Oliver Double

# Tragedy Plus Time: Transforming Life Experience into Stand-Up Comedy

In this article, Oliver Double examines the process of turning traumatic personal experience into viable stand-up comedy material by offering a detailed account of the creative process behind his 2015 show *Break a Leg*. Drawing on Bergson, Brecht, and Noël Carroll, he explores the origins of comic ideas in personal observation, and argues for a two-stage process of joke creation. This is fleshed out in a detailed examination of a particular routine, in which he uses Koestler's concept of bisociation to show how an initial observation was shaped into a series of punchlines. He also discusses authenticating strategies which comedians employ to demonstrate that they are recalling their actual experiences, and ways in which the dialogic qualities of stand-up affect empathy and intimacy. Oliver Double is a former professional comedian who is now a Reader in Drama at the University of Kent. He is the author of *Stand-Up! On Being a Comedian* (1997), *Britain Had Talent: a History of Variety Theatre* (2012), and *Getting the Joke: the Inner Workings of Stand-Up Comedy* (2nd edition, 2014). A film of *Break a Leg* is available on YouTube, and the related podcast *Breaking a Leg* is accessible via iTunes.

*Key terms:* Henri Bergson, Bertolt Brecht, Noël Carroll. Arthur Koestler, bisociation.

A University of Kent lecturer has turned a terrifying experience . . . into a comedy show.
*Canterbury Times*[1]

AT THE END of January 2015, I fell while jogging in snowy conditions and broke my femur. This led to an operation to insert a Proximal Femoral Nail Antirotation into my leg, a stay in a hospital geriatric ward (despite being only forty-nine years old at the time), and a six-month recovery period, during which I had to learn to walk again using first a Zimmer frame, then crutches, and finally a stick. Ten months later, on 6 December, I was performing a full-length stand-up comedy show about the whole experience, entitled *Break a Leg*, at the Gulbenkian Theatre in Canterbury, to an audience of 176.[2]

This was the centre of a Practice as Research project investigating the processes by which stand-up is made. Following Robin Nelson's model of PaR, the emphasis was not on 'outsider' knowledge, observing the subject from an external perspective and focusing on such issues as interpretation and meaning ('know-that'), but rather on 'insider' knowledge, focusing on the experiential and embodied knowledge ('know-how') which I drew on in the process of devising and performing the show. The idea was to generate 'know-what' – this being 'the tacit made explicit through critical reflection' – focusing on such issues as methods of composition.[3] As Nelson points out, 'The key method used to develop know-what from know-how is that of critical reflection – pausing, standing back, and thinking about what you are doing.'[4]

To facilitate this, I created a podcast called *Breaking a Leg*, in which I was able to comment on the creative process while I was actively engaged in it, as well as reflecting on the project as a whole shortly after completing it. Twenty-one episodes were recorded and released between August 2015 and February 2016. They are available to download for free via Jellycast and iTunes, and as I write this there have been 1,735 downloads in total.

The particular focus here is on the creative processes I used to process and transform actual life experience – involving both phy-

 © CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS doi:10.1017/S0266464X17000057 
https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X17000057 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sical pain and emotional trauma – into stand-up comedy material. In addition to existing comic theory and writing on stand-up, I will make use of literature on autobiographical performance and documentary theatre, both of which consider the issues that arise from creating performance based on real-life incidents. I will also make liberal use of material drawn from the podcast and, of course, from the show itself.

The aim is to identify the particular techniques and structures I used to create viable, laughter-yielding stand-up material from what was, on the face of it, a comedically unpromising life experience. I will explore these at two levels, focusing both on the smaller scale, looking at how experiences can be structured into individual gags and routines; but also addressing broader issues, examining larger themes and theories about how individuals create and appreciate humour and the communication processes between comedians and audiences.

## Context

In 2006, Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves named 'emotional pain' as one of the 'still unacceptable taboos' of comedy,[5] yet there is a long history of comedians getting laughs by talking about their own very real misfortunes. In the 1960s Lenny Bruce got a lot of material out of his long-term legal difficulties, although by the time he started reading out actual court transcripts he suffered from diminishing returns in terms of audience laughter. Richard Pryor was much more successful, mining comedy gold throughout his career from various kinds of suffering he experienced, notably such health issues as a heart attack, severe burns inflicted while freebasing cocaine, and multiple sclerosis.

More recently, there has been a marked increase in comedians tackling difficult subjects, particularly in hour-long themed shows at the Edinburgh Fringe. Serious illness is an important theme, from Andre Vincent's *Andre Vincent is Unwell* (2002) – about having cancer – to Scott Agnew's 2016 show *I've Snapped My Banjo String*, about being diagnosed with HIV. That year also saw Richard Gadd win the Edinburgh Comedy Award for his show *Monkey See Monkey Do*, which tackled the difficulties he experienced overcoming a sexual assault.

A number of comedians have created shows about the death of a father, such as Smug Roberts's *Me Dad's Dead* (2006) and Jason Cook's *Joy* (2008). Indeed, in a review of Sean Hughes's 2012 show *Life Becomes Noises*, Brian Logan notes that 'comedy shows about dads, dead and sometimes alive, are a thriving sub-genre in Edinburgh'.[6] Some of these shows have enjoyed considerable critical and commercial success, notably Russell Kane's *Smokescreens and Castles*, which won the 2010 Edinburgh Comedy Award before touring and being released as a DVD; and Mark Thomas's one-man show *Bravo Figaro*, which was commissioned by the Royal Opera House for the Ignite Festival in 2011, reworked for the Edinburgh Fringe in 2012, and subsequently toured.

This trend has become prevalent enough to be sent up in a recent episode of *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle*, in which Lee complains in typically bitter and irony-sodden style about the 'new trend' of 'these young comics' doing 'depressing, award-winning, meaningful stand-up shows', cruelly mimicking them before utterly dismissing them: '"Oh, I've got eczema. It's really itchy. (*Laughter.*) But I, it's, I've m—, it's taught me something about life. Having eczema. Can I have an award please?" "Oh – my dad's dead. An' 'e's died. An' it's really depressing. But –" OH FUCK OFF, SHUT UP! (*Laughter.*) Give your award back! (*Laughter.*)'[7]

Even outside the rarefied context of the Fringe, comedians have begun to perform material about personal trauma. In particular, at the Largo comedy club in Los Angeles on 3 August 2012, Tig Notaro based her entire half-hour set on a series of appalling events that had befallen her, starting the act by announcing over the audience's welcoming applause, 'Hello. Good evening, hello. I have cancer, how are you?'[8] The incident was reported internationally. Louis CK, who witnessed the show, tweeted that this was one of 'a handful of truly great, masterful stand-up sets' he had seen in twenty years of


https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X17000057 Published online by Cambridge University Press

doing comedy, and released an audio download of the performance on his website.[9] It was subsequently released as a CD on the Secretly Canadian label.

The most immediate context for *Break a Leg* is my own experience performing stand-up. From 1988 to 1999, I performed professionally in the UK, as well as promoting and compering a weekly comedy club, the Last Laugh, in Sheffield from 1992 to 1997.In 2006 I did a show called *Saint Pancreas* about bringing up two children with type 1 diabetes, and this led to performances for various diabetes organizations in (among others) London, Windsor, Glasgow, and Orlando, Florida.

## The Notebook

Most theories of comedy focus on its meaning and interpretation, but some also consider the mental processes which occur when we create a joke. For example, the philosopher Noël Carroll makes a distinction between 'found humour' and 'invented humour'. In found humour, 'we may suddenly notice something encountered in everyday life is in some way funny (incongruous)' or 'come across an accidental absurdity'.[10] By contrast, invented humour is 'proffered with the intention, supported by external and internal features of the presentation, to afford comic amusement'.[11]

The distinction, then, is between the *private* humorous amusement we feel when we come across something funny in our everyday lives and the formal joking or comic performance that is *shared between people* with the intention of getting a laugh. Of course, invented humour necessarily involves an act of invention, and in naming the phenomenon of found humour, Carroll offers us a starting point for the creative process behind comedy. Every joke ever told must have started its life with this kind of *noticing* of something incongruous or absurd, thus rewarding its inventor with private humorous amusement.

For Bergson, this ability to find the humour in the world around us is related to detachment. When we really concentrate on what is going on around us and give the people surrounding us our fullest sympathy, it changes our perception so that 'as though at the touch of a fairy wand you will see the flimsiest of objects assume importance, and a gloomy hue spread over everything'. If, on the other hand, we 'look upon life as a disinterested spectator: many a drama will turn into a comedy'.[12]

This brings to mind Brecht's alienation effect, in which 'something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible' is transformed into 'something peculiar, striking, and unexpected'.[13] For Brecht, seeing the world with a detached, questioning eye allows us to see what we take for granted in a new and clearer light, and some of the examples he gives have comic potential or the feel of a joke. For example, he quotes the 'Eskimo' definition of a car as 'a wingless aircraft that crawls along the ground', and notes that, 'If one sees one's teacher hounded by the bailiffs an A-effect occurs: one is jerked out of a relationship in which the teacher seems big into one where he seems small.'[14] Having performed stand-up, I can instantly see the comic possibilities in the second example, and indeed my teenage son and his friends got a lot of laughs out of sharing a rumour that their former science teacher had been seen serving in a fast-food restaurant.

What this detached way of viewing the world allows us to see is the incongruity that surrounds us but often goes unnoticed. Stand-up comedians develop it as a positive mental habit, always sifting experience for comic potential. Crucially, when they experience found humour they must record it, and store it as the raw substance that might be worked up into material for the act. This means that the comedian's notebook is one of the most important tools of the trade.[15]

The first inklings of *Break a Leg* can be found in the pages of a yellow Moleskine notebook with Homer Simpson on the front. It was a general notebook, dedicated less to the business of writing down ideas for comedy material than to making notes relating to my job as a lecturer at the University of Kent. As I recorded in the podcast, shortly after being discharged from hospital,


https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X17000057 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I started wanting to remember this weird experience I'd gone through of spending eight days in hospital having a major operation and then the beginning of being at home and being housebound . . . so I started making notes and drawing little sketches of the layout of the ward and the people I was in the ward with. And, you know, making notes of the types of things they said and that kind of thing.[16]

The main purpose of these notes was to create a personal record of the experience as a way of emotionally processing it all. There was no conscious intention to use any of this as comedy material when I started writing, but even on the very first page there are ideas which eventually went into the show. As the notes continue through the pages of the book, they start to become more and more oriented towards potential material, and there are ideas that have plainly been written as ideas for gags much earlier than the first page which I headed, 'Comedy Ideas'.

There is an oft-quoted phrase, often by comedians, and thought to have been originated by Steve Allen in the 1950s: 'Comedy equals tragedy plus time.' The clear logic behind this is that terrible experiences can become funny when time has lent them enough distance to be seen with detachment. In a sense, the pages of my yellow Simpsons notebook record that transition.

## The Constipation Routine

In order to reveal some of the structures and techniques that can be used to transform life experience into viable stand-up material, I will quote a particular routine in full and show how it has been constructed to get laughs. This was taken from the first half of the show, in a section about my experiences on the hospital ward:

> The other really humiliating thing – was that, er, I got *terrible* constipation. It's like it's a side-effect of, of codeine, which is one of the pain meds I was on. And in spite of the fact I was on, erm – really powerful laxatives and I was eating tons and tons of fresh fruit and vegetables – I couldn't go for *four or five days* – right? And, er – if you, if you think about what's happening in the gut – when that happens, it's like – you've got layer upon layer of organic matter building up and building up, increasing the pressure – until it turns to coal. Right? (*Laughter, 4 seconds.*) And when I – when I *did* go, eventually when I *did* go – oh my God, er – like the constipated maths teacher, I almost did have to work it out with a pencil, er – (*Laughter starts.*) It, er – I love that gag, er – (*Laughter continues.*) But it was, it, it, you know, the thing is, at that point as well, you know, I couldn't even get to the toilet, they had to bring a commode, cos even on a Zimmer frame I couldn't make it to the toilet, so – they brought me a commode, and I hobbled over – on my Zimmer frame and sat on this commode. And they pulled a – curtain round my bed for my privacy. But – this is a thin nylon sheet. (*A couple of people laugh.*) It can stop people *seeing* – what you're doing. *(Laughter, 2 seconds.*) But it's physically impossible to *maintain* your self-respect – when you know that other people can hear you going *nnnnnnnnn!!* (*Laughter.*) Right, and – and er – it was – it was really horrible, er – and it, and it was like – forty, fifty minutes, *nnnnnnnnn!!* (*Laughter.*) And I could *feel* that as well as – *hard*, it was really big, because, I, I – I could feel it crowning, and – (*Laughter starts and continuously bubbles under what follows.*) And erm – and it – th-th-the strain was bringing on muscle spasms – and, and er – and there was one point when I – and I'm not proud to admit this. There was one point when I *reached underneath* – (*Laughter surges.*) to try and pull it out – with my fingers, right. (*Laughter surges.*) You know, forceps birth, and er – (*Laughter surges.*) And, and it was so hard and shiny that my fingers were just scrabbling around – (*Laughter surges and fades.*) and I just – Honestly, it was *so humiliating! It was – properly, like, awful!* It was like – 'I'm an adult, this is just a bod-bodily – oh my *God!* It was *horrible.*' It's like, I'd started trying to sort of – I, I st—, I actually started crying – while I was – and, and erm – I started trying to sort of preserve my self-respect by – thinking of things I'm proud of that I could sort of counteract – (*Laughter.*) So, erm – I was like – HNNN-GGGHHHH-AHH!!! (*Sobbing, then:*) *'I'm a university lecturer!'* (*Laughter and applause, 5 seconds.*) HHNNN-NNNNGGGGG!! (*Sobbing, then:*) *'I've had three books published!'* (*Laughter, 2 seconds.*) HWAAAWWWW!! (*Sobbing, then:*) *'The Guardian said I'm surprisingly funny!'* (*Laughter, 6 seconds.*) So anyway. Finally managed to do it. Erm, the young nurse came, and she was – she was about – nineteen, she was really nice actually, and she tried to make me feel – you know, a bit more comfortable, she went – (*Voice bright and encouraging, Thanet accent:*) 'Oh, well done!' (*Laughter.*) Right, an', an', an' uh-huh! Something really humiliating – because – for the first time since very early childhood – it was being praised as a *major achievement* (*Laughter.*) the fact that I'd managed to take a few steps by myself (*Brief laughter.*) and do a poo on the big boy's potty. (*Laughter.*)

Most of the laughs here have been earned by just a few basic incongruities. Noël Carroll argues that the most valid of the major strands of thinking about why we laugh is the incongruity theory, partly because it has 'immense, practical use value' in providing us with 'important clues about the way in which to construct humour on one's own'.[17] Incongruity theory posits that at the heart of every joke is some kind of mismatch or contradiction, often a surprising clash between two things that are not normally associated


https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X17000057 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with one another. Arthur Koestler coined the term 'bisociation' to describe this, defining it as:

> the perceiving of a situation or idea, L, in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference, M1 and M2. The event L, in which the two intersect, is made to vibrate simultaneously on two different wavelengths, as it were. While this unusual situation lasts, L is not merely linked to one associative context, but bisociated with two.[18]

He provides a neat diagram, showing a horizontal oblong plane (M1) running through the middle of a vertical oblong plane (M2), with a circle (L) at the centre of the line where they intersect, emitting arrows.

To show how this works in practice, he quotes a short joke: 'A convict was playing cards with his gaolers. On discovering that he cheated they kicked him out of gaol.' He analyzes this in a single sentence: 'Two conventional rules – "offenders are punished by being locked up" (M1) and "cheats are punished by being kicked out" (M2) – both self-consistent, collide in a given situation.'[19]

What I have done in constructing this routine is to create comic metaphors by spotting similarities between aspects of codeine-induced constipation and other phenomena. There are essentially three of these. Firstly, the bisociation of fresh fruit and vegetables in my constipated gut (M1) and the formation of coal (M2), which have been connected by the concept of 'layer upon layer of organic matter' being compressed (L). Second, the bisociation between defecation (M1) and childbirth (M2), which have in common the expelling of an object through an orifice in a similar location on the body (L). Thirdly, the bisociation between me as an injured middle-aged man (M1) and a toddler (M2), linked by the fact that both walk with difficulty and are praised for using the toilet (L).

In each case, I highlight the absurdity of my experience by comparing it with something else with which it has certain features in common. However, in addition to this the routine is also underpinned by certain basic incongruities which I spotted in the situation. First, there is the contradiction of having to defecate – something which is normally done privately – in a space which essentially remains public, shielded only by an inadequate 'thin nylon sheet'. Second, there is the contradiction between me as a purely animal being who has to defecate to survive – and a malfunctioning one at that, unable to achieve even that simple act without enormous effort and discomfort – and me as a social being with a certain amount of status and recognition. In a sense, what I am playing with here is very like Brecht's example of the teacher hounded by the bailiffs, going from seeming big to seeming small.

## Building a Joke

This, then, is the basic raw material of the routine. However, there are two stages in the creation of a joke. The first stage is to *notice the basic incongruity*. In the second stage, the comedian finds the best way of *expressing that incongruity to the audience* so that it strikes them as funnily as possible. Here, I employ a number of structures and techniques to do this.

Some of the jokes rely on the particular way they are phrased. The line about the thin nylon sheet relies on emphasis and timing: 'It can stop people *seeing* – what you're doing.' By emphasizing '*seeing*', and pausing at the end of the sentence, the audience's attention is drawn to the other sensory manifestations of defecation which would not be blotted out by the sheet. They have to work out for themselves what else I am hinting at – hearing the noise, smelling the smell – and this puzzle element sharpens the incongruity enough to make it comic.

By contrast, the defecation/birth bisociation is expressed in the particular choice of words. Rather than explicitly making the comparison, it is expressed through the use of the word 'crowning', a term drawn from obstetrics but widely understood to refer to the moment when the foetal scalp appears at the vaginal orifice. Again, this structure leaves the audience to do some of the work, having to pick up the reference to complete the bisociation. The gag is reprised shortly afterwards with the use of another bit of


https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X17000057 Published online by Cambridge University Press

obstetric terminology, 'forceps birth'. The bisociation of my injured self with a toddler also turns on the choice of words in the punchline, but here it is more about tone and association. Seeing a middle-aged university lecturer saying such deliberately infantile phrases as 'poo' and 'big boy's potty' – phrases associated with very small children – heightens the absurdity of the comparison.

Generally, the use of *comic excess* is important. The revelation that I 'reached underneath to pull it out with my fingers' is (you will be delighted to learn) an authentic detail of the incident, which is excessive in itself. However, there is a certain amount of exaggeration when I say, 'It was so hard and shiny that my fingers were just scrabbling around,' creating an excessive, cartoonish image.

This betrays the influence of Richard Pryor. In one routine, he talks of the loss of bladder control that has come with multiple sclerosis, and describes chatting up eight or nine women in the street, when suddenly 'I start pissing'. The audience laugh at this as an excessive image in itself, but he later gets another laugh by exaggerating to create an excessive, cartoonish image: 'And you have piss trailing – block and a half! (*Laughter.*)'[20] As in my gag, something which is lavatorially excessive – conduct which would normally be seen as a violation of decency – is presented to the audience in an excessive way, through exaggeration.

### Some Standard Comic Devices

I also use standard comic devices, like the *rule of three* and the *callback*. Jokes structured around a three-part list are common in stand-up, in individual gags based on the principle 'establish, reinforce, surprise',[21] or in clumps of three gags which often offer variants on the same basic comic premise. Three-gag clumps are normally arranged so that the strongest gag comes last, to create a sense of climax.[22] The incongruity of me being both a defecating animal and a university lecturer is structured precisely like this, with three variations on me grunting and straining, then making a sobbing declaration about my social status.

The third variation is a callback, in that it refers back to an earlier gag, reintroducing a comic idea in a new context to get a fresh laugh with it. At the beginning of the show, I draw the audience's attention to the *Guardian* quote ('Surprisingly funny') used on the poster, and suggest that it is actually rather a backhanded compliment: 'I'm slightly ambivalent about that, if I'm honest. I like the word *funny*. (*Laughter, 3 seconds.*) It's the *surprisingly* bit – (*A few laughs.*)' Having suggested the quote is not wholly complimentary, bringing it back in this routine to reassure myself of my own social worth is a suitably pathetic ploy with which to conclude the rule of three structure, and indeed it gets the longest laugh.

Another common stand-up technique I use here is *instant character*, in which the comedian makes an instant transition from narrator to character, using voice, gesture, posture or facial expression to impersonate somebody (or something) else.[23] Here, I use instant character to impersonate myself in the past, showing myself grunting with strain, sobbing, and talking to myself. In some cases, the comedy works at an elemental level, based purely on funny noises. The sound of my grunting gets more than one laugh, just as Richard Pryor got laughs in his MS routine by impersonating the sound of urination.

In other cases, the performance is more nuanced. I chose to act out the nurse saying 'Oh, well done!' as accurately as I could recall it, trying really to capture in my impersonation the bright, encouraging way she spoke. I remember being surprised that this line got a laugh – but looking back at it, the contrast between her attitude and the situation was incongruous in itself. There might also have been an element of recognition in the laughter, as the way she spoke was, in some ways, typical of how some medical staff tend to speak.

### Playing with the Truth

*Break a Leg* was based on found humour, on aspects of my experience which privately struck me as humorous, which I then devel-


https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X17000057 Published online by Cambridge University Press

oped into material. As a result, it was important to me that the show was staged and performed in a way that emphasized that what I was telling the audience was the truth. I employed various *authenticating strategies* to convince them that the experiences I described had actually happened – even when it had not happened in exactly the way I described.

The way I chose to stage the show was designed to authenticate what I was saying. A small table was placed on the stage, containing real documents and objects relating to my accident and recovery; these included medical forms, information leaflets, and mobility aids. I also used a PowerPoint presentation, which included images of my original journal notes scanned from my notebook, and photographs of the various documents and objects I described. These images are shown at the relevant point of the show, to corroborate what I am saying. Thus, when I talk about the incongruous name of a particular hospital ward, I click through to a photo of a sign with the name on, to show that I have not simply invented it.

Similarly, when talking about the Patient Transfer Form I was given when I was discharged from the hospital, I hold the actual document in my hand to read from it, as well as projecting an image of it behind me. Writing about documentary drama, Derek Paget argued that,

> An undisclosed force stems from the way in which 'documents' are used *at all* within a drama. . . . Encountering the document in a theatrical setting defamiliarizes the document – it becomes necessary for the audience to adopt an attitude to the documentary material itself in order to 'read' the drama.[24]

In comedy, this kind of defamiliarizing effect creates the necessary distancing and irony to turn a non-comic item into something funny. It is a reasonably common ploy in stand-up, one I have previously defined as 'found comedy':

> The comedian finds something from everyday life – perhaps an object, a newspaper article, or some kind of document – and takes it on stage to present it to the audience, and share its unintentional absurdity. Just as the *objet trouvé* is defined by the act of designating it as art, so the comedian creates 'found comedy' by presenting something not designed to be funny as an object of amusement.[25]

When I was presented with the form, some of the phrasing struck me as being incongruous, and thus I enjoyed it as an instance of what Carroll calls *found humour*. By sharing my amusement with the audience, defamiliarising the form by transferring it from a medical to a theatrical context, I turned it into *found comedy*:

> After eight days – I, erm – I got out of hospital. And er, they filled in a thing called a 'Patient Transfer Form'. (*I pick up the form from the props table to read from it.*) I've got it here. Do you know the concept of damning with faint praise? It's funny when you see these things written down about yourself. 'Sight, good. Hearing, satisfactory. (*Quiet laughter.*) Mental state, lucid.' (*Laughter, 4 seconds.*)

I needed to do very little to point out the absurdity I had spotted in the form. The phrase 'damning with faint praise' establishes the idea that these cold, factual words printed on the page might come across as less than complimentary, and the slightly nerdy, sarcastic tone with which I delivered the word 'lucid' was all it took to get the laugh. Most of the work was done by the presence of the form itself, both in my hand and reproduced on the screen behind me.

## The 'Act' of Remembering

In her book *Autobiography and Performance*, much of the work which Deirdre Heddon discusses shares fundamental qualities with stand-up: 'In both cases, the performer addresses the audience directly, acknowledges the reality of the performance situation, and perform ostensibly without the guise of character so that 'the "author" and "performer" collapse into each other as the performing "I" is also the represented "I"'.[26]

Importantly, Heddon points out that 'the binary between fictional/real is notoriously unstable in all autobiographical performance.'[27] This is because 'the act of remembering is precisely that, *an act*, which involves


https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X17000057 Published online by Cambridge University Press

considering past events from the location of the present, such that the present provides a perspective from which to give past events particular meaning'.[28]

Clearly, the act of recalling experience can never be an objective representation of reality. Memory is imperfect in itself, so we may get small details wrong, as I certainly did in *Break a Leg*. More than that, in telling the story of something that happened to us, we inevitably make choices as to what to include and what to leave out, what to emphasize and what to play down. In stand-up, the comedian's subjectivity is particularly important, as it is this that generates much of the laughter. It is not about straightforwardly representing the facts so much as presenting them in the light of attitudes, opinions, and observations that make them funny. To this end, comedians often knowingly change details and even alter key facts when recalling their experiences.[29]

In *Break a Leg*, I made various alterations to the truth as I recalled it, for several different reasons. First, there were ethical motivations. As Heddon points out, 'In and through our everyday practices the self exists in relationships with others.' This means that there are 'ethical dilemmas that arise in the unavoidable practice of representing others when performing autobiography'.[30] A particular issue which I wrestled with when working on the material for the show was how to represent the hospital staff and the patients I shared a ward with.

These patients were elderly men, recovering from serious injuries, and in an early episode of the podcast, I reflected on the dilemma of how to represent them: 'Because I'm going to be talking about real people, I've got to find ways of talking about them without using their names. I don't think it's even fair to use their first names, cos they're not really people I know.'[31]

As a result, I took the decision to rename these incidental characters in my story, taking care to try to find names with the same tone as the originals, with the same number of syllables and a similar set of cultural associations. I projected drawings of each of them scanned from my notebook, and took care to cover up anywhere I had written their actual names when scanning them.

### Shifting the Words Around

By contrast, other alterations were made purely to serve the comedy. I included several quotes from my two sons in the show, which I took from interviews I did with them for the podcast. The authenticating strategy I used here was to read the quotes direct from my notebook, thus indicating to the audience that I was serious enough about repeating their words accurately, that I could not rely on memory alone. In one routine, I spoke about the fact that the pain medication I was on when I got back from hospital made me burst into tears quite often and with little provocation: 'I was talking to my kids about this recently and asked Joe, who's eighteen – I asked him what he made of this – tendency to cry all the time. And these were his exact words. (*Reading from notebook.*) "It was a little disturbing, if quite entertaining." (*Laughter.*)'

In fact, these were not Joe's 'exact words'. What he said in the podcast interview was that, 'It was quite entertaining, if a little disconcerting.' The change from 'disconcerting' to 'disturbing' happened simply because I had inaccurately transcribed Joe's words, but the version in the notebook keeps the word order of the sentence intact. However, in rehearsing this routine, I realized it would be funnier to shift the words around. There is a rule of thumb among comedians that a punchline can sometimes be improved by moving the operative comic word as close to the end of the sentence as possible. Here, the incongruity which gives the joke life is the use of the word 'entertaining' to describe my emotional upheaval, so I shifted the words around even as I read them from the page so that the sentence ended with that word.

I took a bigger liberty in a routine about an encounter at my local swimming pool. In the second half of the show, I talk about doing water-walking as part of my physiotherapy, and declare: 'And what I discovered is that Whitstable swimming pool – is a *hotbed* of *elderly flirting*. (*Laughter.*) It's ace!' I give two conversations I witnessed as


https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X17000057 Published online by Cambridge University Press

examples of this, recalling them as accurately as possible to match my memory. However, a few routines down the line, I talk about being allowed to start swimming again, and worrying that I was slowing the other swimmers in my lane:

> There was one time there was this el— elderly lady – coming up behind me, and erm, she was doing the backstroke – er, and er – and she was you, you know, *powering* through the water and so I stopped at the end to let her past. But she stopped next to me. You know, presumably she wanted a breather or whatever. And I said, er, 'D'you know what? Erm, you do the backstroke *really well*.' And she went, 'Yeah! For an old lady! Hahahahah!' (*Quiet laughter*.) And I didn't want her to think I was being patronizing, said, 'No no no. Genuinely, that is the most elegant, beautiful backstroke I've ever seen.' And she went, 'Oh, aren't you nice? Keep talking like that and I'll show you something *else* I do well for an old lady!' (*Laughter, 10 seconds*.)

The set-up for this story is all true, and told with a certain amount of precision. I recall the stroke the woman was swimming, the words we said to each other, and even my inner state of not wanting to seem patronizing. However, the punchline – a callback to the idea of elderly flirting – is entirely fictional. When the incident actually occurred, I had already decided to do material about elderly flirting, and was suddenly struck with the idea of how funny it would be if the conversation had ended with an outrageous flirtation.

## Empathy and Distance

This combination of truthful set-up and invented punchline is not uncommon in stand-up, and Stewart Lee has made an art of weaving long, involved anecdotes which end with him confessing that he has made it all up. However, he roots these stories in actual locations, and peoples them with real people he has known to take the audience in before revealing the prank: 'I could cloud the edges of the tale with enough true details so that to me, the teller, the story had the flavour of absolute truth, a flavour usually communicated to the believing audience.'[32] Using a similar approach, I was able to pass my punchline off as being authentic, even though it was actually entirely invented.

In the opening section of the show, I tell the audience that there is a moment coming up in which I need them to make the 'noise of a wounded animal'. I cue them up to practice this, and together they make an assortment of cheery, high-pitched animal noises. I respond with mild disappointment: 'I was thinking of maybe a wolf? (*Laughter*.) Or, or an injured stag. Not a damaged hamster. (*Laughter*.) Right, OK, we'll go with that.' Shortly afterwards, I am telling them about my wife's memory of when the paramedics lifted me on to a stretcher: 'Jacqui said – that when that happened – I made a *noise like a wounded animal*. (*Murmur of laughter*.) Now, I don't know if you can imagine what that sounded like, but I think it'd sound a bit like this.' I point at the audience, and they make the high-pitched animal noises they have practised. I pause for a moment, then say, 'I think you're mocking my pain. (*Laughter*.)'

Although this comment is clearly tongue in cheek, it raises a serious point. I am telling the audience about a series of unpleasant, painful, and humiliating experiences, and laughter may seem a strange and possibly callous response. Bergson famously argued that there is an '*absence of feeling* which usually accompanies laughter', and that, 'Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion. I do not mean that we could not laugh at a person who inspires us with pity, for instance, or even with affection, but in such a case we must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity.'[33]

If we accept that empathy and laughter are incompatible, then the comedian is faced with a practical problem. How can he or she recall traumatic experiences without arousing an empathetic response in the audience which will short-circuit the possibility of laughter? Freud offers some insight into this question, by discussing situations in which somebody experiencing something unpleasant responds with humour, thus giving pleasure to those who witness them:


https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X17000057 Published online by Cambridge University Press

He sees this other person in a situation which leads the listener to expect that the other will produce the signs of an affect – that he will get angry, complain, express pain, be frightened or horrified or perhaps even in despair; and the onlooker or listener is prepared to follow his lead and to call up the same emotional impulses in himself. But this emotional expectancy is disappointed; the other person expresses no affect, but makes a jest. The expenditure on feeling that is economized turns into humorous pleasure in the listener.[34]

By responding to misfortune with a jest, the joker signals to the listener that laughter is an acceptable response. What this reveals is the concept of *permission to laugh*. In order to persuade the audience that they are free to laugh at tales of unpleasant personal experiences, the comedian must show them that they have been granted permission to do so.

**'Permission to Laugh'**

I did this in various ways in *Break a Leg*. First, the fact that it was marketed as a comedy show indicated to the audience that laughter would be an appropriate response. Second, although I did not entirely avoid emotion in my performance, my general attitude was playful and jovial, giving the audience a clear signal that I was comfortable with their laughter at the indignities I had suffered. Third, I invited the audience to actively collude with the act of turning my traumatic experience into comedy. When I asked them to make the noise of a wounded animal, I did this in the knowledge that the noise they would make was likely to be ridiculous and would indirectly lead to laughter. Thus, the invitation partly functioned as a signal that they had permission to laugh.

Both autobiographical performance and stand-up comedy are forms which allow for dialogue with the audience. Heddon points out that 'although autobiographical performances look, in form, monologic, their public context . . . and the performers' aspirations to communicate with their spectators transform those works into dialogues.'[35] Similarly, Ian Brodie argues that 'If one imagines a continuum, with a purely monologic, unidirectional communication at one end, and a purely dialogic, bidirectional communication at the other, stand-up resides somewhere in the middle'.[36]

What this quality allowed me to do was to conduct an ongoing dialogue with the audience about the permissibility of laughter, by commenting on their reactions. Some of these comments were planned, like accusing them of 'mocking my pain' with their cheery wounded animal noises. However, others were more spontaneous, and a number of times I found myself commenting on unexpected laughter.

This started at the beginning of the show, during an opening monologue in which I soberly recalled the bare facts of my accident. Just after recalling the moment when I slipped over, I lower the volume of my voice and adopt a more staccato delivery in order to ratchet up the tension: 'And I'm gonna pause the story there – with me hanging in mid-air – (*Quiet laughter.*) over the pavement. Cos that moment – is the *cusp* –' At that point, a single person sitting close to the stage laughs. The laughter is both conspicuous and clearly not the reaction I am looking for, and thus demands a response. 'Shut up!' I say, and that alone is enough to get the first proper laugh, taking in the whole auditorium and lasting two seconds. I cut it off to continue chiding the erroneous laugher for giving the 'wrong' response: 'I'm trying to build tension here! (*Laughter.*) The jokes come in a minute, all right? (*Laughter.*)'

Then I visibly make an effort to refocus myself, and finish delivering the introduction as written, concluding with a sombre line about the effects of my injury, 'which would – force me to realize I'm no longer young – make me think about my own mortality – and take me – to the very edge – of despair'. Having finished my foiled attempt to build tension, I turn back to the solo laugher and say, 'Now you feel a twat, don't you?' This gets another two-second laugh.

Chiding an individual punter for laughing in the 'wrong' place establishes a running theme, and allows me to comment on further unexpected laughs from both individual punters and the audience as a whole. For example, about ten minutes into the


https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X17000057 Published online by Cambridge University Press

show, I describe lying on the snowy pavement with a broken hip and no apparent way of asking anybody to help me. My delivery is quiet, slow and calm as I recall what I was thinking: 'OK, well. Mm. I – might – (*Long pause.*) *die*.'

There is a full-audience laugh, which lasts for two seconds. I break out of the instant character of my past self to comment on this reaction: 'Dunno why that's funny actually, but – (*Laughter.)*' A few minutes later, I talk about a woman who lived near where I fell coming out to help me and one of the details gets an unexpected laugh, which I comment on: 'She took the rain cover from, from a child's buggy. Erm, to, to – (*Somebody starts laughing.*) keep the snow – (*I register the laughter.*) Oh! Again, why? (*Laughter.*)'

Although I am ostensibly puzzled or even slightly annoyed by these unexpected laughs, the important thing to note is that each time this happens, my comments lead to further laughter. The audience understand that this is mock-annoyance, that I am not seriously telling them off for laughing. This means that when I accuse them of 'mocking my pain', in fact I am communicating almost the opposite. I am sending up the idea that laughter might be inappropriate in a comedy show, even one about pain, distress, and mortality. By pretending that they are breaking the rules by laughing in the wrong places, I am actually giving them permission to laugh.

## Intimacy and Emotion

My purpose here is to generate what Nelson terms 'know-what', by reflecting on my experiential knowledge as a maker of comedy to reveal the methods of composition I used to create a stand-up show about a particular life experience: the initial noticing of incongruities; the use of a notebook; the structuring of individual jokes; the conscious manipulation of the truth to create comic and theatrical effects; and the techniques used to assure the audience that their laughter is appropriate. What I have not yet tackled is the underlying creative motivation. What was it that motivated me to use such a difficult moment in my life as basis of a comedy show?

In an episode of the podcast recorded at the time when I was trying to create a coherent overall structure in which to place all the fragments of notes I had so far, I confessed I was worried that the show might turn out to be just a series of 'the most superficial gags . . . with a bit of narrative to make sense of them'. This would feel like 'selling out the idea of the show, to be some sort of honest representation of experience'.[37] Implicit in this is the idea that there is some principle at stake here – that, for all the manipulation of truth, I should open up to the audience in a spirit of honesty.

This desire to share experience relates to a quality which has been identified as an important part of comedy: *intimacy*, as when Noël Carroll argues that humour 'functions to build and to consolidate communities, however ephemeral', which is why 'we use it to establish contact with strangers.'[38] Ian Brodie suggests that 'one of the hallmarks of stand-up as a performative genre' is that it creates 'a disregard for the distancing of the stage'.[39]

Susan Seizer discusses the use of sexual and obscene words in stand-up, arguing that they originate in a 'realm of intimacy': 'Taking these words out of the realm of the senses to use them in public address collapses the expected barrier between these experiential arenas, an incongruity that surprises.' In talking about 'the stripped-naked basics of being human', comedians 'combine self-exposure and intimate address' to 'comment on our collective human condition'.[40] It was this kind of commentary on the human condition that I was aiming for in my constipation routine, in which I specifically exposed a moment in which I had experienced the stripped-naked basics of being human.

There is also an emotional dimension here. Tim Miles tackles head- on Bergson's belief that laughter and empathy are incompatible, arguing that 'stand-up comedy exists in some liminal space between theatre and social performance . . . allowing heckling and audience participation. In doing so, the interpersonal interactions that often facilitate emotion are foregrounded.'[41] He uses interviews with comedians and audience mem-


https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X17000057 Published online by Cambridge University Press

bers to show that, far from being detached and emotionless, stand-up comedy can be a deeply emotional experience for all concerned. For the performers, it can be 'joyous' or 'dismal', depending on how well the gig goes.[42] Those watching the show talk about it as a 'personal' experience in which 'it feels like we are friends', or describe the 'fantastic feeling' they get from stand-up. Miles notes that, 'Many participants commented on the identification the audience member feels with the stand-up comedian in strongly emotional, experiential and empathetic terms.'[43]

Comedians develop skills in interpreting audience's responses, and while performing *Break a Leg* I could sense that the audience were *with me*, and in spite of chiding them for 'mocking my pain', I could feel their empathy alongside their laughter. Indeed, there were moments when this became very tangible. When I recall that after the accident the ambulance 'took an hour and ten minutes to get there', the audience makes a collective sound – gasping and drawing in breath – which is as loud as some of the laughter. This suggests sympathy with me for having to wait for so long while injured and in pain, and possibly outrage at the state of our public services in allowing such a wait to occur.

## The Therapeutic Element

Clearly, this kind of empathy is hard to square with Bergson's argument that detachment is needed to appreciate humour. However, it is possible that there is complexity in the way audiences respond to stand-up shows, moving easily from empathy to detachment as required. They may feel an underlying empathetic connection with the comedian, but still be capable of taking a more detached view at the key moment in every joke. Indeed, one of the classic theories of comedy – relief theory – suggests that laughter is caused when some kind of tension is relieved, perhaps implying a shift from empathy to detachment.

Freud suggests that humour allows us to triumph over the misfortunes that befall us: 'The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure.'[44] In an episode recorded just after performing the show, I note that 'there's something very transformative in a way about taking that unpromising subject matter for comedy and turning it into something that gets a laugh'.[45] If I found the process of turning unpleasant experience into comedy therapeutic – as Freud would suggest, triumphing over the traumas of the external world – my hope was that I would offer the audience a similar pleasure.

I hoped to create a performance which would feel like an authentic human interaction, to create a kind of intimacy which would allow me to share my experience with the audience and view it through a frame of amused detachment which might create insights about the human condition. Towards the end of the show, I make this aim explicit:

> And I asked my son Tom – er, what he made of what I've been through. And these are his exact words. (*Reading from notebook.*) 'If I was reviewing your life as a movie – I'd say you haven't been on much of a journey.' (*Laughter, 3 seconds.*) But – I think he's wrong. Right? I think he's wrong. Cos I think I *have* been on a journey. And I'll tell you one thing – that I've learnt from this – that I wanna take forward for the rest of my life. And that's to live your life *well*. To *try* and do whatever you can, and it takes *effort*. It takes *effort* – to do the things you want to do – with your one chance – of being alive. They're the things that you want to do, and it's worth – putting the effort in.

I acknowledge that 'you only live once' is 'a cliché' which 'sounds corny', but I refine my point about getting the most out of life by ridiculing the kind of phoney euphoria seen in adverts for soft drinks or mobile phones, contrasting it with the 'real joy' experienced by ordinary people – illustrating the point by referring back to incidents described earlier in the show: '*Real* joy is an eleven-year-old girl, meeting up with her friends by arrangement for a game of hide-and-seek! (*Laughter.*) *Real* joy is people who may be elderly but they *haven't forgotten how to flirt!* Real joy, to be completely honest about it, is writing and


https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X17000057 Published online by Cambridge University Press

performing *this entire show* – for one night only – for the hell of it.' By saying this I am suggesting that the path to fulfilment lies not in consumer products, but in making the effort to take control of our lives – and I am offering my own comedic efforts by way of example.

## Notes and References

1. Tim Bates, 'Doctor's Painfully Funny Take on Bad Wintertime Tumble', *Canterbury Times*, 13 November 2015, p. 3.
2. A film of the show is available on YouTube: <www.youtube.com/watch?v=reI7wNujQkQ>.
3. Robin Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 37.
4. Nelson, p. 44.
5. *The Naked Jape: Uncovering the Hidden World of Jokes* (London: Michael Joseph, 2006) p. 188.
6. Brian Logan, 'Sean Hughes: Life Becomes Noises: Edinburgh Review', *Guardian*, 13 August 2012 <www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/aug/13/sean-hughes-edinburgh-comedy-review>, (accessed 06/10/16).
7. *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle*, Series 4 Episode 4 ('Death'), BBC2, 24 March 2016.
8. Tig Notaro, *Live*, Secretly Canadian, 2012.
9. C.A. Bridges, 'Tragedy Plus Stand-up Comedy Equals a Legendary, Moving Show', *News Journal* (Daytona Beach, Florida), 8 October 2012.
10. Noël Carroll, *Humour: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 28.
11. Carroll, p. 37.
12. Henri Bergson, 'Laughter', in Wylie Sypher., ed., *Comedy* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), p. 63.
13. Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1978), p. 143.
14. Brecht, p. 145, 144.
15. See Christopher Molineux, 'Life Memory Archive Translation Performance Memory Archive Life: Textual Self-Documentation in Stand-Up Comedy', *Comedy Studies*, VII, No. 1 (2016), p. 2–12.
16. *Breaking a Leg*, Episode 3: 'Notebook', 7 September 2015.
17. Carroll, p. 2.
18. Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Hutchinson, 1964), p. 35.
19. Ibid., p. 36.
20. Richard Pryor, 'MS', on . . . *And It's Deep Too!*, USA: Rhino/Warner Archives, 2000, Disc 9, Track 20.
21. Tony Allen, *Attitude: Wanna Make Something of it?* (Glastonbury: Gothic Image, 2002), p. 42.
22. See Oliver Double, *Getting the Joke: the Inner Workings of Stand-Up Comedy* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014), p. 373–4.
23. See Double, 2014, Chapter 24.
24. Derek Paget, *True Stories? Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press,1990), p. 15.
25. Double, 2014, p. 213.
26. Deirdre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 8.
27. Heddon, p. 10.
28. Ibid, p. 47.
29. See Double, 2014, p. 164–8.
30. Heddon, p. 125.
31. *Breaking a Leg*, Episode 3: 'Notebook', 7 September 2015.
32. Stewart Lee, *The 'If You Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask for One'* (London: Faber, 2012), p. 65 n.
33. Bergson, p. 63.
34. Sigmund Freud, 'Humour', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XXI (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), p. 160–6; p. 161–2.
35. Heddon, p. 5.
36. Ian Brodie, 'Stand-up Comedy as a Genre of Intimacy', *Ethnologies*, XXX, No. 2 (2008), p. 153–80; p. 160.
37. *Breaking a Leg*, Episode 3: 'Writing Weekend', 2 November 2015.
38. Carroll, p. 84.
39. Brodie, p. 156.
40. Susan Seizer, 'On the Uses of Obscenity in Live Stand-Up Comedy', *Anthopological Quarterly*, LXXXIV, No. 1 (Winter 2011), p. 209–34; p. 214.
41. Tim Miles, 'No Greater Foe? Rethinking Emotion and Humour, with Particular Attention to the Relationship Between Audience Members and Stand-Up Comedians', *Comedy Studies*, V, No. 1 (2014), p. 12–19; p. 13.
42. Ibid., p. 15.
43. Ibid., p. 16.
44. Freud, p. 162.
45. *Breaking a Leg*, Episode 18: 'After the Show', 13 December 2015.


https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X17000057 Published online by Cambridge University Press