

## **Containing the Audience: The ‘Room’ in Stand-Up Comedy**

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### **Abstract**

When selecting a venue for a stand-up comedy performance, promoters rarely think in terms of a room’s personality. Venues tend to be selected and managed on the basis of profitability, ease of access and other practicalities. The relationship between comedian and audience is rightly stressed as the key factor responsible for ensuring the success of the event. Yet this emphasis neglects another important factor: the relationship between the audience and the room.

Although an audience is unlikely to be conscious of the room and its furnishings, the layout and décor of a room can influence their emotions and attitudes, and even dictate their behaviour. This article examines what makes a ‘good room’ for stand-up performance, arguing that the nature and layout of a performance space can itself be important in shaping the character, behaviour and reactions of the audience.

**Key Words:** Audience, interaction, performance, room, space, stand-up comedy.

Stand-up comedy is often described as a battle between audience and performer. This is not surprising. From a comedian’s point of view, an audience can be an intimidating and frightening beast. Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves refer to the interaction that takes place in stand-up comedy as ‘brutal’:

It’s no accident that the language of professional comedians is filled with violence and death – ‘He died on his arse tonight’ being the nadir, and ‘He really killed out there’ being the pinnacle of achievement [...] It’s as though a comedy club is the chosen arena for a fight to the death, where either the audience or the comic gets out alive – but never both. (2007: 115)

When an audience does not laugh, the act fails and the experience becomes thoroughly unpleasant, for the audience as well as the performer. Audiences are threatening because they are powerful. The stand-up act may look like a solo, but in fact the audience's input is necessary to its success:

The audience's laughter is essential to the rhythm of the comic's set; although they aren't talking to him (except for the red-faced drunk in the front row), for the set to be successful it must still function with the to-and-fro rhythm of a conversation, albeit a rather one-sided one. (*ibid*)

It should be noted that audiences are not, typically, antagonistic. Attending a gig usually involves an investment of time, effort and money. The audience thus have a vested interest in ensuring the event's success, and their default position is often a friendly one. All the same, a healthy respect for audience-power is no bad thing. It is the audience's cooperation which allows the act to succeed and they retain the right to undermine the interaction by withdrawing that cooperation. However, such emphasis on the verbal battle of wits tends to ignore the more subtle weapons in the comedian's armoury. One such weapon is the room.

The term 'room' means more than just the physical space in which the performance takes place; it is the term used to summarise a combination of factors which include the nature of the space, the way that space is set up, the character of the audience and more. To analyse these elements in isolation is difficult as, from a comedian's perspective, they are all interlinked and interdependent; a collection of factors which merge together to form the context in which material develops into an interactive performance.

Stand-up gigs come in all shapes and sizes, from small, struggling clubs above pubs to the O2 Arena, a London venue which can accommodate audiences of up to 16,000 for its stand-up shows. The focus here is on live stand-up encounters in small-to-medium sized gigs. As venues get larger, the dynamic of interaction changes. This is both the cause and the effect of a more significant metamorphosis, as the gig comes to be, in part, the celebration of a celebrity figure. Steve Martin provides a detailed account of the phase of his career which saw him rise to such fame that he routinely faced audiences of several thousand, the popularity of his live act peaking in the USA during the late 1970s. The chapters of his autobiography which chart his rise relate both the elation of success and the demoralising separation of a comedian from his craft:

The act was shifting into automatic. The choreography was in place, and all I had to do was fulfill it. I was performing a litany of immediate old favourites, and the laughs, rather than being the result of spontaneous combustion, now seemed to roll in like waves created at sea. The nuances of stand-up still thrilled

me, but nuance was difficult when you were a white dot in a basketball arena.  
(Martin, 2007: 181)

Martin goes on to arrive at a significant conclusion:

Today I realize that I misunderstood what my last year of stand-up was about. I had become a party host, presiding not over timing and ideas but over a celebratory bash of my own making. If I had understood what was happening, I might have been happier, but I didn't. I still thought I was doing comedy. (2007: 185)

The present study focuses on rooms with capacities of up to 500, recognising that somewhere between the medium and the massive lies a dividing line between two different species. The more intimate interaction that takes place at the smaller end of the scale is analysed because it is this dynamic which opens up the most interesting possibilities for comedic interaction. As Mintz states:

Perhaps the best, if not the only, place to witness standup comedy as true social and cultural mediation is in live performance, preferably at one of the small comedy clubs or intimate night-club rooms where interaction between the comedian and audience is more prominent. (1985: 78)

Across the UK, there are hundreds of small, informal gigs that run on enthusiasm, for little or no financial profit. It is in these that most comedians get their start. They learn their craft and gradually work their way up through larger audiences and more prestigious venues. The lucky minority come to a point where they can tour their own show, their fame perhaps fuelled by appearances on television. The very few become famous enough to graduate to the arena gigs or produce a best-selling DVD. Importantly, it is the live circuit of small-to-medium gigs which fuels the upper echelons of the comedy industry, training and nurturing the talent that big business will adopt. In this sense, those small-to-medium rooms are fundamental to all levels of stand-up production.

Most live stand-up takes place in the environment of nerve-racking intimacy that Carr and Greeves describe. In this high-pressure context, comedians and promoters can draw on a wealth of knowledge which allows them to influence the nature of the room and thus shape audience response. This article aims, firstly, to record some of this professional knowledge, as reported to the author in interviews with ten stand-up comedians. These were all drawn from the British alternative comedy circuit and the venues cited are, similarly, all located in Great Britain, unless otherwise stated. The interviewees represented varying levels of experience and renown, giving a picture of the room from a broad range of experience. They included established professionals such as Josie Long and Stewart Lee; artists well-

known enough to tour their own, solo shows and to have some freedom of choice regarding the context in which they performed. The interviewees also included some who were relatively new to the stand-up scene: Kurt Driver, for example, was approximately two years in to his stand-up career at the time of the interview, which followed an unpaid gig delivered in distinctly unglamorous circumstances. In between were the more established circuit acts like Dan Atkinson and Matthew Crosby, who counted comedy as their main profession.

Naturally, the professional knowledge related by comedians is informed by their experience and preoccupations. For this reason, the focus is on factors which are considered instrumental in promoting a good atmosphere and responsive audience, and assumes that audiences and promoters broadly share these priorities. In reality, stand-up comedians look for a range of reactions from their audiences: shock, sympathy and indignation are all part of the rich experience stand-up has to offer. Funniness, however, remains the fundamental yard stick of success, and to that extent the author shares the assumption of the industry: that a successful gig is, first and foremost, one that procures the laughter of its audience (Atkinson, 2008).

In relating the common practices that seek to shape the room, and to create this atmosphere, it may be demonstrated that audiences can also be shaped, and their behaviour manipulated and contained, by resourceful management of the room.

### **A good comedian can play any room?**

The idea that ‘a good comedian can play any room’ is something of a proverb in stand-up culture. The exact meaning of the phrase is subject to a range of interpretations. Dan Atkinson uses it in reference to the comedian’s ability to adjust their performance to fit the unique combination of circumstances posed by each gig. Referring to a show at the Gulbenkian Theatre in Canterbury he says:

I think that’s right, a good comedian should be able to play any room, because you should approach each gig on its own merit and play it accordingly. So there were - what? - 250 people at the Gulbenkian, and so you have to play it slightly larger. But if there were ten people and we’d all played it like we did it wouldn’t have worked because it feels false [...] I think a comedian is able to adjust the pitch of their performance, even if they’re doing the same thing. (2008)

As Joe Wilkinson further explains:

I change [my] persona slightly dependent on the room [...] I did a gig in Aldershot on Saturday night and they were a slightly older audience and a slightly smaller audience and [...] maybe less comedy savvy, you can just tell.

And so I wasn't quite as grumpy about it [...] I was slightly more upbeat [...] They needed to know that I was enjoying it rather than hating it [...] Whereas I did, last night, a gig in Greenwich which was really rowdy, and then I do a lot less in that and I'm grumpier, because [...] it's a bigger clash. The less I do in a rowdy room the bigger the show looks [...] So you have a persona but you have to, sort of, scale it up or down depending on where you are or what the situation is. (2008)

Wilkinson acknowledges that the specific situation in which he performs will influence every aspect of his delivery, from the energy of the performance to the intensity of his persona. In presenting a more 'upbeat' and energetic performance to the Aldershot audience, Wilkinson demonstrates sensitivity to circumstances which are not of his creating but which are, nevertheless, relevant. He senses that this audience are 'less comedy-savvy'; his professional judgement therefore tells him that they may not be as comfortable with the ironic despondency present in more intense portrayals of his stage persona. As a smaller audience, they require encouragement in the form of a high level of energy from the performer. The Greenwich audience, by contrast, have a surplus of energy; Wilkinson meets this with a 'grumpier' performance which seeks to contain the audience's rowdiness and enhance the authority of the show.

The room is a variable factor, and it is an integral part of the comedian's craft to adapt around its specific demands. Yet there must be a limit to the level of adaptability that can reasonably be expected from any one performer. Matthew Crosby interprets the proverb differently, as a call for comedians to be flexible enough to play to any audience. He refutes the idea:

No, I do not think that is true [...] That's a bit like saying, 'oh a good musician should be able to have everyone like their music' [...] There is such a thing as taste, and there is such a thing as opinion, and people seem to forget that in comedy [...] An example that's sort of been used by many different people, that's comparing it to music, is you would never go to a night called 'Music Night' [...] they would want to go, 'well what kind of music are you playing? [...] I wanna be listening to a [type of] music I enjoy.' Whereas, if someone goes, 'oh there's a comedy night happening,' you would go without sort of going, 'well what kind of comedy is it going to be?' (2008)

In yet another interpretation, Dave Bailey, a comedian and promoter based in Chatham, interprets the phrase more literally. To him, the 'room' is quite literally the space in which the performance takes place:

Many comics will say, 'a good comedian can play any room.' I understand this, but slightly disagree [...] The venue will always have some sort of distraction/problem going on, but it's learning how to perform and be funny whilst [these distractions]/ problems are going on that makes you a better comic. (Bailey, 2008)

The idea that 'a good comedian can play any room' puts an arduous requirement on the comedian to develop the skills to play successfully in a diverse range of contexts. The attitude that a good comedian should be able to face any live challenge can be helpful, in that it encourages comedians to diversify and develop a range which will make them more adaptable as performers and more marketable across a diverse circuit; this is certainly the implication of Atkinson's interpretation. The responsibility that this places upon the comedian can, however, be abused. Josie Long relates some difficult experiences:

There are a lot of student comedy nights that are run by various promotional companies and they tend to be horrendously badly organised. Like, you know, not a proper stage, not a proper sound system [...] not a compère, kind of, people not knowing what's going on, not knowing, sort of, how it's supposed to be run [...] that says a lot. I had a really bad experience, on tour [...] where I was booked to play a studio [...] It held like a hundred people, which was fine for my show, perfect. And we sold it out, and it was gonna be such a lovely night and then I got there and they were like, 'yeah we've moved you to a massive room that seats 500 people,' and I was like, 'why?', and they were like, 'we thought we could sell twenty extra tickets.' So, for the sake of them selling 110 tickets as opposed to ninety-five tickets, I had to do[...]an awful show. And basically I'd signed the contract saying that I was in the studio and they were just like, 'well you'll just have to work harder, won't you?'. I was just like, 'No. You've ruined my show, and there's nothing I can do to help it.'[...] I'd never play there again. (2008)

The nature and set-up of a venue can have a profound impact upon the success of the stand-up event. There are plenty of horror stories which mirror Long's complaints of poor amplification, a lack of discernible stage and general disorganisation; many comedians speak of their worst gigs with a still-tangible sense of frustration and resentment towards the promoters who once set them up for a fall. In Long's case, the assumption that she could shoulder the responsibility for the difficult position that she had been placed in merely by 'working harder' was a misconception which allowed the gig to be sabotaged. Her skill may have enabled her to create a workable show, but the venue had become an obstacle when it could have been an advantage.

Comedians recognise that some rooms give their act a better chance than others, enhancing the dynamic to create a better experience for everyone involved. In a sense, therefore, the statement that ‘a good comedian can play any room’ approaches the issue from the wrong angle. It is a phrase that can be abused, encouraging an atmosphere in which the room is allowed to pose needless hurdles to the comedian. The more helpful approach is surely to identify the means by which the room can support the comedian, encouraging the audience to play their part in the interaction.

### **What makes a good stand-up space?**

The nature and quality of a venue is determined not only by the inherent qualities of the space, but also by the actions that a good promoter or assertive comedian can take to improve it. Only a small proportion of stand-up comedy is performed in purpose-built comedy clubs. Very often, performers and promoters have to select the best space available and improvise; finding the best way to exploit the venue’s strong points and remedy its weaknesses. Whether the space is purpose-built to be particularly conducive to stand-up, or faces the performer with one problem after another, the exploitation of the space to increase the responsiveness of the audience is usually an integral part of the show’s delivery.

Some venues can have characteristics which make performance inherently difficult, as Dave Bailey outlines:

I discounted many venues before even trying. I knew a high street pub would be impossible, as there are just too many distractions [...] A high street pub would be too noisy, and with big screen TVs, pool tables, fruit machines – the comic would be fighting a losing battle. (2008)

Difficult spaces can, however, often be improved. As Oliver Double states:

Sometimes this would mean taking obvious steps, like turning off televisions, jukeboxes or one-armed bandits while the show was on. Other times, it would mean rearranging the space, finding the best place for the stage to be set up, adjusting the lighting and rearranging the seating. Usually, this turned an undoable gig into an acceptable one, an acceptable gig into a joy. (2005: 111)

One example is given by Matthew Crosby in reference to a club he ran at the Horsebridge Arts and Community Centre in Whitstable. Here, Crosby took measures to manipulate the actual behaviour of the audience such that they would, themselves, help to improve the room:

We did this thing of moving the tables to the front. Now, a few people don't like this [...]especially because these are big tables[...]so it means that the first person is still quite far away from the act[...]but at the same time we had a problem with people not wanting to sit in the front. So we move the tables to the front, people automatically want tables 'cause they wanna put their drinks down, so you make the front seating much more appealing. (2008)

Even the broader structure of the space can be manipulated to improve the performer's chances. Crosby explains that audiences like to feel that they have come to a popular gig; encouraging the appearance of commercial success increases the audience's confidence in the show. He recalls performing with sketch troupe Pappy's Fun Club at the Tobacco Factory in Bristol:

They had 250 seats, and we were going 'oh, this is fantastic, it's a sell-out show,' and they said, 'well, we could have another 150, and we'd move the stage back and we bring in chairs at the side.' But it felt great, you know [...] 'cause, like, every seat was full. (2008)

When asked what it is that makes a good space for stand-up comedy, the factors cited by comedians and promoters usually fall in to one of two categories. The first consists of the things that reduce challenges to the authority of the performer. As noted above, distractions such as fruit machines and awkwardly-placed doors can provide competition for the audience's attention, and are generally neutralised as far as possible to preserve the performer's authority. Speaking before a show at the Horsebridge club, Crosby explains that it is best to avoid having doors by the stage, or at least to take them out of operation for the duration of the performance. In the Horsebridge, however, this is not possible, as the only entrance door is at the side of the stage:

[I]f someone walks in, you just see the eyes of the whole room drifting[...]I mean as a compère it doesn't matter, I'll just drop what I'm doing and talk to those people [...] but if you're actually trying to craft something bigger than, you know, banter or crowd work then it can be really, really tricky. (2008)

One important, common-sense step, then, is to place the stage such that it draws the focus away from sources of distraction. Other measures in this category include the use of lighting and arrangement of seating. As Mark Simmons states, 'the performer needs to look like the star of the show' (2008); this is not easily achieved if the seating or lighting fails to direct attention exclusively towards the stage. Dan Atkinson also feels that measures can be taken to enhance the perceived status and authority of the comedy gig itself:



The conditions need to be right, as for any gig or entertainment where you've paid to enjoy something [...] the more polished it is, the better. People feel they're being treated to an experience. So if you have, y'know, lights down at the beginning, search lights, intro music, announcements and stuff, it makes it really exciting. And before you've even seen anything you're well-disposed because you've been primed to believe that what you're about to see is good. (2008)

The second category consists of measures which enhance the flow of energy through the room. When it comes to traditional theatre architecture, practitioners and theoreticians generally agree that there is such a thing as a good and a bad space, that everybody can tell one from the other, and that it is primarily instinct through which we recognise and create such spaces. Speaking at a conference in a space which he describes as a 'glamorous, ultra-modern hall,' director Peter Brook states that the room puts him 'ill at ease' (1988: 147). He concludes:

There are no strict rules to tell us whether a space is good or bad. In fact, all this relates to a kind of rigorous and precise science which we can only develop by continuous experiment and empiricism based on fact. (151)

The key to a good space is its ability to promote a high level and quality of interaction between performer and audience. As theatre designer and historian Iain Mackintosh states:

The chief purpose of theatre architecture is to provide a channel for energy. Although this energy flows chiefly from performer to audience the performer is rendered impotent unless he or she receives in return a charge from the audience. (1993: 172)

Mackintosh argues that the arrangement of some spaces is conducive to this process while others destroy the possibility of such communion between performer and audience. This is echoed by Brook, again criticising the conference hall:

I think we can all see right away that this is a difficult space. This is because what matters is for us to have a living contact with one another [...] [I]f at this moment I want to say something in the hope of getting an immediate reaction out of you, I'll have to speak very loudly and try to send a charge of energy through the person nearest to me, and so on, all the way to the back of the room. Even if I were to succeed, your reaction would be very slow, retarded by the gaps between people imposed by the architects. (1988: 147)

In stand-up, the aim is for this flow of energy to combust into the specific response of laughter. As Double states:

Funny lines, gestures and mimes flow from the comedian to the audience, and laughter, applause and heckles flow back. The audience is energised and bonded into a group by the comedy and the performer is energised by the audience's responses. Comics must be able to generate this energy in the audience, or there will be nothing to fuel their performance. (2005: 107)

To produce laughter, an audience needs not only energy but also confidence. To laugh is pleasant, but can also be risky; to be caught laughing heartily when other audience members are silent could be embarrassing. Bergson describes the importance of camaraderie in laughter:

You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo [...] Our laughter is always the laughter of a group [...] However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers [...] How often it has been said that the fuller the theatre, the more uncontrolled the laughter of the audience! (2008: 11)

It is therefore important that, as Brook intimates, the energy that causes laughter flows freely and easily between people.

When asked what makes a good space for stand-up, comedians often cite features which pack the audience in tightly, instinctively adhering to Brook's idea that the energy can be lost in empty space. Related to these factors is the need for acoustics to amplify the laughter, rather than letting it dissipate, so that the laughs that have already come can better fuel those being created. As Dan Atkinson explains:

Low ceilings, hard surfaces, rowed seating - if you're having tables, very, very small tables - very dark, lights only facing the stage. Low stage, so that people feel close to the comic and they know that it's not a theatre performance and that there's going to be interaction. And, basically, what all that does - what you're aiming for - is that you have the audience as one homogenised group [...] You want them all to forget that they are in a group or single, you want them all to be believing they're one lump, enjoying it all together. Which is quite a nice thing, when that does happen. (2008)

When asked about the tendency to reduce empty space in a room, Atkinson replies:

Yeah, it's crucial. That's a technicality about the laughs. Because if you've got high ceilings or a half-full room the laughs get lost a bit, dissipate. It's like doing comedy in a tent's usually shit because the fabric just lets the laugh out. So you want nowhere for the laugh to go and for it to just sort of bounce around the room. (2008)

All of the above has one clear drawback: comfort. It is obvious that a tightly packed space is more likely to create physical discomfort than a sparsely populated one. Strange though it may seem, a more uncomfortable audience is considered more likely to be an amenable one. As Steve Martin observed of the Exit/In, a small, smokey club in Nashville, USA; 'the shows were oversold, riotous and packed tight, which verified a growing belief of mine about comedy: The more physically uncomfortable the audience, the bigger the laughs' (2007: 165). The reason for this is that a comfortable audience is a less efficient conductor of energy. Brook states that, 'Nothing is so unimportant as comfort; comfort in fact often devitalizes the experience' (1988: 147). Mackintosh concurs: 'a less densely packed house seated in ever greater comfort becomes ever more passive, ever more comatose' (1993: 24).

So, in stand-up comedy, audience comfort may be actively avoided. Matthew Crosby explains that the performance space at the Horsebridge is 'really relaxing,' and 'that can often be to the detriment of a room' (2008). He gives the following example:

I've been to gigs where the front row's sofas [...] and they're using the exact same logic that I used with the tables up the front, they go, 'well obviously people are gonna want to sit on a sofa rather than a hard chair.' But if you're on a sofa [...] you're not upright, ready to laugh [...] You could become very passive and treat it like you're just watching telly. (*ibid*)

A successful room will usually show some evidence of an attempt to influence the responsiveness - and even the behaviour - of the audience. The space is laid out to direct the audience's attention toward the performer and enhance excitement about the gig. Occasionally, perception of commercial success is also managed by the layout of the space. The dead space in the room is minimised and the audience are prevented from becoming comfortable enough to be sedate, so that energy may flow more easily into laughter. These efforts are usually subtle and audiences are rarely aware of the way that both they and the space have been arranged to encourage responsiveness. These activities are, nonetheless, common practices orchestrated specifically to influence the behaviour of the audience.

### **How a space communicates**

According to Alain de Botton, buildings, their décor and furnishings, can themselves communicate to their inhabitants. Fundamentally, de Botton argues that buildings are never

asked to serve purely practical purposes; we also expect buildings to contribute to mood and atmosphere:

Of almost any building, we ask not only that it do a certain thing but also that it look a certain way, that it contribute to a given mood: of religiosity or scholarship, rusticity or modernity, commerce or domesticity. We may require it to generate a feeling of reassurance or of excitement, of harmony or of containment. (2006: 62)

Even décor and furnishing may communicate particular moods:

Consider the struts on the backs of two chairs. Both seem to express a mood. The curved struts speak of ease and playfulness, the straight ones of seriousness and logic[...]the struts abstractly represent two different temperaments. A straight piece of wood behaves in its own medium as a stable and unimaginative person will act in his or her life, while the meanders of a curved piece correspond, however obliquely, with the casual elegance of an unruffled and dandyish soul. (89)

Not only does de Botton state that buildings are able to communicate to their users, he also implies that the vocabulary with which they do so is incredibly varied, stretching from the architecture of the building itself, to the detail on its furnishings. Logically, therefore, the design of a good space is not only a matter of influencing the behaviour of the people who occupy it, but also of allowing the building itself to communicate the appropriate mood and feeling.

In applying similar considerations to theatre architecture, Iain Mackintosh (1993: 81) quotes the result of a study which examined the influence of décor on the responsiveness of participants. This experiment by Richard Küller attested that individuals had a higher response rate to stimuli when situated in a space full of colour and pattern than they did when situated in a dull and blandly-decorated space. Therefore, Küller was able to conclude that the arousal rate of audiences who see a show in a 'festive' space is likely to be better than that of an audience in a bland and undecorated space. Thus, Mackintosh argues, it is easier to obtain laughter from an audience in a colourful setting than a bland one – a claim which he believes is supported in the experience of performers themselves. De Botton's observations on the communicative power of buildings and Mackintosh's observations about pattern and colour could provide a guide for the creation of particularly stimulating performance spaces. In theory, the more friendly and colourful-looking the space in which an audience is situated - the higher the 'information rate' (*ibid*) - the more easily the audience can be persuaded to laugh.

De Botton (2006: 17) states that the power of buildings to communicate is ultimately unreliable. For this reason, the communicative power of buildings and their contents is rarely a priority for consideration, and 'it remains odd to initiate a conversation about what a building is saying' (97):

Architecture is perplexing, too, in how inconsistent is its capacity to generate the happiness on which its claim to our attention is founded [...] Endowed with a power that is as unreliable as it often is inexpressible, architecture will always compete poorly with utilitarian demands for humanity's resources. (17)

It is understandable that such an unreliable consideration as 'what a building is saying' may not be the determining factor when a venue is chosen for stand-up performance. Stewart Lee not only performed, but also recorded his DVD *90s Comedian* (2006), in the plain black Theatre in the Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff. This venue is the ultimate in low information-rate spaces, featuring plain black floor, walls, stage, curtains and furniture. However, this venue was not chosen on the basis of aesthetics but rather because the independent, low-budget DVD producer Go Faster Stripe had access to it. Lee had been unable to find any company willing to record and release his show *90s Comedian*, so Chris Evans, an employee of the Chapter, invited Lee to perform there. The show was filmed in practical, unglamorous style by friends and turned into DVDs which were then sold over the internet (Evans 2010). The fact that the Go Faster team had easy access to the venue presumably easily superseded any consideration regarding its plain, black décor. The Chapter's Theatre proves to be perfectly workable for stand-up comedy, Lee garnering the necessary responses from his audience. Other comedians have followed, Lucy Porter (2008) and Richard Herring (2007) being among those who have subsequently filmed successful shows at the Chapter, despite its unexciting appearance. As de Botton suggests, the communicative power of space is simply too unreliable to be made a primary consideration.

Indeed, in an interview for the *90s Comedian* DVD extras, Lee acknowledges that the low-key nature of the Chapter's Theatre is typical of the 'non-showbiz environments' chosen for British alternative stand-up. The appearance of poverty is consistent with alternative comedy's roots, where 'achieving any level of commercial sustainability' was perceived as 'selling out' (Lee, 2010: 6). Some stand-up audiences still link the appearance of poverty with credibility; as Joe Wilkinson states, 'stand-up by its nature's a bit on the, you know, rough and ready side [...] I think if you do it in a wine bar it doesn't feel right but if you do it in a basement of a grotty pub it feels right' (2008). Go Faster Stripe, with its punk-style do-it-yourself ethos and shoestring budget has a credibility which a richer and more polished company would lack, and their venue supports this.

The power of architecture and furnishings to communicate moods and create atmospheres remains, even if its influence can be overruled by other factors. Much stand-up does take place in spaces with high information rates. Purpose-built alternative comedy venues often cohere with Mackintosh's suggestions. The Stand in Edinburgh features bright coloured walls covered with colourful writing and images of human faces. The back of the stage displays a large image of the trademark cowboy, wearing a hat with an over-sized rim and holding a gun to his own head. The seats are covered in a range of fabrics in various bright colours and garish designs. The Glasgow Stand follows a similar theme. The London Comedy Store is largely bright red in colour, featuring several striking comedy store logos, including one on the back wall of the stage, and several pictures of performers in the bar area. At first sight, the Auditorium at the Manchester Comedy Store may seem rather dull; the walls are largely plain brick, encircling a black stage with a black back wall. The only sign of bright or striking décor are the large Comedy Store logos that adorn the walls and some small sections that have been painted red. Yet the plain brick forms a busy pattern, and the red seats and sections of red wall ensure the presence of some, if limited, colour.

Of course, most stand-up gigs lack the resources to customise the space in this way. The more improvised spaces still tend to have high information rates. Many clubs are located in pubs, with a well-lit bar littered with beer taps and bottles, as well as patterned or heavily ornamented walls and furnishings. Even the plain space at the Chapter is arranged to provide some visual stimulation. Lee, Porter and Herring all perform their *Go Faster Stripe* releases on the black stage in front of black curtains, but those curtains are lit in such a way as to send bold stripes of colour dashing down them. Whether it is due to technical knowledge, instinct or tradition, the majority of stand-up comedy tends to utilise venues with high information rates. Evidently, its creators understand that the décor and furnishing in a stand-up space carry their own influence.

### **Dictating the personality and behaviour of the audience**

In a series of lectures delivered in 1979, John McGrath (1996) argued that it was unrealistic to depend solely upon the material delivered within a theatre to determine the nature of the audience's experience. The location of the performance, the price of the tickets, the way the event was publicised and the behaviour of the box-office staff all had their effect on the audience member. These factors were generally crucial in deciding who would come to the performance in the first place, giving a clear message to a certain section of the public that the show was for them, and to others that they were, essentially, not welcome.

In stand-up, as in any kind of theatre, the show's publicity can also be used as a tool to ensure that the 'right kind' of audience attends. One distinction that comedians commonly draw is that between the 'comedy-savvy' audience and the more generalised, less sophisticated audience. By this comedians appear to suggest that a comedy-savvy audience is one which is highly literate with comic forms and devices, and is therefore able to accept

more complex material and spot the better-disguised ironies. It is assumed that such audiences' greater level of experience also means that they are less likely to make the 'error', which Matthew Crosby cites above, of failing to distinguish differences in comedic style: it is this error which leads to the futile attempt to consume all comedy in the same way. The savvy audience are assumed to be more likely to choose to view a style that suits them, and to engage with that style on its own terms.

Understandably, many comedians express a preference for this type of audience, feeling that such proficiency on the audience's part allows the comedian freedom to indulge in the more complex material that they – themselves highly proficient with comic devices – find more interesting (Herring, 2009). Dan Atkinson relates his experience with his own comedy club:

I ran a gig for five years [...] and there were a couple set up in opposition. Where I ran my gig it was all about the experience of the audience. It was all about making everything as funny and as fun as possible. So the brochures would be, sort of, hand-drawn, thirty-two page comedy magazines [...] Everything was about the fun and funny. And we ended up getting a really, really high class of audience; people who were comedy-savvy, who knew what was lazy from a comedian and would genuinely love when a comedian did something comedically interesting. On the flip side of that, there was a bar next door that put on comedy in their bar and they just put posters up [...] and they got the meat heads. So it does make a huge difference how you sell it. (2008)

Stewart Lee delivers a peculiar kind of comedy in that his aim is often to create a feeling of uncertainty among the audience as to how they should respond. It takes a particularly kind of audience to appreciate such an unusual approach, and Lee has a novel way of attracting them:

I [...] always try and put some bad quote on a poster – like 'monotonous, boring and repetitive' or something – if I can find something like that, to just try and thin the audience out a bit. [Then] I don't have to deal with the problem. (2009)

By pitching the publicity, ticket price and type of venue in a particular way, a performance could implicitly invite certain individuals while excluding others. Hence the type of audience attracted to a particular performance may be manipulated. However, while this is a strong possibility for comedians who, like Stewart Lee, have the experience and credibility to mount a solo show, comedians lower down the ladder rarely have the luxury of selecting their audiences. While Atkinson acknowledges the possibility of inviting 'good' audiences,

he cites this as 'a minor possibility because you've got to earn a living' (2008). The most profitable gigs are the ones generally cited as the artistic nadir; the stag and hen dos and the notorious 'corporates'. While a good gig ensures that everything works together to support the comedy, the gig provided as a sideshow at a big party confronts the comedian with an audience who have other priorities. As Josie Long outlines:

A lot of the big clubs, the way they do it is they set up deals with offices for parties or corporate things and they set up, kind of, deals with stags and hens, and with group bookings so[...]the atmosphere necessarily changes because of that. Because it's their party so they think it's their big day, so they're a bit like, you know, 'Woo! Talk about Karen! Talk about Karen!' They're not there thinking, 'I love this comedian, I'm glad I'm going to see this comedian'. (2008)

For the majority of comedians, then, there is little leeway to select the nature of the audience to which they perform. Isy Suttie sums up the situation: 'Clubs which give out home-made cakes are the nicest to play, but sadly they pay the least!' (2008).

Promoters and more economically powerful performers can, however, engage in this process of selection through the way that they frame their shows. Even the choice of venue itself plays a part in attracting a suitable audience and dictating their behaviour. Performing at the Gardner Arts Centre in Brighton, Mark Thomas contrasts the typical 'arts centre' audience with the typical late-night Comedy Store audience. Thomas explains that, despite the Comedy Store's reputation for cutting-edge comedy, it generally attracts 'wall-to-wall pissed accountants' (2003) - by which Thomas presumably means to signify a fairly narrow range of middle-class city professionals - who demand a crude and uninspiring type of comedy. Such are the demands of Thomas' typical Friday night Comedy Store audience that, by two o'clock in the morning, he's 'just shovelling off knob gags to stay afloat' (for clarity, Thomas' speech is transcribed in standard type and his impersonation of audience members in italics, while the audience's response is in standard type and square brackets):

What I'd do is I'd talk about, sort of like, knob gags for about nineteen minutes ... just so I could speak about East Timor for thirty seconds. [Small laugh] ... And that was the trade off, do you know what I mean? So I'd be up there going 'Knob gag'- and they go '*Knob gag!*' [Small Laugh] ... 'Knob gag' - '*Knob gag!*' [Laugh] ... 'East Timor!' - '*Eas' Ti'- What the fuck? I don't know what the fuck that is*' [Laugh] '*Do you know what the fuck tha-*', '*I dunno, I think it's by the clitoris.*' '*Is it? Marvellous!*' [Big laugh] '*Very good*' ... Like knob gag by default, really [Small laugh] ... And I got so pissed off with it I thought 'No, I will not haul my comedic arse around this venue any more.' [Small laugh] ... 'I will go and perform in arts centres' [Big laugh] ... 'I will be an artiste' [Small laugh] ... And it's funny (*Thomas chuckles*) coz you jump on



stage - coz you nearly fell into the trap at the beginning ... Classic arts centre trap. Nine times out of ten you get to an arts centre you jump on stage and go 'Hello everyone', they go '*what does he mean by that?*' [Big laugh]. (2003)

In impersonating his audiences, Thomas gives the 'pissed accountants' of the Comedy Store a growling, drunken, wide-boy character, which develops into a brief flourish of ignorant, pretentious middle-class as they try to decide what East Timor is. Meanwhile, the arts centre audience respond in a well-articulated, contemplative tone.

Thomas' performance at the Gardner Arts Centre is likely to attract a different audience to the Comedy Store by virtue of the show's structure and publicity. *Dambusters* is Thomas' own show and is likely to attract an audience formed largely of those who already know something about his work and share his political outlook; the Comedy Store is a club which shows a range of comedians alongside each other, and is likely to attract a more generalised audience. However, the point that Thomas makes does not relate to the show's publicity, but rather to the audience that frequents each particular venue. Thomas claims to be able to predict what the collective personality of his audience will be according to the venue in which he appears. A civilised and politically-aware audience, albeit prone to over-intellectualising and showing off, frequent the arts centres, while the patrons of the Comedy Store tend to care little for Thomas' humanitarian themes and enjoy drunkenness and crude jokes. The audience's laughter indicates that they recognise the truth behind this observation.

Conversely, the venue and timing of a show are perhaps giving a clear message to the audience about the type of behaviour expected of them; while each venue may well attract different individuals, the same individual may drunkenly demand 'knob gags' in the Comedy Store but seek to demonstrate their intellect in the more civilised atmosphere of the arts centre. Perhaps this is why the arts centre audience laughs when Thomas compares their behaviour to that of the Comedy Store audience. It is partly a laugh of recognition, acknowledging that the etiquette appropriate to each venue is different.

Thomas' contrast between the arts centre and the Comedy Store also suggests that venues are able, to some degree, to tell their audiences whether they should take the material which they are presented with seriously. The Comedy Store audience's ineptitude with 'political' material suggests that this venue gives audiences the freedom – perhaps even the obligation – to ignore Thomas' serious message. By contrast, the arts centre frames Thomas as an intelligent orator, worthy to debate important political matters and suggest courses of action for his audience. The audience in turn are under pressure to understand and respond to Thomas' political statement: this forms the basis of Thomas' joke that the arts centre audience is likely to get carried away by the idea of seeing a political artist, and try too hard

to seek serious messages in the performance. Continuing on the subject of the 'arts centre trap', Thomas remarks:

And I got just as fucked off there ... Coz I'd be talking about East Timor and they'd be going *'Yes very good. East Timor marvellous, very good ... I've got that on my list of socially concerned items I wish to be discussed'* [Big laugh] ... *'Shall I laugh? Shall I fuck!'* [Laugh] ... They wouldn't fucking crack a smile. (2003)

The Comedy Store places no such pressure on the audience, but rather promises an entertainer who can provide easy belly laughs. By choosing to position his show in venues such as the Gardner Arts Centre, Thomas begins to shape his audience's perception of, and reaction to, the show.

### **The power of a good room**

Unreliable though a space's methods of communication may be, they are nonetheless subtly effective in evoking atmosphere and in telling audiences how to interpret and how to behave. The right choice of venue can therefore be of fundamental importance in shaping the character of a potential audience. Where comedians and promoters understand the science of good rooms, they can begin to set limits upon their audiences.

A good room can implicitly invite the 'right kind' of audience, and tell that audience how to behave and how to respond to the comedian's material. It can orchestrate the physical arrangement of the audience within the space, such that the performer is faced with minimal competition for audience attention. It can work on the audience's confidence, allowing each audience member to feel part of a homogenised group and creating acoustics which allow each laugh to fuel the next. The room can also send the message that the event is exciting; a success of which the audience are part. A good gig is not founded on the hope that a comedian can battle through any circumstance, but is rather a matter of creating, proactively, that fine balance between numerous factors which will allow for the best possible interaction.

That the effect of the space in which the performance is situated has an effect on the dynamic of this interaction is widely recognised. This article has cited academics, philosophers, theatre practitioners and a diverse range of comedians who all appreciate the importance of a good room. Yet this element of performance is often marginalised: comedians told how they were let down by a basic lack of sensitivity to the room, and the tendency to place responsibility for 'conquering' a bad room squarely on their shoulders, suggesting that the industry itself does not place enough emphasis on the management of the room. Academic discussion can be similarly naive, focusing on the words that are said

and the skill of the performer while neglecting to note the complexity of the context in which the interaction takes place.

That the room should be the victim of such neglect is perhaps understandable. Its effect is unreliable and its power somewhat ethereal (de Botton 2006: 17). Paradoxically, however, the examples given here show that good management of the room can have a tangible – sometimes dramatic – effect. We must learn to acknowledge the room’s complex vocabulary, and to listen to it.

### **Biographical note:**

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