

UK Stand-Up Comedy 2.0.

Dr Ellie Tomsett – Birmingham City University.

This short piece will offer a reflection on the ways in which the UK live comedy scene has coped during the 2020/21 Covid-19 pandemic. The focus will be on the way stand-up comedy has attempted to sustain itself online during this period, and some of the spatial and temporal challenges this has presented to performers and audiences. So, to paraphrase The Mighty Boosh ‘come with me now on a journey through time and space’.

The UK is (as I write this) in Lockdown 3, having over the last year undertaken numerous different approaches to ‘getting the virus under control’. The strategies deployed by the UK government have often been the target of online satire during this period – notable musical comedy examples here include Flo and Joan’s electro inspired ‘Lockdown Dance’¹ in response to the Prime Minister’s confused and conflicting ‘stay at home’ advice from May 2020, and Munya Chawawa’s Montell Jordan cover ‘This is How We Knew It’² about the (non)surprise announcement of UK Lockdown 2 in late October 2020. The UK’s methods of dealing with this pandemic have not remained consistent, have often appeared contradictory and/or confusing and have had a huge impact on the live comedy sector across the nations and regions. Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England have all adhered to slightly different approaches and timelines set by their respective devolved governments. While I will be reflecting on the UK in general, this is written from my own perspective as a resident of Manchester and as such considers some of the regionally specific challenges faced in North West England during the pandemic.

In terms of the wider political and cultural context, that the UK’s funding bodies have always had a problem with live comedy, and this complex and uneasy backstory set the tone for the way comedy as a form has been considered during the pandemic response to date. Arts Council England’s (ACE)³ notorious refusal to see comedy as anything but a ‘self-sustaining’ commercial form has normalised (however unintentionally, as I am sure they would argue) the idea that comedy is not worth funding. This has been a hotly contested topic over many years (as an example see Davis, 2009). However, when the whole live comedy industry system fell apart due to UK Lockdown 1, ACE had no choice but to admit to something that was always the case – the cultural system of live comedy is very fragile and, in many instances, commercially precarious. As a result of the closure of comedy and hospitality venues many people at the bottom of this system had their work withdrawn and career aspirations wiped out (or significantly set back) overnight.

After significant lobbying from the newly established Live Comedy Association⁴, Arts Council England did eventually acknowledge that comedy could and should be supported via the Cultural Recovery Fund (CRF) during the road to pandemic recovery (Dessau, 2020). Finally, comedy’s time had come. However, the focus on organisations and venues somewhat undermined this help for the sector, since almost all comedians work as self-employed freelancers, and this was a category repeatedly overlooked by government support. Even those venues and festivals that did manage to get funding via the CRF often experienced difficulties. Acclaimed Manchester comedy venue The Frog and Bucket was involved in a high-profile dispute with ACE who, when rejecting their initial application for support, stated that the venue had not made a strong enough case that they were ‘culturally

significant'. What was undeniably significant however was the industry backlash against this decision (Jackson, 2020), with comics and supporters crowd funding for the venue and expressing utter dismay at the decision. The Frog and Bucket is arguably, by many standards, the most significant comedy club for Manchester, if not the wider North West region, and has been central to launching the careers of many big names, including Peter Kay and Jason Manford and, more recently, has provided a home for the UK Women in Comedy Festival. In response ACE publicly commented that 'cultural significance' was not the only way in which they assess applications (and it was only one of the reasons The Frog and Bucket's application was rejected). But this offensively blunt wording from ACE clearly betrayed a lack of awareness of the long-standing scepticism of the funder from the comedy industry, and played into fears that comedy was still not being taken seriously as an art form. It is also vital to note that as comedy has not been included before as a funded activity by ACE, many of these comic organisations were put in the position of having to write complex funding applications without any prior experience. Thus, inexperienced comedy-specific organisations were potentially competing with much bigger regional organisations with experience of the ACE processes and existing relationships (or at the very least name-recognition) with the funder. The way this process was handled, and put comedy applicants at a unique disadvantage, did not seem to be acknowledged as part of this attempt to assist the sector.

Timing: the impact on careers

Timing is critically important for live comedy - not just in the set-up punchline sense but also in terms of building a career. Comedians need to gather momentum and audience recognition to have a sustainable career, as well as build up stage experience to develop as confident performers. Opportunities to do both gather momentum and build up stage time have been decimated during this period. Many stand-up comedians, even those with a significant celebrity status, have been undertaking other employment to survive during the period. Some, such as Edinburgh Comedy Award Best Newcomer nominee 2017, Lauren Pattison, have, within their (online) performances, publicly discussed considering retraining rather than starting the process of building up a career again from scratch. In order to maintain existing momentum several comics devised projects that, while potentially not resulting in huge amounts of income, continued to develop a relationship with audiences online. For example:

- Irish comic Alison Spittle's Covideo Parties encouraged people to synchronize watching films (of varying degrees of quality and kitch-ness) while Spittle, other comics and members of the public, comically tweeted along.
- Comedians Alex Horne, Tim Key and Mark Watson's revival of parlour game format No More Jockeys on YouTube proved successful enough to produce merchandise, and also resulted in an extensive fan community in the comments section, inspiring a twitter account, @BelowTheLineHQ, with fans being affectionately referred to within the game as the 'Jockstraps'.

- The Covid Arms (which I will return to later) was established as an online gig space, along the lines of a traditional mixed-bill, by Jake Lea-Wilson, Jess Lea-Wilson and comedian Kiri Pritchard-McLean, and has provided a significant number of opportunities for a diverse range of comic talent to perform. The night managed to attract the sponsorship of Beavertown Brewery and, since its establishment in March 2020, this initiative has also made (at time the of writing) over £140,000 for the food bank network charity The Trussell Trust.

The above are just some examples of comedians diversifying their approach to maintain their cultural presence in a virtual environment, whilst also providing some much-needed and collectively experienced joy during an increasingly bleak and isolating time. But the creative labour required to undertake these kinds of activities requires time and energy. Therefore, those having to undertake other paid employment to survive while the live comedy sector re-opens and recovers may not have the chance to engage in these kinds of audience and presence sustaining opportunities.

This effective draining of creative talent from the comedy industry will disproportionately affect those who were already at a disadvantage starting out (i.e., those who do not fit the white cis-gender male, middle class, able-bodied type that Friedman (2014) identifies as commercially successful ‘T-Shirt comics’). The economic and class disparities which have long been an issue for creative careers more broadly in the UK (see Friedman and Laurison 2020, Brook, O’Brien and Taylor, 2020), as well as the gendered and racialized distribution of unpaid labour and care work (which noticeably worsened during the pandemic, see Barry, 2021) will no doubt impact on who can take part in the industry, post-pandemic. Unless you have the economic resources and free time to hang on, until things return to relative normality, it may simply not be possible to pick up where you left off. Therefore this lack of support for comedians individually during this time will exacerbate the already existing significant racial, gender and class issues for UK live comedy (Tomsett, forthcoming).

Space: working the rooms

One of the most visible ways in which live comedy was negatively impacted was the (numerous and ongoing) closures of the spaces of performance. This included both dedicated venues (such as arts centres and comedy clubs) and also the more informal spaces provided for comedy such as the backrooms or basements of pubs and bars. Sophie Quirk (2011) has extensively detailed the many ways the physical space of live comedy, ‘the room’, can impact on the way a stand-up performance unfolds. Quirk identifies both the importance of enabling an uninterrupted focus on the performer, and the need for audiences to be in close proximity to each other so that ‘the flow of energy through the room’ (2011, 227) is enhanced, as central to the success of stand-up comedy.

As approaches to minimising the transmission of Covid-19 prevent such physical proximity, and requires good ventilation, face coverings and certainly no shouting or laughing (which impact on aerosol transmission), the spaces where live comedy normally takes place went through a frustrating process of trying to adapt to these changes. After initially being shut formally by the government lockdown regulations, there were then several false starts to

re-opening comedy venues which were poorly handled and resulted in huge amounts of stress for those involved. In late July 2020 The Frog and Bucket were asked by the government to run a pilot night in order to see whether spaces could be adapted to provide a 'Covid secure' environment (Bennett, 2020). The venue did so, and their trial was deemed successful. But after spending time, energy and money re-booking their newly adapted space, they and all other Manchester venues had re-opening pulled away from them only a matter of hours later by the government as part of regional 'local lockdown' restrictions which came into force on the 5th August 2020 (resulting in the need to cancel and refund/reschedule) (Finnis, 2020). Yet changes were made during this period to the physical spaces of comedy, with the hope of enabling performances to go ahead⁵. These temporary changes, however, certainly impacted negatively on the quality of the room for comic performance in line with Quirk's (2011) observations and thus will almost certainly be abandoned as soon as possible in the longer term.

Some events that would normally have occurred live in physical spaces did occur in an online form, such as Sophie Duker's Whacky Racists night and solo shows from Olga Koch, Ahir Shah and Jayde Adams as part of an online line-up for The Shednburgh Fringe Festival (of theatre, poetry and comedy) initiative in August 2020. The Birmingham Comedy Festival managed to deliver a programme of online events in October 2020 (to maintain its successful 19-year history), and The Leicester Comedy Festival (a high-profile recipient of ACE funding) also went ahead with an online model, in February 2021.

Since live comedy has attempted to survive these venue closures via streaming services online, performers and audiences are now in a 'post-room' world. Those engaging with stand-up via the Internet are all, simultaneously, in many rooms. I would argue that stand-up comic performance is uniquely disadvantaged by the need to move online, in that the form is interactional, co-constructed (through a lack of 4th wall – dissimilar from many kinds of other theatrical performance) and requires a significant amount of connection between audience and performer. In this online context it's a much more digital connection that's the issue now. It is no longer 'the audience's cooperation which allows the act to succeed' (Quirk, 2011, 220) but the speed of the comics' wifi, and whether Zoom feels like playing the game⁶. Some online events offered opportunities for differing levels of engagement to their audiences by using multiple technological solutions. For many events audience members could opt to be 'on the Zoom call' and therefore were able to interact with the show as it unfolded (i.e. they could be seen by the performers and engage with the compère as directed). Those audience members who did not want to partake in interaction had the option to purchase cheaper ticket to watch via a live streaming platform (e.g. YouTube) without opportunities for involvement.

When attending online comedy events over the past year, I have found that this change to the spatial dynamics of the performances has impacted significantly on the role of the compère. As Rutter (2000) observed, in the live environment compères play a vital role in contextualising the individual performances on a mixed bill, and create a sense of continuity for the audience. It is clear that compères still provide this function in an online situation. However, rather than bringing a performer into the space of the audience ("welcome to the stage"), they are now arguably facilitating the exact opposite – they are bringing the audience (and the enthusiasm/ good will they have built up) into the space of the performer

(as it appears on screen). When Kiri Pritchard-McLean hosts *The Covid Arms*, we start with her, in her highly decorated, sparkly and sequined space that attempts to replicate the show-biz nature of stage performance. Throughout the event Pritchard-McLean then facilitates (as compère) the shift between her curated space and (for example) the living room of Lolly Adefope or the spare room of David O’Doherty. This change in location occurs through a brief moment of ‘hand over’ where compère and comic both appear on screen, as small talk or ‘banter’ is used to cover the awkward shift between one space and another as the compère extracts themselves from the shared screen space. Rather than just enthusiastically shouting the name of the comic, handing them the mic and leaving the stage, this baton-handover requires a more complex form of participation on the part of the compère. Meanwhile the audience has actually remained in their own domestic space (in my case cat snoring loudly, tea in hand, iPad balanced on coffee table) and thus the ability to truly focus on the comic’s performance, as is facilitated by a good ‘room’ in the real world, is not easily achieved.

Concluding thoughts:

It is clear that live comedy has faced many challenges that overlap with wider creative and performance industries in the UK during the pandemic response of 2020/21, and no doubt the specific challenges to the form of live comedy may well be similar around the world. What is unique to the UK however, is the way this situation has forced the main funder of arts and culture projects to finally include comedy (at organisational, if not at an individual level) within its remit. It will be essential to see if this inclusion, and acknowledgement of comedy as an art form in need of financial support to survive, is maintained in the longer term. This support will be of vital significance - not only for new entrants into the industry whose chances to break into the field will be further diminished should comedy clubs, festivals or organisations go under, but also in regard to the sustainability of careers already established but cut short, or curtailed, by the pandemic. This is especially important to consider in relation to the inclusion within the UK live comedy industry of those who experienced existing economic, racial and gendered challenges to working in the sector before the Covid-19 outbreak, which have only intensified during this period.

References

Barry, Andrea. 2021. “We cannot allow the pandemic to set gender parity back decades.” *Joseph Rowntree Foundation* [online] 8/3/21. <https://www.irf.org.uk/blog/we-cannot-allow-pandemic-set-gender-parity-back-decades> (accessed 31/3/21)

Bennett, Steve. 2020. “It’s good to be back! Inside the UKs first comedy club gig for four months.” *Chortle* [online]. 30/7/2020 https://www.chortle.co.uk/features/2020/07/30/46601/its_good_to_be_back!_inside_the_uk_s_first_comedy_club_gig_for_four_months (accessed 5/3/21)

Brook, Orian, David O’Brien, and Mark Taylor. 2020. *Culture is Bad For You*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Davis, Hazel. 2009. "Why isn't comedy funded by the Arts Council?." *The Guardian* [online] 3/11/2009 <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/nov/03/comedy-funded-arts-council> (accessed 31/3/21)

Dessau, Bruce. 2020. "Comedy Clubs Can Apply for Cultural Renewal Fund Grants." *Beyond the Joke* [online] 29/7/2020 <https://www.beyondthejoke.co.uk/content/9153/comedy-fund-grants> (accessed 22/3/21)

Finnis, Alex. 2020. "Greater Manchester lockdown map: Areas affected by local coronavirus rules coming in today and how they work." *iNews* [online] 9/8/2020. <https://inews.co.uk/news/uk/greater-manchester-lockdown-map-areas-new-local-coronavirus-rules-postcodes-restrictions-explained-568071> (accessed 5/3/21)

Friedman, Sam. 2014. *Comedy and Distinction: The Cultural Currency of a 'Good' Sense of Humour*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Friedman, Sam and Daniel Laurison. 2020. *The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Heward, Emily. 2020. "Manchester comedy club Frog and Bucket is finally reopening – here's what's on." *Manchester Evening News* [online] 11/09/2020 <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/whats-on/comedy-news/manchester-comedy-club-frog-bucket-18917361> (accessed 6/4/21)

Jackson, Daisy. 2020. "Comedians rally round Frog and Bucket after funding outrage." *Manchester Evening News* [online]. 13/10/2020 <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/whats-on/comedy-news/comedians-rally-around-frog-bucket-19097982> (accessed 22/3/21)

Quirk, Sophie 2011. "Containing the Audience: The 'Room' in Stand-Up Comedy." *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*. 8(2): 219-238.

Rutter, Jason (2000) 'The stand-up introduction sequence: Comparing comedy compères'. *Journal of Pragmatics*. 32: 463-483.

Tomsett, Ellie (forthcoming) *Stand-up Comedy and Contemporary Feminisms. Reflections on UK Comedy's Glass Ceiling*.

¹ For Flo and Joan's Lockdown Dance see <https://youtu.be/OE50ZV5d5fs> (Accessed 31/3/21)

² For Munya Chawawa's This is How We Knew It (Montell Jordan Parody) see <https://youtu.be/nfUPiUiNI7w> (Accessed 31/3/21)

³ The bodies awarding National Lottery funding for Arts and Culture across the UK are as follows. In England, Arts Council England - <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk>. In Scotland, Creative Scotland -

<https://www.creativescotland.com> (which does formally recognise comedy as an artform for both individuals and organisations as part of eligibility guidance on their website). In Wales, Cyngor Calfyddydau Cymru/Arts Council of Wales - <https://arts.wales> and in Northern Ireland, Arts Council of Northern Ireland - <http://www.artscouncil-ni.org> (all sites accessed 6/4/21)

⁴ See <https://livecomedyassociation.co.uk> (accessed 6/4/21)

⁵ For an image of The Frog and Bucket's audience space (when open between Lockdowns 1 and 2) see Heward (2020).

⁶ I am aware I have implied that Zoom is sentient in this sentence – but as someone who has been teaching online a lot this past year, I feel I have a body of anecdotal evidence to support this theory.