



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.