

'WHAT'S

PLYMOUTH CITY MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY PRESENTS

FUNNY

**YOUR
MOTHER!**

Comedians – *from the 1940s to Now*

ABOUT

15 August to 10 October 2009

THAT?'



This booklet has been put together for the exhibition 'Comedians - From the 1940's to Now', from the National Portrait Gallery. We work closely both with them, and our other partners - Graves Art Gallery, Sheffield and Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens, to produce interesting exhibitions for people both young and old.

When we started to write this booklet, we had no idea of how many fascinating facts we would find about comedy, and so consequently we had to leave quite a lot of them out. You can find another booklet in the gallery with much more information in it, should you fancy a longer read.

The Australian kookaburra is named after the sound of mad, human laughter!

WHY DO WE LAUGH?

The study of laughter has a name. It is called *gelotology*. The people who study laughter are called gelotologists, which is quite a funny name in itself!

We laugh when we find something funny, but we also laugh when we are embarrassed or when we want to avoid a difficult situation. We also use laughter to build friendships with people. For example, we are 30 times more likely to laugh in front of other people than when we're alone.

HE HEE...
HE HE HE HE...
HE HEE HEEEEEEE
HE HE HE HE HE HEEEEEEEE
HE HE HEEEE HEEE HE HEEEEEEEE...

**MAAAAAAAA
AAAAAAD!**



Adults laugh on average 17 times a day whereas toddlers will laugh on average 300 times a day!

IS LAUGHING CONTAGIOUS?

Yes! A recent study of the brain has concluded that it is contagious.

Sophie Scott, a neuroscientist at University College London and her fellow researchers played a series of sounds to volunteers and measured the responses in their brain with an fMRI scanner. Some sounds, like laughter or a triumphant shout, were positive, while others, like screaming or retching, were negative. All of the sounds triggered responses in the premotor cortical region of the brain, which prepares the muscles in the face to move in a way that corresponds to the sound. The response was much higher for positive sounds, suggesting they are more contagious than negative sounds which could explain our involuntary smiles when we see people laughing.



History of comedy - *comedy through the ages*

Comedy as a dramatic form dates back to ancient Greece - the poet Aristophanes was the most famous comic playwright of this ancient era. Since then, comedy has become an ever evolving craft.

Shakespeare's 'comedies', including *A Comedy of Errors* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, wouldn't have them rolling in the aisles in the way you would if you went to see a stand-up comedian today, but the word comedy then meant having a lighter touch than a tragedy, a sequence of misunderstandings that is finally resolved and all ending happily ever after.

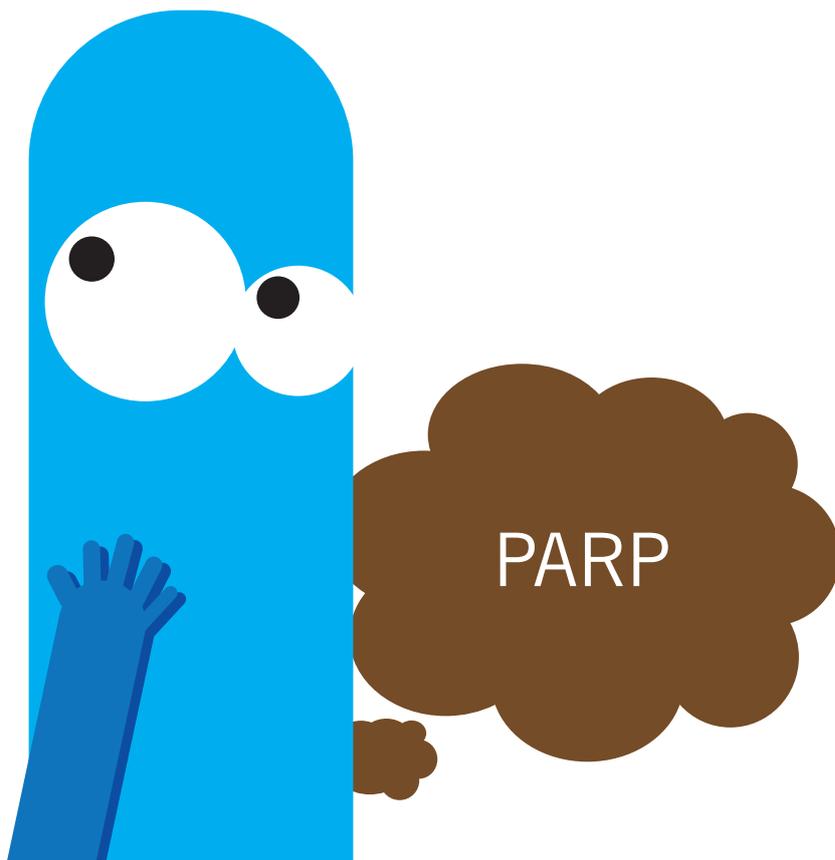
More recently, comedy was associated with performances in Variety Halls. It wasn't until the advent of radio and television that comedy as a form in itself has found other ways of reaching people and found huge world-wide audiences. Although TV and cinema did sound the death knell for Variety Halls, shows like *The Goons*, *Hancock's Half-Hour*, and *Monty Python's Flying Circus* were hugely successful and popular.

In 1979 *The Comedy Store* opened in London and created an environment where anyone could get up on stage and have a go at being funny. In 1982 Channel 4 came into being and created another arena for more avant-garde comedians - *The Comic Strip* presents highlighted the talents of Rik Mayall, Dawn French, Adrian Edmonson, Jennifer Saunders etc.

Jokes have been part of human culture since 1900 BCE. A fart joke from ancient Sumer is currently believed to be the world's oldest known joke.

WHAT IS A JOKE?

Jokes are different things to different people. What some people class as a joke, others might grimace at but generally a joke is told to try and make people laugh. Whether or not people actually laugh at a joke is another matter altogether!

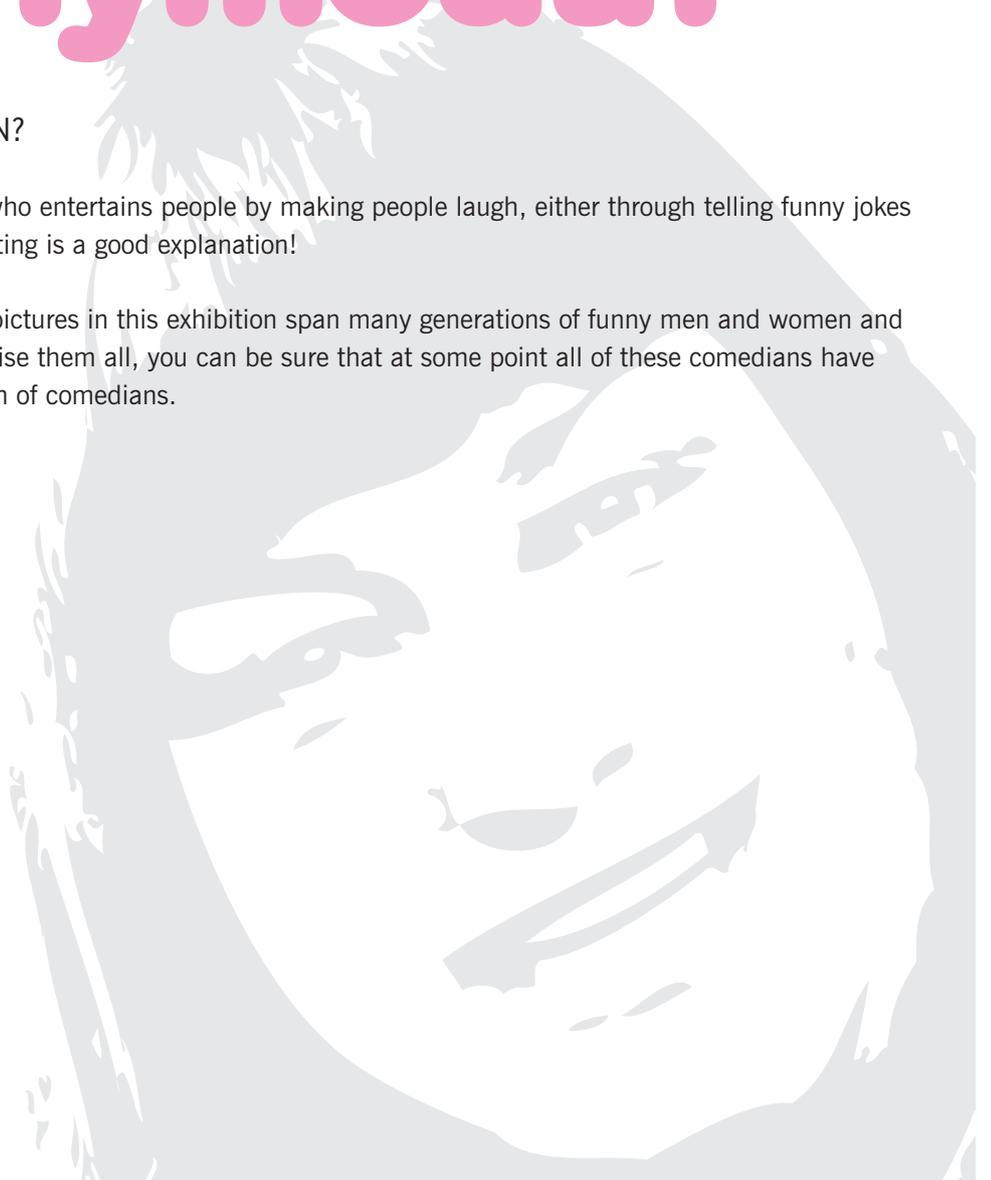


Dawn French was a pupil at St Dunstan's Abbey School in Plymouth

WHAT IS A COMEDIAN?

Good question. Someone who entertains people by making people laugh, either through telling funny jokes and stories, or by comic acting is a good explanation!

The people you see in the pictures in this exhibition span many generations of funny men and women and while you might not recognise them all, you can be sure that at some point all of these comedians have influenced a new generation of comedians.



Peter Sellers was married to the Swedish actress, Bond girl and legendary beauty, Britt Ekland

WHY IS HAVING A SENSE OF HUMOUR SEEMINGLY ATTRACTIVE?

Ask pretty much anyone what they look for in a potential partner and 'good sense of humour' will figure pretty highly. We do value looks but if a good-looking person has absolutely no sense of humour but a less attractive person has a great sense of humour, who would you choose to go out on a date with?

Humour is highly valued in our society - if someone can make us laugh then we feel warm towards them. It makes us feel more relaxed, less self-conscious, and more receptive towards that person.



MAXIMUM LEVEL OF HUMOUR WITH A MINIMAL NUMBER OF WORDS IS TODAY CONSIDERED ONE OF THE KEY TECHNICAL ELEMENTS OF A FUNNY JOKE.

'I took a speed reading course and read War and Peace in 20 minutes. It involves Russia'
Woody Allen.

IS HUMOUR UNIVERSAL?

Some comedy has travelled the globe and been found funny everywhere - it hasn't been restricted to a particular time or place or political or social understanding - it is just found to be universally funny. Think Monty Python - millions of people around the world still find the films funny even though they are forty odd years old. If you haven't seen any of their films yet then go and get one out of the library today and see what you think.



Only 12 episodes were ever made of the Torquay-based sitcom **Fawlty Towers**

IS THERE REGIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH HUMOUR?

Is there a north/south divide when it comes to understanding a joke? Are pasty jokes funny in Scotland? Are jokes about haggis funny in Devon? If a joke was made about a 'janner' would a Plymouthian find it offensive? And would a 'Geordie' find it funny? Or are those terms offensive in their own right?

Where are you from and do you find jokes made about your heritage funny or not? Do you tell jokes about Englishmen, Irishmen and Scotsmen. Or blonde jokes? Or topical jokes?



Comedy and depression:

A fine line

The world of comedy is full of people with a history of depression and mental illness in some shape or form. Famous sufferers include Spike Milligan and Peter Sellers. Spike Milligan even wrote a book entitled *Depression and How to Survive It* with leading psychiatrist Anthony Clare. In his lifetime, Spike Milligan experienced at least 10 mental breakdowns and was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder, yet is recognised as one of the country's funniest comedians. He believed that his problems with his mental health stemmed from the shell shock he suffered during WWII. His headstone is engraved with the phrase 'I told you I was ill'.

Peter Sellers was a universally loved as a funny man, starring in the infamous Pink Panther films which saw him take on the role as Inspector Clouseau, an inept character who created chaos wherever he went resulting in slapstick comedy scenes.

In real life, Sellers was notoriously difficult to work and live with. His four wives have all spoken of his cruelty. It is worthwhile noting that Sellers first name was actually Richard, but his parents named him Peter after an older brother who was stillborn. Maybe stepping into the shoes of an older dead sibling had something to do with him liking being in character and not being himself?

Being funny doesn't always equate with being happy.

**Laurel and Hardy gave their last
ever stage performance on 17th
May 1954 at The Palace Theatre
in Plymouth and stayed at
The Grand Hotel on The Hoe.**

CAN LAUGHTER BE GOOD FOR YOU?

Studies have shown that watching a funny film can boost the way your blood vessels function. There is evidence that smiling and laughing releases endorphins and hormones that make people feel good.

So laughing really is the best medicine sometimes!

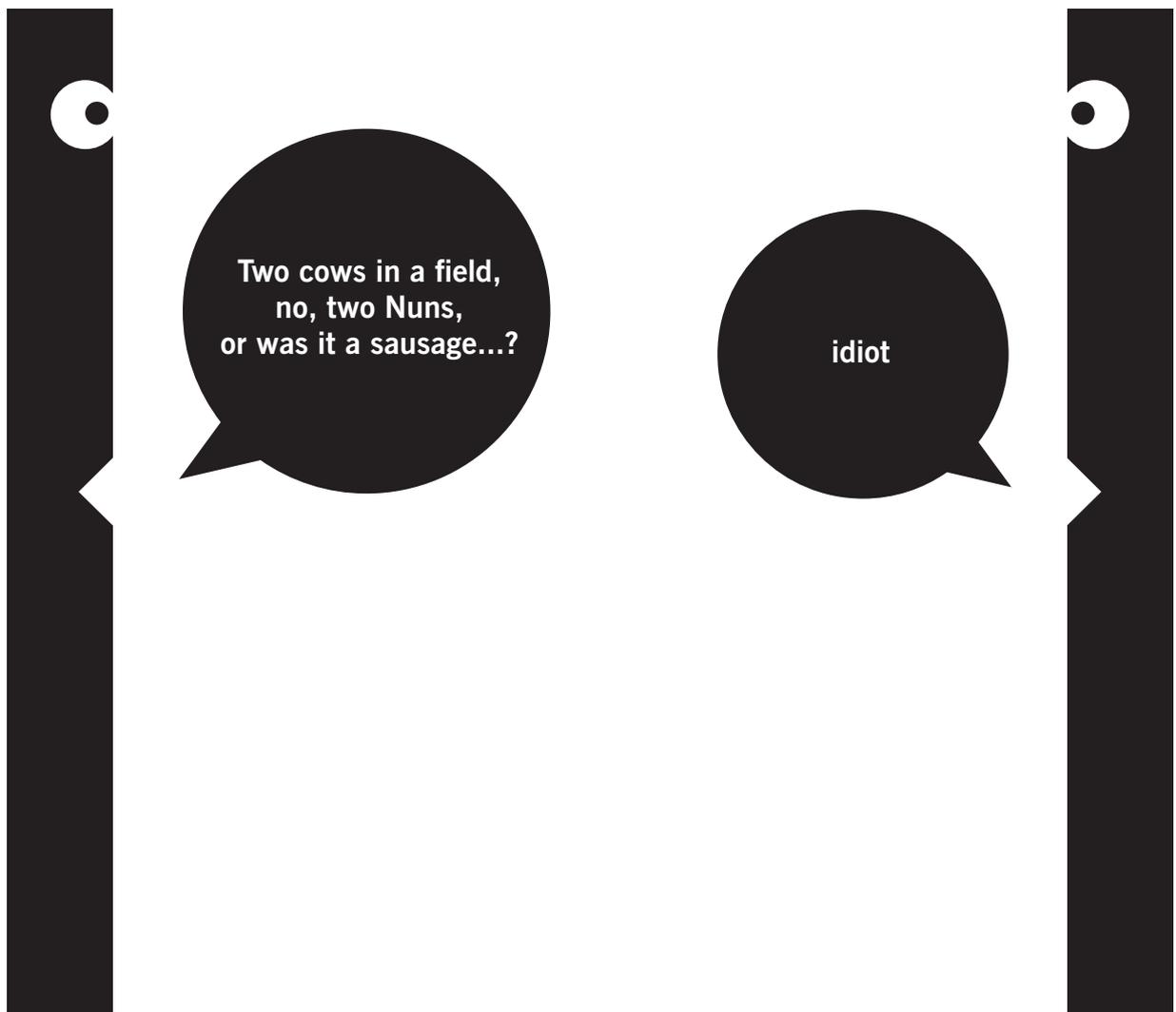


Until 1968 British law required theatre scripts to be approved by the Lord Chamberlain's office and the department also sent inspectors to some performances to check that the approved script was complied with exactly - no improvisation allowed!

WHY CAN'T WE REMEMBER JOKES?

Why is it that when someone tells us a fantastic joke we make a mental note to ourselves to remember, and when the time comes for us to repeat said hilarious joke, not a single atom of the it remains in our brains?

Is it just one of those things? Are our brains wired up in such a way that we literally can't retain something funny in our heads for very long? Try a little experiment - find a really funny joke and tell it to someone. Don't write it down. A month later, see if you can tell the same joke again.



**Did the pictures
in the exhibition
make you laugh or smile?**

Why was this?

**Think about why you
liked the picture.
Was it because it looked funny
or because you were thinking
about that particular comedian?**

**Do they make you laugh
when you see them perform
so you feel more inclined to
like the image?**

**Did you not like
any of the photographs?
Do you know why this was?
Was it to do with the photo or
the person in it?**

**Did you have a
pre-conceived notion
of whether you thought that
person was funny?**

**If you didn't
like the picture
was it because
you don't actually
like the comedian?**