

NC 0021598 8



The bardic role of the stand-up comedian in society

by Paul Gibney

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people for their assistance in the completion of this thesis:

Gerry Walker, my thesis tutor for his help and guidance throughout the project

Gemma, assistant librarian in N.C.A.D for the letter of recommendation for the Trinity College Library

Trinity College Dublin , for the use of their library facilities while compiling research

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Introduction

With years of humour research it has been generally agreed by the classical theorists that the human species is the only one to enjoy the pleasure of laughter. With this statement comes a series of questions such as: why do we laugh? What function does laughter play? What do we laugh at? and so on. All these questions and more arise and are tackled in humour research.

Before I begin to introduce the form my thesis will take and the topics I personally will undertake, I would like to give a brief introduction to the study of humour. Although my thesis will be concerned solely with the professional comedian, most research done into the subject is surrounding joking relationships between people at work, in the pub or at a party, for example.

I will discuss joking relationships, but firstly I would like to look briefly at the functions of laughter. Historically laughter has been seen as a trait of the foolish or the ignorant. Aristotle said that "Laughter has its basis in some kind of shabbiness or deformity", he describes it as "degrading to morals of art and religion, a form of behaviour from which civilised man should shrink" [Foot, Chapman 1977]. We know this now, of course to be untrue and people like Wasson described humour as "something which causes a tickling in the brain and laughter was invented to scratch it" [1926].

It has always been a very desirable trait to possess great wit and men with humour have always been admired. As a tool, laughter has been tested and a universal conclusion points out that it is a relief from psychological tension, other simple answers are anxiety of fear, breach of inhibitions and a celebration of belonging or association. Palmer [1994] describes J. Morrell's summary of previous theories on the subject as follows; (1) where humour derives from a feeling of superiority over what is laughed at; (2) where humour derives from a sensation of psychological relief; (3) where humour derives from the perception of incongruity in what is laughed at. Humour is seen as an aid to social bonding. So it might be said that under all joking circumstances and all differences in what people laugh at there is one feature that is common to all and that is, a purpose [Palmer 1994].

So most arguments on the functions of humour seem to draw similar conclusions i.e. humour is concerned with behaviour and ideas that are beyond the norm. Most classical theorists such as Freud see humour relief as a type of momentary holiday from the mind or indeed from society. Humour could be seen simply as a

perception of Any thing out of the ordinary (Chapman/Foot 77). This perception or interpretation in order to be humourous, does however depend on recognition from an audience in the stand-up comedians case (I will talk more about this in chapters 1). This suggests that certain 'Recognizers' hold different ideas of what is normal order and this leads us to the reason for the wide variety of events that people find funny or worthy of some humourous comment[Bergson and Cant/Chris Powell '96].

The next common topic in Humour Research is what is known as 'Joking Relationships' i.e. relationships where humour exists between men and women, men and men, women and women employer and employee and so on. Joking Relationships are also concerned with situations where joking behaviour is acceptable within society. Some examples of studies done suggest that older men joke obscenely together in the workplace where there are no women present or that younger men will only do so when there is a woman present and the sexual innuendo or obscenity is initiated by the female. Gender study within joking relationships is especially relevant to the professional comedian.

Such questions as do women have different senses of humour to men? have been asked. Some studies suggest that there are clear differences, such as men are more likely to appreciate sexual humour than women [Terry and Estel, 1974] or that men enjoy more aggressive humour and women are more interested in the 'absurd' [Chapman and Gadfield, 1976]. Some research indicates that people in general prefer humour that is aimed at a group they are not a member of, i.e. another 'reference group' (see Chapter 1) Le Fave[1972] found that:

"Pro-Male Males (i.e. males whose definition of themselves coincided with traditional concepts of masculinity) Found anti female jokes funnier than pro-female (i.e. women whose views coincided with feminism,) found pro-female anti-male jokes funnier than pro-male anti-female jokes." (1972:205).

This statement and indeed this type of research may seem to be just common sense but it is important that the comedian takes this into account when 'winning over' his audience. My next example of humour research is the one that I am concerned with for my thesis. This is the idea of social control and humour, or in my case the social Role of the stand up comedian. In writing this thesis I hope to convince the reader, through documentation of my research as well as my own analysis, that the stand-up comic does play a role in today's society. I want to dis-

cuss the historical fool or clown (e.g. the Court Jester) and the Bard or Minstrel as commentators on society from the past and in doing so give a stark comparison to the modern day comedian as one with the same role. After a short introduction to the study of the fool, I will talk about the idea of 'the Modern Bard', Discussing Bardic functions and the Comedians relationships with his audience. I have chosen four comedians, all British comics and all are contemporary (i.e. all material is of the last 10 years). I will be looking at their observation skills, their approach and most importantly their examples of latent social comment. In the final part of my analysis chapter I will be discussing the comedians in terms of bardic theory. Finally in my conclusion I will be summarising all that has come before and pulling together all my research and analysis to make a final statement on my subject. All humour analysis and research that I will be stating will be in the general but all will be applicable to individual situations.

Chapter one bardic theory

As our history books prove, comedy has always had an effect on society in some respect. When studying the modern comedian and his social role, one must look back in time to the earliest documentation of professional humour. In medieval times, a mythical time of theatre and mime, a major central character in society was the fool.

'The court jester' for example is a form of fool most people would recognise. With his colourful cap and his bells, the jester sums up the vision of an idiot chosen for his lack of intelligence to entertain in the king's court with forms of juggling, miming and clowning. History shows however, that the jester was not always a man of low intelligence but a man of latent comment in the role of a fool. An example of this would be the well documented verbal conflict of King Solomon and his court fool, 'Marcolf'. Marcolf reveals on numerous occasions that his folly is equal to Solomon's 'great' wisdom. Marcolf can be termed as the wise man because he knows he is a fool, Solomon on the other hand can be termed the fool as he thinks he is wise [Swain, 1932: 30-36; Jones, 1991]

The court jester also can comment on day to day events and society with impunity, as he is 'stupid', he knows ~~no~~ better not to utter such things. The jester and the king have a special joking relationship¹ where activities are performed that would otherwise be offensive. The fool cannot give offense because he is a fool. Knowing this the fool can use such a fact to give latent comment on society. Enid Welsford [1935] has written about the medieval fool and she comments that "the fool is the creator of beauty, he is the creator of freedom." Klapp[1972] describes the social function of the fool to be many, although he finds the most important one to be the fact that " ...by his negative example he tells us what is valued even if he himself cannot quite get it right." [Pollio and Edgerly (1976)]. The fool could therefore be seen as a reverse- moralist.

Although the jester is a unique example of a historical comedian who supplies latent comment with impunity, for the sake of my argument I have chosen the 'bard' as a comparison to the modern stand- up comedian.

When looking at the stand- up as a modern bard and indeed talking about his bardic role we must concentrate as much on the messages and the language as on the comedian himself. We must look at the audiences response as well as the comedians

1. see introduction for brief example of joking relationships or *Taking humour seriously* by J.Palmer (1991) prt. 1 ch.1

intentions. As I have said, I am going to use the idea of the stand- up as our cultures bard, as our voice for society, as a modern day minstrel.

Firstly we must look at the classic bardic functions our stand- up must possess. He must be a mediator of language; one who uses words and indeed language to continuously construct series of messages to communicate to a culture a reinforcing version of themselves. The traditional bard spoke about the happenings of the day in verse where as the modern comedian gives his perceptions in an equally entertaining and specialised informal series of messages.

Secondly the structure of these messages must be organised to suit the audience that will be receiving them i.e. they cannot be just pleasing to the aesthetic of the language or to the needs of the comedian. The comedian must firstly communicate with his material, it is his audience that decides if that communication is successful. The stand- up comedian is a creation of society rather than that of an individual, it is his popularity that keeps him alive and therefore his culture that dictates his longevity as a performer. The bardic role the comedian fulfils means that he must always be at the centre of his culture. Society has always had a need for a drawback to a common centre. Along with the needs of the individual there is also this need for centralisation, from such a centre the bard can speak to all members of society on the same basis. A simple example would be the modern comedians fixation with the habits of human nature, observations that set a culture apart and unites it.

The bard has a voice and communicates verbally. Oral contact makes a big difference and it allows the bard to communicate to a mass in a moment. The decoding of abstract use of literature is replaced with use of tone and mime. The bardic role is normally a positive one and the bard must communicate to his audience the reality to which he refers, while using the magic of laughter to draw attention to a subject and keep the attention of the audience. To back up the above I am going to talk about the very basis for 'alternative' stand- up comedy i.e. observational comedy and the use of 'recognition'. The message that is being put forward is not as effective if it is vague or extremely personal to the comedian i.e there must be immediate recognition by the audience to the situation being described, this is not to say that self disparaging humour is not acceptable but merely that it must be somewhat relatable to others. The blame for such disparagement will often point subtly to our society². The effect here is to show the culture that these

2. see Frank
Skinner ch. .2

observed inadequacies must be taken into account and that modifications to society are required.

When adopting a bardic role the comedian is not merely an observer and portrayer of the facts, he is foremost an entertainer and to maintain his audience is of obvious upmost importance. As with the clown or medieval fool, he must operate in the latent and connotation as opposed to the donation and manifest [Fiske '76]. The bard with his myth and folly, his modern counterpart with his humourous anecdotes and observations.

Before I go any further I would like to summarise the functions of the bard in his culture in seven short points. These points will be the basis for my analysis in chapter two.

bardic functions

- 1 To express clearly through given lines of communication the cultures nature of reality.
- 2 To construct their messages according to the needs of their audience.
- 3 To occupy a central position in his\her culture. To utilise this centralisation to communicate with all members of our 'fragmented' society.
- 4 To give an assurance to the culture of it's adequacies and to confirm some unconfirmed ideologies.
- 5 To remind the cultures of it's inadequacies and to show when observed that some modification of ideologies may be needed.
- 6 To give an audience a confirmed outlook on their status and their identity as individuals within their culture as a whole
- 7 To transmit a sense of cultural membership for individuals (security and involvement)
[Fiske; Hartley: p88]

In fact the comedian's main role as a bard is to challenge the nature of reality when a culture is happy to leave it unchallenged and unstated. The comedian looks at the conventions of their culture in a different light, he works and reworks their reality. Fiske speaks about the bardic function of 'ritual condensation' in television[p89-91]. This too applies to the stand-up in his role as a

bard. Leach ['76] explains the process;

"By converting ideas, products of the mind [menifacts] into material objects 'out there', we give them relative permanence and in that permanence/ material form we can subject them to technical operations which are beyond the capacity of the mind acting by itself. It is the difference between carrying out mathematical calculations 'in your head' and working them out with a pencil and paper or a calculating machine." [p37]

Ritual condensation can be spoken about in many different ways. The mystical clown or the talented comic's very behaviour sets them apart from all others. [L.H. Charles 1976] talks about 'the clown with fire in his hand', although he is playing with fire, he does so with impunity. There is a balance here of stupidity and mastery which of course is the control a skilled person has over a scary or taboo event. The skill and the mastery is what reveals the clown or in our case the comedian as a master of the fire rather than fuel for consumption [Foot '76]

So the marvel at this skill (be it the bard with his fabulous verse or the stand up with his greatest of services 'laughter on demand') gives the performer a vehicle for serious social criticism.

"Behind the comedian or clown's mask there often lurks a moralist ready to rebalance that which is upset, repressed or distorted in a society." [Chapman/ Foot '77 p218] As I have now explained the theory behind my thesis, I would like to talk about the audience in more detail. Before we go into the next chapter on Decoding the comedians we must ask ourselves why some individuals appreciate certain material and not others. We also know that in a bardic role the stand-up comic must play to his audience with such tools as 'identification' and 'reference'. Here the idea of the 'reference group' and 'identification group' comes into practice [Bennett 1991].

"An individual reference group is the category of person with whom for reasons of race, religion or occupation others associate him/her. An individual identification group is the category of person with whom the individual associates him/ herself." [p80]

However as some people may not have coinciding groups, a person's response to jokes with racial or social stereotypes will depend on how his identification group corresponds to his refer-

ence group [Bennett'91]. People will however laugh at a joke at the expense of their own reference group if he/she belongs to another reference group or relates especially to another group(as long as the joke is well constructed and worded well). Appreciation of humour is also largely effected by social and cultural factors. Certain types of material which are usually taboo can be spoken about in a humourous way giving the audience a chance at releasing tension and a chance to laugh at something they wouldn't dare before. As I mentioned in the introduction, humour that is timely can diffuse a threatening situation or help to correct a distorted view on a subject.

Education also plays a large role in the appreciation of humour 'British people are accustomed for example to laughing at fat men but not pregnant women [Bennett '91]. This is due to the social framework we are bred into and the 'do's and don'ts' in society i.e Joking Relations. Although this frame is becoming very old fashioned by today's comedy standards it still stands there in some form to "draw the line'. So why all this talk about audiences? one might ask. The reason is that to study the modern bard we must study those who receive the messages. The good comedian must realise that once, having delivered the material, those who have received and understood it will appreciate it for various reasons; some for it's cleverness or artistry, some relate to the subject matter and so on. All of this must be taken into account when messages are being constructed by the comedian.

Chapter Two analysis and comparisons

In this chapter I will be introducing my chosen comedians. I have chosen only contemporary british Stand-up comedians for my analysis as I feel that they are the most suitable for the purpose of my subject. This chapter will be broken into five sub headings. The first four will deal with the comedians themselves, namely; (1) Ben Elton (2) Frank Skinner (3) Eddie Izzard (4) Billy Connolly. The fifth will deal with the comedians in terms of bardic theory and analysing their fulfilment of the bardic functions. To achieve the best analysis results I chose a wide range of comic styles. Each comedian was chosen for Individual reasons as well as possessing constant qualities. These qualities are; Good observational skills, charisma, and natural wit. Along with these qualities each comedian had to bring something unique to the analysis e.g. Frank Skinner,s crudeness and aggression ³. All analysis was done in relation to bardic theory and social comment.

Ben Elton 'The man from auntie'

Image and Reality - the reality gap

Ben Elton has been the top comedy writer in Britain for the last 15 years or so. With top hits like 'The Young Ones' 'Blackadder' and 'The thin Blue Line', Elton has been in a league of his own for original sit-com's in britain. Also a writer of novels, Elton is lesser known as a stand up comedian. Once a Labour M.P. in the early eighties, Elton's material is obsessed with the 'State' of Britain and Synonymous with his hatred for Margaret Thatchers Government, Elton's message is mostly a negative one with the theme of disorder and corruption of Great Britain.

Known mostly from his series in the mid eighties " The man from auntie" and Channel 4's 'Friday Night Live'. Elton is an easy choice to analyse, as his message is 'Point Blank' and his material well written. Elton speaks profusely about the economy, always digging away at the Conservatives and their running of the Country. Elton's insights are extremely clever and he talks about what he knows best, life and reality.

I would like to talk about Elton's Video " A Farties Guide to the man from Auntie" (BBC Entertainment Ltd. 1991). 'Fartie' is Elton's Euphemism for the normal member of society ('Joe Soap' if you will). This character comes into play in a lot of Elton's material. Elton uses a lot of props and even a couple of sets, (not actual sketches but Elton acting out the topic in an environment). However his normal stand-up out of context is much more effective. it allows

3. see p14

the viewer to use their imagination and therefore relate it back to themselves. So does Elton have bardic qualities? The answer to his question is Yes. Ben Elton is the perfect voice of the people. Although his delivery is very acted out and his natural humour seldom seen, what is evident is his cleverness and great observational skill. What Elton has is a great ability to put these observations into spoken word. His approach is energetic and aggressive and his message is always clear, always trying to point out something we may all have missed. The best piece of material in "...Man From Auntie" is Elton's description of the reality gap i.e. the gap between the media and television version of a person and reality. In this piece he gives his description of the reality which he calls "Fartie". Elton sets the mood of the media life situation. He describes the beautiful male and female model types on a train, he's drinking Tennents low alcohol and she's drinking Perrier, their your stereo-typical "Beautiful People"

" Then up the corridor staggers Fartie you might recognise Fartie cause he's you and me. Were not the Beautiful Models and we're not wearing Levi 501" and if we were they would still look like woolworths on us...wouldn't they?" [Elton '91]

Elton at this point is building up a picture as the media's brainwashing of the public. He explains how the average guy on the street (Fartie) is brainwashed into thinking that he is not as good as the guy in the 'banking ad'. He gets almost upset as he thinks about bank adds and the lies and the illusion they portray, "All we want is a few extra staff on at lunchtime and pens on the ends of those little chains.."Throughout the routine about the 'Reality gap', Elton manages to get continuously and purposely sidetracked to link "the Green House Effect" into the piece along with having a dig at the Poll tax as well. Elton loves the taboo and in fact possesses all the qualities of a good comedian. In his material he is both aggressive and confident and also shows elements on Incongruity. He looks at the different status of Men and Women on both sides of the reality gap, he looks at social hierarchy both within and across a cultural context and of course the taboo subjects which provides the fire and most of what's been laughed at (Chapman/ foot 76).

It is true to say that Elton is a excellent example of a 'Modern Bard' as well as being an extremely humorous performer and writer, I shall discuss this more at the end of this chapter.

Frank Skinner *Crude But Clever*

I am now moving onto one of the two more recent stars, Frank Skinner. Frank has become famous for his BBC humorous football debate show 'Fantasy Football League' but has recently acquired his own talk show which consists of Frank getting in as many gags as possible at the guests expense. However, Frank Skinner the stand up comic is a different story. Franks "Ladism" reputation stands true. Another Great lover of Taboo subjects, Frank likes to tackle them all in the brutalist way. Frank does however fulfil the functions of the Bard, his language is clever and he knows what he wants to say although his messages are sometimes lost. Skinner could be termed the social clown or fool seemingly crude and Unintelligent but, like 'Marcolf', a shrude operator. Full of self disparagement, skinner fulfils the most important social function of a fool.⁴

Frank Skinner's video (live from the London Palladium) is full of examples of Franks self disparagement. Skinner's history is one of foster parents orphanages and alcoholism in later life. In his stand-up Frank makes preference to his drinking and the situations that would follow: "I used to, when I was a drinking man... Piss the bed, 2 or 3 times a week.....now I am not bragging !" [Skinner 96]

What follows is Skinner's report of urinating in the bed with a woman in it. This routine is in fact extremely humorous and probably even more so as it's a true story. This is a classic example of the Bard putting himself in the central subject of ridicule for the purpose of a serious message. A historic example of this goes back to the Zuni Clowns who would drink large quantities of Urine to the great merriment of the crowd [Charles 1945]. The merriment wouldn't be so great if a psychotic patient did such a thing in a hospital ward. Skinner's routine is a success and it's not until later when the shock value wares off that we realise just what it says about our drinking society.

"When reporters asked Marilyn Monroe what she slept in, she said ...Channel no. 5... they loved that. when they asked me and I said... my own Piss... it didn't go down so well".

The aesthetic of the language isn't exactly what keeps Skinner's audience attention but more the Blatant Shock value statements and clever gags. Although, not caught up in politics or society like Ben Elton, Frank Skinner is a classic modern Bard.

4. see ch. two p.4

Eddie Izzard *Definite Article*

Eddie Izzard is an obsessive, Rambling, bizarre, transvestite and a conceptual, expressive performer. Watching Izzard in action one begins to think that "this guy's brain is on overload", constantly grasping at extremely original ideas, working and re-working them. Izzard takes the most bizarre concepts and observations and analyses and re-analyses them. Also possessing a unique miming style on stage all through his act, you can't help but notice that Izzard is enjoying it greatly and indeed that he is amusing and even impressing himself with his train of thought and 'on the spot' ideas. Izzard's 1996 video "definite Article" (Ella Communications production '96), is a bizarre ride into Eddie Izzard's mind. Constantly working and reworking societies view of reality and observing the things that make our culture unique.

Izzard launches into a routine about our modern supermarkets. He begins to describe walking around this market with his trolley full with such a wide selection of goods and observing what other people have in their own trolley's. Working the old saying "you are what you eat", he talks about old ladies in the shop.

"hair nets and dog food, that's all they buy. They Reach a certain age, about 80 I think, and then say 'Fuck everything else... Hair nets and dog food that's all I need now'... cause your on bonus time from then on, aren't you? So you might as well get weird shit... hair nets and dog food." (Izzard '96)

With this statement the comedian is questioning our culture and the change of a persons needs with age, this opens our eyes to something we've all seen before but may not have thought about. The joke is also about old people and the 'weird' things they do so it's not aimed at the average 'identification group' this is the reason many people find it funny. Izzard continues to talk about these old people 'Quirkes' by saying

"Hair nets of course are pointless, we all know this. At night you put them on and you take them off in the morning and you have criss cross patterns on your hair. So why old lady, why the hair net and they go 'oh the hair thieves" (Izzard '96)

Although an exaggeration Izzard is giving us his example of an eccentric old lady. This piece is successful for the reason of recognition, although not to the individual in the audience but because every one 'knows some old lady' with some kind of old fashioned eccentric habit. Throughout his show you never get the feeling that even Izzard knows what he is going to come up with next, although it must be cleverly pre-planned. This is the stark difference that Eddie Izzard brings as a stand-up, a refreshing change from comedians who stumble from gag to gag. As Izzard continues on his supermarket routine he starts to talk about the products and the supplier/consumer relationship. He talks about the labels on food stuffs which is an invention of our culture to 'inform' us about our products.

"They've got labels on all food stuff now that says things like 4 grams of protein' and you say 'aah'... is that good? is that far too little protein?... 0002g pf sodium... do I need 0002g of sodium?"

What our 'modern Bard' is doing here is humourously analysing consumerism. These companies use facts and figures these days to sell products, but to the normal person none of this makes any sense. At the end of this routine Izzard gets on to the new barcoding system in Supermarkets and conjures up ideas of the cashout person 'glancing' the items through the barcode reader and as they do this all day the only bit of excitement they have is when the machine doesn't read the code for some reason.

'just a moment while I punch in the handy 50 diget number...oh modern technology how it's speeded up the process'.

This is also a classic bit of "recognition humour" and it implies the irony of modern living, how people are constantly striving to come up with new ways of efficiency which do not always work.

Throughout his show Izzard is a genius of social observation and comment, his peculiar approach is refreshingly original. With his range of Quirkies and insistent rambling, he keeps the momentum going at his audience attention centre as he bombards them with his day to day observations and perceptions of our culture.

Billy Connolly **'The Big yin'**

As a stand-up comic, Billy Connolly needs no introduction, with his record amount of sell-out nights anywhere he visits and his series of live video's throughout the years, his success and fame stands for itself. Connolly has been a stand-up comedian since the 70's and is definitely the most experienced at his profession from those mentioned before. With his wild flowing locks, his tall lanky body and his outrageous 'dress sense', Connolly was born to be a comedian. His natural charisma shines through in any appearance he makes. Connolly, like Izzard, is obsessed with bizarre observations of the world. His train of thought fluctuates constantly throughout his act as he laughs as loud as any audience member at his Anecdotes and spontaneous thoughts. Connolly is a master of this profession, a brilliant story teller, one gets the feeling that Connolly could deliver any line (where others could not) and get a successful response. He constantly remembers his childhood and the view he had of the world then, he suggests throughout that his view has not changed since then a great deal. Connolly seems to marvel at the world and seems to have an optimistic view of life, "as life roles merely on, the things that used to make me crazy as a child still make me crazy today' (Connolly '94)

For my analysis I chose his most recent video (Billy Connolly Live 1994). This is Connolly at his best. Dropping the slight 'political correctness' he seemed to have acquired in the few proceeding years, this is Connolly uncensored. Giving us a great picture of his life as a child in Glasgow and the Quirks of society at that time, right through to his pet hates and absurd ideas on modern culture. At one stage Connolly is Pondering the idea of the Scottish coming from Ireland and goes on to describe how typical that was as the scotts always strived to live in colder conditions. He says they then attracted Calvinism which came from Switzerland. This introduces Connolly's next subject 'the Swiss'

"Do you know who I've always wanted to see... the Swiss army, just to see what they do with those wee Red knives. I'm sure in Rhuanda or somewhere like that they'll turn up with their wee knives up like that..." (Connolly proceeds to wander up and down the stage with his invisible knife held to his shoulder like a miniature rifle.)

"Squad halt, knives out..."

Scissors Out...
Nailfiles Out...
Things for getting stones out of horses hooves Out...,
(Connolly '94)

This is Connolly building up a great image of the uselessness of an army armed with only these 'Red Knives'. He gives us the basic image and let's the imagination of his audience do the rest. A lot of Connolly's act is very visual and hard to quote on paper, as he acts out all his thought's extremely well, thus always giving a picture that is easy to imagine (i.e. the audience never has to do too much work). You could imagine Connolly as the grand father of Alternative comedy, a wise man sitting back and observing all the ridiculous factors and categories in our culture. Connolly seems always determined to point out to us something new he noticed that is out of the ordinary, always determined to educate.

Like Izzard in his video, Connolly discusses consumerism i.e. he talks about the consumer/ supplier relationship. This story is based near Galway on the west of Ireland, where he goes into a small restaurant for an evening meal. He describes the menu as such:

"it was one of those menu's with nothing on it, I don't know why they bother giving it to you...it's got things like... soup of the day, so you then have to ask what it is, cause you can't say i'll have soup of the day. it might be (pause) octopus arsehole soup".

What Connolly is Questioning in the cultural norm for what way a menu is written. He explains that it is something he finds most amusing.

"...Soup of the day is nothing... just get a pen or a pencil and write what kind of fuckin soup it is... 'Vegetables is Season', they could be pumpkin or frozen peas, Japanese mushrooms, you've no idea... the fish, 'catch of the day' (pause) what is it? Whale? Jelly fish? What are we talking here?"

Connolly's eye for detail shows through here, his mastery as a performer and his accent all carry the material superbly. Billy Connolly is the master of 'Ritual Condensation' (see Ch 1), one of the main bardic functions, as he uses ideas that we may all recognise but never could put into an oral structure like he does. Along with Comedy, Connolly used to busk and play the banjo,

adding this to his outrageous image i think he could fit easily into the kings court.

Comic analysis in terms of bardic theory

Now that I have given a description of the comedians analysed and examples of their routines, we must look at each one in terms of bardic theory. Looking back to chapter one at the seven bardic functions as well as one or two more, I want to give examples of our four comedians fulfilment of the role. The first function was concerned with the bard communicating with an audience a 'reinforcing version of themselves'. Throughout The review of the four comedians, communication was clear and successful, although styles varied from the crude (Skinner) to the absurd (Izzard), no message was lost on the chosen audience. As for a reinforcing view of themselves (the culture), Ben Elton was the comedian most obsessed with showing this, with his constant reference to human behaviour and his piece on 'image and reality'.

The second function deals with the construction of the messages successfully meeting the needs of the audience. This was also attained by all four subjects, utilising the identity and reference groups factor to achieve this. All comedians used recognition objectives and all were most successful. The third function, that of occupying a centralisation within a culture is also evident in all cases. All members of society were open to address and topics such as shopping (Izzard) and alcoholism (Skinner) are as central to a culture as eating out (Connolly) and advertising (Elton).

The fourth function of the bard which I have for-mentioned was to give a reinforcement to a culture (audience) of it's adequacies. Examples of this are less evident in the comedians work as reminders of cultural inadequacies but they do exist. For example Billy Connolly talks fondly about his childhood memories and of things that he finds humorous. He gives his audience a light hearted outlook on society and although by his comment he is often pointing out the negative aspects, he also points out positive aspects of society one must strive to increase. The fifth function is basically a contradiction of the fourth as the comedian points out inadequacies in our culture (Ben Elton's routine on British rail), although they must co-exist and rely on each other for their existence.

The sixth function of the bard is to give the audience a confirmed outlook on their individuality within their culture as a whole.

The seventh is to transmit a sense of cultural belonging and membership within that society. Both these functions deal with reference and identity groups and all our subjects fulfil these functions throughout. Elton talks about 'farties' and the television image of reality, Izzard talks about old people and Connolly talks about 'the Scotts' and 'the Swiss'. These are examples of reference groups and are used to eliminate or reinforce cultural membership.

Apart from the seven mentioned bardic functions the bard must begin by obtaining the skill of 'Ritual condensation'. The ability to take ideas and observations and construct a series of oral messages is what sets him/her apart from the norm. Our comedians all fulfilled this function throughout their work although Izzard and Connolly seem to be the most impressive with their absurdity and obscure references. In my opinion, each subject complies to each of the bardic functions and each in their own way or amount of compliance. The following chart displays my analysis on their success utilising one to ten for simplicity.

Bardic functions	Ben Elton	Frank Skinner	Eddie Izzard	Billy Connolly
1. clear communication, cultures nature of reality	8	7	8	9
2. messages to audience needs	8	6	8	9
3. occupy a central position	7	7	8	7
4. assurance of cultures adequacies	6	6	8	9
5. reminder of cultures inadequacies	8	9	8	9
6. confirm individual identity within culture	8	9	9	9
7. transmit sense of cultural membership	8	7	8	8
8. ritual condensation	9	9	9	9

This chart was constructed merely to give a visual representation of my opinion on the success of the comedians analysed, to back up the bardic theory, obviously tastes may differ. As you can see all the subjects fulfilled the role quite adequately, some more than others. I shall stress this theory one last time in my conclusion.

conclusion

In my introduction I spoke about the human pleasure of laughter. The subject of humour research is a very wide topic and a subject that has been studied by philosophers and psychologists alike. As I gave examples of some research that had been done in the past I got into the Functions of Laughter. I describe such views as tension relief, breach of inhibitions and a celebration of belonging or association. J. Morrell gave a three point summary of where humour derives from (1) Where humour derives from a feeling of superiority over what is laughed at; (2) where humour derives from a sensation of psychological relief; (3) where humour derives from a perception of incongruity in what is laughed. (Palmer 1994) These are Morrell's main reasons for laughter and these points are very relevant to a comedian while writing a routine.

Just like the functions of the bard, the comedian must take many things into account. I also gave a brief description of joking relationships in the introduction, e.g. the relationships between men and women, father and son, employer and employee, all change the tone of the humour. We see now that this is not completely relevant to the stand up comedian (although he must take much things into consideration) as he has a unique one way relationship or conversation with his audience. Laughter could be seen as communicating a response to the comedian but this response is dependent on the comics material, as is any group participation. "you see, when the lights go down it's my turn... when they come up again it's yours" (Connolly '94) Leading into my first chapter I described gender within humour and the difference in what both genders find funny. The comedian should use this knowledge to gain the appreciation of both genders (see bardic functions).

At the beginning of chapter one I spoke briefly about the historic comedian, describing the court jester and the clown with examples of 'Marcolf' and 'Solomen' and work done by Enid Welsford (1935) and Klapp (1972). The bard was the entertainer I chose for my theory and I began to explain the functions of the bard in society. We concluded in this chapter that communication and latent comment are the basis of these functions and although they have been stated thoroughly already they are the basis for bardic theory and a tool for my analysis so I will state them again; (1) Clearly communicating the culture's nature of

reality, (2) Messages constructed to suit audience needs, (3) Occupying a central position within culture, (4) Assuring the culture of its adequacies, (5) To remind the culture of its inadequacies, (6) To transmit a sense of cultural membership.

'Ritual condensation' (the constructing of ideas and thoughts into oral messages) is the eighth function and one that sets the comedian apart. Another bardic function is to challenge the culture's nature of reality, to state the unstated. A lot of comic material may seem to point to the obvious but is humorous due to the fact that using ritual condensation the unstated is stated. After describing the functions I began to talk about the audience and the reasons for humour success. Bennett (1991) described reference and identification groups which are the basis of recognition and observation, e.g. a reference group is a group that a person associates with due to race, religion or occupation. In general people enjoy laughing at other reference groups although one can laugh at one's own group if the joke is well constructed or depending how his identification group relates to his reference group. Another reason I mentioned for humour appreciation was education.

I used a set of four contemporary comedians for my analysis. Each comedian was chosen for separate reasons as well as over-all criteria. Things such as charisma, observational skill and natural wit were constant. A short description of each comedian's style and examples of their material were given with little mention of bardic theory. After introducing all four comedians my final sub-heading in chapter two was concerned with discussing the comedians in terms of bardic theory. We found that all the comedians chosen did fulfil the bardic role within their material. As 'Contemporary bards, some functions were more evident than others and one or two of the comedians were more suitable than others. I created a simple chart at the end, to visually represent what I felt were the results of my analysis. This chart was based purely on self opinion and was merely a visual aid to back up my analysis. All comedians scored high and the more evident functions can be seen in the results. Ritual condensation was the most evident one, next to a reminder of Cultural Inadequacies, which seems to be a popular topic within comedy today.

As with Fiske and Hartley's 'bardic television' (Fiske/Hartley ch.6 '76) I see the comedians as the perfect modern bard with his constructed messages and latent comment just like television as a communicator, the comedian fulfils all bardic functions stated. All comedy depends on circumstances, whether it involves

group cohesiveness, certain reference groups present or subtle give and take of the night club stand-up. The comedian must take into account many things when constructing comic material. A fine balance exists between 'kidding and offending' social commentary and prejudice. Enid Welsford suggests that the comedian provides a situation that in turn provides brief transcendence, designed to make fun of situations, events and taboo that lay most heavy upon us. These moments of transcendence and the comedians ability to provide social comment with impunity, are the reasons that the comedian is seen to be 'above the norm'. This levitated importance is what gives the comedian his audience and what provides the modern stand-up with the opportunity to maintain his unique role within society.

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