empathy and intimacy in stand-up comedy

how can the performer negotiate with an audience in order to encourage empathy and intimacy in stand-up comedy?

Tory Gillespie, MDrama

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the use of empathy and intimacy in stand-up comedy. It considers the potential harm that these elements are often considered to bring to comedy, partly through an examination of existing theory and practice, but primarily via practice as research. Empathy is explored through the comedian's manipulation of the audience which is managed by the identification of specific tools and skills employed in the practice. Intimacy is used both physically and emotionally to make use of, at various points, the audience members' potential tension, feelings of solidarity and willingness to connect to the other people around them, as well as their willingness to connect with the performer. Performances designed, written and performed with the investigation in mind enable a targeted approach to the question and allow insight into the *intention* of the performer and how that translates (or doesn't) rather than the 'end goal' of whether or not the audience laughed. These stand-up comedy experiences include *Ulster Loves Me!* which was performed only once to curated audience and with a specific aim. *Baby Madness is a Real Disease*, however, was performed fourteen times to largely unpredictable audiences.

By demonstrating the potential benefits of utilising empathy and intimacy, including social inclusion, heightened theatrical experience and most importantly, comic effect, this thesis seeks to encourage the exploration of more intimate moments so often feared by comedians and audiences alike, suggesting that the tiniest of audiences are no enemy of stand-up comedy, but can be utilised as the conduit of a more enriching comedy experience.

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> Here I would point out[…] the *absence of feeling* which usually accompanies laughter. It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion. (Bergson 1956, p.63)

INTRODUCTION:

How can the performer negotiate with an audience in order to encourage empathy and intimacy in stand-up comedy?

In 2006 when I decided to pursue a Master's degree in stand-up Comedy, friends and family were stunned. They were surprised that it had been deemed worthy of academic study, seeing it as a frivolous and lightweight topic. They were unconvinced of the value of such an enquiry. In 2007 when I carefully crafted a 20 minute stand-up comedy performance about the sudden, violent death of my Grandfather, people were horrified. They were repulsed that an event so traumatic, so personal and so utterly unsuitable for comedy would be abused by the ridicule of stand-up comedy. They were unconvinced about the ethical integrity of such an enquiry. The performance itself walked the line between respect and mockery, but ultimately provided significant relief for those who loved and missed him. The rest of the audience were noticeably quieter. Was the concept too abhorrent for them to feel comfortable laughing at the death of a stranger? Or was the performance too intimate, leaving them to feel like voyeurs, witnessing something that was none of their business? This enquiry is born of these questions.

Stand-up comedy has provoked ethical and moral debate almost as long as it has been known under that name.[1] In 1964, Lenny Bruce was arrested and convicted of obscenity in New York for using the word 'cocksucker' on stage. In 2011, an unsuccessful bid was launched to have Frankie Boyle arrested under the obscenity laws in the UK for making various jokes, including one about the Queen being raped.[2] There was much

[1] Double suggests that the term may have been in usage earlier than 1917 (Double 2018), although after that it does not appear to have been used again until 1948 (Double 2017a), with the OED incorrectly citing its first usage as being in 1966; Lenny Bruce was first arrested for obscenity in 1961 (Collins and Skover 2002, p.52) although police intimidation started in earnest in 1959 (Collins and Skover 2002, p.93)

[2] This was in print, rather than live on stage, but came after a series of challenging jokes in his lives shows, including one about a child with Down syndrome which led to an argument with an audience member

interest, in both cases, in trying to decide whether or not these topics were appropriate to joke about in public, but little or no attention given to how the comedian made the jokes happen. This overlooked point, that they were successful jokes that a room full of people felt they were able to laugh at, was not deemed relevant. This investigation focusses on how the comedian may give an audience the opportunity to laugh at sensitive subject matter in such a way as to remain empathetic and sympathetic to what might be described in crude terms as the 'victim' or butt of the joke.

Although there were elements of the jokes in these examples that provoked disgust from 'outsiders', i.e. people who had not been present at the original performance, we know that at least some people present at the performances found the jokes funny and laughed, and in Boyle's case, the people who laughed were in the majority. There is a recording of Lenny Bruce being arrested for obscenity in Chicago in 1962, on which we can clearly hear the audience laughing at his response to the arrest. Other recordings of his 'obscene' material contain loud laughter from the audience present. It is certain that at a large part of his audiences found his material to be funnier than they found it offensive. The experience of being in the audience, live and in front of the comedian as part of a bigger show is demonstrably different from reading the joke, out of context, in the newspaper the next day or, in Bruce's notable experiences, the courtroom. Having a non-performer read his routines out in a courtroom, out of context and without any performative effort, was very different from what had occurred in the original performance, as Bruce was well aware.

> He wanted to do his own performance in the court, for the judge to see what it was he *actually* did on stage, as opposed to some, uh, to some cop from the, uh, from around the corner making illiterate notes about what he *thought* Lenny said[...]he then had the idea of making a film of his performance or a videotape of his performance live in a club and showing that ultimately in the supreme court (Gleeson in Collins and Skover 2002, CD track 32)

The denial of this as a possibility was devastating to Bruce's cases. Something specifically relating to the experience of being a live audience member and that most crucial element, context, alters our the flexibility of what we consider to be acceptable. This investigation is dedicated to exploring what it is that the comedian does, and how he manages the audience in order to manipulate us into accepting something that we would otherwise reject.

It would be prudent to define my terms at this point. Although I will be using familiar concepts, I will be referring to specific definitions, in order to achieve clarity and precision.

Stand-up Comedy

Dr Oliver Double dedicates an entire chapter towards attempting a definition of stand-up, and comes to the conclusion that it requires three elements: personality, communication

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whose child had Down.
http://www.chortle.co.uk/news/2011/11/27/14409/prosecute_franke_boyle_for_obscenity!

and the present tense (2014, p.19). David Marc claims that '"directness of artist/audience communication" is the definitive feature of the art' (1997, p.13), with Tony Allen, stalwart of the alternative comedy scene, taking this as a starting point.

> A stand-up comedy performance involves direct communication with an audience. Performing rather than acting.[…] There is no contract, only a nebulous agreement that the performance is spontaneous and authentic.(2002, p.28)

The importance of this spontaneity may be less important today than it was in 2002. The audience understands that the comedian may be performing the same scripted or semi-scripted show as part of a year-long tour and has more in the know about how stand-up comedy tends to function. With more comedians bringing their 'show' to television and DVD, there is a greater understanding that comedy is written and rehearsed before it makes it to public performance. Allen does go on to say that the performance may be scripted and learned off by heart, but crucially must contain this feeling of spontaneity, of being in the 'here and now'(2002, p.28) Two years later, he acknowledged that 'very little is spontaneous, and it is only the potential for spontaneity that exists'(2004, p.93). The comedian may prepare for the performance, but crucially, must adapt to the liveness of the situation.

In terms of hard definitions, there is a curiously restrictive explanation of what a stand-up comedian is, given by Lenny Bruce:

> A comedian is one who performs words or actions of his own original creation, usually before a group of people in a place of assembly, and these words or actions should cause the people assembled to laugh at a minimum of, or on average, one laugh every 15 seconds - or let's be liberal to escape the hue and cry of the injured and say one laugh every 25 seconds for a period of not less than 45 minutes, and accomplish this feat with consistency 18 out of 20 shows. (1984, p.41-41)

I certainly find this too be too restrictive, given that Bruce himself did not always adhere to these rules. A hard definition is not particularly useful here, however, and in this thesis the term 'stand-up comedy' is used as an umbrella term that covers the broad spectrum of performance that involves talking directly to an audience with the intention of making them laugh, rooted in the present tense. I have named the specific style of stand-up comedy that forms the majority of the practice for this enquiry 'stand-up theatre' and defined it later in this section. With many other objectives possible in Stand-up Comedy, particularly in this enquiry, it is worth referring to Limon's succinct and absolute summary:

> Your laughter is the single end of stand-up (Limon 2000, p.12).

Without laughter or at the very least, the intention of producing laughter, the performance is not stand-up.

To negotiate

Sophie Quirk's *Why Stand-up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence* (2015) argues that not only must the comedian manipulate their audience but that manipulation is not an inherently bad thing. Although 'manipulate' might seem to be a more appropriate word here, I have consciously chosen to 'negotiate' with my audiences. This word has various definitions according to the Oxford English Dictionary, mainly:

> To communicate or confer (with another or others) for the purpose of arranging some matter by mutual agreement; to discuss a matter with a view to some compromise or settlement(OED).

The inclusion of the words 'discussion' and 'compromise' become very relevant to this enquiry, as I hoped not to sell an agenda, but to find out where the audiences' opinions lay and tried to work with that in order to encourage broader thought. The word 'manipulate', although correctly identified by Quirk as to 'handle or control something skilfully' (2015, p.1) implies a level of control that is traditionally valuable in stand-up comedy. I wanted to experiment with relinquishing some of that control. With this in mind, the definition of 'negotiate' most relevant to this enquiry is:

> To find a way through, round, or over (an obstacle, a difficult path, etc.).

The practice of this enquiry sought out various 'difficult paths' and intended to find a way through via comedy, in order to come to a mutual understanding. Although 'manipulation' might be a useful word, and it is certainly one that Quirk employs to discuss all manners of stand-up comedy, even in the most positive of senses, I was interested in deviating from the path. Such a permanent fixture of stand-up needs re-examining, and I intend to move towards a gentler, more democratic form of comedy. That is not to say I would like to encourage heckling (comedy is inherently democratic in that sense) (Thomas in Quirk 2015, p.141) but a gentle shift in the idea of power and dominance, towards a friendlier, inclusive atmosphere where an audience member may comment without it seeming like a traditional, disruptive, disrespectful heckle. If a place such as that exists, free from the negative macho dominance that continues to haunt the art form, it will serve the rest of my enquiry well.

Empathy

> The ability to understand and appreciate another person's feelings, experience, etc. (OED)

In this investigation when 'empathy' is mentioned, I am referring to a specific attitude held by the comedian whereby they are conscious of the potential harm in being too flippant or outright cruel when dealing with material that could be considered emotionally charged in some way. An empathetic approach to stand-up will also involve effort to guide the audience towards laughter that comes from an empathetic place and context that encourages that possibility of laughing with, rather than at the subject of the joke or routine. 'To joke with empathy' requires the comedian to be intending to avoid offence.

Empathy is not usually considered to be an important part of stand-up comedy. Some consider it to be entirely incompatible with joking and Bergson goes so far as to say that the exact opposite is necessary for comedy to exist, with laughter 'having no greater foe than emotion' (Bergson 1956, p.63). If this were true, every time we laugh at a difficult situation, we would be turning off our feelings in order to enjoy ourselves, rather than working with those strong emotions to release some tension through laughing at the absurdity of the situation. I will mention briefly that the three main theories of comedy – Superiority, Incongruity and Relief - are all relevant here. These will be discussed in detail in Chapter One, but at this stage I will mention that no one theory is sufficient in explaining comedy in general: all three must be used for different jokes in different styles, with possible sub-theories being of use as well. For the style of comedy used in this project, Relief theory will be particularly relevant.

Incorporating empathy into comedy is at odds with what comedian Martin Willis considers to be traditional of stand-up.

> To perform stand-up comedy is to single-handedly dominate a room full of people. This otherwise exists in poetry and perhaps performance art, but in these forms the audience is rarely involved in the dialogue – even if in comedy it is to respond purely with laughter. More than that, in other art there is an emotional openness that is all but outlawed in many comedy environments. (in Independent 2018)

Willis seems to consider the 'toxic masculinity' of the traditional stand-up circuit to be a compulsory element, but dreams of a more emotionally open experience. In terms of this enquiry, empathy has been attempted via emotional openness, jokes that remain respectful of their subjects, actively seeking difficult topics and exploring how to encourage empathy in an audience of strangers.

Emotional Openness

In the context of this project at least, 'emotional openness' will be considered to be present when the comedian does not try to sanitise or offer an escape from the emotional impact of any topic. This is an attitude I have adopted in my writing and performance. It is something to be gently encouraged in an audience but cannot be forced.

Intimacy

> "[…]when you do like, stand-up in a small room it's like er, we're all friends.." (Lee, 2008)

When referring to 'intimacy' in this investigation, I mean a closeness that can be either physical or emotional, that forces engagement and is demonstrated by a significant relationship between the comedian and their audience, with a certain intensity. Intimacy is often spoken about in positive terms when associated with Stand-up, right from its earliest beginnings. Here a *Times* reviewer states that intimacy is an absolute requirement:

> "Stars" of the music-hall must give the lie to their name. Though they may glitter, coldness and distance are taboo. The bond between actor and audience must be friendly if it is to exist at all. (The Times 1936, p.10)

The review continues with a summary of the connection each act makes with their audience, rather than the entertainment value of the performance or the skill on show. A closely shared experience between audience and performer is seen as essential here, but it is debatable whether or not this is a defining requirement of stand-up. It is certain that the loss of intimacy is a significant loss, with arena comedy being quite a different experience from a small, sweaty gig in a pub basement (Lockyer 2015). This enquiry delves into a thorough exploration of intimacy by way of two routes: the physical and the emotional. As mentioned above, physical intimacy has been an important part of stand-up comedy for a long time, however this project pushes the limits of this in the opposite direction, looking at small and tiny audiences. The practice embraces the uncomfortable intimacy that results from a small gig in a small room, where the audience cannot possibly be anonymous in a room of hundreds. In this close, suffocating situation 'the audience' becomes individual people, and the comedian is faced with the decision of whether or not to isolate and identify them, risking awkwardness either way. Intimacy, usually beneficial to a stand-up comedy gig, becomes an obstacle that the comedian must negotiate around in order to manage the performance and the audience.

The emotional intimacy brings the audience and performer even closer and might make them even less comfortable. Deeply divisive or personal subject matter, used to bring human interest to political issues, is presented in this practice with a view to exploring the limits of intimacy and the negotiation that must take place in order to achieve success in stand-up comedy terms, i.e. laughter. In order to manage a negotiation and not mere manipulation, it is necessary to converse with the audience to some extent, gaining knowledge about their personal opinions and reactions. In the traditional stand-up gig, where the comedian speaks and the audience is expected to listen, an open and intimate approach works well. The audience is required to sit, listen and laugh, and should anyone choose to contribute, or heckle, that's their (often misguided) decision. If the comedian desires further interaction and intimacy from their audience, however, steps must be taken to encourage audience members. Mintz notes that this is generally known as 'working the room' (1985, p.78). Sarah Millican, a comedian that we will be looking at in more detail in Chapter 1, regularly encourages audience interaction to inform and grow her material, asking questions of her audience that may provide amusing responses. Although she can delve into racy territory, much of her appeal lies in her warmth.

> What people identify with is that I'm a bit like your sister, or your mam, or your auntie. I'm just normal (Millican in Cavendish 2011).

Although she revels in smut (Logan 2016b), she tends to attracts crowd looking for relatively 'safe' comedy (Bennett 2018). Her audience is not as likely as others to merrily shout out personal details in front of an audience of 3,000 or so people and so the comedy space is adapted to encourage people to speak up.

> I always make sure the room is really dark so I can't see the audience, which makes them happier to join in when I ask them to talk about sex (Millican in Connolly 2011).

The audience is protected and anonymous, able to distance themselves from their answers. How could the comedian encourage this openness and intimacy, in a truly intimate setting? With a small audience, no hiding and no pretending that we aren't really saying the things we're saying? This investigation looks to explore the nature of intimate comedy topics, intimate comedy gigs and intimate moments between the audience and the comedian. With regards to empathy and the underlying implication of positivity that underpins this project, it was never my intention to expose audience members against their will. Everything personal that is to be shared must come freely from the individual. In the footsteps of Adrian Howells, a one-on-one performance artist whose work focusses on protecting the audience members, my focus is on the experience of the audience member as a potentially vulnerable individual and I would not seek to exploit or embarrass anyone.

Ridicule, mockery and victims

The word 'ridicule' comes up frequently in this writing and in some critical reactions to comedy. The OED has this definition:

> To subject to ridicule or mockery; to make fun of, laugh at, deride.

This seems to be an entirely negative experience, but this project challenges this assumption, asserting that ridicule can do more than expose derisory feelings, and could have a gentler, altogether more positive meaning. Although De Sousa uses 'phthonic laughter' to describe 'the evil element in laughter' (1987, p.289), I have decided to assign 'ridicule' to describe jokes that have a target whose negative behaviour is laughed at without any consideration to their feelings. Ridicule is something cruel and devastating, designed to reduce the victim of the joke in a way that they are not supposed to enjoy. I call the gentler version of this 'mockery'. Mockery, although defined as 'derision, ridicule; a mocking or derisive utterance or action' (OED) is used here in the same manner that Descartes uses 'modest Bantering', which:

> constructively admonishes vices by making them appear ridiculous, but in which one does not laugh at them oneself or express any hatred against anyone(…) (1989, p. 117).

This is a more positive way of making fun of someone, in a way that is actually fun for everyone involved. How this is achieved is discussed at length in Chapter Two.

Material unsuitable for Stand-up Comedy

Arguably there is no material unsuitable for stand-up, although recent trends may suggest otherwise (Wills 2018; Logan 2019). Offensive jokes are common in Stand-up Comedy, with the Just for Laughs festival in Montreal dedicating a series of performances to this purpose each year, called *The Nasty Show*. Similar shows appear in Australia and at the Edinburgh Fringe. Interestingly, the original Nasty Show has been criticised recently

for not being 'nasty' enough (Montreal Gazette 2018). The article that protested this claimed that only Jimmy Carr, a household name in the UK at least, might push the boundaries of offence on a regular basis. This gives us the beginnings of a basic definition for material that is 'unsuitable' for Stand-up Comedy, i.e. material that has the potential to cause offence and detract from the laughter of the audience to the extent that it is avoided by many comedians. This includes but is not limited to death, paedophilia, terminal diseases, infertility, abortion and deeply-felt political divisions.

Comedy is a wide genre accommodating many different tastes, just as the broad umbrella of 'music' can cover a huge variety (Stott 2005, p.148; Crosby in Quirk 2015, p.71-72) but even within the genre of Stand-Up there are significant differences that are worth demarcating. I am not talking about the various styles, attitudes and political leanings of comedians, but the set-up of the actual gig itself that make for very different experiences. In his 2017 article 'The origin of the term stand-up comedy' Double traces its roots back to early 20th Century music hall. This would have been a significantly different performance that those that take place in the O2 Arena, and both of those styles of performance would be very different to those featured in this PaR enquiry. It will be necessary to name and define some sub categories that have been identified for the purposes of this project.

Open Mic

These are short sets, usually five to ten minutes, that can be performed by virtually anyone, often to non-paying audiences. These tend to be under attended with the audience mostly made up of other acts. Timeout has a good analysis:

> Here you can see fresh, raw comedy hopefuls honing their first few minutes of material. Some will be great, some will be terrible (Online)

Gigs

The word 'gig' will refer to any 'usual' Stand-up Comedy performance, which is typically a professional billing where several acts share the stage over the course of the evening which is managed by a compere. I use professional broadly – the comedian may not be paid, but the gig is put on in order to earn money for somebody. These nights tend to offer slick, laughter-dense comedy, with acts performing their current best 20 minute set to an audience who may or may not have heard of them, and probably haven't specifically come to see any particular name, but to be entertained by whoever is on. Newer acts may also be allowed to perform anything from five to twenty minutes long. This term is used broadly in these circumstances, covering any type of gig that is not open-mic or long form Stand-up Theatre (see below).

Stand-Up Theatre (concept shows)

The idea of stand-up theatre is born from the rise of long-form concept shows, as opposed to what bookers refer to as a 'tight 20', referring to twenty minutes of rehearsed, reliable material that can be brought out for any standard club gig. Stand-up

theatre, on the other hand, is a crafted, self-contained show rather than just a performance, with a coherent story arc and including some elements of traditional theatre such as set, props, lighting and sounds cues. There may be more poignant moments either in order to enhance the impact of the comedy moments, or in opposition to them. They may even be written with the aim of achieving something other than just to make people laugh which is the only true objective of what might be referred to as 'classic' stand-up comedy. The work of Mark Thomas best typifies this. Thomas creates a titled show, usually based on a particular aspect of his political or social activism and tours the country with it for at least a year. The show often includes a simple backdrop as set, with one or two props, which serve to fill the large theatres or art centres that Thomas tends to visit.[3] His 2002 show Dambusters, which will be discussed further in Chapter 1, finishes not on the biggest laugh of the night, but on a cold, harrowing, furious rant, from which no light relief is offered. The show is funny but that is not its only objective. The idea of Stand-up Theatre has been dismissed by some comedians and critics, however. The derogatory term 'The Dead Dad Show' refers to this long-form style of Stand-up, often featuring an emotional arc. This is discussed further in Chapter 1.

Practice as Research – qualification and methodology

There have been PaR enquiries regarding the use of difficult personal material in stand-up comedy, most notably Oliver Double's 'Break A Leg' which documented the dramatic injury and laborious recovery that he experienced as a result of falling over on ice while out for a jog. This show played to an audience of about 170 in a 340-seat theatre and although it felt like an intimate experience, it was really only a one way conversation and the audience didn't have to participate outside of standard 'getting-to-know-you' compere activities. Further to that, this enquiry explores permission that cannot be sought from the comedian, stories that are from elsewhere, big political issues made personal by experience and the intimacy of making someone laugh who does not agree with your political position.

I performed around 14 hours of stand-up for this investigation, comprising of open mic gigs, typical gigs and stand-up Theatre shows. The most interesting performances that led to the most significant revelations were the latter, although a few of the smaller gigs informed the practice in important ways and consistently performing to an 'untamed' audience made up of the general public meant that I was never allowed to stay safely in the confines of the institution. Stand-up comedy is a popular form of performance and this investigation could not have been restricted to the comfortable confines of a polite, academic audience. Having said that, the first significant piece of practice was experimental, and I decided for that reason to perform on the Café stage at the Gulbenkian Theatre, which is a professional theatre based on the University of Kent campus. This first show, performed in April of 2013 was *Permission to Laugh?*, a 30-

[3] Gyles Brandreth's 2013 show 'The Seven Signs of Happiness' might also be considered to be stand-up Theatre by this definition, although when I asked him about it he sighed and muttered something disparaging about 'obsession with labels'.

minute show with a support act doing the first section and myself as a compere. The show was based on my Grandmother's death from cancer and started to explore how the comedian might gain or give permission to laugh at a subject that far from light-hearted. In addition to this, I was dedicated to finding a way of writing and performing the show that would remain respectful to my Grandmother, or at least in a way that would have made her laugh. A few months after this performance, I took *Permission to Laugh?* to the Camden Fringe Festival, sharing a bill with another comedian under the title *Camden Cackles*. The audience were mostly members of the public who had seen the listing in the festival program and had little idea of what to expect, but it was well received.

The following year I performed three distinct shows that grew from one idea. Each show progressed from the last. The first was *Bring Out Your Gays*, a 30 minute show as part of a bill of three 'experimental' comedy shows, performed by the stand-up comedy Master's students at the Aphra Theatre at the University of Kent. The aim for this piece was to explore the theatrical edges of stand-up and featured a set, props, lighting and sound cues. The set was themed around the casual homophobia that exists in daily life in Britain, and as such was a sensitive subject for some people, but not a devastating one. It allowed me to push at some tender areas via audience participation in a way that left the member of the audience in control of what to share. It was a careful first step into other people's worlds which is a recurring theme in this project. The second show went back to my own territory, dealing with the backward chaos that was the state of politics in Northern Ireland at the time. It was called *Could Be Worse* and as with the previous show, was part of a bill of three and was performed at the Gulbenkian Theatre in the Cafe space. This show played with my left-leaning audience's disappointment at the result of the general election and used the strong feelings associated with that. The final show of that year was *Ulster Loves Me!*, a combination of the previous two shows, but based on the story of the gay cake row that erupted when a the Christian owners of a bakery near Belfast refused to make a cake with a slogan supporting gay marriage. The man who ordered the cake became subject a lot of personal abuse when he decided to refer the incident to the Equalities Commission, including homophobic abuse. The show took place at the Green Room at the Black Box Theatre in Belfast, and sold out, with high attendance from the LGBT community. The man who ordered the 'gay 'cake', Gareth Lee, attended and enjoyed it very much.

Ulster Loves Me was performed as part of the Comedy Labs Festival at the Black Box, which encourages experimental or truly alternative stand-up Comedy. It was here I previewed the final piece of work the following year: *Baby Madness is a Real Disease* (*BMIARD*). I then took this show to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival as part of PBH's Free Fringe (a sort of festival within a festival) and performed thirteen shows at Sportsters Bar and Grill. *BMIARD* was an exploration of the political and personal impact of attitudes to women and women's fertility, via my own personal, emotional wrestling match with the decision to start a family. A summary of all the practical details of these shows, such as ticket pricing, capacity etc., can be found in Appendix 1, along with a list of every piece of practice undertaken.

This enquiry, if not intending to change minds, has certainly broadened them, bringing information to audiences and allowing them to come to their own conclusions (albeit in a manipulative and hopeful way). Because of the spectacularly intersubjective nature of stand-up comedy generally and this enquiry specifically, with each audience member having different views and each audience at each different gig forming a different general consensus together, a set of hard and fast rules is impossible to form (although I have come to some general conclusions). As a result, the reflective nature of Practice as Research is the only suitable mode of enquiry, with insight gained by performing under different circumstances, or in the case of *BMIARD*, performing the same show (more or less) in the same venue night after night to different audiences sourced in the same way.

Stand-up comedy has experiential secrets that is particularly suited to investigation via PaR. Research sometimes shies away from comedy in general. E.B. White had notably dismissive views on comedy:

> Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind (1941, p. xvii).

This is a popular quote and a widely held opinion. Comedians are sometimes reticent in attempting an explanation of their method, either in an attempt to protect their livelihood or with the reductive excuse that comedy is impossible to analyse; they 'just know' what works. I find this to be entirely correct: comedians have an instinct, possibly natural but always improved with practice, for knowing what works. They have a detailed understanding of the small differences and nuances that can improve their delivery, turning a good joke into a great one. They exploit unexpected opportunities with minimally prepared lines and are able to do this through what Robin Nelson calls 'know-how': 'insider, close-up knowing' (2013, p.41). I have, as a fledgling comedian, been mocked by experienced acts who claim that it is either fruitless or impossible to study stand-up comedy in an academic light, excluding perhaps from a social sciences perspective and I'm not alone in that experience.

> Certainly on the comedy circuit there's a bit of snobbery about the idea of going on courses to learn the trade (Brand 2012, online)

The experiential knowledge of stand-up comedians is so personal and so their own that other people could not possibly understand without years of practice. It is the responsibility of Practice as Research to extrude this knowledge and make available to the reader (or viewer) without these years of performance. It could be argued that Practice as Research is the most appropriate way of studying stand-up comedy.

This thesis pays close attention to Nelson's concept of 'modes of knowing' as set out in his book, *Practice as Research in the Arts* (2013). Nelson identifies three forms of knowledge necessary to PaR projects as part of a multi-modal inquiry: 'know-that', 'know-how' and 'know-what'. The 'know-that' refers to what Nelson describes as 'outsider' knowledge (p.45), which in this instance can be considered to be academic perspectives

on comic theory, critical analysis of stand-up comedy (such as reviews in the press), but also 'spectatorship studies'; in this case, live or recorded viewings of stand-up comedy. This 'know-that' is covered in the literature and practice review which forms the first chapter.

The 'know-how', i.e. the 'insider, close-up knowing' here consists of the elusive knowledge that a stand-up comedian knows themselves about how to write, how to appear onstage and what to do if it all goes wrong. This knowledge, possibly even more instinctive in stand-up than in other forms of theatre, comes from years of practice and experience in performance situations and cannot be gained effectively in any other way. There is a wealth of knowledge here that is hidden, often ignored or reduced to the attitude that you've either got 'it' or you don't. Through the third mode of knowing, the 'know-what', is how this knowledge becomes available to those outsiders without the experiential performative knowledge. Through critical reflection one one's own practice or on the practice of others but with a performer's eye and knowledge, this elusive, ethereal knowledge is translated to the written page. For this research enquiry, this manifests as chapters two and three of this thesis, which articulate the findings of the practice, exploring the tricks and techniques a comedian might employ in order to encourage their audience to find themselves able to laugh at topics 'generally deemed unsuitable for stand-up'; general approaches to these topics both at the writing stage and in the performance and reflections on real-world issues and possible ethical considerations to those. Having said that, although ethics and efficiency are recurring themes within this project, they are of interest only in how they may serve the central investigation of empathy and intimacy in stand-up comedy.

Methodology

In terms of the methodology of the practice itself, this has been developed with adherence to Nelson's model, through both the 'know-that' (traditional, academic knowledge) and the 'know-how' (hands-on, experiential knowledge) research. In terms of the traditional, 'outsider' knowledge, analysis of the work of professional comedians, both live and recorded for the purposes of convenience, is used to extract various tricks and techniques that the comedian may use in order to manipulate the audience and encourage their acceptance of their act, particularly when it features subject matter that an audience might generally consider to be unsuitable for comedy. The use of 'know-how' informing the 'know-what' is central to any PaR investigation. In-keeping with Nelson's model, I have used a variety of voices in the writing, each appropriate for the type of knowledge it is demonstrating.

> Because of the multi-mode approach, the final submission is likely to include different modes of writing, ranging in principle from the poetic to the traditionally passive academic voice, alongside other practices (Nelson 2013, p.66)

These modes of writing include the stand-up comedy writing itself and my personal reflections on the practice, written soon after the performances, some of which is in note

form. I had no specific goal as to the amount of practice I would need to perform and have ended up with about 14 hours of footage. This unpredictability is a key aspect of PaR, because according to Nelson:

> Given the breadth of drama, theatre and performance modalities, it is to be expected that the nature of the creative works for submission can differ considerably, be it in style, length or number (2013, p.132)

I have also included scans of a 'scrapbook' of supporting documents, such as tickets, flyers and listings (see Appendix 3).

As discussed further in Chapter 1, Sarah Millican and Dara O'Briain follow a specific formula when touring in order to generate material based on audience responses. Jimmy Carr prepares his audiences in a very specific way, by warning them that they won't like the next joke, in order to improve the chances of them accepting it. This is discussed further in Chapter Two, but both examples contributed to essential elements of the methodology of the practice developed for this inquiry. These techniques have then been adapted and experimented with, using my own 'know-how' in order to produce work that explores and addresses the research question. This knowledge is made explicit through critical reflection to discuss the results and effects of small moments within performances and the bigger picture of the performance as a whole.

I feel strongly that to perform stand-up comedy only within the university setting is to restrict the audience to a sympathetic, academic-leaning sort, which moves too far from the essential elements of stand-up, namely the chaotic uncertainty of the interests, knowledge and behaviour of the audience members. Where it was important to the research to have a co-operative audience, I was happy to perform on the university grounds, however most of the bigger pieces that qualify as 'stand-up theatre' were also performed in a public setting. The marketing may have attracted audience members interested in the nature of this version of stand-up, but the opportunity was open to all and I did not know what to expect in those cases.

The approach to practice was comprehensive. I performed 60 times, the majority of those performances being five to ten minute sets at traditional stand-up nights where I was part of a longer bill of performers. These were mostly open mic, a few invited performances and about half at the University of Kent's regular 'Monkeyshine' night which usually only features the MA stand-up comedy students. These audience ranged from quiet and respectful to noisy and disinterested to openly hostile, with one gig featuring sexually aggressive heckling to the only other female performer. The three long-form scripted shows which come under the heading of stand-up theatre usually originated in a university performance space, going on to be performed in public at the Camden Fringe in London, the Belfast-based Comedy Labs festival and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. These were opportunities to find comedy fans who did not necessarily have any interest in the academic exploration of stand-up and just wanted to be entertained. Keeping that balance between pushing the boundaries of stand-up comedy and providing an entertaining (if not always laughter-intensive) performance was

essential to the integrity of this project. A PaR performance that exists only in the academic realm is limited, particularly on based in stand-up comedy, so it was particularly important to me that there were plenty of public performances as well.

In an ideal world, each relevant piece of practice would have been filmed on multiple cameras in full HD, with separate, high quality audio, occasionally panning the audience to give an idea of what sort of crowd was in. Generally, this has not been possible, for a variety of reasons. The main problem was that filming, particularly at small, intimate shows, was invasive, either physically (cables trailing in a potentially dangerous manner) or by making the audience a little more aware that their responses were being noted. Most venues were not particularly well-lit, leading to poor visuals. Many early gigs were not filmed at all, as they were only booked in order to hone my stand-up comedy skills, but as happens with semi-improvised performance, interesting moments popped up unexpectedly, and so some clips are audio-only. Detailed information for each performance (such as venue capacity, audience numbers and ticket prices) can be found in Appendix 1. It is not necessary to view all the footage provided, but please view each clip when instructed as so:

PLEASE WATCH 'EXAMPLE CLIP' NOW

A playlist is available via YouTube:
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLW1BKoLQj7xa9eD8NwqUskRY7GKjvEcnz

In some cases, in order to give a clear view of my set and shows, I have had to spend much time on the detail of the venue, the audience, the other acts and their material. This highlights a notable element of stand-up comedy practice as research: it cannot be taken in isolation, and even stand-up theatre with its more controllable environment will still require more context than might be usual for any other PaR project. In some cases, even video documentation has not been achieved, with only an audio recording available. This is due to unexpectedly interesting revelations within a performance intended only for sharpening up my stand-up comedy skills. Such is PaR.

This investigation takes the under-examined field of stand-up Comedy and explores it on its own terms, through practice as research. It looks specifically at how emotion and comedy may go beyond co-existing to working together in order to enhance the comedy and the comedy experience. This leads to a look at the anonymity of being part of a large audience affects an audience's potential vocal response, and how that loss of anonymity can be countered by the comedian's skilful handling the audience. Rather than finding that 'laughter has no greater foe than emotion', we will find that stand-up Comedy can be positively emotional experience.

CHAPTER 1: Literature and Practice Review

Stand-up comedy, although receiving more and more attention in the academic world, remains under researched. This makes it a particularly ripe topic for a Practice as Research project and encourages consultation of a wide range of sources as well as those traditionally found in a literature review. This chapter includes theories from philosophers; from the classical Greeks to modern-day Brits and anyone in between with a general theory on comedy and/or humour, particularly with a focus on empathy, intimacy or a lack of it. These ideas and claims provide ideas to explore and counter through practice. The more contemporary academic writing is focussed more on the art and craft of stand-up itself, including ideas about the boundaries and limitations of stand-up. Some of this touches on what is acceptable in stand-up, what is not and how the comedian must manage or manipulate the audience in order to gain acceptance.

In terms of practice, although there is limited writing from pure and true Practice as Research investigations, comedians do regularly reflect on their own work, with some useful insight. This can take the form of published interviews, academic interviews or their own publications, all of which feature in literature-focussed section of this chapter. Performances of stand-up from other comedians have been the most crucial element of the performance review section of this chapter. These performances have been viewed live or via a video or audio recording. In order to reach a wider range of appropriate performances I have also made use of reviews. With all aspects of this chapter, I have approached the research with relation to the key ideas featured in the title – empathy and intimacy. There is also a more detailed examination of the phenomenon of 'stand-up theatre', a cursory look at ethics, particularly in relation to the intention of the comedian and, as a result, their ability to encourage empathy in themselves and their audience. I have made a conscious effort to remain focussed on these key topics. Although my wider research revealed numerous interesting resource, such as investigations into humour and joking from the perspective of psychology and even physical medical science, not to mention decades' worth of comedy in film or television, this would have left too many potential areas to be thoroughly investigated in this project. This literature review pinpoints the most relevant information, assisting a thorough and rigorous exploration of the question of this investigation.

Since ancient Greece, many philosophers have had negative views on comedy and joking, seeing it in terms of the comedian or joker having nothing but hostile feelings towards a *victim*. Here we see the oldest of the three main theories of comedy emerge – the Superiority Theory. Arguably the defining Superiority theorist, Plato's position is firmly based in the assumption that laughter and ridicule are intertwined and universally detrimental. Even when laughing at our friends, he considered there to be malice involved, as pleasure mixes with pain (Plato 1972, p. 97). Bergson seemly subscribes to this theory as well, as mentioned in the introduction, with his requirement of a 'momentary anesthesia of the heart' (1911, p. 64) leaving no doubt as to the painful and damaging nature of comedy. Scruton talks in terms of 'the victim' and describes humour as 'devaluing' the object of the joke, with mention of mimicry, also in unfavourable terms (1982, p.201). Hobbes, arguably the most prominent Superioricist, believes that laughter demonstrates the sudden elevation of the self above the subject of the joke, revealing the ambition of the joke-teller, with 'Sudden glory' responsible for the occurrence of laughter. He remains rooted in the negative view of humour, suggesting that comedy arises 'by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves' (2005, p.48)

The Superiority Theory is, of course, limited. Hutcheson, finding it odd that there is not more of a distinction given between laughter and ridicule mentions 'innumerable instances of laughter where no person is ridiculed; nor does he who laughs compare himself to anything whatsoever' (1973, p.106). These instances might involve self-deprecating humour or absurdities that makes us laugh, for example, at which point the Superiority Theory becomes inadequate. Writing in the 21st Century, Critchley describes comedy that can be explained by the Superiority Theory, but specifies a type of humour that denigrates humour, implying that not all humour can be explained in such a way (Critchley 2002, p.11). Here, the Incongruity Theory is more useful (and generally, in this researcher's opinion, the closest we come to achieving one comprehensive theory). Suddenly comedy doesn't seem like such a cruel sport:

> …the ethics of humour are not all negative, for there are also ways in which humour can be beneficial. One is by promoting critical thinking. The humorous mind looks for incongruity, and that is frequently a discrepancy between what people should be and what they are. (Morreall 2005, p.74)

The Incongruity theory asserts that comedy can be attributed to some sort of surprise or unexpected occurrence, allowing for a more positive approach to comedy, where the comedian could take difficult or troubling issues and allow the audience to laugh at the incongruities involved, rather than at a victim.

> The essence of the laughable […] is the incongruous, the disconnecting one idea from another or the jostling of one feeling against another. (Hazlitt 1901, p.7)

This idea of feelings jostling seems particularly interesting to this investigation, but Hazlitt claims that 'we can laugh at what only disappoints our expectations in trifles', and that

more serious concerns merit serious responses (ibid., p. 2). Kierkegaard follows in the same vein:

> The tragic and the comic are the same, in so far as both are based on contradiction; but the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comical, the painless contradiction. (Kierkegaard 1964, p.459)

Even more damning, Hazlitt continues to claim that we laugh more at things that are 'inappropriate':

> As we laugh from a spontaneous impulse, we laugh the more at any restraint upon this impulse. We laugh at a thing merely because we ought not. (1901, p.11)

Here Hazlitt moves away from Incongruity and seems to be heading towards the third theory of comedy. The Relief theory, predominantly associated with Sigmund Freud, is based on the idea that laughter is the release of tension that might otherwise manifest as aggression. Hazlitt's assertion that we laugh because we *aren't* supposed to can go some way to explain 'nasty' jokes or the darkest of dark humour, examined later in this work. With Kant the moral judgement dissipates, attributing laughter to 'something absurd' in every case.

> Laughter is an affectation arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing. (Kant 1978, p. 199)

Although Incongruity fits as a general theory to apply to comedy, the Relief Theory is beginning to look more appropriate to this investigation. We might also consider Mary Douglas' idea of Comic Subversion as a theory in its own right:

> My 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, all jokes are expressive of the social situations in which they occur (1968:366).

Douglas' idea that humour arises when the social status quo is subverted may give us a little more insight, but broadly speaking, this can also fit under the umbrella of the Incongruity theory.

As a first response to these broad theories of comedy, I set out to challenge their limitations through my practice. This is documented in chapters two and three. For now, let's return our focus to the positives and negatives of comedy and humour. One of the most important ideas when looking at the presence or absence of empathy in stand-up is the idea of punching up or down.

> […]to "punch up"- to target a person who is privileged or entitled or, in one obnoxious way another, just asking for it (Schwartz 2016, p.134)

Punching down is, of course, the opposite of this: making a joke of someone that could be seen to be below the joker in status, or less fortunate. Zijerveld considers crossing the

status barrier to be 'an important corroboration of the power relations in stratified societies' (1968, p.297), but is not without its issues:

> All forms of emancipation are, of course, fatal blows to this sort of joking, which can be observed clearly in the relationship between black and white in this country. The joking of the white man, accepted formerly, is a source of conflict and violence today. (ibid., p.299)

Again, the assumption is that comedy on the whole is so lacking in empathy that it will be rejected (although as Zjiderveld was writing about race relations in 1968, this is understandable). Billig proposes a division that would allow us to consider the positive and negative aspects of comedy separately, so that 'ridicule, along with sarcasm and the laughter of bigotry, can be classified on the bad, negative side' (2005, p.22). Littlewood and Pickering do not see the need for such a distinction, and are more interested in the direction of the joke:

> In a rather crude sense, we could say that where joke-structures are dependent on the identification of a butt, on a target of ridicule or abuse, all comedians are faced with the choice of whether they direct their comic aggression at those who are in positions of power and authority, or at those who are relatively powerless and subordinated. In other words, do they kick up or down? (Littlewood and Pickering in Wagg 1998, p.295)

Although it could be considered positive to kick up against someone that is powerful and causing harm, this would still be a joke that requires a victim, ridicule, and some sort of ill feeling. In this sense, although the joke may have a positive outcome, it still involves ill feeling towards another person. To joke with empathy, it would be preferable to avoid kicking anyone at all.

Although the three main theories of comedy can be useful, modern academics are moving towards considering comedy as a more complex beast, with potential for both positive and negative attitudes. Miles embraces this and refutes Bergson's claim that emotion is the enemy of humour:

> What we see instead is a paradigm shift, with a focus on identification, interaction, empathy, mutual therapy and well-being; as well as a need for recognition. (Miles:2014, 17)

His main argument in the article is that humour should be considered to be an emotion, which is an idea that had been presented by Sharpe (1975,201-203). Comedy can, without a doubt, become an emotional experience, but I am still most interested in comedy and emotion working together to give some positive feeling or outcome. Catharsis can be found through comedy. Disabled comedians joke about their limitation, but also about the ridiculous prejudices that they encounter (Albrecht:1999; May:2013; Lockyer:2015). Double mentions the technique known as 'instant character' as an example of a method to act out 'painful, traumatic or terrifying experiences' (2015, p. 403) and in 2016

demonstrated this in his PaR project 'Break A Leg' which will be discussed later in detail. In the article written as a response to the performance, Double notes:

> while performing *Break a Leg* I could sense that the audience were *with* me, and in spite of chiding them for 'mocking my pain', I could feel their empathy alongside their laughter. Indeed, there were moments when this became very tangible. (Double 2017b, p. 154)

Double's project about a distressing personal injury did not shy away from emotional moments or completely separate them from comedy. The audience were offered various levels of engagement with that emotion and occasionally surprised the performer himself with their empathy, where a laugh had been expected. Emotion and comedy clearly are able to co-exist, making for a richer and more meaningful comedy experience. As mentioned in the introduction, stand-up comedy seems to be an inherently intimate medium, with its roots in the front cloth comics of variety demonstrating that. A review of Max Miller in 1939 is very enthusiastic on this point:

> In this case character has the most valuable of meanings in the music hall, warmth and intimacy and cheerfulness (The Times 1939, p.10)

On the other side of the Atlantic, a popular vaudeville performer was also connecting with her comedy audiences in an intimate way:

> [Moms] Mabley assumed the kind of cozy, confidential tone that made the public feel as if they were part of her large, extended family. She would sit down on a stool and say, "I got something to tell you," as if she were giving them some intimate advice. Her fans often called out to her during the show, voicing their approval and support as if they were engaged in a two-way confessional dialogue rather than a comedy routine. In her hands a monologue becomes a communal ritual of inclusion. (Jenkins 1994, p.188)

These examples are on the fringe, at the beginning of what we consider to be stand-up comedy today, but they both expose intimacy as a key element of this type of performance, which Brodie summarises here:

> [...]stand-up comedy is a form of talk. It implies a context that allows for reaction, participation, and engagement on the part of those to whom the stand-up comedian is speaking[...]However heavily one-sided, it is nevertheless a dialogic form, performed not to but with an audience.(2008, p.153)

It is surprising to hear Brodie describe the performance as being *with* an audience when modern stand-up often takes place in large theatre or giant arenas, where large sections of the audience are capable of only very limited feedback. It is this intense relationship and the flow of energy between the comedian and audience that is at the heart of the 'negotiation' mentioned in the title of this project. Not a relaxed conversation where all participants are on equal terms, but an intense, rigorous negotiation.

Plenty has been written about various intimate topics or areas that comedy can explore, with the most prominent and widely discussed of those relating to race. Joking about race can be an affirmation of identity amongst friends (Jenkins 1994, p. 180) or violent personal attack, and many things in between, but always with potentially intimate and personal effects. Philips puts forward two theories to help talk about racism in joking. The Agent-Centred Account addresses the defence that if the comedian harbours no feelings of ill-will towards the group that their joke is aimed at, then the joke-telling is not an act of racism (1984, p.76). This is then surpassed by his Act-Centred Theory, which puts forward the idea that it is the *result* of the act which is important, i.e. if there are real-world consequences, such as hurt feelings or worse. (Philips 1984, p.77)

> At least as important, I think, are the affective consequences. For, insofar as racist humor constitutes an assault on members of an ethnic group, it joins together those who participate - both performers and audience - in a community of feeling against that group. (1984, p.90)

Although it might not be a wholly negative feeling, De Sousa says it is wrong to laugh under these circumstances:

> What is wrong with laughing at people behind their backs, when the same joke would be acceptable face to face? The answer is that if you were face to face, the balance of ambivalence would tip: the alienation expressed by the joke itself would be offset by the reality of community signaled by the sharing of it. (1987, p.294)

Worse than alienation, a racist joke directed at one single representative of that group can feel like a vicious, intimate attack. This is notably different from what Mintz describes as 'working the room':

> This interaction with the audience often, but not always, includes ritual insults directed at audience members, and sometimes heckling and the putting down of the heckler (also relaxing the audience, making them feel less vulnerable (it doesn't *really* hurt…much…even if you are the target).' (1985, p.79)

This sort of directed 'attack' may also be considered to be undesirably intimate. We often hear about comedy such as this in terms of victims and ridicule. Scruton talks of mimicry in terms of the distortion of the victim (1982, p.201). Here we see what might be considered a division between the comedy that fits in with the ideas behind the Superiority Theory, i.e. that which seems to generally produce or promote negative feelings. Billig writes at length on ridicule, and even whether or not it should be considered to be comedy at all, but doesn't spend as much time considering positive comedy, and the benefits of laughing (2005). For this, we turn back to have a proper look at the Relief Theory.

'Gallows Humour' is one of the strongest arguments in favour of the Relief Theory. It can sometimes be considered to be inappropriate in polite society, but for Cohen, this is

only true if we intend to avoid 'the real issue' (1999, p.69). Obrdlik described 'gallows humour' as the humour of 'people who literally face death at any moment.' (1942, p.712)

> 'These people simply have to persuade themselves as well as others that their present suffering is only temporary, that it will soon be all over, that once again they will live as they used to live before they were crushed. In a word, they have to strengthen their hope because otherwise they could not bear the strains to which their nerves are exposed. Gallows humor, full of invectives and irony, is their psychological escape, and it is in this sense that I call gallows humor a psychological compensation.' (ibid.)

In this sense, gallows humour is resigned. Bergler suggests that any potential comedy can only be achieved after the seriousness of the situation is understood and the comedian/victim has accepted the condition of death (1956, p.166). Freud, however, argues that humour is rebellious, and 'signifies not only the triumph of the ego, but also of the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstances'(1961, p.163). In this case, it is not a 'momentary anesthesia of the heart' that occurs, but a total delusion of the ego in the face of reality.

> The main thing is the intention that humour carries out, whether it is acting in relation to the self or other people. It means: 'Look! Here is the world, which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but a game for children – just worth making a jest about!' (Freud 1961, p.166)

More recent humour research in a medical setting found that not only was dark humour used for relief in Freud's sense, but also that it could enable and encourage social benefits through emotional bonding (Moran and Massam, 1990).

The relationship between the serious and the comic is the key theme that runs through this investigation. Initially we looked at those philosophers who considered comedy to be a negative presence, then to those who might see a positive side, and now those who not only consider comedy to be a positive thing, but that seriousness has an important position in comedy. Spencer suggests that there is a special relationship between the two:

> [M]en who, as proved by their powers of representation, have the keenest appreciation of the comic, are usually able to do and say the most ludicrous things with perfect gravity. (Spencer 1963, p.301)

Schopenhauer suggests that 'the more a man is capable of entire seriousness, the more heartily he can laugh' (Schopenhauer 1907, p.281). This would imply that seriousness, rather than being in opposition to comedy, actually does some of its groundwork for it. This leaves a big question that has not been answered by traditional academic research: how might a painful contradiction, as Kierkegaard puts it (see above), be used to produce comedy? How does the stand-up comedian go about achieving that? Traditional research has taken us so far, we must now look to the practice to inform us. In this performance review, we will be examining stand-up comedy that typifies 'stand-up

theatre' as mentioned in the introduction, particularly that which has come to be known as 'DIY stand-up', described here:

> […]a group of comedians - inspired by the likes of Daniel Kitson, Stewart Lee and Demetri Martin - are taking a hands-on approach to combating the rise of bland Friday night TV, stale one-liner routines and pissed hen parties doing conga dances through Jongleurs. (Jonze 2007)

The innovative approach is as important as the long-form nature of stand-up theatre, which not only facilitates material that takes more time to develop, going deeper and potentially into more meaningful areas than a tight twenty-minute set mostly reliant on short gags. Although I've experienced a highly entertaining hour-long Tim Vine show comprising solely of one-liners, it's a mean feat that not everyone could pull off and as an audience member, it was a relentless onslaught to endure, not necessarily sit back and enjoy. A big show demands something more, something for the audience to invest in and keep their attention, rather than grab at it. A long show gives the opportunity for the audience to invest in the comedian and for the comedian to take time to get engage, get intimate, take an emotional journey and maybe even depart from comedy for a little while. Although there are often theatrical elements to arena shows, such as Peter Kay's *The Tour That Didn't Tour (*2010), these shows lose the crucial intimacy which is such an important part of stand-up Theatre. Musical stand-up such as Bill Bailey's *Tinselworm* (2008) gives great theatrics as well, with music itself providing the comedy, but as before does not offer much in the way of intimacy, emotion or a story arc. Stand-up theatre allows the comedian to connect with the audience in a more profound way.

Mark Thomas' work has been the main inspiration for this project and for the definition of 'stand-up theatre'. His comedy is as raw and honest as comedy can get, but his staging is more reminiscent of theatre than stand-up generally is. Since 1999 he has been using comedy to draw attention to atrocities and causes that one would not generally deem to be suitable material for stand-up comedy. In order to make this work as part of a set on a club night, Thomas would 'talk about knob gags for about nineteen minutes, just so I could speak about East Timor for thirty seconds' (Thomas, 2001)[4].

A key point of interest in Thomas' work is that the work has aims other than just to make people laugh. Laughter and enjoyment are merrily sacrificed in order to convey information, often intimate and emotional, with the intention of changing minds and forcing action. The opportunities offered by the theatrical setting are used to this advantage, with lighting, sound and simple sets enhancing the drama and emotion. The 2011 show *Bravo, Figaro!*, about Thomas' father was commissioned by the Royal Opera House and went so far into the realm of theatre that a script was published, complete with lighting and sound cues. The performance was primarily funny, and the performance style was certainly more akin to stand-up than anything else, but dramatic

[4] This is from one of the first of his 'stand-up theatre' shows, Dambusters. This was a show based on the building of the Ilisu Dam in Turkey, and the human rights abuses that were carried out (and at the time of performance, were still being carried out) as a direct result.

moments were embraced and intimacy and empathy were encouraged. Here more than with his other work, serious moments were used in order to heighten some of the punchlines, but it remained a comedy show that managed to be respectful to the memory of Thomas' father, while also refusing to remember him in more favourable light than was deserved. *Bravo, Figaro!* sits on the edge of stand-up, very nearly a theatrical one-man-show.

His 2016 show *The Red Shed* uses as many theatrical technologies and also had its playscript published but feels more firmly centred in stand-up proper. Where *Bravo, Figaro!* is a personal and reflective experience about the personal reflections of Thomas on his father, *The Red Shed* is based on the socialist ideals of the titular shed and is presented in an appropriately social style. Six audience members reside onstage for the duration of the performance, holding masks in order to represent key people in Thomas' story. The main audience were encouraged to respond on cue, playing the part of the clientele of the Red Shed. Thomas speaks directly to the audience in a highly interactive manner, expecting and encouraging response. There are more serious and poignant moments within the show, but they don't last too long and there are plenty of laughs. The final two minutes of the show, however, are a furious attack on the failings of the Tory party and a moving musical tribute to the struggles of the miners. Two minutes is a long time in comedy, and this makes for an emotionally significant moment which is certainly not a usual way to end stand-up Comedy. Thomas' work sits on the very edge of the genre. What Thomas does not do, however, is seek to make comedy from the very darkest aspects of his shows. The darkness sits in opposition to the comedy, and those who have suffered the most are not used for comedy purposes. This is a gap that my practice sought to fill.

Most long-form stand-up shows sit comfortably within the stand-up Theatre confines, however. Even shows that may seem like merely a longer version of a standard set can be transformed by a well-written ending that ties the whole thing together. In his 2012 show *Carpet Remnant World*, Stewart Lee choses to make this process explicit.

> […]what I will do is about five minutes from the end, I, at about ten o'clock, I will, I will repeat the phrase, 'Carpet Remnant World' [LAUGHTER] over some music, [LAUGHTER] and that will give the illusion of structure. [LAUGHTER] [Lee 2012, 05:31]

Of course, the show is highly structured. The running themes of failure, resenting his audience and general despair at the state of the world are introduced appropriately and develop over the 120 minute piece. The end of the show, in spite of everything Lee has said about there being no structure and no relationship between the title and content, is a dramatic, theatrical climax. He signals the beginning of the end, with a story that meanders.

> 'I've got nothing. So I got in the car one last time [PAUSE] and I drove north to an industrial estate near Sunderland [PAUSE] with the sole intention [PAUSE] of visiting [PAUSE] a retail outlet [PAUSE] called Carpet Remnant World.'

The pauses are not exaggerated, they signal that something big an important is on its way, as does the slow, purposeful delivery of 'Carpet Remnant World'. This is the cue for the lights to dim and some slow, inspirational, eastern-influenced electronic music to play. Lee begins to tell a fantasy story of his Carpet Remnant World utopia in darkness, until halfway through, as he describes the city made of carpet remnants, the lighting effects begin and we see the set on the back wall, seemingly a row of carpet remnants, light up like office buildings, housing estates, a carpet remnant world. This gets a laugh. Another lighting effect becomes apparent, a sun is rising across the city. Lee is now talking about 'free carpet remnant universities' in an inspirational and idealistic fashion and gets a laugh. As he says 'it's beautiful, a utopia' the next lighting effect - stars in a night sky - come on suddenly, achieving another laugh. The final speech is the final joke on the audience:

> But then he said to me, 'but there's a message for you in Carpet Remnant World, Stewart Lee, and it's this. That a ragbag of seemingly disparate and unrelated items, people, concepts, things, can, if stitched together in the correct order, with a degree of sensitivity, give the impression of being a satisfying whole. [LAUGHTER] And I said to him, 'You mean?' and he said, 'ha-ha-ha [LAUGHTER] Yes.'

Lee replaced his mic in the stand as all light faded from the stage, until the only his spot was left. He looked up and clicked his fingers to shut it down, plunging the stage into darkness and bringing the show to the end. Every time a piece of music or lighting effect is used, it is a signal to the audience, it tells them how to behave or react - sometimes to a joke that hasn't been told yet. This is stand-up theatre at its absolute best, making use of lighting and sound in a manner so subtle, the whole show still seems like a 'traditional' stand-up show.

Although it is not necessary or even usual, there are stand-up Comedians who do display empathy in their routines. Bridget Christie is a feminist comedian whose shows are driven by an agenda and often have real-life impact. At each performance of *A Bic For Her* a male member of the audience would be handed a direct debit form for the women's domestic abuse charity, Refuge, and instructed to fill it out. Christie uses an exaggerated version of herself as a punchline alongside worthy butts-of-jokes, such as high-profile men who had made sexist or misogynist comments. In terms of empathy, the audience have no choice but to remain empathetic to those women who have been wronged, such as domestic abuse victims or Malala Yousafzai, as they are never the target of any laughter at all.

Thomas' early work takes this approach as well – punchlines often come from his own reactions to challenging situations, betraying his ignorance, overconfidence or other acceptable negative personality trait. People who have genuinely suffered or situations that are extremely grim are not lightened or used as punchlines. There is gentle ribbing of some vegan friends (Thomas 2001), but nothing too dramatic and only in the context of introducing them, not in midst of telling a traumatic tale. In a completely different way, Al Murray also uses considerably less subtle ribbing and mimicry with his character, Pub

Landlord, a brash, profoundly un-PC racist homophobe. This comedy character says things that are socially unacceptable in this post-alternative comedy age, not because they are edgy and truthful, but because they are lazy, xenophobic generalisations that do not have any basis in reality but are recognizable as exaggerations of opinions by a minority of British people. This could be considered to be fairly thoughtful comedy then, as the intention of the comedian is to ridicule the racists and if not exactly empathise with the victims, to remain on their side. One of the problems with Murray's comedy, however, is that the Pub Landlord character has arguably attracted a following that may take the xenophobic rants against the French and Germans at face value, rather than seeing them as a satirical rejection of the pre-Alternative Comedy days.

> You sometimes worry that the audience is laughing with him rather than at him, and that the joke for them is the Landlord "telling it like it is" (Kettle 2009)

Even Murray himself, watching recordings of his shows, is sometimes shocked (Double 2014, p.125), but ultimately is confident that his work is doing no harm:

> Sometimes the Pub Landlord will say something that you agree with completely, or something that seems reasonable, until he completely drives it into the ground[…]I think the people who are sympathetic to him may well be enjoying laughing at themselves, which is a thing people are allowed to do as well (Murray 2014)

This raises questions relating to Phillip's theories regarding racism and whether it is enough to say that the performer himself meant no harm, if there is a reasonable chance that some audience members might take the joke at face value. Stewart Lee's attitude is clear:

> I don't mind causing offence when I intend to, but I don't like causing it accidentally. (Lee in New Statesman 2014)

This comment came about after Lee was informed of the offence that had taken place. How to tell if the audience is enjoying comedy for the wrong reasons can be more difficult to ascertain, but not impossible. Sarah Silverman recalls an encounter with a fan who had completely misunderstood the purpose of her comedy and told her 'You tell the best nigger jokes!' (2012, p.93). If the comedian wishes to avoid the possibility of being misunderstood, they must be explicit in their intentions, which may not allow for witty subtlety or find a way to communicate with their audience that makes the intention clear, while working with the comedy. This is a key point of consideration in this project.

So far, we have seen empathy and comedy in the same show, but kept distinctly separate. Tig Notaro is one of the few comedians who has managed to throw these two (seemingly) opposing elements together with great success. 'Live' is only a twenty minute set with Notaro as one of several acts, rather than a prime example of *stand-up theatre* but apart from the length of the show, it fits perfectly in this category. It was a one-off,

honest routine in which she spoke candidly about her ill health and personal difficulties. There was no careful lead in to the difficult material or time to prepare the audience. The stark open style was key to the success of the act:

> [Audience cheers and applauds] Hello. Good evening, hello. [Audience applause begins to die down] I have cancer, how are you? [Applause continues, some laughter, some cheers] Hi, how are you? Is everybody having a good time? I have cancer. How are you? [Laughter] (Notaro 2012)

When the compere announced her name, the audience were warm and enthusiastic, suggesting that this was a crowd familiar with her work and that they were an ideal bunch for this radical set. Their responses vary throughout, from happy laughter to disbelieving hysterical laughs (often from a single audience member while the rest remain silent) to cheers and applause to sad expressions of concern that cause Notaro to respond.

> Who's taking this really bad? *[Imitating audience member]* Oooh. It's ok. *[Applause]* It's ok. It's gonna be ok. I mean, it might not be ok. But I'm just saying, *[Laughter]* it's ok. You're going to be ok. I might not be ok.

Notaro plays with the obvious empathy of the audience, reprimanding them several times for laughing or not laughing at various points. One such reprimand seems a little sharp, as though there is the possibility that the laughter of the audience member may have been inappropriate.

> Sir, this should not tickle you so much. I'm not that happy and comfortable.

Most of the audible responses are gentle and appropriate, however. One touching moment, after a bit about Notaro's recently deceased mother receiving a questionnaire from the hospital about her stay provoked a hearty laugh from one man, followed by a sigh. The audience shared and accepted her reality and laughed along with her. They remained entirely empathetic to the situation the comedian was in and honoured that by laughing, as they were invited to do.

From my own previous Practice as Research projects in stand-up comedy, I am well aware of the risks that come with small audiences. With an audience of fewer than fifteen[5] people the comedian runs the risk creating a tense environment where there is no chance of audience anonymity, resulting in an audience that may not be relaxed enough to laugh. On top of this, the absence of laughter that comes with a failed joke is particularly noticeable. For these reasons, stand-up tends to steer clear of intentionally small audiences. In the world of cutting-edge, experimental theatre, small audiences may be desirable. A cosy, intimate setting could allow for a profound, exclusive experience that enhances the show. Notable pieces of theatre that feature a small audience include

[5] This number was pulled out of the air by a fellow comedian just before a gig that was not particularly well attended. I have heard others put the number at 20, but never higher than that. I have, through the aforementioned previous PaR work experienced this theory in action, and although the size of the room has a big role to play, these are, generally speaking, reliable numbers.

Adrian Howells' or Marina Abramovich's one-to-one performances. In Howells' *Foot Washing for the Sole* he tenderly washed the feet of one audience member.

> Intimacy was engendered not only through the touching of the feet but also through the silence and stillness that surrounded the performance[…]For many it was a deeply profound and moving experience (Howells 2012, p.131)

The 'silence and stillness' is a happy by-product of working with a tiny audience, where no other audience members' rustling will distract from the experience. Abramovich's 2010 piece *The Artist is Present* featured the performer sitting opposite a single audience member, but this was witnessed by others in the gallery where it took place. Both pieces were so intimate to be moving, reducing many of the participants-cum-audience members to tears.

Finding examples of stand-up on such a small scale has proved impossible, with the only performance coming close being one that did not happen. In 2008, Doug Stanhope offered a single ticket to a 16 hour show at the Edinburgh Festival for £7,349 as a protest against the 'big' venues that were leaving comedians out of pocket. Not so much an artistic exploration of intimacy as a publicity stunt, the ticket remained unsold and the performance never took place. Again, not for the sake of pushing the limits of stand-up but as the result of lost bets knowingly made on a horse that we can be fairly sure was not expected to win, in 1998 Mark Thomas performed in the living room of a friend.[6] This was filmed for TV and cut between filmed 'bits' so although there were fewer than fifteen people present at the live gig, there was a feeling of a wider reach. The closest thing we have to a proper embracing of the small audience is the DIY movement of stand-up. This came about circa 2002, enabled by the expansion of the internet. Comedians were no longer reliant on big promoters to grace them with gigs but reach new audiences doing it themselves – making podcasts, posting videos on YouTube or connecting through various social media outlets. The revolution was not just digital. In 2011 Josie Long created *The Alternative Reality Tour*, travelling to the most budget venues possible and putting on a show wherever she and her acts could, to whoever they could get. As before, this was not an artistic exploration, but a socialist mission to bring comedy to the masses, protesting against austerity with moral outrage and a touch of whimsy. From the website:

> We do not care for those who do not agree with us.
> We seek to find, console and empower those who do. We are morally right.
> We bring unabashed politicised music and comedy. We bring blankets in case it's cold.
> We are on the side of justice. Hence magical things happen to us. Another world is possible. Possible and awesome (Long, 2011).

[6] The crazy betting was filmed for the show and very much the main joke of the episode, partly to demonstrate what Thomas refers to as the 'transient nature of wealth' and partly as a two-fingers up to the establishment.

DIY comedy is thoughtful, positive movement, a world away from one-liners about children with Down Syndrome.

> If I'm interested in doing comedy about an individual it's never to mock them[…]It's to discuss them and why I found them wonderful.[…]I don't like the idea of people leaving feeling guilty for laughing. (Long in Guardian, 2007)

The refusal to shrug off offensive comedy as 'just joking' is at the heart of this comedy with a conscience that this project is pursuing. Long's comedy tends to avoid contention altogether, rather than embrace it, with shows titled 'Kindness and Exuberance' and 'Trying is Good'. Part of the appeal of this approach lies in the relationship Long arranges with her audience. Personal touches such as passing out handouts before a show, in person, or throwing satsumas to audience members play a central role in Long's comedy. This contributes to the warm, positive atmosphere that Long fosters, which may encourage her audience to participate when required. This is a truly 'alternative' version of audience interaction, something positive and inclusive.

Sarah Millican also encourages positive interaction, although without the need for props. She interacts extremely regularly with the audience, nearly to the point where it seems as though she's on a schedule. Roughly twenty times in the 100 minute long *Chatterbox Live* she asks the audience to cheer as a rudimentary census. She asks them, amongst other things, to cheer if they lived on their own, if they give blood regularly, if they had kids, if they didn't have kids, if they'd ever been married and if they were divorced. The audience's response will usually be followed by a simple retort, i.e. after the cheer for not having kids, commenting that it was a more energetic response than the cheer from the parents. Sometimes it is not referred to at all, but always leads in to a relevant, well-rehearsed bit. Although these are slick and generally well-written, there is no clunky divide between the written material and the off-the-cuff audience interaction. The DVD was filmed at the end of a long tour and many of the biggest laughs were from Millican telling anecdotes about the funniest responses she had had from previous audience members. Her style is informal and conspiratorial, bringing the audience well in to her universe. If we look at the specific structure and techniques employed in these shows, we see a wealth of practical skills that can encourage joyful audience interaction.

Cheering

Millican asks her audience to cheer regularly, getting them used to the idea of responding vocally in a simple way.

Topping and tailing

Most audience interactions are introduced with a strong set bit, or a lead in from a previous topic. Millican will then speak to four or five people in the audience, ensuring that she takes people from all areas of the theatre, and work with what there is, gently poking fun at some of the more ridiculous answers. When she's had enough, she tells her 'punchline', a set piece to finish, perhaps with some of the best or worst responses she's had to the question from the rest of the tour.

Emotional arc

Millican tends to get more serious about two thirds of the way through the performance, which allows for a long lead-in to the more serious parts and enough time to bring the energy up at the end to finish the show.

Added extras

Josie Long uses handouts and oranges and Sarah Millican uses Phil Creswick of the 90's boyband Big Fun to foster a sense of joy in her audience. The audience of *Home Bird* in Newcastle seemed to be fans and enjoyed dancing along to 'Blame It On The Boogie' with specially adapted moves that Millican's Mum would have approved of, as mentioned and demonstrated in a previous section. It's a lovely, unexpectedly bizarre moment at the end of the show which isn't particularly clever or funny, but sends the audience home laughing, singing and dancing, with a sense that something special has happened and that they have had a good night.

The essence of stand-up Theatre lies somewhere darker, however. In 2010 Des Bishop performed his ground-breaking stand-up show 'My Dad Was Nearly James Bond', a black comedy about his father's terminal cancer at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. It received four out of five stars from The Scotsman (the most widely-regarded reviewers of the festival) and typified a genre known as the *Dead Dad Show*.[7] Although Bishop's show was highly regarded, Dead Dad Shows seemingly saturated the Edinburgh Fringe the following year, and by 2012 they were considered to be (at least within the comedy world) utterly clichéd.

(Bennett 2012) (Logan 2015). Stewart Lee even makes a passing mention to them in his 2012 show 'Carpet Remnant World'. Years after Bishop's show, the 'Dead Dad' concept was still haunting[8] the comedy world:

> Meat-and-potatoes comics used the phrase to cat-call standups who made self-consciously emotional shows with cathartic last acts, implying that these were cynical gestures to woo critics and highbrow fringe audiences. That performances with a narrative arc, about death and emotion, were in some way contrary to the spirit of pure standup. (Logan 2016a)

Regardless of the criticism, the genre has produced some notable works. Mark Thomas' *Bravo Figaro,* discussed earlier in this chapter pushed the boundaries of stand-up in a theatrical direction; Sean Hughes' *Life Becomes Noises* described as a welcome addition to the genre by Steve Bennett of Chortle (2012); Richard Herring's *We Are All Going To Die* (2013) and John-Luke Roberts' anti-Dead Dad show at the 2015 Edinburgh Fringe, which used the absurd and proudly silly style of Alternative comedy to expose his late

[7] My research indicates that Bishop's was one of the earliest shows of this type, and certainly the most prominent, however Paul Fleckney of The Guardian claims that the movement started somewhere between 2008 and 2010 (https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/aug/28/standups-edinburgh-show-sean-hughes-comedy-award-festival-fringe)

[8] Sorry.

father's 'difficult' personality. Additionally, we could consider a few others to have come from this movement, although not featuring the aforementioned dead Dads. Shows about mental health issues (Simon Amstell's *Numb*; Dave Chawner's *Over It*; Ruby Wax's *Losing It*), or about uncertain paternity (Joe Davies' *Who's The Daddy?*) or serious illness (Alistair Barrie's *No More Stage 3*, Josh Howie's *AIDS: A Survivor's Story)* have similar hallmarks to those scornfully labelled above, although with different subject matter. The wide spread of this genre and its apparent popularity suggests that far from being a comedy cliché, personal grief and trauma is a ripe area for comedy, and one that audiences certainly want to see.

Doug Stanhope's *Beerhall Putsch* has even less of the feel-good factor, but involves a highly personal and detailed story about his mother's last hours. After a long battle with cancer she decides to take her own life with her sons by her side. Instead of attempting to rouse the audience to rise up against injustice, this story is presented for comedy's sake. There may be something cathartic for Stanhope in telling it (although his performance suggests otherwise), but there is no wider, social purpose to the performance. It does show assisted dying in a positive light, but this is not highlighted. Stanhope's on-stage persona is abrasive and his attitude to drug use can be considered controversial. His manner of performing an intimate, deeply personal set differs dramatically from Double and Notaro's, as sentimentality is ignored and emotions are recalled in a mocking fashion. In spite of this, it can be quite moving. The moments of emotional tenderness are exploited for the purposes of comedy, relieving the audience and releasing any potential awkwardness from seeing such a high-status comedian in such intimate circumstances. The comedian is in charge and never lets himself be caught out by vulnerability. This is something that the audience needs from this performer.

It is possible for the comedian to expose their own vulnerability and remain perfectly in control of their show and their audience, however. Oliver Double's stand-up show *St Pancreas* (2007) was based on his infant son nearly dying of diabetes and is another example of stand-up theatre. Double presented himself as a father and husband above all else, and the show was intimate and moving, making use of light-hearted material from the silliness of his young sons, but also delving into the emotional trauma of the dramatic period in which he thought he might lose his son. His 2015 show *Break A Leg* saw him take to the stage to discuss breaking his femur at the age of 49, but due to the severity of the injury, ending up in the geriatric ward. Double discussed mortality and extremely painful physical trauma, but as a more independent figure, which allowed for more silliness and anger than had been seen previously. In *Nanette*, Hannah Gadsby delivers a furious but controlled explanation at why she felt the need to change her performance style:

> And I, I built a career out of self-deprecating humour. That's what I built my career on. And I don't want to do that anymore [Applause] because do you understand, do you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from somebody who already exists in the margins? It's not humility. It's

> humiliation. I put myself down in order to speak. In order to seek *permission* to speak. And I simply will not do that anymore. Not to myself or to anybody who identifies with me. [Applause and cheers] (Gadsby, 2018)

Nanette offers a considered analysis of the tactics Gadsby had been using in order to make herself comically acceptable on stage, and the damage that that had caused. A gay woman from a small town in Tasmania, Gadsby's shame at simply existing manifested in self-deprecating jokes that further damaged her idea of herself. As we will see in Chapter 2, self-deprecation can be used to draw the audience closer to the comedian, but for Gadsby, being the butt of the joke proved to be damaging to her mental health.

Unclear intentions can also be dangerous. Brendon Burns' 2008 show 'So I Suppose THIS Is Offensive?', had him push his audience to the limit of what they would accept, only to reveal at the end that the joke was on them. The comedian character Burns plays often defends himself insufficiently, giving a flimsy excuse as to why he's not racist which serves to divide the audience into those who reject him and those who are happy to laugh along. At one point, after an audience member accuses him of being racist (which we later learn is a set-up) he points to his dancers, one of whom is black, the other white and proclaims that nothing is less racist than that. It is a weak argument and divides the audience in those who are willing to accept it and move on, and those who are troubled by the attitude that Burns appears to be taking. Presenting the opposite of the comedian's own belief can be very successful in comedy terms and is commonly used in a more obvious way. Here Steve Martin pretends to be appalled that an elderly woman would ask her son for money for food:

> 'I'm so mad at my mother, she's a hundred and two years old and she called me the other day. She wanted to borrow ten dollars for some food! I said, 'Hey, I work for a living!' (Martin 2007, p.177)

This example is crude, given that it is impossible to imagine any person demanding that their 102 year old mother should go out and work in order to eat, but the clarity of the intention of the comedian, playing an unsympathetic character, makes the joke completely free from confusion or potential upset. The dire situation of the fictional elderly woman is not the butt of the joke, the uncaring character is. Unlike the Burns' show (which was intentionally playing on the edge of acceptability) the comedian's intention is clear.

The comedian might also choose to simply ignore the contentious element of the routine. In Susan Calman's 2015 show *Ladylike*, she mentions that she is gay and married to a woman without that being the joke or central to the theme. It is incidental information, and its handling by Calman, or lack of, demonstrates her opinion that it is not contentious material at all. If the audience disagree, they are not given a chance to show it – there are no cheap gags for them to laugh at, no opportunity to indulge in ridicule. Stewart Lee's 'vomiting into the anus of Christ' routine from his 2005 show, *90's*

Comedian, on the other hand, embraces the contentious nature of blasphemy, and tries to dig as deep as possible into the mire of offence, pushing buttons and boundaries the whole way down. It is a clever routine, which achieves much more than just obscenity, but is not squeamish in the slightest. It works partly because of the intelligent and thoughtful writing, but also due to Lee's established position as a boundary-pushing comedian.

The comedian is often seen as a special person with the licence to say things that others can't, reminiscent of the court jester or the fool (Douglas 1968, p.372; Stott 2005, p.39; Lee 2010a, p.150). According to Douglas, however, this licence is limited:

> He is by no means anything like a taboo breaker whose polluting act is a real offence to society. (p.372)

While the stand-up comedian has been considered the modern equivalent of this privileged truth-teller, the licence to fool is not automatically given. Just by going onstage as an unknown comic, there is generally the need to prove oneself to the audience, before that licence is granted not to mention manipulation (Quirk 2015, p.15; Mintz 1985, p.79). If the comedian is going to express anything other than the general consensus and possibly break some long-held taboos, it is clear that their approach to the material and handling of the audience must be intelligent and properly planned.

We've clearly come a long way since the original philosophisings on comedy. The Superiority Theory and the assumptions that all comedy is detrimental to society, morality or one's own character is clearly flawed. The Incongruity Theory and Relief Theory provide moments of useful insight, particularly in regard to empathy and intimacy, with Relief helping to explain why we might laugh at awkward or difficult moments to relieve tension, and Incongruity showing how we can laughing at horrible things with empathy, expressing ourselves through laughter at the difference between what should be and what is happening. As before, neither are enough on their own to be put to work as a single broad theory of comedy. Instead, each of these three can be used to help explain different aspects of comedy, and must be used together.

The practice mentioned in this chapter clearly demonstrates that emotion and empathy are (or at least, can be) entirely compatible with stand-up comedy. Comedians can bare their souls about the most tragic and upsetting situations and be received with kindness, but more importantly, consistent, joyful laughter. Through defining stand-up theatre and the sub-section of that known as 'Dead Dad Shows', I have demarcated the style of stand-up that this PaR project explores while acknowledging that it is possible to explore empathy and intimacy in traditional, 'club-night' stand-up (see Tig Notaro), stand-up theatre lends itself to this sort of investigation.

Not only possible, but desirable, empathy in comedy is found regularly. We have seen a number of different ways that this can happen, with comedians sharing their own personal challenges, or using comedy to ridicule the powerful, empathising with the powerless. Intimacy in stand-up is much more common, but to varying degrees. Pursuing this to the extreme, either with very small audiences or by sharing extremely personal

information can be challenging to an audience and affect the success of the gig, in terms of audience laughter. How the comedian goes about this and whether or not it is generally considered to be morally good may be decided with the use of Philip's theories on racism (which can be applied more broadly to cover all offence). Whether or not the comedian intends to cause offence is far more difficult to determine, however, than whether they did in fact, cause offence. This is one of the reasons that this investigation has been conducted through practice, although avoiding offence is not the end goal. It is desirable, if only because if the audience is offended it is unlikely that they will also be intimately and emotionally engaged with the comedian and their performance. In this instance, avoiding offence is not necessarily a question of ethics, but of practicality.

There is some great academic writing on stand-up comedy and plenty of fantastic, creative practice from comedians in the field. Comedians are often interviewed about their work and so there is some reflection on practice. What's missing, however, is reflection from performers on an academic level that attempts to bridge the gap between practice and theory, making invisible knowledge, that is, the 'know-how' of Nelson's model, explicit. This Practice as Research project does just that, exploring empathy and intimacy in stand-up comedy from the point of view of the performer, with the intention of remaining positive, productive and informative. This style of stand-up comedy doesn't look for victims to ridicule, it exposes discrepancies (or incongruities) and helps us to acknowledge them, without accepting them.

CHAPTER 2: Using Empathy and Emotional Intimacy

> (...)it is the process which takes place in the other person – the 'humourist' – that merits the greater attention (Freud 1950:162).

Stand-up comedy is generally considered to be a form of performance in which anything can be said, under the proviso that what is said is *only a joke*. Cruel and uncaring jokes are regularly made on the professional stage, with some comedians actively fostering an image of a person who chooses to go against societal restrictions and says the unsayable, such as Frankie Boyle (Lougher 2017), Sarah Silverman (Parkinson 2017) and Jimmy Carr (Scotsman 2004). Through satire they address the 'lazy clichés of public opinion' (Carr and Greeves 2006, p166). This is a dangerous game, as for some audiences using bigotry ironically 'can look suspiciously like actual bigotry' (Anderson 2005).

> It's often impossible for the audience to distinguish, with any certainty, the comedian's true intent behind the layers of misdirection and subtext.[…]They can also up the ante as a far as shock is concerned, with the get-out clause that they are exposing hypocrisy (Carr and Greeves 2006, p. 167)

The Superiority Theory holds that when we laugh at bigotry in jokes, we are attempting to elevate ourselves above the victim of the gag, finding joy in being superior to them. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Superiority Theory has been shown to be deficient as one all-encompassing theory to explain *all* comedy, it can be considered appropriate in helping to explain some jokes. It is obvious that there are jokes that fit into Hobbes' idea of the sudden glory of the joker, in that some are hostile, derisive or reductive. The jokes that the aforementioned comedians tend towards are distinctly reliant on emotional distance from the victim and lack of empathy for them. The work that informs this chapter sets out to create comedy that would make light of difficult, emotionally-charged and/or traumatic situations with such empathy and emotional intimacy that the Superiority Theory would be of no help in explaining how and why we laugh at it. This investigation seeks not to find morally superior comedy, laughing at those that deserve it most and remaining empathetic only to those the comedian deems worthy, but to create and perform stand-up comedy that remains empathetic and intimate without needing a person to ridicule at all.

The idea of needing *permission* to joke or laugh continues as a key theme in this chapter. This work explores the comedian's negotiation skills and relationship with the audience. Encouraging or manipulating the audience into granting the comedian *permission* to make jokes about the most serious of topics is essential, with this work leading to the production of some key techniques that the comedian may employ. The practice pushes up against the limits and boundaries of stand-up as well as the limits of the audience's empathy and provides a better understanding of the challenges the comedian faces when attempting to incorporate empathy into comedy. As we will see

later in this chapter, the practice is informed by and continues on from comedians such as Josie Long, who describes her stand-up as 'friendly and silly' (2019), with handmade programs and a general feeling of intimacy and DIY. She presents her dorkiness with glee, welcoming her audience to a rare thing indeed, stand-up comedy without judgement. Crucially, in spite of her left-leaning politics, she genuinely welcomes one and all to her shows, even providing word searches for Conservative-voting audience members, in case they get bored during the more socialist bits. Stand-up comedy is often divisive, intentionally excluding someone in order to make the joke (Henry in Ince 2018, p.160), but this is consciously *inclusive*, empathetic stand-up. Most importantly, it is funny.

I quickly discovered that it is very easy to do short jokes about challenging topics such as paedophilia or abortion as part of a short set, but to do such jokes with a feeling of empathy and respect to those who had suffered was very tricky.

> Jokes that didn't make it into the show included one about victims of domestic violence and the media coverage of it. It was a weak joke, and it was an aside. What was becoming clear is that dedicating time to a difficult theme gave time to explore and understand it, whereas a passing joke seemed even less respectful because it wasn't deemed worth any more of my time (Personal reflections on *Permission to Laugh?!*, written eight days after the first performance).

In terms of packing in the maximum number of laughs possible, it was inefficient. These more complex topics clearly lend themselves to stand-up theatre, which allows for development and full explanation of context, and so, facilitating a thoughtful comedy experience. This became my main area of exploration, with three self-contained shows that allowed me to experiment with long form comedy, building a story arc and setting up a certain environment for a joke to be delivered into, in order to fully push the limits of challenging material. Within this form I explored the development, maintenance and on one or two occasions, abuse of my relationship with the audience, playing with their tolerance in the 'safe' environment of stand-up theatre, where I was allowed the time and space to go to uncomfortable areas but have the opportunity to 'get them back' before my time was up if it had all gone too far.

The final investigation of the practice was with the long run of one show, *Baby Madness is a Real Disease* at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. This allowed me to truly experiment and tinker with the show from night to night. Stand-up can't really be rehearsed; it needs an audience (Ritchie 2012, p. 164). This long run allowed for a thorough investigation, minimising the effect of the variable of the audience which affects the show so much. This third approach was a combination of both previous methods of practice, being a long-form stand-up theatre show but entirely at the mercy of the general public, in the world of stand-up comedy, rather than safely kept in the institution, or in a cosy, arty venue with a sympathetic, reliably left-leaning audience.

I jumped headfirst into trying to get people to laugh at some horrible things. Short political jokes – even ones concerning racism in front of an ethnically diverse audience –

were always successful. They were empathetic in the sense that they supported the victim and ridiculed the abusers, but they were lacking in depth and emotional intimacy. My first major revelation was that short jokes are easy to get away with but would probably not contribute much to the project. I then jumped headfirst into a challenging, eight-minute rant about the abuses of the Catholic Church and the comically half-hearted apology that was given by the Christian Brothers for their part in it. It was not well received (see Appendix 1 for detail). This led me to consider possible reasons for the failure of the joke and how it might be managed in order to get a more positive response.

Bridget Christie won the 2013 Edinburgh Comedy Award with her show *A Bic for Her*, which embraced a number of challenging subjects and managed them with care. This included a spectacular joke about domestic violence, which ends with a male member of the audience 'winning' a direct debit form for Refuge, which he is instructed to fill out. Christie explains how difficult subject matter might be managed:

> I can laugh at something I don't necessarily agree with. For example, I'm much more likely to laugh at material that is considered sexist if the character of the comedian is pitiful, powerless and pathetic…if he genuinely has nothing, and if his contempt for women is outmatched by his own self-loathing; if the comedian has made it clear to us that he himself is beneath contempt, and that his opinions are extreme and ridiculous; if his jokes say more about himself than the supposed failures of women; or if the comedian has taken a position in which he is obviously satirising misogynist belief systems. I could also imagine laughing if he is indiscriminately bigoted, and appears to hate everyone equally, due to some incident in his past that is alluded to early in his set, that gives us **'permission to laugh'.** (Christie 2014, p.74)

By applying Christie's explanation, we suddenly see that there were many issues with my first approach to using comedy to explore tragedy, not least taking a non-topical story about child abuse in the Irish Catholic Church and plonking it in the middle of a short set, as a short joke at an east London comedy night. On top of this, it was handled badly and managed to ridicule both victim and aggressor equally, thus failing by Christie's standards in that the satire was not obvious enough. Finally, it was not my story to tell. Not only that, but there was nobody present in the audience who had experienced this horror and given me permission to make jokes about it, a crucial element in ethical humour, according to De Sousa:

> if you were face to face, the balance of ambivalence would tip: the alienation expressed by the joke itself would be offset by the reality of community signaled by the sharing of it. (1987, p.294)

I had no connection to this story other than Irishness, which is not always apparent by my accent. Of all the comedy sins I had committed, trying to make light of someone else's suffering seemed to be the greatest, at least in terms of what I had been trying to do with this investigation. Although Christie's work had included topics not generally deemed suitable for stand-up, the comedy came from the fact that she was attempting to tell these jokes in an empathetic way and that she had tricked a male audience member into

financially supporting Refuge, not from laughing at the horror of the situation in an empathetic way. Realising that I had lived a blessed, mostly tragedy-free life, I started considering this idea of the necessity of giving the audience *permission to laugh* and how I might be able to reconsider my approach to tough topics. I have identified the four possible circumstances that involve permission in stand-up comedy. Whether or not permission needs to be gained, and how, depends on one of four situations:

Obvious ownership - it is obvious to the audience that the comedian owns the permission to tell a joke. In *BMIARD* I made jokes about my own incompentence. In *Could Be Worse* I made fun out of the Northern Irish football team, (while making my accent a little stronger than usual). In these examples, it was clear that I had the right to joke, either because it was about myself or something I had ownership of in some way.

Hidden ownership - it is not initially obvious to the audience that the comedian owns the permission to tell a joke. In *Permission to Laugh?* I introduced the show with the information that we would be joking about my Grandmother's death in a rather brutal fashion. Over the course of the show it was made clear to the audience not only that we were close, but that she enjoyed making and hearing dark jokes about the cancer herself. The ownership was made explicit over the course of the performance and the permission to laugh was granted.

Collective ownership - permission is shared equally between the comedian and the audience. In *Ulster Loves Me!* I would joke about local things to my Belfast audience, such as the decision to film Game of Thrones in Northern Ireland.

PLEASE WATCH 'GAME OF THRONES' NOW

Anti-English jokes are guaranteed to unite a Northern Irish audience, no matter where their politics lie. As seen in this clip, joking with collective ownership can be a particularly positive way of engaging with an audience and connecting with them in a more intimate way.

No ownership - permission is owned by neither audience nor comedian, comedian must gain permission for everyone, as seen in this example:

PLEASE WATCH 'ALEX'S FUNNY STORY' NOW

Alex was not present at this recording and was therefore unable to make his consent obvious to the other people in the room, so I had to make explicit the fact that I had had his permission to joke in this way, and that it was appropriate for the audience to laugh. Where the permission of the victim is not available, for example if the victim is a celebrity, a group of people or a nation, I have identified three main techniques[9] that the comedian

[9] Additionally, the comedian may 'ask permission' to tell a particularly challenging joke. I found this to be used in cases where the joke was sick, cruel and/or completely lacking in empathy. As a result, it has not been a key part of my technique in this project.

can employ to manipulate the audience into accepting the joke and at least within the stand-up comedy show, accepting that the comedian is in the right, to the extent that they feel able to laugh. The comedian is able to step into the world of another whilst remaining empathetic, but must consider the approach in at least one of the following ways:

Be the butt - the comedian makes himself the butt of the joke. A common way this is employed is by making fun of one's own inappropriate reaction to something, making it clear what is and is not acceptable, while acknowledging what a common reaction might be. This is explored in several ways throughout the practice and is a highly reliable technique.

PLEASE WATCH 'WHAT I SHOULD HAVE SAID' NOW

Manipulate - letting the audience know that they'd be wrong to be offended. This is generally outside of conventional morality, 'wrong' in this context can mean different, too emotional or not in the know. This technique requires the comedian to maintain a high-status persona. This can be seen in *Alex's Funny Story*, when I tell the audience in as many words, that it would be wrong not to laugh. In *Permission to Laugh* as I will explain further down, this unsubtle manipulation sets the tone for the rest of the show and allows other stories with questionable morality to be told.

Apologise - the comedian can apologise in advance as a way of confirming that they are in on the joke and mean no genuine harm. The apology can be direct, or an indirect admission of guilt. It is also possible to apologise after the joke, although at that point it is too late for that particular laugh but will ensure that the audience remain (or come back) onside.

PLEASE WATCH 'BAD WAY TO START A SHOW' NOW

Instead of trying to jump in headfirst to the most challenging topics, I started to sneak in small bits of 'challenging' material to my short club night sets. Rather than aim to do a short introduction and then base most of the set on a topic, I crafted a snappy set full of short jokes and one-liners that worked well at keeping the audience's attention. I started writing extremely short jokes based on themes I was interested in exploring. Let's have a look at a few examples.

> I'm a radical feminist. That means I skateboard without a bra.

This joke was always followed with a flirty wink to the nearest male audience member, often accompanied with an over-the-top tongue click and 'gun finger'. If I wanted to talk about feminism and wasn't sure that an audience would go for it, this was a great joke to bring out. It introduced the idea of feminism in one of its most aggressive forms, then revealed that the comedian's understanding of radical feminism was fundamentally flawed. Not only that I wasn't calling for an end to the patriarchy but actually was

conforming to typical gender roles by flirting with a nearest man. It was a great way to test the water. The fuller the laugh, (possibly from sheer relief that I wasn't *one of those feminist comedians*) the more likely an audience would be hostile to any pro-feminism material. If the joke received a groan, the audience were more likely to take my material on women's rights in a positive way.

In Northern Ireland, the Troubles cast a long shadow over everything, and sometimes it's better to address this quickly and easily by nailing my neutral colours to the mast.

> I wrote a joke about Ian Paisley and asked my Dad if he thought people would laugh. He said, 'Never! Never! Never!'

It's a mocking imitation of Paisley and his trademark stubbornness, but that marks a person as fairly neutral which can be very important for a Belfast gig, especially if I wanted to go down a political route but stay away from sectarianism. Short political jokes can be very useful, especially when they managed to place the comedian politicially, without isolating audience members who may have different views. This joke, written and performed when Ed Milliband was floundering as leader of Labour in opposition, did just that.

> Knock! (Who's there?) Ed Milliband. (Ed Milliband who?) Exactly. [Sigh][10]

It may seem obvious, but a solid 'know-what' finding here is that short political jokes get a bigger laugh than long jokes about abuse in the Catholic Church. Short political jokes are easy to deliver in that they do not require the audience to be emotionally prepared in order to find them funny, and they are easy to understand. There is no context that requires setting-up and these audiences were very happy to laugh at politicians, even if the consequences of their failings were serious. The differences between the failure of the jokes about abuse in Catholic Church and the success of these political jokes is not solely based on content. With short jokes I did not linger, directly heading for the laugh, and added ridicule to already ridiculous people. The abuse jokes took longer to tell and had no comedy figurehead to lampoon, only the towering power that is the church itself, seemingly unaffected by horrific revelations of the past few decades. This version of gallows humour did not adequate shift the balance of power and did not work within the favourable methods of stand-up comedy, i.e. getting to the punchline in an efficient way. Short jokes are too useful to stand-up to dismiss them from empathetic comedy, but they had to work with and enable the more challenging material. *Permission to Laugh?!* was a long-form piece that brought these new ideas together. I constructed that show with a combination of the short jokes and longer gags and stories that were challenging in various ways, with an over-arcing theme of my Grandmother's death from cancer. In reality, the jokes that dealt directly with that only took up the final ten minutes, but the

[10] This was inspired by a joke I heard on Radio 4's The News Quiz, which had Miliband responding to serious news events by doing mundane household chores, i.e. 'The Government has announced dramatic changes to the Family Tax Credits scheme. Ed Miliband has responded by popping down to the shop for a creme egg.' This is still one of my favourite jokes of all time.

whole show up to that point served those final ten minutes, preparing the audience for what was to come. The show was structured in the following way:

Intro	Talking to various people present. This included two almost contextless mentions of sexual abuse.
Intro to me	Jokes about my name. Semi-political.
Mother-in-Law jokes	Re-worked mother-in-law jokes to give a positive representation of the relationship
My Mum	The health food shop she works in; her views on me having kids
God and Girl Guiding	A bit of hyposcrisy-bashing; a reminder that I'm from Northern Ireland
Ian Paisely	Some audience participation, for purposes that are detailed in the personal reflection below.
Lesbian Cunt	A routine that allows for an examination of casual homophobia and every day classism, explored later in detail.
Gran	A reminder of the purpose of the show and what Gran was like.
Alex's Funny Story	Given as an example of manipulation above. This served to inform the audience that it was both acceptable and important for them to be able to laugh at the next jokes, which would be about Gran and her decline.
Chablis Cures Cancer	This was a re-imagined version of something that happened. It mis-represented my Grandmother and her attitude to alcohol, and ultimately the truth was funnier (as seen in the clip 'Chablis Cures Cancer', which is discussed at the end of this chapter).
The List	A list of horrible that were/ were not acceptable to joke about, according to my Grandmother

Although I had intended to write a show about her life and death, *Permission to Laugh?!* ended up using that topic to create an air of tension around this possiblity that was regularly released with frivolous jokes. By keeping the audience focussed on the potentially devastating content on Gran's death, I was able to throw in other contentious stories without scrutiny. Every so often the audience would be reminded, or warned, that the show was about death. This allowed for more contentious topics, such as sexism, racism and casual homophobia to slip in without apology or warning, presented as just normal jokes.

PLEASE WATCH 'BLACK GUYS DO BLACK JOKES' NOW

This is a short, throwaway joke about paedophilia that works really well. Instead of jumping headfirst into the serious stuff, I come from an entirely different angle, with the paedophilia reference being part of the punchline only. This joke addresses uncomfortable material that I have no particular authority on, but by linking the issues of being a black comedian to the issues of being a female comedian, I am able to create the illusion of authority. Authority on Jim Davidson is not required, as he is meant as the butt of the joke and there is no need to apologise for him. In those terms, I had permission from the audience to make Davidson the butt of the joke as he happily makes detailed jokes about paedophilia (2008).

What was clear from this is that short jokes are the best vehicle for sick or risky stuff, as they are very clearly 'just a joke' and can/should be forgotten instantly, as they take up very little time. They are clearly not a great vehicle for empathetic and intimate comedy, as they deliver their punch and then walk away with no investigation. Bergson's idea of the 'momentary anesthesia of the heart'(1911, p. 64) is most appropriate here, where short jokes cannot work if empathy is engaged – there is simply not enough time given to the management of the joke for that to be possible.

After *Permission to Laugh?* I started to explore the idea of 'hidden ownership' and ways to make ownership explicit without crudely telling the audience something along the lines of 'don't worry, my friend is in a wheelchair and he likes this joke'. I had noticed that several highly successful comedians asked questions of the audience in order to create material. It is not uncommon; many comedians will use this technique at some point, but Sarah Millican has used it extensively and with great success. With Millican in mind, I began working out ways of extracting some funny, moving, personal stories from total strangers. If my comedy was going to 'devalue' anyone (Scruton 1982, p.201), at least it would be me. I employed the safest of approaches, making myself the butt of the joke via my ignorance. At 'Tickle Me Pink', a fundraiser for the LQBT+ Society at the University of Kent, I made light of the fact that straight people can sometimes ask deeply personal and thoroughly inappropriate questions of people in the LGBT community:

> Alright, erm, I've got to be honest, I'm a straight woman, I've had a few drinks and we all know what happens then – I've got a few questions [Low-level laughter] that I'm happy to ask in public. [Laughter continues, builds a little]

This conveyed the information that I was going to be asking some questions, but also let the audience know that I was aware it was a tricky situation that people might not be happy to talk about in such a public forum. I began with a silly question, asking the audience what the opposite of 'gay' might be.

PLEASE WATCH 'THE OPPOSITE OF GAY' NOW

This gag takes a word that had been in use in a derogatory sense without thought, by people who would not otherwise consider themselves to be homophobic. I was one of those people and wanted to apologise in some way. Rather than explicitly saying 'I'm sorry', the apology was made via the joke. I wanted to challenge people to think about

how they speak how we talk about gay people. It also served as a silly but empowering moment, as gay people got to choose a word for themselves, which is a highly significant act. According to Butler, gay people have never had a choice about how to self-refer, but only to 'claim' words that had been thrust upon them.

> In this sense, it remains politically necessary to lay claim to "women," "queer," "gay," and "lesbian," precisely because of the way these terms, as it were, lay their claim on us prior to our full knowing. Laying claims to such terms in reverse will be necessary to refute homophobic deployments of the terms in law, public policy, on the street, in "private" life. (in Queer Studies Reader 2013, p. 21)

This small act of asking the LGBT audience to suggest some terminology may have been culturally significant, but functionally, it served to break any tension created by telling the audience that they were about to be asked deeply personal questions. It also gave them an easy 'win', i.e. a question they could confidently answer, to encourage participation later. This set was built around 3 questions – one frivolous and silly ('What's the opposite of 'gay'?') one a bit more personal ('Who's got a good coming-out story?'), one with the potential for very serious ('Has anyone managed to come out and remain religious?'). These all functioned well as each one had a punchline ready to go, in case the stories weren't funny, or the audience weren't forthcoming. As it happens, a few audience members contributed some great stories, and I suddenly had a lot more material to work with. This new material, from stories told in a public forum offered up as having comic potential, came with permission to share and ownership was obvious as soon as I explained where the story had come from.

The stories I had got from *Tickle Me Pink* were funny, touching and useful for building the next show, but I wanted to see how far I could push into an area of discomfort with the hope of finding, encouraging or creating some deeply satisfying comedy. The limit of what was acceptable had not yet been reached. In *Bring Out Your Gays* I decided to facilitate this by moving against some of the generally accepted rules of stand-up comedy regarding pacing, energy, and handing control to an audience member.

PLEASE WATCH 'SHARING STORIES' NOW

The stories that these audience members chose to share was not particularly funny or well told, but were permitted to exist as they needed to be told by them at that time. There was space to breathe in both shows that stand-up comedy, with its traditional focus on relentless laughter, cannot always facilitate. In a further push towards stand-up theatre, I incorporated some theatrical elements. There was a lighting plan, sound cues and a small set consisting of a door, decorated with sparkly streamers, to serve as a makeshift 'closet'. After the audience heard and shared some good and bad stories about coming out as gay, I offered anyone the opportunity to 'come out' of the 'closet' (as whatever they liked, not necessarily gay) to whoops and cheers and celebratory applause. The physicalisation of such a key symbol of gay culture was not intending to anaesthetise the concept of coming out, nor dramatize what may be for many, a fairly mundane act. In fact, focussing too much on the concept of the closet could:

> risk glamourizing the closet itself, if only by default; will risk presenting as inevitable or somehow valuable its exactions, its deformations, its disempowerment and sheer pain (Sedgwick 2008, p. 68).

Giving the audience an amplified voice to share their most brutal coming-out stories in a time and space that was not overly concerned about laugh-per-minute efficiency gave respect to the cruel details that are at risk of being forgotten or generalised. The pairing of those stories with a glitzy closet to come out of gave a cathartic end to a moment that had been allowed to delve as emotionally deeply as the storyteller wanted to go. I had spent the first half of the show creating a celebratory atmosphere and an air of inclusion, relaxed and friendly, so when the audience members were offered the opportunity to speak, they felt able to share. Giving the audience member the power of speech made this show seem pleasantly different to a traditional stand-up gig. In a 'normal' stand-up gig changing the pace like this could spell disaster for the rest of the show, but here it didn't break the momentum at all, because the whole thing had been low-energy and relaxed, as seen in 'J's Horrible Story'[11]. There weren't many laughs in the story itself, and this is actually key to the whole concept of this show. It might have become funny with additions from the comedian or other audience members, but we chose not to laugh or joke, because it would not have felt appropriate. Serious moments existed in the show without affecting the light and silly moments, with no need to mine them for comedy or alter the facts to make us feel better. This show existed to facilitate what came up and see how we would respond. Ultimately, we just took this story as it came, and that was enough. It was an important and relevant experience that needed not to be overlooked, even though we were ultimately seeking a laugh and the story wasn't funny. In order for empathy to occur, we needed to allow ourselves to hear the worst stories. To demand laughter here would have been to shy away from the hurt. By delving in fully, we were allowing ourselves to fully appreciate the 'coming-out' at the end of the show, giving it added significance.

Of course, if I had felt the need to get laughs out of this story, or any other emotional moment, it could have been possible while remaining empathetic, by 'being the butt'. Mintz refers to this as the comedian taking the role of 'negative exemplar':

> (...)socially unacceptable traits are enacted by the comedian to be ridiculed, laughed at, repudiated, and, finally, symbolically "punished" (1985, p75)

Marc states that 'visible or audible baggage the comedian carries in life is not merely fair game for exploitation on the stage but a textual feature of the act that demands use' (1997, p.18).

While physical (or audible) flaws may be usual topics of self-ridicule for comedians, this project focussed more on the internal. The first example of 'being the butt' that I will use to explore the concept is 'Bisexuals Don't Exist'.

[11] This is the second clip in 'Sharing Stories'.

PLEASE WATCH 'BISEXUALS DON'T EXIST' NOW

This joke, although intended to be the perfect example of 'being the butt' is flawed, as I merely present information that is incorrect but widely accepted as true in my own voice, without clarity that I am the butt of the joke because I am wrong. Finding one's 'sexual category' is an important part of a young person's identity (Coleman-Fountain 2014, p. 89) and bisexuality is so often ignored and/or diminished even within the LGBT world (Angelides 2013, p. 60) that this seem ripe for satire, but any possible joke fell flat. I was relying on my audience to have understanding of the plight of the bisexual within the LGBT community. Either they had no understanding, or they just thought this was me being ignorant. It didn't work well as a joke because it was not obvious that I was wrong, so I couldn't be considered to be the butt of the joke.

Lesbian Cunt is a much more successful example of 'being the butt' in action. It's more complicated, with the target of the joke and ridicule changing as the story went on, but as the failings were clearly set out for the audience at each stage, this targeting is much more obvious and the story works well.

PLEASE WATCH 'LESBIAN CUNT' NOW

Most of the humour comes from the fact that I couldn't decide whether or not to be insulted, and that I had overthought the entire thing, while my life may have been in danger. Overall, the message is actually that sometimes there are more important things to think about than homophobic language, at least when you're in danger, but that doesn't detract from the point being made, that some people need to consider how they casually use homophobic terms in daily life. Rather than pointing fingers at those making mistakes, 'being the butt' works well here. This approach is flexible enough to offer the audience the choice between laughing only at my own failings or laughing out of recognition, if I am portraying behaviour that is in some way familiar to them.

The idiocy and the offensiveness of my behaviour I recall in the joke has an almost limitless capacity, as long as it is made clear to the audience that the comedian has learnt from this mistake and now shows understanding in some way. This can be tongue in cheek, such as the moment when I 'realised' that the guy was gay, and that that was his issue with my response, or total admission of devastating guilt, such as the end of the joke where after such revelations, I still manage to call him 'gay' as an insult. Even with the more subtle approach, as long as the audience is led in the right direction (in this case, being told that my intention was to create a positive comedy experience) this will work.

This joke still had an outsider as the true butt of the joke, in the aggressor. This is acceptable as he is 100% in the wrong in yelling homophobic insults at a stranger in the street, so I haven't tried to be balanced in any way. These overtones of superiority, one of the few times that the Superiority Theory can be used to explain the humour in this practice, allow me to hammer my point home via this cartoon villain whose behaviour is there to be rejected. He is ridiculed, via my condescending admiration for 'his dedication to the Adidas brand' in order to elevate the worthy (in this case, lesbians, those mocked

as lesbians) above the homophobes. It's a positive piece of Superiority Theory in action. A less positive section of joke does not necessarily suffer from Superiority, but certainly in terms of sensitivity. I performed this joke at a gig I arranged for a group of teenagers from all over Kent who had been put forward by their schools as bright and capable, but for various reasons, unlikely to consider university as a likely step on their journey. When it came to the line about the cliché of being stabbed on the streets of Tottenham, there was a gasp from the audience and mutterings of disapproval. What I had failed to realise is that stabbings in North London almost exclusively involve under-25s and was likely to be a topic that teenagers would feel close to. Additionally, these teenagers were from areas that have seen deprivation that can lead to gangs and violence.[12] Outside of that context and that age group, 'Lesbian Cunt' became one of the most useful gags of this project, as it set up an idiot savant persona, played with details of every day homophobia and questioned what the audience felt comfortable laughing at.

Empathy is central to every part of this investigation, so it seemed prudent to explore it in terms of the audience and the comedian's manipulation of their attitudes to various emotionally charged situations. My approach was threefold:

1) to make the details of the emotionally charged situation explicit and inescapable, but allow distance from empathy

2) to distance the audience from the tragedy in order to allow them to feel empathy that does not discourage laughter/ experiment with this distance

3) to allow no distance from the tragedy and no opportunity to avoid empathy

The first approach is often seen in stand-up comedy. As I have argued so far is by no means essential, but it is certainly easier to distance ourselves from horrible things in order to laugh at them(Bergson 1911, p. 64)(Obrdlik 1942, p.712)(Freud 1961, p.166). It is common for comedians to joke about really upsetting things with a distinct lack of empathy and I wanted to make sure that I too was capable of such things. I was also interested in pushing the ethical boundaries of a roomful of university students.

Although my overall intentions with this project were ultimately altruistic, intending to bring some sort of intimacy and empathy through comedy, understanding the nature of the audience via a manipulative exercise was essential. I chose a fellow comedian to act as a plant in the audience, playing the 'good' role, challenging what I was going to say. I played the unsympathetic voice and made fun of one of the most horrific tragedies to affect Africa, the Ebola outbreak of 2014.

PLEASE WATCH 'EVERYTHING'S FATAL IN AFRICA' NOW

I responded to the 'heckle' quickly and with complete confidence, whereas the 'heckler' faltered a little and, unmiked, his voice seemed weak in comparison to mine. As heard in the clip, this had devastating results for empathy and the audience laughed at my 'witty

[12] Unfortunately there is no recording of this gig, as I was not using new material or consciously testing anything out.

comeback'. I was surprised by how easily an audience could be manipulated by attitude and efficiency. I moved on to the second avenue of my empathetic investigation, playing with distance and respect when joking around a challenging topic.

Generally, when we make jokes from something serious we are criticised for making light of them, of ridiculing victims who have already suffered undeservedly. I had an idea that it was perfectly possible to 'mock with love'. It is considered completely acceptable to joke in this way in some cultures, as Mary Douglas observes:

> The role of the joker at the funeral could call attention to his individual personality. Indeed, in the Jewish *shib'ah*, a week of mourning after burial, the friends who come in to comfort the bereaved and praise the departed, invariably find themselves joking at his expense. Thus they affirm that he was an individual, not only a father or brother in a series of descending generations, but a man (1968, p. 373-4).

One of my first ambitions with this project was to create stand-up comedy that would be able to mock without ridiculing anyone (who didn't deserve it, at least). The Superiority Theory could be completely abandoned if I was able to perform comedy that managed to mock someone in dire straits without becoming superior to them. It was *Alex's Funny Story* that got me thinking about this in the first place. I felt uneasy in telling his story for laughs and would often rationalise it to my audience (who, more often than not needed no encouragement to laugh at his cavalier attitude to life). Alex was unharmed from the ordeal, so it wasn't a particularly big risk to take in comedy terms. When Gran got cancer, however, that seemed like a bigger challenge.

Rather than seeming heartless, I found that joking was the only way that we, as a family, could cope with a terminal diagnosis. Those jokes were made within a tight-knit group who all had a common understanding of the context and intention of each joke, no matter how grim. The joking was appropriate because everyone involved was in a similar situation and holding similar attitudes to that situation. If someone who was not part of the family had chosen to make those jokes, they would have been inappropriate.

> Whether joking is in place or out of place may depend upon who is telling jokes to whom...But joking is almost always out of place when it is a kind of avoidance. (Cohen 1999, p.69)

The challenge as a comedian was in transferring or translating these jokes for an audience of strangers with varying attitudes to death and respect for the dying. Cohen considers death to be a particularly useful topic for stand-up (ibid., p.43) I tried to write jokes a number of different ways. Short jokes might be successful, but could leave the audience distanced from the sad reality that was important to explore. Even worse, according to Critchley, would be giving an air of cold detachment (2002, p.87-88). In the performance for my master's degree, a show about my Grandfather's sudden and unexpected death, I made comedy from the bizarre horror of his death, poked fun at some of the characters we had met and made fun of my own grief, which all worked very well. What hadn't worked is when I had made fun of my Grandfather himself. It had seemed disrespectful,

in a way that Douglas would consider to be 'obscene' in its rejection of social structure (1975, p. 371). So here was my challenge.

PLEASE WATCH 'GETTING TO KNOW GRAN' NOW

The first two bits paint a picture of a canny woman who is cynical about the loving behaviour of a couple of strangers, who is tough enough to be unfazed by a bomb scare, but values her appearance highly, even in her early seventies. By the time we get to the lists of acceptable and unacceptable jokes, she has been established as the sort of person who refuses to be a victim, no matter the circumstances and so leaving the final joke in a strong position to fully allow the audience to understand, appreciate and laugh at her behaviour.

The lists are delivered in a very specific way. The 'acceptable' jokes list is kept irreverent and light, which, rather than serving to distance the audience from the grim reality of death, brings us closer to the attitude of the 'victim' which was that these things were to be laughed at. I didn't delve into any personal stories about colostomy bags or the persona indignities suffered, as that would not have been acceptable to my Grandmother. In building up to the list of unacceptable jokes, I build the tension by making it seem as though I am preparing the audience for something truly dreadful. My voice falters a little, as though I am unsure about what I'm doing, then becomes supremely confident in delivery of the punchline.

By crafting a show that mourned my grandmother while affirming her individuality and celebrating her character, I convinced an audience of strangers that their laughter was not only desirable, but an appropriate response to my comedy. As above with Alex, this is a celebration of her eccentricities, not ridiculing her because of her death or her vulnerability. On the contrary, this makes her tougher, uninterested in sympathy. She was laughing death in the face, maintaining her sense of self and what was important (keeping a perfectly clean house) which was altogether silly and unexpected, but comfortingly familiar for a grandmother figure. The laughter was warm and friendly, not cruel or malicious. Laughing at someone I loved and respected was perfectly possible, and there was no 'mixing with malice', as Plato suggests happens when these sorts of jokes are made (1972, p. 97). It is true that I was laughing at something ridiculous in a friend, but I had not given the opportunity for the audience to laugh with cruelty or malice, because the framing of her character and her holding of values (such as having a clean carpet) even as her life was coming to an end showed her in such a positive way. She was not presented as stupid for wanting her carpet to be pristine, but as someone with greater values than us. Later, with *Baby Madness is a Real Disease* I became absolutely convinced that it was possible to mock without malice, when I performed a bit about my friend (referred to as 'D') apologising profusely for cancelling our evening out because she was having a miscarriage.

> It is said that when men of wit make us laugh, it is by representing some oddness or infirmity in themselves, or others(...)that we imagine ourselves

> incapable of such mistakes as the alluder seemingly falls into; so that in this case too there is an imagined superiority (Hutcheson 1973, p.105)

In one sense, Hutcheson's proposal can be applied here: I mocked D for not putting her own feelings before mine, imagining myself incapable of such a 'mistake'. I couldn't imagine myself being so selfless in such a terrible situation. I did not, however, feel superior to her. Possibly this was a sort of reverse Superiority Theory in action – I found my inferiority very funny when compared with her selflessness. I mocked and celebrated her selflessness simultaneously, with no malice whatsoever. *Mock* malice might have occurred, as I exaggerated my disbelief that someone could be so selfless at such a difficult time, but no negative emotion was thought or felt towards my friend. This is what Descartes might refer to as 'moderate Bantering' which:

> constructively admonishes vices by making them appear ridiculous, but in which one does not laugh at them oneself or express any hatred against anyone(…) (1989, p. 117).

Although hardly a vice in the usual sense, being selfless to such an extent as to be more worried about breaking an engagement with a friend than your own feelings while having a miscarriage is not a healthy way to live. I used 'instant character' (Double 2015, p. 393) as a technique in this section, imitating D as overly sympathetic and apologetic (this is discussed further in Chapter 3). In *Permission to Laugh* I imitated my Grandmother with more detail, such as her Yugoslav accent, her sporadic use of definite articles and her disapproving stare. For me, these were heartfelt reminders of the person she was, full of love and celebration, however Scruton has strong opinions on mimicry.

> Mimicry is amusing partly because of its successful presentation of *two* things in one – the mimic, and the person being mimicked. The "funny man" presents his victim at the same time as distorting him, with the odd result that one sees the victim *in* the distortion. (Scruton 1982, p.201)

Here Scruton is exploring mimicry in terms of Schopenhauer's ideas on the Incongruity Theory, suggesting that people laugh because the imitation of the victim is both familiar and surprising, but it cannot be applied to imitation of a person that is not familiar to the audience. Distortion was not obvious in 'Getting to Know Gran' and the difference between my impression of her and her own real mannerisms was minimal. In fact, those who knew her laughed partly *because* it was an accurate impression. Having introduced my Mum to the rest of the audience in the first performance of *PTL?!* her enjoyment of these impressions was visible and audible to everyone in the room, gaining valuable permission for all present to laugh as heartily as she was. For the later performances at the Camden Fringe, I asked her to attend one night, but not the other, in order to see if there was any difference in audience reactions to the more personal jokes without her presence to guide the laughter in either direction. As we will investigate further in Chapter 3, laughter relishes company (Bergson 1956, p. 64) and audience members generally avoid the embarrassment of laughing on their own (Quirk 2015, p.68-69). My Mother's presence, along with her audible and possibly visible enjoyment of the show

encouraged the audience to the extent that the laughter was clearly bigger on the nights that she attended. Without her 'permission', the audience were risking displaying malice (Plato 1972, p. 97) and de-valuing the deceased (Scruton 1982, p.201), but when given permission in this way, they laugh even more heartily at this usually forbidden, but temporarily allowed thing (Hazlitt 1901, p.11).

After playing with permission in *Permission to Laugh?!* I decided to move towards something more directly personal to the audience. I wanted to play with an open wound and see what I could do with high emotion. I didn't want to pick on anyone or make an audience member feel like they were being bullied, so I needed to start gently with something that we all had ownership over that would affect me as much as it would them.

PLEASE WATCH 'COULD BE WORSE' NOW

As luck would have it, a Conservative government was elected a fortnight before I had a 20 minute slot scheduled at a theatre space on the University campus. It was a showcase of the Drama department's stand-up comedians and could almost be guaranteed to attract a liberal, lefty audience who were either working in education, the arts, or hoping to. This knowledge of the attitudes and ideals of my audience, along with a dominant political story with which everyone in the room could be assumed to be familiar, made for a perfect opportunity to manipulate some strongly held opinions.

Could Be Worse ran on the simple premise that any Conservative government could not possibly be as bad as the political situation in Northern Ireland. It wasn't insensitive, but it was certainly intending to reduce the hysteria by comparing the NI situation to that of the rest of the UK. There wasn't a lot of writing in this show as the politics and politicians of Northern Ireland are horrifyingly ridiculous. Rather than seeing peaks and troughs of levity and seriousness (or rather, more serious joking) this show started in a frivolous way and grew more and more serious as the show developed, then ended on a big, ludicrous punchline. The frivolity began with the throwing of bags of Tayto crisps[13] into the audience, which is a favourite brand in Northern Ireland. This was inspired by Josie Long's approach to comedy, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Throwing bags of crisps with as little skill as I did provided some low stakes, physical pre-show comedy, permitting some silliness before we got into anything heavy. With *Could Be Worse* it allowed the audience to adjust and reset, as the previous act had been very funny but also very intense and somewhat bleak. Throwing crisps meant that the audience had to pay attention in a different way, and engage with the new show.[14]

[13] Tayto takes the North/South divide seriously. There is an Irish company and a separate Northern Irish company. They share a logo and mascot, but in a slightly different style. The Northern Irish factory is at Tayto Castle, the Irish factory at Tayto Park. Both are considered to be tourist attractions.

[14] To throw bags of crisps was inspired by seeing the indie ska punk band Reel Big Fish emptied several bin bags full of popcorn over the audience at the Reading Festival in 2004. Suddenly it was raining popcorn and the audience went nuts for what seemed like a completely crazy stunt. I didn't think my audience would want to shower in cheese and onions crisps, so I threw bags.

The show itself discussed a few of the most prominent and powerful Members of the Local Assembly (MLAs) and therefore involved hypocrisy, violence and homophobia. I decided to take a baffled approach, embracing the absurdity of the fact that these people were in power, while rejecting them and their values. I relied on the assumption that my audience would not know much about the topic and that worked – they had no idea that the Northern Irish Assembly included a politician who had once been arrested for having 250 pounds of explosives in his car, or that another leading politician claimed that homosexuality was the only thing worse than child abuse (she subsequently cheated on her husband with their 19-year-old gardener, to the delight of many). The situation was dire and bizarre. After toiling in the knowledge that there were no politicians in Northern Ireland that I could support, I then 'discovered' that there was a political party whose ideals matched my own and revelled in the possibility of a new socialist wonderland, with the final punchline that my closest political party was actually Sinn Fein.

As a twenty-minute set, I gave five minutes to an introduction, which included the crisp-throwing and usual gags about my name. I gave the remaining 15 minutes to this one joke, with smaller punchlines scattered throughout the story, but with the whole thing aimed at one main payoff at the end. This was an experiment in longform joke-telling, building up to one tension-relieving punchline. *Could Be Worse* is the strongest example of *know-how* in action, with my skills as a comedian necessary to 'feel the room' and gauge where the audience were in terms of sensitivity. Laughter is not the only feedback mechanism and a quiet room is not necessarily a bad thing in comedy. Towards the middle of the show the tension and depressing nature of the discussion created a strange stillness that wasn't much affected by small gags. The audience were appreciating the show and were giving it their attention but did not feel free and joyous in the way that enables big bursts of laughter. The tension grew quietly, with the audience more and more aware of their respectful silence, until the final, obvious punchlines released it all. The awkward drop in laughter rate led to a greater payoff at the final reveal. I finished the show by reminding the audience that although the UK had just voted in a Conservative government, that it 'could be worse'. I ended by ridiculing the audience for being so upset about a Conservative government getting voted in, but it was a layered joke, with the subtext being that things are dreadful everywhere. I was reframing reality in order for those most upset by it to be able to cope with it better, while also encouraging them to take action. After the show, two separate audience members came up to say how much they had enjoyed the show and how surprised they had been that Northern Irish politics was so messy and rooted in bigotry.

Playing in areas where tensions run high was one of the most important ways to use my practice. In *Permission to Laugh* I mentioned cancer several times in the context of a relative dying from it. There was one joke based on a spectacularly insensitive real-life incident which might have seemed risky to tell, however with the framing of the bigger story and the knowledge of the close relationship my Grandmother and I shared, the audience choses to laugh freely.

PLEASE WATCH 'CHABLIS CURES CANCER' NOW

My mistake and horror in realising the situation I had got myself into is what got the big laugh here. I had clearly done something awful – told a dying lady that I had a cure and had her believe it – and my realisation gets the laugh, possibly along with Gran's willingness to believe. I do not consider this to be 'ridicule' or even the gentler version, 'mockery' of my Grandmother, just enjoying the awkwardness of the situation and my horror at having made such a faux pas. I mock myself, I am 'being the butt'. When I mentioned cancer in *Bring Out Your Gays*, however, a show that had not prepared the audience for cancer jokes at all, the reaction was quite different.

PLEASE WATCH 'CANCER OUT OF CONTEXT' NOW

The audience did not seem convinced that this was an acceptable topic to joke about at all. When it came to the joke itself, which demonstrates the strangeness of someone guessing something deeply personal about yourself, the audience laughed, but when I returned to more abstract suggestions of joking about cancer, the uneasy laughter returned. Preparation is everything.

Could Be Worse had been an easy test of my structure and technique for presenting challenging information in a comical way, without softening the blow or allowing us to escape from the difficulty of the material. I had tested it with something fairly soft and easy to stomach, so now I wanted to see how far I could go with it. When working with such evocative material it has been very important to make the intentions of the comedian clear, sometimes for the sake of getting the laugh and sometimes for the sake of getting the empathetic laugh. In *Ulster Loves Me!* I employed techniques in the same vein as Josie Long and the DIY comedy movement. I handed out Tayto crisps as I had at *CBW*, but this time with the audience already well aware of the significance of Tayto, giving a feeling of Northern Irish identity, which is not always easy to do in a positive way. I made use of some of the negative assumptions associated and put them together with some positive events. One of those gags was 'Game of Thrones' mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, the other was 'Titanic'.

PLEASE WATCH 'TITANIC' NOW

The Titanic, built in Belfast and now with its own museum there, in the area known as 'the Titanic Quarter' is such a looming part of Northern Irish identity that this was an easy joke to bring the room together without any risk of political division. Mocking the English is always safe, even amongst those with strong Unionist tendencies, as this is merely 'punching up' at the powerful (see p.21).

Although 'the 'ghettoization' of homosexuality is dissolving under the impact of broadening liberalization' in most of Britain (Weeks 2007, p. 148) Northern Ireland is lagging behind, so in addition to fostering a little national pride, I took any opportunity to encourage LGBT pride.

> Managing a show that discussed the Gay Cake Row would be more complicated than simply gaining the audience's permission. The wider audience of Northern Ireland was divided, with a large majority of people

> sitting on one of two sides, furiously beating their drums and posting hate-filled comments on the Belfast Telegraph's website.[15] The vitriol was violent and disturbing, and made me wonder if Northern Ireland is forever destined to remain a divided society, in one way or another. I've thought for a while now that our national motto should be 'I'm not prejudiced, I just hate them'uns'. I wanted to perform a comedy show that discussed the situation that remained respectful of all opinions, as far from meeting in the middle as they were. My ultimate goal was for the show serve a greater purpose than merely providing an afternoon's entertainment, and do something productive in the community (17th August 2015).

I was stepping into someone else's world in a fluid combination of hidden, combined and no ownership of the various topics I would be talking about and had to ensure that the audience would allow me to joke in the way I had planned. When asked if I minded Queerspace flyers being put on the tables, I went further and took one on stage, talking the audience through it and promoting the cause. Additionally, as the show centred around Christian bakers refusing to bake a cake with a slogan in favour of gay marriage, I handed out 'gay cakes' to the audience. They featured a rainbow and were baked by my sister, an enthusiastically church-going Christian. This was both a silly and poignant moment, being able to provide the very thing that had caused the whole issue. People took the Christian-baked gay cakes and ate them together. I didn't labour the point with the audience, but this was a symbolic breaking of the bread, as told in Acts 2 42-46 as a demonstration of Christians coming together and discovering what they had in common with one another. It was a small act that went a long way in demonstrating my intentions and making the point that the wider Christian community was not necessarily against the LGBT community.

The majority of the audience was wholly sympathetic to the LGBT issues that the show was based on, but contained different groups of people with varying degrees of willingness to laugh at jokes where gay people were the butt of the joke, albeit ironically. Before the show I noticed one particular section, right at the front of the room but sticking to the wall on the left as I looked out, who seemed uneasy. The group was mostly women and they looked somewhat hostile. Later I discovered that this was the representation from the LGBT rights group, 'Queerspace' who had come to support Gareth Lee, the unfortunate man who became the centre of the gay cake row. Before I had this knowledge, however, it became clear that this group of people would be key to the success of the show, being in the eyeline of the majority of the audience. I noted their reactions from the very start of the show. The show had been constructed in order to push at the edge of acceptability in regard to casual homophobia. The 'Lesbian Cunt' story had been received in a lukewarm fashion, but once I got to 'LGBT Hierarchy' and made my ignorance the obvious butt of the joke (Be The Butt), the group felt safe enough to laugh at the possibility that Lesbians had fought to get their 'L' at the beginning of 'LGBT'.

[15] Comments on news articles are one of the easiest ways of tapping in to the strongest, most hate-filled opinions that society possess.

Person Reflection: The Lesbians

[On 'Lesbian Cunt'] Audience reaction was a little different from usual, not as enthusiastic as I normally would expect. The punchline was not as well received, possible because calling someone gay as an insult is not ok?

[On 'LGBT Hierarchy'] The crowd was lesbian-heavy and this obviously caused a happy stir. Mentioning the hierarchy within LGBT society can be risky, but worked here.

In terms of empathy, I had was attempting to balance the scales in order to avoid isolating out Christianity as the problem, rather than the human error and ego in interpreting Christian values. With this in mind, I ended *Ulster Loves Me!* (a show that was performed on a Sunday, let's not forget) with a bible reading and the group singing of a new version of 'Jesus Loves Me'. The clip 'BIBLE READING' is available to watch, however concept is the important thing here, and that it actually happened. The video shows the awkward reluctance of the Christian reader and the enthusiasm of the rest of the audience.

Ultimately there were two clear indicators that I had achieved the balance of empathy between the two sides. The fact that a Christian lady (who had been visibly not enjoying the show as much as everybody else) was willing to come up on stage to read Bible verses showed that I had not completely isolated that side of the divide. The other, very happy event, indicating that I had not belittled the LGBT community in Belfast, was Gareth Lee coming up to me after the show to thank me for doing it. He had loved the show. Every cheer for him and the LGBT community in Northern Ireland been heard and appreciated at a point when this quiet, private man had been vilified brutally and publicly in the press. Here he had been made to feel supported by the wider community, which had been one of the main objectives of the performance. By joining together the Ashers'-supporting Christians and friends and supporters of Gareth Lee, singing together and sharing Northern Irish crisps and gay cakes, we had achieved a brief moment of community. The empathy of the room had been felt.



Figure 1: Me with Gareth Lee after Ulster Loves Me!

> 'Ulster Loves Me' felt like an event, a one-off experience, which is the sort of feeling I was hoping to capture (Personal Reflection, 17th August 2017)

In *Baby Madness is a Real Disease* it was even more apparent when the audience were responding in an empathetic way. *BMIARD* was the no-holds-barred test of how far an audience could be pressed into accepting emotion and comedy. The ultimate aim was to get comedy working with and because of the emotional aspect, not to just have them co-existing in a segregated way. The show was carefully set up to maximise the laughter and emotional journey. It was divided into six thematic sections, each serving a specific purpose.

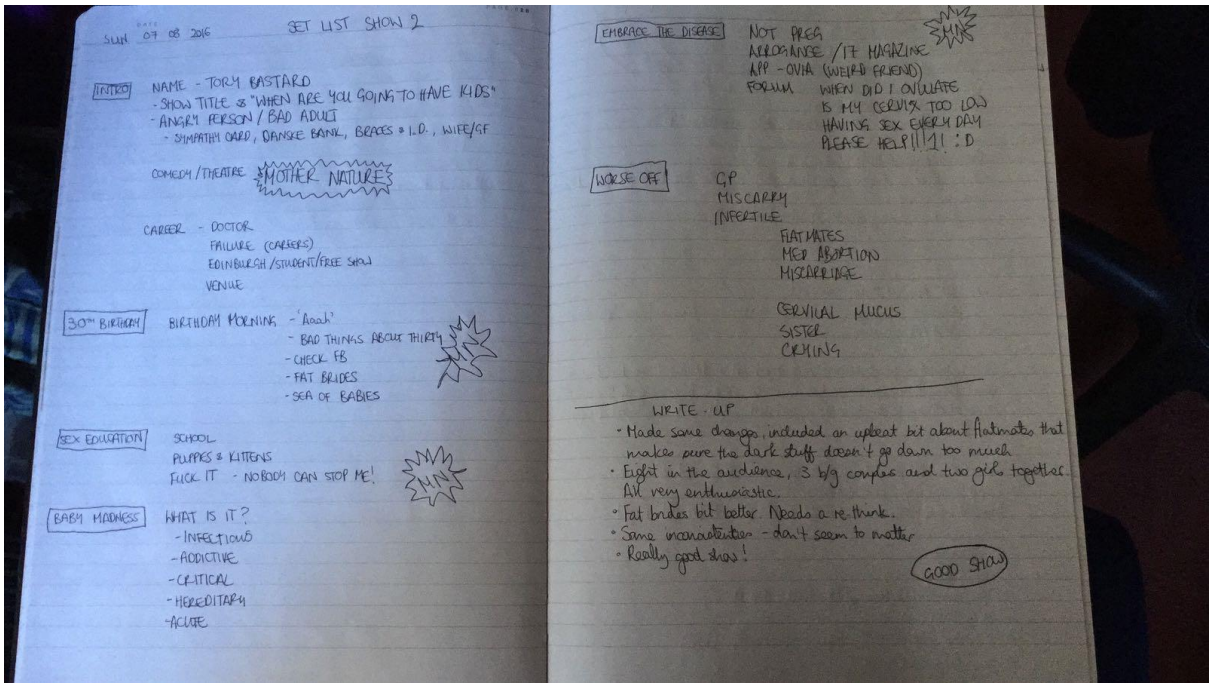


Figure 2: Set list for BMIARD.

Permission to Laugh had been created in a straightforward way as a collection of stories and gags with a running theme. *Bring Out Your Gays* and *Ulster Loves Me!* had been structured in a similar way as collections of stories and gags but worked towards a big theatrical ending, giving a feeling of celebration and showmanship. After working towards one major punchline in *Could Be Worse*, with one large, tension-relieving payoff, I thought carefully before deciding on the arc and feel of BMIARD. In discussing the development with colleagues, the word 'journey' kept cropping up. What journey did I want to take the audience on? How often did I want them to laugh, and in what way? For this discussion on empathy and intimacy and how far those can be pushed in stand-up comedy, I will be focussing on the final section of the show, which, after a number of stories that were deeply personal and emotional to me, I changed the direction suddenly but smoothly, to discuss the abortion law of Northern Ireland.

When I started trying to write jokes or funny stories about issues I had with the abortion laws in Northern Ireland I found that although the situation was ridiculous, it was not funny. It might get some nervous laughter but was unlikely to get massive belly

laughs. I tried being flippant, angry, I tried to seem amused by the violations of human rights, but it seemed doomed to remain as a topic that either gave a laugh via a short joke with no context, the laugh coming from the shock of the audacity of the comedian to joke about such things (or the gory, insensitive detail of the joke). Although BMIARD was made up of three main sections, each with plenty of strong jokes and stories, the final section was where the long-form nature of my show became necessary. I could afford to suddenly become fiercely pro-choice as I had spent the first two thirds of the show desperately wanting a baby. This was the ultimate permission-giving context that enabled this section to happen.

For the first show, I just told the stories that made up the final section straight, with no attempt at joking and only one potential tension relieving apology that could act as an acknowledgement that it was all getting a bit serious (Show 1, 00:15:35:00). This got a small, nervous titter, but for four minutes and thirty seconds there was no other laughter. I hadn't wanted to repress everything, I had wanted to release and encourage emotion and/or laughter, so I changed the format of the final section. For Show 2 I dropped in a frivolous flatmate story before the horrible one about abortion pills, which allowed the audience to enjoy some low-stakes comedy for a moment, before being dropped back into the challenging material. This joke got a good, hearty response, but also offered me the opportunity to pronounce 'shower' with a heavy Northern Irish accent, and then 'translate' for everyone, reminding them that I am from Northern Ireland in preparation for the next bit. Show 2 was also much sillier than Show 1, even in the darkest moments, particularly when I was comparing the really horrible stories to my situation, which was nothing more than an inability to instantly get pregnant. By Show 3 I had worked out how to improve the pacing.

PLEASE WATCH 'EMPATHETIC RESPONSES' NOW

I had started by being slow and respectful every time I was talking about the abortion stories in Northern Ireland, but in this clip, rattled through it quickly, inserting some energy into what was otherwise, quite a draining section. When I did pause, significant moments were punctuated and heightened by the sudden silence. The pause in my speech allowed the audience to laugh or give another verbal release of tension – a murmur of sympathy or a tut of disapproval. This confidence and fast pacing through difficult, challenging stories sets up one of the final gags nicely. When I began to offer solutions to what I termed 'Baby Madness' (i.e. the restrictions on abortion in Northern Ireland) I started to falter at one option, as though it was really contentious and might upset some people in the audience.

PLEASE WATCH 'I BELIEVE IN CRYING' NOW

Crying, although seemingly frivolous, can be seen as a weak thing to do, but as I believe it to be an important and healthy part of expressing emotion, encouragement to cry is included within the punchline. This is an incongruity joke – people were expecting a more serious plan for how to counter baby madness. This style of joke, where the punchline includes an important message that does not detract from the comedy, is the most effective way of having comedy and empathy work together. Some comedy may come

from the surprise of being misdirected or from my determined pride that crying is important, but there is absolutely no victim and no possibility of distance from empathy.

By Show 4, I had started to use the fast pace to get though the most emotional moments. By drawing attention to the fact that my subject matter is so serious, I acknowledged the herd of elephants in the room, giving the audience permission to laugh, or even, permission to myself not to be funny. The most serious moments were permitted to exist without the pressure of also being jokes. The audience are reassured and I'm in control.

PLEASE WATCH 'SERIOUS STUFF' NOW

By the final show, I am using the phrase 'hilarious stuff' and giving mocking reprimands to the audience for not laughing at the abortion stories. There is no pussyfooting around and no apology.

PLEASE WATCH 'HILARIOUS STUFF' NOW

The sarcasm was heavy, making my position clear while also recognising the issue that this was a comedy show and I was telling stories that were highly upsetting and not funny. After consideration, this was the only respectful way to get people to laugh at the sorrow of infertility and miscarriage. By running this show for thirteen performances I had the best opportunity to swing the pendulum until I found the best approach for a highly emotional comedy show. Between the small numbers, the social interaction facilitated by that and the heightened drama of the final section of the show, it was clear to see and hear the audience taking the opportunities that had been created for them to respond to the show with empathy. Murmurs are audible on the recording, but additionally there were tense, shocked silences that were full of empathy, apparent to anyone in the room.

As Al Murray has shown (see Chapter 1) the intention of the comedian and the reasons the audience are laughing do not always match up. 'Flatmates are Shit' served to lighten the mood, but also led into the story about the woman being prosecuted for taking abortion pills with my disapproval of the actions of her flatmates clear, so that there could be no misunderstanding about where my sympathy lay. This might seem obvious and an unnecessary step to many in the UK, but when performing in front of a Northern Irish audience, there was no guarantee that people wouldn't be completely disgusted that someone had had an abortion. This section needed subtle signposting to guide the audience through, without the comedian stopping and explicitly saying 'I believe in a woman's right to choose'. Apart from being clunky, it's not funny. The final section had to flow, had to make people laugh and had to be clear.

Empathy and emotional intimacy are not the enemies of comedy that Bergson might have thought they were. An 'absence of feeling' (1956, p.63) is not necessary for comedy to work when dealing with emotionally challenging topics. As Miles notes, not only can audiences cope with an emotional connection to the performer and their material, but they often desire it (2014, p. 16). In *Permission to Laugh?!*, at least one audience member definitely did:

> My Mum enjoyed the cathartic experience of hearing jokes about Gran. My jokes were certainly not all innocent, and frequently used Gran as the butt of the joke, however as they came from a good place, Mum felt that none of the jokes went too far, none of them were inappropriate. She and I both enjoy laughing when we're not supposed to, just to annoy those people who would censor us, but there was more to it than just the naughtiness of going against the norm. We were laughing at Gran's foibles, hypocrisy and obsession with clean carpets. I was making Gran the butt of the joke, but it doesn't mean that I cared any less about her. In fact, Mum and I have come to the conclusion that we were only able to laugh in this way because of absolute knowledge that nothing in our relationship or attitude to her had deteriorated because of these jokes. In fact, Mum mentioned that it allowed her to look back at what was a very difficult, stressful time in a different light, remembering the good bits rather than the bad (Personal reflection, written eight days after the first performance of *Permission to Laugh?!*).

Through an exploration of personal and public topics that were chosen in order to illicit high feeling from audiences, I have found routes and techniques that can facilitate empathetic stand-up comedy. Although this is definitely easier under controlled circumstances where the performer might know a good deal about the audience in advance, such as gigs performed to theatre students and staff on their own campus, with careful handling it is perfectly possible to work with comedy, emotion and empathy to an audience of strangers. The necessary steps for this to work include gaining permission from the audience to joke in such a way, providing total clarity when doing so in where the comedian's opinions lie and (if desirable) how the audience should react. Confidence, pacing and control of the situation are all key in stand-up already, but are particularly important when navigating emotion. In order to remain empathetic and encourage the audience to do the same, the comedian must allow for emotional depth, which generally means that long form performances and stories rather than one-liners are the most appropriate way to go. At the end of a long show, particularly one that delves into the murkiest of emotional depths, a big theatrical celebration can be as effective as a fantastic punchline. It should be noted, however, that the deeper one delves, the more welcome a fantastic punchline will be. Comedy can be enhanced and enjoyment heightened with the use of emotion and empathy. Contrary to Bergson, laughter may well have no greater colleague than emotion.

Although it was possible to let the audience speak (and it was certainly interesting), it was not as *efficient* as if I had had total creative control. If 'efficiency' seems to be a recurring theme in this work, it is at least in part due to already being a feature of good stand-up (Bruce in Bruce 1984, p42). Even more in this work, the comedian must work efficiently to manage plunging to the depths of sorrow without the relief of cheap jokes and pulling the show back into comedy. It is more effective to utilise 'stand-up theatre' when asking for input from the audience that brings the deepest and darkest emotions, allowing the audience to gain catharsis later from generalised celebration (in this case, listening to mid-90s pop and letting off party poppers while

following a conga line through a makeshift closet) rather than ignoring what has been felt and going back to jokes, supressing the emotion and shying away from intimacy. Indeed, one of key aspects of stand-up theatre is the freedom to abandon efficiency in some respect, in order to embrace empathy and/or intimacy. This work has shown that the comedian can talk about whatever they like but audiences need preparation, and sometimes convincing. What audiences really love is having someone to laugh at, so if the comedian is interested in empathetic comedy, they must be the butt of joke themselves.

Supressing strong feelings or deeply held convictions is difficult or even impossible for some. Pushing those feelings into a slightly different framework is easier to do, such as in *Ulster Loves Me!* when trying to convince the pro-LGBT audience that the owners of Asher's were not bad people, just confused ones who hadn't read the bible properly. Above all, this work shows that a feeling of community between audience members is most helpful to navigating complex material. More than just making the audience feel like one entity, making them feel like a community makes them consider feelings and opinions, but by giving them guidance as to what these might be (by proclaiming them in the crudest sense, or by enabling that sort of exploration through the comedy). This is explored further in Chapter 3. The final 'know-what' from this series of performances is that it is perfectly possible to make entirely positive comedy that doesn't rely on pushing someone else down, but audiences love excluding people and the quickest and easiest way to create a community feeling is by making an 'us' that is notably different to the 'them'. Where even Mark Thomas and Bridget Christie had held back from making comedy directly from emotionally challenging and traumatic circumstances, my practice shows that these topics can be carefully and empathetically explored in a way that is satisfying, respectful and above all, funny.

CHAPTER 3: Physical Intimacy and Tiny Audiences

> You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo [...]How often it has been said that the fuller the theatre, the more uncontrolled the laughter of the audience! (Bergson 1956, p.64)

When I started performing stand-up comedy in 2006, a promoter told me that in in a room with a capacity of 70, in order to make the gig as successful as possible, we would need a minimum of 50 people. Anything less than that would leave too many empty spaces, making the audience feel self-conscious and less likely to laugh. The quieter the laughter, the more self-conscious the audience would become and were then even less likely to laugh. Filling the room was important. Different rules applied at the Edinburgh Fringe, a festival with notoriously small audiences (Simkins 2008) In our pub room with a capacity of 60, one of the other acts said that 15 was the minimum number he'd be happy with. Going lower than 10 can have disastrous results.

> A genre as interactive as comedy, with the ever-present threat of being picked on by the comic, will obviously result in audiences being more comfortable laughing en masse. Fewer than ten people and the room clams up. (Toms 2008)

The lowest number that could still be considered an audience is even more difficult, as Twayna Mayne discovered:

> I performed to two people once. It was like a really awkward date between three people. I wanted to cancel the show but they'd come to see it. (Interview for comedy.co.uk 2017)

At the Black Box in Belfast, their Green Room space, described as 'intimate' but with 'poor acoustics' (BBC 2014) was at full capacity (75) when I performed *Ulster Loves Me!*, about the gay cake row. For that show, every person in that room was needed, as some bits were designed to elicit knowing laughter from some sections of the audience and isolate others. The room needed to be full to the brim and give confidence that the show was a Big Deal, in order to instil confidence during the most challenging parts.

By the end of my 13 show run at the Edinburgh festival, however, I decided that the minimum number of people I needed in an audience for the show to work well, even in a room with seats set out for 60 people, was two. I decided that considering my exploration of intimacy, a one-to-one stand-up comedy show would have been too intense, or as one Edinburgh performer described 'kind of soul destroying' (Youngs 2013). The audience should outnumber the comedian and a one-to-one show seems less like stand-up and more like me yelling at a stranger for 45 minutes. With two people or more,

I could do great things with my show.[16] It became clear that numbers were not the problem, but whether it was possible to knit the individual members of the audience into a *community* in a short space of time. In choosing titles for the shows, I was able to encourage a specific community, giving me an advantage before I even began the show. With *Ulster Loves Me!* I was able to assume, thanks to the publicity, blurb and the public interest surrounding the theme of the show, that those present would probably be heavily invested in the 'Gay Cake Row'. With *Baby Madness Is A Real Disease* I could not expect the average Edinburgh Fringe-goer to read anything past the title, so chose something that might encourage women who had limited maternal feelings. This idea of forging a community, welcoming but distinct from 'outsiders' who were not sharing our space and experience, is a key element of intimacy and empathy in stand-up, which this chapter explores.

For the purposes of clarity, I will refer to an audience of 15-50 people as a 'small' audience, and an audience of 8-15 people as a 'very small' audience and fewer than 8 people as a 'tiny audience'.

Stand-up comedy is an intimate form of performance and the audience's responses are what determines whether the performance has been a success or not. Quirk even suggests that the role of the audience is so key that it is almost wrong to think of the comedian as a solo act (Quirk 2011, p.220). Limon goes so far as to say that the audience *makes* the joke happen:

> Laughter is more than the value of a routine; more than a determinant of the routine (its rhythm influencing the comedian's timing or its volume his direction); it is the arteries and veins of the routine's circulation. (Limon 2000, p.13)

Getting the balance right is important, of course. If we look at the phenomenon of arena comedy, first occurring with Steve Martin in the US in the 1970s but steadily gaining in popularity in the UK since 2009 (Lee in Independent 2010), we can immediately understand the issues that might prevent a comedian from fostering and intimate feeling with their audience. In the O2 arena, for example, there are 20,000 seats, and for safety reasons, the front row is a couple of metres away from the stage. Although arena comedy is undeniably popular (Lee 2010b) comedians generally prefer intimate venues for comedy purposes, acknowledging that the financial reasons for performing in an arena are compelling (Chortle 2017).

> [T]he recent move of live stand-up comedy into large arenas simultaneously extends and restricts the performance opportunities and experiences for stand-up comedians and audiences (Lockyer 2015, p. 600)

[16] The only possible argument here is that 8-12 people did not seem to work well in that room. With so few people, we occupied a middle ground where everyone was more aware of the empty space, but the small numbers did not feel safe or anonymous.

It should come as no surprise that arenas do not lend themselves to intimacy (Double 2014, p.194-8; Guardian 2013) but even more modest venues can have issues. Josie Long claims that having an oversized venue 'ruined' her show (Quirk 2015, p224); Dara O'Briain had issues at the Liverpool Philharmonic because the audience was divided in such a way as they couldn't see each other(2010, p.46). It is important for the audience to be able to interact with each other, it seems, as well as the comedian.

The definition of an 'intimate' gig is highly variable. Ricky Gervais' performances at the Pleasance Theatre in Islington were described as 'intimate' (Fletcher 2018), however the biggest space at that theatre can hold 230 people. That may be more intimate than the gig Gervais usually tours (Hammersmith Apollo – 3,500; 3Arena in Dublin – 13,000 capacity, Arena Birmingham – 15,800), but it's all relative. The biggest gig I ever played was 300 people, and that felt vast and impersonal. If there are people in the audience the comedian can't interact with, can it really be called an intimate gig? I don't think so. For the purposes of this investigation, I decided to experiment with what we might call 'super-intimate', i.e. 15 audience members or fewer. I haven't met any comedian or promoter who thought that numbers lower than 15 would be ideal for a stand-up comedy gig.

> 'You can't do a gig in a vacuum, because it is specifically about the performer and the audience, and it's specifically about generating the prerequisite number of responses. And they're very audible responses.' (Thomas in Double 2014, p.188)

Some have gone as far as to say that small gigs aren't enjoyable for the comedian or the audience (Logan 2016c) and that small audiences in big venues are disastrous (Orvedahl 2013). Stand-up comedy may revel in intimacy, but a British audience tends to have difficultly embracing strangers, both literally and figuratively. With my investigations into intimate stand-up comedy topics and experiences, I wanted to explore how a smaller audience, which would usually be considered a hindrance to a successful comedy night, might facilitate an empathetic, intimate and (most importantly) funny comedy show.

One of the early insights into tiny audiences came in the form of a joke with a punchline that could have dual interpretations, depending on whether you had the additional information required to interpret it. This is a reflection on a joke about Ian Paisley (or another Ian, my mother-in-law's ex-husband):

> One of my objectives was to use comedy in a directly useful way to improve someone's life, by making jokes around a topic that they were emotionally involved with. I had intended to get the audience to shout something abusive about my Mother-in-law's future ex-husband, but was forbidden from doing so by her friend, who I knew would be in the audience. Although I was certain that my Mother-in-law would enjoy it, I was equally certain that her friend would not, and as one bad reaction might have been enough to influence other audience members, I altered the joke. Instead of being explicit as to my reasons for getting the audience to yell 'Ian, you're a twat!', I mentioned that Ian Paisley had been in the news recently and directed the vitriol at him. It wasn't

> developed enough as it was a last-minute solution to my problem, and because at least half of the audience knew who it was actually aimed at, it became an extra 'in joke'. This may have isolated some audience members, but it heightened the enjoyment of those who were 'in the know', particularly my mother-in-law, who has mentioned several times since how much she loved that part of the show, and what joy it gave her. It was a chance for her to be naughty by proxy, indulging in my thinly-veiled abuse at Ian Paisley to have a temporary holiday from acting like a sensible member of society. It was silly and fun, but it also released some of the tension that she had, knowing that I had planned to perform some material about the divorce (Personal Reflection, 21st May 2014)

In the sense that it was a joke only fully appreciate by a few audience members, performed for a 'tiny audience', but in the company of more people and with the added bonus of being specially personalised. It was easy to make a success of this joke as it was not subject to the other pressures that come with performing to a tiny audience. For the shows at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival I had to manage a strange shift between acting as functional front-of-house staff to being the exciting performer that everyone had come to see, as I was running the show entirely solo. The stage area was barely distinct from the audience area and the sound desk where I would have to bring my own music on or off, was at the front, directly in vision. The difference between me and my audience was not particularly well defined. According to Limon, this is a unique attribute of stand-up in any case:

> [Stand-up comedians] are not, as performers, entirely distinct from [their audiences] (2000, p.13)

My tiny audiences would need to know that I was there to perform for them, while also interacting with them in a friendly way. Too professional and removed, and that wouldn't be achieved. Too close and intimate, and I risked losing my performative power. I have identified two key aspects of stand-up comedy that must be focussed on and adapted when performing to a tiny audience: 1) *working the room* and everything that goes with that, such as engaging with the audience in an appropriate and effective way and 2) maintaining and adapting a clear *persona*, which might involve moving away from some of the most reliable tools of stand-up. Both are key concepts in stand-up but used here in a way that is notably different than usual. We will first look at *working the room*. This is not a unique concept to stand-up but refers to the bringing together of an audience of strangers by one person who manages their attention.

> A monologue, like a sermon, asks the anonymous members of the assembly to spontaneously merge into a single emotional organism capable of reacting uniformly to the metaphor, wisdom, and worldview of one appointed personality (Marc 1997, p.12)

In stand-up comedy terms, *working the room* involves not merely the recitation of jokes or stories, but quality interaction between the comedian and audience, reaction in the

moment to what's happening and controlling the performance in order to get the best laughter responses (or other audible responses). Tony Allen's summary:

> [Working the room] involves demolishing the fourth wall and acknowledging the audience. It also requires a few basic techniques – mugging and mimicry, timing the laughs, even manipulating applause, while at the same time anticipating hecklers and being prepared to deal with them (Allen 2002, p.26).

For Allen, manipulation of the audience via perfectly planned reactions to their responses is key. Mintz focusses more on the bringing together of the audience as made up of lots of strangers, in order for them to happily laugh as one.

> The comedian must establish *for the audience* that the group is homogeneous, a community, if the laughter is to come easily. "Working the room," as comedians term it, loosens the audience and allows for laughter as an expression of shared values rather as a personal predilection (since people are justifiably nervous about laughing alone and what that might reveal)(1985, p.79).

Note that Mintz also sees laughing alone as a negative situation, with the potential for something to be revealed, possibly something uncomfortably intimate. The comedian should then bring the audience together in order to put them at ease. Quirk takes the view that it is the 'unified reaction' that is important and control of those reactions (Quirk 2015, p.5). Double dedicates a whole chapter to 'Working the Audience' (2014, p.187) and it is considered to be a key element of stand-up.

Working the room is particularly essential for this practice-based enquiry, as we begin to look beyond empathy towards intimacy and how that might work with stand-up. Miles, in his article arguing in favour of the role of emotion in stand-up, challenges Bergson's views on the incompatibility of laughter and emotion (already well documented in this work).

> What we see instead is a paradigm shift, with a focus on identification, interaction, empathy, mutual therapy and well-being; as well as a need for recognition (Miles 2005, p.16).

If Miles is correct and empathy, mutual therapy and well-being are not only possible in stand-up but desirable, it will certainly require the working of the audience in order to make it happen. An uncomfortable audience is less likely to laugh freely. Limon describes Richard Pryor dividing the audience at a gig as seeming 'comically suicidal'(2000, p.84). Stewart Lee happily, repeatedly divides audiences at his shows, although it is not always to maximise comic responses (2012, p.23).

Even before the comedian starts *working the room*, the room starts working the audience. This is an important part of what Quirk refers to as the 'manipulative environment':

> When an audience enters a comedy gig, they are entering an environment in which everything works together to make them more responsive. They will not usually be cognizant of the extent to which the arrangement of the space, the publicity and the very register in which the comedian delivers his material has been contrived to enhance the excitement of the event and make them more likely to laugh (2015, p. 90)

Quirk fully explores this idea of the manipulation of the comedy setting and everything else that influences the performance on the night, including targeted marketing and the performance style of the comedian. We will now look at some of the manipulative environments I occupied and encouraged in order to perform intimately.

For the 30 minute show *Bring Out Your Gays*, performed as a self-contained show as one of three acts, I wanted to convey some feelings of traditional theatre, rather than that of a stand-up comedy gig. The venue assisted with this. I performed in the Aphra Theatre on the University of Kent campus, which is a multi-purpose performance space with steeply rigged seating and a high-quality sound and lighting. There were dedicated front of house staff and technicians, as one might expect at a theatre show but not necessarily at a stand-up gig. I had a small set – a door in the middle of the stage – and set decoration. Although the show was leaning towards the theatrical, I needed to maintain crucial elements of stand-up comedy as well. In order to encourage the atmosphere I required and fully manipulate the space the show would be inhabiting, I distributed party hats and hooters amongst the seating, and decorated the stage with party debris such as streamers and balloons. For me, these were iconic items to represent a party, and by giving them to the audience, along with playing upbeat pop music such as Britney Spears or The Backstreet Boys[17], gave the audience a little license to behave more as party guests than audience members. I needed them to feel that they could contribute and collaborate, not just sit passively and watch. The venue wasn't perfect: the steep rigging of the seats meant that the audience weren't a cosy, homogenous group but more like stratified teams. No alcohol was served (the show was early in the morning) which removes one element that could have encouraged the party atmosphere. The environment was manipulative, but not wholly in the way that I would have chosen. The clip 'SECRET CLOSET OF SEXUALITY' is available to watch in order to demonstrate the flavour of this show but the 'coming out' conga line towards the end is the key section.

For *Ulster Loves Me!* I used the Green Room at the Black Box. This is a pub-style room with the bar at the back and a small stage at the front (see figs. 11 and 12). There is sound system and some lighting, but it has the feeling of a makeshift speakeasy rather than a professional venue. The seating is arranged cabaret-style and the walls are adorned with posters from previous gig and shows. It's a warm venue, with a DIY feeling but a top-quality bar serving homemade pizzas and craft beer. To make best use of this great venue, I gave out Tayto crisps (you may remember them from a previous show) and

[17] On reflection, I dated myself by choosing hits that I considered to be party hits, rather than something more contemporary. When I mentioned this later to an audience member she assured me that it was fine, because 90's retro was in. I felt very old.

the homemade 'gay' cakes. This alone contributed to a feeling of inclusivity that was key to the comfort and confidence of the audience. It was not possible to get the room particularly dark, and the stage lights were not particularly powerful, but this worked to the advantage of the show, as I could see and engage with every audience member on an individual level. The manipulative environment provided a feeling of friendly warmth for audience to relax enough to be able to find the show funny. The venue was safe, inclusive and proud to be local, which was everything I had wanted *Ulster Loves Me!* to embody. Of all the performances for this project, this one had the best match of show and venue.

The room for *BMIARD* was far from ideal, set up for 60 people, but most I got in was 15. We had a 15 minute turnaround between shows so rearranging the room in order to reduce the feeling of emptiness, as recommended by Quirk (2015, p.69) was not possible. This also meant that it wasn't possible to generate a 'feeling of excitement about the show' or a feeling like 'they have come to a popular gig' (Quirk 2015, p.70). From all the knowledge we have gained about what is good for stand-up comedy gigs, this shouldn't have worked.

> To produce laughter, an audience needs not only energy but also confidence. To laugh is pleasant, but can also be risky; to be caught laughing heartily when other audience members are silent could be embarrassing. (Quirk 2015, p.68-69)

A full audience definitely encourages a buzzy atmosphere. In the narrow, oddly shaped room where BMIARD was performed, the tiny audiences were certainly in danger of getting lost in the room. This risked loss of energy and less laughter as a result (Quirk 2015, p.69). To combat this, we, my tiny audience and I, dominated our small area of the room. My performance was addressed to them, not the rest of the empty space. Early in the run I let people sit wherever they felt comfortable, not wanting to make anyone feel even more exposed by moving them front and centre instead of clinging to the sides of the room. By the end of the run, however, it was clear that an audience who would sit as close to the performer as possible would be most engaged and confident. Even reluctant movers would relax and engage more if they had been (politely!) forced to move.

How the comedian goes about managing the audience is closely tied to the *persona* of the comedian, their status and how these are applied. Bridget Christie gives an example:

> When you're performing a solo show on tour you are the compere, opening act and headline act. A compere's job is to create a good vibe in the room. A compere would assume the audience would applaud an act when he or she introduced them, and if they didn't, he or she would insist that they did. I just had to do that for myself, that's all. You can't begin a two-hour show without being clapped on. A room full of people who haven't clapped you on hold the power, and you have to get it back off them. (2015, p.191-192)

In this explanation, Christie mentions the audience holding power, and her needing to get it back. Before starting the run of Baby Madness is a Real Disease, I considered this to be

the biggest practical challenge facing the final show of this investigation, performed as part of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival at Sportsters Bar and Grill. Sportsters was a large open-plan drinking venue with a great many large TV screens and many large men watching them. The comedy shows took place in a long, narrow room with seats for 60 on the first floor with an unused bar running the full length of the room. There was a small stage about 2 metres wide, a black curtain for a backdrop, and a mic. With a small audience and a room designed to get people drunk while watching sports, I needed some sort of assertion that I was worthy of being watched and keeping the majority of the attention was important. Getting the audience to applaud my entrance was a good place to start, but the entrance itself would need more work before it could be successful with a small or tiny audience. There were issues with the sound system for my first show at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and Sportsters Bar and Grill had not provided a technician.

I needed a proper entrance, so I requested that the audience hum Wagner's 'Ride of the Valkyries' so I would have music to come on to.

PLEASE WATCH 'RIDE OF THE VALKYRIES' NOW

This clip involves three different versions of the introduction, as I enjoyed testing the audience's interest in engaging. They generally were enthusiastic, but not familiar enough with the music to keep going for more than a few seconds, and that uncertainty produced a bit of laughter. Accusing them of being rubbish, again drawing attention to the shabby, DIY nature of the performance, got another laugh. Sometimes we started again, I gave myself an off-stage, on-mic intro ('Please welcome to the stage, TORY GILLESPIEEEEE!) and the audience switched from humming to welcoming applause. I hadn't even started the show and I'd had two laughs, audience participation and a group of disparate people who had been brought together as one. It was a fun way to open the show and by lowering the professionalism bar, the audience could see me less as an aloof performer and more like some idiot friend to chat to (or at least, respond to without fear of ridicule). The audience participation element was a practical tool for gauging who might need a bit more work and who was fully ready to embrace the spirit of the thing and engage with me. Above all, I was laying down the rules for our temporary community – one which would happily get a bit silly together, as long as everyone was doing it.

The sound system got fixed, of course, and I tried using pre-show music again, but it was clear that with such a small and potentially awkward audience, having a pre-show icebreaker was incredibly useful. I would give a different reason for doing it each night, exploring my stand-up comedy persona and trying to find something that could pull together the material, venue and intimate feeling I was aiming for. If I said that the sound system was broken, it made the whole thing seem like an unprofessional shambles, which I loved to embrace. If I said that I wasn't listening when the sound guy told me how to work it, I could make myself seem dumb and immature, which would set up some of the later jokes about being too irresponsible to have children. Similarly, if I said that I wasn't listening because the sound guy was too attractive, it might be surprising to the audience later to find out that I was married and trying to get pregnant. These could be guilty admissions of a failing, letting the audience in on a secret, or these could be proud, self-

mocking moments where I confidently embraced the flawed situation. I could have said that my sound guy had called in sick, or another reason that made me sound higher status or professional, but in these circumstances, it was unlikely to aid the show. Besides, they wouldn't have believed me, the place was a dump.[18]

I adapted the beginning to suit the audience. Sometimes I would let them go on humming for as long as possible, which might get an uneasy laugh as the music petered out, and then a proper laugh as I apologised, telling them that I just wanted to see how much they knew. Sometimes an enthusiastic singer deserved acknowledgement but sometimes a tiny audience really didn't want to sing, and it was better to just get on with something they could be more comfortable with (i.e. sitting back and listening). Intimacy cannot be forced in stand-up comedy, and if someone really doesn't want to engage, I leave them be.[19] Quirk's observation that 'high level of quality interaction' is crucial to stand-up (2015, p.227) is particularly noticeable here, as is Brodie's views on the performing needing to work to 'engage with an audience, reconciling the distance not of the stage to the floor but of differing world views'(2014, p.63).

As mentioned above, it is the general consensus amongst comedians that a small audience in a big room is one of the worst problems that a gig can face. After doing the most basic thing of getting the audience to come forward as much as possible and sit as closely together as they were comfortable with, I addressed the issue directly my making the audience feel special and that their presence was highly valued.[20] I tried to make them feel that a small audience was inherently a good, remarkable thing. If there were upward of five people I would congratulate myself, as the Fringe is notorious for small audiences, thus normalising the situation and putting the audience at ease. If there were fewer, I would make light of the fact, while suggesting that the comedy would work better as a result.

PLEASE WATCH 'REASSURING THE TINY AUDIENCE' NOW

On what was supposed to be the most difficult day of the festival to attract an audience, I proudly praised myself for getting five audience members in. Praising myself in an entirely genuine way also contributed to putting their minds at ease, giving the m the confidence that Quirk deems necessary (2015, p.68-69) – she must be pretty good if she got five people in on 'Black Tuesday'! When I found myself with an all-female audience, I drew attention to this a few times, saying how much better it would be like this and that we didn't want any drunk sports fans wandering in.

[18] Sportsters has since re-opened under the name 'Brewhemia', a cocktail-loving, cabaret-inspired bar. Had I done the show there as it is now, I would have had to find different reasons for getting the audience to sing. The type of audience that would go there these days probably wouldn't need much encouragement.

[19] I'm thinking of Show 5 here, when the three teenage boys in the front row were polite and attentive throughout, but really did not want to participate, thank you very much. There was no point in pushing them into anything, they really seemed very innocently awkward.

[20] I once attended a stand-up gig with only five audience members and the comedian did not attempt to hide his disappointment. It was a lacklustre start to what should have been a fun gig, and after ten minutes he stopped and asked us to leave. I left thinking that it was somehow my fault.

PLEASE WATCH 'ALL-WOMEN' NOW

This suggested a subtext that other people wouldn't like the show, but *of course* these women would, reinforcing our unity and distancing our small, temporary group from the rest of the big, bad world. I may have gone too far, as when I mentioned that with only women in the room, we could 'say mean things about boys' and there was a bemused reaction. Maybe they weren't sure if I was joking or not. Maybe they thought I was becoming a little obsessed with the fact that it was a female only audience. Then my saviour appeared in the most ironic form possible. A drunk man wandered in and disrupted the show. I was really thrown and it was at this point that the audience started to get behind me, giving more enthusiastic responses from this point onwards. After this significant interruption, we were united but quite off track, so I encourage everyone to do a huge fake laugh, under the ruse that I would just edit it together without the interruption. This picked up the pace and energy of the show and helped to get the audience back in physical shape again, having not laughed in a while. Faking laughter seemed to encourage this audience to genuinely laugh later on.

The times when I let my guard down in this way were where the *persona* of the comedian was separated by the narrowest of lines. The 'performance' starting as soon as my audience members walked into the room, unlike other gigs, where I would have remained unseen until I made my entrance, as is typical with stand-up and performance in general. Keeping the performer separate from the audience helps to dictate the relationship that they will have. The performer is there only to perform, and their 'otherness' is signposted clearly, i.e. they arrive at a different time, from a different entrance, existing in a different space. This is particularly useful in the genre of stand-up comedy where although barriers between audience and performer are intentionally broken down through direct address and lack of an invisible fourth wall (Allen 2005, p.28), maintaining a different status, not necessarily high status, is essential to the performance. The comedian may be relatable, but they are not an audience member. For this performance, however, I was breaking away from the conventional trappings of stand-up (including some literal ones, such as the microphone, which we'll look at later in this chapter), and allowing the audience to enter into an intimate relationship with me from the beginning. There was no pretence or distance, I just welcomed them in as myself. As people came in, I needed to greet them and almost make friends with them. If I pretended to be an artist too much, especially for those performances with the tiniest of audiences, it would risk seeming pretentious.

It would have been 'pretending' as I had already greeted them as myself, and it's difficult to think of a greater barrier to intimacy than pretending to be someone else, even if it was some version of myself. As a result of this strange situation, the beginning of the show became an important make or break point. I chose to refer to the lack of a professional feeling about the whole thing while also establishing that I was in charge and that the usual unspoken rules of performance (such as giving the performer your respect and attention) would still apply. Having a big exciting announcement and making them applaud as I came on gave hints of a big, exciting, normal comedy show. It meant my role

had changed from 'person' to 'performer', but that I was still myself and not falsifying my behaviour. The rules were made clear to the audience and the performer was still 'available'. One of the most fascinating insights that performing to a tiny audience has given me is how stand-up comedy walks the line between performance and conversation. It's worth reminding ourselves of Brodie's analysis of stand-up:

> [...]stand-up comedy is a form of talk. It implies a context that allows for reaction, participation, and engagement on the part of those to whom the stand-up comedian is speaking[...]However heavily one-sided, it is nevertheless a dialogic form, performed not to but with an audience (2008, p.153).

This idea of performing 'with' an audience becomes even more interesting when the stand-up comedy focusses on subjects that might be considered taboo even within the 'safe' realm of stand-up. If everything on stage is in inverted commas (Lee on Provenza, in Lee 2010a, p.150), what changes when there are only three people in the room? Brodie asserts that the comedian can never fully bridge the distance between him and the audience 'as there is always the expectation of being an outsider (2014, p.44)' however Marc suggests that the stand-up comedian is inherently intimate with an audience, 'eschewing the luxury of a clear-cut distinction between art and life (1997, p.12). The main purpose of *Baby Madness is a Real Disease* had been to try to reduce any gap between audience and performer, using physical and emotion intimacy to enable empathy and emotion to work well in stand-up comedy. With a small audience, that gap is bridged even more, with a very tiny line between me and the audience as a group of friends. Sometimes I was more like a show-off friend dominating the conversation in a generous and inclusive way than the sole performer. I laughed at other people's comments or stories as a crucial social exchange and asked questions that I wanted answers to. With my tiny audience, a lot more give and take was possible, rather than just the illusion of intimacy. It seems counterintuitive, but the smaller the audience, the more audience interaction is necessary. Where I might have chatted to two or three people, asking a little about them, in an audience of, for example, five, it seems odd if I don't speak to everyone to learn their names, their occupation and some additional info on how they're finding the festival. This more than doubles the interaction time.

One of the most interesting ways that a small audience alters the performer's experience is when it comes to eye contact. In a 'normal' gig the comedian might try to make eye contact at points in the show, as an important part of *working the room*, but direct most of the performance to the audience in general, sweeping their gaze across the room. With really tiny audiences, the comedian must actively choose to either look at someone or look at no one, but there is no option for taking in the whole room in a general way. This risks the crazed intensity of staring at one person for most of an hour, or avoiding eye contact completely, awkwardly gazing over the top of heads, pretending that there are more people in the room just so you don't have to make eye contact. If the early prep has been done and the comedian has spoken with their audience enough to make everyone feel at ease, with the small numbers having been acknowledged, this is

less of an issue.[21] There is a greater risk of distraction for the comedian as well. If only one person starts fiddling with their phone or (in the worst of circumstances) talking to a neighbour, that's a significant percentage of the audience, and is distracting to everyone, not only the performer. This too, must be acknowledged. Again, this means more show time is being spent on interaction, and not on planned material. Used well, this is a gift, especially in terms of encouraging an intimate performance. Managing this is absolutely *working the room*, but not in a way that is usual in stand-up.

One distinct advantage of the smaller audience is that there is a greater opportunity to get to know them in a way that does not arrest the show, which in turn means that the essential homogenisation of the audience is easier and that each individual is not required to lose too much of their own set of values in the process of becoming one with the rest of the room. The jokes can become tailored to the unique set of people in front of the comedian. I'm not suggesting that there were re-written on the fly as a result of sudden insight into someone's interests, but delivery and reactions were easily adapted, with more emphasis in places, or more mockery if I thought it might get a better reaction. When the awkward trio of teenage boys sat in the front row (Show 5), I prepped them with throwaway lines such as 'brace yourselves, lads' or acknowledged their unease 'you're going to learn a lot tonight!'. A small audience gave me the opportunity to avoid joking in a generalised middle ground sometimes. For example, a joke at the expense of men in general in front of a female-only audience seen in 'Women Only' did not have to be tempered or apologised for, and I didn't run the risk of isolating anyone. The audience got it for what it was – a silly reversal of traditional misogynistic jokes.

Once the rules have been established via the manipulation of the audience at the very beginning of the show, there is much less need for the stand-up comedian to adapt much during the main performance itself. Instead, key techniques that are important to any stand-up comedy performance suddenly become essential when performing to a smaller audience, such as responding to the audience's responses.

> The audience are spoken to, conferred with and confided in, and more importantly their responses are acknowledged. (Allen 2002, p.28)

With a tiny audience, it becomes much more possible to carry out what Allen prescribes. Rather than using the front few rows as a sample representation of the rest of the audience, the comedian has the opportunity to confer and confide with every member of the audience. Responses become even more important than they were in a room of 200 people. In a bigger room a comedian might choose to pass over some responses shouted out by audience members if they are not useful or funny, if the rest of the audience has missed them or if acknowledging the interruption might break the flow of the show. With the small audience, however, the comedian cannot do that. Everyone hears and awaits

[21] The Northern Irish comedian Paul Currie once performed his show 'The Sticky Bivouac' to only two people. Unfortunately the show included a bit that required two volunteers from the audience to help perform some puppetry, and another bit in which he crowd surfed.

the comedian's response. The voice of the audience member, no longer lost in anonymity, becomes almost as important as the voice of the comedian, or possibly even enjoying equality. This does not indicate a loss in status for the comedian, it just reflects the natural shift when performing to a smaller group. The feeling changes from one of performance to that of a discussion amongst friends, and that can be a most welcome enhancement to the stand-up comedy experience, according to Brodie:

> Much of stand-up comedy's appeal is precisely its contiguity with group talk, as opposed to oratorical or theatrical modes. (2014, p.43)

Although the comedian might not want to encourage the audience members to talk amongst themselves extensively for fear of losing the performer status entirely, there is something exciting about allowing that interaction when it arises. It is certainly intimate, and with a tiny audience it seems wrong to try to prevent such intimacy for the sake of the comedian's ego. There is little danger that they will lose control of such a small audience and by allowing the audience to speak in front of a small, manageable audience they may overcome a significant barrier, according to Miles:

> The audience identifying with the accessibility of stand-up comedy paradoxically operates in conflict with the sense that they cannot identify with the performer, due to the perception that performing stand-up comedy requires a heightened level of bravery, though this admiration may include a degree of respect for the craft. (2014, p.17)

By Miles' assertion, the audience might be able to identify with the comedian more closely as part of the tiny audience, with the changes to the performance style that remove physical divisions and put the audience and performer on a more even footing. Although it may be that more bravery is required to perform to a tiny audience, the show becomes nicer, the audience behaves better and a 'heighted level of bravery' does not seem so essential. Although I found 'heckles' to be more common with smaller audiences, possibly as a result of the smaller audience and the heckler feeling less intimidated by 'performing' in front of a big group of people. These heckles were never cruel, or personal, and they were mostly witty and welcome. On the one occasion where I had been annoyed and responded with a sharp response that might have had a big laugh in another gig, there was no such result. Instead of a comedian putting an audience member in her place with a witty retort, we got a drunk woman interrupting a sober one, with the sober one resorting to jokes about the other's age and then sexual history. In a small space only a few other people to watch the spectacle, it seemed like ageist, sexuality-shaming bullying. It didn't get a laugh and created a weird distance between me and my audience. The brutal comeback, usual a key part of stand-up, was unhelpful in front of a tiny audience. When an audience member then came in late and talkative, I carefully walked the line between letting my annoyance out as hostility, while making it clear that I was deserving of respect, as seen in this clip:

PLEASE WATCH 'PLAY NICELY WITH THE HECKLER' NOW

The audience is undeniably a crucial part of any stand-up comedy performance, as Miles notes:

> [...]there is a complex symbiotic relationship between the stand-up comedian and their audience in relation to the body, and well-being[...](Miles 2005, p.15)

When this relationship is abused by an unwelcome and badly timed interruption, the intimate connection is damaged. Interrupting a tiny audience is very different from interrupting a bigger one and the response from the comedian must be carefully measured. The interrupter has less at stake – he's only interrupted a few people, not a whole, full room, but with a tiny audience, every small interruption is more significant and more obvious to everyone. Had there been 20+ people, I might have ignored the man's fumbling at the door at the back of the room, but it had caught the attention of 50% of my audience and needed to be dealt with. Somehow, with a smaller audience, I felt the need to be more polite to him that I otherwise would have been. Additionally, without a microphone to amplify my voice and status, asking him to shut up and get out felt weird and wrong, like I was bullying someone in front of my mates. When things did settle down, it co-ordinated with the part of the show that worked best if it was performed straight, without interruption or unplanned interaction. The first 15 minutes had been designed as a huge compering exercise, as an introduction to me and my values before we started to jump into the more challenging stuff. I needed that stuff to go well, properly, so I adopted a slightly firmer tone from that point.

PLEASE WATCH 'KEEPING THE AUDIENCE IN CHECK' NOW

I was no longer willing to stop for interruptions, so when our drunk friend decided to contribute, I firmly explained that this was not ok. The audience loved this firm and confident approach. I had gone too far at trying to ingratiate myself with my audience and lost hold of my comedian persona. Although I was aiming for genuine human interaction, the audience liked me better when I was honest and spikey in a way that would be rude in the 'real world', and not trying to suck up to them. I had wanted to facilitate intimacy and thought that the best way to do that was by lowering myself to ground level, but intimacy happened when *I* allowed it to, when I allowed myself to be myself (and, admittedly, when we cemented our group by excluding the invader from a different tribe).

A more effective way to alter the performance in order to encourage intimacy is to stop using the microphone. A iconic element of stand-up, its important role is celebrated extensively by Brodie for its role in returning intimacy to a performance (2008, p.158)(2014, p.43). In a noisy room holding upwards of 50 people, a microphone allows the performer to speak at a conversational volume, giving the illusion of intimacy.

> Because of the power accorded the performer through amplification, the possibility of allowing all those previously unavailable elements emerges. In other words, knowing that one can easily pull focus back gives license for

> giving it away. The microphone helps to create the illusion of a small group discussion irrespective of the group's actual size. (Brodie 2008, p.161)

Brodie also says that the mic can only do so much and that the front few rows become a proxy for the rest of the audience (2014, p.63). This makes me wonder about the special stand-up experience that those front few rows get, compared with everyone else. I would propose that it is a better experience. It is certainly more intimate. As an audience member, however, unless I feel particularly confident, I try to avoid the first two rows for this reason, and it is not uncommon for a performer to have to encourage people to come forward and fill up the front. I am not alone in my fear of interaction and possible public ridicule. At BMIARD, however, the audience got the benefit of the intimate interaction without the possibility of ridicule in front of a roomful of strangers, which certainly contributed to an emotional intimacy that was otherwise unachievable in stand-up.

Since Show 3 I had toyed with the microphone, using it when I felt the need for the traditional trappings of a stand-up gig, but just before I started Show 12, realising that my audience would consist of only two people, I was certain I was going to use it, in order to retain some visual authority and one division from the audience, as the stage was less than a foot off the ground and was a nod to performance rather than an important tool for aiding visibility. Standing on a low stage with a microphone, I was still able to behave in a relaxed and friendly manner, but just a small reminder that I was in charge. With a slightly bigger audience of four or five there was less need for this physical reminder that I was primarily to be watched, and holding the microphone felt like a blocker between me and them, so I did not use it. In Show 12, the two audience members were particularly interested and friendly, more so than other audiences had been, and as a result I wasn't struggling to maintain my status at all. I was able to engage in plenty of interaction, rarely having to alter my status or style in order to keep the focus.

PLEASE WATCH 'TALK AMONGST YOURSELVES' NOW

Here we see a conversation occurring as a result of a joke, which is something that absolutely could not have happened in a normal gig. This is intimate and private, a discussion between friends and not the facsimile of that as is often attempted in stand-up. This tiny audience allowed me to indulge in genuine conversation and for longer than I usually would have chatted to audience members for. This was partly because I could, without fear of boring or isolating anyone, but also because it became crucial to my understanding of those people and my interesting in adapting and tailoring the performance for the optimal reception by them. At one point the performance was in danger of slipping too far towards conversation and I pulled it back. I did this explicitly and openly, and there is no need to make a pretence of what is happening or to distance them with. The physical intimacy facilitates emotional intimacy and, as a result, honesty is required. At one point, so relaxed and intimate is the performance that I let myself completely slip into a conversational register, with the projection of my voice reduced significantly, as there is no need for anything bigger, either in terms of audio or status. My register audibly changes when I get back to 'the show'. Difference between stand-up and

conversation is suddenly made clear through tone and behaviour of the comedian. The decision is taken by the comedian and without needing to explicitly say the words 'you guys need to treat me like the performer again' the audience understands what is required of them.

While exploring physical intimacy in this project, unexpected physical changes to the performance space were noted. Adrian Grey, a straight but slightly camp and effeminate stand-up comedian explored toxic masculinity in his award-winning comedy short *Macho Man* and in an interview with Martin Willis, he ponders how stand-up comedy might have developed differently in the presence of a predominantly female audience.

> I imagine if there'd been a matriarchy rather than a patriarchy in the 20th century, maybe stand-up would've emerged in a different way[…]The dominant social ideas would be different. Maybe the chairs would be all around the stage [Grey in Willis 2018)

We needn't ponder. Two performances of BMIARD were (by chance) performed only to women, and we saw something occur that is not a million miles away from Grey's imaginings; changes to the physical and emotional space. In Show 12, seen above in 'Talk Amongst Yourselves', the two audience members decided to sit in the middle of the front row. They responded to me and my performance, but also to each other and by the end of the show their chairs were slightly angled towards each other, representative of the three-way communication that had taken place. The microphone remained unused in its stand. Instead of using the whole stage, gesticulating and dominating my performance area, I was happily standing at the front edge of the stage, as physically close as I could be to my audience without leaving the stage and my performer status. The physical intimacy encouraged the sense of openness and the people in front of me, conversing with me were never an 'audience' so much as two ladies I was talking to. Grey is on to something – this style of performance felt entirely uncombative, relaxed and fun in a happy way that stand-up usually does not. In a women-only room, physically intimacy was neither a threat nor a barrier to comedy. Again, the idea of *community* returns. My audience had become comfortable and unified. This aided the show as a whole, where my community was hearing and relating to another community. In the case of *ULM!* it was the LGBT community in Northern Ireland; in *BMIARD* it was any women who have ever struggled with reproductive issues.

> Stand-up comedy is an individual talking to a community. A lot of it is about defining who the individual is, who the community is and how one relates to the other[…]As well as confirming the audience's beliefs, the comedian can also find ways to challenge them (Double 2014, p.239)

When it is important to the comedian to remain respectful, a tiny audience allows the comedian to be pretty certain of how the audience is reacting and to adjust their performance accordingly, making it easier to form a strong community. Some gags can afford to be sillier, or mockery can afford to be more brutal, or less. A smaller audience

can provide a safer space, with fewer people for the comedian and audience members to be concerned about. At the beginning of Show 13, all five audience members decided to have a little chat and find out about each other before the show started, which gave a really lovely feeling to the room and provided understanding that no matter who made or laughed at what jokes, no harm was intended. I had not led the interaction, but the small numbers reflected a situation where it felt appropriate for them to interact and get to know each other. With a smaller audience the members' relationships with each other come into finer focus. Each person can see how the others are taking jokes, and make their own opinions obvious, and worry less about their laughter being misinterpreted as cruel.

The conditions facilitated the move away from 'traditional' stand-up comedy. It was made clear, through lack of mic, through small, intimate audience numbers, DIY spirit that this was certainly something alternative, but there was still a place for that traditional theatrical activity so well utilised in stand-up, audience participation. Audience interaction can be very helpful to stand-up, particularly to a compere who is trying to encourage the audience to engage and unify. I used audience interaction in this way, to keep the audience involved throughout the show and to release some tension at the end, giving them a chance to rid themselves of tension where laughter was not forthcoming.

PLEASE WATCH 'AUDIENCE INTERACTION' NOW

The simplicity of repeating the same phrase each time made it easy for the audience to take part, with little chance of embarrassment but meant that every five to ten minutes they were forced to show engagement. I might have lost an audience member who had no particular interest procreation (such as the awkward teenage boys in Show 5, or the single middle-aged men in Show 4) but by participating in this way with the rest of the audience, they remained part of the room.

This show took audience on a journey – started with silly intro to give them an idea of who I was (irresponsible, emotionally stunted adult), then went to catastrophic revelation that I wanted kids, went a bit mock sad that it was difficult, then delved into actual difficulties conceiving, then dropped into abortion rights in Northern Ireland. The show was not billed as being about spreading information about abortion rights in NI, and if it had been, I suspect it would have attracted a very different audience. By framing the show around my desperate desires for a child, the final section where I revealed myself to be strongly in favour of a woman's right to choose came as a surprise, but not a devastating, outrageous shock.

PLEASE WATCH 'FINAL SECTION OF BMIARD' NOW

The audience knew me, we had laughed together and communicated in a meaningful way, so that my opinions on abortion were made clear it was obvious that I was not a heartless baby-killer, but concerned about the women at the heart of the stories.

In conclusion, there are great differences between small, very small and tiny audiences, and this should be reflected in the way the stand-up comedian adapts when performing to them. The role of the audience is essential to any stand-up gig, and the

fewer people there are in the audience, the more intense this role becomes. The comedian must then, *work the room* in order to make everyone feel comfortable and unified. I refer to this as 'intimacy management' and have identified three main elements for the comedian to consider:

1. Treat audience members as individuals
   Although it is desirable to bring the audience together as one, with a tiny audience the individuality of each member is stark and must be addressed. Getting to know each member of the audience individually is a luxury not usually afford to stand-up comedians and it should be indulged. This is partly so that a connection is forged between those two, but also to allow other audience members to be introduced to them, allowing them to feel more connected to each other. It can also benefit the performer a great deal, having a little more knowledge about those they are trying to entertain, and may connect their pre-written material to a personal piece of information that had just been discovered, or ad-lib something new, as is usual in any stand-up comedy performance. The difference with a tiny audience is the potential for *every* member of the audience to experience this intimacy.
2. Manage the line between performance and conversation
   As discussed in relation to Show 12, encouraging a tiny audience to participate freely can run the risk of changing the very nature of performance into something else. This may not be undesirable, but the comedian must have made a decision before the show as to where their status must lie in order for the performance to work (and possibly, take place as a performance and not a conversation). The power dynamic might change as the audience member engages in conversation, but the comedian must be able to take back control when needed. The use of microphone, staging and other trappings of professional stand-up comedy can assist with this, but it may mark the line between audience and performer too starkly.
3. The golden rule of all stand-up: be flexible.
   A flexible approach by the comedian with regards to tone and attitude is more subtle and allows for greater intimacy. Intimacy is almost guaranteed to be a happy by-product of these small gigs, as long as the comedian is capable of putting their audience at ease. Conversely, the audience may feel more at ease as there are fewer risks when speaking out or acting in a way that is not usually part of the stand-up comedy 'contract' if only a few other people are present to witness it, and audience members may feel emboldened to behave in an unpredictable fashion. Unexpected moments, such as a latecomer or talking between audience members are too obvious to ignore and must be accommodated in so far as the comedian must respond to the situation in some way.

Intimacy management may be assisted by a number of factors outside of the performance itself, such as a small room with great acoustics, appropriate marketing but ultimately any unhelpful aspects of the environment can be overcome through a skilful performance.

There were more positive results from doing these shows than I had anticipated. Indeed, tiny audiences had not been a planned part of this investigation at all, but the benefits that come with a performance to a tiny audience were so significant and helpful in understanding intimacy and empathy in stand-up that these findings have become a key part in this project. With a very small or tiny audience, I found that people concentrated in a way they don't always in a bigger gig. Each audience member was visible, not necessarily in a horribly self-conscious way, but they seemed less likely to be checking phones or whispering, etc. There was a notable absence of hostile heckling, if we exclude contributions from the very, very drunk. Additionally, the intimate setting facilitated the use of 'serious' material and difficult topics, ultimately aiding empathetic responses to comedy. In some instances, it dramatically enhanced the comedy. The comedian must respect and work with the audience's attitude to this intimacy and their willingness to be interact. Pushing an audience member out of their comfort zone might elicit giggles in a bigger room, but with only a couple of other people watching, picking on someone can feel like bullying.

Contrary to Quirk's concerns about an empty room and Bergson considering laughter unable to exist in a vacuum, as long as other audience members are not disagreeing with each others' reactions (i.e. one person laughing while another is offended and refuses) then I find that the audience can be made to feel confident enough that the gig is successful and enjoyable. If the audience is made up of only two members, but they are in total comedic synchronicity, as happened in Show 12 when the audience consisted of two good friends. Their synchronicity surpassed any advantage a bigger audience might have brought: the whole audience was on the same page. Intimacy brought empathy and this allowed the particularly sensitive subjects from *BMIARD* to flourish in the medium of stand-up comedy. I thought I was trying to prove that it was *possible* to perform well to a tiny audience, but I have actually found tiny audiences to be *advantageous* to the entire experience and should therefore be valued and sought after, rather than feared and avoided.

CONCLUSION

> To laugh, or to occasion laughter through humor and wit, is to invite those present to come closer' (Coser 1959, 172).

Through experimental practice this project has shown that emotion and comedy, far from being mortal enemies, can co-exist happily and even work well together, with emotion enabling higher highs and tension-filled lows, punctuated happily by empathetic punchlines which avoided victims (unless we *all* felt they really deserved it). Where emotion made us feel that laughing wouldn't have been much fun, we sat with the sadness for a little while, allowing the problem to exist without shying away from it, then laughed again when we were ready. The two main problems facing the question at the beginning of the investigation were that of permission and intimacy: people didn't feel comfortable laughing at certain topics and intimacy, although commonly cited as a marker of a successful stand-up comedy show, in extreme forms was a comedy killer. Existing comic theory suggested that comedy would elevate a person's status (Superiority Theory), be completely unexpected (Incongruity) or provide catharsis after a threat that turn out to be harmless (Relief). Practice existed that went some way towards exploring emotion and stand-up together in one show, but these performances had not been specifically developed with the intention of investigating intimacy and empathy. Of these, very few were undertaken as an academic Practice as Research investigation, so although some interesting work existed, the crucial 'know-what' information had not been gleaned. This practice-based project showed the depths of emotion and intimacy in stand-up comedy to be vast, and without the limitations that had previously been assumed.

The most important aspects for creating and performance intimate and empathetic stand-up comedy have been identified as:

1) performance style (p.71; 80-81)
2) permission (Chapter 1)
3) creating a community (p.80; Chapter 2)
4) intimacy management (p.82-83)

Performance style includes some of the usual aspects of stand-up comedy, such as confidence, appropriate pacing and control of the audience, but when working with empathy and intimacy, these must be handled in a specific way. The comedian must have confidence in every situation that may arise, such as an unexpectedly candid revelation from an audience member and be able to respond in an appropriate manner. In most

stand-up routines this would involve a short, snappy joke to break the tension and return the focus to the comedian, but this investigation saw that it was possible for the comedian to let the moment exist without need to exploit it, and return to comedy later or in a different way. This decision is related to the pace and feel that the comedian wants to give to the overall show which should reflect the 'journey' that the audience are to be taken on. In order to tackle inequality and injustice, the performer might start by cementing a communal identity, before carefully moving on to move sensitive topics and finishing on a rousing, celebratory high. For a more complex issue, they might start frivolously, slowly making their way deeper and lower, spending significant time in an uncomfortable place until finishing on a silly joke that represented a bigger point, while also allowing some cathartic relief from all that has gone before. The comedian must develop the flow of the show from the depth of the material to allow empathy to breathe and comedy to flourish. Incompatible attitudes between material, delivery style and emotional journey will hinder audience responses.

Control of the situation, not only the audience, commonly comes under 'working the room' but in this context we saw how that needs to become more than just bringing the audience together. Fostering a community where people feel confident in their neighbours' reactions is highly beneficial to both an intimate and an emotionally open performance. With a tiny audience, it is essential to introduce the audience members to each other so that rather trying to treat them as an anonymous mass, the audience is a team made up of individuals, with a common mutual respect. This respect is closely tied to the second of the compulsory considerations, permission. The comedian must have or gain *permission* from their audience in order to joke. This permission can be gained by being the butt of the joke themselves, manipulating the audience into believing that the comedian has permission to joke, or apologising in a comic way, either before or after the joke, in order to acknowledge the situation. Control also extends to the use of the 'manipulative environment' (Quirk) which can be utilised or apologised for, highlighting the specialness of the version of stand-up comedy on offer. Rejecting an inappropriate environment can actually do more good in creating a community feeling – the third important consideration - and making the audience understand what they're about to experience better than an 'appropriate' environment.

The final consideration is what I have called 'intimacy management'. Audiences love the idea of intimacy, but that can go too far and a tiny audience can feel awkward and exposed. Having worked with a series of tiny audiences, I have found the following techniques to be highly effective:

1) Treat audience members as individuals.
2) Manage the line between performance and conversation.
3) The golden rule of all stand-up, be flexible.

More than just being possible, the accommodation of empathy and intimacy in stand-up comedy can enhance the depth of the comedy experience. Good management of intimacy creates an intense, close experience where an audience member (and comedian) can walk away feeling that something significant has occurred. They are allowed to connect in a stronger way that is usual for stand-up, leading to better audience responses, deeper emotional investment, better concentration and goodwill towards the comedian. The comedian is freed by this allowance and can relax the stand-up comedy 'rules' and is under less pressure to provide a laugh-intensive show. There is time and space to more slowly and considerately through some difficult areas, and to give them the respect they deserve. Intimacy and empathy feed into each other, encouraging each other. This partnership allows particularly sensitive subjects to flourish when expressed through stand-up comedy. Although some of the literature and practice reviewed here played with aspects of these ideas, it is only through the professional knowledge through practice that we see it fully shown.

This style of stand-up seeks to avoid offence by careful handling of the audience, rather than avoiding conflict altogether. It is desirable to avoid offence, if only because if the audience is offended it is unlikely that they will also be intimately and emotionally engaged with the comedian and their performance. As mentioned in Chapter 1, avoiding offence is not necessarily a question of ethics, but of practicality. This is achieved in part not by looking for victims to ridicule, but by exposing discrepancies (or *incongruities*) and helps us to acknowledge them, without accepting them.

Intentionally creating a show to utilise empathy and intimacy in order to conduct an academic investigation through Practice as Research has offered many interesting points that were not anticipated. This is the real benefit of Practice as Research and of doing so many performances in different venues with wildly different show and audience types. I was able to adapt and change direction as was appropriate and interesting, playing with the laugh-per-minute efficiency and seeing how that could be set to one side in order to allow an emotional connection to develop. The work took different routes and approaches, but the consistent thread was the intention on the part of the performer to remain positive, productive and informative themselves, while encouraging empathy and intimacy in their audience. This would not have been possible in a traditional academic investigation, in part due to the limited material available, but more critically, because the intention of a comedian can never really be known to anyone but themselves. Even when some of my jokes were not as sensitive or empathetic as I would have liked, I was able to analyse how that had happened. Sometimes it was from thoughtlessness, not spending enough time developing the joke well, sometimes I had underestimated my audience's knowledge of the topic about which I was joking, and sometimes it was my understanding that was lacking. Being able to dismiss the possibility of the comedian being intentionally cruel or prejudiced allowed for further analysis into how the jokes worked (or didn't).

In terms of having an impact on the audience, each show achieved something of its own. *Permission to Laugh?!* provided personalised catharsis to three people through

its performance – my mother, my mother-in-law and myself. Parts of the show were crafted specifically for their understanding and enjoyment, without excluding the rest of the audience, but with an added bonus that only they could appreciate. Moving towards offering something for every audience member, *Bring Out Your Gays* gave every member of the audience a chance to speak and the chance to join 'come out' as whatever they liked on stage to celebratory applause. *Baby Madness is a Real Disease* brought the stories behind Northern Ireland's restrictive abortion laws to life, sharing them with multiple audiences who had no idea those restrictions were in place, or so devastating. These shows are part of a movement which is slowly gaining public interest and momentum, and will, if it successful, have an enormous impact of the lives of women in Northern Ireland.

The most significant and wide-reaching impact came from *Ulster Loves Me!* The idea of the show gained the attention of the local media, leading to interviews on radio and in the press, which in turn helped to publicise the resistance to the Asher's (who had had strong support from some communities). The show itself was sold out with a strong representation from the LGBT community, Queerspace (the organisation that had been supporting Gareth Lee) and Gareth Lee himself. This show furthered public discussion in a positive way, allowed emotional catharsis for those closely involved with the story, enabled those not closely involved to demonstrate their support publicly, and brought together two sides of the argument with cake, crisps and choral singing.

The work featured in this investigation is only some of the practice that was undertaken. Future research would pick up some of the threads that there just wasn't enough room for in this thesis. One of the first ideas I had wanted to pursue was stand-up comedy performed to a known group of people, crafted entirely for their own appreciation[22]. I completed one piece of practice in this vein: a stand-up comedy show for Deaf people, interpreted by my sister, who works as a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter. Although intended merely as a look at how advanced knowledge about the audience could benefit their engagement, sidestep some permission issues and delve straight to the heart of some intimate topics, this piece of practice proved to be very interesting in its own right, particularly given the ability to work closely with my interpreter, and the questions of dual performance. There were too many avenues worthy of exploration leading away from my core and it could not be included in this thesis. Other areas of potential interest include picking up Grey's idea of having the audience and comedian make a circle with their seats (see Chapter 3) to play with the status and role of the comedian in a different way, in order to encourage empathy and intimacy in that way.

Rather than finding that 'laughter has no greater foe than emotion' (Bergson 1956, p.63), we find that stand-up Comedy can be positively emotional experience. It does not require malice (Plato 1972, p. 97), there is no need of a victim (Scruton 1982,

[22] This is where *Ulster Loves Me!* came from, before the focus shifted to what it ultimately became.

p.201) and it does not necessarily elevate the joker above anyone else (Hobbes 2005, p.48). Laughter does not *need* company as Bergson suggests (1956, p.64) but it does like company it trusts. We see in this research conducted through practice that a feeling of empathy and intimacy grants permission to joke in all sorts of ways with trust and understanding. Intimacy facilitates empathy and empathy enables intimacy and both of these enhance stand-up comedy.

APPENDIX 1: List of performances

Note: in most cases, the max capacity of the venue is accurate, but the audience attending on the night is an estimate. The numbers refer to audience present/max capacity.

2013

Monday 3rd June – **Comic Mondays**
Venue: Theatre Royal, Stratford East, London.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 40/60 (estimate)
This is a free night with paid compère, opener and headliner. It's a quiet, but generally respectful crowd, usually equal numbers of black and white punters.
Opening joke:

> It's quite disconcerting seeing your own name in the headlines so much. 'Tory in black bastard row' – that wasn't me! 'Tory catfight scandal' That wasn't me. 'Tory caught at sex party with two premier league footballers' That... also wasn't me.

Reflection written at the time: 'I moved on quickly to something more challenging: child abuse in the Catholic Church and the comically half-hearted apology that was given by the Christian Brothers for their part in it. I thought this was the perfect story for my first exploration of empathetic and intimate comedy, as it had a basis in truly horrific abuse, but the butt of the joke would be the Christian Brothers PR department, who had thought that this was a suitable apology. I was wrong. After coming off stage, visibly miserable and trying desperately to become invisible while the compere desperately tried to recover the audience, shocked into silence, veteran comedian Dave Fulton threw me a sympathy bone. He said, "Kid, it's a good gig when they don't throw things." It was clear to everyone that I needed to re-think my approach.'

Thursday 6th June – **Monkey Business**
Venue: The Oxford, Kentish Town, London.
Tickets: £7.50/£6
Capacity: 20/40
Long-standing professional club in Camden, held in the Oxford pub in Kentish Town. Relentless promoter Martin Besserman does a spectacular job of getting punters in, but a less spectacular job of MCing. He Thursday night show is mostly open spots, usually with a paid headliner doing 20 minutes.

Monday 24th June – **King Gong**
Venue: The Comedy Store, London.
Tickets: £8/£5, meal package available

Capacity: 60/400 (estimate)
A professional venue and a veritable bear pit of sexually frustrated accountants, desperate to have someone show their tits (according to their heckling).

Monday 29th August – **Comic Mondays**
Venue: Theatre Royal, Stratford East, London.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 40/60 (estimate)

Wed 16th Oct – **Angel Comedy**
Venue: The Camden Head, Angel, London.
Tickets: Pay what you can, via collection afterwards.
Capacity: 60/60
Excellent comedy club that started as a comedian-run effort and now hosts comedy seven days a week. Acts are not paid, but drop-ins from big name comics are usual, bringing in large, supportive, comedy-loving audiences. On this occasion, Russell Howard headlined.

Monday 21st Oct – **Lady Luck**
Venue: The Lady Luck, Canterbury.
Tickets: Free
Capacity:
Comedian-run night at the Lady Luck pub in Canterbury. It can attract an awkward, quiet audience, as it did on this occasion.

Monday 4th Nov – **Red Raw**
Venue: The Pavilion, Belfast.
Tickets: £3/£2
Capacity: 15/
One of the few regular comedy nights in Belfast, comedian-run but to a professional standard.

Thursday 26th Dec – **Monkey Business**
Venue: The Oxford, Kentish Town, London.
Tickets: £7.50/£6
Capacity: 25/40

2014

Wed 8th Jan – **Funny Feckers**
Venue: Hoot 'N' Annie's, Kentish Town, London.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 30/50
Comedian-run regular night in the basement of Hoot 'N' Annie's, no longer running. Friendly audience, over-represented by comedians.

Thurs 16th Jan – **Monkey Business**

Venue: The Oxford, Kentish Town, London.
Tickets: £7.50/£6
Capacity: 15/40

Mon 24th Feb – **Comic Mondays**
Venue: Theatre Royal, Stratford East, London.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 40/

Wednesday 26th Feb – **Funny Feckers**
Venue: Hoot 'N' Annie's, Kentish Town, London.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 25/50

Wednesday 30th April – **Funny Feckers**
Venue: Hoot 'N' Annie's, Kentish Town, London.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 30/50
With my father-in-law in attendance. He heckled me in a rather spectacular way, possibly because I had encouraged the entire crowd to boo him. This was a great night.

Tuesday 6th May – **We Are Funny**
Venue: Dirty Dicks, Bishopsgate, London
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 20/80
Dirty Dicks (pub). WAF is something of a cult in the open-mic scene, with performers encouraged to complete their Stand-up comedy course. Audiences are minimal and fond of heckling, and on this occasion I was heckled by the compere. A strange experience.

KEY PIECE OF PRACTICE:
Tuesday 13th May – **Permission to Laugh**?
Venue: The Gulbenkian Café stage
Tickets: £5/£3
Capacity: 20/150
This took place in the newly opened stage in the café area of the Gulbenkian. It's definitely more of an 'area' than a room, down one end of the large space that also houses a bar, cinema and lecture theatre, but shows are timed to avoid audiences entering or leaving the main theatre. Large, bare windows on either side of the stage were somewhat distracting and the audience was made up by a mere twenty people. I had invited two other acts to perform 15 minutes each to make up the first half, then performed half an hour of my own show for the second act. Charging £5 per ticket was tactical – it was a low enough price that it was affordable, but also made potential audience members aware that it was worth something. A reduced rate of £3 was offered for students.

> The aim of the show was to experiment with the ways in which an audience is made able to laugh at a joke, i.e. given permission to laugh by the comedian. I intended to perform jokes about topics such as the death of my Grandmother, sexual abuse, large-scale tragedies and disability. A socially conscious audience like the one I could expect to come to the show would not normally expect to laugh at jokes like these, so I would employ various techniques and tricks to make them feel that they could enjoy the joke without enjoying the tragedy, and feel comfortable enough to laugh (Personal Reflection, 21st May 2014).

Sunday 18th May – **Big Nose Comedy**
Venue: The North London Tavern, London
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 20/60
Comedian-run venture that runs every other Sunday. As with many open-mic clubs, it is mostly attended by comedians wanting to hone their act, rather than get any exposure.

Monday 19th May – **Lady Luck**
Venue: The Lady Luck, Canterbury.
Tickets: Free
Capacity:

Thursday 26th June – **Kent Summer School Comedy Night**
Venue: The Aphra Theatre, University of Kent, Canterbury.
Tickets: Free, restricted to attendees of the course.
Capacity: 40/120
This was a one-off night run as part of a summer school for 16-24 year olds from areas in Kent that were generally less likely to send students to university. This was a very unusual comedy experience, with the majority of the performers having never attend a stand-up gig before, let alone performed at one. I compered the event, working hard to keep the energy high and adapting my material to teenage audiences on the fly as I discovered they are far less likely to laugh at sick jokes than adult audiences. This was fascinating, but as this was not performed as part of my research, I did not record it.

Thursday 14th August - **Hilarity in Shoes**
Venue: The Ophelia, Dalston, London.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 12/40
Terrible comedian-run night in the back of a pub in Shoreditch.

KEY PIECE OF PRACTICE:
Thursday 22nd–Friday 23rd August – Camden Cackles (second run of *Permission to Laugh*)
Venue: The Camden Head, Camden, London.
Tickets: £5
Capacity: First night – 25/60, second night – 40/60

I decided that the institution-based performance had been too private and too 'easy' to fully experiment with, so I performed a further two times as part of the Camden Fringe Festival, to a public audience. This was reflection was written between the first show in Canterbury and the festival shows:

> I have since performed most of this set to two other audiences. The first was a ten minute set to an audience of strangers at Big Nose Comedy, a free, twice-monthly comedy night where the audience is mostly comedians and very friendly. I started with strong material, then went into the section about Gran, which had a limited response. I got some laughs out of it, but not anywhere near as many as at the Gulbenkian. The following night I performed 20 minutes of the show at Lady Luck in Canterbury. Although it's a strange gig there, my early, non-controversial material got a great response, but my cancer and death material died. They did not enjoy it at all, and it was difficult to raise a laugh. This has made me think that the show and the material was designed for me and Mum, not for strangers, and more explanation about my relationship with Gran would be needed.
>
> I've got two more performances of the show to do at the end of August. I have two days in the Camden Head as part of the Camden Fringe, sharing the bill with another comedian. Her material is very positive and rarely based in reality they way mine is, so it will be a challenging show. It's billed as 'Camden Chuckles', with no mention of my title or the fact that I am studying comedy. It will be a big challenge, but an excellent test for the show. My Mum will be present at the second night of the show, so I will be able to compare the two nights and see what difference it makes having her there and not (Personal Reflection, 21st May 2014).

I shared the title of 'Camden Cackles' with Mandy Dassa, each doing 30 minutes in the pub room above the Camden Head in Camden as part of the Camden Fringe. We charged £5 per ticket and sold about 80 seats over two nights. The audience were mostly members of the public who had seen the show in the Camden Fringe program (we did very little publicity for the event) and had no idea of what to expect, which worked well for my show, in spite of it being based on my Grandmother's painful death from cancer.

Monday 6th Oct – **Comic Mondays Monthly Competition**
Venue: Theatre Royal, Stratford East, London.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 35/
Pitted against four other newish comics, I managed to win this low-key competition and a prize of a £20 paid spot on my next gig at the club.

Thursday 16th Oct – **Monkeyshine**
Venue: Mungo's Bar, University of Kent, Canterbury.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 100/150
Student-comedian run club at the University of Kent. Supportive atmosphere, reliable audience numbers. Free entry.

Thursday 23rd Oct – **Monkeyshine**
Venue: Mungo's Bar, University of Kent, Canterbury.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 100/150

Thursday 6th Nov – **Monkeyshine**
Venue: Mungo's Bar, University of Kent, Canterbury.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 100/150

Thursday 20th Nov – **Monkeyshine**
Venue: Mungo's Bar, University of Kent, Canterbury.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 100/150

Thursday 27th Nov – **Monkeyshine**
Venue: Mungo's Bar, University of Kent, Canterbury.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 100/150

Thursday 11th Dec – **Monkeyshine**
Venue: Mungo's Bar, University of Kent, Canterbury.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 100/150

Thursday 18th Dec – **Monkeyshine**
Venue: Mungo's Bar, University of Kent, Canterbury.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 80/150

2015

Monday 26th Jan – **Comic Mondays**
Venue: Theatre Royal, Stratford East, London.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 40/
I was invited back to Stratford as the competition winner

Tues 3rd Feb – **Dynamite Comedy Club**
Venue: Café Mode, Covent Garden, London.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 3/30

Unfortunately, this gig was cancelled due to only my husband, his friend and on other person turning up as audience. I was willing to perform anyway, but the promoter pulled the show.

Tuesday 10th Feb – **Tickle Me Pink**
Venue: The Gulbenkian Café stage
Tickets: £8
Capacity: 15/150
A fundraising gig organised by the University of Kent's LGBT society, held in the Gulbenkian café. I made good use of the knowledge that it would mostly be attended by members of the society and created some useful material by interacting and asking the audience for stories and responses. These were used in later shows to great effect.

Thursday 19th Feb – **Monkeyshine**
Venue: Mungo's Bar, University of Kent, Canterbury.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 80/150

KEY PIECE OF PRACTICE:
Tuesday 10th March – Experimental Comedy Shows: **Bring Out Your Gays!**
Venue: The Aphra Theatre, University of Kent, Canterbury.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 100/120
This was a 30 minute show as part of a bill of three 'experimental' comedy shows, performed by the Stand-up comedy Master's students.

> This was designed as a celebration of homosexuality, ending with a party atmosphere and giving audience members the opportunity to come out of the 'closet' i.e. a large door in the middle of the stage.[23] This worked to some extent – I gained more stories about coming out, employed my audience interaction structure, and had several members of the audience 'come out' at the end. One had been planted in case nobody was forth coming, but in the end four people came out of their own accord, with minimal coercion (Personal Reflection, 17th August 2015).

KEY PIECE OF PRACTICE:
Thursday 21st May – **Last Stand (Could Be Worse)**
Venue: The Gulbenkian Café stage
Tickets: £5
Capacity: 60/150
As with the Experimental shows, my show at the Last Stand was part of a bill of three, shared with two stand-up comedy Master's students. Although not billed as such, the title of my show 'Could Be Worse!' and played with my left-leaning audience's disappointment at the result of the general election.

[23] The plan was to have an actual free-standing closet on stage, but due to delivery problems that wasn't able to happen.

I [talked about] several politicians, before coming to the conclusion that there was nobody in Northern Ireland capable of representing my political interests.

'And then I found out that there was one guy who wanted to have a referendum – a politician – who wanted to have a referendum to see if the people of Northern Ireland wanted gay marriage, as they are doing in the Republic tomorrow. He wanted to bring that in. And all the other parties voted it down. They wouldn't let him, they wouldn't let the people choose if they wanted gay marriage. So I looked into this guy and had a look at his manifesto, I've got a quote from..uh..from his website. 'This party believes that the people should be at the heart of an economy.' I'm listening! 'An economy should serve society, not the other way around. We believe a successful economy redistributes wealth via the tax and welfare systems.' I'm onboard. 'It sees employment, education and training as a right. And it takes into account all the activity that is not currently measured by modern economies, such as housework, child rearing, caring and volunteering.' I'm in love! Does that not sound amazing?! Does that not sound like the socialist utopia that we've all been dreaming of?! (laughter) Do you want to know the name of the party that put forward this manifesto?! Sinn-fucking-Fein! (laughter) Northern Irish politics are so broken that the person I have most in common with is Gerry Adams, a man who used to bomb shopping centres at Christmas! (laughter) So I'm sorry that you got a Conservative government. (laughter). That must be really tough for you! (laughter) You could have a really conservative, anti-abortion, homophobic – openly homophobic – government with a socialist minority that used to kill people like me…but you got a Conservative government! Aw, well guys, I've got news for you – it Could Be Worse (30:11).'

It wasn't the most laughter-intensive performance I've ever given, but after the show two members of the audience came over to tell me how much they had learned and that it had actually made them reconsider how lucky they were to live under a Conservative government (Personal Reflection, 17th August 2015)

Thursday 25th June – **Kent Summer School Comedy Night**
Venue: The Aphra Theatre, University of Kent, Canterbury
Tickets: Free, restricted to attendees of the course.
Capacity: 40/120
This was a one-off event designed to give attendees of Kent's summer school the chance to perform stand-up for the first time. It took place in the Aphra Theatre at the University of Kent and was attended by the 16-25 year olds on the course. I compered, adapting my material to the teenage audience.

Friday 24th July – **Comedy Club at the Hub**
Venue: The Hub, Cookstown, Northern Ireland.
Tickets: £5
Capacity: 35/50

The first night of a new regular comedy event in Cookstown in Northern Ireland. Cookstown is very much in the middle of nowhere, and the gig had a homemade feel to it, with the £5 entrance fee including a variety of snacks and drinks picked up from Tesco by the compere.

KEY PIECE OF PRACTICE:
Sunday 26th July – **Ulster Loves Me!**
Venue: The Green Room at the Black Box, Belfast.
Tickets: £5
Capacity: 75/75
Comedy Labs Festival, The Black Box, Belfast. Filled to capacity. Gareth Lee present.

> The show was a huge success in comedy terms with the 75-seater selling out and the laughter coming regularly and generously. I found success in terms of my research objectives as well. The venue had a bar at the back where people could get drinks and pizza, which contributed to the feeling that this was an event, a gathering of like-minded people. Before the show started, a woman in a t-shirt that had 'lesbian' blazoned across it handed out cards advertising 'Queerspace', a Belfast-based support network for the LGBT community, which I then promoted during the show. It certainly felt like that room was a safe place to be gay. At the end of the show I served 'gay cakes'[24]; cupcakes made by my sister, the aforementioned Christian, thus righting the wrong that was made in the first place. After the show the vast majority of the audience stayed for drinks and chatted, making it feel like a very positive experience for everyone. I discovered that Gareth Lee, the man who had ordered the gay cake from Asher's was in the audience and came over to tell me how much he had enjoyed the show.
>
> One of the most exciting aspects of the show from my point of view was the Bible reading. During the final 'Sunday service' section (which did go ahead with approval after key tweaks from my sister) I invited a member of the audience up to do some Bible readings. I insisted that they must be a 'bona fide Christian', as I felt that it could be seen as mocking to have a non-Christian doing the readings. To my horror, a woman in the front row that had not cracked a smile during the entire show reluctantly got up, as if she'd been asked to change the cat litter. I was concerned that this might end up being a bit of improvisation that I hadn't planned for. She behaved perfectly well, and did exactly what I asked her to do, albeit with visible displeasure. The readings were all from the loveliest, friendliest bits of the Bible and the first one from Proverbs 10:12 got a spontaneous round of applause:
>
> Hatred stirs up quarrels, but love makes up for all offenses. (New Living Translation Tyndale Illinois 2004)

[24] Simple cupcakes with white blobs of icing as clouds and a 'fizzy multicolour sweet belt' curved over as a rainbow on top. They looked amazing.

No church service would be complete without a hymn, so we also sang, as a group 'Jesus Loves Me, This I Know' with slightly altered lyrics:

Ulster loves me, this I know

For the Bible tells me so

Gays and straights to Him belong

Asher's are weak, but we are strong.

Yes, Ulster loves me! Yes, Ulster loves me. Yes, Ulster loves me!

The Bible tells me so.

It was a great, rousing end to the show and brought the entire room together. What's more, it also got a few laughs (Personal reflection, 17th August 2015).

Thursday 24th September – **PreMonkeyshine**
Venue: Mungo's Bar, University of Kent, Canterbury.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 130/150

Thursday 15th October - **Unspeakably Funny**
Venue: Crescent Arts Centre, Belfast.
Tickets: £3
Capacity: 20/140
This was a one-off gig put on as part of Queen's University, Belfast's Unspeakably Funny project which looks at translation and stand-up comedy. I performed 20 mins with my sister, a British Sign Language interpreter, interpreting live beside me. Although she had an idea of what I was going to say, there was no script and it was a challenging experiment for her. The show was not as full of laughter as a standard stand-up gig, but we got the most spectacular heckle from the only deaf audience member, who feigned indignation after I used some particularly rude language, and declared (in BSL, translated by the interpreter) that I should wash my mouth out and that my sister should wash her hands.

2016

Monday 29th March – **Comedy at the Hideaway**
Venue: The Hideaway, Archway, London.
Tickets: Free
Capacity: 16/80
A classic open-mic gig, which is to say, there were no audience members, only reams of acts. I was one of two women; it was an unpleasant experience.

Friday 8th April – **Duke Street Comedy Night**
Venue: Duke Street Basement Bar, Margate.

Tickets: information not available
Capacity: 40/50
A keen crowd filled the pub, but the lack of compere detracted from this gig. I abandoned most of my material in favour of getting the energy level up, which improved the rest of the show.

KEY PIECE OF PRACTICE: Baby Madness is a Real Disease
Monday 18th July 2016 – **BMIARD Preview**
Venue: Black Box
Tickets: £5
Capacity: 15/75

In spite of publicity on Radio Ulster, the Belfast preview of BMIARD had low attendance. This set me up nicely for low attendance throughout the Edinburgh run, which ultimately led to some very interesting insights into tiny audiences.

Saturday 6th August 2016 – BMIARD Show 1
Venue: Sportsters
Tickets: Pay what you like
Capacity: 15/60

> Fire alarm halfway through[...]Serious bits very serious, but effective. Audience not huge laughs (Personal Reflection, 6th August 2016).

Sunday 7th August 2016 – BMIARD Show 2
Venue: Sportsters
Tickets: Pay what you like
Capacity: 8/60

> Made some changes, included an upbeat bit about flatmates that makes sure the dark stuff doesn't go down too much (Personal Reflection, 7th August 2016)

Monday 8th August 2016 – BMIARD Show 3
Venue: Sportsters
Tickets: Pay what you like
Capacity: 6/60

> Best laughs from adlibs. Still on book too much. Ending needs something (Personal Reflection, 8th August 2016)

Tuesday 9th August 2016 – BMIARD Show 4
Venue: Sportsters
Tickets: Pay what you like
Capacity: 4/60

Wednesday 10th August 2016 – BMIARD Show 5
Venue: Sportsters
Tickets: Pay what you like
Capacity: 5/60

> Getting bored of the show and sick of small audiences. Have decided to allow Mary Flanigan to do ten minutes at the beginning of the [show] on 19th. She's Northern Irish, small, bespectacled [sic], intelligent – a good fit for my show[...] INTERESTING POINTS SO FAR: stand-up can work perfectly well with small numbers, its[sic] just a case of putting the audience at ease (Personal Reflection, 9th August 2016).

Thursday 11th August 2016 – BMIARD Show 6
Venue: Sportsters
Tickets: Pay what you like
Capacity: 8/60

Friday 12th August 2016 – BMIARD Show 7
Venue: Sportsters
Tickets: Pay what you like
Capacity: 1/60

Saturday 13th August 2016 – BMIARD Show 8
Venue: Sportsters
Tickets: Pay what you like
Capacity: 2/60

Sunday 14th August 2016 – BMIARD Show 9
Venue: Sportsters
Tickets: Pay what you like
Capacity: 5/60

Tuesday 16th August 2016 – BMIARD Show 10
Venue: Sportsters
Tickets: Pay what you like
Capacity: 4/60

> Shorter show, mixed it up a bit, low bits very low[...]Audience loved it, wanted a picture (Personal Reflection, 16th August 2016)

Wednesday 17th August 2016 – BMIARD Show 11
Venue: Sportsters
Tickets: Pay what you like
Capacity: 4/60

Thursday 18th August 2016 – BMIARD Show 12

Venue: Sportsters
Tickets: Pay what you like
Capacity: 2/60

> Very enthusiastic but a bit too much like conversation at times[...]Wondering if I should include more re: why I want kids suddenly. Girls tonight did NOT want them and vocally disagreed with my decision(!) (Personal Reflection, 18th August 2016)

Friday 19th August 2016 – BMIARD Show 13
Venue: Sportsters
Tickets: Pay what you like
Capacity: 5/60
Wednesday 7th December – **Northern Ireland Human Rights Festival**
Venue: The Belfast Barge
Tickets: £15
Capacity: 20/50

2017

Friday 10th March – **Belfast Feminist Network's International Women's Day**
Venue: Parador Inn, Belfast
Tickets: £7/£5
Capacity: 35/50

APPENDIX 2: The Gay Cake Row of 2014

In May 2014, a man named Gareth Lee went into Asher's bakery in Belfast and ordered a cake bearing the slogan 'Support Gay Marriage'. It was to feature the children's TV characters Bert and Ernie, as well as the logo for Queerspace, a support network for the LGBT community in Belfast. The order was taken, then rejected, on the grounds that it conflicted with the Christian values of the owners of the bakery. Lee reported this to the Equality Commission, who decided to take Asher's to court. If this were the end of the story, it wouldn't seem to be worth writing a whole stand-up show about. A joke, perhaps, but not much more than that. Unfortunately, the story provoked an enormous reaction from the people of Northern Ireland, facilitate by social media and various incendiary media products. A nation that was starting to catch up with the rest of the UK in terms of political and pseudo-religious divisions was now fighting a war of (very rude) words over a cake intended to support love. The Equality Commission had decided to take the case to court, but vitriolic personal abuse was being directed at Lee. I was one of many who were very upset that a man who liked cake should be hounded in such a way just for standing up for those of us who are fiercely in favour of gay marriage in Northern Ireland. It became clear very early in the lengthy court proceedings[25] that this would produce strong feeling on both sides and that the Christians were choosing to behave in a thoroughly un-Christian manner. It was an emotional case I felt very strongly about but had no specific authority on with incongruities and silliness aplenty. It was perfect stand-up material. Additionally, writing and performing a stand-up show on this topic gave me the opportunity to use comedy for real-life change, supporting the community in a direct way and showing that support publicly.

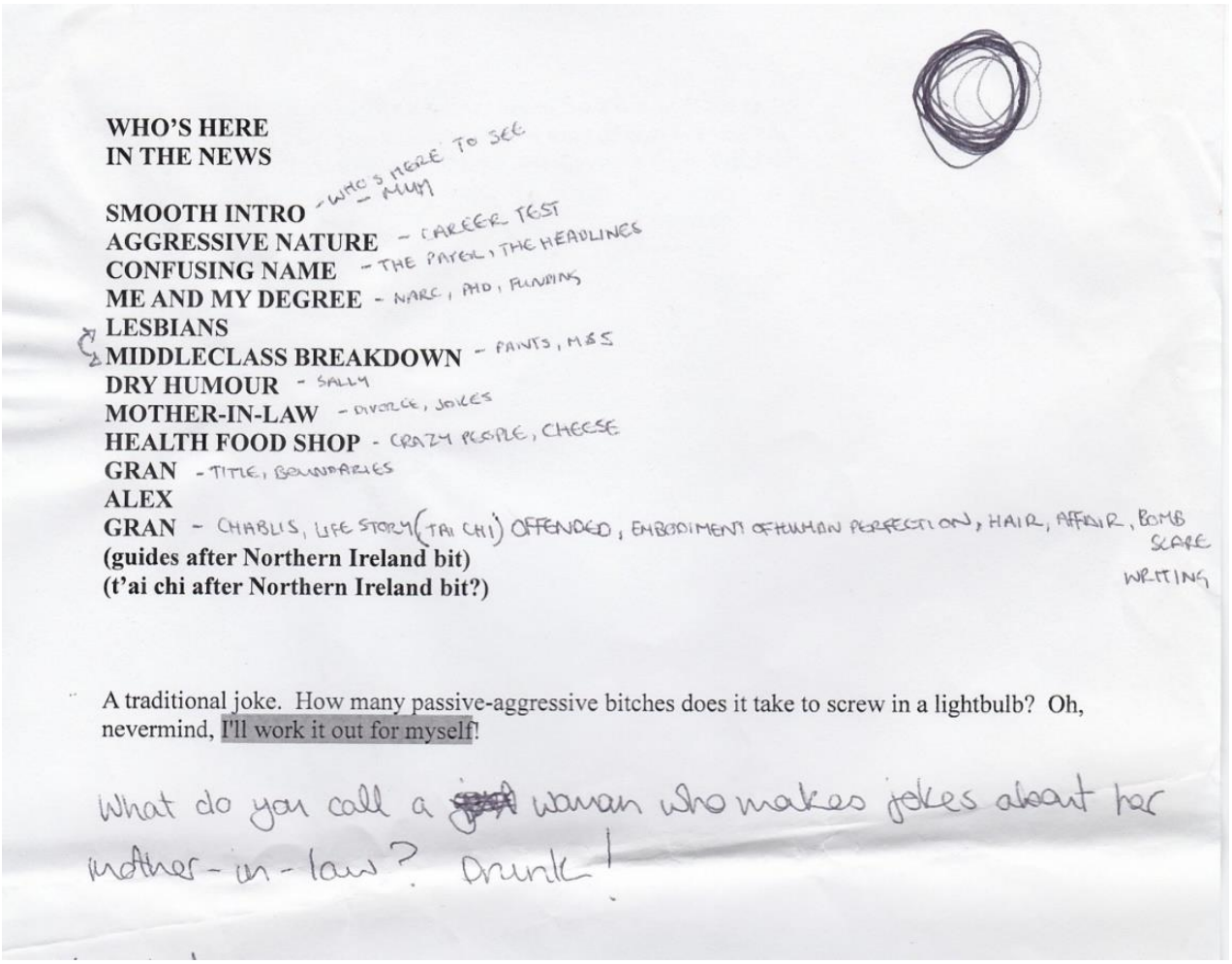
[25] The case eventually made it to the Supreme Court and on 10th October 2018 they ruled that Asher's bakery were not guilty of discriminatory behaviour.

APPENDIX 3: Documentation of process

According to Nelson, a Practice as Research enquiry such as this should include 'documentation of process (sketchbook, photographs, DVD, objects of material culture)' (2013, p.26). This appendix contains scans of flyers, notes, scripts, listings, photographs and posters for the most significant performances of this project.



Figure 3: Flyer for Permission to Laugh?!



WHO'S HERE
IN THE NEWS

SMOOTH INTRO - WHO'S HERE TO SEE MUM
AGGRESSIVE NATURE - CAREER TEST
CONFUSING NAME - THE PAPER, THE HEADLINES
ME AND MY DEGREE - NARC, PHD, FUNDING
LESBIANS
MIDDLECLASS BREAKDOWN - PANTS, M&S
DRY HUMOUR - SALLY
MOTHER-IN-LAW - DIVORCE, JOKES
HEALTH FOOD SHOP - CRAZY PEOPLE, CHEESE
GRAN - TITLE, BOUNDARIES
ALEX
GRAN - CHABLIS, LIFE STORY (TAI CHI) OFFENDED, EMBODIMENT OF HUMAN PERFECTION, HAIR, AFFAIR, BOMB SCARE
(guides after Northern Ireland bit)
(t'ai chi after Northern Ireland bit?) WRITING

A traditional joke. How many passive-aggressive bitches does it take to screw in a lightbulb? Oh, nevermind, I'll work it out for myself!

What do you call a ~~[illegible]~~ woman who makes jokes about her mother-in-law? Drunk!

Figure 4: Notes for Permission to Laugh?!

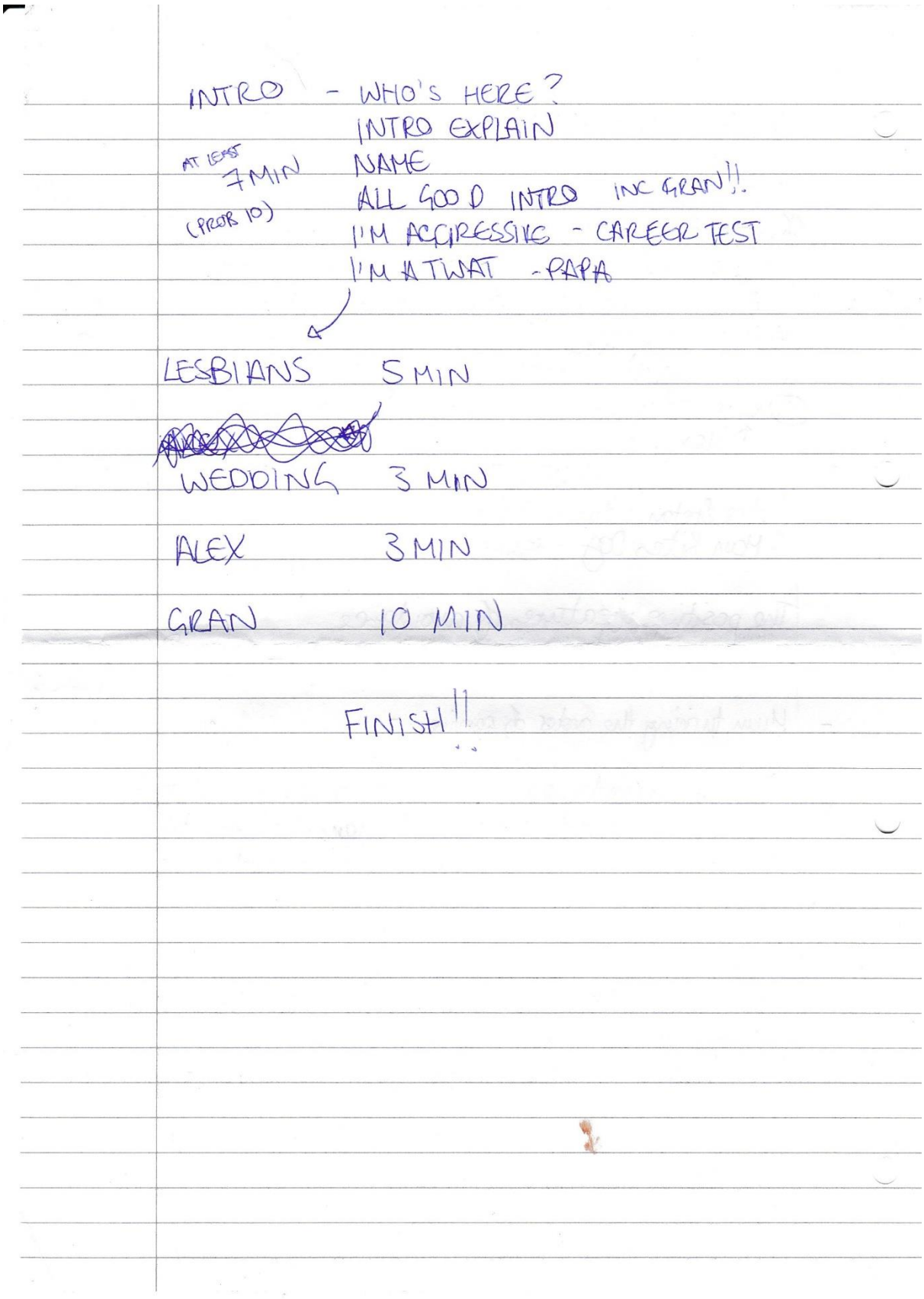


Figure 5: Final set list for Permission to Laugh?!

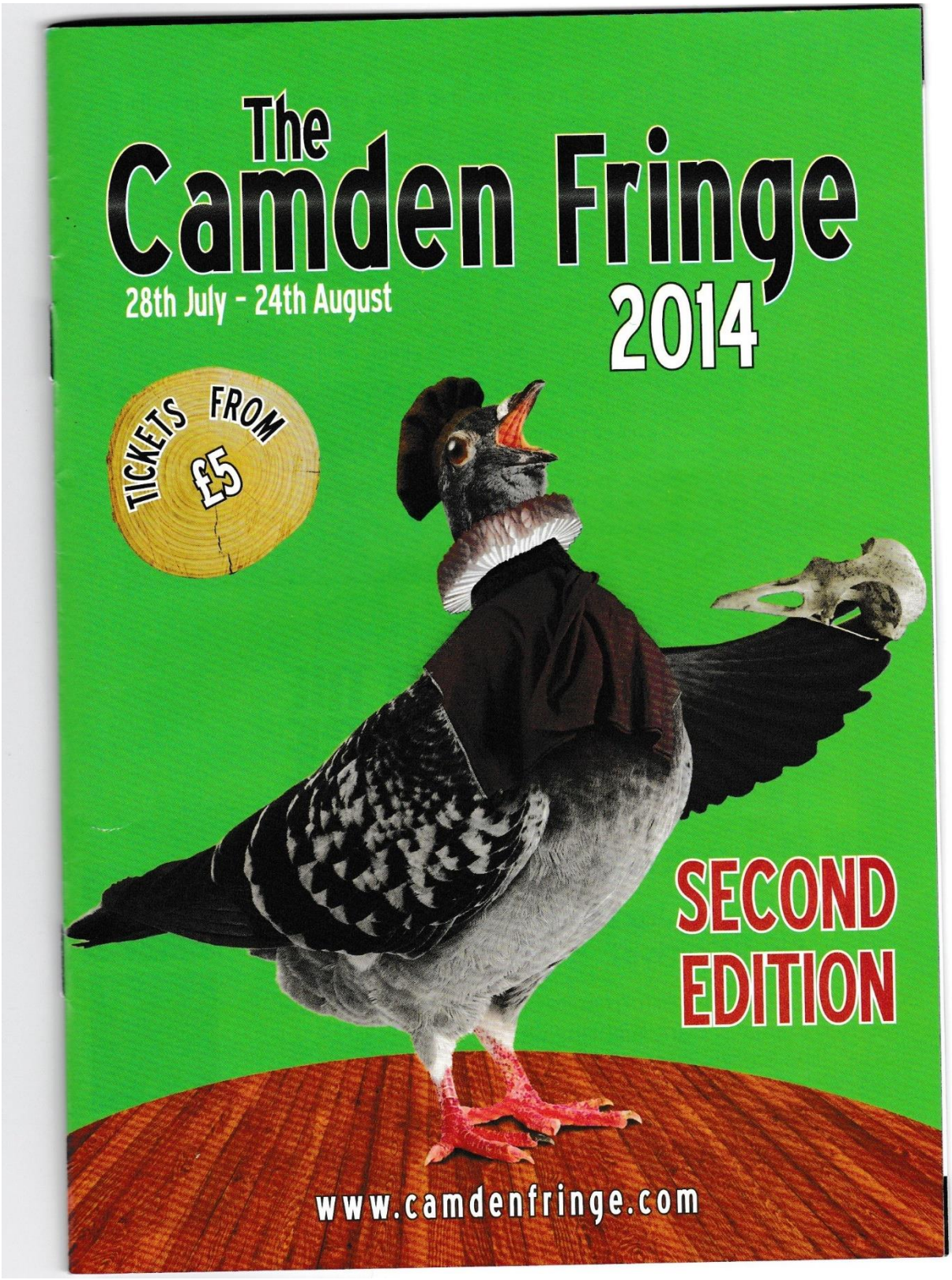


Figure 6: Camden Fringe Program.

The Camden Fringe 2014

28th July - 24th August



The Wonder

The Real Inspector Hound

There is a madman at large, the phone lines have been cut, and a dead body lies in the drawing room.

New theatre company The Wonder invite you to Muldoon Manor to witness Tom Stoppard's farcical whodunnit unfold. Expect triple identities, lewd innuendos, and a spot of Bridge.

Upstairs at the Gatehouse
21, 23 August: 7.30pm
24 August: 6.00pm
£12 (concs £10)
theatre



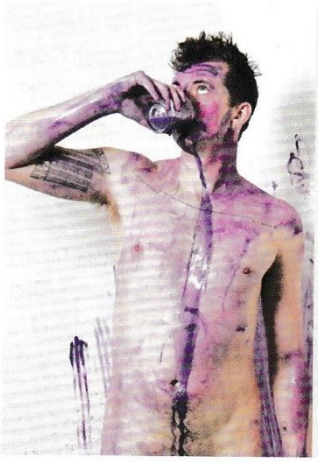
Tasty Combo

Tasty Combo Go To Hell!

A frustrated sketch writer considers selling his soul to the Devil in return for improved comedy skills, but insists on a tour of the Underworld first. The damned funny new show from *Time Out* Critics' Choice sketch comedy quintet Tasty Combo, following their sell-out run at Camden Fringe 2013.

'Very funny, brilliantly written' - *What's Peen Seen*

The Camden Head
21 - 24 August: 8.00pm
£9 (concs £7)
comedy



Gulliver Bell

Demetrius Unchained

The dream is over, and Demetrius is unwell. It's a year since that midsummer night and he's feeling queerer by the day. Can Doctor Goodfellow unpick this curious case of chemical bondage before his patient turns completely 'purple with love'? Join him as he lays bare one of Shakespeare's most enigmatic creations, burrowing through the flesh and into the very chemistry of the brain of 'this spotted and inconstant man'.

Darkly absurd drama - putting the 'meat' into Demetrius! 16+ some nudity.

Gulliver Bell - theatrical voyages into the twilight spaces between science fiction and science fact.

Previous show reviews: 'Bizarre...intriguing...beguiling' - *OneStopArts*

'Beautifully human' - *The Scotsman* 'Fun, dramatic and moving' - *Sci-Fi Bulletin*

Etcetera Theatre
21 - 24 August: 8.00pm
£8 (concs £5)
theatre



Mandy Dassa & Tory Gillespie

Camden Cackles

It's summer in the city and time for some Camden Cackles! Join Mandy Dassa & Tory Gillespie as they share an hour with two halves of some cracking stand up comedy. Mandy Dassa brings you her chatter in thirty minutes. Telling you her tales and spinning her funny yarns about psychotic children, deaf parents and their dog that won't stop barking.

The Camden Head
21 - 22 August: 9.30pm
£5
comedy



The Quills of Change

Osric Omand and the Untimely Outbreak

Osric Omand and the Untimely Outbreak is a sixty minute horror comedy. Set in an Institute in New Forest, the show follows Osric Omand and his caretaker Hans try to return each of their 'residents' to their confines.

However as they go on they find that this isn't just mere outbreak but an act of revolution from one of their greatest foes.

Etcetera Theatre
21 - 23 August: 9.30pm
£8 (concs £6)
comedy

Figure 7: Camden Cackles/Permission to Laugh listing.

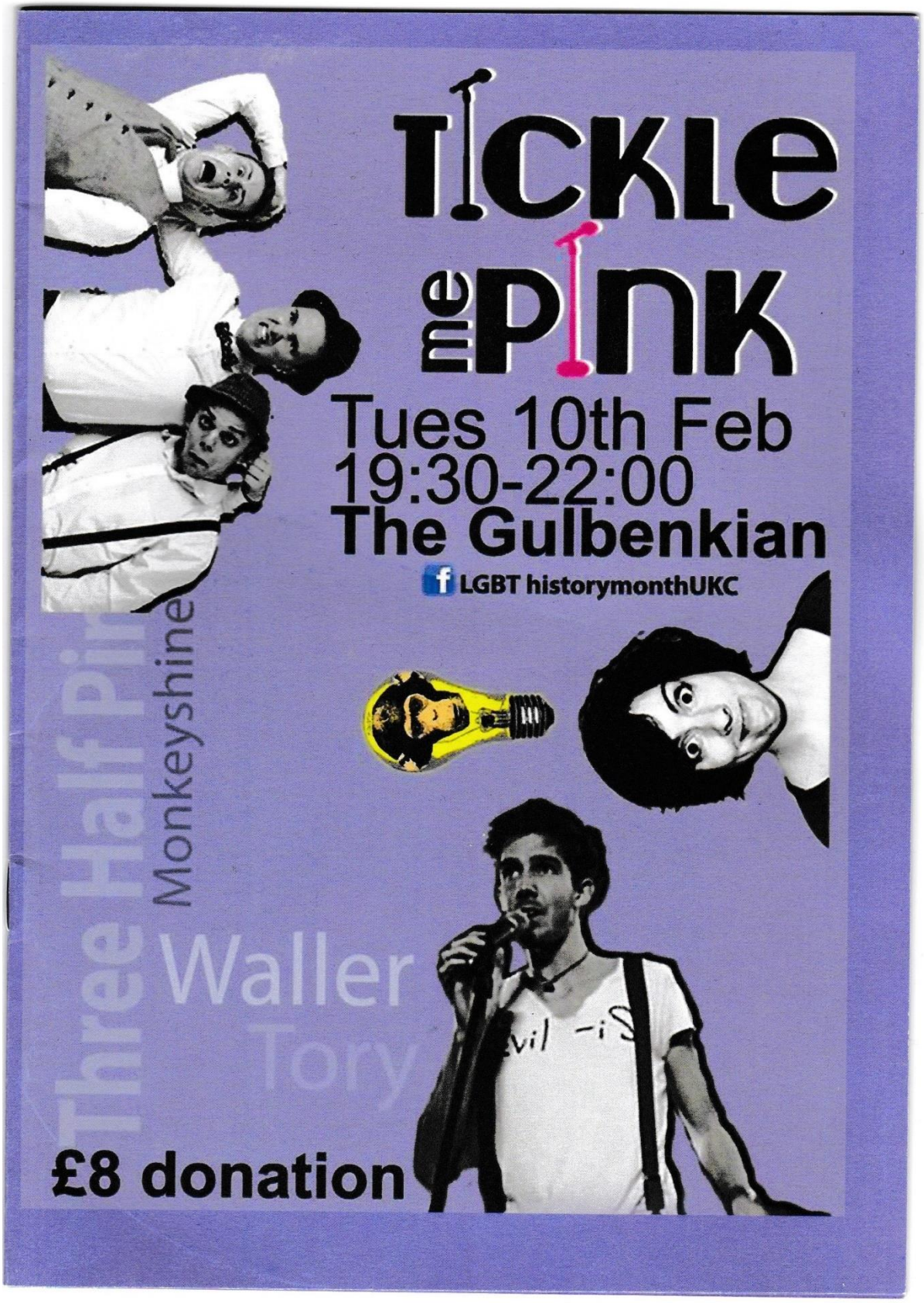


Figure 8: Tickle Me Pink program.

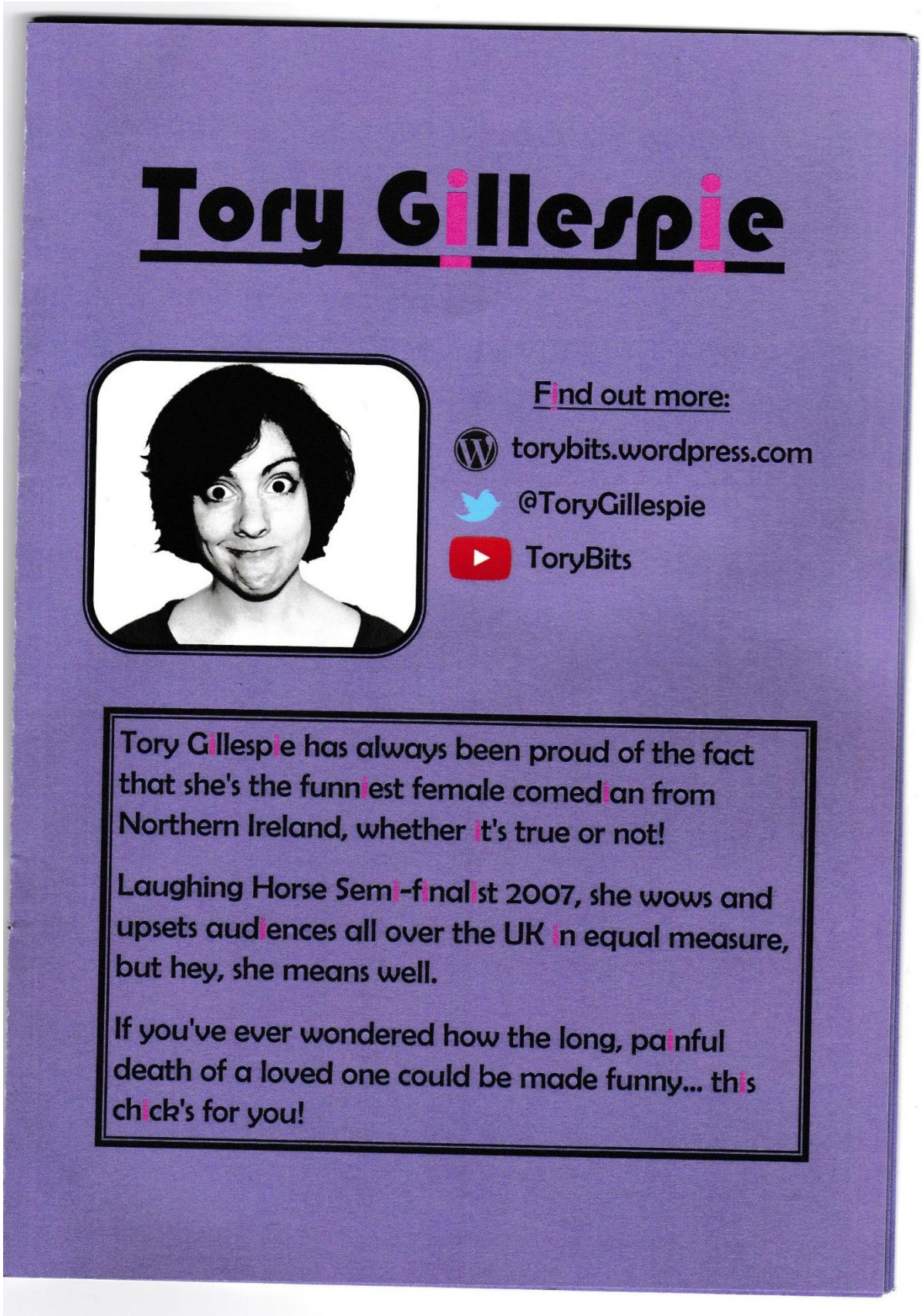


Figure 9: Tickle Me Pink bio.



Figure 10: Ulster Loves Me! flyer.



Figure 11: The view of the stage in The Green Room at the Black Box



Figure 12: The audience for Ulster Loves Me!



Figure 13: Me, with the chalk board outside The Green Room.

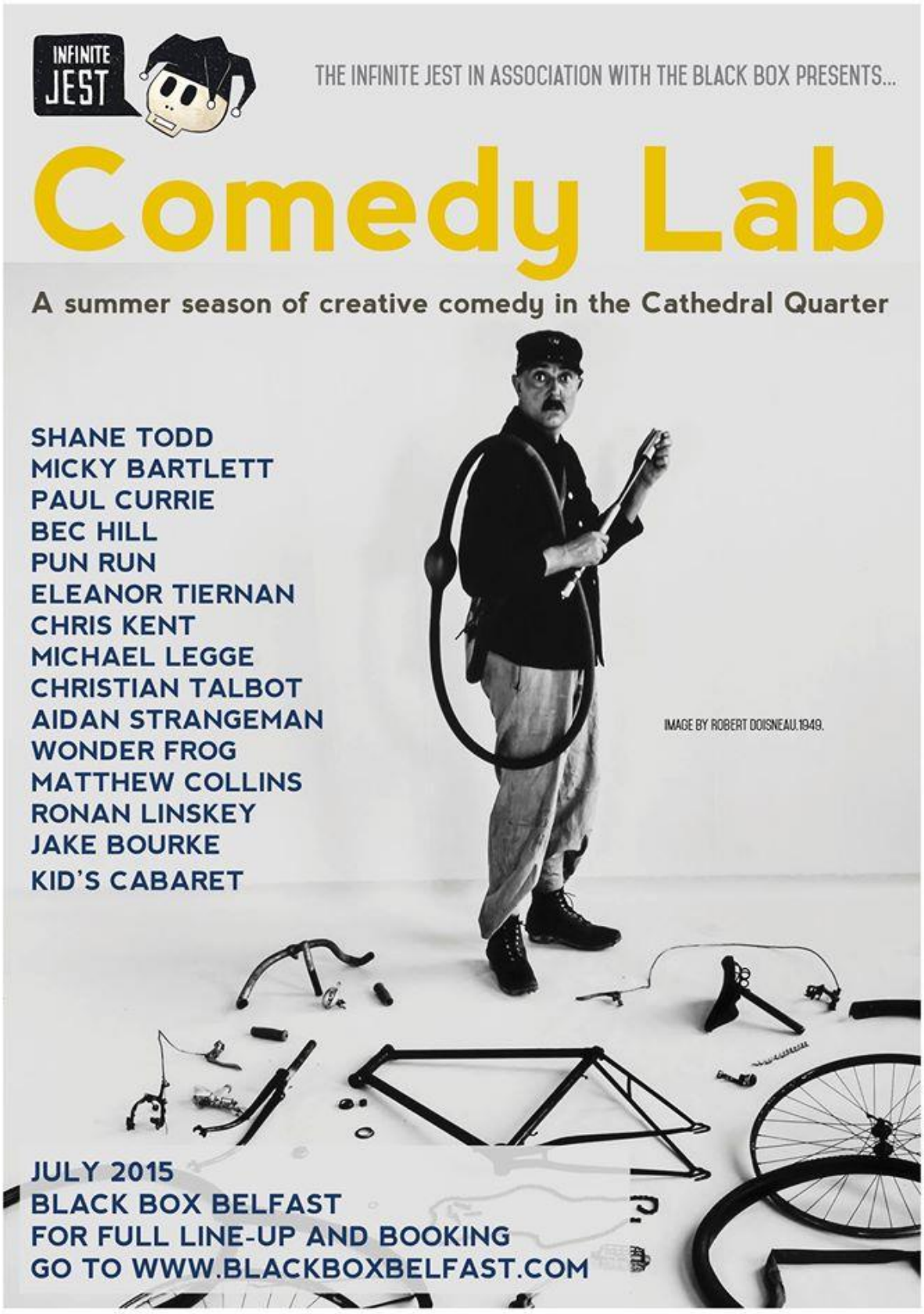


Figure 14: Comedy Labs poster

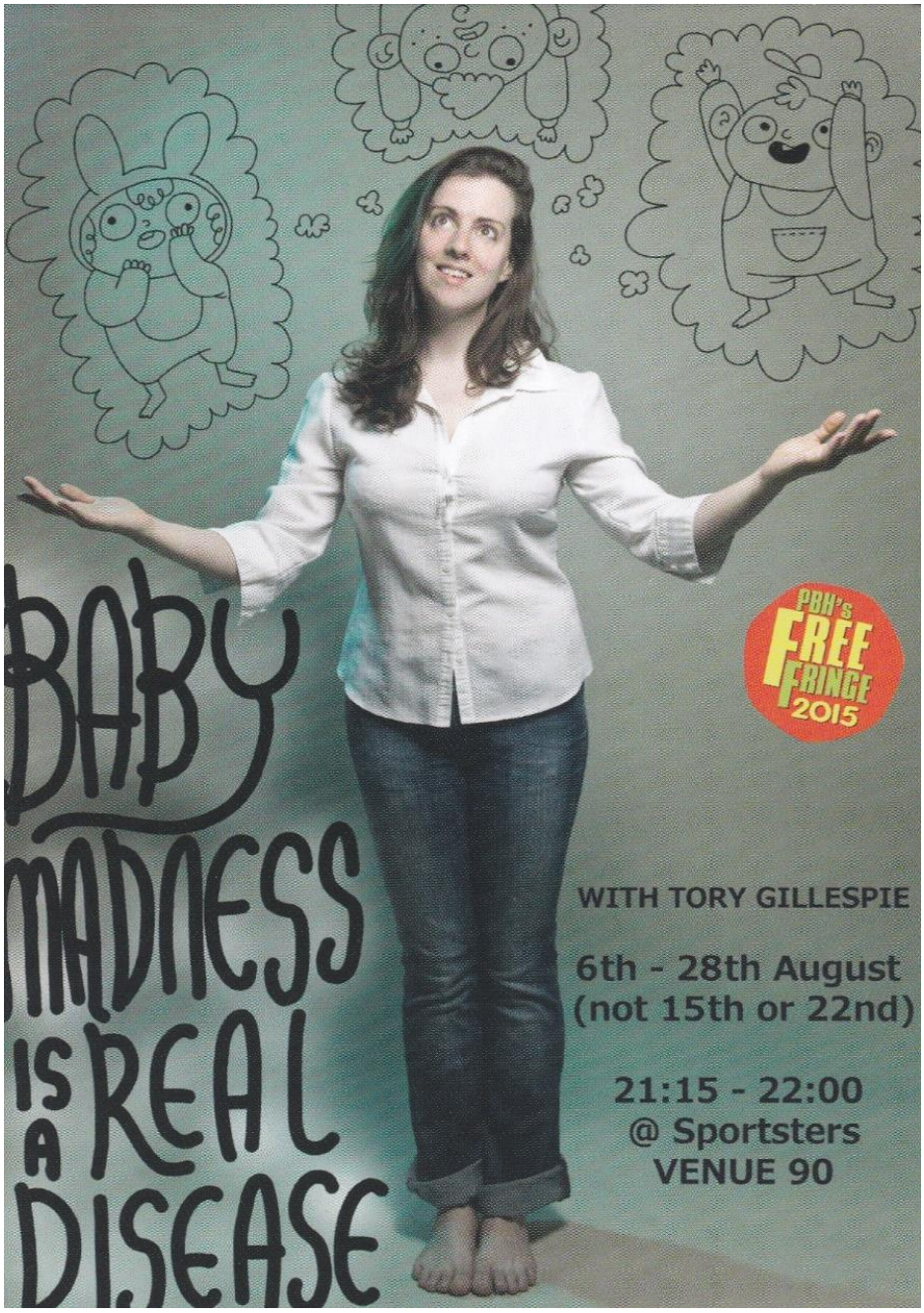


Figure 15: Flyer for BMIARD.

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