

The Subversive Laugh?

A few months ago an edition of Rory Bremner's BBC2 comedy show closed with a brief dialogue between Jeremy Hardy and John Dowie, two performers culled, like Bremner himself, from the burgeoning alternative cabaret circuit which centres on London pubs and provincial colleges. Musing on the links between comedy and political parties, they observed that the Conservatives had got Jim Davidson, the extreme Right had Bernard Manning ... But who had the Labour Party got? Answer: 'Neil Kinnock'.

Ten years ago this kind of exchange would have been unthinkable. It was only really with the last election and Kenny Everett's infamous 'let's bomb Russia' joke that the link between comedy and party politics was explicitly made. It was around 1979 that the term 'alternative comedy' was coined. But what are the politics of this comedy, and what is its relationship to 'mainstream' humour?

The term 'alternative comedy' is said to have been originated by stand-up comic Tony Allen to advertise a tour by comedians based at London's Comedy Store venue. Some of the roots of this comedy, however, stretch back at least to the early 1950s and the emergence of such radio comedies as *The Goon Show*. *The Goon Show*, written largely by Spike Milligan, ran from 1952 to 1956 and was mildly subversive, both of existing comedic forms - being more surrealistic and less cosy than 40s' comedies like *ITMA* and *Much Binding in the Marsh* - and of contemporary attitudes: the character of Major Denis Bloodnok, for example, mocked the diehard empire loyalists of the period.

None of the Goons, however, had university backgrounds - unlike the writer-performers of *Beyond The Fringe*, whose revue, first performed at the Edinburgh

Festival in 1960, is widely held to have set in motion the British 'satire boom'. The cast - Alan Bennett, Jonathan Miller, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore - were all Oxbridge graduates. Bennett has since commented on the disproportionate reception *Beyond The Fringe* was given - as if it had been indiscrimi-



Image victim: Tina Turner

nately 'mowing down sacred cows'. In 1960, though, it was strong stuff and it contained two elements very prominent in British comedy since that time: *parody of social types* (the unctious clergyman, the fan who watches the same show again and again, partly in the hope of spotting a noble personage in the Royal Box) and the *political lampoon*. (Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, shrewdly catching the mood of the time, attended a performance and laughed ostentatiously at Peter Cook's impersonation of him).

'Satire' was now hailed as a breath-of-fresh-air renovating the British political scene. The Establishment Club, providing satirical cabaret, opened in Soho in 1961 and, in 1962, satire was imported into BBC television (through, be it noted, the Current Affairs department) in



Revenge of the suburbs: Python with something different

the form of *That Was The Week That Was* (TW3). Twenty three years on the final show of TW3 remains, in parts, remarkably acerbic. Its politics, too, are quite clear: on *social* questions such as gay rights (a sketch ridicules the role of the civil service in the Vassall affair) and racism (Millicent Martin sings a swingeing lyric about racism in the Deep South of the USA, accompanied by dancers, dressed as BBC *Black and White Minstrels*) they side unequivocally with the angels.

But, on *political* matters, they are iconoclastic, attacking politicians as a *breed*, across the political spectrum, dispensing lampoons and jokes about broken promises, lack of policy, and so on. Occasionally the sketches were fierce - as with David Frost and William Rushton's spoof *This Is Your Life* on the then Home Secretary Henry Brooke - but always the focus was upon individual politicians, their foibles and failings.

The BBC now looked to Oxbridge for further comic material. *I'm Sorry I'll Read That Again*, a radio programme which ran from 1964 to 1970, was performed and mostly written by the cast of the highly successful Cambridge Footlights revue of 1963. Most of the show's wri-

ters were used by David Frost (whose main role on the comedy scene was as entrepreneur, not as performer or writer) for his *Frost Report* of 1966-7 - an importation of the irreverent, sketch-based undergraduate format into mainstream tv comedy.

Acknowledging Milligan and the amiably incomprehensible 'Professor' Stanley Unwin as influences, they hankered after something sharper and more surrealistic. This came in the form of the obscurely titled *At Last The 1948 Show* in 1967 and, in the same year and also on ITV, *Do Not Adjust Your Set*. The latter was a children's programme partly inspired by the popularity of *I'm Sorry I'll Read That Again* among the young. Comedy, like popular music, often expresses, and defines, generation gaps - a fact itself parodied in the recent *The Young Ones*). Representatives of these two shows combined in 1969 to produce arguably the most substantial and successful work of this genre: *Monty Python's Flying Circus*.

I don't think it's pretentious to suggest that *Python* was in some sense an artistic anticipation of Thatcherism: if Thatcherism is 'the revenge of the suburbs', the social groups which *Python* spoke for were among the

objects of its vengeance. The programme offered an horrendous procession of respectable, semi-detached monsters doing silly walks, jumping up and down with knotted handkerchieves on their heads, busily rubbing lard on the cat's boil while Hitler and Goebbels, in full Nazi regalia, went on the stump in the Minehead bye-election: the sketches were often humorously defensive, being broken up by brusque army officers ('This is silly') or condemned in fictitious letters from the home counties, but they were in many cases only one step ahead of reality: in the early 1970s for instance *Python* invented a tv programme called 'Prejudice' in which viewers were asked to think of a silly name for the Belgians. We all laughed when Michael Palin, as the leering compere, announced the winner ('The Sprouts') but, in the early 1980s, during the 'Sheep Meat' dispute, *The Sun* was actually appealing to its readers for silly names to call the French.

The arrival of the next 'cult' tv comedy *Not The Nine O'clock News* routinised this approach. Four actors here performed sketches contributed to, as in TW3, by a team of writers. The scripts showed a strong bias toward parodies of well-known tv programmes, adverts and personnel. Pamela Stephenson, the show's principal mimic eschewed any notion of venom in her impersonations, and, in one programme, newsreaders Jan Leeming and Angela Rippon took part, rating Stephenson's performance in the manner of ice dancing judges. Television remains the main subject matter for even the best of the current writers - Victoria Wood, for example - and 'impressions' have become a required part of any aspiring comedian's repertoire. Many thus become, at best, human parrots purveying meaningless echoes of famous voices or, at worst, professional sycophants - mere adjuncts to the cult of celebrity.

This can also be said of the overpraised *Spitting Image*,

first broadcast by Central TV in 1984. Undeniably savage and daring in some of its portrayals, *Spitting Image* is based ultimately on the same rightwing iconoclasm as TW3 and *Private Eye*, assuming everyone in the public eye to be equally suspect and open to ridicule, irrespective of creed or cause. This is the ethos of the popular press and daytime Radio One, on which DJs like Steve Wright enthusiastically endorse the show: 'Great show again last night, lads. But I do think they ought to lay off the Queen Mum, don't you'.

Spitting Image, in any event, confirms, rather than undermines, the cult of personality: the rising generation of media-wise politicians (Edwina Currie, for instance) must regard it as a positive boon to their work in the 'being famous' business. Indeed, the impressionists and the puppets are celebrities themselves and, like other celebrities, can be hired for business functions: it emerged recently that ITV's ex-footballers Jimmy Greaves and Ian St John cost less to hire than the two *Spitting Image* puppets of them.

In recent times the other bearers of the subversive comic tradition have been the Comedy Store performers of the late 1970s. These, like the artists currently on the alternative cabaret circuit, are drawn mainly from colleges, polytechnics, and redbrick universities. A number of them are socialists, or have socialist sympathies - notably Ben Elton, stand-up comic and writer (*The Young Ones*, *Blackadder II*).

Interestingly, in a recent issue of *New Socialist* (December 1985) those ex-Comedy Store comics who have become commercially successful (*The Young Ones*, *Five Go Mad In Dorset*, *Saturday Night Live*, *Girls On Top*) were accused of 'absorption into mainstream showbiz'. A comedienne on the circuit - one of depressingly few - was quoted as saying: 'When I read that Sarah Ferguson had listed alternative cabaret among her pursuits at college, I

knew it wasn't anything I wanted to be associated with any more'.

For a comic like Elton, playing on tour to university audiences, the problem is mostly the opposite. He can assume an antipathy to racism and sexism more safely than an opposition to capitalism (and the same goes for a Comedy Store audience). He addresses them instead as undergraduates (jokes about sex, medical students...), as young people (his 'I hate fuckin' Hippies' recalls Malcolm McLaren's strategy for the Sex Pistols) and consumers (grumbles about the toilets in motorway service stations), slagging the Tories only in asides.

Finally, as to Sarah Ferguson, this is not the fault of the alternative comedian: once a joke falls among its audience they are free to do what they like with it. The new generation of Sloane Rangers, lawyers, executives, accountants, Big Bang stockbrokers and the like have more *instrumental* values than their predecessors: while sustaining the accepted code at work, they are quite happy to hear the piss taken out of it during their leisure time ('It's a game, isn't it'). In any case, short of staying physically outside the main media, a comedian may find it impossible to resist absorption into 'mainstream showbiz'. For example, *Monty Python* once performed a stinging parody of show business award ceremonies, in which a cringeing compere eulogised, and handed an Oscar to, David Niven's fridge. Not only did the Variety Club confer an award on the (absent) Pythons, they actually showed the sketch in tribute.

For myself, the tv humour I laughed loudest at in 1986 was the wry dialogue which permeated the scripts of BBC1's excellent *Casualty*. Here the jokes were given an edge by the humanity of the characters and by their *context*, which was one of struggle against health service cuts. Pleasingly, Lise Mayer, a creator of *The Young Ones*, was among the script-writers. •

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