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## Belittling Ern: the changing performance dynamic of Morecambe and Wise

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### ABSTRACT

Despite their renown as one of the most successful double acts in British television history, Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise have received scant academic attention. However, they have been celebrated in numerous biographies and documentaries, as result of which various narratives have come to be constructed around them: namely, that their success at the BBC in the 1970s was in large part due to the re-working of their screen personae by writer Eddie Braben. Braben claimed to be the first person to have incorporated the real bond of affection that existed between the men into their screen *alter egos*, and also stated that his reimagining of Ernie Wise's character as a pompous yet talentless writer allowed him to eschew the traditional role of a straight man and feed.

Drawing upon archive interviews, written accounts and textual analyses of Morecambe & Wise's television performances, both at the BBC in the 1970s and in the 1960s at ATV, this article demonstrates that their personalities were very much an established part of the act prior to Braben's arrival, and that his reinvention of their screen dynamic, while capitalising upon Eric Morecambe's comic talents, in fact served to weaken Wise's agency as a performer.

### KEYWORDS

Morecambe and Wise; television comedy; double act; sketch comedy; BBC

## Introduction

One of the most successful double acts in British television history, Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise have been commemorated in numerous biographies, television documentaries and two docudramas, through which certain narratives have been constructed around the pair. Although Wise was the first to achieve fame as a child comic and musical performer, it was Morecambe who became 'the funny one' when the pair formed an act after meeting on Jack Hylton's 'Youth Takes a Bow' tour. Imitating American cross-talk acts such as Abbott and Costello, Wise was positioned as the sharp-witted straight man, exploiting the more gullible Morecambe. It was in these

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roles that the comics came to prominence in broadcast media, but following Morecambe's much-publicised heart attack in 1968 the duo found themselves deprived of their regular writers when Sid Hills and Dick Green took up the offer of their own show at ATV. Eddie Braben, formerly a gag writer for Ken Dodd, was hired as a replacement. Braben has since been hailed as the man responsible for re-thinking the performers' established dynamic, and, along with producers John Ammonds and Ernest Maxin, providing them with their greatest success at the BBC in the 1970s. Observing the bond of affection that existed between Wise and Morecambe in real life, Braben sought to incorporate this in their television personae, crafting new on-screen identities for both men – but focusing on Wise in particular:

I gave him character. I made him the egotistical writer, with the plays what he wrote ... And Eric knew Ernie was a bad writer. He knew it, but he would never let Ern know he was a bad writer. He would insult his writing, make gags about his writing, but he would never let anyone else do it. (Braben 1993)

Braben claimed that Morecambe's newly protective stance drew upon his real life affection for Wise, whose role in the partnership was also enhanced, blurring the traditional line between comic and straight man: 'What we finished up with was a double act without a straight man. We had two funny men' (1993). Boon states that Morecambe, who had tired of the Lou Costello-inspired 'cretinous model' of comic (2004, 183), now became 'restless, quick-witted, devious ... ever ready to deflate his partner's pomposity' (178). Critic Kenneth Tynan offered his own perspective on the new formula when he argued that 'Ernie today is the comic *who is not funny*. And Eric ... is the straight man *who is funny*. The combination is brilliant, wholly original and irresistible [original emphasis]' (1973 cited Hall 2020).

Who and what can be regarded as funny is a subjective matter, and this article will not address so thorny an issue. Instead, it will critique the discourses that have been generated around Morecambe and Wise, in particular the claim that Braben's incorporation of their off-screen personalities transformed Wise's character into something more than a traditional 'feed'. It will instead be argued that Morecambe and Wise drew heavily upon their personal relationship prior to Braben's arrival, and that his reworking of their screen characters in fact deprived Wise of comedic agency. It is difficult to deny that Braben provided Eric Morecambe with a more multi-layered persona and increased opportunities for humour, but the success of the BBC years was due less to a blurring of the lines than a forceful restatement of Morecambe's position as the comic to Ernie Wise's straight man; an adjustment that worked to the detriment of Wise as a comic talent.

### Morecambe and Wise and their writers

Although Dick Hills and Sid Green remained with Morecambe and Wise for their first BBC television series, being replaced by Eddie Braben from series two onwards, it is tempting to view authorship of the act's material as straightforward binary: Hills and Green at ATV for *Morecambe & Wise Show* (aka *Two of a Kind*) (1961–1967), and Braben at the BBC for *The Morecambe & Wise Show* (1968–1977). Hills and Green offer a clear contrast with Braben in terms of their working methods, which arguably

allowed the performers equal creative input. Whereas Braben would carefully type out scripts for his sketches, which would then be reworked following suggestions from the performers, Hills and Green preferred to offer a basic concept that evolved into a skit via improvisations by Morecambe and Wise in rehearsals. Interviewed for their 1973 autobiography, Morecambe expounded on the extent to which the ATV material was a collaborative endeavour between writers and performers:

It was remarkable how well we gelled. There were arguments, plenty of them, but oddly enough ideas stemmed even from the differences of opinion. In the middle of a verbal scrum somebody would mention something and the rumpus would abate, as though a referee had blown a whistle. The thought would have clicked with everybody. Then, slowly at first, then with mounting excitement we'd build on it. (Morecambe, Wise, and Holman 1973, 157 and 158)

At ATV Morecambe and Wise were clearly doing much more than learning their lines and adding a comedic flourish in performance. In the same interview, Wise outlines how the process changed upon Braben's arrival:

Our method of working remained very much as it had been with Hills and Green, except that Eddie provides us with more than just a sheet of ideas. Eddie sends us a completely scripted show on which Eric and I will do some further work with the gags and situations. It is a happy collaboration. (Morecambe, Wise, and Holman 1973, 208)

When interviewed, Braben, while not specifically naming Hills and Green, portrayed himself as better able to serve Morecambe and Wise due to his experience as a joke-writer:

How many times have you seen a sketch that hasn't been funny? The basic idea has been funny, but the actual content of the sketch – the words – haven't been funny, simply because the writer – or writers – haven't had the training of writing gags. (Braben 1973)

Although Wise was also keen to give their producer John Ammonds credit for 'ideas and gags' (Morecambe, Wise, and Holman 1973, 208), it is Braben who has largely been credited with re-crafting the duo's on-screen dynamic at the BBC, a perspective he repeatedly reinforced in documentaries and interviews. Braben argued that, by giving Wise a more defined screen character as the pompous yet untalented writer, he enhanced his role, and claimed that Wise regarded this as a positive development:

When Ern read for the first time the sketch in which he was to play the part of a pompous and egotistical author he was pleased ... He might appear pompous and egotistical, but he was very much aware he would also get a lot of sympathy and a few laughs because he was obviously such a terrible writer. What really pleased Ern was that he now had a definite character to play. He would no longer be saying dreadful lines like 'What happened next?' or, 'And what did you say?' The standard lines delivered to enable the comic to deliver the tag line. (2004, 47 and 48)

While Morecambe and Wise openly acknowledged Eddie Braben's contribution to their success, they did not always hail it in the same transformative terms later employed by Braben. In 1973, Wise reflected on the adjustment that had taken place with regard to his screen persona:

Since Eddie's advent my stage character has subtly changed – I am now put over as quite a mixture of meanness, ego and vanity, and it has come over very well, with the familiar

gags about my wig – ‘You can’t see the join’ – and my ‘short, fat, hairy legs’.  
(Morecambe, Wise & Holman, 208)

In fact, such gags had begun a decade earlier in the Hills and Green-scripted shows. In his later autobiography Wise again credited the duo’s existing catchphrases to Braben (Wise and Barnes 1990, 139 and 140), but what is notable about both accounts is that, while Wise admits that Braben adjusted his 1970s character, he does not describe this as an epochal turning point.

Whenever Wise or Morecambe discuss their relationship with their various writers, there is a clear sense that, while not denying credit, they are also keen to emphasise their own input. Wise initially puts this diplomatically, admitting that while the duo can augment a script, they would not be able to produce ideas in the same way as Braben:

We can improve on what other people have written – we can make it better, probably – but when you’ve actually got no idea, and you’ve got to sit down and think of it; that’s the hard bit. That’s where we would find it difficult. (Wise 1973)

By the time of their 1981 autobiography, Wise had adjusted this position, choosing instead to underline the importance of his and Morecambe’s improvements, rather than the script itself:

We could never do word for word what a writer had written. We have to put our own stuff in it. It’s no criticism of the writer, but we feel we can improve it in places. It’s very hard to get the perfect script. (Morecambe, Wise, and Freedland 1981, 87)

By the 1990s, Wise had significantly revised his views regarding authorship:

I think the makers of Morecambe and Wise were ourselves: Eric and I. But I think we’re indebted to the writers, Hills and Green and Eddie Braben, for some of the work that they gave us. But in the final analysis, we had to sort of get the feel of it and shape it to our own personalities, and we had to go on and do it. (Wise 1993)

Clearly, Wise regarded his and Morecambe’s input as key to their success, no matter who wrote the scripts. The question of to what extent their personalities were incorporated into these performances will now be examined.

### Morecambe and Wise as personalities

How far Morecambe and Wise’s own personalities informed their screen characters can in part be inferred from their appearance on the chat show *Parkinson* (BBC, 1971–1982) in November 1972. While Morecambe remains ‘the comic’, his humorous input is split between relating amusing anecdotes and interrupting Wise when the focus shifts onto him. This accords with the role of a guest entertaining the audience with stories regarding their life and work, while the undercutting of Wise demonstrates Morecambe fulfilling the expectation that he be ‘funny’ at his partner’s expense. In contrast, Wise presents himself in a manner quite separate from ‘Little Ern’ (an appellation that Morecambe only began employing in the act following Braben’s arrival), and like Morecambe tells entertaining stories about his career. Interestingly, while Wise provides his share of quips, the studio audience do not respond as positively to these as to Morecambe’s. In addition, though Morecambe himself frequently

chuckles with laughter at Wise's asides, he clearly feels the need to 'top' them. When Wise tells the story of the duo's poor reception at the notoriously hostile Glasgow Empire, which saw them depart the stage in silence only to be advised 'They're getting to like you' by an onlooker, the audience laughs appreciatively. However, when Morecambe then relates the tale of Des O'Connor pretending to faint at the same venue, his recollection is received uproariously. Throughout the interview there is a sense that the pair understands that the audience expects them to fulfil predefined roles: Morecambe is obliged to be funny, Wise less so. The fact that Morecambe makes fun of Wise's recollections about his early career reinforces this. When Wise reminisces about performing on stage with his father in the 1930s, Morecambe frequently interjects ('He didn't sing it like that, did he?') and the audience continues to laugh: *with* Morecambe, *at* Wise. This leads Wise to jokingly protest, 'This is very sensitive, very dear to me.' After this, Morecambe holds his peace as Wise describes his early image as a juvenile Boulevardier, complete with straw boater. As Wise speaks, Morecambe pours himself a glass of water, and the former regards him watchfully, leading Morecambe to reassure his partner that he is not performing a comic routine with the water in order to pull focus. In contrast, when Morecambe describes the childhood dance classes he was obliged to attend by his mother, Wise does not interrupt, and the audience laughs along with Morecambe. Such moments suggest that, after three years of performing Braben's characters, the screen pattern of Ernie as straight man to Eric's wily comic has become interwoven with their real personalities in the minds of their audience. During the *Parkinson* interview Wise does not shout at or become exasperated with Morecambe - which his screen character might well do - but instead demonstrates good humour and moments of wit entirely at odds with the irascible character created by Braben. However, by this point the public does not expect Wise to entertain them in the same way as Morecambe, and Wise's jokes are consequently less well received than his partner's.

The *Parkinson* appearance signals an implicit recognition that Wise is the 'straight man' to Morecambe's 'comic', even when they are not playing Braben's creations. Before proceeding to analyse the pair in performance, however, it is necessary to unpack what this role of straight man signified, not least to Wise himself.

### Straight man or stooge?

Wise clearly appreciated the fact that audiences regarded him as the straight man of the act: the person responsible for feeding lines to which Morecambe, as comic, could respond with an amusing reply. It was this very traditional relationship that Braben felt limited the act's potential during the Hills and Green era, and which he contended he had remedied by creating Wise's new persona. As will be seen, Morecambe and Wise's on-screen performing dynamic was seldom this straightforward, even before Braben became their writer. In his autobiography, Wise - who began his career as a comic - clearly felt the need to clarify his role:

Did the fact that two comics together equal one comic too many mean that I was the stooge? I think not. And for a number of reasons. From the very earliest days Eric and I did two different things which were never fundamentally in opposition. He was a

comedian who danced and sang a bit; I was a song-and-dance man who cracked jokes occasionally. Those two sets of complementary talents fused over the years into an act which gave us scope for both. Of course, most of the broad comic lines went to Eric and most of the feeding was left to me, but the act was always more than comic and feed. (Wise and Barnes 1990, 158 and 159).

Wise displays some resentment at the implication he was regarded merely as Morecambe's 'feed', and takes particular umbrage at the use of the word 'stooge', i.e. the butt of the joke. Wise is perhaps protesting here without cause, as this is not a term biographers or critics appear to have used about him during his lifetime. If anything, during the 1960s it was the slow-witted Morecambe who usually took the role of stooge, outwitted and humiliated by the fast-talking Wise despite the latter ostensibly being his 'feed'. The problematic term 'stooge' later resurfaced in the documentary 'The Importance of Being Ernie', which adopted the conceit of Wise playing two characters: himself as solo song-and-dance stage performer, and a second role as a critical audience member, giving voice to what would seem to be Wise's assumptions regarding the public's opinion of his role in the act. When the latter accuses Wise of being Eric's 'stooge', the onstage Wise becomes defensive: 'I wasn't the stooge. The stooge is somebody who just stands there with a white face and doesn't say anything. I mean, Eric was the comedian, and I was more the song and dance man. I don't like being called the stooge' (Wise 1993). Wise thus refutes any implied reading of his role in the act as an unfunny figure of ridicule for the comic, again emphasising his musical abilities as complementary to Morecambe's comedic skills.

Whether or not Wise's negative reading of the public's attitude towards his role was justified, since his death commentators have attempted to highlight his importance, even going so far as to adopt a critical attitude towards Morecambe:

Whisper it in Morecambe [Morecambe's home town], but on his own Eric wasn't all that funny. Without Ernie, his humour is too broad. Next time you see one of Eric and Ernie's song-and-dance routines on telly, try covering up the side of the screen without Eric on it. Without Ernie's sublime set-ups and faultless dancing, Eric's clowning seems coarse and hammy. (Cook 2009, 16)

The changing screen dynamic between Morecambe and Wise will now be examined, along with the question of whether Eddie Braben's claim that he was the first to incorporate elements of their personalities is justified. To this end, sketches from the ATV and BBC eras will be compared.

## Morecambe and Wise in performance

The first text is a guest appearance on *The Jo Stafford Show* (ITV, 1961), broadcast live from the London Palladium on 4 November 1961, in which Morecambe and Wise perform their self-defence routine. At this time they were midway through their first run of episodes for ATV, but as this season no longer exists in the archives it is not possible to say whether the sketch was borrowed from a broadcast episode. However, the fact that it was later revived twice, for a 1963 guest spot on *The Ed Sullivan Show* (CBS, 1955–1971), and again in their big screen debut *The Intelligence Men* (1965), indicates that the duo regarded it as strong material. It is certainly representative of the

Hills and Green era in that it centres round Morecambe's shortcomings being highlighted by the sharper-witted Wise as Morecambe attempts to instruct him on how to defend himself against various imagined threats. While much of the humour derives from Morecambe's physicality, delivery of lines, and interactions with his partner, Wise, though ostensibly limited to the 'feed' role that Braben considered restrictive, demonstrates that he is far from being a 'stooge', receiving laughs as big as Morecambe's in the moments where he undercuts him.

The sketch begins with two young men in judo kit practicing throws, before Wise enters and addresses the audience. Although using his own name, it becomes clear that he is playing the role of a reporter, and when he asks whether he can have lessons, he is advised to see 'Professor Morecambe'. This signifies that, although the performers' surnames are being used, for the purposes of the sketch they are not known to each other, as evidenced by Wise asking: 'Professor Morecambe? Could I meet him, please?'

Morecambe receives an enthusiastic welcome as he bounds onto the stage in his judo costume, shaking hands with the two demonstrators before effortlessly throwing them to the floor. Morecambe in fact barely touches them, and these spectacular falls are clearly due to the skill of the 'trainees' themselves, who then exit. Morecambe also makes as if to shake Wise's hand, but then raises it at the last moment to leave Wise hanging, which seems to indicate that the sketch will revolve around Wise being played as Morecambe's 'stooge'. In fact, the opposite proves to be the case.

Morecambe attempts to demonstrate various modes of self-defence to Wise, who deflates each one by finding the weak points in his 'expert' techniques. First, Morecambe encourages Wise to 'stab' him from behind with an imaginary knife while Morecambe pretends to be in a bar. Morecambe confidently employs a move by which he swiftly swivels round and grabs Wise's right arm with both his hands, holding Wise immovable with his firm grip. However, Wise responds by pretending to stab the surprised Morecambe in his exposed rib cage (twice) using his free arm. This receives an appreciative laugh from the audience, which is repeated when Wise explains that he is left-handed.

Undeterred, Morecambe instructs Wise to pretend to hold a gun to his back from behind, and demonstrates in slow motion the move with which he intends to disarm him: an outward slashing action. Forewarned, Wise simply steps backwards, leaving Morecambe to slash thin air and fall on his face.

Morecambe next demonstrates how a woman should defend herself against a mugging, donning a blonde wig and carrying a handbag. Wise responds by grabbing the handbag and beating Morecambe over the head with it.

Finally, Morecambe pretends to be an enemy soldier, creeping up on Wise's sentry from behind. The only problem is that Morecambe's shoes are squeaking. He takes them off, only to discover that it is in fact his feet that are squeaking.

Throughout the sketch Morecambe repeatedly demonstrates his comic sensibilities to garner additional laughs, as when miming the rapid consumption of alcohol at the bar, pretending not to notice Wise menacing him with the knife, turning Wise's mime of holding a gun to his spine into an impromptu massage, or suddenly swerving his body towards and then away from Wise, as though constantly poised to attack. In



these moments Morecambe is clearly conforming to the role of the comic, yet due to the fact that Wise repeatedly outwits him, he is also playing the stooge. Conversely, though Wise in many ways fulfils Eddie Braben's definition of the straight man, posing questions to which the comic provides amusing responses (e.g. asking Morecambe what he has a black belt for: 'To keep my trousers up'), he also demonstrates his share of physical comedy. On the second occasion Morecambe suddenly swerves towards him, Wise backs away and holds his arms up to defend himself, but quickly abandons this posture when it becomes clear that Morecambe is not actually going to attack, prompting the audience to laugh. In addition, there are several moments at which one of the duo seems to improvise a line or action that provokes laughter, either from the audience or the other performer. Morecambe's intimation that he is enjoying the pressure of Wise's finger being held against his back causes Wise to chortle, though he quickly snaps back to a straight face as he listens to Morecambe explain how he will disarm him, and both men receive a laugh on their delivery of the line 'Yung Tanga-Hanga': the name of the disarming move that Morecambe is about to (unsuccessfully) employ. When Morecambe lands on his face, Wise, still standing, pauses and waits for the audience laughter to subside before leaning down and tapping Morecambe on the head. As Morecambe looks up, Wise mimes shooting him with his finger, saying 'Bang!'. This is greeted with another wave of laughter from the audience. Wise's attack on Morecambe with the handbag (which is energetic, to say the least) is equally well received. Although Morecambe attempts to respond in kind by hitting Wise with his wig, he is ultimately forced to protect himself by lying on the floor with his head down. Wise stands back as the audience laughter and applause gradually subside, then adds a final grace note: just as Morecambe cautiously begins to raise his head, Wise steps forward and gives him one last swipe with the handbag, recommencing the laughter.

These moments show that, even when playing characters that were intended to be strangers to each other, the personal affection between Wise and Morecambe shone through in their performances, causing both them and their audience additional enjoyment. The sketch also shows that, far from only graduating to become one of 'two funny men' in Braben's scripts, Wise was already able to generate laughs in his own right, demonstrating that he was more than a simple feed for Morecambe in the 1960s.

In order to focus on the screen dynamic between the comics, without the complicating factor of guest stars, the BBC routine selected for study is the first that viewers saw in the 1970s: the introductory welcome from episode one of their third BBC series, broadcast on 14 January 1970. The most obvious difference between this and the self-defence sketch is that Morecambe and Wise are here playing versions of themselves. Boon (2004, 188) has hailed the fact that Braben's scripts 'drew on their shared, impoverished northern backgrounds to create individual biographies that were more cartoon-like, but only semi-fictionalized', and while this applies more to the 'at home' sketches than front-of-curtain routines, it is present here via the pair's shared recollection of a failed gig they allegedly once played in Sunderland.

The sketch revolves around Morecambe interrupting Wise's attempt to welcome the audience to point out that, in comedic terms, his partner makes no real

contribution to the act. Outraged, Wise reminds him of the occasion in Sunderland when Morecambe was too ill to perform, and Wise went on alone to great acclaim. This is challenged by Morecambe, who asserts that, without him, Wise would be like 'Engelbert without Humperdinck. Aston without Villa. Sid without Dick.' This dig at their departed writers, whether scripted or ad-libbed, becomes more pointed when he adds: 'Which can't be bad!' To address what he perceives as Wise's comedic failings, Morecambe promises to transform him into one of the funniest men in the country, forcing Wise to replace his trousers with a pair of baggy clown pants, topped off with a red nose and funny hat. The reluctant Wise then retreats behind the wings to make his grand comedy entrance. After being announced by Morecambe, Wise bounds on to an upbeat musical accompaniment, and performs an energetic (and admittedly amusing) clown-style dance in which his baggy pants jiggle backwards and forwards. Encouraged by Morecambe, the audience applauds enthusiastically, and the sketch ends (somewhat anti-climactically) with Morecambe pronouncing Wise's new comedy persona 'A knockout!'

Despite the sketch ending with the triumph of 'Little Ern' as a comedy performer, the thrust of the narrative is that he is not perceived as being funny, and that Wise's contribution to the act is therefore limited compared with Morecambe's. Interestingly, though Braben claimed to have created a more rounded character for Wise, he is more restricted here to the role of feed than in the self-defence routine, and is also positioned as the stooge; the role against which Wise later railed. Both Braben's script and Morecambe and Wise's performance centre round the belittling of 'Little Ern' by his partner, from the line 'You'd be nothing without me' to Morecambe revealing Wise taking off his trousers behind a curtain without his knowledge, earning an easy laugh from the audience. The absence of a guest star, whose function was often to ridicule the Ernie-penned plays, means Morecambe has no third party against whom to defend Wise, and instead he is permanently on the attack, either physically (Morecambe twice slaps Wise's face – by now an established motif – in addition to roughly adjusting his baggy trousers and snapping the elasticated nose against his forehead) or verbally, repeatedly insisting that Wise would be 'lost' without him.

As noted above, the personal relationship that Braben claimed to draw upon is present, but it functions at the level of both writing and performance. Braben's script works upon Morecambe and Wise's long-standing partnership via references to Sunderland, and the comedy arises from the fact that the two have entirely differing recollections of Wise's reception. This arguably plays on Braben's re-conception of Wise as an arrogant performer, unaware of his own limitations, and 'Little Ern's' outrage at the suggestion he did not go down well bears out Braben's assertion that Wise enjoyed having a distinctive character to play. This dispute leads to another scripted gag, when the pair reminisce about once offering a man five pounds to sit in the audience and shout for more when they came on stage; a story Morecambe pays off with the line 'I remember that; we gave the money to his widow.' Such jokes support Braben's assertion that he made use of the existing relationship between the men, yet much of the comedy derives from their performance of Braben's material, rather than the essential script itself, and it is here that the real bond between the performers is most evident. Just as Morecambe could cause Wise to (temporarily)

corpse in the self-defence sketch, he does the same when, before slapping his face for the second time, he warns him 'Now, I don't mean this – but I'll still do it.' In the middle of the duo's dispute over Sunderland, Morecambe spontaneously throws his arm round Wise's shoulders in an affectionate hug (presumably not part of the script), after which both men break character and chuckle. When recalling the supposed death of the man they bribed to sit in the audience, Morecambe begins to ad-lib, and Wise joins in. By the time they have finished extemporising the audience laughter has subsided, and it is clear that at this point Morecambe and Wise are primarily amusing each other.

Such moments display natural warmth, and play against the central narrative of 'Eric' humiliating 'Ern'. When Morecambe asks an unseen stagehand to give Wise a funny hat, the payoff is that the oversized, ill-fitting trilby turns out to be Wise's own. This joke is recycled when Morecambe admires Wise's 'funny walk,' and Wise protests that he always walks that way: 'And you don't get arrested?' Whereas, in the self-defence routine, it was Morecambe who wore an emasculating wig, this time Wise is placed in a clown's outfit. In addition, Wise's scripted lines are deliberately designed not to generate laughter among the audience; this function is now clearly designated for Morecambe. Sensing that Morecambe has something negative to say about his contribution, Wise barks 'Come on, out with it!' - a line that Morecambe transforms into an innuendo ('Pardon?'). When Morecambe asks, 'What exactly do you do?' Wise angrily responds 'What do I do?', setting Morecambe up for the line: 'Don't you know, either?' The solitary laugh that Wise earns in his own right is an unscripted one. Having been forced to repair the snapped elastic on his clown's nose, he quietly ad-libs: 'I'll get the nose on; I think they'll wait [the audience].' As a result of Eddie Braben's reconceptualising of their characters, Wise now has far fewer moments of comic agency, and is forced into a subsidiary role in relation to Morecambe.

This article's brevity precludes a more rigorous examination of Morecambe and Wise's changing performance dynamic in the 1970s, and the case studies examined cannot be taken as absolutes. Many BBC sequences depart from the formula examined here to position the guest star as 'stooge', placing Morecambe and Wise on 'the same side' as forces of chaos who jointly deprive them of their dignity, as when facing off against conductor Andre Previn, or addressing Shirley Bassey's footwear malfunction. Occasionally, a routine such as 'The Stripper' allows them to work together harmoniously, receiving an equal share in the comedy honours (interestingly, this evolved out of a suggestion by Wise). It is also notable that several of the lavish musical numbers which became a feature of their Christmas shows re-establish the 1960s dynamic of making Morecambe the butt of the joke, as when he is soaked to the skin in 'Singing in the Rain', or encumbered with an ever-lengthening cane. However, the changes wrought by Braben are never far away. When Wise shouts at Morecambe in the ATV episodes, it is to berate Morecambe the stooge for his stupidity; when he shouts at Morecambe in the BBC years, it is because Morecambe has exasperated Wise with his antics.

Those who worked with Morecambe and Wise agree that it was always their personal relationship that provided the key to their comedic success on screen, but that they needed their writers to accommodate this. Decades before producing their 1970s

shows, Ernest Maxin (2013) directed them in *Running Wild*: ‘Even at rehearsals, I could see the fun in Eric and Ernie – but this did not come through in the script’. For historian Hannon (2013), ‘the Hills and Green era saw the point at which Morecambe and Wise relaxed into themselves; relaxed into who they were as individuals’. Richard Boon concurs that Morecambe and Wise only began to mature as an act when they moved away from their early cross-talk inspirations; ‘Abbott and Costello talked *at* each other; Morecambe and Wise wanted to talk *to* each other [original emphasis]’ (2004, 183). For former agent Michael (now Lord) Grade (2016), this process began at ATV: ‘It became great when it got down to the essence of Morecambe and Wise, which was them talking to each other, the two of them, centre stage ... [The] focus on them and their relationship; what a difference that made’. However, Grade (2011) also concedes that Braben ‘gave a whole new dimension to the kind of comedy they did, and created some of the greatest television we’ve ever seen in this country’. While it would be difficult to deny that Braben’s contribution brought Morecambe and Wise their greatest popularity, the above analyses suggest that this came at a cost in terms of Ernie Wise’s comedic agency.

## Conclusion

This article demonstrates that, while Morecambe and Wise achieved their greatest popularity after Eddie Braben reworked their screen characters at the BBC, the established discourse that he was the first to incorporate their off-screen personalities, and that this worked to the benefit of Ernie Wise, is open to challenge. Far from acting as ‘feed’ to Morecambe’s comic in their 1960s work, Wise also had the space to demonstrate his own comedic abilities. The performers’ shared role in the evolution of their material with Dick Hills and Sid Green meant that their own personalities, and the underlying warmth of their relationship, were already providing a key point of appeal for audiences prior to Braben’s arrival. While Braben intentionally incorporated the existing relationship between the two men into his scripts, acknowledging their shared history, his reimagining of Wise as ‘Little Ern’, while capitalising on the comedic skills of Eric Morecambe, simultaneously positioned Wise more firmly as the butt of his jokes.

What impact this argument might have on future consideration of Ernie Wise’s legacy as a comic performer remains to be seen. But for once, the last word should perhaps go to the man himself: ‘As the comedian Ben Warris told me very early in my career, “it doesn’t matter who gets the laughs as long as you get half the money.”’ (Wise and Barnes 1990, 159).

## Disclosure statement

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