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This was published 17 years ago

Funny: the joke's on us

April 29, 2006 – 10.00am



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The best comedy knows no geographical boundaries, writes Stephanie Bunbury, and much of it can be witnessed in Melbourne during the final week of the Comedy Festival.

WHAT'S SO funny? Two weeks into the Comedy Festival now; a lot more laughs to go. Laughter: the universal panacea. Not, of course, that it necessarily is universal. Travel writer Martha Gellhorn noticed when she was in central Africa that the real distinction between peoples must surely be sense of humour; nothing about the naked village women about her seemed half as foreign as their collective sense of humour. They laughed a lot, she could see, but why? She could never see the joke.

We often take this as a truism, that what we find funny is a product of age, class and culture. A friend of mine lecturing in media hooked up with an American counterpart to monitor his class's response to an episode of *Kath and Kim*. They didn't laugh at all. But, objected plenty of the people who interviewed her about it, what else would anyone expect? Why did she waste taxpayers' money (as they say) on that phone call to hear what everyone already knew? That Americans don't do irony?

At other moments, however, "everyone" equally knows that we are all the same under the skin and that we can all get along if we just have a laugh. Interestingly, nobody is more adamant about the universality of comedy than the comedians on the front line. "I've always thought that if funny is funny, funny travels," says Glenn Wool, a Canadian who has worked in Britain for nine years and is now in Melbourne. "There might be subtle differences in the crowd, but it's not enough to shake something that is actually funny."

He prefers working in Britain, he says, because Canadians are more easily offended. "I don't think I say anything offensive" (at least, not for someone who starts his set with a joke about anal sex) "but I prefer London as they are so cynical and you can take it to another level." But anyone who notices significant national differences, he says, is probably doing material so parochial that it excludes anyone else.

"Then they say the differences are vast but it's just that people don't understand the references. They can put together what the joke is, but unless it's something

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close to their heart they are not going to say 'oh yes, there has clearly been an injustice here somewhere' and laugh out loud."

Anything that has a local equivalent, however, will work - which, according to English comic Daniel Kitson, generally means anything at all within the English-speaking world. Everyone has talent competitions and reality shows on television, whether they watch them or not. Everyone recognises the same kinds of social tribes, the same embarrassments and bones of social contention. There cannot be a corner of the globe left, for example, where you couldn't raise a titter with a decent gag about mobile phones.

But even if Wool is right, that funny is funny wherever you take it, it is still true that different places produce different kinds of funny. Not so long ago, British critics regularly lamented the state of the local sitcom; no local writing was as funny, clever or scintillatingly professional as the comedies coming out of America - written, as everyone knew, by teams of razor-sharp comedians jockeying for position.

What was meant, really, was that nothing was as good as *Seinfeld* or *The Simpsons*, both critical favourites and broadly popular, although for the purposes of this argument "good" could also include such astonishingly successful money-spinners as *Friends*. Americans had discipline. They did joke counts, checking off laughs against minutes. They were better because they were ruthless.

At pretty much precisely the time that this became the conventional view, however, British comedy was being revitalised, even reborn, in the two zones way below the radar of these critical observers: fringe theatre and radio. In the early

1990s, Chris Morris and Armando Iannucci started a spoof news show called *The Day Today*, which later transferred to television.

Morris was later to cause outrage with a fake news show called *The Brass Eye* in which he persuaded real politicians and celebrities to rail against entirely imaginary social problems: "animal suicides", "heavy electricity" and a fictitious drug from Prague called "cake" that one Conservative MP promised Morris he would raise in parliament. *The Daily Mail* described Morris as "the most loathed man on television". Novelist Will Self suggested he was God.

For Australians of a certain age, there were echoes here of Norman Gunston and his inspired interviews with bewildered stars who thought they were supposed to be on a chat show. Roy and HG, particularly during the Sydney Olympics, were similarly prepared to charge into no-go areas, although even they might have stopped short of Morris' satire on pedophilia.

What was particular to this British "school" of comedy, however, was its surrealism, twists on language and unembarrassed intellectualism: it was comedy for people who read books, and made sure everyone knew it. Indeed, Dylan Moran's and Graham Lineham's *Black Books*, set in a second-hand bookshop, was a classic example of the genre.

A current one is *Green Wing*, a bizarre comedy about a large teaching hospital in which time is continually sped up and slowed down; patients and their afflictions are never mentioned; and the ongoing plots, like the one about the anaesthetist who unknowingly has sex with his own mother, crash every taste barrier. As far as comedy is concerned, the revolution is being televised.

This new wave is also very specifically British in its theatrical background. Some of the television comedies of the past few years, such as *The League of Gentlemen* and *The Mighty Boosh*, began as theatre shows; others merely reference the tradition in their use of over-articulated language and improvisation. There even seems to be a loose repertory group of actors and writers who swap between shows of a similar ilk, a sharp contrast to the American preferences for fresh ensembles or star vehicles.

Almost all of this work is for the small screen, but many actors familiar from *Spaced*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *Green Wing* pop up in a new feature film, *Confetti*, a satire on the wedding industry in which both dialogue and plot were entirely improvised.

Interestingly the director, Debbie Isitt, knew almost none of these actors before she started working with them.

"I think the thing I aspired to do was use a company of actors in the same way I've done in theatre for 24 years," she says. "And for me, that comes from theatre, not television. You have to engage an audience, you don't want to bore them, you want to give them a dramatic, fulfilling experience, you want to hear laughter but you also want to hear a few tears. I'm always saying I want the audience to laugh, cry and think. That's the principle I've always worked on."

Most significant of all, perhaps, is the new television comedy's use of silence. Caroline Aherne's *The Royle Family* challenged every platitudinous assumption about what made a sitcom funny by sticking to a static set and turning tedium into a comic effect.

Then came *The Office*, which pushed silence right into Harold Pinter territory and brought a new intensity to British comedy's great subject: miserable, toe-curling social embarrassment. Again, however, it is a British subject that has mutated painlessly into an excellent American version of the show; as Glenn Wool says, funny is funny.

Those silences were initially possible because, in British comedy, muddle is OK. Not everything has to work. The comedy in British sitcoms emerges, sometimes quite slowly or slyly, from character rather than from one-liners. Some stand-ups are as snappy as *Seinfeld*, but the comedian most namechecked by other comedians, Daniel Kitson, is a shambling, chaotic presence with a significant stutter. It all adds up to the opposite of a joke count. It is also, as Kitson particularly insists, not for everyone.

For the past couple of years, Kitson has been trying to deter audiences he doesn't like; as he puts it, "to stop c---s coming". This is not easy. Television comedies such as *Green Wing* are counted as hits on the basis of thinly spread audiences of the like-minded; if you turn on a show at random, you soon know whether it's for you. Stand-up comedy is, first and foremost, a night out. Kitson says he can rail against drunks in the audience and the drunks will say, "Hey hey! He's talking about us! Great!" and come back the next time.

"It is easy to think ignorance can't be that tenacious, but it is," he says. "It is just as likely someone will like me for all the wrong reasons and like me for far longer than someone I do want to like me." When I saw him, the night before he left for Australia, he paid someone £20 to leave; the ticket price was £8 but Kitson didn't

have change. It was worth it, he says. "He was texting for ages and it wasn't so much that, it was that he did that thing of saying 'oh, just carry on'. And that annoyed me. I just decided I'd rather he wasn't there."

What this reflects, albeit in an entirely personal way, is the niche character of the best of current comedy. There have always been class distinctions in humour, obviously, but this is less about class than tribe, about laughing at the same things as people like us and not laughing at the things other kinds of people find funny. We're past talking about whether Americans get irony - maybe a lot don't, but the ones like us do - or which side of the Atlantic does funny better. In this context, it doesn't matter where comedy comes from: for Americans, English, Australians, Canadians or any other variety of Anglophone, funny is funny. It just isn't funny for everybody.

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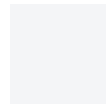


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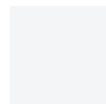
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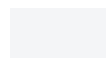
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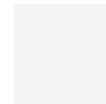
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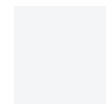
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