

DRESSY UP

Uncloaking the comedy consumed by costume

Words *Paul Oswell* Pictures *Sharm Murugiah*

From the earliest days of joking around, it was in the fool's best interest – if the fool had so much of a lick of sense, that is – to always look the fool. If you weren't dressed in a floppy, bell-laden hat and harlequin garb, then you were just some cocky Herbert taking pot-shots at the king in front of his friends. Regal heckling in those days meant a Game of Thrones-esque evisceration, and your witty comebacks probably rang hollow in the torture chamber.

Dressing up, self-inflicted disfigurement and generally looking like a tit became the trope that would enable comedic performances for centuries. There weren't any open mics for people in street clothes in Shakespearean times – you put a donkey mask on, pranced about to get laughs and just hoped not to get pelted with anything too unsavoury or offputting.

Little changed for performers and satirists even up to the emergence of music hall in the late 19th century. The highest-paid comedian in the world at this time was Dan Leno, popularly known as 'The King's Jester'. This man had Michael McIntyre-levels of national popularity, yet was known mainly for his favour with and relationship to the ruling classes.

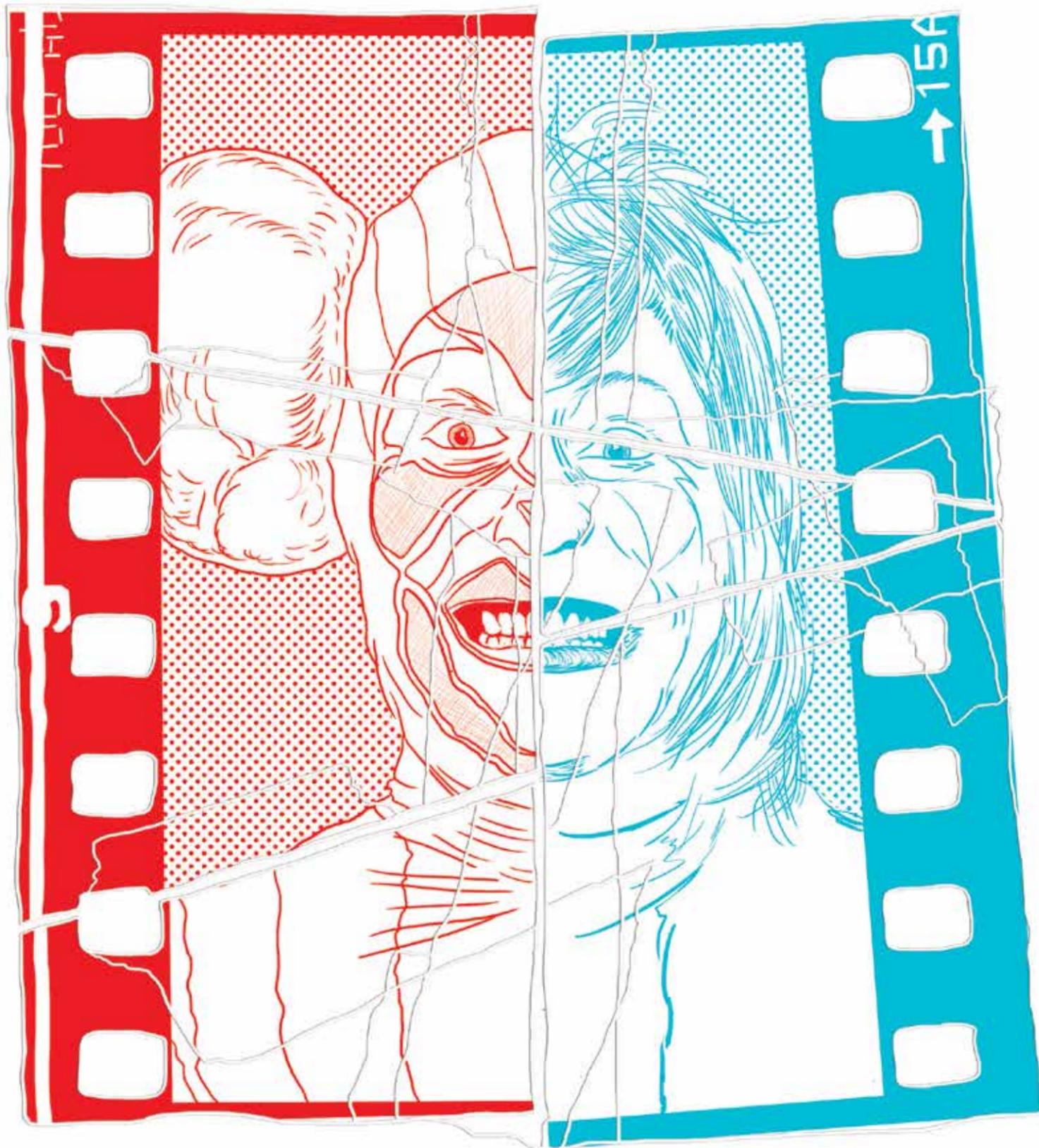
Leno was a master of readily-recognisable lampoon, with caricatures such as the Beefeater and Railway Guard that

100 years later would ultimately evolve into phenomena such as *The Fast Show*. Paul Whitehouse recognises, and even plays a self-aware tribute to, this undeniable lineage (parodying his own show's reliance on catchphrases in the process) in his Arthur Atkinson sketches.

It wasn't a huge leap to make as moving pictures took comedy into a new era and to global audiences. Charlie Chaplin was presumably living the highest of Hollywood high lives with hot and cold running champagne and all the starlets he could snort. And yet he knew that mass appeal lay in not only appropriating the demeanour of the common man, but appearing to be a figure that even the common man could look down on.

Little wonder that Chaplin's character 'The Little Tramp' became the one most synonymous with his work. The rags of a bumbling vagrant don't challenge anyone's social status, and the character's relatively harmless manipulation of authority figures is perfectly pitched for universal acclaim, even today.

The publicly-loved vaudeville characters found a home as TV sketch comedy developed, though well before *The Fast Show* took the concept to its logical conclusion, everyone from the intellectual surrealism of Monty Python to the working class smirks of Les Dawson had paved the way. Even Little Britain donned its Sunday best.



Sketch comedy demands physical transformation, limited time frames for context and set up requiring shorthand visual cues. The audience doesn't want tedious exposition, so the Pythons or Dawson dressing up as housewives gave audiences a comfortable base.

The housewives in these cases worked very differently, of course. Whereas the Pythons relied on juxtaposition (these housewives are making jokes about Sartre), Dawson would draw on and exaggerate aspects of everyday life, a furrow that Peter Kay would later plough for all it was worth. Although not as globally successful, Dawson's housewife, complete with nuanced mannerisms and a sense of empathy, is arguably more subtle and subversive than that of Cleese, Palin, et al.

Modern day dress-up seems to work on number of levels in both stand-up and TV comedy. It's the TV-tried and tested shorthand to present a character that, through their clothes and accessories, can be recognised or at least provide context from the get-go.

Simon Munnery uses this approach with, for example, his security guard and Alan Parker Urban Warrior characters, and even though Munnery's surreal performances work best when they subvert expectations, you're at least coming from a place where the fundamentals of the character don't need to be introduced and fleshed out with much more than an opening sentence.

Graham Fellows as John Shuttleworth/Brian Appleton relies on even more subtlety in character detail, with a regionally-specific dialect and subtle variations in clothing all helping to round out his creations. This is a process that sketch and character practitioner and Edinburgh regular Caroline Hardie also looks for in her creations.

Hardie, whose regulars include an Australian feminist and a cockney Queen, admits that characters provide a safety net. "Costumes can change your body," she says. "You can go from looking lost and dishevelled in an over-sized coat to a power-crazed loon in a fitted jacket."

Hardie is also aware of the distance that the character can put between you and the material being performed. "It's a bit trite, but you're not 'you' when you're in costume. If a joke dies, don't blame me, blame 'her'," she says.

The details of a creation are of paramount importance. "I have been known to panic because I'm missing a hair clip that's intrinsic to a character," says Hardie. "It's not of course remotely important to an audience that's never 'met' a character before. But to me, when I see a portrait in my head of pretty much every character I do, if something's missing then it feels wrong."

Comedian Doc Brown agrees. "Half of any performance is about appearance and what you wear significantly speaks for you," Brown says. "It always bugs me when I see discrepancies in costume on screen. For example, when you see some movie where there's supposed to be a working class character on a council estate, and all their clothes look way too new and made by brands you've never seen on the street, it doesn't ring true. The wrong outfit can be the difference between someone believing in your performance and not quite buying it."

Brown pays a lot of attention to what he wears to perform. When asked if that practice comes from any particular influence, he says, "Probably [well-dressed English American rapper] Slick Rick. Not that I dress anything like him onstage – he basically dressed like Henry VIII – but I just remember him being asked in an interview why he dressed so flamboyantly and he said, 'Coz no one wants to pay to see a bum.' I took that to heart and decided to always look good at every single show with no exceptions."

Character can encroach on one's public, or at least the public performer's, persona. What began as an occasional character for Rich Hall now blurs into his panel show appearances, and the lines between his real self, Moe from the Simpsons and Otis Lee Crenshaw can be fuzzy.

A comedian I've performed with, Travis Elkin, performs a character similar to Crenshaw around the comedy clubs of the deep south in the States. Coming from a rural Louisiana background, Elkin – now a typical, educated city dweller – tours as Travis FromLongville, a persona that opens up comedic avenues for him.

"My character, at its basic level, is who I really am," says Elkin. "I'm able to express my own perspective in a way I wouldn't do off stage. I would never want to offend anyone, but if Travis FromLongville offends someone in order to



point out a meaningful principle, it feels good.” A lot of it is aimed at subversion, he says.

“I try to break the stereotype of rednecks. A lot of ‘rednecks’ (small town, farmers, cowboys, etc) get labelled as dumb when they have thick southern accents, but I know they’re not. They have the same philosophical ideas, they just might not recognise it.”

A second sense of costume is to enhance a comic personality that isn’t necessarily a drawn ‘character’. Eddie Izzard would likely take offence to the suggestion that his stage presence, replete with glamorous women’s clothing, was anything but his true self. And yet it adds to his showmanship. You can’t imagine Izzard delivering the same material looking like he’s just heading down the pub and it having quite the same success rate.

To a lesser extent, but still in the same camp, are the expressive clothing choices of, say, Noel Fielding and Paul Foot. They explore and present camp, androgynous aspects of their persona which doesn’t alter the fundamental nature of the comedian presenting the material, but definitely enhances it.

There’s a further, particularly modern use of costume that exists in contemporary comedy, though. It’s almost the opposite of character development or creation, as it doesn’t so much hide the identity of the comedian so much as completely eradicate it.

Crude masking can help render the individual comedian almost completely anonymous. There’s a prosaic beauty to the use of household objects that, simply utilised, can inject a sense of danger and mystery that can often be missing in the most elaborate garb or money-drenched production values. Think of the plastic-bag, almost bank-job masks of The Rubberbandits who have, without even a sniff of a budget, made themselves into the Daft Punk of lo-fi satire.

Their brand of provocatively crude hip-hop is disarming enough, but add that to the raw, Netto-fabulous disfigurement of their visages, and you’ve got an act that’s hard to ignore. Blindboy Boatclub, Mr Chrome, Willie O’DJ...the names of the performers are almost an irrelevance, the profane invective and egoless mockery providing more than enough to engage a rightfully impressive number of fans.

Basic, supermarket-centred costuming is also exploited by the Stewart Lee-created “inventor of

Canadian stand-up”, Baconface, who wears a Mexican wrestling (lucha libre) mask covered in rashers of the finest Canadian bacon.

In his few in-character interviews, Lee as Baconface has stated that he wears his mask as the result of an accident he had in the late 1970s that caused disfigurement. He talks about the mask as a hugely liberating thing, actually representing the texture of his real face, and makes the somewhat meta-satirical point that as the mask is identical to the face it conceals, he is merely a more obvious representation of every comedian. Within the joke there’s a serious point.

As much as this is a point we would expect Stewart Lee himself to make, the basic fact is that the mask allows Lee to be exponentially more crude and lowbrow than audiences would ever allow the regular ‘stand-up Stewart Lee’ character to be. The same principle is at play with, say, The Rev Obidah Steppwolf III, where depravity, cruelty and morality are blurred through the lens of the preacher’s son character.

Both Rubberbandits and Bacon Face can trace their heritage back to the logical conclusion of anonymity, The Unknown Comic. Also a Canadian, this was the alter-ego (and anti-ego) of comedian Murray Langston. Legend has it that Langston was so embarrassed about having to appear on The Gong Show (kind of a proto-America’s Got Talent) just to get some money that he asked producers if he could appear with a bag over his head. A character was born and the rest is shame-faced history.

If anything, the alter-ego or character is there to bridge the gap between two worlds. It can be their world and the audience’s everyday life, low art and high art, housewives and Sartre, but it’s always a channel.

“I want people to realise I am doing a character for a purpose, to bridge the gap of the small town and big city, to convince the city folk that rednecks aren’t stupid, and for rednecks to embrace progressive ideologies,” says Travis Elkin. “We all have a character we portray in society. Who we are at work or in public is far different than who we are when we’re alone in our own thoughts. A person’s stage persona is rarely who they really are. I just embrace that and manipulate it.”

Maybe he’s right, and that the masked, costumed comic is funny because we recognise the masks that we all wear every day. Maybe we should all go into work tomorrow wearing a lucha libre mask festooned with bacon and see who, if anyone, laughs.