appreciation of Steel's idea is signalled by the extended applause that follows almost immediately afterwards. What he offers is a wistful vision of a working life vastly more rewarding than the ones many of us endure on a daily basis. By suggesting a fantastical alternative to jobs which are pointless, alienating and unrewarding, he is asking his audience to question and challenge the status quo in their working lives.

Conclusion

Stand-up comedy is a legitimate if highly specialised profession, but numerous gags and routines rely on and promote the idea that it lies outside the world of conventional employment. It may require, as Sarah Millican points out, a powerful work ethic, but the toil that lies behind the performance is rarely considered. Instead, the notion of trading in laughter is incongruous enough to be used as the basis of jokes. The unusualness of comedy *as* work allows comedians to create a range of comedy *about* work. Stand-ups see the everyday world of the workplace from the outside, and they trade in an activity – humour – which is seen as outside of the normal discourse. This gives them licence to satirise fundamental attitudes about our working lives, from status and hierarchy to the core principle that the work we do serves a tangible, useful purpose. They may not be able to suggest any realistic solutions to the problems they identify, but their utopian thinking provides a 'formidable contestations of what is'.

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