

## Book review

**Double, Oliver (2020). *Alternative Comedy. 1979 and The Reinvention of British Stand-Up*. London and New York: Bloomsbury.**

The title of Oliver Double's monograph clearly summarises the purpose of this book. After briefly explaining the personal reasons behind this endeavour, in his introduction Double offers a general overview of the British social and cultural context within which alternative cabaret, or comedy, developed. Double's investigation is based on his long-standing scholarly research on stand-up comedy, the analysis of recorded material held at the British Stand-Up Comedy Archive (BSUCA) as well as interviews with British comedians involved in alternative comedy such as Andy de la Tour, Alexei Sayle, Tony Allen and Pauline Melville.

Since it is difficult to determine exactly when and how the term *alternative* in conjunction with *cabaret* or *comedy* was first used, Double concentrates on the phenomenon itself, its tenets and ethos. Hence, the book is purposefully divided into three sections. Part I is devoted to the analysis of *alternative comedy* (often shortened as *altcom*) from 1979 to 1990 by looking predominantly at live performances. The main objective is to describe the way this phenomenon developed over time; consequently, the chapters in this part have a more diachronic and sociological slant. In Part II, Double delves into the investigation of *altcom* as a way to innovate stand-up, how comedians learnt to perform or created their *stage* or *comic persona* (cf. Quirk 2015), as well as their political engagement. Part III concludes the book by reflecting on the legacy left by alternative comedy and its connection to the present comedy scene in the UK. In the introduction, Double also discusses the social and political context of the 1970s and 1980s in the UK, which is a necessary step to contextualise the comic scene at the time. Importantly, the author underscores the almost total absence of female stand-ups and explains that, even if some demonstrated to be quite successful in the past, they remained virtually out of a job in the 1970s and, with the exception of Marti Ciane, the working men's clubs (WMC) circuit featured all male acts (pp. 9-12).

Chapter 1 recounts the birth of alternative comedy in London and southern England and its influence and repercussions on the northern stand-up comedy scene. Double examines the way stand-up comedy developed from the old generation (e.g., Joey Bishop) to the new one. He argues that one of the main problems of the old generation of comedians was that they used, reused and overused old jokes. The audience could finish them before the punchline and no originality or creativity was perceived, not even a glimpse of the comedian's experience or perspective was offered (p. 21). Conversely, the new generation drew their inspiration from unfettered American comedians from the 1950s such as Mort Sahl, Mike Nichols, Elaine May, John Paul Johns, and most importantly Lenny Bruce. These American stand-up comedians reached the UK via their recorded performances. Their LPs were often bestsellers, hitting the Billboard Chart, as in Shelly Berman's case (p. 19). Interestingly, although it is often believed that several comedians in the alternative comedy circuit were members of the working class, many had a university background, such as the Oxbridge Monty Pythons or Rik Mayall and Ade Edmondson's double act (p. 24). One of the most interesting aspects of this new wave of

comedians is that, apart from becoming more political in the topics they used and the jokes they cracked, they also started to seek the audience's involvement. Comedian-audience interaction became a trend for some comedians working in Covent Garden (p. 32), thus paving the way for stand-up comedy as we see it today (cf. Chovanec & Tsakona 2018 on the concept of 'interactional humour' and Dore 2018 on stand-up comedy and comedian-audience interaction).

Since many of these new comedians worked in isolation, they eventually felt the need to come together. Hence, in Chapter 2 Double offers a thoroughly documented account of how alternative comedy started, from the Comedy Store created in London in 1979, which drew inspiration from an American comedy club with the same name (see also Mintz 1985 for an overview of the American stand-up scene from its early days to the 1980s). Despite having been to some extent mythologised, Double rightly points out that the Comedy Store started a trend of stand-up comedy that did not exist in the country, which he calls "the comedy big bang" (p. 44). Comedians such as Sayle, de la Tour and Allen were part of the crew and the idea was to open up a space for unknown and unpaid comics to perform onstage, which however caused much discontent among professional acts (i.e. comedians). One important feature worth remarking on is that the Comedy Store refused to accept sexist or racist comedy (p. 46). In addition, the comedians who started or met at the Comedy Store also ventured into other partnerships such as Alternative Cabaret and the Comedy Strip. The former became particularly famous across London and the student unions of universities such as LSE and UCL, with comics earning money to perform rather than living on Arts Council grants. Nonetheless, the experience did not last, and the group soon dispersed. The latter was more a theatre than a nightclub. The mix of regular comedians and one-offs meant that the night could swing from success to disappointment, but that gave newcomers on the comedy scene the opportunity to perform. The Comic Strip regulars (Alexei Sayle, Rik Mayall, Nigel Planer, etc.) toured the country and had to win over their audience each and every time, even though they received a good deal of media coverage. Some also toured Australia and landed roles in TV shows such as *Boom Boom Out Go the Lights*. All this demonstrates that the Comedy Store, the Comic Strip and Alternative Cabaret significantly contributed to creating alternative comedy in the UK (pp. 47-61).

Chapter 3 is a detailed account of how the altcom circuit spread from the beginning of the 1980s. This list of artists included solo, double or triple acts performing in rooms above pubs or big venues supported by theatre-companies such as CAST. The left-wing attitude of such companies and performers allowed much artistic diversity, including female and minority acts (pp. 62-70). Over time, stand-up agencies and promoters started cropping up. Again, Double proves that he has done detailed fieldwork with analyses of archived material from BUSCA and interviews with agents such as Ivor Dembina, who started as an amateur and turned professional in the industry. In this case again, comedians toured the country performing at universities and colleges, but then finally reached big festivals such as Glastonbury and the Edinburgh Fringe. Some also had entire shows on a single theme, which influenced the scene for the years to come (p. 78).

Chapter 4 is a lucid analysis of the way alternative comedy turned from amateur to professional, from comedians struggling to put together a 20-minute set to hour-long solo shows, which required an entirely different approach (p. 88). Much inspiration was drawn from visiting American comedians such as Robin Williams or, conversely, British comics such as de la Tour visiting the US thanks to grants offered by the Arts Council. The artistic innovation of altcom acts is thoroughly discussed in Chapter 5. In analysing one of Sayle's jokes that becomes an offensive remark towards the audience, Double highlights that what appears innovative is that Sayle broke the social contract between the comic and their audience, but it is successful exactly because of that (p. 95). After all, as Lockey & Mayers (2011) explained, the audience may like to attend stand-up comedy because they expect the unexpected and, as I argued elsewhere (Dore

2018), the audience probably does not take offence at face value. Aside from becoming offensive to the audience, Double also refers to the use of controversial or sick humour by some alternative comedy acts, as in the case of a joke about a policeman who lost an arm when Catford police station was bombed in 1980. Moreover, some standard jokes (e.g., knock-knock jokes) were often subverted, thus turning into *metacomedy* (pp. 101-103). Some comics opted for comic surrealism, and it became an extremely popular trait of British stand-up, since it entails incongruities and juxtapositions of two not only opposing, but also irreconcilable elements. This surrealist approach was also the result of many comedians' highly educated background, as many attended university or art schools (e.g., Sayle's ability to mix and contrast high and low culture). In addition, some comics were considered funny precisely because they acted as if they were boring and unfunny, while others such as Andrew Bailey were so unconventional that the audience would even argue whether they were funny or not (pp. 107-117).

Chapter 6 is an intriguing analysis of the *comic persona* and the comedians' worldview. Double pinpoints two of most important ethical principles of altcom. The first is the avoidance of sexist and racist humour, meaning no more mother-in-law or Irish and Pakistani guy jokes, which were typically uttered in working men's clubs. The second postulated that each comic had to develop their own material and avoid stealing from others (see also Pete 2014 on joke ownership and theft). Although not all comedians would always abide by these principles, most of them did, sometimes even buying jokes off others (p. 119). In terms of the difference between the comedian self and their *stage persona*, Double explains that there were comedians who performed as themselves, those with exaggerated personas, and others who could be described as "character comedians" (e.g., Pauline Melville impersonating Edie, a northern housewife; p. 121). Some of the characters staged by the comedians were nonetheless part of the comedian's true self (e.g., Stephen Pile's angry poet) to the extent that it is often difficult to really separate the onstage persona from the offstage self. Probably the best way to describe the phenomenon is in Double's words when he says that many comedians "adopted personas, rather than playing characters, building stage identities out of elements of their own personalities" (p. 127). As for the comedian's worldview, most altcom comedians shared it with their audience. As for their opinions about politics, current affairs etc., these aspects certainly set altcom acts apart from the traditional joke-based performers of the working men's club (p. 132). In this light, Double devotes a section to the emergence of female comedians thanks to altcom and their (feminist) worldview on topics such as contraception and body weight (e.g., Maggie Steed and Jenny Lecoat), also remarking on the dearth of female comics (pp. 134-136) or other minorities such as gay comedians (e.g., Julian Clay, Bernard Padden) in the previous tradition. As Double concludes, the possibility of putting self-expression on stage was probably altcom's greatest achievement (p. 138).

Chapter 7 focuses on the comedian-audience relationship, the conversational approach followed by the new wave of comedians at the Comedy Store and other venues. Altcom acts exploited their audience's response, be it positive or hostile, by playing along with it. Double explains the abuse some comedians often had to endure and how they tried to cope with it. Although the audience was generally supposed to be non-racist, middle-class and left-wing, the recordings of some shows at the Comedy Store that Double examines sound more like a battlefield where the comedians, especially if they were women, had to face the audience's (sometimes unmotivated) abuse (p. 145-149). By reading Double's account, it seems that these events had become a place for the audience to vent to their frustration and sense of superiority by booing or heckling and making the comics the targets of their anger. However, this chaotic atmosphere at the Comedy Store was an exception rather than the rule. Double describes "crowd work" (or "working the room" in Rutter's 2000 terminology) as the attempt to get to know the members of the audience in the front rows, to also try to engage and control them, thus also

building a relationship and connection, which could also turn into giving suggestions and debating the audience's reaction (pp. 150-152). Conversely, some comedians could also ridicule their audience or dent their prejudices, for instance, by parodying the left-wing subculture that many people in the audience associated with (examples in this sense are taken from Barclay's or Melville's shows). Sometimes comic sets would verge on frontal confrontation and offense (e.g., Sayle's or Keith Allen's shows), while others inspired fear or violence (pp. 153-160). However, Double concludes that, all in all, the audience was varied, from misbehaving punters and hecklers to polite, reserved people. Comedians like Allen would provoke them, sometimes throwing darts at them, and many people did not know how to react (pp. 161-162).

Chapter 8 takes a more political stance, as Double explores the radical orientation of altcom by questioning if and, if so, to what extent it really had a political or social effect. To tackle these issues, the author first considers the common belief that alternative comedy often attacked Margaret Thatcher not only on political grounds, but also in misogynist terms. However, Double's lengthy archival research demonstrates that sexist attacks were rare. Criticism against Thatcher was based on her political choices regarding domestic and international affairs (e.g., the NHS and the Falklands War; pp. 170-175). Besides, Double asked some comedians whether they believed that their performances would influence people's political orientation or thought, but some of them appeared sceptical about the power of stand-up comedy. Yet Double remarks that the movement's principle of avoiding racist or sexist humour was itself a way to instil change (pp. 168-170). What is certainly more important is that alternative comedy acts became popular for two opposing trends. On the one hand, some opted for a provocative approach by discussing controversial themes such as the IRA and their actions (i.e. killings, bombs), thus receiving mixed audience responses depending on where they performed (e.g., in England or Northern Ireland; pp. 175-178). On the other hand, many comics performed during benefit events to help raise awareness or money for important causes (e.g., to help striking miners, for nuclear disarmament, to lift the taboo about menstruation), which proved that altcom performances could indeed have an effect on society, albeit small (cf. Quirk 2015: 197-208 for similar considerations).

Chapter 9 concludes this book, and Double reflects on what type of legacy alternative comedy has left to today's UK stand-up comedy scene. By looking at the first ten years (1979-1989), he argues that altcom has allowed UK stand-up comedy to flourish, giving it the pillars upon which it currently stands. Alternative comedy taught comedians to become professionals, even if it meant turning the industry into an extremely lucrative business for some of them, while others make comparatively very little money or just break even, as in the example of the Fringe Festival. This more profitable attitude also seems to have geared stand-up comedy towards the neoliberal capitalism of the 1990s, whereas altcom acts were renowned for their left-wing, Marxist or even anarchist stance (pp. 191-203). Truly enough, although right-wing comedians can also be found (e.g., Lee Hurst or Geoff Norcott), most today's comedians remain largely left-wing and, Double argues, this is still due to the influence of alternative comedy (p. 198). It is therefore not surprising to find that alternative comedy is still celebrated by UK television and documentaries, and comedians such as Pauline Melville and Alexei Sayle have returned, albeit briefly, to perform stand-up, thus also proving to be intergenerational. Most importantly, Double contends that altcom reached high quality standards without the superstructures that are now in place and make it very hard for new comedians to emerge (p. 203).

All in all, Double's monograph is certainly a very thorough, well-structured and well-explained piece of research on alternative comedy in the UK. The book is certainly suited to scholars and students interested in the performing and sociological aspects of stand-up comedy. Those studying stand-up comedy performances from a linguistic standpoint may instead like to read this volume to broaden their understanding of this phenomenon.

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