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‘My life fell apart. Are you happy now?’: an interview with Laura Lexx

Laura Lexx started performing stand-up whilst studying drama at the University of Kent and has gone on to pursue an eclectically successful career. Highlights include her masterful response to sexist male heckler at Komedia in Brighton in 2016 being written up by the *Evening Standard*, the *Huffington Post*, and the *Daily Mail*; an appearance in the BBC’s *Live at the Apollo* Christmas special in 2018; and her first book, *Klopp Actually: (Imaginary) Life with Football’s Most Sensible Heartthrob* being published in 2020 after her idiosyncratic tweet about the Liverpool manager went viral. Lexx has produced four full-length Edinburgh Fringe shows to date: *Lovely* (2015); *Tyrannosaurus Lexx* (2016); *Trying* (2018); and *Knee Jerk* (2019). The third of these, *Trying*, concerned the experience of suffering from depression after trying for a baby, and received glowing reviews. *The Telegraph*’s Dominic Cavendish wrote, ‘Lexx brings such effervescent delight to her tale of hopes dashed that she’s produced a show that somehow throws you up in the air, inducing giggling delight, at the same time as it delivers a lurch to the stomach.’¹ On 12 August 2020, Oliver Double interviewed Laura Lexx via Zoom about the process of turning traumatic personal experience into a full-length stand-up comedy show.

What I want to talk to you about today is comedy dealing with personal trauma, with depression. So I’m going to start with a big, obvious question. Why did you do the show Trying?

I did *Trying* because I tend to write what I’m doing at the moment. I think because I’m not very strict with writing I do tend to just write whatever’s on my mind. You know, that’s what my brain’s churning over. So that’s what the jokes come about. And with *Trying*...the depression and the trying for a baby had just been so consuming for years that I wasn’t thinking about anything else. Like, the thought of trying to really make up my mind what my opinion on Brexit was or whatever while that was going on...would have been really hollow. So I just kind of gave in to it a bit and was like, ‘Right let’s see what’s there then.’

The reviews you got for Lovely, which was your first Edinburgh show, said you were nice and it’s so happy and cuddly and that kind of thing. And then suddenly you’re doing this show.

Well, that’s what made me laugh because when I did my first show, I really decided to keep it delightful. Because I don’t really like comedy about negative [stuff]. Well, not that I don’t like comedy about negative stuff, but I don’t really like that Edinburgh thing...it’s hard to say it without sounding like I’m slagging off loads of people that I really love. But when the jokes get sacrificed for the point of making a point, that’s when I just am not interested in seeing a show. I think it’s horses for courses and there’s lots of people out there that do prefer a

¹ Cavendish, Dominic (2018), ‘Tales of a conception battle give birth to a bouncy new star’, *Daily Telegraph*, 20 August: 25.

much lower gag rate and like [doing] a talk on something but to me, that isn't the comedy [I like]. I like an Edinburgh show to have a gag rate like a club gig. I think that that's what interests me...So with *Lovely*, when I was doing my debut hour, I was like, 'Right, I want to write a show that's really cheerful.' And the other thing I wanted to do was...I was 27, 28, white, cis, straight, not loaded but my parents had given me most of the stuff I'd ever needed, I got through uni. There was nothing I could stand on stage and pretend was bigger than anything anyone else was going with. So it just felt ludicrous for me to stand there and be like, 'And here's my tragedy.' Stuff has happened in my life, but at that time, nothing that I felt wasn't really offensive to everyone else in the room to be like, 'You should listen to this. This is sad.' So I said that. I did the show and said, 'I'm all right. Like, I've been really lucky. Everything's been great...it's not like I'm a princess running round on a cloud, but I got lucky. So here's a show about other stuff.' And then all the reviews were like, 'It's really funny and it's all right'... One person actually put in their review, 'One can only hope there's some sort of tragedy around the corner for her, because she'll be much better when she's got something bigger to talk about.' So when we came to do *Trying*, I put that in all the press material. 'Here you go, *Broadway Baby*. My life fell apart. Are you happy now? I hope you enjoy the show because it wasn't worth the last three years!'

Can you just tell me a bit about what happened that you then reflected on in the show Trying?

I got back from the 2016 Edinburgh, which was where I was doing *Tyrannosaurus Lexx*, my second show...And I've been married for a year or so. And we were then ready to start trying for a baby. We'd kind of gone, 'Oh okay...We've been together a while, everything's going well, [in terms of] careers. We've wanted kids forever, let's start trying.' And before we've really even started trying, I developed quite crippling generalised anxiety disorder and depression. And I became fixated on the environment. So they sort of call it eco anxiety. That's not the medical term, it's generalised anxiety disorder, but with this fixation. And I just spiralled really, completely lost the plot...just was completely obsessed with not harming the environment and that there wasn't going to be enough time on the planet to have a child. So [I] had a terrible time falling into that then got help and got into therapy and sort of started to manage that, and we started trying for a baby. And then we went through two years of trying with no success, like, no conception, nothing. And the Depression was really hard to deal with through that because it was so *weird*, like being stuck between half my brain going, 'Well you shouldn't have a baby anyway, it's the worst thing you can do for the planet. And it's not fair to your baby. Like, you can't create a life knowing that there's only 30 years of water left on the planet for them, blah, blah, blah.' And the other half my brain every month when I wasn't pregnant was going, '*No!* I really wanted that!' So I was just completely stuck in these two [reactions]. Like, really wanting something, and not sure if I wanted it, and couldn't get it anyway. So it was just horrible. That's what the show was about.

So you did the show and what was the reaction to it?

I took it to the Soho theatre for a run. I didn't tour it because it was too difficult, that show. It was a lot. And I think by the time I'd done Edinburgh and it went really well, and then we did Soho. And Soho was sort of five months later, so I had to keep that show sort of bubbling and then do it for a week, five months later. The reaction was incredible...it was my most successful show at that point. The audiences were wonderful...the critics loved it, but a little bit of my brain was like, 'Of course I do. It's got tragedy in it, that's what they come for don't they? They're sort of vultures. "Aw, she's had a sad time and she still managed to make the show, well done."' So the critics were really pleased with it, but the audiences...I'd get messages from people being like, 'I was [unsure] about coming because we've been trying for baby and I didn't know if I wanted to sit through it and then actually it was so uplifting and, like, open but happy.' ...[O]ne of the things I talked about in the show was that I hadn't recognised I was as ill as I was, because I was still functioning... I'm very focused on achieving and I've got stuff to do so even at the point of being pretty much not sure I wanted to carry on living, I was still turning up to gigs and being really good at them. I just felt like a zombie inside. And because I wasn't an alcoholic, and I hadn't trashed my house or lost everything, I was like, 'Well, it can't be that bad then.' And I talked about that in the show and the number of messages I got from people going, 'Oh, I didn't realise that either! And I've now gone to the doctor and I'm now on antidepressants, and wow, you can feel so much better!' ...[O]r they were in therapy or whatever, that had worked for them. But that really made my day every time I got one of those messages...because I think when depression and difficult stuff gets talked about, it's usually the worst end story, you know, like, [they] got into gambling to hide it and lost everything and hit rock bottom. But what happens...if you don't hit rock bottom in your surroundings, you've just hit it in your brain? That I think was quite an important thing for me to get out and talk about. And go, 'It's all right. If you could just be better, then be better. You don't have to be the worst before you're allowed to ask to be better.'

I've done a couple of shows which touched on things that were unpleasant.² After the after the first one, which was about having kids with diabetes, I went on to do quite a few gigs for diabetes organisations. And what I found was that people would come want to come and talk to you afterwards and tell you their story. And although I didn't have any aim to make the show therapeutic, it seemed like it had had some form of beneficial effect more people hearing something that related to their story. Is that something that you've experienced?

Yeah, I did. And actually, the talking to people afterwards was kind of the bit I couldn't cope with. Because I think if I'm honest, I did *Trying* too early for myself as a person. It was a little

² *Saint Pancreas*, Horsebridge Centre, Whitstable, 2006; and *Break a Leg*, Gulbenkian, Canterbury, 2015.

bit too soon in my own recovery for me to have been doing that show. But I'm really proud of it, and I wouldn't change that. But when I was on stage...it was all true, but tweaked to suit a show, and to make it funnier, and to sort of play with it. So when I was doing it as the show, I could detach what had actually happened from it. But when I was sort of stood face-to-face with people having one-on-one interruptions, that was when I felt more vulnerable. Which was partly why we didn't tour it because I just couldn't. I felt like, 'I can't keep dragging myself through that every time.' What we decided to do with touring was when I did the show the year after, *Knee Jerk*, the tour for *Knee Jerk* was two halves. It was the best of *Trying* and *Knee Jerk*, the best bits from both shows. Because there's great material in *Trying*, I just can't do the whole thing as a storyline like that.

In Stanislavskian acting, you take something from your own life and you transmute it so that it matches what the character's going through. But in stand-up, you take something from your life and you do that onstage. Like you say, you tweak it and shape it, but still there's not that distance that you would get in acting. But you're saying that actually when you were performing it did feel like you could get distance from the thing, but it was only afterwards you were talking to people where it became hard?

Yeah, I think so. Because I've made the show upbeat. I know [that] if you haven't seen the show, there's no way you could possibly think the show was cheerful to listen to, but it genuinely was really fast paced. The joke rate was so high. I worked with Jessica Fosteckew, she directed this show... She's so good at structure and characters and keeping the gag rate high....I didn't want *Trying* to be misery porn. So when I was performing it, it was about, 'How are the jokes going to land?' – and I was really proud of the jokes. And it flicked around in terms of structure. So it was all based around a camping holiday that I'd gone on with my family. And I dip in and out of this holiday in France, going back and telling more of what was going on in the personal life... There's a section on [how] we got tropical fish, because I wanted something to look after, a pet. And we couldn't have a dog at the time because we lived in a flat....so we got these tropical fish. And then the tropical fish had babies and ate them all. And at the time, it was just like, 'Ugh!' – but as soon as you think to yourself afterwards, there's no way that can't be funny. So this scene with all these tropical fish...when I was performing that I was just really proud of having turned it into this, and keeping it honest, and doing something that was so real, but had been jolly.

So what you're saying is that you took something which wasn't funny at the time, but you had the sense that it could be, and you turned it into something funny in the show. And then that gives you a sense of having moved beyond it, I suppose. Because you you've taken this thing and done something amazing creatively with it.

Yeah, I think so. I mean, it depends what your personality is like but...people do laugh in terrible situations, people do find the humour at the time in these dreadful things. I was

reading an interview with Michaela Coel the other day, the woman that's written *I May Destroy You*. And somebody said to her, 'How do you find the humour in these situations?' And I'm paraphrasing her terribly here, but she said something like, 'The humour's always there. I just wrote it down.' And I think that's what my real life is like. Even at the midst of crying my eyes out about something, if something funny occurs, you say at the time and it becomes this sort of laugh-crying thing that you're finding the humour in. I don't think in my life I ever don't know that the humour's there. It's just whether it's the top thing. So turning it into stand-up lets you polish it. And now the mental image I have in my head of, say, like...the stuff that I did on the way people talk to you when you're trying for a baby. That felt so raw at the time, but those interactions that I've used verbatim in the comedy, but sort of given these caricatures – now when I think of advice that you get from people when you're trying for a baby, my brain immediately flicks to the caricature versions. And I can delve back and think about the real bit. But because I've used it so many times for the other thing, that's the main connection I have now. So I think in that way it helps.

I think there's something to do with layered perception. On stage you have that thing where you're doing the bit that you're doing, but you're also thinking about the thing that comes up. That can also happen when you're experiencing trauma, so that as well as being very upset, there's another layer that allows you to see funny aspects in what's going on. I'm really interested in what you say about that, that having transmuted that experience into something that's a comedy bit, that's exaggerated, that becomes your main memory of the thing. Do you think therefore that process of taking those experiences and making them into something funny, that's slightly removed from it – do you think that was therapeutic in any way? For you?

I don't think it was, writing it at the time. I think it's definitely had an effect. I couldn't say whether it was therapeutic because I don't know whether it's a good thing – is the honest answer! I had a lot of actual therapy to deal with a lot of this and I will go back as and when I need to. I can't make up my mind whether doing that to yourself and your brain and your perceptions of tragedy is helpful. Or whether it is just squashing and using it as fuel, but I couldn't say. It has an effect. I don't know whether that effect is a healthy therapeutic effect. I think stand-up for me has always been a little bit therapeutic in a way. Like, I really remember when I was at the worst of the crash point – the bit where I wasn't functioning, the best time of my day was the twenty minutes I was on stage, because of those split brain layers that you mentioned. Because you're so full of thoughts of, 'What's this material? What's the next bit? Why isn't that guy laughing? Okay, they laughed harder at that bit, so I might throw that bit in in a minute. What's he saying? Dah, dah, dah, dah, dah.' My brain was so full during the twenty minutes of stand-up that I was not necessarily happy – but just that was the only part of my day where I wasn't thinking about climate change was that twenty minutes, so that gave me a little bit of respite every day. And then I'd come off stage and it would all just *voomph* back into my head and I couldn't sleep, couldn't do anything. So

I think stand-up, for me, does have some sort of brain effect. But whether it's a good thing, I don't know.

You're describing that moment onstage, that because you're so absorbed by the task, it distracts you from the from the other thing, but also it also strikes me as being like 'Dr. Theatre' or 'Dr. Footlights' – if you have flu or something, you can feel better for the duration of being on stage because of adrenaline or whatever.

Yeah, absolutely. I think so. I guess it is just that filling your brain up with other stuff. It just gives you a bit of peace for a while.

Since probably the late 2000s there's been a rise in these shows, sometimes people call them 'dead dad shows', you know, the hour-long show that deals with something traumatic and it's not always a parent who's died, it can be lots of different things. Do you have a sense of why those kinds of shows have proliferated? Because if you go back 15 years, they were a real rarity.

I think because they won the awards. When people did that, that's what got people attention. Edinburgh is so expensive. It's a trade fair, isn't it? So, Edinburgh morphed. Well, it's going through a phase I think, and I think Edinburgh will come back and go through other phases, but it really went through a phase of the people getting the most attention were not the circuit stalwarts, were not the funniest joke a minute. You had to be 'funny *and*'. And so tragedy has always been valued higher... The Oscar winners are always for tragedy... 'Best Actress in a Leading Role' – it's never Melissa McCarthy. Because she's so funny, people think funny is easier than sad. So sad gets this and if you mix sad and funny, aren't you brave? Well done, rah rah rah. And it's not that I don't think the shows are really good but I just think there became this fashion that Edinburgh for a bit has to teach you something. Like, you can't just go and make people cry with laughter for an hour, it's not enough. So that I think it became fashionable for a while. And if you're going to go to Edinburgh, you can't go thumbing your nose at Edinburgh, it's too expensive. You can't go anarchically really, unless you've got the money or you're already at that position. You know, to do an Edinburgh show in a venue costs. I mean, basic accommodation, unless you know someone you can stay with, you're probably going to splurge three or four thousand pounds just on accommodation. Then if you've hired a room, it's another three. So you can't go and thumb your nose at it. If you're going to go and you need some sort of a return on investment, you've got to play the game. And the game's been, you know, make a point.

So interesting, because the fringe was once known as this hive of experimentation. The first people who went up and had successful shows where they were dealing with issues, that was experimentation. But then presumably what happens is because of the commercial

pressures, because it's arguably exploitative of artists, then it actually mitigates the other way. It mitigates into sticking with formulae that are known to work.

Yeah, I think Edinburgh's wonderful. I really love Edinburgh. But... I do think it is exploitative of artists because even if you take out the vast majority of the costs, you know, people always bang on about, 'Oh, don't pay these PR ghouls.' Personally, I think PR is one of the best things you can pay for because it's the worst thing to do yourself. But even if you don't have a producer and you don't go in a paid venue and you, say, do the Free Fringe, the cost of accommodation up there is *ludicrous*, absolutely bananas. So unless you have a financial income the rest of the year that means you can afford that accommodation, plus take the gamble of taking an entire month off how you normally earn money, and relying on bucket money from the audience that come and see you, that takes a level of privilege to be able to do that. That says there aren't two children waiting in my house for me to feed them, or siblings that depend on my money, or parents or whatever. That requires a huge level of privilege and confidence to get up and do that. And that's like suggesting that you are going up and doing the Free Fringe, which is the least expensive and most experimental way you can do it. But even with that, because of the turnover, the number of shows now, you have your 55-minute to 60-minute slot and then there's maybe [a] 15-minute break before the next show. So there's only so crazy you can go, if you've got to clean up in seven and a half minutes to give them a seven and a half minute get-in. So I do think a lot of that anarchy is lost from the Edinburgh Fringe. But it clearly is brilliant, and it clearly is wonderful, and it clearly is what a lot of people want it to be. But then on the flip side of that, I also don't think is this Machiavellian plan like some people talk about it and, 'Oh, it's big business has done this!' And you think, 'Well, kind of but also it's just slowly morphed over years and years, and it'll morph back again.' I think it's very cyclical. It'll be fascinating to see what happens to it after this break because of COVID. Absolutely fascinating because the people in comedy that have been hit the hardest by COVID will be the people who were just starting to get paid work, just starting to get there, and then the gigs will have shrunk. Their slots will be gone, and they were a huge bulk of Edinburgh – that's why you go to Edinburgh early on, is to get that. So what will the festival look like if a lot of people have had to stop doing it? And the money isn't there to take that luxurious month and burn money on the Royal Mile? It'll be interesting.

Obviously, people have reflected on trauma in the arts, in lots of different art forms – in novels, poems, songs, plays, films, paintings. What are the advantages of specifically stand-up as a form, in terms of dealing with difficult stuff in your life?

Stand-up's very immediate I think, which means you can adapt it constantly. And also there's no sort of barrier between you and the audience, really. One of the things I liked with *Trying* was there was...a moment in the show where I recounted getting my period on this holiday in France, and so realising yet again that I wasn't pregnant. And I performed that

differently every day. The words were different every day and the feeling was different because at the time of performing *Trying*, I was still trying for baby – unsuccessfully. So I let myself have that bit however it was that day. And if I was all right that day, then that bit didn't have a huge emotional weight. But like the day I got my period in Edinburgh, I think I was almost in tears on stage going, 'I got it, and I've just had it again today.' And could stand there and say to people, 'I'm still here.' ...I think that sort of thing is what makes stand-up so accessible, is that if I, as a performer, wasn't really sad that day, that bit wasn't really sad. So it didn't seem forced, so the days where I was like, 'Oh! This is a gut punch today!' it was real. I think that helps. I also think the lack of meddling between what you want to say and saying it. To do a theatre show that would reach as many people, it would go through a writer and then a director and then an actor, and then a producer, and then hits the audience. Whereas with stand-up, I thought of it, I perform it – those might have been seconds apart. And then it's straight to the audience. And if the audience wants to, you know, they don't often but there is that feeling in the room like, it could be a conversation, that it isn't [just] for interpretation. You can have this, and it's here for all of us. It's sort of performative, but non-performative, if that makes sense. And I also think with stand-up, especially with a longer show, because you try it out in little bits as you go along, you kind of get a sense as you're going along what works. Whereas my experience of plays, I mean, I've not done big plays, but you have to do the whole thing and then you start the run. And you can *then* tweak it after a week or so. But with stand-up, you try five minutes. How's that going? Duh-duh-duh, and build it up. So it allows you to condense it to the bits that get the best reaction from the audience. And that's obvious when it's jokes. But when it's tragedy too, you learn that balance very quickly of what the audience need.