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Comedians With A Difference

The Performance Techniques of the Outsider in
Stand-Up Comedy

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Introduction

That this House notes with sadness the 10th anniversary of the death of Bill Hicks, on 26th February 1994, at the age of 33; recalls his assertion that his words would be a bullet in the heart of consumerism, capitalism and the American Dream; and mourns the passing of one of the few people who may be mentioned as being worthy of inclusion with Lenny Bruce in any list of unflinching and painfully honest political philosophers.

MP Stephen Pound, Early day motion 678,

House of

Commons, London, February 25, 2004¹

Labour MP Stephen Pound is not the obvious voice to publicly praise the work of the comedian Bill Hicks on the floor of the House of Commons in 2004. Hicks took drugs since high school, and believed that there was a government conspiracy surrounding the death of President John F. Kennedy. Not your average conservative Texan. His praiser, Pound, tended to vote along liberal, Labour Party lines, supporting housing and welfare benefits, higher taxes on corporations, and efforts to protect the environment. He even voted against the smoking ban several times, fitting well with Hicks' attitude toward the "whining, obnoxious, self-righteous slugs" that make up the world's non-smoking population². However, Pound and Hicks' views do not mesh perfectly. This is demonstrated most notably by the fact that, in 2003, Stephen Pound voted *for* the use of UK military forces in combat operations overseas and voted *in support* of the

¹ Pound, S. (2004, February 25) *Early day motion 678: Anniversary of the Death of Bill Hicks*. [www.parliament.uk. http://www.parliament.uk/edm/2003-04/678](http://www.parliament.uk/edm/2003-04/678)

² *Bill Hicks: Sane Man*. (1989). United States: Sacred Cow Productions.

Iraq War.³ Hicks, who passed away in 1994, had the following to say about the Persian Gulf War, another highly controversial engagement in Iraq which occurred a between 1990 and 1991:

You know we armed Iraq. I wondered about that too, you know. During the Persian Gulf war, those intelligence reports would come out: "Iraq: incredible weapons – incredible weapons." "How do you know that?" (*Pauses, small audience laugh*) "Uh, well (*pauses, pulls an absurd "thinking" face, big laugh from audience*) we looked at the receipts. (*Big laugh and applause from audience*) But as soon as that check clears, we're goin' in. (*Laughter and applause throughout the next three lines*) What time's the bank open? Eight? We're going in at nine. We're going in for God and country and democracy and here's a foetus (*gestures to the right*) and he's a Hitler (*gestures upstage*). Whatever you fucking need, let's go. (*Small laugh*) Get motivated behind this, let's go!⁴

It was a very similar sense of purpose and patriotic self-preservation that what led so many to vote in favour of the 2003 Iraq War. Indeed, the satirical gibes of Hicks were mirrored by the real-world statements of the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair in 2002:

For the moment, let me say this: Saddam Hussein's regime is despicable, he is developing weapons of mass destruction, and we cannot leave him doing so unchecked. He is a threat to his own people and to the region and, if allowed to develop these weapons, a threat to us also.⁵

³ mySociety.com. 2016. "Steve Pound: MP, North Ealing". [Online] Available at: https://www.theyworkforyou.com/mp/10484/steve_pound/ealing_north/votes. [Accessed 10 August 2016]

⁴ Bill Hicks in Bould, C. (Director). (1993) *Bill Hicks: Revelations* [Television Special] United Kingdom: Channel 4; The "foetus" and the "Hitler" references are performed as separate from one another. The "foetus" is a provocative image representing the abortion debate, meant to be another reason for people to feel passionately about a fight, whereas the "Hitler" is in reference to Sadaam Hussein, the leader of Iraq during the Persian Gulf War.

⁵ Tony Blair quoted in Hansard, House of Commons 6th series, vol. 383, col. 23. 10 April 2002.

This statement and others like it is what led 396 members of Parliament to vote that “the Government should use all means necessary to ensure the disarmament of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction leading to the UK joining the US invasion of Iraq two days later.”⁶ Stephen Pound was among their number; the same Stephen Pound who, just two years later, would affirm on the floor of the House of Commons that Bill Hicks was “worthy of inclusion with Lenny Bruce in any list of unflinching and painfully honest political philosophers.” Clearly Hicks’ words and ideas permeated the conscience of many, even those who did not agree with him on every issue. How does an outsider comedian evolve from an outsider who holds some rather extreme ideas, to a “painfully honest political philosopher” in the eyes of such a person as Steve Pound?

Hicks once described his role as a comedian by saying that “the comic is the guy who says, ‘Wait a minute’ as the consensus forms. He’s the antithesis to the mob mentality . The comic is a flame – like Shiva the Destroyer, toppling idols no matter what they are.”⁷ What is it that could grant a stand-up comedian such potential destructive and (hopefully, also like the god Shiva) constructive power? This thesis attempts to answer this question by examining certain performance techniques that an outsider comedian, one whose ideas are viewed as unusual, unexpected, or unpopular, uses to create a bond with their audience. The meaning of *outsider* that this thesis will adopt is as follows: An outsider is one who does not fully exist within any one world; a figure who lives a marginal life. This marginality should be understood in the terms

⁶ mySociety.com. (2016). *Steve Pound: MP, North Ealing*. [Online] Available at: https://www.theyworkforyou.com/mp/10484/steve_pound/ealing_north/divisions?policy=1049. Accessed 10 August 2016.

⁷ True, C. (2002). *American Scream: The Bill Hicks Story*. London, United Kingdom: Sidgewick & Jackson. p.178.

laid out by Robert Park: the outsider is “a cultural hybrid... He is a man on the margin of two cultures and two societies, which never completely interpenetrated and fused... One who lives in two worlds, in both of which he is more or less of a stranger.”⁸⁹ While the idea of the marginal man has existed for nine decades, the language is perfectly crafted to allow the reader to easily picture the situation of the outsider comedian. They are truly astride two experiences; not fully in their own mental and experiential world, but also connected to the ever shifting world of their audiences. This may be said to describe nearly all comedians, or performers who offer up a glimpse of their naked self on stage, but what sets the outsider stand-up comedian apart is that they are constantly using this position as a deeply personal reference point for their comedy. Almost all of the material references here is related to this bridging of two experiences, two clear and distinct worlds that the comedian is choosing to compare and contrast through a variety of well-honed performance skills.

The shifting audience population faced by the stand-up comedian also facilitates the need amongst outsider comedians to become masters of a wide variety of performance techniques which can potentially draw an audience closer to the comic. This drawing in could potentially lead to a very close relationship between comedian and audience. The outsider comedian would then be able to present their unusual, unexpected, and unpopular ideas with more care, candour, and conviction. This thesis aims to explore those performance techniques and their impact on

⁸ Park, R. E. (1928, May). Human Migration and the Marginal Man, *American Journal of Sociology*, 33(6). The University of Chicago Press. p. 892.

⁹ Within this thesis, Park’s term “marginal man” should be understood as referring to the outsider position of both men and women. The designation should not be considered exclusive to male comedians within the broader scope of modern stand-up performance.

the relationship between the comedian and their audience. I will present smaller case studies for the techniques themselves, with evidence often drawn from first-hand interviews and viewings of performances. There are also three larger case studies which highlight outsider comedians who demonstrate a mastery of a wide variety of performance skills. These comedians go on to create a community within their audience, and challenge them to rethink or reconsider their thoughts and opinions. When is it socially permissible to laugh? What does the British public think it knows about British Muslims? And how should the British government best represent their citizens' needs.

However, before that discussion can begin, I will spend the first chapter of this work setting out a clear understanding of what stand-up comedy is, where it came from, and what makes it such a perfect vehicle for potential societal change. This is then followed by a chapter regarding the identity of the audience. How should we think of this collection of individuals? How do comedians who use their outsider position as an active part of their performance understand the composition of their own audiences? It is then that we turn to a discussion of the techniques practiced by the outsider stand-up comedian to bridge the gap between themselves and the audience.

The overall goal of this thesis is to investigate how stand-up comedians who actively emphasise their marginality, use certain performance techniques uniquely suited to stand-up comedy in order to build a relationship with their audience. Those performance techniques will be analysed for how they serve to draw the outsider comedian and their audience closer together.

We will then end this investigation by looking at comedians who have employed those techniques in such a well-crafted and intentional manner, that they not only build deep relationships with their audience, but reach a point where their unusual, unexpected, and unpopular outsider ideas have the potential to take root and grow within their audience. The magical thing is that this new growth may not be confined to the four walls of the performance space. The ideas could spread, like a vine, clinging to the hearts and minds of the audience members who had grown so close to the comedian throughout the performance. Travelling with them. Ready to be replanted.

Chapter One

Stand-Up Comedy - Definition and Modern Origins

Defining Stand-Up Comedy

Stand-up comedy. Two words that must be fully understood to kick off our investigation into the potentially transformative power of the outsider stand-up comedian. A firm foundation for this understanding would be a definition of what sets stand-up comedy performance apart from other dramatic forms. What makes stand-up comedy different from dramatic theatre? How is it different from spoken-word poetry, live television, or film? What makes stand-up comedy *unique*? Oliver Double defines stand-up comedy as "a single performer standing in front of an audience, talking to them with the specific intention of making them laugh".¹⁰ This simple, straightforward sentence serves to address some of the above questions and is a great place to start on our journey towards a greater understanding of the outsider stand-up comedian and their potential ability to inspire change.

In *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-Up Comedy* (2013), Double expands on this earlier definition to draw deeper distinctions between stand-up comedy and other approaches to performance. He adds an emphasis on the importance of the "Personality" of that "single performer", differentiating them from an actor playing a scripted role: "[Stand-up comedy] puts a

¹⁰ Double, Oliver, 1997. *Stand-Up! On Being a Comedian*, p. 4

person on display in front of an audience, whether that person is an exaggerated comic character or a version of the performer's own self." The nature of the comedian/audience relationship is also fleshed out in greater detail in this revised definition: "It involves direct communication between performer and audience. It's an intense relationship, with energy flowing back and forth between stage and auditorium."¹¹ This "intense relationship" is at the heart of the art form, and the key dynamic that will be explored in greater detail throughout this thesis. Together these two factors are also clearly linked to an earlier definition of stand-up comedy that will form the foundation of our investigation into the link between the stand-up comedian and a fuller understanding of the outsider.

The foundational definition referred to above is built upon in David Marc's *Comic Visions: Television Comedy & American Culture* (1997). Marc crystallises the two central aspects of stand-up comedy performance that set it apart from other art forms, adding dimension to our definition of stand-up comedy:

1. An "absolute directness of artist/audience communication in a free-standing presentation rather than as part of a narrative drama"¹²

¹¹ Double, O. *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-Up Comedy*, 2013. p. 19. Double also specifies the importance of the "present tense" nature of stand-up performance in this section: "It happens in the present tense, in the here and now. It acknowledges the performance situation". This portion of the definition will be returned to in a later chapter when discussing the building of a created community by the comedian and audience within a performance, but diverts slightly from this chapter's discussion of the person of the comedian, and was therefore not highlighted above.

¹² Marc, D. *Comic Visions: Television Comedy & American Culture*, 1997. p. 13. The formatting of these quotations as a numbered list is my own.

2. The stand-up comedian "addresses an audience as a naked self, eschewing the luxury of a clear cut distinction between art and life"¹³

This compound definition finds its roots in another attempt to define stand-up comedy by Lawrence Mintz: "... our definition should stress relative directness of artist/audience communication and the proportional importance of comic behaviour and comic dialogue versus the development of plot and situation. Such a definition is hardly pure, but it is workable."¹⁴ As Mintz says, this definition is not "pure", but it does allow for a wide variety of performance styles. Marc takes this openness one step further by focusing the second part of his definition on the person of the stand-up comedian, rather than the form of the performance itself (presentation of "the naked self" versus presentation of "comic behavior and dialogue"). It is Marc's emphasis on the person of the comedian that this thesis will investigate further, irrespective of the specific form that those comedians' performances take.

These two characteristics, couched within the simple, straightforward definition of stand-up comedy as offered by Double, are inherent to every approach to stand-up performance, and effectively set the art form of stand-up performance apart from other theatrical forms. Double's later additions to his own definition of stand-up comedy slot very nicely into these two areas, as well; one point highlighting the "direct communication between comedian and audience", and the second focusing on the presentation of the comedian as a "person on display". These two aspects of the definition of stand-up comedy are our foundation. Using them as a starting place

¹³ Marc, p. 11

¹⁴ Mintz, L. E. *American Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Special Issue: American Humor (Spring, 1985), p. 71

for analysis, we can attempt gain a greater insight into the person of the stand-up comedian. What drives them? And, crucially, why might outsiders flourish in the world of stand-up comedy?

So let us examine this first characteristic at the heart of stand-up comedy, the absolute directness of artist/audience communication. Stand-up performance without an audience is transformed into something entirely different. It becomes something to be listened to, not to be directly engaged with in the moment. It is for this reason that both parties, the comedian and the audience, are absolutely integral to the performance. Double describes this necessity of communication as vital to the success of a stand-up performance:

The job [of being a stand-up comedian] is dynamic and interactive. If a comedy film isn't getting laughs in the cinema, the celluloid will keep rolling through the projector completely unaffected by its failure. The stand-up feeds on audience response, and if the laughs don't come, he or she will tense up, the delivery will lose its edge, the while performance will get worse, and so the audience will laugh less and less.¹⁵

This interplay between comedian and audience is what holds sway over the entire performance. The comic offering and its response by the audience either keeps the proceedings rolling along happily, or jolts everything to an awkward or angry stop. This inherent characteristic of the art form of stand-up comedy means that any successful practitioner must be able to read and adjust to whatever happens during their performance. This is a wholly separate pursuit from careful

¹⁵ Double, O. 1996. p. 5

rehearsal of a play script by a dramatic actor, or hours spent in a cutting room by a film editor. Stand-up comedy demands a live audience. As William Cook has said, "Since stand-up hinges on the interaction between an individual and an audience rather than other individuals on a stage, there's absolutely no proper preparation apart from the real thing."¹⁶ Because the directness of artist/audience communication happens live in the moment, it can only be honed through years of practice. The stand-up comedian must become an expert at addressing a group of individuals different from himself, developing their skills to establish that directness of communication quickly and maintain it throughout the performance. It may sometimes seem as though both parties, the comedian and the audience, are coming to a performance with no real foreknowledge of exactly how the evening will play out. However, by continually performing and honing those communication skills, the seasoned stand-up comedian has the benefit of a back-catalogue of responses they can employ, as well foreknowledge of how portions of their performance may go down with an audience. These cultivated skills help the comedian control the balancing act of every performance to keep the evening ticking along successfully and will be further detailed in Chapter Four of this thesis.

The second of our key characteristics of stand-up comedy is that the comedian addresses the audience as a person on display, a naked self, blurring the line between art and life. This adds dimension to Double's defining of stand-up comedy as featuring "a single performer standing in front of an audience". This "single performer" is presenting their "naked self" as they stand in front of that audience. Whether performing as a closer reflection of themselves or as a highly

¹⁶ Cook, W. *Ha Bloody Ha: Comedians Talking*, 1994. p. 123

extrapolated character, “naked self” refers to the closeness of the creator to the final performance. Often that closeness is so extreme as to appear complete, and this is only enhanced further by their connection to the material. They are not beholden to an unchanging, pre-existing script, or a prescriptive 'right way' that they should go about performing their own material. In so doing, the stand-up comedian is presenting their own unique approach to the world around them. Every detail, both big and small, of the presentation adds up to a performance that is inexorably linked to that specific comedian. Try as one might, no one could perform the "Cake or Death" section of Eddie Izzard's show *Dress to Kill* (1999) and have it be received in exactly the same way as the original. This is because, unique to stand-up performance, the line between a comedian's art and their life lacks any clear cut distinction. How much of the success of that bit is down to Izzard's facial expressions, his timing, his accent and his tone? Where does the material stop and Eddie Izzard begin? It can often be impossible to tell thanks to stand-up comedy's emphasis on the presentation of the naked self.

And so we have a fuller definition of “stand-up comedy”. It is a single performer standing in front of an audience, talking with that audience directly within a free-standing presentation of the performer's naked self, all with the specific intention of making the audience laugh. Having presented this definition of stand-up comedy and its key characteristics in further detail, we have one task remaining to truly flesh out this art form. We must look to the historical stepping stones that led up to this art form, for only by acknowledging the past of theatrical comedy can we gain a full understanding of the present, and all of the opportunities it presents.

Historical Roots of Modern Stand-Up Comedy

When the stand-up comedian sits down to draw up their theatrical family tree, what would they find? Just like when anyone else investigates their genealogy, learning about the past can give one a new appreciation for the present. And so we must begin at the beginning. The art form of stand-up comedy shares DNA with theatrical forms from hundreds, even thousands of years ago, even with tribal and religious rites, some documented, others only theorised by historians. The story continues through medieval carnival festivities and Italian Renaissance street performers. Within each of these select theatrical genres we see the fostering of outsider voices, a voice which our stand-up comedian genealogist would eventually be able to claim as their own. However, the most recent relatives of modern stand-up comedy would emerge around the late nineteenth century, taking place in two separate locations, the United States and Great Britain.

In the U.S., the “father” of today’s stand-up comedy was Vaudeville, “a form of popular theatre which began in the late nineteenth century. Growing out of forms of popular entertainment like dime museums and Yiddish theatre.”¹⁷ Vaudeville emerged from the bustling streets of New York City, offering the diverse populace a place of entertainment and escape from their busy lives. The first glimmers of what would eventually become stand-up comedy can be seen in the work of the vaudeville MCs who introduced the other acts. “By definition, they had to address the audience directly, and they would also make comic ad libs.” This glimmer is also witnessed in the work of comic monologists who performed scripted material. Performers like Bob Hope, Jack Benny, and Milton Berle. “addressed the audience directly and told jokes, but they

¹⁷ Double, Oliver. *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-Up Comedy*, Electronic book. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, London, 2013. p. 23

probably only started doing this towards the end of the vaudeville era.”¹⁸ Double goes on to trace the American roots of modern stand-up through this demise of vaudeville due to competition with cinema, the transferal of those monologists’ acts to hotel circuits in upstate New York’s Catskill Mountains, as well as cabaret, night club, and small theatre circuits in cities around the country. This restructuring eventually leads to the development of comedy clubs (the first being opened in New York City in 1962¹⁹) and a traveling class of comedian performers who take their material with them wherever they perform, adapting and changing it as they go. The transient life that accompanied this need to appear on a circuit will go on to define the experience of most modern stand-up comedians.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, the “mother” of modern stand-up comedy was the British Music Hall and its performers. Founded slightly earlier than the vaudeville tradition, defined by Double as occurring in 1852 with Charles Morton’s opening of the Canterbury Hall in London, solidifying the tradition of “tavern-based entertainment” into a more “formalised” format. This format initially included “a series of acts - mainly singers - performing to male-dominated, largely working-class audiences who drank and ate as they watched”, but would grow to fill bigger and bigger spaces which “began to look less like taverns and more like theatres.”²⁰ Acts began to diversify around this development. “The classic musical hall style of solo performers singing comic or serious songs in character was gradually by a more varied set of acts.”²¹ This “varied

¹⁸ *ibid*, p. 25

¹⁹ *ibid*, p. 26

²⁰*ibid*, p. 35

²¹ *ibid*, p. 36

set of acts” causes the term “variety” to supplant “musical hall”, and amongst this variety grows the embryo of stand-up comedy. The singers sing largely comedic songs directly to the audience, “a patter section” emerges between those songs involving the telling gags, and over time that patter begins to overtake the songs in the performance.²² As asserted by Double, the personalities of those performers are “put on display in front of an audience”, much like the personas of our modern stand-up comedians. The directness of communication between those comedians and their audience that emerges from this type of persona-based performance can be seen reflected in the definition of stand-up comedy we outlined earlier.

This chapter has set out to both define stand-up comedy, and to offer a better understanding of stand-up comedy’s place in modern comedy performance history. The “absolute directness of artist/audience communication” that anchors our definition of stand-up comedy, binds the stand-up comedians of today to those comic performers of old. It also points us towards our next area of inquiry: the audience.

²² *ibid* p. 37

Chapter Two

Understanding the Audience

As established in the previous chapter, one of the defining qualities of stand-up comedy is the directness of communication between artist and *audience*. When the label of outsider is applied to the stand-up comedian, one must look to identify the insider in that relationship. Who exactly are these outsider comedians an outsider from? This chapter aims to investigate how the stand-up comedy audience stands in contrast to the comedian, and how this contrast could actually create an environment in which both comedian and audience can come together to build a relationship through the performance.

The Complexity of Audience Composition

In much the same way that no two live performances are ever the same, no two audiences are ever the same. There is a wide variety of factors that can contribute to an audience's composition, and an equally wide swathe of people who may choose to attend the same performance. In his work on the interplay between cultural capital and an individual's taste in comedy, "Comedy and distinction: the cultural currency of a 'good' sense of humour", Sam Friedman highlights one particular comedian who demonstrates this audience diversity:

Interview data describing preferences for Eddie Izzard illustrated the utility of this methodological eclecticism. In the survey, Izzard was shown to be not only the most popular comedian (liked by 67% of the sample), but... he

was also liked by the majority of respondents from across the cultural capital spectrum. However in interviews, when respondents were asked to explain why they liked Izzard, their reasons were often very different.

Izzard's comedy was found to be a polysemic resource, open to multiple readings.²³

Izzard's 'energy' and 'silliness' attracted those whom Friedman deemed holders of lowbrow cultural capital, and his respondents identified as holders of highbrow cultural capital emphasised the more 'surreal', 'whimsical', or 'challenging' aspects of Izzard's comedy. This variety in response demonstrates the complexity present in many comedians' audiences. Izzard also demanded the highest favourability rating from those surveyed (out of the 16 comedians and 16 television shows Friedman included in the study). This speaks to the intensity of feeling held by this collective group of audience members, no matter what it is that specifically attracts them to Izzard. For someone at this level of popularity, it would seem almost impossible to ever fully pin down exactly who it is that comprises each successive audience. Holders of high and lowbrow cultural capital can potentially find themselves shoulder to shoulder with each other at Izzard's shows, laughing and enjoying the fruits of a talented stand-up comedian.

This is just one example of comedians who, by virtue of their specific fame and appeal, attract a diverse audience. As with other such successful comedians, this diversity can exist socio-economically, racially, or in terms of gender/age.²⁴ As a result of this type of appeal, it may become difficult to clearly identify a comedian with such broad appeal and appreciation, as an

²³Friedman, Sam. *Comedy and Distinction: The Cultural Currency of a 'Good' Sense of Humour*, 2014, p 81

²⁴ Friedman also highlights comedians Simon Amstell and Jimmy Carr as examples of this same type of broad attraction to a variety of audience members (p 82)

“outsider”. An outsider from whom? Surely, with such an amorphous group of audience members, one could not claim to be completely unlike every single member of that audience. The audience being so fluid, makes the statement “I am different from you” a difficult truth to claim. However, even in light of the widespread appeal of comedians such as Eddie Izzard, Jimmy Carr, or Simon Amstell, we can still clearly and honestly state that these comedians are undeniably outsiders from each of their audience members in one specific way, stated so succinctly by comedian Phil Jupitus:

“There’s this odd dynamic of just a thousand people in the room...

I’m the one and you’re the 999.”²⁵

He efficiently simplifies the separation between the comedian and the audience in this short statement. The bare bones of a stand-up comedy performance is, after all, that one person talks and everyone else listens. Every comedian, regardless of performance style or material, is an outsider by the fact that they are the one on a stage performing, while everyone else is united as the audience, no matter who exactly that audience is made up of. A stand-up comedian whose identical twin sat in the audience would *still* be able to look out at that comedy club audience and be cast as an outsider thanks to this brave step up to the microphone. The comedians discussed in this work are those who embrace this position of exclusivity and use it as a performance tool to help build a relationship with their audience, together exploring the comedian’s potentially unusual, unexpected, or unpopular ideas, beliefs, and stories.

²⁵ Jupitus quoted in Double. *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-up Comedy*. London: Methuen, 2005. p. 107

Knowing the Audience

Working from our understanding of audience complexity and diversity established by Friedman, we can now investigate *how* a stand-up comedian can begin the process of using their outsider position (as defined by Jupitus) to build a relationship with their audience. One of the key tools in a comedian's tool box when it comes to constructing a solid relationship with an audience in every performance, is some understanding of who their audience is. Are they highbrow or lowbrow holders of cultural capital, or maybe somewhere in between. This act of pre-performance analysis relies heavily on the comedian's preexisting knowledge of who their audience is, both in general and specifically (should the performance be catered to a specific population such as a corporate show, a university gig, or a charity fundraiser). The ability to know such details may take weeks, months, or years to fully develop, and is almost always evolving and changing based on the career path followed by the comedian.

Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves make the argument that amateur comics are much more likely to "know their audience". In their book *The Naked Jape: Uncovering the Hidden World of Jokes*, they add to this assertion by saying:

This is why you can sometimes tell your friends a joke completely back to front, mess up the punchline and *still* all end up on the floor; the whole purpose of private joke-telling is not to judge the quality of the performance, but rather for everyone to laugh together, signalling how much they're enjoying each other's company.²⁶

²⁶ Carr, J. and Lucy Greeves. *The Naked Jape: Uncovering the Hidden World of Jokes*, 2007. p. 117

This sort of casual joking can reinforce the bonds between small groups of friends, and are often integral to the forming of a lasting relationship. Unfortunately for the professional comedian, a full-time outsider, the ability to gauge one's audience involves a great deal of exposure to a variety of unknown faces. The intimacy of understanding shared between a small group of close friends is a far cry from a connection between the comedian and the one hundred plus individuals in the audience. For example, when asked how well he thought he knew his audience, veteran comedian Marcus Brigstocke responded:

I end up surveying my audience quite a bit, and I have a slightly peculiar demographic in as much as I've done a lot on Radio 4, which means that a lot of my people that are interested in my work are in their 60s or even above. I've also done children's shows, so I get quite a few early teens who want to come and see me, and I probably have a much smaller demographic of normal stand-up fans who like comics and go and see a range of comics who I would mostly put in their 30s... In terms of who they are as people... Every comic probably flatters themselves that they attract an intellectual crowd, but I probably do for the most part, or at least a curious crowd, which is much better than being intellectual anyway.²⁷

Brigstocke uses this knowledge of his audience to adjust his material. When he made this remark, Brigstocke was touring the extremely audience interaction-driven show *The Brig Society*. Over the course of the show Brigstocke would appoint various audience members to be new government cabinet ministers. They would be asked to think up a piece of government legislation for their department which they felt would be an improvement on the current

²⁷ Marcus Brigstocke interview. October 25, 2012

government's policies. The newly "elected" ministers would later be called on to share their ideas which Brigstocke would then propose to the entire audience and riff off of the response. Deciding to write such a show means that Brigstocke must have had a great deal of trust in the intellect and social engagement of his audience. The success of this show and its format in turn shows that the writing of such a premise is not as risky as it would be for a comedian lacking any demographic knowledge of their audience. As stated earlier, Brigstocke feels that the audience he attracts is an "intellectual" and "curious" crowd, and with this knowledge he was able to write and structure in large sections of audience discussion and debate without worrying if the audience would be to the challenge.

Another way comedians can use an understanding of their audience's commonalities to their benefit is by constructing material and employing performance elements that will force the comedian to continually evolve and develop their performance style and content. For example, comedian David O'Doherty notes the following:

The comedy audience is generally what would be called "Liberal" or "left leaning", it doesn't take much to come out and tell them that you're in favour of the right to choose or whatever, it's not that interesting a thing to do... that will tend to get a wide spread agreement.²⁸

This demonstrates O'Doherty's preexisting knowledge of who his audience is and the type of morals they are likely to hold. He therefore knows that to spend time on such topics as being

²⁸ Mills, S. (2012, October 29). David O'Doherty interview. Personal.

“left leaning” or supporting a woman’s right to choose will neither satisfy the audience’s desire to be exposed to new ideas, or his own creative desire to develop new material.

David O’Doherty, knowing that his audience would be unsatisfied with stagnation and “more of the same”, is riding the wave that first crested with the emergence of alternative comedy in the 1980s. Left-leaning comedians chose to go out of their way to challenge their left-leaning audience. In his book *Stand-Up!: On Being a Comedian*, Oliver Double highlights the connection between this challenging new approach to comedy and the emergence of punk rock at around the same time:

The links with punk bands were more than mere coincidence: the first alternative comedians shared punk’s aggressively anarchic approach to performance, together with its insistence that passion was more important than technical ability.²⁹

The young public who were attending shows at The Comedy Store in the early days of alternative comedy did not want to hear outdated mother-in-law jokes or racist quips about Pakistani shopkeepers, they wanted, and were attracted to, the new, loud, challenging performances of comedians such as Alexei Sayle, Tony Allen, Rik Mayall, and Ben Elton. One such example from Tony Allen combines the new audience’s dissatisfaction with the stand-up comedy of the past and Allen’s own, often anarchistic observations of life:

Ok, stand-up comedy, I know what you want... There was this drunk homosexual Pakistani squatter trade unionist takes my mother-in-law to an Irish restaurant... says to the West Indian waiter, ‘Waiter, waiter,

²⁹ Double, Oliver, 1996. p.167-168.

there's a racial stereotype in my soup...' No, no, no... That's not to say that I haven't got prejudices, 'cos I have. There's one minority group that I *loathe*... the Metropolitan Police Force. And in particular the drug squad. You can always recognise the drug squad where I live, on Portobello Road, Saturday afternoon - they're the only people in plain clothes... khaki anoraks, C&A denims, short but unfashionable hair, and sensible boots, right? They look like lapsed Mormons...

What I want to know is, where is the cop on the beat when it comes to arresting the *real* criminals... you know, the *real* criminals - the multinational corporations... that move the economy of one part of the world to another part of the world and blitz whole communities... Where's the cop on the beat when it comes to arresting *them*? 'Well, I was walking in a north-easterly direction in the boardroom of Amalgamated Conglomerates, when I noticed the accused and several other persons unknown, making a dubious decision as to the economic future of Latin America. Well, I cautioned him, arrested him, and bunged him in the back of the Transit. That's when he must have hit his head...' ³⁰

By knowing that his young audience were angry and frustrated with the common tropes of stand-up comedy in the 1970s (racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.) Allen was effectively given comic license to act as a release valve for that pent up frustration. The new trend of "alternative comedy" allowed Allen and his contemporaries to link into the social and cultural revolutions taking place in all aspects of 1980s life in Great Britain. While discussing "Alternative Cabaret",

³⁰ Allen quoted in Wilmot, Roger, and Peter Rosengard. *Didn't You Kill My Mother-In-Law?: The Story of Alternative Comedy in Britain from the Comedy Store to Saturday Live*. 1989. p.29-30

an offshoot of the “altcom” revolution, Double emphasises the following development of comedy during this time of change:

Alternative Cabaret also took one of alt com’s most important political steps when it adopted a non-sexist, non-racist line. It was the first time in the history of stand-up that comedians had voluntarily adopted egalitarian moral guidelines in their work, and the repercussions of this are still with us today...³¹

Intelligence and a social conscience were not requirements, but the exercising of them through performance was welcomed by an audience thirsty for something new. An audience that the outsider comedian was able to more closely align themselves with thanks to a strong understanding of what that audience expected of them as comedians in the tumultuous environment of 1980s Britain.

As the alternative comedians of the 1980s could tell what their audience expected of them, current stand-up comedian Tony Law feels that he knows that his audience “pretty well” and believes that they would never allow him to stop evolving and experimenting:

I always think (my audience) won’t except me if I do a bit that’s a bit hack, or lame. They want creativity from me, I think. And it’s only been the last few years since I’ve built up an audience where I’ve had to feel like that, and it puts a lot of pressure on me, I think. Yeah, I’ve really got to always be creative and try to come up with something that’s as unique as I can be... If I turned around and did a set that got me on *Live at the Apollo*, and was, like, hugely popular, suddenly I had all these new

³¹ Double, Oliver. *Stand Up!: On Being a Comedian*. London: Methuen, 1997. p.174

followers, I think my core audience might be disappointed... They would prefer me go down a road that doesn't work. They like to watch me fail once a show *at least*, I think.³²

Law is able to recognise that his core audience would prefer that he continually experiments and does not settle on any bit of easily identifiable schtick (the type of performing that lends itself so well to success on major stand-up comedy television series). This helps Law continue to evolve and change, adding things to his act, playing with the form, and knowing that his core audience are the type of people that appreciate this dynamic in their comedian/audience relationship. John McGrath relates this demand for new material to the development of mass-media culture:

... The experience of movies has led the popular audience to expect a certain level of invention and intensity and movement from a good piece of entertainment: and taught them the shorthand, the elliptical language of narrative necessary to maintain such a pace. What's more, the pace is increasing over the last ten years...³³

Clearly this knowledge of one's audience not only helps hone preexisting material and performance technique, but can also serve as a catalyst for the creation of new, fresh ideas in the future. Fully appreciating the audience as a potentially complex and diverse organism, as well as bringing to the fore every last bit of gathered knowledge as to who precisely they have performed to in the past, provides the outsider comedian an excellent resource from which to build a strong relationship with their audience. The following chapter will investigate how

³² Mills, S. (2013, March 23). Tony Law interview. Personal.

³³ McGrath, J. (1997). *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form*. London: Nick Hern Books. p. 19.

different comedians use this knowledge of audience to accentuate their own outsider nature, thereby drawing audiences together and building a strong relationship between performer and public.

Chapter Three

Performing outsidership as a relationship building tool between comedian and audience

This chapter will seek to offer clear examples of how the stand-up comedian plays off of their outsider position to draw their audience in and build a relationship with them. We will break down this investigation by considering two types of outsider comedians: the natural outsider, and the crafted outsider. The natural outsider wears their identity on their sleeve, or maybe more accurately on their skin, their face, or through their voice. This comedian uses these unavoidable markers of individuality as a tool to build material, as well as a relationship with their audience where both parties are made stronger by a striving towards better understanding. The crafted outsider deliberately cultivates their outsider persona, relying less on unchangeable aspects of their identity, and instead choosing ways of building a performance identity that sets them apart. Providing an extreme representation of crafted outsidership also has ways to draw the audience in, everyone eager to explore and better understand the world created by this bizarre figure. Both approaches demonstrate ways in which performing outsidership can serve as a relationship building tool between comedian and audience, and it is precisely that kind of relationship building which may open the door for an audience to be challenged, inspired, and motivated by a stand-up comedian in a bigger way than just a laugh or a chuckle in the darkness of one's seat.

The Natural Outsider

As stated above, the natural outsider uses their unavoidable markers of individuality to drive much of their performance of outsidership. This includes everything from one's voice, to one's race or level of celebrity. The line between the comedian's naked self and their persona is a thin one in this scenario, and the audience is drawn in by virtue of the comedians' frankness, openness, and passion when performing through this lens of natural outsidership. It is often visible to everyone, but the care that is taken by the comedian to take what is visible and use it to creatively pull others into their story, is what makes this type of performative outsidership such a useful tool in building a strong comedian-audience relationship.

The Chosen Language and Voice of the Natural Outsider

There are many ways by which an audience can identify the natural outsider comedian during a performance. The easily observable characteristics of a performer's speech patterns, turns of phrase, and accent are often the very first glimpses given to the audience of who it is they are about to see perform. These can be used as tools by the comedian to highlight their otherness, as well as emphasise the character and material they are attempting to put across to their audience.

In the 1979 work *Social Markers in Speech* the following is said of the impact which speech markers³⁴ have on social interaction:

At the most fundamental level, [speech markers] serve as easily perceived auditory stimuli which permit speakers to reveal their association with broadly defined biological, social and psychological states, and listeners to categorise others accurately in these terms. Level 1 speech markers, then, serve the general function of maintaining the social system by identifying and recognising members who occupy various roles and hierarchical positions within it... At a more psychologically important level, speech markers permit interlocutors indirectly to communicate important attitudes, beliefs, values and intentions about their own social states as well as processing the emotional significance of the social states of others... Although our assignment to many social categories is largely involuntary, we do have some control over our overt feelings about them. Speech markers assume salience, then, in marking our beliefs about and attitudes towards these social categories.

Therefore, it may be obvious which ethnic group a person belongs to from cues of skin colour and the language spoken, but inferences about whether the person is proud or ashamed of the affiliation, the person's attitudes towards other related social categories, and specific anxieties towards other related social categories and so forth can be communicated by accentuating or attenuating speech markers characteristic of the particular social category in question.³⁵

34 "Speech markers are defined as those extralinguistic, paralinguistic and linguistic cues which differentiate between various biological, social and psychological categories or characteristics of speakers which are important - actually or potentially - for social organisation and social interaction." -Giles, H., Scherer K. R. & Taylor, D.M. *Speech markers in social interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1979. p. 360

35 Giles, H., Scherer, K. R., & Taylor, D.M, 1979. p. 343-345

So much information can be transmitted through something as minute as a single sentence. When placed in the mouth of a comedian, one who has purposefully placed the spotlight on themselves alone, these variances in speech markers can be very useful. They can assist the comedian by self-defining their character, their beliefs, and their background incredibly efficiently. Often these auditory markers correlate with outwardly observable aspects of the performer, but at other times, it is the voice itself that propels the audience into an understanding of the comedian's removal from their community,

One prime example of such a clear distinction being drawn between comedian and audience by virtue of the performer's speech markers is the show *Made in France*, by comedian Yacine Belhousse.³⁶ As the title makes clear, the comedian is himself French and is performing in English. At the opening of the show, Belhousse states that this is his first time performing a show completely in English, and that the audience must forgive him if he misspeaks. He says all of this through a very thick French accent, which he points out is realistic, rather than the overly guttural and exaggerated form of the accent that many British people assume his countrymen have: "No one speaks like that! We had the last man who spoke like that killed... on Tuesday!" Belhousse wants to make it clear that his voice is genuine, and that his performance will stay true to that genuine nature. He is also letting the audience know, very blatantly, that he has anxiety related to his treatment of language during this performance.

I can speak English pretty well, except that I'm afraid sometimes I will forget the verb. So sometimes I will use the infinitive form and add this:

36 Belhousse, Y. *Made In France*. Edinburgh: The Pleasance Theatre.

“This is in the past”. Okay? So I might say, “He throws the ball... in the past”. I just cannot get it right. He THREW! He THREW the ball!³⁷

Not only does this section of material serve to highlight Belhousse’s self-awareness as a foreign speaker of English, but in so doing he is building a bridge of understanding between himself and his audience, effectively drawing them closer together. This continues to be the case throughout the evening, with Belhousse emphasising every instance that he is forced to correct his less than firm grasp on the past tense. He places the mic very close to his mouth and deliberately whispers “... in the past” after every such slip up, garnering more and more laughter with each recurrence. As a running joke, this emphasis on his linguistic otherness actually draws his British audience in and cements a bond built on honesty and lightheartedness towards the outsider amongst them.

Belhousse uses his clear vocal otherness to draw his audience towards him, however accents and other speech markers can just as easily be called upon to underline major differences between the speaker and their audience. In his show “Dress to Kill”, English comedian Eddie Izzard, performing in front of a crowd of Californians, calls out the linguistic canyon existing between British and American English:

They do say Britain and America are two countries separated by the Atlantic Ocean... and it’s true. They *do* say it’s separated by a common language too... Like you say “Caterpillar” and we say “Caterpillar”. *(Laughter)* And you say “Ah-lomb-minum” and we say “Al-luminium”. You say “Centr-if-igal”, we say “Centri-fu-gal”. You say “Lee-sure” we say “Lie-sure-i-a”. *(Large laugh)* You say “Bay-sil”, we say

37 Belhousse, Y. *Made In France*. Edinburgh: The Pleasance Theatre.

“Bah-sil”. And you say “erbs”, and we say “H-erbs”, because there’s a fucking “H” in it. (*Laughter and applause*)³⁸

Here we see a comedian seemingly doing the opposite of Belhousse. Instead of drawing the audience together through an understanding of his self-diagnosed linguistic shortcomings, the English comedian, Izzard, is pointing out to his audience the various ways in which he and the people in his native country treat their shared language with America in vastly different ways. However, as Giles, Scherer, and Taylor pointed out earlier, “Speech markers assume salience... in marking our beliefs about and attitudes towards these social categories”. Izzard may be stating facts when he recounts the manner in which both countries pronounce words such as “aluminium”, “leisure”, or “herbs”, but the speech markers present when acting out this material make it clear that his attitude is not one of superiority or stern correction. He pokes fun at both countries, deliberately mis-pronouncing “leisure” as it would be said by a Brit, and adding mock disgust and anger over the exclusion of the “H” sound in the American pronunciation of “herbs”. This joke telling is thus both a reliant upon his outsider position for the material to be communicated with conviction, and yet it also serves to show how something as menial as disparate accents are meant to be laughed at, rather than used as a basis for judgement. Once again, the voice of the outsider serves as the catalyst to unite the audience and the comedian.

This power of the voice can also be used by a comedian to dispel ideas about inherent otherness from their audiences’ minds. When we as an audience hear a foreign accent, we cannot help but place those “broadly defined biographical, social and psychological categories” upon the speaker, as mentioned earlier. However, there are some comedians that use this outsider-creating

38 Izzard, E. (1999). *Eddie Izzard: Dress to Kill* [DVD]. United States: Ella Communications Ltd.

characteristic in creative ways. Take, for example, Omid Djalili's show *No Agenda - Live at The Palladium*.³⁹ The introduction of the performance is done by Djalili himself via an offstage microphone. We hear a distinctly Middle Eastern accent encouraging us to welcome onstage "the undisputed Les Dennis of the Middle East". For the next three minutes Djalili delivers his anecdotal material in what he reveals to be his Iranian accent. It is only at the four minute mark that the facade is abandoned and Djalili's voice is revealed to be an RP English accent. "Well, there you go. There's the ethnic section out of the way", he reports in a slightly camp, patronising tone which is met by much laughter. "As a lot of you know, I don't talk like that one bit, that's just a little ethnic ruse I like to do right at the beginning. (*Laughter*) I used to be a management consultant, (*Laughter*) and I thought I'd give comedy a crack and, uh, I'll tell you what, it's going *really* well." (*Laughter and applause*) Djalili then settles into his native middle-class English accent for the remainder of the gig, occasionally displaying his prowess with other accents to aid in his story telling. However, one must question why he chooses to remind the audience of his otherness at the outset of the gig. This is a part of his act which Djalili has been performing since before 2002, and, at the 2008 recording of *No Agenda*, he is still clinging to that part of his identity as a major cornerstone to his shows.⁴⁰ Aside from providing Djalili with a classically humorous and incongruous payoff punchline, he is also calling out into the open the fact that he visibly displays traits of a culture other than that of the white, British majority. By emphasising his position as an outsider at the very outset through his vocal performance of a cultural stereotype and then smashing it with what is his own accented reality, Djalili is setting a

39 Omid Djalili: *No Agenda - Live at The Palladium*. Perf. Omid Djalili. Stunt Baby Productions, 2007.

40 Sturgess, F. (2010, March 5). Omid Djalili: "I'm Cast as the Arab Scumbag". *The Independent*. Retrieved from TheIndependent.co.uk

stage for his observations to be seen as equally unpredictable; capable of pulling a similar bait-and-switch with topics ranging from worries over racism and political correctness to the trials of being a parent and a performer. By skilfully employing his use of the outsider voice, Djalili preps his audience for an unpredictable evening of humour that will come from a individual firmly rooted both within and outside of the dominate culture of the country in which he is performing. The audience will eventually learn that it is the differences called upon by Djalili which make their relationship with him as a performer so memorable.

The final example I will offer of an outsider comedian using their unique speech markers to connect deeply with their audience comes from the little-known comedian and monologist Tim Sample. Sample performed live comedy in the 1970s and 80s in what was known as the "Downeast" style. He told stories and stated truths based largely on his experiences as a native of the state of Maine, and played to almost exclusively Maine crowds for much of his career. What sticks out when one watches or listens to a recording of Sample's comedy is his distinct and clearly unaltered Maine accent. This thick, characterful accent acts as a sign post to point towards the very centre of his material. Sample was unapologetic regarding his Downeast point of view:

Before we go too far I've got to explain just a little bit about the type of humour that I'm going to be doing tonight. Now this is Maine humour, and as such it ain't the kind that you see on television, see. (*A few small laughs*) Don't start laughing yet, it's gonna get funnier. (*Laughter*) It ain't the kind, see, where the fella tells the joke and then they laugh, then a joke and then they laugh. It ain't like that, see. A lot of this is gonna go

right over ya head. (*Laughter*) Now it ain't that it ain't funny – you just don't get it.⁴¹

Sample's humour in general, and this recording in particular, was largely consumed by those of a very similar biographical, social, and psychological background to himself. However, it is often the accent and the local speech patterns which many are called out as iconic when referring to Sample's work. What could be gained by showing off one's nativeness to a tiny audience (Maine's total population sat at roughly 1.1 million in April of 1980⁴²) if one desired to impact their audience with their performance? As the above quote makes clear, Sample knew that his audience both understood and failed to comprehend what he and his fellow Maine humorists were attempting to do. They were offering up an utterly unique style of story-telling and stand-up comedy steeped in the local culture, and for an audience unused to having their stories told in the spotlight, the emergence of a performer with a thick, authentic Maine accent on a stage recounting tales of places and people so familiar to them all must only have been met with laughter and bemusement, and an overwhelming sense of community within the theatre. By emphasising his Maine heritage through his thick accented performance, Sample found a way to remain an outsider figure even while performing in front of people who could very well have lived down the road from him – “Which'd probably be 'bout four miles down the road”, as Sample would quip.⁴³

Thus we see how the voice of the natural outsider is able to be employed in any series of ways in order to ensure a close connection between the comedian and their audience. In every situation the comedian works with the understanding that, as Giles, Scherer and Taylor make clear,

41 Sample, T. (1983). *Downeast Standup* [CD]. The State Theatre of Maine, Lakewood, Maine.

42 US Census Report, Series P25-1106, Current Population Results, Series P25-1106 (1980).

43 Sample, T. (1983)

“Speech markers serve the general function of maintaining the social system by identifying and recognising members who occupy various roles and hierarchical positions within it.”⁴⁴ It is then up to the comedians to find their specific niche within which they can take that inherent human tendency towards categorisation based on auditory stimuli and mould it into a tool with which the comedian and audience can grow closer.

Natural Outsiders, Race, and Celebrity

And so now we turn from the sound of performative natural outsidership, to the often visible, and always present dynamic that a natural outsider’s race can bring to a stand-up performance. There are many examples of comedians who have used race as a foundation for much of their material. Reminders of one’s race are so present in everyday life for anyone who does not conform with the “majority” of their country’s racial demographic that it would seem odd to not have race as an active influence on one’s comedy. For one very prominent African-American comedian, the natural outsider status granted by race is compounded by the label of celebrity. Both factors lead to unique opportunities for the comedian and the audience to grow closer together. In the case of this specific comedian, an opportunity instead arose for the fame of the comedian to get in the way of a deeper understanding of how race can be discussed and better understood through the voice of an outsider comedian.

44 Scherer, K. R., & Giles, H. (2013). p. 343

I cannot count how many times I heard “I’m Rick James, bitch” echo down the halls of my high school in overwhelmingly white, suburban Scarborough, Maine. Drove of my classmates seemed to connect to the “irreverent humor, political incorrectness, and—above all else—fearless commentary on race and racism”⁴⁵ of the man behind this new program. The first season of Dave Chappelle’s “Chappelle’s Show” would go on to earn three Primetime Emmy nominations (for Outstanding Writing, Outstanding Directing, and Outstanding Variety, Music, or Comedy Series), as well as a slew of other awards and commendations. Critics embraced his “quick mind and nimble comic riffing”⁴⁶, and his clear-eyed social observation. But what was there in the character of Clayton Bigsby, the Black and blind white supremacist, or the caricatured portrayal of the above named Rick James, that prompted the affection and connection between Chappelle and those teenage fans? I could tally the number of non-caucasian students at my high school on one hand, and yet this 30 year-old Black comedian from Washington D.C was able to connect with this group so seemingly removed from his world. His material was sticking with my classmates and the rest of the nation as well.

At the peak of the “Chappelle’s Show” fame, Dave Chappelle sold out a 4,000-seat theatre in Sacramento, California. His new-found popularity filled the seats with fans of the program, a testament to his ability to connect with his audience. However, “that popularity also caused the frustration for the performer, as audience members continually shouted a character's catchphrase from "Chappelle's Show" - it starts, ‘I'm Rick James ...’ and ends with the b-word.” The shouting

45 Harriot, M. (2017, March 29) *The World Changed, but Dave Chappelle Didn't*. Editorial. TheRoot.com.

46 Rabin, N. (2004, February 24). *Chappelle's Show: Season One Uncensored!* Editorial. AVClub.com.

from the audience actually caused Chappelle to walk off the stage for two minutes, stating once he returned that the audience needed to “shut up and listen, like you’re supposed to”. “People can’t distinguish between what’s real and fake,” he added. “This ain’t a TV show. You’re not watching Comedy Central. I’m real up here talking.”⁴⁷ This was far from a harmonious interaction between performer and audience. Indeed, Chappelle went on to chastise the crowd further saying, “Every day I fight for you. I tell [the network officials] how smart you are. Turns out, I was wrong. You people are stupid.” The renegade, outspoken Comedy Central performer had become so much of a popular celebrity figure that his “fearless commentary on race and racism” had become supplanted by the public’s desire for catchphrases. Chappelle could no longer push at the boundaries of society through “Chappelle’s Show”, so he jumped the fence entirely.

During the 2005 filming of his third season, without any announced reason, Chappelle abandoned a \$50 million contract and retreated from public life.⁴⁸ Conspiracies and whispered rumours hung thick in the air as millions of fans wondered what could have driven their comic hero to seemingly vanish from the comedy and pop culture landscape. He had checked into rehab for drug abuse problems. He had flown to Africa to ‘find himself’. Everyone had a theory. In July of 2014, nine years after his exodus from the public eye, that Chappelle spoke

⁴⁷ Carnes, J. (2004, June 17). *Dave Chappelle lets rude crowd have it, sticks up for Cosby's comment*. The Sacramento Bee. FreeRepublic.com/focus/news/1156342/posts.

⁴⁸ Young, A. (2014, June 11). *Dave Chappelle reveals the real reason why he left Chappelle's Show*. ConsequenceOfSound.net. <https://consequenceofsound.net/2014/06/dave-chappelle-reveals-the-real-reason-why-he-left-chappelles-show/>

about his decision on David Letterman's *Late Show*. His response could leave many just as confused as they had been in 2005:

You know, because when you quit, like my friends will try to make me feel better, but no one has been through that, so they'll say... 'You know, Dave, at the end of the day, you still have some integrity.' That's great. I'll go home and make the kids some integrity sandwiches; it makes no sense at all. There's nothing anyone can say. It's just you do what you feel like you need to do. It's a very complicated answer because I felt a variety of ways over the last years. Whenever there's something I'd like to have that I could have afforded but I can't now, then I'm upset about it. But then when I see a guy who goes to a job that's time consuming and he doesn't have free time to do things I get to do, then I feel good about it... Money is the fuel for choices. Money gives me choices. It's not nothing. It's something...⁴⁹

Chappelle appeared conflicted, with the desire for a more fulfilling family and personal life vying with the freedom that his lucrative contract would have offered. This "fearless" social commentator who was unafraid to toe the line of political correctness saw the limitations fame put on his life, while also harbouring the desire for more wealth. He wanted to remain true to himself, and yet could not deny the allure of celebrity.

Throughout this whole period of self-imposed exile, the public perception of Chappelle's comedy was frozen in time. "He remained in the national consciousness for more than a decade

⁴⁹ Yahr, E. (2014, June 11). *Dave Chappelle gets real: Does he regret walking away from million of dollars?*. [TheWashingtonPost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2014/06/11/dave-chappelle-gets-real-does-he-regret-walking-away-from-millions-of-dollars/). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2014/06/11/dave-chappelle-gets-real-does-he-regret-walking-away-from-millions-of-dollars/>

without doing consistent stand-up or film work.”⁵⁰ The public remembered the characters from his television show. Unless his audience was able to catch his limited run of shows at New York City’s Radio City Music Hall in 2014, no one really knew what had become of his comedic take on the world.⁵¹ It was Chappelle’s biting satire that audiences were excited to see once again when it was announced that he had signed a \$60 million agreement to make two comedy specials for Netflix, his first specials in nearly 17 years. The maverick, influential voice of the Black American experience was returning to the spotlight.

However, when the two specials, *Deep in the Heart of Texas: Live at Austin City Limits* and *The Age of Spin: Live at the Hollywood Palladium* (filmed in 2015 and 2016 respectively) went live on Netflix on March 21, 2017, the public was met with a slightly skewed image of the David Chappelle they thought they remembered. As one reviewer stated:

I hoped that Chappelle, now entering his mid-40s, would have used his signature slyness and world-weary insights to tackle subjects more daunting than low-hanging and dated comedic fruit of trans people, rape, and famous Black men (O.J. Simpson and Bill Cosby) accused of horrific crimes against (mostly) white women.⁵²

For one clear example of Chappelle’s drifting away from his audience, one need only look to when he acknowledges the divide between himself and his Black audience incredibly clearly,

⁵⁰ Abe, D. (2017, March 31). *Is David Chappelle’s Humor From a Time Before Black Lives Matter?*. Editorial. [TheStranger.com](https://www.thestranger.com/film/2017/03/29/25052552/is-dave-chappelles-humor-from-a-time-before-black-lives-matter). <https://www.thestranger.com/film/2017/03/29/25052552/is-dave-chappelles-humor-from-a-time-before-black-lives-matter>

⁵¹ Young, A. (2014, June 11)

⁵² Young, D. (2017, March 28). *Dave Chappelle Didn’t Change with the Times—and That’s the Problem*. Editorial. [GQ.com](https://www.gq.com/story/dave-chappelle-netflix-standup). <https://www.gq.com/story/dave-chappelle-netflix-standup>

saying, “My own actions drew a wedge between me and the community I hold so dear”. This leads him into a story about how “A couple weeks ago (February, 2016) I was supposed to be in Flint, Michigan, for a charity benefit that was supposed to raise awareness for the appalling conditions of the water in Flint.” Flint, Michigan, a city with a large African American population, has been dealing with the problem of lead in their drinking water since April 2014, with very little support coming from any state or federal agencies. However, Chappelle then reveals the following:

It was the same day as the Oscars... I was on my way to the airport to go to Flint, and then Chris Rock calls me and is like, ‘Hey, Dave, I got a ticket for you for the Oscars, can you make it?’ Damn, I’m on my way to the airport right now!

(Laughter)

Come on, man, what am I gonna do about the water? What am I, a fuckin’ superhero? I need to have fun. I need to live too! I didn’t fuck that water up!⁵³

Chappelle was no longer the scrappy, come-from-nowhere kid of his early career, but rather a guy who is explicitly not a “superhero”. He can’t do anything about the water. In response to this particular piece of material, Brittany Luse, an African American cultural commentator for National Public Radio, had the following critique:

Well, on the one hand, I kind of get where you’re coming from. But on the other hand, you’re having *princess problems*. You don’t actually have to work. You’ve been out of the loop for a really long time, but in a way that you chose... I feel like I’ve gotten this

⁵³ *The Age of Spin: Dave Chappelle Live at the Hollywood Paladium*. (2017). *Netflix.com*. Pilot Boy Productions.

person now who's like a rich, black, Archie Bunker*... For him to be as out of touch as he is, I don't know. I feel really disappointed. It broke my heart, man.⁵⁴

Chappelle may have shot to fame for his pointed, clever lambasting of America's racial prejudices and politics, but many saw these specials as the comedian standing out from the audience by virtue of his detached, celebrity lifestyle; still a figure set apart, but one whose connection with his audience had withered and failed to adapt over time. While he may have stood out as a shining example of a stand-up comedian with a unique and potentially persuasive voice in the early 2000s, by failing to maintain a bridge between himself and his audience these 17 years later, Chappelle acts as an excellent example of what can befall the disengaged outsider voice. An echo chamber full of "princess problems" has little chance to stay with an audience member and act as a potential catalyst for change in a community. Such a result could be possible if the comedian embraces their position as an outsider figure, and works to build and maintain a deep, engaged connection with their audience.

The Crafted Outsider

The second way in which performative outsidership can be used by a comedian to build a relationship with the audience is by actively creating ways to set oneself apart from the majority.

⁵⁴ Pop Culture Happy Hour: The Return of Dave Chappelle and "Chips". (2017, March 31). Podcast. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/sections/monkeysee/2017/03/31/521801982/pop-culture-happy-hour-the-return-of-dave-chappelle-and-chips>; *Note: "Archie Bunker" is a reference to a cantankerous, reactionary, conservative, blue-collar, older male character in the 1970s American television program "All in the Family". Archie Bunker could be described as gruff, overbearing, and largely defined by his bigotry (which the show did not shy away from exhibiting).

This takes many forms, but we will focus on comedians who use costume, speed of delivery, and character-based comedy to highlight their position as crafted outsiders. A distinctive costume, a unique delivery style, and the performance of different characters during the show, when masterfully rendered, elicit the interest and engagement of the audience. They are drawn in by the novelty of the crafted outsider comedian's choices. The world created by these choices is an inviting one, one where all sorts of other unusual, unpopular, or unexpected ideas have the potential to be heard and absorbed.

The Costume of the Crafted Outsider: Sam Simmons and the Constraints of Jeans

While speech markers allow an audience to recognise and categorise the comedian through the spoken aspect of their performance, there is a more immediate way in which comedians can declare their membership in or rejection of the community they are performing for. Clothing can be understood as "a part of the total structure of personal appearance which includes hairstyles, ornaments, (and) masks". This incredibly important aspect of culture is "consciously manipulated to assert and demarcate differences in status, identity, and commitment (support or protest) at the level of personal, national, and international relationships."⁵⁵ Clothing can tell us so much and through solo onstage performance of stand-up comedy, this process of identification is placed under intense scrutiny by the audience. The costume assumed by comedians during performance speaks not only to their personal story, but also the status and relationship they wish to have with their audience.

55 Kuper, H. (1973). *Costume and Identity*. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 15(03), p. 348.

There is a great diversity of costumes assumed by stand-up comedians in today's equally diverse world of approaches to stand-up comedy performance. Clothing can be viewed as a "vast reservoir of meanings that can be manipulated or reconstructed so as to enhance a person's sense of agency."⁵⁶ From the most abstract and avant-garde performers to those making observations of everyday, familiar occurrences, the clothing choices of the stand-up comedian can be artfully made to construct identities that bridge the gap between the outsider comedian and their audience.

Australian comedian Sam Simmons is known for performances that rebel against "'relatable' comedy", preferring to perform in a wild, absurdist manner.⁵⁷ His 2015 show "Spaghetti for Breakfast" takes this unique take on stand-up comedy and clearly targets Simmons' distaste for the homogenization of the contemporary stand-up landscape. The attack on mundanity takes the form of Simmons acting out a long list of "things that shit me"; a list including everything from "Walking into a room and forgetting why you went in" to "Iceberg lettuce". These statements, piped over the sound system in the theatre, are responded to through Simmons' acting out of his frustrations.⁵⁸

One of these qualms with society is revealed to be the gross overpopulation of comedians who wear skinny jeans and graphic tees, spouting mainstream, "relatable" material such as impressions of celebrities. He then allows himself to be convinced by the unseen voice of a pre-recorded heckler to dawn the aforementioned apparel and attempt a pass at a celebrity

56 Crane, D. (2012). *Fashion and Its Social Agendas Class, Gender and Identity in Clothing*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. p.2

⁵⁷ Bennett, S. (2015, April 1). Sam Simmons: Spaghetti for Breakfast: Melbourne International Comedy Festival review. chortle.co.uk/review/2015/04/01/22142/sam_simmons:_spaghetti_for_breakfast.

⁵⁸ Simmons, S. (2015, August). *Sam Simmons: Spaghetti for Breakfast*. Edinburgh: Underbelly Topside.

impression. Throughout this section of the show, Simmons voices his discomfort and has to be continuously coaxed to go on by the unseen heckler's encouragements. It is this piece of material that throws into sharp focus Simmons' choice to perform the entire show in a plain white undershirt and white boxers. Simmons has clearly been "manipulating" our ordinary responses to seeing someone in their underwear. Simmons is not simply attempting to lower his status with the audience, winning their favour through inviting others to laugh at him; he is also using his consideration of costume to draw a clear distinction between his absurdist style and the "mainstream" status quo of "T-shirt and jeans" comedy. He is, as mentioned earlier, reconstructing the meaning of the costume to give himself a new sense of personal agency. Through this reconstruction, the audience is able to be brought closer to Simmons as he makes his case for honest and unique comedy, rather than cookie-cutter, primed-for-TV stand-up.

The Crafted Outsider and the Speed of Delivery: Steven Wright, Deadpan Delivery, and the Absurdity of the World

When discussing the ability of certain performance techniques to greatly impact an audience's reception of the material, one of the clearest examples that must be discussed is the carefully measured monotony and seriousness of the skilled deadpan crafted outsider comedian. Stephen Wright, a veteran stand-up comedian from Cambridge, Massachusetts, has been honing the art of deadpan delivery since 1979.⁵⁹ The slow, lethargic, and serious delivery practiced by Wright serves as an extremely effective contrast to his pun-laden, ironic, and often absurd material. The following excerpt is from his first HBO special, filmed in San Francisco in the same year as his inaugural stand-up album, *I Have a Pony* netted him a Grammy nomination. His large mop of

⁵⁹ Lovence, F. (2009, May 28). Comedian Steven Wright plays Westbury Sunday. Newsday. <http://web.archive.org/web/20090531055218/http://www.newsday.com/entertainment/music/ny-etent2812804889may26,0,6077734.story>:

curly hair is all that really sets his appearance apart from the norm. He wears a plain blue shirt and denim jeans. He also sets the stage for his still and pensive performance at the outset of the gig by silently walking to the microphone stand amidst loud applause and cheering, waiting until the crowd is completely silent before launching directly into his material. Throughout this performance Wright shows how his carefully paced delivery and deadpan approach keeps the audience hanging on his every word with quiet anticipation, encouraging them to constantly question his comic license from joke to joke:

Called the wrong number today. I said, "Hello, is Joey there?" And a woman answered, she said "Yes, he is."

(Three second pause)

And I said, "Can I speak to him, please?" She said, "No, he can't talk right now, he's only two months old."

(Laughter followed by a five second pause)

And I said, "Alright, I'll wait."

(Big laugh during which Wright remains motionless and expressionless.

Pauses for further five seconds)

One time right in the middle of a job interview I took out a book and I started reading.

(Small laugh. Wright stares directly out at the audience for three seconds)

The guy said, "What the hell are you doing?" I said, "Let me ask you one question. If you were in a vehicle and you were traveling at the speed of light...

(Brief pause)

... and then you turned your lights on...

(Brief pause)

...would they do anything?

(Laughter and some applause. Wright is motionless and sighs into the microphone)

He says, "I don't know". I said, "Forget it then, I don't wanna work for ya."

(Big laughter and much applause followed by a four second motionless pause)⁶⁰

His audience is forced to patiently wait for the completion of the entire joke in eager anticipation as Wright takes his time with every word and syllable. The feed lines of his jokes are often followed by a lengthy pause before the punch line, enforcing the sense of control Wright is exercising over the tempo and overall mood of the performance. This level of control is also due to the way in which Wright thinks about the delivery of his set as a singular unit. When asked how he is able to memorise an hour and a half of non-sequiturs, Wright replied, "To the audience, it's like I'm changing the subject every five seconds, but to me, my show's almost like a 90-minute song that I know exactly. I wrote every note, and I know exactly where everything is."⁶¹ The audience is made to trust that this "90-minute song" will keep them entertained as Wright hops from topic to topic with abandon. His monotone voice, laconic style, and expressionless face may give off the impression that Wright is completely removed from the audience. However, Wright again asserts that, even if he rarely looks at them, he is always attentive to the interaction occurring between his audience and his material, and that it is his insular, droning style that allows him to best communicate his material to his audience:

60 A Steven Wright Special. (1985). [DVD]. United States: Pyramids & Ponies.

61 Steven Wright quoted in Robinson, T. (2003, January 29). Interview: Steven Wright. Retrieved from <http://www.avclub.com/article/steven-wright-13796>

I'm very reactive to how they're reacting, but it's more an audio thing for me. Because of the lights on stage, I'm looking out into total blackness. It's like it's night, and there's a truck parked on a hill pointing its lights at me. I can hear them, but I can't see them. But sometimes if I can see them, if the light spills out over them, it's just distracting. I need to think about what I'm talking about, and present it to the audience as if it's one giant being, rather than all these individual jokes.⁶²

Thus we see how this crafted outsider comedian with his deep, Boston-accented voice, is able to make his delivery style perfectly serve the overall impression he wishes to leave on his audience. Even as he paces back and forth across the stage holding his head in one hand, the microphone held very close to his mouth in the other, Wright is considering the audience, carefully crafting a performance that will leave his audience on the edge of their seats for the entire night. And while they sit on the edges of those seats, Wright also sees the chance for his audience to perhaps question the absurdity of the world around them in the same way he does; a marginal man sharing some of his outside perspective with an established community that could begin to think of things in a new, more abstract way:

After I'd been at it for 10 years, I noticed that what you could say I was saying... is that the world is insane. You're on a jet, you're five miles in the air, you're going 500 miles an hour, and you ask someone to bring you another Coke. That is as weird to me as any joke I said last night. I think that's why people identify with me, because there are a billion pieces of information, and there's so much chaos. So much of civilization is just trying to organize this information. Everyone's trying to have rules so that it's not complete madness-chaos. But as organized as it can be, it's

62 Steven Wright quoted in Robinson, T. (2003, January 29). Interview: Steven Wright. Retrieved from <http://www.avclub.com/article/steven-wright-13796>

only organized to an extent. Shit is spilling over the edges. I'm just pointing out the stuff they're trying to make rules about, and the stuff that's spilling over. As I'm saying this to you, it sounds so deep, but all I'm noticing is that things are funny. You can just move something and look at it from a slightly different angle, and it's funny.⁶³

Wright's serious, deadpan delivery style allows this madness and chaos to be seen from an absurdly comedic "different angle". In turn, this allows space for further commentary on the social norms and commonplace events by members of the established community who might never have noticed them before this outsider figure cast his comedic light on them.

The Crafted Outsider's Use of Character: Adam Riches and the Benefit of Multiple Characters

In the same way that Stephen Wright's unique delivery style allows him to string together 90 minutes of unrelated one-liners without a audience losing the structure and message of the show, the comedian Adam Riches is able to use his diverse collection of personas and characters to craft narrative performances that pull the audience into the production (literally). He manages to do so without letting the audience lose sight of the story he is trying to tell. In its simplest terms, the use of character by the crafted outsider comedian can remove a layer of possible offence that an audience may feel toward the performance. The audience must ask themselves, "How much is Riches really playing himself?" Riches' **vast** array of alternate identities, such as those on

63 Steven Wright quoted in Robinson, T. (2003, January 29). Interview: Steven Wright. Retrieved from <http://www.avclub.com/article/steven-wright-13796>

display in his 2014 show *Adam of the Riches*, allow him to engage directly with a large number of his audience members in unique and mischievous ways.

Through this large collection of characters Riches becomes a marginal man within his own performance. He takes the role of “a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct people”⁶⁴ and goes one step further than just the divide between himself and the audience. Riches’ use of multiple characters in one performance gives the audience a multitude of touchstones to connect to. If one persona does not aid in maintaining comic license, perhaps the next one will, or the one after that. The conceit of such ludicrous characters as “a crazed, tattoo-obsessed redneck with electric toothbrushes welded on to the end of his arms, or [a] semi-naked, shower-obsessed mega-stud Victor Legit”⁶⁵ allows Riches to achieve his desire for extreme levels of audience involvement. On one level, the characters Riches adopts throughout the performance protect both the comedian and the audience with such a thick layer of overstated silliness that both parties approach any direct involvement during a sketch with good-hearted playfulness. And yet, at the same time, it is the **large** size of Riches’ cast of characters which really allows him to act as the clearest societal outsider. He is showing that, as stated by Alfred Schuetz, “he is not bound to worship the ‘idols of the tribe’ and has a vivid feeling for the incoherence and inconsistency of the approached cultural pattern.”⁶⁶ The

64 Park, R. E. (1928). Human Migration and the Marginal Man. *American Journal of Sociology*, 33(6), 892. The University of Chicago Press. p. 892

65 Monahan, M. (2014, August 18). Edinburgh Festival 2014: Adam of the Riches, Pleasance Queen Dome: 'You will laugh yourself silly'. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/edinburgh-festival-reviews/11040820/Edinburgh-Festival-2014-Adam-of-the-Riches-Pleasance-Ace-Dome-you-will-laugh-yourself-silly.html>.

66 Schuetz, A. (1944). *The Stranger; An Essay in Social Psychology*. *American Journal of Sociology*, 49(6). The University of Chicago Press. p. 506-507

audience is presented with not one alternative take on “the approached cultural pattern” of the day, but many, and each skilfully tailored to draw the audience in.

One clear example of this willingness to play could be seen right at the beginning of the performance of *Adam of the Riches* at the Pleasance Dome during the 2014 Edinburgh Festival Fringe.⁶⁷ Once all of the audience had taken their seats a voiceover is heard to announce that tonight the role of Adam Riches will be played by Sean Bean. Already the meta-marginality is introduced to the performance. Immediately after this announcement, in strides Riches wearing leather armour and astride a metal folding chair, encouraging the chair as though it were his noble steed. Riches then begins to pontificate in a very poor Sheffield accent about the many great deeds and adventures that he, “Lord Bean”, has just returned from. Having made such a bombastic entrance, the transition to slaughtering members of the audience in mock-combat only seems in keeping with the over-the-top nature of the performance of Riches. An audience member is invited on stage to sit their own mount, another metal folding chair, but is later instructed to “slit its throat” and lay the now folded chair gently to rest on the ground. They are not made to feel silly or unsure of their actions, as everything they need to do is modelled by Riches as Lord Bean. The actions are also bookended with compliments, or friendly jibes that cause both the featured audience member and the audience as a whole to laugh at the absurdity of the situation. This absurdity is initiated by the comedian’s use of a larger-than-life character, and that creates an ideal environment for the type of interaction and play that makes Riches’ show a place where people can potentially escape from societal norms and challenge just how silly they can allow themselves to be. In addition to this, “Lord Bean” is simply one character

67 Riches, A. (2014, August 24). *Adam of the Riches*. Edinburgh: Pleasance Dome, Queen Dome.

amongst a half dozen in one performance. The likelihood is high that *someone*, even if it is just one person, will recognise and connect with that character and the critique on societal norms of masculinity it is lampooning. And if “Lord Bean” proved too gregarious, there would be Victor coming up in five minutes. This shifting set of characters increases the chances that more members of an audience will grant comic license to the performer they are watching, it just takes a masterful performer to present them all with vitality and conviction, something *Adam of the Riches*’ multiple four and five star reviews would seem to attest to.⁶⁸

The natural and crafted outsiders find a variety of performance techniques that create strong bonds with their audiences. They use what sets them apart to draw others in. This can often result in laughter and cheers from crowds of people, but it may also be turned to greater ends by the most practiced of comedians. Some comedians turn that attention towards the challenging of social norms, some to the behemoth of bigotry and racism, and others focus on performing their outsider roles in such a way as to highlight political issues and activism. It is to these performances that we now turn our attention.

⁶⁸ Adam Riches: *Adam of the Riches*. (2014, August 12). Retrieved from <http://sohotheatre.com/whats-on/adam-riches-adam-of-the-riches/>

Chapter Four

The Outsider Comedian as an Agent of Change

There are so many ways a stand-up comedian can use what makes them different and unique as a tool to build a strong connection with their audience. Chapter Three outlined a variety of these performance techniques, and described the difference between those comedians who are naturally set apart from others, and those who find ways to set themselves apart. This chapter will serve to show how great the influence of the natural and created outsiders could be when they use their performances to try to challenge their audience on large, complex topics.

Before launching into these examples, it would be useful to illustrate in a little greater detail, just how the material of the comedian is able to pierce through discussions that might otherwise seem too big or serious for a stand-up performance to tackle. Thus, we turn to the key concept of comic license, or the approval that is extended by the audience to the comedian. Comic license is what is offered when audience and the comedian have formed a close relationship, and what is retracted when the two parties are not connected and cannot share in the joke together. Often the latter situation is the result of a comedian who has not been able to achieve that closeness with their audience; an outsider who has remained wholly outside of the world of their audience.

Mary Douglas and Safe Spaces for Joking

There are two main ideas about the origin of this comic license. What is it that tells us it is okay to make a joke? How can we be certain the performance techniques of the outsider comedian

have sufficiently bonded the two groups together? The first understanding of comic license. Douglas's research regarding the purpose of jokes centres on the premise that "All jokes have this subversive effect on the dominant structure of ideas."⁶⁹ She states that her hypothesis is that "a joke is seen and allowed when it offers a symbolic pattern of a social pattern occurring at the same time. As I see it," Douglas says, "all jokes are expressive of the social situations in which they occur."⁷⁰ The joker is able to recognise the patterns of action present within a society, and their manner of commenting on this pattern is through a joke which symbolically offers an alternative action to that of the established community.

Douglas elaborates on the joker's societal position by stating that "He appears to be a privileged person who can say certain things in a certain way which confers immunity. He is by no means anything like a taboo breaker whose polluting act is a real offense to society."⁷¹ The reason that Douglas associates joking with such an open, warm community is that the joker is in a position which grants them immunity. She makes sure to state that this immunity means that the joker is not seen as a real threat to the established group. They are very different from the "taboo breaker" who might go one to cause "real offense to society". Douglas expands upon this societal "immunity" by showing how the joking actually reflects views already held within the community:

He has a firm hold on his own position in the structure and the disruptive comments which he makes upon it are in a sense the comments of the

⁶⁹ Douglas, M. (1975). p. 95

⁷⁰ *ibid.* p. 98

⁷¹ *ibid.* p.107

social group itself. He merely expresses consensus. Safe within the permitted range of attack, he lightens for everyone the oppressiveness of social reality, demonstrates its arbitrariness by making light of formality in general, and expresses the creative possibilities of the situation.⁷²

Here we see Douglas reinforcing her argument that the joker has the ability to joke and be accepted due to an understood agreement between themselves and the established society they operate within. The joker is actually fulfilling a role that the social group has created in order to “lighten for everyone the oppressiveness of social reality”. It is Douglas’ belief that the joker’s “comic license”, the origin of their right to make jokes, lies within this agreed-upon societal role. We grant the joker a license to make their jokes because they do so in an arena that society as a whole has deemed a “safe space”. This means that however skilful the performance techniques of the most practised outsider comedian, the influence of their voice and their message would be contained within the walls of the theatre or comedy club; culturally agreed-upon spaces where unusual/unpopular/unexpected can be heard, and then set aside. I would argue that this limits the scope of possible impact by truly skilful comedians who have learned how their position as an outsider, be it a natural or created persona, makes them uniquely placed to bring about change within their audience. And so we must look for a newer understanding of the origin of comic license in order to see how these practiced performers use their close relationship with their audience to inspire deeper, perhaps more long-lasting, discussions.

⁷² Douglas, M. (1975). p.107

Sophie Quirk and Comic License through Joking

Today comedians are able to punch through the permitted range of attack and the audience is able to remain open to this outsider's point of view. Instead of a socially agreed upon limit, this permitted range of attack should be thought of as dynamic, shifting with every joking exchange between the comedian and audience. This back and forth relationship is framed very realistically by comedian Marcus Brigstocke:

I think an audience does give permission to a comedian (to 'push the boundaries'), but if an audience comes to see me and finds it, they might find it funny, but if they don't agree on some level at least with the premise of what I'm talking about then they won't come back, and so then they're not giving me permission to do that thing... The question is, can you present an idea that is unpalatable to people and have them want to come and see you again?⁷³

This type of relationship exemplifies the progression of the role of the outsider comedian. No longer is the joker solely working within an agreed-upon set of limits that are within the permitted range of attack. Now they are happy to push the boundaries, even if they can never escape the need to retain an audience in order to have a viable career in today's stand-up comedy world.

And so we must look to the alternative theory of the origin of comic license as described very clearly by Sophie Quirk. She acknowledges that, for Douglas, "the key to successful joking is to

⁷³ Mills, S. (2012, October 25). Marcus Brigstocke interview. Personal.

remain within the boundaries of consensus”, but Quirk uses the example of comedian Mark Thomas to counter this idea.

Thomas’ work aims to be influential, engaging audiences in energetic critique of their social structures and eliciting their agreement with Thomas’ radical political outlook: yet we know that Thomas can only succeed by remaining within the boundaries of acceptability.

*Balanced precariously between two vital but opposed tasks, Thomas must skilfully negotiate and manipulate those boundaries. [Own emphasis]*⁷⁴

Like Brigstocke, Thomas needs to find the right balance between “acceptability” and his own “radical political outlook”, and his aim is to “be influential” and engage his audience “in energetic critique of their social structures”. He is looking to kickstart an enlightenment process within the individuals who compose his audience. This sort of approach to the societal role of the comedian means that a comedian’s comic license does not solely emerge from within the safety of an agreed-upon set of limits, nor do these limits mean that society is immune to the possible cultural advancement that could be brought about through the challenges and questions posed by the comedian. Quirk proposes that the true origin of comic license lies in the joking itself: “It is the activity of joking which gives him his license. He commands a special respect, but this springs from the joke itself and does not grant him personal immunity.”⁷⁵ The audience will be comfortable with negotiated boundaries so long as the joking is done in such a way that

⁷⁴ Quirk, S. (2010) *Who’s in charge? Negotiation, manipulation and comic licence in the work of Mark Thomas*. *Comedy Studies* 1(1). p. 115

⁷⁵ *ibid* p. 118

they are being thoughtfully engaged with the new alternative social patterns being proposed by the comedian.

The skill required to inspire this thoughtful consideration of new modes of action is not held by every joker who offers their critique of the established community. There are those who fail to either emancipate *or* enlighten the individual members of the approached group. They represent the jokers whose jokes do not offer a meaningful and thought-provoking “symbolic pattern of a social pattern occurring at the same time.”⁷⁶ In the world of modern stand-up comedy this can be seen in the comparison between *controversial* comedians and comedians who *push the boundaries*.

The moniker of “outsider” can be applied to both of these classifications, but the comedians who are merely “controversial” may never be able to inspire any momentary emancipation or meaningful enlightenment amongst their audiences if the controversies they bring about do not address the lives and experiences of that community. As Mary Douglas states, a joke *must* be “expressive of the social situations in which they occur”. If a joker fails to connect their material to the social situations likely to occur in the lives of their audience, there is little chance that comic license will be extended to them.

This idea that it takes more than a “controversial” idea to grant the joker comic license serves to reinforce the idea that it takes a practiced and skilled outsider comedian to impact their audience

⁷⁶ Douglas, M. (1975) p. 98

beyond the bounds of their performance. It also supports my belief that stand-up comedy can inspire individuals to take meaningful action in their own lives to question important issues existing within the established community that we all find ourselves in. Comedian Marcus Brigstocke also recognises the importance in distinguishing between “controversial” comedians and those willing to push the boundaries which could inspire change within the audience. In response to the question “Is it more difficult to push boundaries now than it used to be?”, Marcus Brigstocke has the following to say on the granting of comic license:

No it's not. It's not in the UK because freedom of speech here is robust, incredibly robust... Never once has my freedom of speech been questioned at all. My only thing is that some of the people that 'push the boundaries' are pushing the wrong fucking ones! They're pushing ones that don't matter. They're only a boundary, not because some ruling elite have decided that you mustn't talk about this, but because we the people, the thinking people collectively say “No” to that. No to the needless victimisation of somebody for whatever reason, because they're ugly or something. That's not the point. That's not good enough.⁷⁷

Clearly, Brigstocke is stating that not every joker is to be afforded comic license as a result of their joking. In such cases the potential for comedy to change how people see the world and live their lives is hampered when its practitioners do not use the perspective granted to them as strangers and marginal men (and women) to its fullest extent. This privileged position as an outsider, as a stranger constantly attempting to challenge social patterns and modes of action of an established community, should not be employed to “needlessly victimise” people based on

⁷⁷ Mills, S. (2012, October 25). Marcus Brigstocke interview. Personal.

their appearance, race, gender, etc. Instead it should be used to challenge the audience to think critically about the very social patterns and cultural models that have created the possibility for such victimisation to exist.

What is then gained by an analysis of the origin of comic license? Although Douglas embraces the joker's subversive effect of the dominant structure of ideas existent within the established community, one *must* acknowledge that she only saw this as being possible when granted immunity through the community with which they were interacting. This meant that the joker could never cause a *real* offence to society. They could subvert the community's ideas, but only because the community was allowing it to happen, and it was always to be confined to a safe space agreed upon by that community. This strips away any chance for the modern stand-up comedian, who employs the tactics of joking as defined by Douglas, to hope to connect to their audience in a way that could impact the audience outside of the bounds of performance.

This is the point at which the value of a new understanding of the origin of comic license is required. As defined by Sophie Quirk, comic license instead originates with the activity of joking itself. This serves to strengthen the claim that it takes the skilful use of the outsider voice to influence and inspire change which has the possibility to extend beyond the bounds of the performance. When comic license is left in the hands of the audience to bestow it requires that the joking connects clearly and meaningfully with the concerns of that group. When the individual audience member is able to see the joke connecting to their experiences within the established community, they can then begin to adopt the comedian's light-hearted approach to

patterns of action and cultural models which had previously seemed so unquestionable and incontrovertible.

All of this is only able to occur due to the fact that the stand-up comedian follows in the tradition of the outsider continually encountering pre-established cultures within the audiences they perform for. They are not able to sit passively by and allow incoherent, inconsistent or unclear patterns to repeat within that community. They are called to point it out. They are outsiders, forever attempting to awaken within their audience a desire for enlightenment so that the individuals themselves will begin to think outside of the constraints of the dominant culture and question their shared norms and values.

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Chapter Five

Case Studies of Outsiders at Work

The following chapter will highlight three comedians who have crafted stand-up comedy shows that highlight their marginality. Each production utilises its own unique performance techniques to draw in the audience and create a community within the theatre. Each production features a comedian who, through their material, is trying to speak to a unusual, unexpected, or potentially unpopular idea. And each production has the ability to plant seeds of new thought within every audience member. It is my hope that, by focusing on these three performances in greater detail, we can better observe how the voice and message of the outsider comedian is uniquely positioned to facilitate this potential new growth of ideas. How do carefully employed performance techniques eventually lead the outsider comedian and audience to this fertile land rife for exploration?

Challenging the Permissibility of Laughter in Sean Hughes' *Life Becomes Noises*

There are many ways in which one can change one's mentality, and certainly stand-up comedians can attack any number of topics in an effort to inspire change within their audience. It is perhaps surprising that some comedians would choose to use their comic license to make their audience question the permissibility of laughter itself. Asking an established community, even the impermanent community created in a stand-up performance, to change their understanding of this social norm is a monumental undertaking when the main thrust of one's argument is communicated through joking. However, this is exactly the journey that Sean Hughes takes his audience on in his 2012 show, *Life Becomes Noises*. In a show chronicling the recent loss of his father to cancer, Hughes successfully acts as a change agent, inspiring a new self-renewing mentality within his audience. This is a mentality which is open to laughter as a means of working through the kind of complex emotions arising from trauma such as the death of a close family member.

Testing the Strength of the Comedian-Audience Relationship

Step One of the analytical process towards potential self-renewing change within an audience requires that the comedian assess the relationship they have built up with their audience. Within the performance of *Life Becomes Noises* the strength of the comedian-audience relationship is tested by Hughes in order to be sure that his audience is comfortable being directly involved with his ideas for the performance. He places great trust in his audience, and how they respond to that

trust will allow Hughes to analyse whether the audience will continue to collude with his vision as the show progresses. The major tactic employed by Hughes to build up a strong relationship with his audience is the direct involvement of them in various aspects of his highly narrative performance. The success of this tactic lies in the audience's willingness to grant Hughes the comic license he needs in order to kickstart their self-renewing change of mentality. By gauging the limitations of his ability to continually earn comic license, Hughes can take the next step towards introducing his unusual viewpoints to his audience.

This process of testing the strength of his relationship with the audience begins very early on in the performance. As a television on stage plays a recording of a horse race, complete with the original commentary, Hughes races from offstage left to right clad in a shiny green and black jockey costume astride a hobby horse. When the footage ends with the winning horse crossing the finish line Hughes himself has arrived centre stage, raising his arms in celebration and the audience happily applauds. However, as his first step in manipulating the way in which his audience reacts to his material, Hughes goes on to chide them.

Phew, I'm a bit tired. I've just won the Derby. Now what's probably happened here is you've never met anyone who's won the Derby before, hence your *shit* reaction to someone who's just won the Derby.

(Laughter) So what we'll do is we'll start the show again and this time just give me the respect for someone who's just won the Derby, okay?

*(Laughter)*⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Hughes, S. (2012, October 20). *Life Becomes Noises*. Canterbury: The Gulbenkian Theatre.

The ability of the comedian to control the audience's interaction with their material is a playful way for the comedian to judge they strength our the connection between the two parties. This playfulness will encourage engagement and facilitate the continual process of granting comic license to the performer. Hughes pushes this test even further by calling the audience's attention to his ability to manipulate. He is making a joke out of his manipulation, in essence creating a meta-commentary on his role as leader and controller of the evening's entertainment. In addition to this blatant manipulation of his audience's response to his material right at the beginning of his show, Hughes also sets up some direct involvement of certain audience members in the performance before leaving to "start the show again".

Obviously I haven't really won the derby, but it's a dream sequence to start the show and it makes a lot of sense that I won the Derby and that'll make sense as the show goes on. So what we'll do is I'll come back on and this time if you lovely people there (*points to two member of the audience and brings them a teapot from the set*), if you can give me this trophy for winning the Derby. (*Laughter*) Obviously it's teapot because dreams very seldom make sense do they? (*Small laugh. Hughes then approaches a different member of the audience*) Do you like animals? Right, when I point at you, if you could just like, "Oh my God, I've won so much money on this horse, but I don't really like horse racing. They shoot some of the horses after the race", and just adlib around that, alright? (*Laughter*) Really make that moment your own. And I like you, sir. (*Points at another member of the audience*) If you could just ask me what it's like to win the Derby. I've got this mark here (*indicates a piece of tape on the stage floor*) and a big spotlight will come on me, I answer

your question quite profoundly, and then we'll probably have the best two hours of our life, okay? (*Laughter*)⁷⁹

After this assignment of roles, and an introduction to the show's crew (James from New Zealand), Hughes then relaunched the evening with, "I'll just restart the show. Good luck, everyone." The racing footage begins again, Hughes trots back and forth, and the audience willingly fulfils all of the roles assigned to them: showing him "proper respect" with much more thunderous applause, whistles, and cheers, the presentation of the "trophy" (complete with kisses on each cheek of the presenter), a somewhat light heckle from the animal rights activist, and a prompt request for "what it's like to win the Derby". All of these responses are woven into Hughes own practiced lines, and his response to the final question introduces the topic of his show:

(Delivered in a tightly focused spotlight, surrounded by darkness) Thanks very much for asking. What's it like to have won the Derby? Well, I'm glad you asked me that because my father always wanted me to be a jockey and he died of cancer last year and I never actually became a jockey, so I was a huge disappointment to him, and on reflection that's what the show is about. So thanks for coming, folks. *(The suddenly lights come up and there is a small, short laugh from the audience)* It's quite a big convoluted story just to get that one line out.⁸⁰

This direct involvement of the audience from the very beginning of the show is Hughes' way of constructing and very rapidly testing the strength of the comedian-audience relationship. If the

⁷⁹ Hughes, S. (2012, October 20). *Life Becomes Noises*. Canterbury: The Gulbenkian Theatre.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

audience are willing to play *with* him, he can better get a sense of what the limitations of his earning of comic license from the audience may be. In the case of this performance, the audience are more than willing to become involved in the performance. This in turn encourages Hughes to take the next step of introducing his unusual viewpoint regarding the treatment of the death of a family member to them, confident they are willing to actively engage with his material.

Introducing the Unusual/Unpopular/Unexpected Viewpoint

The next step in the journey towards self-renewing change within the audience involves the comedian relying on the strength of that confidence. Hughes has to combat the tendency outlined by Elias and Scotson, namely that “Interdependent outsiders”, such as the stand-up comedian, “share neither the fund of common memories nor... the same norms of respectability as the established group.” These individuals will therefore “act as an irritant”, and this irritant is “perceived by the members of the [established group] as an attack against their own we-image and we-ideal”.⁸¹ This is the roadblock that Hughes must use the comic license continually to overcome, all the while knowing that his material may seem like an attack the “norms of respectability”. The topic and tone of his material is about to shift drastically, and this makes the process of needing to earn his comic license repeatedly during the performance becomes essential. He takes the audience from a gentle, playful level of involvement, to a face-to-face encounter with one of these “irritants”. The unusual or unexpected viewpoint presented by Hughes in *Life Becomes Noises* is that of the comedian who has only recently lost his father to

⁸¹ Elias, N., & Scotson, J. L. (1965). *The Established and the Outsiders: A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems*. London: Sage Publishing.

cancer *choosing* to do a show all about their relationship and that father's unsuccessful battle with a deadly disease. By choosing to do a stand-up comedy show about the death of his father, Hughes is forcing his audience to grapple with the question of the permissibility of laughter, and he has his audience begin this struggle before he has even appeared on stage.

Many audience members will have read a review of the show before seeing it, thereby knowing that the material would take this turn for the dark at some point. This performance was self-described as a “hilarious yet poignant tale” and a “beautiful insight into the lighter side of dying”.⁸² This type of simple prefacing is echoed in the when the audience arrive and take their seats. Sophie Quirk sums up the power of the space in stand-up performance in the following way:

The room can also send the message that the event is exciting; a success of which the audience are part. A good gig is not founded on the hope that a comedian can battle through any circumstance, but is rather a matter of creating, proactively, that fine balance between numerous factors which will allow for the best possible interaction.⁸³

This “best possible interaction” for Hughes means inviting the audience into his world completely. As the audience enters, they are met with a stage picture full of furniture and props. A hospital bed sits far stage left with a wooden chair beside it. Already the audience is asking questions of the performance and there are still another ten minutes before Hughes will take to

⁸² Hughes, S. (2012, October 20). *Life Becomes Noises*. Canterbury: The Gulbenkian Theatre.

⁸³ Quirk, S. (2011). Containing the Audience: The ‘Room’ in Stand-Up Comedy. *Participations, Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 8(2): p. 18

the stage. What kind of stand-up performance would need a hospital bed? Surely that could just be implied through Hughes' use of language and the audience's imagination. A television stands atop a cabinet upstage right, glowing slightly, and centre stage houses a bookshelf with a large painting of a chestnut horse perched on the top shelf (*see Fig. 1*). The television one could understand. The use of projection and visual aids is something that has grown greatly in recent times⁸⁴, and with no large projection screen

on the stage, perhaps he would be using this television to show his audience some visualisation of his material. But why would a stand-up comedian need a portrait of a horse in order for the audience to understand and enjoy their comedy? These



Fig. 1: A portion of the set design for Sean Hughes' *Life Becomes Noises*

“homey” touches set the stage for a more narrative form of theatre, rather than the blank stage, microphone stand, and bottle of water which have become ubiquitous in modern stand-up performance. The slow, bluesy music of the band Spain is being piped through the speakers, and blue light illuminates the set. This creates a calm, peaceful environment in the space, one quite at odds with the harried, in-your-face world of a comedy club where the compere quickly shuffles acts on and off and comedians only have ten minutes to make an impact on their audience.

⁸⁴ Double, O. *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-up Comedy*: p. 43

All of these elements serve to adjust the audience's expectations to the material they are about to watch. The layout of the stage more closely resembles a naturalist drama than a stand-up comedy performance. As one reviewer stated, the layout of the stage prepares the audience for something that "feels more like a one-man show than straight stand-up."⁸⁵ The audience is primed for something new, something different. Hughes is signalling to the audience that this will not be the sort of stand-up performance that Brigstocke described earlier with regard to a club performance; a fast, loud, "Bang! Pay attention to me!" type of comedy. Instead he is aiming to "take [the audience] on a journey, especially with this show, it's very much, there's a lot of light and shade in it."⁸⁶ Simply via the careful setup of his performance space Hughes is able to communicate the fact that his show will present a comic point of view that challenged the audience's conceptions of what stand-up comedy can be, preparing them for his unique/uncommon viewpoint. Hughes recreates a minimalistic hospital room for his ill father and his family home in 1970s Dublin, and yet continuously assures active engagement with the audience which is so key to successful stand-up performance. If an audience member knew nothing about the content of the show they were about to watch, this setting, along with the smooth music and soft blue lighting, primed the public for a nuanced, personal, and perhaps melancholy narrative to be told. By preparing the performance space with clues as to the tone of the performance, Hughes is sending a message to the audience that this performance will force them to question their preconceived notions of the stand-up comedy form. The intricate stage design, the mellow music, all add to a sense of calm that will seem at odds with the stereotypical punchiness of

⁸⁵ Pettullo, S. (2012, August 15). Sean Hughes: Life Becomes Noises. *The Skinny: Independent Cultural Journalism*. http://www.theskinny.co.uk/comedy/reviews/302839-sean_hughes_life_becomes_noises.

⁸⁶ Mills, S. (2012, October 20). Sean Hughes interview. Personal.

stand-up performances. Hughes is also managing to begin the process of introducing his uncommon point of view regarding death by planting a hospital bed centre stage and allowing his audience to question what this prop could be doing on stage during a comedy show. As one reviewer stated, these elements helped produce something different and unique; a performance that “isn’t quite comedy, yet it isn’t theatre either. *Life Becomes Noises* is somewhere in between.”⁸⁷

The theatre setting allowed for Hughes to administer a more concentrated dose of his unique outsider’s perspective on family, life, and death, and the audience were in turn more receptive to his material because of the control he could exercise over their experience in the venue. Being drawn into his performance so deeply allowed for that “absolute directness of communication” which David Marc deemed so essential to the definition of what stand-up comedy is, and indeed Hughes goes on to keep the audience engaged with his unique viewpoint through very direct exchanges and involvement with the performance.

The material within *Life Becomes Noises* continues this process of introducing the audience to Hughes’ unusual/unexpected viewpoint on the permissibility of laughter and does so through incredibly upfront engagement with the audience’s reactions to joking about death. As stated earlier, Hughes tells his audience very early on in the performance that his father passed away only one year prior to the show.

⁸⁷ Wardle, H. (2012, August 13). Review: Sean Hughes - Life Becomes Noises - Pleasance Forth, Edinburgh. <http://www.gigglebeats.co.uk/2012/08/review-sean-hughes-life-becomes-noises/>

Honestly, my father, he died of cancer, right, and my biggest regret in life is that I wasn't dressed as a jockey on his dying bed. When we were waiting for the traditional dark clothes, sadness, "Oh, it's very sad he's gonna die". But he was also on so much morphine at the end we were just shapes to him. *(Small laugh)* My biggest regret is I wasn't dressed as a jockey for his dying wish. I'd love to have been there. But he'd have had a big smile on his face, "Oh my God, my son, the slightly overweight tall one's become a jockey! *(Laughter)* I can die happy now!" But no, the last thing he actually said to me was, "Uh, son, nothing's gonna happen to me." And, of course I had to lie because in situations like that you have to say "Of course not, Dad"... I know what he was really saying was, "Son, I'm scared, can you comfort me." And I could tell that from the look on his face, which is very similar to the look that a lot of you people *(indicates the audience)* have on your faces right now. *(Big laugh)*⁸⁸

Here is Hughes forcing his audience to laugh about their response to his material. Again, this is a meta-commentary being made by Hughes. Without realising that they could laugh about such a situation, Hughes has made it clear to the audience that laughter does not need to be avoided. He has very directly invited them to laugh at the situation he is describing, beginning to chip away at their "social norms of respectability". This particular example of the melting together of a very serious situation (his father on his death bed) with the wish of wanting to dress as a jockey just to bring some joy to his father's final minutes is centred on the question of the permissibility of laughter. By calling out the audience on how their own faces are carrying a serious or concerned

⁸⁸ Hughes, S. (2012, October 20). Life Becomes Noises. Canterbury: The Gulbenkian Theatre.

look as he recounts his father's true feelings of fear, Hughes is drawing the audience's attention to the fact that this is meant to be comedy. Normally we laugh and smile at a stand-up comedy act, but here Hughes is calling his audience on the fact that we tend to treat death (and the fear of death) as the exact antithesis to this experience. We feel inherently buttoned up about such ideas, and by pointing out that no one is laughing during this comedy show, Hughes is releasing the pressure valve that has been building within his audience up until that point. He acknowledges that no one is laughing at this material, and the audience laugh at this observation. There is some underlying sense of uncomfortableness that we have surrounding the permissibility of this type of laughter, and by highlighting it thusly Hughes cuts through his audience's worries of potential rudeness. This relieving of tension surrounding the permissibility of laughter serves as a brilliant lead into the “serious” refrain of Hughes' show:

Honestly, we take life way too serious. We take death way too serious as well. I think there should be a law change. I think every time you're given bad news by someone in authority, such as a policeman or a doctor, by law, after they've given you the bad news, they should go 'Cha cha cha cha', (*Laughter*) because we're always gonna get bad news, but it puts a little spring in your step. (*Laughter*)⁸⁹

This section perfectly sums up the unusual and unexpected point of view that Hughes is presenting in this performance. He is encouraging his audience to laugh with him over the next two hours, even though those two hours will be centred on the very recent death of the comedian's father. The audience must ask themselves if it is cruel to laugh at such a tragic

⁸⁹ Hughes, S. (2012, October 20). Life Becomes Noises. Canterbury: The Gulbenkian Theatre.

disease and the effects it can have on entire families. Hughes is thus creating an internal debate within the mind of each audience member. His approach, as one reviewer points out, is one of "near-total lack of sentimentality, which runs so contrary to current orthodoxy as to begin to seem weird."⁹⁰ The "current orthodoxy" would say, "Don't joke about a terrible disease". However, through his performance tactics of direct engagement with his audience. This "weird" feeling is prompted by Hughes' purposeful challenging of his audience's preconceptions of the treatment of death and the permissibility of laughter regarding such subjects. He frames his material in such a way that he invites the audience to laugh, removing the anxiety to laugh spontaneously at such a deeply personal tale of bereavement. This steady introduction to a new way of thinking about laughter permissibility allows the audience to reach a place where they can reevaluate their previously held beliefs.

Turning Discussion into Change

Having found a way to start his audience questioning their ideas about the permissibility of laughter, Hughes is now in the position to kickstart the audience's self-renewing change in behaviour and mentality. He has to effectively leave these individuals in a state where this change has the opportunity to occur. As stated earlier, this process is able to occur thanks to the outsider comedian's role as a change agent within their carefully crafted comedian-audience community.

⁹⁰ Logan, B. (2012, August 13). Sean Hughes: Life Becomes Noises – Edinburgh review. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/aug/13/sean-hughes-edinburgh-comedy-review>.

For Hughes, the fact that he is trying to introduce a new concept about the permissibility of laughter has an inherent ability to grease the wheels of change within the minds of his audience. By using his material to cue, and therefore control, the audience's laughter in relation to the death of his father, Hughes is guiding his audience toward a releasing of the pressure that social "norms of respectability" have built up surrounding death. As stated earlier in Part One, this pre-existing nervous energy poses a challenge for the comedian. Every audience member brings all of these stresses and concerns with them into the theatre or comedy venue. The stand-up comedian must then facilitate the relief of that energy. As Park states, "Social changes... have their inception in events which 'release' the individuals out of which society is composed". This guided release of the audience's anxieties through laughter is the action which kick-starts the audience's own self-renewing ability to change their behaviour and mentality regarding the permissibility of laughter. As Park goes on to say, "Certain changes take place- at any rate they are likely to take place- in the character of the individuals themselves. They become, in the process, not merely emancipated, but enlightened".⁹¹ Having led the audience to a place where they are able to laugh at material generally considered beyond the realm of comedy, Hughes has emancipated them from usual societal anxieties and opened the door to a state of enlightenment regarding the overall permissibility of laughter.

As discussed earlier, Alfred Schuetz highlights the lack of certainty that any change to the social norms and morays of an established community will latch on and achieve this level of change.

"For the approaching stranger", he states, "the pattern of the approached group does not

⁹¹ Park, R. E. (1928). p. 887-888

guarantee an objective chance for success but rather a subjective likelihood which has to be checked step by step.”⁹² The “pattern” of laughter Hughes may generate during the performance does not necessarily guarantee that those audience members have seen this laughter as a gateway to a new mentality regarding the permissibility of laughter in their lives. Therefore, it is up to Hughes to craft his show in such a way that this enlightenment is made more likely. By cuing his audience to laugh when discussing dour, depressing topics, Hughes is continually allowing his audience to see that “we take life too seriously” and in particular, “we take death too seriously as well”. As one reviewer said:

What makes *Life Becomes Noises* so affecting is that darkness seeps into it despite Hughes' best intentions. For every jocular recollection of his father's confused answer phone etiquette is a candid memory that the performer acknowledges will haunt him for the rest of his life. Certainly, an audience member could make the same claim about this innovative and hugely accomplished show.⁹³

The constant juxtaposition of laughter-inducing scenes with the tragic context in which they are occurring serves as a constant reminder that the worlds of laughter and death need not be so firmly divided. This ever-shifting dynamic provides an environment where the metaphorical “door to enlightenment” could be constantly re-opened. This could in turn mean that more and more members of Park’s “established community” could surpass the emancipation stage and begin the creation of a self-renewing change in behaviour and mentality.

⁹² Schuetz , Alfred. (May, 1944). p. 506

⁹³ Porteous, L. (2012, August 18). Sean Hughes: *Life Becomes Noises*. Retrieved from <https://www.fest-mag.com/edinburgh/comedy/101308-sean-hughes-life-becomes-noises>

Challenging British Muslim Identity in Tez Ilyas' *TEZ Talks*

The outsider comedian's comic license can also be used to highlight struggles and prejudices facing a group of people, and through a clever combination of facts and personal testimony, this comedian has the opportunity to kick-start a self-renewing change in mentality regarding this group of people. Such is the situation for comedian Tez Ilyas in his debut solo show, *TEZ Talks*, which premiered at the Pleasance Courtyard during the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, August 2015. Like Hughes, Ilyas would use a unique structural format to present his material on his own experiences as a devout British Muslim and how these experiences might relate to the larger national feeling towards Muslims in the United Kingdom. Through this show he aims to awaken a new understanding within his audience of what life is like as a Muslim in this country. Through his position as a racial and religious outsider, Ilyas can shine a light on the experiences of his community for an audience, and through his use of comedy, the audience can be both emancipated and enlightened.

Testing the Strength of the Comedian-Audience Relationship

Ilyas is very aware of the demographic disparity that exists between himself and his audience, and the recognition of this fact is integral to testing the strength of the comedian-audience relationship:

Being on the mainstream circuit in the UK, in terms of background, I would say 95, 99% of my audience is different to who I am. They're white and more often than not they're probably from a middle-class background, as well. Whereas, I'm from an Asian, meaning South Asian,

working class background. So I'm very conscious that, in terms of background, my background is very different to the overwhelming majority of my audience.⁹⁴

The clear sense of his outsider nature allows him to devise a performance structure in which the audience will be led to align themselves with this unique background, whether they like it or not. This is accomplished by framing the entire performance as a TED Talk. TED Talks are short presentations, limited at 18 minutes, given in a conference setting which are “driven by this goal: How can we best spread great ideas?”⁹⁵ While casting the time limit aside, Ilyas is still appealing to that stated goal of TED Talks; he is using the format as a way to try and “best spread great ideas”. This show's conceit is that Ilyas is the invited speaker at a TED conference he somehow has all to himself. The audience are cast as a class of soon-to-be converts to Islam, people who would be open to his desire to “spread great ideas” about Islam. By framing the performance in this format, he is testing to see just how far an outsider comedian can lead an unfamiliar audience before they shut down and fail to “play their part”.

To reinforce this imposed relationship, Ilyas finds points within the performance to remind the audience of their role as lecture attendees and prospective converts to Islam. At the beginning of the performance, following a self-introduction from high in the raked seating, he walks down the stairs, accompanied by upbeat music, shaking the hands of audience members as a politician would on the campaign trail. “Good to see you”, “Welcome, welcome,” he says as he works his

94 Mills, S. (2015, August 25). Tez Ilyas interview. Personal.

95 How TED Works. TED Conferences, LLC. Retrieved from <http://www.ted.com/about/our-organization/how-ted-works>

way towards the stage.⁹⁶ Ilyas then welcomes the audience to their final seminar before they finish their conversion process. “This is the last lecture, so we want to make sure that you are fully prepared for what you will experience out there as a Muslim in Britain.” Following this introduction, he launches into his “TEZ Commandments”, ten items every British Muslim should adhere to. This structure allows Ilyas to incrementally feel out how much comic license his audience are permitting him to have throughout the show. This Edinburgh Festival crowd may not have known the format of the show, perhaps being drawn in by a flyer outside of the theatre, but they quickly learn that this format allows them to become co-creators of this new reality. This imposed casting of roles allows Ilyas to play off of the “nervous and excited” converts, and very comfortably assume the role of leader and motivator, able to assume control and with that control, a firm hold on his own comic license. We see this exact same approach in Hughes' use of direct audience interaction in order to clearly define his relationship with the audience. Both are formatting the performance in such a way that the audience is forced into colluding with the comedian's vision. The comedian can then use this cooperation to introduce their unusual, unpopular, or unexpected viewpoints much more smoothly than otherwise possible.

Introducing the Unusual/Unpopular/Unexpected Viewpoint

As mentioned earlier, the major conceit of *TEZ Talks* is that this lecture is a forum for Ilyas to pass on his TEZ Commandments, comprising his “top ten pieces of advice on how to be Muslim in Great Britain today”. Through the introduction and explanation of each point, he is able to slowly introduce his (while perhaps not unusual, unpopular, or unexpected) certainly widely

96 Ilyas, T. (2015, August 19). *TEZ Talks*. Edinburgh: Pleasance Courtyard Below.

unfamiliar viewpoint to the audience. As acknowledged earlier, Ilyas is keenly aware of his “racial, religious, and sometimes class” separation from the vast majority of his audience, and this list of points for the fictional class of converts to learn from allows him to bridge the gap between his own experiences and knowledge and that of the audience.

Ilyas using this structure to introduce a new viewpoint for his audience when he cues up a slide and it simply reads “Engage in Jihad”. This initial reveal is met by laughter from the audience. He allows this laughter to occur without interruption, but then goes on to offer a definition of the term “jihad”, which, as one reviewer mentions, “hopefully most of the savvy liberal arts festival crowd knows, means a struggle for improvement.”⁹⁷ The laughter has ceased, and the audience is then asked what their “jihad” is. “What do you do, miss?” Ilyas asks an audience member. “I’m a student”, she replies. “Well, that is certainly your jihad, am I right? You are always trying to write better, research more. That’s your struggle.” The audience member nods. Through this process of structured exchange, the audience can begin to see certain aspects of their lives from this uniquely Muslim context. Again we see evidence of the audience colluding with comedian's ideas about the non-radical implications of "jihad". They are providing examples and nodding to show that they understand what he is saying. By reclassifying the audience’s understanding of the culturally loaded term “jihad”, Ilyas is suggesting that this specifically Muslim word can indeed describe a universal experience. This serves to introduce his audience to the unfamiliar viewpoint that certain aspects of Muslim identity are not so very different from non-Muslim experiences of the world, even where “jihad” is concerned.

97 Bennett, S. (2015, August 8). TEZ Ilyas: TEZ Talks. Retrieved from https://www.chortle.co.uk/review/2015/08/08/30008/tez_ilyas:_tez_talks

A subsequent commandment also reinforces the confused notion of a stark disparity between Muslim and British identities. This slide declares that the soon-to-be converts should always “Uphold British Values”. “Sir, what would you call a ‘British value’?” Ilyas asks an audience member in the second row. “I don’t know – Drink tea?”, replies the man. “Okay, drink tea. What else?”, he asks the room. “Queue etiquette,” offers another audience member. After fielding a few more suggestions, Ilyas asks the audience if any of these things are actually what British culture should concern itself with. “I don’t know what makes these ‘British’ values and not just characteristics, but no matter what, you must obey British values! If you don’t, you’ll never really integrate with the people around you.”⁹⁸ What Ilyas is doing by pulling suggestions from the audience is forcing them to realise how separate one’s ideas about “being British” can be from what people mean when they demand that Muslims throughout the country “uphold British values” (as opposed to preconceived notions of what “Muslim values” would be). In reality, by forcing his audience to identify “British values” for themselves, Ilyas draws their attention to how non-specific and useless those terms are when it comes to specifying a code of behaviour. All of these reactions showcase Ilyas’ main viewpoint that “British” and Muslim identity is fluid, and resists codification. This point of view is continually reinforced with every new “commandment”, and together they help to build towards the final goal of securing a self-renewing change of mentality within the audience regarding the real definition and understanding of the modern British Muslim identity.

⁹⁸ Ilyas, T. (2015, August 19). *TEZ Talks. Edinburgh: Pleasance Courtyard Below.*

Turning Discussion into Change

As a religious and racial outsider, in addition to being an outsider comedian, Ilyas adopts Schuetz' attitude of the stranger as they encounter and interact with an established community:

The cultural pattern of the approached group is to the stranger not a shelter but a field of adventure, not a matter of course but a questionable topic of investigation, not an instrument for disentangling problematic situations but a problematic situation itself and one hard to master.⁹⁹

The "cultural pattern" of the audience involves the various ways in which their background and beliefs differ from that of the comedian. As the stranger approaching a "group" vastly different from himself, Ilyas seems to delight in the challenge of deciphering and reforming the cultural pattern of his audience through direct address and discussion. He sees these differences as a "field of adventure", drawing out unique responses from his audience and manipulating his audience to collude with him through direct engagement and discussion. As with *Life Becomes Noises*, *TEZ Talks* has the ability to check in on the process of audience emancipation from existing "cultural patterns" step by step as Ilyas introduces each new "commandment". By engaging the audience directly, Ilyas is able to hammer home his message using improvised joking tailored to each specific crowd. As discussed earlier, Mary Douglas points out that it is the joker who offers a "symbolic pattern of a social pattern" that they see regularly repeated everywhere. By casing this symbolic pattern in the form of a joke, the joker is able to efficiently open up discussion surrounding this particular tool existing in the audience's "cultural tool kit".¹⁰⁰ So much of what Ilyas does throughout the performance of *TEZ Talks* is to take the

99 Schuetz , Alfred. p. 506

100 Douglas, M. (1975). p. 108

audience's preconceived notions, their preexisting "cultural tool kit", and tip it out for closer examination. He holds certain tools up to the light and invites the audience to laugh at the ridiculous characteristics some of them have developed. The audience is asked to think critically about their understanding of language, their beliefs about "British values", and through a stirring final monologue, Ilyas casts himself and his own experiences under the spotlight so that the audience can learn from his personal understanding of the "British Muslim" identity.

This emotional climax to the performance, and the act which will open the doors to a possible change in audience mentality, develops from a discussion Ilyas has with the audience regarding how they (the soon-to-be converts to Islam) will feel about totally assimilating into British culture. Ilyas departs from the role of the jovial pre-conversion lecturer, and he reverts to his established persona, seemingly free from any artifice of character. He goes on to give an impassioned speech about "Muslims being urged to integrate into a society that seems increasingly hostile to their very existence, fuelled by media coverage that's little more than thinly-veiled racism."¹⁰¹ Ilyas has spent the entire performance closely aligning the audience with the viewpoint of dedicated and enthusiastic British Muslims (or soon-to-be Muslims) through his TED Talk format and structured interactions. He opens with a warm welcome to the final step of the audience's Muslim conversion process. This means that by the time the audience reaches this emotional climax they are in a position to be much more empathetic to the experiences and raw emotions Ilyas shares with them. They have been given their role as willing converts, thereby beginning the performance in a manipulated position of collusion with Ilyas'

101 Bennett, S (2015, August 8)

outsider point of view. They are walked through structured rules to follow within this new role, thereby deepening their understanding of the role in which they have been cast and colluding even further with the comedian's goal of a growth in understanding and empathy. This building up of understanding amongst the audience about how British Muslims should act leads smoothly into Ilyas' own deeply personal testimony regarding how he leads his own life in light of this identity. Herein lies the performance's real chance to kick-start a self-renewing change in mentality and behaviour within the hearts and minds of the audience. Within the context of this show, these key moments of collusion that make it probable for change to occur within his audience. The ability to use their otherness to reframe the audience's understanding of an unusual, unpopular, or unexpected idea demonstrates true power of the outsider comedian.

Challenging the Audience to Motivate Change in Mark Thomas' *The People's Manifesto*

This final example of an outsider comedian using his position to kickstart self-renewing change in his audience focuses on bringing very specific political and cultural ideas into the forefront of his act. However, there is one distinction between this set of unusual and unfamiliar viewpoints and those discussed in the previous two cases. In Mark Thomas' show *The Manifesto*, the viewpoints presented are not authored by the performer; they come from audience members who submit their ideas for new political or cultural policies to Thomas before the start of the performance (via email and pre-show, written submissions). This show was recorded at various venues around the country and broadcast nationally on BBC Radio 4. While the broadcast version is heavily edited for time, the act of whittling down the suggestions so that only the

strong survive is still featured as key to the show's format. Thomas is acting as a comic curator, choosing which will be investigated and debated during the performance, but throughout this whole process, the genesis of the ideas remains with the audience. The conclusion of each performance features a vote taken by the audience to choose which of the policies discussed they wish to adopt and add to "The Manifesto". These ideas are then actively campaigned for by Thomas and others via various happenings, protests, etc. This show illustrates most clearly an outsider working with an audience to bring about a change in behaviour and mentality. The ideas are those of the audience, the defence of those ideas is made by the audience members themselves, and in the end, through careful manipulation and curating of the discussions, Thomas leads them to formally adopt the ideas through a vote. As with Hughes and Ilyas, Thomas finds ways to encourage his audience to collude in the performance, working together to build strong policies that everyone will want to fight for. The desire to change some particular aspect of the politics or culture of the time is drawn out of the audience by Thomas' teasing out of the submitted ideas, and in the end, it is the audience who chooses how they wish bring about change.

Testing the Strength of the Comedian-Audience Relationship

In order to hand over so much of the performance to the voices of his audience, Thomas must build a very clear and structured relationship with his them. This allows for every member of the audience to simultaneously not feel afraid to speak up, while also remaining attentive to what others are saying so that they can make the educated decision at the conclusion of the show as to which policy they wish to adopt. They must be willing to be heard, but also be able to listen, and

it is Thomas who must craft this dynamic. This requires that the comic license granted to Thomas by his audience throughout the show must be robust. He must constantly be aware whether or not the audience is “with him”, a feat not made any easier by the fact that Thomas turns over so much control of the show to the audience. The performance techniques he has honed over decades of performances as an outsider, political irritant, must be welded to perfection. The show structure is stated very clearly by Thomas at the beginning on the evening as if his is setting the agenda for a town council meeting:

This is the show where the audience have sent in their policy suggestions to me on how to improve the world, or at least their lives. And tonight we are going to examine and discuss those ideas and then put them to a vote to select a policy to enter our Manifesto.¹⁰²

Everyone is made aware of the plan for the performance, and can understand what will be asked of them. They also are reminded of the fact that the policy suggestions come from members of their own community present at the performance that night. They will not be dealing with anyone else’s ideas, just their own. Another key portion of this statement is Thomas’ choice to say “we are going to examine and discuss...” This is not a solitary activity in which the audience will remain passive throughout. Thomas is building up a strong relationship with his audience right from the beginning of the performance by saying “We will do this *together*”. Codependent upon that statement is that the audience are willing engage in the process of granting Thomas comic license throughout the back and forth discussion format of the performance.

¹⁰² Thomas, M. (2009, June 11). *The Manifesto: Series 1, Episode 1*. BBC Radio 4; The Drill Hall, Royal Academy for the Dramatic Arts. Broadcasted 25 June, 2009

Thomas also tests the strength of the relationship between himself and the audience through a process of complimenting the audience and then undercutting that statement by acknowledging the outliers.

My audience has a reputation of being independent, considered, and mindful. *(Pause)* And having read some of the suggestions tonight, I have to say that might not always be the case. *(Short chuckle from audience)*¹⁰³

Thomas is simultaneously encouraging his audience to carry out intelligent discourse during this performance, and undermining that same intelligence. This sort of rapid reversal acts in a similar way to Hughes' rebuffing of his audience's response to his arrival onstage after "winning the Grand National". Both performers are directly engaging with their audience's response to the content of the performance at the very outset of the performance. What Thomas does with this engagement is to jokingly deride his audience. This is met with laughter, which signifies that the audience has, on this occasion, decided to extend comic license to Thomas. Thomas is, in turn, able to use this feedback to judge the possible limits of and receptiveness to challenges from him later on in the performance. It is from this position of foreknowledge that Thomas is able to launch into the next portion of the *The Manifesto*, when the voices of audience members are thrust into the limelight.

¹⁰³ Thomas, *ibid*

Introducing the Unusual/Unpopular/Unexpected Viewpoint

Prior to the debating of ideas from audience members, Thomas shares example policies he has encountered while on tour. In this way he prefaces the viewpoints that will be shared by this particular audience, giving them a comfortable context for their own policy suggestions. This can eliminate the potential nervousness of not knowing whether a policy suggestion is too extreme, or too scathing. The targets of these policies could be very diverse, again having the effect of assuaging fears regarding the soon-to-be-shared audience policies. Thomas shares one such “extreme” suggestion from an audience member in Bath:

I’ve been touring this show around and you can see where public opinion is going through the policies. A few months ago, bankers, everything was about bankers. In Bath, one of the policies: Hang a banker every day of the year.” (*Laughter*)¹⁰⁴

This sort of suggestion proposes what is, within this politically liberal audience, a not-at-all unpopular viewpoint. It is for the reason that Thomas shares it now. This is Thomas relying on his earlier statement that his audience “has a reputation of being independent, considered, and mindful”. The audience will be informed as to the corruption and greed and bankers, and relish the idea that this policy, laughing at its intentions and implausibility. Again, this extreme suggestion will also lend some context to the policies that will be introduced during the present audience’s own ideas. Another example policy Thomas uses to introduce an unusual viewpoint that has slightly more connection to real-world, actionable ideas:

¹⁰⁴ Thomas, *ibid*

But then it moved on to politicians—with a vengeance. (*laughter*) One policy that was voted through at Leicester was that MP's houses that had received public money should be open to the public. 'Cause we've paid for it, we should be able to enjoy it.¹⁰⁵

This policy is the perfect way for Thomas to draw his audience towards the applicable possibilities of their own policies. Indeed, Thomas also gives evidence of the actions that have resulted from past suggestions, such as the policy above. Again, this gives the audience evidence that he will indeed hold true to his pledge to fight for and enforce the Manifesto they are all creating. By setting the stage for the kind of real world actions and activities that this audience's choice of winning policy could bring about, Thomas is also building a sense of pressure and excitement for the audience. Their choice of policy must be worthy of such action. For example, the policy recounted above resulted in some very direct action by Thomas and some of his fans recruited through the internet:

And while I've been touring around we have been running an unofficial open day policy. (*Small chuckle*) And actually it was great. We played croquet on Julie Kirkbride's lawn. (*Big laugh*)¹⁰⁶

Julie Kirkbride was one of many MPs caught up in an expenses scandal that garnered national attention in 2009 in which MPs seemed to claim compensation for questionable, often indulgent, personal expenses. Kirkbride, an MP for Bromsgrove, was forced to relinquish her parliamentary seat after it was revealed that she and her husband had claimed an astounding £170,000 to simultaneously fund their homes. She also used her parliamentary allowance to help

¹⁰⁵ Thomas, *ibid*

¹⁰⁶ Thomas, *ibid*

fund a £50,000 extension to her home in order to provide a bedroom for her brother.¹⁰⁷

Kirkbride only stoked the fire of public outrage when, in 1996, she had been quoted as saying “Why would anyone want to go into politics? All that prying from the press. All that contempt from the general public.”¹⁰⁸ It was statements like this, and the types of expenses she tried to claim for, that made her the perfect target for this particular Manifesto policy. Here we see to what extent Thomas' audience can end up colluding with him to achieve real public action following the agreement on a Manifesto policy. He is offering his audience a glimpse at the change that their ideas can bring into being when both he and they come together. Even if the attempts at kickstarting that change seem quite light-hearted (playing croquet on the lawn), the policies are still being acted upon; they are brought out of the theatre or comedy club in which they were proposed and taken into “the real world”. It is through the performance process of discussion and eventual collusion between the comedian and the audience that ideas once considered unusual, unpopular, or unexpected can be turned into the basis for an active political and cultural engagement beyond the confines of the theatre.

In another performance of the show, Thomas also uses this introductory portion of the performance to share some short policy suggestions sent in by the present audience via email. Similar to the broader statements about what he has heard on tour around the country, this stage in the performance serves to offer examples of what to expect from the performance. This gives Thomas a chance to enforce the concept that not every idea is perhaps worthy of closer

¹⁰⁷ Booth, R. (2009, May 29). *MP's Expensives: how Julie Kirkbride and Andrew MacKay fell from grace*. TheGuardian.com. <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/may/29/mps-expenses-julie-kirkbride-andrew-mackay-conservatives>

¹⁰⁸ Booth, *ibid*

interrogation. However, it also serves to localise the actions of the performance immediately, awakening *this particular audience* to a sense of accountability to their own words and beliefs. It reminds the audience that these unusual/unpopular/unexpected viewpoints are *their's*, and Thomas is just there to facilitate discussion:

We've had some brilliant ideas. I'll just read some of the ones that have come in from tonight. From Jason, it says, 'The streets and minds of London and Londoners is awash with the overuse of the word "Sorry", and I purpose issuing "Sorry" tokens to limit people's overuse of the word.' (*Laughter*) He goes on to say, 'In tandem with the restriction you would also promote educational alternatives, to provide situational alternatives, such as "Excuse me", "Hello", "May I have your attention momentarily.'" (*Laughter. He then moves straight on to another suggestion*) Uh, "More tea and cake shops, less coffee shops..."¹⁰⁹

All of these steps in the performance process of *The Manifesto* help to build the audience up for the main portion of the performance in which they will take a very active role in advocating for and defending their ideas. The policies have been pruned by Thomas, hence his decision to move swiftly on from the "Sorry" tokens idea may not be a total dismissal of the policy, but rather a case of wanting to move on to the meatier arguments still to come. These quickly mentioned policies are serving as a warm-up for the audience. They are now ready to find the policy that they wish to have Thomas campaign for.

It is at this point in the proceedings that Thomas comes to the audience for input on the bigger policy ideas that the audience there has put forward. He invites those who have proposed the

¹⁰⁹ Thomas, M. (2009, June 29) *The Manifesto: Series 1, Episode 2*. BBC Radio 4; The Drill Hall, Royal Academy for the Dramatic Arts; Broadcasted 2 July, 2009

selected policies, who will be referred to as the “amendment authors”, to campaign for their idea. Thomas also plays devil’s advocate, forcing the amendment authors to defend and justify their policy suggestion to the entire audience. One such policy attempted to tackle one of the governmental standards of practice that seems to obstruct honest voting and self-representation in Parliament:

My name’s Jackie, and I think we should get rid of the Whips because they seem to be Parliament’s playground bullies. If we think that MPs are worthy of having a voice, then they should be free to vote with their consciences.¹¹⁰

Whips are nominated by the party to try and convince party members of how they should vote on various issues that come up during a Parliamentary session, as well as holding major influence over the membership of the “select committees” within the House of Commons. It is after this initial policy statement that Thomas introduces research that he has conducted outside of the performance that supports or offers more context to the policy idea being presented. This allows the audience to analyse this unfamiliar viewpoint more closely, leading to an “independent, considered, and mindful” decision being made at the conclusion of the performance. The type of outside research offered with regard to the policy of removing Parliament’s Whips involves interviews with experts in this particular field: professor Phillip Cowley and Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn (someone who votes against their party platform regularly). Thomas then goes on to use this outside research to amend the earlier draft of the proposed policy, and the amendment author is asked if they approve of the edit:

¹¹⁰ Mark Thomas, *The Manifesto: Series 1, Episode 1*. BBC Radio 4; Broadcasted 25 June, 2009

Thomas: Your idea that actually we should abolish Whips met with a lot of approval to reform the Whips, not to abolish them. And Jeremy Corbyn suggested, in fact so did Phillip Cowley, actually what should happen is that MPs should be able to select who is on the select committees, and that we should encourage legislation to come from the select committees and from the backbench MPs, rather than let the government drive it through. Would you go with that amendment, that we should reform them?

Amendment Author: Yes. I think my main objection is the idea that they're in the background quite shadily, meaning that people aren't voting for what they want to be voting for, they're voting for position, or they're voting because they think it will hurt – like, they don't want to rebel because they don't want to hurt the government.

Thomas: So would you settle with the selection–

Amendment Author: Yes.

Thomas: –through the selection committees.

Amendment Author: Yes.

Thomas: So listen, thank you very much for putting forward your suggestion there, I think that's fantastic (*Large round of applause*)¹¹¹

Here Thomas and the amendment author work together to clarify the intentions of this, previously unfamiliar, viewpoint, allowing the rest of the audience to be left without any question as to the meaning and possible applications of the policy. This process is quintessentially collaborative, and leads to a stronger, more refined statement of purpose. It is Thomas encouraging his audience members to become complicit with the outcome of the performance. Together they have colluded to author this piece of policy that will be campaigned

¹¹¹ Thomas, *ibid*

for by Thomas and members of his community of fans and followers. The change from the initial policy suggestion to this final edit is measurable evidence to show that the audience, in the person of the amendment author in particular, are engaging in by the introduction of these new ideas. There is no policy without both Thomas and the audience, the two are bonded together, bridging the gap between the stranger and the established community to create something worth fighting for in the real world. It is within the final step of this performance analysis that it becomes clear that Thomas can stretch this level of connection with these policies to the audience as a whole, allowing for the possibility of personal and political change.

Turning Discussion into Change

The step from revising the policy with the amendment author to ratifying the audience's choice of policy is made by holding a final vote between all the policies discussed and debated during the performance. Prefacing the final vote on which policy the audience would like adopted,

Thomas asks:

Out of all the suggestions we've heard tonight, which ones do you think were— Is there anyone in the audience that's got a particular affinity to any particular policy that's come up so far. Is there anyone that you think 'Yes, that one sums it up for me.' Just shout out.¹¹²

Examples of this willingness to join in range from a simple shouting out of which policy they prefer, to Thomas encouraging other people to back up their choice with educated reasoning. By engaging with this step in the process, the offering of final statements from the rest of the crowd, the audience is indicating that they are willing to confront new, unusual viewpoints and

¹¹² Thomas, *ibid*

interrogate their currently held position on the subject of the policy. Even if the proposed amendment correlates with their existing beliefs, the act of introducing expert testimony and listening to Thomas amending and debating the policy with its author alters the spectator's relationship with the topic. They are now more informed, more expert. This level of engagement has thus been strengthened much more than if each policy had simply been read out individually.

Thomas presses his audience beyond this initial showing of affiliation by then leading the audience through a vote on which policy will be adopted and added to the Manifesto. This process begins by narrowing down the candidate pool. This is done by Thomas, based on his reading of the audience's responses to the policies as they were introduced and debated. Any policy which prompted laughter, but little sustained debate was cast to the side. Thomas then begins the final voting process, reminding the audience of the other policies brought forward that evening, and calling for a showing of support:

Okay, well this is what we shall do; we shall put it to a vote, this is gonna be the vote. The vote is gonna be a shout. I'm just gonna go through the policies which we're gonna put forward: So, there should be a public referendum to actually go to war, for British troops to be deployed abroad. If you support that idea shout "Aye" after three. One, two, three! *(A loud portion of the audience shouts "Aye!")*... If you want the Whips reformed in the House of Commons, and the House of Lords, presumedly, please shout "Aye" after three. One, two, three! *(An even*

louder portion call out “Aye!”) Actually, the Whips got it there.
*(Laughter and applause)*¹¹³

The audience willingly declare their position on these previously unfamiliar policies which, thanks to the process of well-researched analysis and debate, they would like the rest of the country to know about. Having carried out this final vote, and with such a clear winner decided instantly, Thomas addresses the amendment’s author:

Thomas: So, you’ve won tonight. Congratulations.

Amendment Author: Thank you

Thomas: And, how do you feel?

Amendment Author: Very good!

Thomas: Okay, so we’re gonna take this forward...¹¹⁴

This is the point at which Thomas describes the way in which this audience’s chosen policy will be brought into the public realm, again reinforcing the implications of their active engagement with this new proposed government policy:

Thomas: ... and we’re gonna start a campaign on this.

Amendment Author: Fantastic!

Thomas: Are you up for this?

Amendment Author: Yes!

Thomas: Right, ‘cause that means we have to devise a method. Because Gordon Brown, the other day, said he was gonna decrease the power of the Whips but, ya know, it’s Gordon Brown, ya know what I mean?

(Quiet chuckles)

Amendment Author: I have more power than him, I think *(Small laughter)*

¹¹³ Thomas, *ibid*

¹¹⁴ Thomas, *ibid*

Thomas: Do you know– (*Cheers and laughter break out*) I think you're possibly right! In fact, while we've been here, probably half a dozen people have resigned. (*Laughter*) I was waiting for the news that Sarah Brown had resigned as his wife. (*Chuckle*) But obviously we'll try and campaign this because I think it's a great idea.¹¹⁵

Thomas gives the audience a clear sense of where he sees the policy going, and how relevant it is to the country by sharing that this is already on the docket, according to Gordon Brown.

However, Thomas also makes it clear that he does not believe that this is a guarantor of success, thereby insuring the importance for active campaigning on the issue by both himself, and the audience community that has deemed this a worthy addition to the Manifesto. This invitation to further complicity with their idea offers both a challenge and promise that Thomas will continue to fight for the policy, but he will need his audience's support. The collusion cannot stop at the theatre door, no matter how silly or serious the eventual policy is, these ideas must be fought for so that the rest of the country can become engaged with the underlying issues. Thus we can see that the underlying goal of the performance has grown from simple entertainment to include a possibility for lasting, political action and influence on the comedian, the audience, and the country as a whole.

To further demonstrate how the policies determined in *The Manifesto* encourage continued collusion between the comedian and the audience following the show's completion, we can examine the case of the proposed invasion of the island of Jersey. Within a performance of *The*

¹¹⁵ Thomas, *ibid*

Manifesto an audience member puts forward the simple proposition that Britain should invade Jersey. Thomas goes on to outline the logical underpinning to this argument as he manipulates the framing of the policy to bring more audience members to a place of potential collusion and support for the idea.

This policy has become truly popular, not least because Jersey is one of the tax havens that have become the legal pirate coves of the 21st century. The Tax Justice Network (not to be confused with the rightwing Tax Payers' Alliance) estimates the UK loses about £18bn a year in tax revenue due to "corporate tax efficiency" i.e companies moving offshore. The Iraq war cost at least £8bn. So war with Jersey would not only be morally right but self-financing too. In fact we could probably do a bond issue for the invasion to pay for everything up front with the promise of a steady yearly return for investors.¹¹⁶

By comparing the proposed invasion of Jersey to the deeply unpopular war in Iraq in such stark terms, as well as reinforcing the morality of fighting against tax havens versus the immorality of the Iraq war, Thomas is attempting to make the unexpected viewpoint that we ought to invade Jersey more understandable. He is manipulating our understanding of a just and moral war and by directing our attention to Jersey, perhaps at first glance a comical replacement for our military attention, one cannot argue with the potential monetary impact of this invasion. Thomas also supports this policy in a similar way to the regulation of the Whips, offering expert statements to draw in more audience support.

¹¹⁶ Thomas, M. (2010, February 8). *Why Britain should declare war on Jersey*. The Guardian. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/feb/08/britain-should-invade-jersey>

The case for invading Jersey is made even more compelling by whistleblower Stuart Syvret, the longest-serving senator and "father of the house" in the Jersey parliament. Syvret recently posted documents on his blog claiming that the island's political elite were refusing to investigate malpractice in the health service. He was rewarded with a morning raid by 10 police officers who searched his home (without a search warrant), confiscated his computer (holding his constituents' private data and communications) and imprisoned him while they did so. Syvret now lives "in exile" in London and says Jersey should be invaded "for regime change" – although he prefers the term "liberate" to invade.¹¹⁷

Further support of this policy from someone with firsthand experience of the Jersey "regime" deepens the rationality behind taking action on this Manifesto policy. The call for action extends beyond the island as an immoral tax haven. According to the story of Stuart Syvret the island's "political elite" are failing to fulfil their duties and abusing their power when someone draws attention to this negligence. Again, Thomas is further encouraging his audience to collude in this policy's vision. Jersey is rife for invasion. Indeed, the article that these excerpts are drawn from is evidence of Thomas following through on his own promise to advocate for his audience's policies, seeking to draw in further support on a much wider scale by publishing such calls to action on the website of The Guardian. Thomas would also take this call and turn it into action, meeting and speaking with people to increase the public attention on the need to invade, or "liberate", Jersey.

¹¹⁷ Thomas, *ibid*

The most public of these interventions involved Thomas visiting Jersey, what he would deem a scouting trip for the later invasion. 'Greeting myself and the show's producer Colin Anderson at the airport was a large sign with the words "Welcome to Jersey" sponsored by the Royal Bank of Scotland (who invested their sense of irony in the sub prime market and lost it completely).'¹¹⁸ Thomas and his producer had arrived on the island in time for a protest at the capital, St. Helier. The protest was aimed at new tax laws brought into being by the island's Senate. These Laws would see non-Jersey based companies paying 0% tax (this includes such major businesses as high street chains), banks in Jersey paying 10% tax on their profits, but island-owned businesses would have a tax rate of 20%.¹¹⁹ This type of disparity is exactly what motivated the original policy suggestion during the performance of *The Manifesto*. Thomas aligns his original audience's enthusiasm for change on the island with the enthusiasm of those actually on the ground on Jersey, beginning to share the policy of an invasion (or liberation) with those fighting for just that:

I'm here to tell you that across Britain people have said that we won't pay for the bankers' bailouts. The banks got the bailouts, we got the cuts. Pensioners see their housing benefits cut. Poorer people see their housing benefits cut. Students won't get their education paid for. They'll be in debt for the next umpteenth years of their life. Now that's the reason why I'm here.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Mark Thomas quoted by Saul, S. (2011, January 6) *When Mark Thomas invaded Jersey*. BBC.co.uk. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/comedy/2011/01/mark-thomas.shtml>

¹¹⁹ Thomas, *ibid*

¹²⁰ Mark Thomas quoted in Morrison, R. (2010, December 4). *"Invade Jersey" Mark Thomas IN Jersey*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8I1a98-aKc>

Thomas then goes on to outline the policy that has led him to Jersey, garnering cheers from the crowd huddled under umbrellas in the rainy town square.

Thomas: Actually, I genuinely believe this is a common cause and that actually it is the rich that have managed to avoid paying tax that affects everyone throughout the world. It affects developing world countries where the tax is being taken out of that country; where there's more tax being avoided paying than there is paid going into that country. It affects developed countries because it skews economies like here in Jersey where actually there should be a tourism industry and there should be an agricultural industry—

Protester: There was a tourism industry and they destroyed it!

Thomas: Exactly! This is because it's been skewed towards the finance sector, and actually we need to reclaim those industries, and we need to be building them and saying, "We defy what is going on here and we will fight against the monopolization of the economy by the banks." So I'm here really to say well done for coming out, I hope you help me when I invade (*laughter*). Good luck with your struggle because this is a struggle across Europe and across the world. (*shouts of "Here here!"*) And it's about working people taking back government; making sure that taxation is fair, and that means the rich pay the most and not the other way around! (*More cheers of "Here here", applause, and cheers*)¹²¹

The collusion between the comedian and this new group of people is evident through their cheers of approval and encouragement. The assembled protesters are already a receptive audience, but the audience sitting in the theatre during the performance of *The Manifesto* where this policy was proposed may not have been. By virtue of the format of that performance, the audience is

¹²¹ Thomas, *ibid*

responsible for the policy urging Thomas to head to Jersey and inspire change. Voting for a fellow audience member's unusual and unexpected idea means that that audience has colluded with Thomas to help bring about change greater than the confines of the theatre allows. They have given Thomas his marching orders. Thanks to the masterful welding of the performance techniques of an outsider comedian, in collusion with an engaged audience, these orders have the possibility to enact and support real-world change.

Conclusion

And so we return to the goal of this document: To investigate how stand-up comedians who actively emphasise their marginality, use certain performance techniques uniquely suited to stand-up comedy in order to build a relationship with their audience. The Irish middle-aged man openly joking and encouraging laughter about the death of his father, the young British-Pakistani coopting an audience full of largely caucasian festival-goers into a TED Talk on life as a British Muslim, or the political provocateur helping his audience formulate policies for a People's Manifesto. Each stand-up comedian utilises his own specific performance techniques to create a community with his audience, drawing them in and building a relationship together. Through this relationship forming, the door is opened to potential growth and change.

These final three case studies show the potential for continued development of new ideas among the audience members. However, the earlier examples of possible performance techniques employed by a wide variety of today's outsider stand-up comedians, shows just how diverse and open this art form truly is. There are so many comedians with so many unusual, unexpected, perhaps even unpopular, views and ideas to share. This plurality of approaches to building a strong comedian/audience relationship enriches the stand-up comedy world. No two comedians will ever be exactly alike, just as no two audiences would be likely to be the same. This fact allows for continual evolution of the form and the messages comedians will try to set forth.

I began this investigation with a small question: How do stand-up comedians connect with their audiences? I wanted to better understand what it was about the features and characteristics of stand-up comedy that made audiences connect with these performers. Performers they had probably never met, who were saying things that could challenge and potentially upset their audiences every night. It seemed like a tight-rope walk that ideally saw both parties meeting somewhere in the middle. Every now and then the comedian would bounce up and down on the wire, but a truly skilled performer would find ways to keep the audiences right up there with them, hanging on and eventually coming to enjoy the bounces. This is what an outsider stand-up comedian does with every performance. They setup their wire carefully, give their audiences the appropriate amount of preparation, then invite the crowd to climb up and go for a walk together.

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