

# CREATIVE CAREERS

## Getting started in museums and galleries

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### Comedians Interpretation plan Draft 6 Updated 25 February 2009

An interpretation plan draws together all the thinking and aspirations around a project and supports the developed of the project. It provides a framework for exploring ideas and keeps everyone informed about choices and decisions made.

It also documents project progress so is a good way of capturing all decisions made along the way which otherwise could easily be lost or forgotten.

Start with the context of the project to ensure everyone is clear about the project.

#### Context

The purpose of the programme, *People, Places and Portraits*, is to broaden access to the National Portrait Gallery's collection for children, young people and communities, through specific projects at local level. The project is funded through Strategic Commissioning, the DCMS/DCFS funded National/Regional Museum Education programme.

#### Introduction

This interpretation plan aims to draw together the thinking and ideas developed to date in order to inform interpretative planning and resource development by all the partners. It builds on the draft outline of the exhibition developed by Sunderland (appendix 1) and reflects partnership discussions to date. It developed out of discussions on Tuesday 11 November 2009 at the National Portrait Gallery with Strategic Commissioning partners from Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery, Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens, and Museums Sheffield.

As a collaborative project it is intended to capture the best ideas and aspirations and support the development of the touring exhibition. It offers a framework for possible areas of exploration in the exhibition.

#### The Exhibition 2009

Comedians - A partner-selected exhibition of portraits of British comedians from 1940s – today in the three partner venues with interpretation through exhibition panels, labels, shared resources and programmes of activity. The works have been selected to reveal the way British comedians have been portrayed, revealing both the public and private faces of comedy and have been selected for their striking visual quality, quirkiness and humour. Originally, each partner was planning to select five portraits with regional connections/significance. Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens is the lead partner for the development of the exhibition.

#### Role of the Comedians Interpretation Plan

The interpretation plan is the first step towards detailed plans for the Comedians exhibition interpretation and engagement programme. It identifies and offers a framework for possible approaches that could be taken. Partners discussed and agreed that the first step was to identify a clear exhibition narrative to inform the development of associated interpretation and resources. It was discussed that this narrative is the core content on which the interpretive resources and the learning programme will be based. It will identify and convey the purpose of the exhibition – the key message–big idea. This primary interpretive theme is the starting point for communicating the exhibition's significance.

From this starting point, it is anticipated that additional key messages will be identified to communicate to the target audiences. It is envisaged that these will be developed through interpretative panels and labels, programmes and activities. The most effective themes link things (the tangible) with ideas and meanings (the intangible). They help visitors forge connections with the selected works collection.

As Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens is the lead partner for the exhibition, they have led the development of the exhibition narrative with partners and developed the direction the narrative will take. The following possible interpretive themes were suggested by the partners for consideration. Including all these themes in the exhibition could be confusing in terms of the messages we want audiences to leave with. Sunderland will research the themes in depth and develop a clear and informed exhibition narrative explaining what the key messages our audiences will take away from the exhibition are. What is the angle the exhibition is taking – what are we wanting to say about British comedy? A refined and detailed interpretative narrative will inform the exhibition hang and the development of additional shared resources by the partners.

### Possible Interpretive Themes

Brainstorm all the possible stories your exhibition could tell and write them up. This helps focus you on what story you want to tell and how you want to tell it.

- **What makes people laugh**

One approach is to explore what it is that makes people laugh. When we looked at the images of the comedians in our meeting why did we laugh? Memories; associations; remembered jokes, catchphrases, sketches; eye contact with each other and group interaction; simply how the comedians looked in the photo – silly, strange, bizarre; almost familial bond with the comedian – sense of intimacy with sharing a joke, connecting on same wavelength; belonging to a group - comedians being extremely age specific, appeal to different generations. Linked to this the objective may be to make visitors laugh.

- **The history of British comedy**

Exploring how comedy has developed from 1940s – today across different mediums – radio, TV, film, stage.

The history of British comedy was the main story told in the exhibition.

### **BBC Radio**

1940-s-50s: variety shows on radio

1950s: Two influential radio shows which helped shape future of radio and TV comedy in Britain, *The Goon Show* and *Hancock's Half Hour*

1965-68: BBC radio double-entendre heavy *Round the Horne*

1967: start of panel game format with *Just a Minute*, still running

BBC radio is still the starting point for much new talent with shows transferring to TV. Examples include *Whose Line is the Anyway?* *Goodness Gracious Me* and *Little Britain*.

### **BBC TV**

Sitcom format is typical such as *Steptoe and Son*, *Fawlty Towers*, *Ab Fab* and *Blackadder*

1960s-70s: Hugely influential *Monty Pythons Flying Circus* and subsequent films.

Other famous TV notables include *Morecambe and Wise*, *Two Ronnies*, *French and Saunders*, *Little Britain*. An exploration of comedy pairings?

1990s *Vic Reeves Big Night Out* influenced the style of a whole new generation of comics

1990s-2000s: New generation of sitcoms such as *Green Wing*, *Office*, *Spaced*, *Gavin and Stacey* and *Extras*.

### **Stage**

1993 Baddiel and Newman sold out Wembley Arena – comedy became the new rock 'n' roll. Stand up comedy currently hugely popular. Audience engagement and response is an important feature.

### **Questions to consider**

If this narrative is developed as the key message, will it influence the exhibition hang? Would it explore the history of British comedy chronologically from 1940s – now or would it look at each platform in turn and portraits would be hung as such eg. Sections on radio, tv and stage? What are you wanting to say? What is the key message? Does the Paul Merton film successfully cover this narrative?

- **The duality of humour and melancholy**

Exploring the dichotomy of humour and depression including the public and private lives of comedians such as Kenneth Williams and Tony Hancock. It could also explore how certain comedy is driven by anger, rage or injustice eg, political protest – Ben Elton and Mark Thomas.

### **Questions to consider**

If this is a message to be highlighted in the exhibition what are you wanting to say about it? What is the angle? Will it include a history of comedy/tragedy? Which portraits would this theme apply to? Is there a spread throughout the exhibition or is it just applicable to 1 or 2 images? Does the image selection reflect this theme or is it thought this theme should perhaps not be covered in the exhibition as it could take the exhibition in a very different direction, one perhaps not reflected in many of the images?

- **Comedy styles**

Smut and innuendo; political; absurd; black humour; manic; humour inherent in everyday life; British class system; embarrassment of social ineptitude; sarcasm; parodies of stereotypes. This approach would allow for groupings of older comedians with new comedians in an interesting way and allow for inter-generational discussion around comedians. Interpretation would explore the definitions of comedy styles and could possibly reveal interesting comments about historical contexts. For example is there a reason why political humour is more popular at some points in history?

### **Questions to consider**

If this is a narrative you are thinking of developing and including in the exhibition which comedy styles have you selected? What definitions have you developed and which comedians in the exhibition fall into each comedy style? Explain how the comedians and styles connect.

- **Can humour only be appreciated by people with similar cultural, political or historical backgrounds and memories?**

Or does it transcend this and act as a catalyst for understanding what people aren't comfortable/familiar with?

An interesting narrative could explore the notion of place and explore whether humour is a local/regional affair; a national affair? - is it part of our national identity? When we talk about comedians being household names, whose house do we mean? Exploration of factors such as class, race and gender? This approach could also explore whether humour is universal. Laughter is universal but does humour travel? Is the global success of Monty Python and the Simpsons the exception rather than

the rule? This narrative could also consider emotions wrapped up in not getting a joke and the sense of alienation/otherness/being an outsider.

### **Questions to consider**

Would this affect the exhibition hang? If this narrative was the key message would images be grouped according to different regions in the UK and a map detailing where the comedians come from and how their local identity has shaped their comedy? What would the key messages to this narrative be?

- **Signifiers of humour**

This approach would explore what defines each comedian. What is their trademark that people associate with them? This could explore catchphrases; their most famous jokes/sketches; their most recognisable facial expressions; their clothes etc...

This approach would provide a straightforward biographical narrative of the sitters.

- **Who are we laughing at?**

Do we laugh at the comedian? At others? At ourselves as we recognise ourselves in jokes? The audience is made complicit by laughing. What are the boundaries? What is acceptable? How far can a comedian push an audience? Does the comedian have the last laugh? Who is laughing at who? Is humour generational/age specific?

### **Questions to consider**

If you are pursuing this narrative, what answers would you be suggesting for the above questions? Or would you be suggesting the questions for the audience to answer? If this is the approach, in what context would you frame the questions?

- **Transgression**

Comedy readily accepts the blurring of gender boundaries — Kenneth Williams, Kenny Everett, Eddie Izzard, Alan Carr, Stephen Fry, Matt Lucas. Exploration into history of gender transgression. Other themes to cover could explore why there are more male comedians than women. Are men inherently funnier than women? Or is the industry biased? Also, exploration into emergence and popularity of culturally diverse comedians. How comedy has evolved over time to reflect Britain today.

### **Questions to consider**

Again, if this is being explored, what are you wanting to say about it? Which images would be referred to and how? Is there a strong enough connection through the decades? What is the history of gender transgression? Why is it 'accepted' in a comedy setting? If you are exploring female comedians – what is the message? Who would you include? How would you explain why there are more male comedians than female comedians?

- **Is language at the centre of all comedy?**

Understanding or misunderstanding...

### **Questions to consider**

If you are exploring this question, what approach would you take? As the exhibition is of images – visual language without words – would this be the starting point? That language is not necessary as the images alone make people laugh? Or does the silence of the images highlight how important language is? Could this narrative weaken what we are trying to say?

## **Key Audiences**

At the Learning Strategy meeting on 16 January 2009 all partners identified and agreed a shared priority audience for this project:

Young people (11-19) in formal and informal education

Include your target audience to ensure interpretation is developed to respond to this audience.

The overall programme of activity will look at ways to work with and sustain relationships with this target group.

This will include:

- KS3 cross curricular approaches.
- Youth Forum engagement to embed consultative practice
- Exhibition based learning materials and programmes to address broad audiences for young people 11-19

### Interpretive Approaches – Shared resources for the exhibition

Shared resources developed by partners will include

What interpretive approaches will you use to tell the story?

#### 1. Introductory film by Paul Merton

An overview of British comedy over the last 70 years developed by the NPG. This introductory film will feature at the start of the exhibition. See Appendix 4 for the narrative structure.

#### 2. Listening post of comedy clips

7 tracks featuring famous comedy sketches on a listening post of comedians featured in the exhibition will bring the portraits alive. The 7 clips will cover the chronology of the exhibition, acting as a timeline by featuring sound sketches covering the 70 years – one clip for each decade. Museums Sheffield to research sound archives such as the bbc, the bfi archive and the British Library National Sound Archive, to source the clips, get copyright clearance for the duration of all 3 exhibitions and research equipment/hardware options.

Sheffield selection – rationale being people who epitomised their decade

Arthur Askey – 1940s

The Goons – 1950s

Morcambe and Wise – 1960s

Monty Python's Flying Circus – 1970s

French and Saunders – 1980s

Meera Syal (goodness Gracious Me) – 1990s

League of Gentlemen – 2000s (though as they were early 2000s, perhaps Russell Brand or someone more current would be better?) Recommendation that Sheffield speak with their Youth Forum to determine what contemporary comedian in the exhibition young people would respond to.

Sunderland has provided their wish list of top ten comedians to be included

Morecombe and Wise

Python

French & Saunders

Rowan Atkinson

Lily Savage or Julian Clary (clip suitable for family audience)

Tony Hancock

Two Ronnies (if included in exhibition)

Tommy Cooper

Ken Dodd

Lee Evans

Museums Sheffield currently researching their recommendation of comedy sketches to be included which covers each decade.

Museums Sheffield has investigated hardware options for the listening post. The posts can come with either 1 or 2 handsets. Tracks can be selected with same track being played through 2 handsets. One option could be to have 2 separate 8 button audioposts that could sit in different parts of the gallery.

8 button Audiopoint £1444.00

14 button Audiopoint £1610.00

An average price for licensing audio tracks is £250, 14 tracks would be c. £3, 500

I wonder if our most affordable option would be to have one 8 button with an extra handset (£85).

Total estimated cost including c. £2000 for audio is £5529.00

### 3. Podcast trail from Paul Merton

Developed by the NPG. Content pending.

### 4. Stage Equipment

Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens to develop a project plan for this shared resource demonstrating how it will be used effectively in relation to target audience and curriculum links.

### 5. Text panels and labels

Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens will develop in close consultation with NPG around approach and editing. Sunderland to update NPG with a plan detailing their purpose, length, voice – the target audience they are speaking to, and content. Partners agreed labels should also include biographical details of sitter and photographer.

### 6. Wall quotations

Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens to research and develop this resource around an agreed theme. Suggestions include quotes about comedy – the broad philosophies of comedy, quotes by comedians, or comedians' catchphrases. Quotes by comedians should reflect the comedians featured in the exhibition. A timeline of the history of comedy was also suggested.

### 7. Resource pack

Plymouth are developing a resource pack for young people and group leaders. This could potentially double as a schools pack but is not principally a teachers pack as the focus is for our target audience – young people 11-19. Plymouth to update NPG with a plan detailing approach, objectives and format.

### 8. Digital Resource

The NPG will lead the development of a digital resource to meet the criteria of the new vocational diplomas - 14-19 Creative and Media Diploma, inspired by the exhibition themes. This resource will support the setting of provision by each partner within their overall strategic priorities. This will extend beyond the partnership to provide an example of best practice for use within the cultural sector. The approach and wider application of the resource is not given here but will be expanded on in the planning document being prepared from individuals plans to meet the DCMS deadline.

### Interpretive programming

Partners to provide the NPG with project plans of their interpretive programme using the template supplied with the Strategic Commissioning Proposal.

- KS3 Cross curricular sessions provision developed in consultation with teachers
- Youth Forum engagement to embed and shape youth based practice in the exhibition interpretation
- Additional learning projects and programmes at each partner venue inspired by the exhibition themes to develop target audiences

### Exhibition Timescale

Sunderland 3 April – 21 June 2009

Plymouth 15 August – 16 October 2009

Sheffield 14/18 November – 6 March 2010

### Budgets and management

Partners to provide this in their project and programme plans

### Production schedule

Partners to provide this in their project and programme plans

### Next steps

Agree partner target audiences	all - agreed
Agree broad interpretative themes	all – updates pending
Agree focus of resources	all – updates pending
Agree production schedule for resources	all - pending

### Bibliography to help inform interpretation research

These books could provide useful content knowledge to inform interpretation

British Comedy Greats – Nigel Andrews and Bayley Stephen

'Radio Times' Guide to TV Comedy – Mark Lewisohn

Great British Wit – Rosemarie Jarski

Laughlab: The Scientific Search for the World's Funniest Joke – The British

Association for the Advancement of Science

The Language of Humour – Alison Ross

Include references and areas for research on the subject as a way to spark more ideas.

### Links

There is a wealth of information about British comedy online – these are just some links illustrating what resources already exist. They could usefully inform interpretation.

[www.laughternetwork.co.uk](http://www.laughternetwork.co.uk)

[www.laughterexperiment.co.uk](http://www.laughterexperiment.co.uk)

[www.bbc.co.uk/comedysoup](http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedysoup)

[www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/quizzes](http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/quizzes)

[www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/games](http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/games)

[www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/clips](http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/clips)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio7/programmes/genres/entertainmentandcomedy>

<http://www.bbcshop.com/Comedy/BBCs-Great-Comedy-Moments-DVD/invnt/bbcdvd1055>

[http://www.sitcom.co.uk/british\\_sitcom.shtml](http://www.sitcom.co.uk/british_sitcom.shtml)

[http://radio.suite101.com/article.cfm/classic\\_bbc\\_radio\\_comedy](http://radio.suite101.com/article.cfm/classic_bbc_radio_comedy)

## Appendix 1

Draft outline of exhibition developed by Sunderland

### The Face of Comedy (working title)

Seventy years of comedy greats from the National Portrait Gallery

#### Exhibition summary

This exhibition of photographs from the National Portrait Gallery will show the face of British comedy from the 1940s to the present day.

The works selected will explore the way in which well known British comedians have been portrayed, revealing both the public and private faces of comedy.

Approximately 60 comedians will be represented in the exhibition. These will cover a wide range of comic genius from stand-up comedians to those working mainly in television and radio. Some may be represented with more than one image.

The portraits will be chosen for their striking visual quality, quirkiness and humour.

In the gallery we hope to include A/V footage of some of the comedians featured in the exhibition and an interactive comedy stage area.

#### Other suggestions for titles:

Carry on laughing  
Seventy years of comedy greats  
Comedy Genius  
Comedy Greats  
The Face of Comedy  
Funny Faces  
The Funny Side

Choosing a title for an exhibition is hard. Keep a note of all suggested ideas and discuss together with your team.

## Appendix 2

Initial interpretive programming and resource ideas from partners prior to Learning Strategy development

### Plymouth

#### 1. Ideas from Plymouth's Youth Forum - The Core

- Talking labels on MP3 players - or similar to The Core's balcony display labels - speech bubbles of edited conversations
- Mighty Boosh (or other live performance)
- Projection of performance/stand up/gig (I know that Bill Bailey was filmed at Eden - brilliant!!!)
- Props/costume to use
- Niche markets as well as family friendly - eg late night adult, children's matinee - Shrek?!
- Political comment - Punch, Private Eye, cartoonists, Have I got news for you, Mock the Week, ranting pod casts on-line
- Crazy comedy quiz nights - eg QI (with buzzers!) maybe themed?
- Text/script/jokes printed/written on the walls - graffiti jokes? (Back of toilet doors - my favourite joke in the Kings Head "I'm so right on I can read my rebirthing book by the light that shines out of my own \*\*\*\*\*" !)

Capture all event ideas and share inspiration.



- Quotes from comedians about themselves rather than a label about them

## 2. Ideas from Plymouth's Learning Team

An interactive unit to tour with the show including:

- Show reel of comedians in action through the decades – this could include footage from regional archives of 'local' comedians/venues. In Plymouth we have venues such as the Palace Theatre, and have had notable performers including Laurel and Hardy in town. We could utilise our contacts at the South West Film and Television Archive (SWFTA), and BBC Devon.
- Audio recordings of jokes from various comedians – visitors could be asked to rate them according to how funny they think they are.
- An 'Open Mike' area, where visitors can stand on stage and record their favourite joke. Edited jokes could be added to a compilation that grows throughout the exhibition tour. The performance area could also double as a stage for comedy events staged alongside the show. NB – would need permission from the NPG to have larger events in the gallery.
- It might be fun to use the tour to question regional identity through humour – do Janners (Plymouth people) find certain things funnier than people from Sheffield? How to do this is up for discussion, but we could ask SW comedians, have a regional favourite joke vote etc etc.
- Canned laughter, buzzers, lights and sound.
- Comedy props/costume in the gallery with mirror/camera

## 3. Programming ideas from Plymouth

- Famous comedian to do a gig (Bill Bailey/John Cleese)
- Comedy nights - using the exhibition space for local comedians
- Tuesday Talks – academic examination of the history of comedy, local links to great performers, local theatres/film archives etc
- Comedy/drama workshops for Secondary Schools – possibility of making links to Plymouth's Theatre Royal, and their rehearsal and production facilities (TR2).
- Intergenerational reminiscence work – has humour changed since the war? We propose to use our 'Showtime' community resource box for sessions.
- Saturday afternoon kid's cartoons, games, entertainment
- Comedy 'marathons' of popular comedies; Mighty Boosh, Have I Got News For You etc, including refreshments

### Sunderland

- AV footage of featured comedians
- Interactive comedy stage area

### Sheffield

Audio material from the BBC archives to support the images of comedians in the exhibition. At this point we're suggesting that the resource should be purely audio as the photographs provide visual material, though if the themes explore the transition from radio to screen, or the differences between stand-up, radio and television, then perhaps this should include other footage (there may be a cost difference as far as licensing goes).

### Objectives

This web resource will:

- provide the opportunity for visitors to listen to a range of comedians/comedy

### Options for delivery devices

There are three options for devices on which the audio can be delivered (depending on budget etc).

- delivered on a handheld device with headphones (like an audio guide)
- listening post/s with headphones – press a button to select an audio track
- wall mounted speakers played into the gallery on a loop (does this interfere with the other resources?)

### **Options for content**

We're suggesting four options for content. We've been thinking about 7 tracks, depending on the themes of the exhibition (obviously for a history of comedy, this allows one per decade). However, the licensing cost may have an impact on how many we can have.

- An excerpt from a key comedian from each decade covered by the exhibition or each theme that the show explores.
- A selection made by our guest comedian. However, we may be too pushed for time, or already asking too much of our comedian.
- Audio extracts from the 'missing' comedians.
- A regional selection. However, as this could triple the workload, perhaps this could be an option as an addition if each venue wanted to source tracks.

### **Audiences**

Families, Young people, Adults

### **Budget**

#### **Appendix 3 – Exhibition images update – responding to suggestions by Paul Merton**

X45299 Sir George Robey and P281 Charlie Chaplin

Both these works were suggested by Paul Merton, but they are not included in the film/tape. Sunderland will make a decision as to whether to include them as they are both earlier than 1940

| X35154 Richard Murdoch – PM asked for him to be included

| X45334 Sid James and Tony Hancock - Paul Merton was not keen on the image of Tony Hancock originally selected (P725) – he felt that the image appeared to focus too much on his depression.

| X126499 Max Wall with Maggi Hambling – PM suggested including Max Wall (we have an image of him on his own but it shows him as an actor rather than a comedian)

X27869 Julie Walters – PM asked for her to be included

Rob Brydon was on partners' wish list and the Gallery has now acquired a photograph (x132445). The image has not yet been scanned and is not on this list, but I will send it on as soon as I can.

The title of the exhibition is confirmed as:

***Comedians From the 1940s to Now  
Photographs from the National Portrait Gallery***