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Frank Skinner on the Road

Love, Stand-up Comedy and The Queen of the Night

Frank Skinner

SUNDAY 12 AUGUST 2007

I'm sitting on the midday train from London to Edinburgh. Tomorrow night I start a two-week run at the Pleasance Cabaret Bar. It's the first time I've done stand-up comedy at the Festival for ten years. In truth, apart from the odd corporate gig – with an audience of business-people whooping at jokes about Paul from Marketing's dodgy haircut – and a cluster of hit-and-miss warm-up shows earlier this year, it's the first time I've done stand-up anywhere for a decade.

It's fitting that my official return to this job should be at the Edinburgh Festival. I was onstage there, one night in 1988, when I first found my comedy voice; first felt at home with a microphone in my hand, bantering with a mouthy crowd and spitting out punchlines that hit and hit and kept hitting till I, at last, goodnighted them into one big roar. Over the next nine years, there were many nights like that in Edinburgh. I won awards, got knockout reviews and played to packed houses, night after night. But then ten years of television caused me to put stand-up on the back burner. All through that period, people would come up to me in bars, at football matches or just in the street, and say, 'When you gonna do stand-up again?' and they'd follow the question with reminiscences from a show they saw in the nineties, in Worthing, Wolverhampton or Hull. 'It was brilliant,' they'd say. And now I'm back to either reinforce that opinion or piss all over it. And I really don't know if I'm good enough, if I can do it any more, if I've lost it.

The train is busy. I'm scribbling in my journal, cautiously shielding the page with my left hand. I like writing in public; fresh and hot. Thoughts are liable to go cold if you leave them sitting on the work surface. These last few years, I've very much taken to keeping a journal. Each year I buy a bigger book, keen to note ever more detail. I'm not sure why, but a day doesn't seem to have happened until I've written it up.

All around me, English voices are charged with expectation. There are a lot of English voices at the Festival, onstage and off. Sometimes, in an audience

of two hundred, there'll be just three or four Scots. I was thinking of a line I might try:

I probably speak to more Scottish people in London than I do in Edinburgh. Sadly, I don't always HAVE spare change.

MONDAY 13 AUGUST 2007

I had a restless night. I tell myself it was the unfamiliar bed, but it probably had something to do with tonight's show. I've always thought of myself as a very un-nervous performer. No pre-show shakes or vomiting; just focussed and ready to go. Then, about three months ago, I got myself a new watch. It's got a button on the front which, if held down for a few seconds, tells you your current heart-rate in beats per minute (bpm). The average male heartbeat, at rest, is 70 bpm. Anything over a 100, at rest, is a worry. Your maximum heart-rate (come on – stick with it) give or take 10 bpm, is 220 minus your age. In other words, as a fifty-year-old man, my maximum heart-rate is between 160 and 180 bpm. Anything higher than that and I'm liable to start getting dizzy and eventually black out. Obviously, the heart-rate is increased by physical effort and/or anxiety. Well, now, my stand-up is not terribly energetic. It basically involves walking, talking and holding a microphone that weighs around ten ounces. Some comedians use a microphone stand but, hey, I like to work that upper body. My point is: any increase in my heart-rate during a gig is going to be largely down to anxiety. If that anxiety takes me over 180 bpm . . . well, we could be talking Tommy Cooper.

WEDNESDAY 29 AUGUST 2007

I've been back in London for three days now. The work started immediately after my last Edinburgh gig. I went straight back to my flat and, with the sound of late-night Bank Holiday revelry rising up from the street, I sat in a pool of table-lamplight and spent two hours going through each of my routines: charting their progress, or lack of it, during these last sixteen shows; swirling the grit and gravel in search of glistening gold. The remaining question marks have made my mathematical calculations difficult. I still have, I would say, about an hour and ten minutes of material I feel confident with. The rest is guesswork. These upcoming gigs in King's Heath are my last chance to test stuff before the tour proper, so my plan is, over the two nights, to throw everything at them.

Maybe some borderline stuff I rejected earlier on in the process, when my performance skills were still in storage, could find new life now I've regained some of my strut and swagger.

I've also thought about adding a couple of songs to the act. On the last series of my chat show, I wrote a topical song each week and performed it as Bob

Dylan, circa 1966, with massive black curly wig and shades. David Blunkett's affair, bird flu, the Paris riots, Madonna's leotard, Gary Glitter's imprisonment . . . they all got the Dylan treatment, with me playing guitar and kind of playing harmonica. I loved it. It was my favourite part of the show. In my current stand-up set, I touch upon the old British tradition of singing comedy songs about warfare, particularly World War II: mildly abusive attacks on the enemy leader – 'Adolf ' by the Billy Cotton Band or '(It's just too bad for) Nasty Uncle Adolf ' by Ambrose and his Orchestra – and more general comic ditties about the experience of war, like George Formby's songs 'I'm Guarding the Home of the Home Guard' and 'I Did What I Could With My Gas Mask'. In my act I bemoan that this tradition has died out. It seems, I say, like a very British way of coping with the horrors of war. I then go on to wonder how modern audiences would react if, in the current climate, I brought out a Formby-type song about the War Against Terror. I even sing a brief snatch, in my best George Formby voice, of how that song might go:

My mate Ali was a dentist

Now he's a Muslim fundamentalist.

Bang! Bang! Baghdad.

He's gone bomb-mad.

Bang! Bang! Baghdad-Boy.

It's a simple idea, incorporating a comic dance, and it almost always goes well, often getting a round of applause. Now, I don't get much applause mid-set. I find applause from a comedy crowd often means 'we agree' rather than 'we think that's funny'. Thus, jokes about George Bush being stupid get applause; jokes about granny porn get laughs. If I'd wanted applause, I'd have gone into politics. There is something about a comic song – in fact, any song – that makes people feel they should applaud at the end of it; even a brief, unaccompanied snatch of a song like the one above. I don't want that – some sort of hollow politeness – but, if they LAUGH at the song as well, if that song is a series of deserve-to-be-there putto-music gags, that's a different story. So, I'm writing a couple of more fully formed George Formby-type songs, this time to be accompanied by my banjo-ukulele.