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Comedy clubs that platform marginalised identities: Prefigurative politics in Sophie Duker's Wacky Racists

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Sophie Quirk** 

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Abstract

Wacky Racists is, in the words of its creator, Sophie Duker, 'not a night for actually wacky, actual racists'. It is one of a number of clubs which provide a platform for identities and perspectives that are marginalised on the British comedy circuit. This article demonstrates that such 'platforming clubs' can be considered as prefigurative spaces, drawing upon Raekstad and Gradin's model of prefigurative politics. Using Wacky Racists as a case study, it is argued that these clubs pose a necessary challenge to dominant industry practices by building an alternative to them. Their impact exists in their capacity to expose a range of harmful and inequitable practices, to demonstrate that these are unnecessary, and to provide the living and viable alternatives that, as Raekstad and Gradin argue, are a precondition of change.

Keywords

Equality, equitability, identity, meritocracy, prefigurative politics, stand-up comedy, Sophie Duker

This article examines comedy clubs that create space for voices and perspectives which are marginalised in the mainstream comedy industry, taking identity into account when deciding who should perform. Drawing upon Raekstad and Gradin's (2020: 36, emphasis original) definition of prefigurative politics as 'the *deliberate* experimental implementation of *desired* future social relations and practices in the here-and-now', it is argued that platforming clubs are an important political activity, and that their importance and impact can be best understood by viewing them as prefigurative spaces. This is achieved through

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a close analysis of Wacky Racists (2019c): a monthly comedy club in London, the United Kingdom, run by comedian Sophie Duker to ‘. . . provide unique nights of hilarity through platforming performers of colour, increasing representation of marginalised and minority voices/perspectives ACROSS THE BOARD and generally avoiding splashing around in the mainstream’.¹

Using the club as a case study, this article critiques some key assumptions and practices prevalent in the mainstream industry, as identified by the performers who are impacted by them. These include the idea that success and opportunity in the comedy profession are equally and equitably available to performers on the basis of talent, and are not affected by the performer’s background or identity; also, widespread prejudices which erase or deny the presence, talent or wide appeal of marginalised performers. The practice of tokenistic booking – where clubs book one sole performer per bill to represent a marginalised identity group – is identified as a prevalent abuse. In identifying and consciously subverting this practice, Wacky Racists successfully prefigures a much-needed alternative for the British live comedy industry.

Methods and limitations

This article argues for the political importance of practices that have neither a mass audience nor a quantifiable impact. It seeks a model through which we can understand the significance of something as small and contained as a comedy club, and suggests that we can do this by applying the model of prefigurative politics. Raekstad and Gradin’s (2020) *Prefigurative Politics* is the first major work devoted to this important set of political tactics (although, as they note, the practices far predate their book and the term itself). Their text is utilised here as the best available taxonomy through which Wacky Racists’ ability to function as a prefigurative space can be demonstrated, and its significance articulated.

Wacky Racists is one of a number of clubs that employ platforming tactics. For example, the collective Abnormally Funny People are ‘a team of comedians, mostly with disabilities although we often have a token non-disabled comedian too’ (Disability Arts International, 2019). The London club Queer as Jokes (2019) describes itself as, ‘a sex positive gig for people who identify as lgbtqia, or kinky, or both!’ Brighton’s Lava Elastic (2019) offers, ‘openly neurodiverse comedy/performance/poetry nights’. Sian Davies’ Best in Class (2019) is, ‘a crowd funded profit sharing show that champions the talent of working class performers’. It was founded to tackle the prohibitive costs and systemic barriers which Davies identified as excluding working class performers from the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, a critical marketplace for comedians aspiring to progress in their profession.

In practice, Wacky Racists particularly emphasises women of colour, and Duker is closely networked with other practitioners whose platforms share kindred aims. For example, Kemah Bob sometimes performs at Wacky Racists, and Duker likewise performs at Bob’s FOC It Up! Comedy Club, a night platforming femmes of colour which goes so far as to offer a ‘a 100% no-white-dudes-onstage guarantee’ (see, for example, marketing for the Gilded Balloon, 2019). Both Duker and Bob have appeared on fellow comedian Deborah Frances-White’s podcast The Guilty Feminist (n.d.), in which panels

‘discuss topics “all 21st century feminists agree on” while confessing their insecurities, hypocrisies and fears that underlie their lofty principles’, usually in front of a live audience. Since its launch in 2015, *The Guilty Feminist* has grown into a movement, inspiring listeners to undertake activism, promoting work by women and other marginalised groups across the arts, and launching Frances-White as a leading voice in popular feminism.

Wacky Racists poses an important challenge to dominant attitudes and practices in the comedy industry, both as an individual club and as part of this wider network of platforming practices. By focusing on Wacky Racists as a case study, it is possible to offer deep analysis which serves the purpose of theory-building (Eckstein, 2009); probing the possibility, which came to the fore during fieldwork at the club, that platforming comedy clubs’ political significance can be understood by reading them as acts of prefigurative politics.

During spring-summer 2019, Wacky Racists was enjoying frequent sell-outs at 2Northdown, a small venue in the King’s Cross area of London, with a maximum capacity of 100. During this period, I was able to frequent the club as an audience member and to monitor the club’s marketing; this fieldwork was complemented by a semi-structured interview with Duker by telephone in July 2019, in which she elaborated upon her methodology for running the club, the rationale that underpins her practices and her own motivations. At the time that the fieldwork and interview were undertaken, the researcher was not investigating the club specifically as a prefigurative space but rather conducting an open investigation into whether and how comedy clubs can be understood as political spaces. The study therefore employed open methods of enquiry which enabled procedures to be shaped around what was discovered, rather than pre-determining what was to be sought.

The case study approach enables a deep and rich study of Wacky Racists, but not a widespread study of attitudes and practices across the industry. Nonetheless, this article does repeat and reflect upon common criticisms of the comedy industry. Duker’s own perception is fundamental to understanding why Wacky Racists operates in the way that it does: it is her experience that shapes her practices. It is also relevant to consider the wider discourse in which Duker operates, hence the article also draws upon other comedians who participate in her professional networks and echo her concerns, such as Kemah Bob, Deborah Frances-White and Kiri Pritchard-McLean. Their reflections are treated as significant data, whether they could be ‘verified’ by widespread data-gathering or not. An important principle underpinning Raekstad and Gradin’s (2020: 87–110) interpretation of prefigurative politics is that personal experiences – including those felt by the minority – must be acknowledged and given weight. This process has long been denied by dominant discourses which posit that reason may enable anybody to decide what is fair and needed for all people, but in doing so, ‘exclude certain areas of life from negotiation and public scrutiny’ by designating important experiences as apolitical or irrational. This process disproportionately affects marginalised groups (Raekstad and Gradin, 2020: 91–92). To ignore or doubt the experiences reported by marginalised comedians would repeat and compound the abuses of erasure and victim-blaming which impact them.

A survey of the Wacky Racists audience, or of a large number of the clubs’ performers, was beyond the capacity of this study. To an extent, therefore, this article has to take Duker’s own reading of her audience, and her interpretation of what her acts are getting

out of the club, as the best available source for understanding their characteristics and why they attend. Again, it must be noted that Duker's practices are informed by her own interpretation rather than any statistical analysis or methodical study; it should also be noted that the comedian's ability to read both their audience and co-performers constitutes a very real and valuable set of professional skills. While a more extensive study utilising audience research and engaging more closely with a greater number of acts would be a significant and useful area for further study of prefiguration in comedy clubs, this study's role as a 'plausibility probe' (Eckstein, 2009: 19–22) can be adequately fulfilled by an analysis of Duker's own impressions.

It is important to note that Duker has not created Wacky Racists with the intention of making a prefigurative space, any more than Raekstad and Gradin have set out to write a guide for creating comedy clubs. Duker (2019, Personal communication) stresses that the club exists primarily for entertainment. The atmosphere of the night – its chaotic sense of fun, its friendliness and its air of challenge – must remain at the forefront of any meaningful attempt to interpret it. A description of a single night at Wacky Racists is offered below, as the best available way of giving the reader some insight into the atmosphere and functioning of the club.

A night at Wacky Racists

The 9th of June 2019, 6:15 p.m.: 2Northdown, London. In a converted garage near Kings Cross, a buzzing audience visit the tiny bar and squeeze into their seats. The stage is set as if for a friendly, low-budget party. A few colourful balloons loiter intriguingly in a corner of the stage. The huge painted logo on the back wall, which usually represents the venue's name ('2N↓') has been adapted to read '2NBROWN'. Golden balloons in the shape of letters, gaffer taped to the wall, spell out the word 'WACKY'. Next to the 'W' hangs a t-shirt reading 'white girls copying gay men copying black girls', which will later be awarded as a prize in an improvised party game. Sophie Duker, in the role of host, hurries about with an air of hasty efficiency, making ready for the launch of this month's edition of Wacky Racists (2019b) Comedy Club.

When Duker takes the stage, she exudes warmth and fun. She articulates some ground rules and explanations that her repeat punters will likely have heard before, emphasising that this is emphatically 'not a night for actually wacky, actual racists'; it is not for 'whimsical bigots'. Rather, this is a comedy club which, in the words of its Facebook page, 'accept[s] acts and audience of all types, stripes and strokes. We platform performers of colour but are always seeking to better represent any perspectives that aren't being seen or heard enough on the mainstream circuit' (Wacky Racists, 2019c). In addition to the emphasis on performers of colour mentioned here, the club offers the majority of its spots to women. All of the acts presented on the bill tonight are performers of colour; all but one are women.

Duker's initial compering spot makes reference to another important operational principle of this club, as she states, 'this is not a safe space'. Duker can offer no assurance that material offered will be easy listening, or palatable, to all audience members. Her acts are invited to experiment, to be honest and to offer challenging material. Audience members are promised that they can leave if they find anything difficult,

without fear of harassment and that Duker herself is open to one-to-one discussion about the show's content.

Some of the material is indeed far from 'safe'. For example, Ria Lina plays on awkwardness around race, inviting her audience to describe her and gently mocking them for dodging any mention of her race. She jests that she is constantly mistaken for her white daughter's maid and closes with a graphic pro-choice song told from the point of view of a child who wishes their mother had been allowed to abort them. Carmina Biryana discusses her interest in ethics through her interest in BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadochism and Masochism), pulling an audience member up on to the stage and demonstrating spanking manoeuvres on his behind with her custom-made whip. Kemah Bob performs as her drag king persona Lil' Test Ease, a parody of the toxic masculinity courted in rap music. Acts present contrary political ideas. For example, Duker introduces a game where different forms of privilege – including, for example, being university educated and able-bodied – are written on balloons in marker pen. A few audience members are selected as players: the balloons are tied to their legs with string and the players engage in a chaotic attempt to pop one another's balloons. The winner is the last player left with some unburst privilege. The politics of this piece are directly subverted by the headline act, Loyiso Gola, who argues that the term 'privilege' is overused because its usefulness in discourse about social justice is to identify the specific abuses of *white* privilege. This important ideological difference between acts is accepted; the audience listen and continue to give friendly responses to all performers.

Reflecting on how she started the club, Duker (2019, Personal communication) recalls that she wanted Wacky Racists to offer 'space for people to . . . talk about stuff and be weird and silly'. This summarises two of the important factors that have shaped the club's ethos. It is first and foremost a comedy night, a space for comedic ambition to spread its wings into its silliest and most fun forms of expression. At the same time, Duker (2019, Personal communication) also wanted to, 'enable . . . exchange of . . . knowledge, whether that's . . . watching people . . . and learning from their set and their skills . . . or . . . learning how to be in comedy, and about the world through each other'. Duker's skillful arrangement of the club creates an environment in which acts and audience alike laugh, have fun, discuss and learn, and in which challenging and experimental material can be received in a spirit of trust and generosity.

Wacky Racists is an artwork and an entity in its own right, to be defined by its own ethos and practices rather than by what it is not. That said, the club intentionally offers an alternative to some dominant practices in the UK comedy industry, and this is one of the reasons why it can be described as a prefigurative space.

Wacky Racists as prefigurative politics: 'desired future social relations and practices in the here-and-now'

When asked why she started Wacky Racists, Duker's (2019, Personal communication) response emphasised the following three key political factors: two focused on her industry and one on global social injustices. The first was a wish to operate outside of the traditional hierarchies at play on the mainstream circuit:

Working in comedy – like the comedy industry and the circuit – can be very hierarchical. There are like, kind of, very old clubs [where] there's a sense of . . . progression to get to where you want to go and there's a certain kind of vibe that is . . . dictated by the people making money from the venue . . . and certain people that tend to do well there . . .

Second, she highlights a lack of representation for minority and marginalised identities, including the widespread practice of tokenism:

Other than . . . demarcated, like, certain circuit gigs – so for instance like the black circuit – there isn't a place where [you] can find . . . a lot of comedians of colour in one place, or just a lot of different types of . . . representation on one bill. Because people tend to do like a sort of selection box of comedians, that have their own idea about categories. So they're like 'oh this is a woman comedian, and this is a category' – or 'American comedian' or a 'black comedian' or a 'queer comedian'.

Finally, she refers to the wider political context saying, 'I think there was a lot of stuff, at the time I was thinking about it, too, like Black Lives Matter, in terms of injustices that were targeting certain demographics . . .'.

These concerns are interrelated. Wider social injustices and disparities that marginalise women and minorities are reflected across society and pervade the cultural and creative industries (CCIs). This is despite widespread perceptions within those industries that they are meritocratic, offering individuals equal opportunity to succeed based on professional competence, regardless of their identity. These inequities are supported by existing hierarchies within those sectors. The *Panic!* Report, a 2015 survey of attitudes among people working in the arts and CCIs, showed that these fields were highly unequal; 'marked by significant exclusions of those from working class social origins', while, '[w]omen, and those from Black and Minority Ethnic . . . communities face [additional] barriers . . .' (Brook et al., 2018: 2). Those in the most precarious positions noted structural inequalities, while those who were 'most handsomely rewarded by the sector' (Taylor and O'Brien, 2017: 44) were more likely to describe success as dependent upon merit. There was also a stronger motivation among those who enjoyed wider structural privilege to invest in the concept of meritocracy: ' . . . the survey respondents who are most attracted to this idea are highly-paid white men, irrespective of age' (Brook et al., 2018: 3).

In the comedy industry, identity-driven bias and systemic discrimination have been widely discussed, with the most high-profile debate focusing on women. In 2014, BBC Director of Television Danny Cohen announced that 'TV shows without women are unacceptable', highlighting the widespread underrepresentation – and often outright omission – of women from these lucrative and high-profile platforms (Cooke, 2014). There are many shocking stories circulating among practitioners, and in the academic literature, about the way in which key gatekeepers within the comedy industry foreground identity when making decisions which impact individuals' career prospects. For example, Frances-White (2016) has spoken about a comedy agent who refused an invitation to come and see her show with the claim: 'I cannot consider anyone of the female persuasion. That might sound sexist but it's not'. Sociologist Sam Friedman notes how comedy scouts at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe foregrounded identity when considering

acts. For example, ‘. . . a number of scouts mentioned the recent success of a clutch of what they called “T-shirt comics” – young, white, attractive, male comics such as Jack Whitehall and Russell Howard, who were described as “safe” and “inoffensive”’ (Friedman, 2014: 289). One scout said, ‘there is currently a huge gap in the market for a young and charismatic black male voice’ (Friedman, 2014: 289).

It is sometimes argued that minorities are at an advantage in an industry hungry to improve diversity. Pritchard-McLean (2020) has referred to ‘The rictus grin you give as men tell you that your achievements are due to a diversity drive not talent’. This line of argument implies that any representative of a minority who is ‘good enough’ will be snapped up by the upper echelons of the industry – for example, television, and the comedy agencies who exercise significant power in granting access to the most prestigious, high-profile and lucrative opportunities – while members of the dominant group will have to compete with a mass of other straight, cis-gendered, middle-class, white men with no visible disability. This line of argument is pernicious for several reasons. It uses decidedly flawed logic to present the limited space awarded to minorities as an advantage to them, attributing struggle to the dominant group; such a twisting of the definition of privilege is unethical. In the example from Friedman earlier, we may note how there have been a number of spaces created for ‘young, white, attractive male comics’, and a single space for a ‘young and charismatic black male voice’. It further erases the many comedians who are active and talented performers but have not yet broken through. An example of this attitude is given in the origin story of Funny Women, a women-only comedy movement founded by Lynne Parker (n.d.) in response to a male promoter who, ‘When asked why he hardly ever booked any female acts . . . said there weren’t any and furthermore “women aren’t funny”’. Pritchard-McLean, earlier, highlights additional nastiness in the implication that those who have had good opportunities have not really earned them.

The characteristics of live comedy lead to further spurious reasonings that enable those with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo to ignore systemic inequalities. Live comedy is commonly – and somewhat romantically – interpreted as a pinnacle of meritocracy because the comedian’s craft relies on getting the laughter and cooperation of the audience, so that it is generally acutely obvious which comedians have won their respect and which have not. Whether or not the audience laugh is attributed solely to the comedian’s skill and creative genius. In the UK, the live comedy circuit has a strong origin story rooted in the Alternative Comedy revolution of the late 1970s and 1980s, in which progressive politics and the refusal of misogyny, racism and homophobia were prized. An influential sector of the industry remains invested in this progressive self-image. It can be easy for live comedy’s personnel to sell themselves the idea that their field offers equality for comedians of all identities. As experienced gig organiser, Ivor Dembina (2019) states, with genuine conviction, ‘All [the audience] want you to be is good . . . Honestly, they don’t care about your gender, whether you’re gay, black, straight . . .’. This idea remains popular among many performers and promoters on the mainstream circuit.

Nonetheless, it is clear that everywhere in the UK comedy industry, identity plays its part in the award of opportunity. One key practice that is commonly complained of among members of marginalised groups – which Duker references and Wacky Racists

directly subverts – is the practice of tokenistically booking one, lone representative of each minority for each comedy night. Duker refers to this as the ‘selection box’ approach. Her experience is echoed by Bob, who notes that FOC It Up!’s acts would

normally show up to a comedy night and maybe get to see one more, like, femme of colour . . . if that . . . [T]here have been instances where I’ve performed in rooms of, like, over 80 people and I’ve been the only . . . black person there, period. (Wentworth-Smith and Layton, 2018)

Tomsett (2022) has highlighted that women comedians typically find themselves the lone woman on mainstream comedy bills. Promoters who use this practice may not be particularly conscious of it as exclusionary. For example, Dembina (2019) has explained his own practice by saying,

Every club’s different . . . I see myself as putting on a variety show . . . I read this interesting thing about a black comic . . . he says, ‘I never knew you had any black comics ‘cause I never meet ‘em, ‘cause they always . . . only have one of us on at a time’. And I’ve got to hold my hand up and plead guilty. I’m like that . . . you know I’ll tell you the truth. I try and put on a show with texture, variety.

Comedians whose identities are tokenised in this way highlight a range of problems springing from the ‘selection box’ approach. Some of these are explored here with a view to assessing how platforming clubs can have a role in ameliorating or countering these impacts. First, a tokenistic booking policy means fewer spots are available for those identities that promoters choose to tokenise; this has implications for comedians’ finances and progression, contributing to a pay and opportunity gap. The existence of opportunities targeted specifically towards those who are given limited space on the circuit at large does not create equal levels of opportunity (and certainly does not provide unfair levels of access to ‘diversity quota’ opportunities) because those platforms still constitute the vast minority of the total available gigs. However, they do increase access to quality performance opportunities for those who are tokenised elsewhere.

Second, the selection box can limit performers’ access to networks of fellow practitioners who share tokenised aspects of their identity. Duker (2019, Personal communication) notes that comedy, ‘can be seen as a very solitary career, but there can be this . . . capacity for people to . . . be support networks for each other and share advice’. She highlights how important advice from fellow women comedians was to her, and notes that running her own nights that foregrounded women (such as Manic Pixie Dreamgirls, which she co-ran before Wacky Racists) and participating in the Funny Women competition, have given her access to the valuable resource of networking. As has been noted, Wacky Racists was founded with this aim in mind: it brings together individuals who can form valuable networks.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Dembina’s description of the ‘selection box’ bill posits it as one that offers ‘texture’ and ‘variety’. This assumes that variation exists between identities and takes no account of the variety and diversity of experience that individuals who share an aspect of their identity may bring to a bill. This is a common complaint about tokenistic booking; it leads to an environment in which a single comedian is taken to represent an entire identity group, perhaps even to speak for an entire

community or embody the sum total of talent and experience within it (see Tomsett, 2022). As Duker (2019, Personal communication) states, Wacky Racists ‘was born out of the need . . . for me and . . . fellow comedians to express ourselves in more variation than the template was giving us’. The bringing together of voices that are usually staged in isolation offers creative benefits in terms of the diversity of material offered, as well as networking opportunities for the performers themselves.

Third, it is argued that being isolated on a bill affects the way a comedian is read by their audience. Frances-White explains this through the concept of ‘tribal confidence’. This is different from personal confidence ‘in our ability to do things we know we’re good at’ (Frances-White, 2018: 76); rather, it reflects, ‘the confidence that we will be included because the group trusts us’ (p. 80). Those who belong to a dominant identity group can take a degree of tribal confidence for granted, because ‘[p]eople who have almost always known inclusion . . . have built up reserves of trust like money in the bank’ (Frances-White, 2018: 77). Those who are in a minority, and in an environment in which they have been routinely underrepresented, do not take trust for granted; any context in which you are underrepresented is, of necessity, one in which you will feel a lack of tribal confidence.

Frances-White (2018) describes the Guilty Feminist Podcast as, ‘simply an environment where the tribe trusts women by default. We create our own tribal confidence’ (p. 141). She illustrates how tribal confidence has a direct impact on performance, noting that her small minority of male guests frequently ‘shrink a little and behave like the lone woman on a panel of men. They get nervous, take up less space, try harder than they need to’ (Frances-White, 2018: 140). The notion of tribal confidence highlights how cultivating confidence is not merely a matter of personal ‘pluck’, but something that is provided by the environment as much as the individual. Wacky Racists is an environment which offers enhanced tribal confidence to the marginalised voices that it platforms.

Fourth, the selection box has been accused of posing dangers to comedians’ personal safety. When comedy journalism website Chortle (2018) ran a survey asking ‘how can we make the comedy circuit safer?’ suggestions from the anonymised respondents included, ‘Ensuring promoters put more than one female on open mic nights so we don’t feel so isolated’, and ‘Book more women. Don’t constantly have us outnumbered on bills. Please’. In the Summer of 2020, a number of comedians exposed stories of harassment and abuse they had experienced on the live circuit, revealing a culture in which this behaviour was routinely ignored, covered-up or endured. Pritchard-McLean (2020) said,

. . . the silence is killing careers, often before they’ve started. The very worst abuse flourishes on an overcrowded, unregulated circuit ripe for exploitation. I don’t know a single female act who doesn’t have an unsavoury story about abuse or harassment when it comes to working in comedy.

The informal, unregulated and atomised nature of the comedy industry creates conditions in which systemic discrimination and abuse can thrive. Butler and Stoyanova Russell (2018) demonstrate that comedians undertake significant emotional labour to manage their professional relationships, ‘[feeling] compelled to remain “friends” with promoters in spite of often emotionally distressing employment conditions’ (p. 1682).

This ‘reliance on social networks exacerbates economic inequality in the creative sector’ (Butler and Stoyanova Russell, 2018: 1669). Their study explores working conditions including poor levels and punctuality of pay rather than harassment and abuse, but juxtaposed against Pritchard-McLean’s (2020) description of some of the means by which this culture of abuse is perpetrated, the onus on comedians to maintain ‘friendly relations’ takes on an even more chilling aspect:

... the problem is so wide reaching ... From comedians being raped by promoters to those guys who insist you give them a hug before they pay you, the stalkers who threaten to sue you if you speak out and the men who start speculative conversations about what other female comedians would be like in bed while you stare at your phone screen in a green room.

Toxic work environments, substandard economic practices and harassment can impact comedians of any identity, and can exist in any kind of club. Time and again, though, comedians point to the enhanced vulnerability experienced by those who are tokenised, and hence isolated as the only representative of their identity on a bill. In this regard, Wacky Racists models a way to create safer environments for performers.

Finally, it is worth noting that unequal representation may stop some potential performers before they begin. Duker (2019, Personal communication) suspects that some would-be comedians are put off by the fact that comedy as a whole does not reflect, or appear to welcome, their identities. She further believes that her club invites a new demographic of comedy audiences:

What’s amazing with Wacky is that so many people come who don’t go to traditional comedy clubs and haven’t necessarily experienced comedy before. And I think what ... Wacky’s doing, what nights like [others including] FOC It Up! are doing, are kind of disrupting that system of clubs. And I think to some extent, like, we’re taking the audience of the traditional clubs but we’re also opening up ... what comedy [can possibly] provide for people who have ... been excluded from it ... or who haven’t seen themselves represented on stage.

Raekstad and Gradin (2020) argue that change cannot happen without prefiguration. They do not posit prefigurative strategies as the only valuable forms of political action, but they contend that it is necessary to experiment with alternatives as well as critiquing or dismantling existing, problematic structures, as we need to have some idea of what will replace those. They argue that ‘We should not only be against the social conditions and structures that we *don’t* want, but also simultaneously be for those that we *do*’ (Raekstad and Gradin 2020: 152, emphasis original). Wacky Racists achieves this by giving comedians in marginalised groups access to some of those advantages that the widespread practice of ‘selection box’ booking denies them. It offers opportunity to perform and to network; an environment where tribal confidence is raised and in which many comedians who understandably feel vulnerable when placed in a minority of one may feel – and be – safer. Duker also contends that the club opens up a greater range of creative possibilities within her bills, in comparison to those who perceive that one individual has an identity group ‘covered’, and attracts an audience that traditional clubs fail to engage. Hence, Wacky Racists and other platforming clubs offer immediate advantages in the ‘here and now’ for both performers and audiences.

Furthermore, the existence and success of Wacky Racists, along with other platforming clubs, poses a strong challenge to those practices which it rejects. Tokenistic booking practices are shown to be neither logistically necessary nor artistically beneficial. Prejudices which assert that there is either insufficient talent among marginalised demographics, or insufficient appetite among audiences to hear from them, are shown to be false. Alternatives are both viable and wanted. Platforming clubs expose faults in mainstream industry practices and assumptions, building workable solutions now, which demonstrate the feasibility of more widespread change in the future.

Doubts and difficulties

Duker (2019, Personal communication) avoids attaching labels to her own politics, saying ‘I would align myself with, like, left sensibilities’ but explaining that she finds more specific categorisation problematic. Indeed, she argues that comedy clubs are not political spaces, ‘at all!’ characterising them rather as spaces where political ideas can be presented along with other aspects of life. She emphasises that Wacky Racists is a space that exists, first and foremost, to make good comedy:

[P]eople are . . . quick to characterise nights like this as being, like, really woke – like used as a slur – or preachy or . . . virtue signalling. And I’ve no interest in . . . signalling virtue . . . I just want everyone to have the most fun . . . I want the performers to be able to mess up, and try things and be brave, and I want the audience to have . . . a great time and learn things and for it to be really good, for people to leave feeling exhilarated . . . The last thing I think anyone wants at Wacky is tepid comedy.

Duker draws an important distinction. Wacky Racists does aspire to offer safety in that it is careful to provide a non-threatening, enjoyable environment for both acts and audiences, in which adventurous material can be attempted. However, Duker’s oft-repeated statement that the club is ‘not a safe space’ clearly signals that there is no policing or censorship of material; no attempt to prevent work that is exciting or that audiences may find risky. The artistic emphasis is on fun and artistic extension rather than preaching a narrowing political formula.

We might, by contrast, expect meaningful political activity to focus on creating specified and widespread changes. This, though, is not how prefigurative tactics work. Instead, Raekstad and Gradin (2020) emphasise the experimental nature of prefigurative actions:

What we today believe to be necessary will likely change over time – it certainly has so far . . . [S]ince it is difficult to work towards a better world without having some conception of what that world might look like, we cannot do away with visions of the future altogether. Rather, we must treat them as temporary, tentative, and subject to revision. (p. 37)

When asked about her hopes for the club, Duker’s (2019, Personal communication) response implies no ambition to see the whole of the comedy industry adapt to the Wacky Racists model, albeit that she has hopes for the industry as well as the club. She notes that hers is not the first or only comedy club to emphasise minority voices or seek social change, referring to a long tradition of artistic and social spaces which work towards those goals.

She hopes that the club ‘continues to . . . introduce people who are less likely to experience comedy to . . . become part of . . . that world . . . I think it needs to engage people that have been left behind or forgotten about’. She also mentions a wish for the club to expand to different platforms, such as a podcast, ‘so that more people can experience it’ and ‘that it becomes even more of a . . . community, like a family, like . . . (*chuckles*) an entity in its own self that can just grow and get bigger and stronger’. Reflecting on the club’s aims, she says, ‘This [club] is kind of about being . . . constantly adaptive and constantly pushing the needs of people who haven’t been represented to before . . . So I think I’d just like that to continue’. She articulates similar hopes for the comedy industry:

. . . there are so many industries and art forms . . . [in which] the point of entry . . . dissuades a lot of people. Like comedy’s still so middle class . . . it’s pretty white, it’s pretty dominated by certain attitudes and ways of thinking . . . I think that hopefully it can become something that’s constantly checking itself, and constantly pushing its performers and its audience.

None of these ambitions speaks to a coherent or intentional programme of universal reform for the comedy industry. Of course, it would be ridiculous to expect such an ambition in a single comedy club. Rather, Duker describes the club’s ongoing evolution as a fundamentally *experimental* process; constantly trying new ways to expand and engage. The very fact that Wacky Racists is not designed as a conscious effort to overturn the status quo, replacing it with a new regime, is one of the reasons that it qualifies as a space of prefigurative politics. Central to valuing practices of prefiguration is the realisation that things that are small and contained are nonetheless significant. As Richard Day (2005) asserts, such micro strategies find their strength in this very feature; change becomes more achievable when we realise that ‘what it seems cannot *ever* be done *for anyone at all* using hegemonic methods can perhaps be done by some of us, *here and now*’ (p. 214, emphasis original).

A further fundamental of prefigurative politics is the acknowledgement that nothing is inevitable; those power relationships which we take for granted exist only because individuals act to reproduce them (Raekstad and Gradin, 2020: 54–55). Therefore, not only change, but also the status quo, is in the constant ‘[process] of becoming’ (Raekstad and Gradin, 2020: 55). Realising this can make change feel more achievable, because it emphasises that existing practices are contingent. Duker’s (2019, Personal communication) interpretation of mainstream industry practices reflects this belief that the industry is formed through incremental acts of change or reproduction:

I think that comedy’s changing . . . and responding in much the same way as other . . . forms of . . . art and . . . creativity are . . . People aren’t always being deliberately exclusive but . . . I think it is a *decision* to refuse to adapt, and to learn . . . I think that if you refuse to be progressive and to learn as a promoter, or as a performer, or even as an audience member then it’s bad for your comedy, and it’s bad for business.

Duker points to the popularity of her club and other models like Frances-White’s Guilty Feminist, which speak to formerly neglected demographics, and contrasts this with examples of clubs who are ‘not saying anything particularly . . . new or fresh or interesting’ which face a ‘real struggle to get bums on seats’. There are nights with very different

ideological perspectives to Duker's that are thriving and it cannot be argued that providing a platform for the marginalised is the only strategy that is 'good for business'. Yet, in describing the 'decision to refuse to adapt', Duker underlines how even the traditional and dominant practices in the comedy industry are dependent upon the actions of its personnel to constantly create and recreate its ethos, standards and practices, and that this is a choice rather than an inevitability.

It could be argued that the club does not prefigure desired social relations at all, as the desired future is surely one in which equity exists and strategies to stage diverse voices become unnecessary. Indeed, such strategies are sometimes posited as inequitable and discriminatory in themselves. Duker (2019, Personal communication) explains that nights which platform marginalised perspectives are sometimes seen as part of a trend that marginalises those who happen to belong to the dominant group:

People criticise nights that put . . . marginalised people at the forefront, or . . . have certain values . . . they associate it with censorship, with PC culture, with there kind of being restrictions . . . like, that, basically, white men can't do any more and it not being like it was . . . I don't think those things are really true.

As has been noted, Wacky Racists does not exercise censorship or restriction: it encourages experimentation and stages material that may be challenging, controversial or experimental, stretching both performers and audience artistically and politically. The club will stage white men, although they may be introduced as a 'token' act; a joke which emphasises their marginality in this space.² A response to the supposed exclusion of dominant identity groups may be found in Raekstad and Gradin's (2020: 96) identification of strategies which form 'targeted action to counteract particular hierarchies and inequalities' but which would 'not exist or be needed in the future society they aim for'. Such strategies are needed to counteract existing, ingrained power relations:

They show that prefiguring does not mean simply pretending that society is already free, equal and democratic. It does not mean ignoring currently existing hierarchies and inequalities. Rather, it means bridging the gap between what is and what could be, in a way that implements important aspects of the desired future society in the here-and-now. (Raekstad and Gradin, 2020: 97)

Alike Raekstad and Gradin, Duker (2019, Personal communication) argues that giving more space to marginalised people is an important step towards achieving equality. For the dominant group, this will entail a (perhaps unsettling) process of giving up some of the space that they currently occupy; indeed, achieving an equitable division will often involve giving up more than the 'equal' share. Raekstad and Gradin (2020: 93–94) defend this approach:

We need to do more than merely not exclude certain groups . . . Since we live in a society that provides some people with more resources, confidence, entitlement, and skills than others, these informal and indirect inequalities require particular attention. Prefigurative organising should also include measures that counteract broader inequalities and that give socially marginalised groups particular support.

This principle is reflected in Duker's (2019, Personal communication) response to criticisms of platforming spaces as discriminatory, where she posits that such attitudes partly come from dominant groups' own inexperience in encountering material not aimed primarily at themselves: 'they're not being targeted and they [feel] challenged by it'. In addition, she argues that the long history of comedy created by more privileged demographics, and the veneration of 'comedy heroes' within this, can lead to an assumption that those established models of challenge and subversion are the best or only necessary ones. When the challenge comes from a less familiar angle, 'they think "well this must be a place where no-one's . . . pushing the boundaries like Bill Hicks did" . . . or . . . "people are only allowed to say a certain frame of reference"'. Duker smilingly adds, 'but I think . . . if they came to the night, they will like it'. In doing so, she stresses that her night does not actually exclude anyone; it is simply that it shifts the emphasis in a way that may feel unfamiliar to individuals who are used to being centred and amplified.

The practice of proactively platforming marginalised perspectives is coherent with the practice of prefiguration, even if the tactic itself may not be needed in the hoped-for, equitable comedy industry of the future. In the current circumstances, there is a need for the marginalised to claim more space. Similarly, Duker's focus on comedy over widespread political change does not preclude Wacky Racists from being interpreted as prefigurative, as the experimental nature of prefigurative action removes the onus on its exponents to pursue a worked-out programme of reform. Despite some potential doubts and difficulties, then, we can categorise Wacky Racists as a prefigurative space.

Conclusion

Wacky Racists may be interpreted as a prefigurative space in that it embodies – and its creator echoes – some of the key underpinnings of prefigurative politics, including the recognition that the personal cannot be divided from the political, that subjective as well as supposedly 'objective' experiences must be taken into account when shaping equitable communities, that creating change means not only identifying what you are against, but also modelling what you are in favour of, and that the status quo is itself mutable. It experiments with new ways of doing things, eschewing outmoded notions of diversity embodied in 'selection box' booking procedures in favour of a specific focus on marginalised perspectives; this reads as radical within the current industry context. In doing so, it engages with 'the deliberate experimental implementation of desired future social relations and practices in the here-and-now' (Raekstad and Gradin, 2020: 36).

The result has been to produce some immediate beneficial impacts; for example, Duker asserts that her club (along with other spaces) is growing new and thriving audiences; it has provided its performers with a space in which they benefit from the tribal confidence that may be denied them in some other clubs, as well as valuable networking opportunities. It removes some of the risk factors that can lead to toxic or unsafe working environments.

The club's existence identifies, and draws attention to, problems with representation in the current industry. Importantly, it also provides living evidence that current practices such as tokenistic booking are unnecessary, demonstrating that prejudices and assumptions about the limited availability or quality of talent among marginalised groups are

spurious. By its very existence, and through its success in creating high-quality nights of entertainment, the club demonstrates that making space for marginalised voices is a viable strategy; artistically, commercially and morally. We may feel that this should go without saying; however, current inequities in the industry, supported as they are by widespread attitudes and practices, demonstrate that many still need to be convinced. For all of these reasons, Wacky Racists can be seen as a prefigurative space.

Recognising platforming clubs as prefigurative spaces can help us to understand their significance as political entities, and their capacity to create change. As Raekstad and Gradin argue, change is unlikely to occur using prefigurative strategies alone, but cannot occur without them. Platforming clubs therefore provide an important means by which the comedy industry – and wider society – may be brought to recognise and embody more equitable attitudes and practices.

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Notes

1. Historically, the term ‘alternative comedy’ usually refers to a particular form which emerged as a marginal scene in the late 1970s and grew to dominate the comedy landscape; ‘mainstream’ to the dominant form to which that movement was opposed at the time. Today, these terms may still be used in this way. However, they may also be used as Duker does here, where ‘mainstream’ signifies *current* dominant practices, some of which may even be associated with the style and personnel of the original Alternative Comedy movement: this is how the terms are used in this article.
2. This is, for example, the treatment afforded white male one-man ‘house band’ The Tone Deafs at the April gig (Wacky Racists, 2019a).

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