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## **The roots of alternative comedy? – the alternative story of 20th Century Coyote and Eighties Comedy**

### **Abstract**

*There have been many articles but too few rigorous critiques detailing the naissance and flowering of alternative comedy – a rather loose and undefined term for the brand of ‘non-racist, non-sexist’ comedy of the 1980s. The descriptions that do exist of the formation, growth and continued influence of this ill-defined ‘genre’ tend to be rather uncritical and more often than not, factually incorrect. The articles are often London-centric and rarely identify the origins of one of the more important roots of this comedy phenomenon to a jazz club in Manchester. For it was Band on the Wall in the run down northern quarter of Manchester in 1976 that first played host to one of the key inspirations for character-led improvised sketch comedy. This brand of performance, which also tends to be under-discussed, transferred to the comedy clubs in the late 1970s and 1980s, including the original Soho Comedy Store and The Comic Strip. Formed by the author Lloyd Peters in March 1976 whilst studying B.A. Drama at Manchester University, his improvisatory character-led comedy troupe 20th Century Coyote was to become the resident company at The Band on the Wall. Peters recruited fellow thespian student Rik Mayall principally because they shared the same off-beat humour – anarchic*

*slapstick mixed with a large dose of Monty Python's Flying Circus. Two further Manchester University drama students were press-ganged from the year below and rather late in the day (October 1976) Adrian Edmondson to appear in Coyote's first improv-based comedy entitled Dead Funny (1976). Six other shows followed before an Edinburgh Fringe Festival spin-off. The 40-minute live shows were self-contained narratives based on recognized comedy templates but worked, or more correctly warped, by improvisation and then re-improvised in performance. The shows were often loud, crude and grotesque. This article details the importance of the group, its techniques and the lasting influence of character-led sketch and 'improv' comedy that shaped a distinctive brand of 'alternative comedy' in the 1970s and 1980s and that would soon dominate the comedy mainstream.*

## **Keywords**

20th Century Coyote

alternative comedy

character-led comedy

television comedy

stand-up

Band on the Wall

Manchester University Drama Department

## Context

It is welcome and unsurprising that with the passage of time a more objective analysis of the 1980's comedy scene can now commence. The term alternative comedy had been claimed at its most basic – allegedly defined by comic stand-ups Malcolm Hardee and Tony Allen – as an *alternative* to the mainstream live comedy. But there is no denying that it is a broad, over-used (and often mis-used) term that covered a multiplicity of performers and performance styles that flowered in the early 1980s.

Against the backdrop of Margaret Thatcher's administrations (1979–1983 and 1983–1987) and the discordant soundtrack of rebellious punk music, comedy performers as diverse as Keith Allen, Alexei Sayle, Rik Mayall, John Hegley and French and Saunders enjoyed burgeoning success. Most would eventually be appropriated, assimilated (and inevitably re-packaged) into the mainstream of television with shows such as *The Young Ones* (BBC 1982–1984), *French and Saunders* (BBC 1987–2005) and *Saturday Live* (Channel 4 1985–1987). This 'new wave' brand – it was too varied to be called a movement – coincided with the birth of a new *alternative* television broadcaster, namely Channel 4 who was established to commission 'minority' interest programming (commenced 2 November 1982). This was a perfect springboard to harness the talents of Peter Richardson who ran *The Comic Strip* (1980–1981) (at the Boulevard Theatre in the Raymond Revue bar, London) together with other defecting comedians (from the more

aggressive Comedy Store) in The Comic Strip Presents series (1982–present) and whose *Five Go Mad in Dorset* was screened on the new Channel's launch day.

What is often conveniently over-looked is that the majority of the performers on the alternative comedy scene at this time – and it tended at first to be principally a London-centric circuit – delivered quite evidently non-political content. There were notable exceptions such as Alexei Sayle (the first and regular Master of Ceremonies of The Comedy Store), Tony Allen, Jim Barclay and Pauline Melville who, probably due to their radical fringe theatre roots, could be described as confronting political issues directly. Attacks on Thatcher were a staple component of their stand-up sets. Sayle, with his Stalinist parental influence, also often turned his ire on The Labour Party's inability to effectively confront the Thatcherite agenda.

However, it must be said that most performers of this time were quite conservative (small 'c') in content and form. Stylistically the majority of the stand-up comedians adopted the traditional cabaret/music hall and heightened persona modus operandi. However the traditional set-up, development and punch-line structure was often devoid of the 'killer' pay-off – outrage, passion and rage rather than neat funny 'closure' was more the order of the day. An audience wasn't there to please – but to confront. This was the 'new' world of challenge and attitude in which, notably Keith Allen would hurl back the Comedy Store ashtrays at an unappreciative audience from whence they came. However, the most outraged and radical of these performers still appeared to confirm the notion that despite the left-wing stance, comedy remains a 'conservative' art-form in that material must

register with what is already accepted in an audience member in order to trigger a response.

As Simon Critchley identifies in *On Humour (Thinking in Action)* (2002), a joke-teller and audience agree a:

...tacit social contract... namely some agreement about the world in which we find ourselves as the implicit background to the joke. There has to be some tacit consensus or implicit shared understanding as to what constitutes joking 'for us' as to which linguistic or visual routines are recognized as joking....Joking is a game that players only play successfully when they both understand and follow the rules. (2002: 4)

Others might characterize this phenomenon as simply preaching, (or rather joshing), to the converted.

There was a second sub-section of *alternative* performers of the time, such as Randolph the Remarkable (one big belly and one small plastic bowl of water), John Hegley (off-beat poet with Glasses) and Julian Clary (promoted as the Joan Collins Fan Club – a duologue between Julian and Fanny the dog) that subverted the stand-up form. These were in the main curiosity, unusual acts that were deemed *alternative* by the nature they were not the ordinary or mainstream fare one would expect to see on a comedy line-up.

The third distinctive sub-section that I would identify at this time, and which I would argue, were the most visibly influential of the *alternative* performers (in that they were appropriated more readily by television), were the character comedians. This was not stand-up or novelty performance – these were often improvised (or based on *improv*), character-led short sketches exemplified by the likes of The Oblivion Boys (Steve Frost and Mark Arden), French and Saunders and the surreal Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer.<sup>1</sup> One of the most successful duos of the comedy clubs of this time, The Dangerous Brothers (Rik Mayall and Ade Edmondson) developed these characters and skills from their time with 20th Century Coyote at Manchester University only four years earlier. It is due to the major impact of this character-led form on alternative comedy and its continuing influence today (on what I like to call post-alternative comedy), that the roots of this comedy are the principal focus of attention in this article.

### **Birth of Coyote**

It is undeniable that the cultural and political context of the time are essential to understanding the roots of 1980s UK character-based comedy. However, only when an analysis of the personnel involved placed in a specific geographic location can the full picture emerge. The continual comedic interchange of the five members that made up 20th Century Coyote: Lloyd Peters, Rik Mayall, Mike Redfern, Mark Dewison and Ade Edmondson – played a major part in developing comedy character routines, which were to feature later in their shows. Indeed, the relationships and ‘*lazzi*’ (comedy business)

they established were akin to a continual long-form improvisation – highly amusing to those involved and quite tiresome to those who were not, including their lecturers. However, it is self-evident that most of the comedy groups through the ages owe their success to an intimate understanding of each performer's strengths and weaknesses. It is where a group's timing is honed and developed to a stage where the unknowing spectator would describe the comedy as 'intuitive' and 'instinctive' – the performer knows that spontaneous improvisation takes a lot of rehearsal.

It is important to recognize and credit the roots of Coyote's character-based sketch comedy. Leaving the influence of The Marx Brothers to one side for another article (concerning film to television to theatre influence), radio and television antecedents such as *The Goons* (BBC 1951–1960), Spike Milligan's *Q* series (BBC 1969–1982), Michael Bentine's *It's a Square World* (BBC, 1960–1964), *Do Not Adjust Your Set* (ITV 1967–1969) and most importantly for the baby-boom generation, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (BBC 1969–1974) were all pre-cursors that created the fractured, non-narrative, off-beat sketch shows of 20th Century Coyote.

What directly impacted upon the students in 1975 were the plays and playwrights introduced as part of their drama course. Major influences were the Commedia dell'Arte stock character types, the surrealist/dadist classics such as *Ubu Roi* (Jarry), the Absurdist such as Ionesco (*Rhinoceros*) and most importantly the Restoration Comedy of Manner playwrights, especially Moliere – *Tartuffe*, *The Misanthrope* and Ben Jonson's *Comedy of Humours* (*Volpone*). Also Grotowski and Artaud had a bearing especially concerning

concepts of physical performance connected with the *Theatre of Cruelty*. Significantly, it is no coincidence that the first major show in which Peters, Mayall and Edmonson appeared was the 1976 first year production of Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*. Some of the performances were open-air, which provided invaluable voice-projection training in readiness for the noisy pub environments they were to experience at Band on the Wall. The larger than life characters, needing projection and exaggerated delivery to communicate (especially outside), was the performance template employed for all 20th Century Coyote shows.

More than that, what the students stole from Comedy of Humours/Manners' texts was the opportunity to present bawdy characters enmeshed in scurrilous plots. What was undeniably attractive about Restoration plays was that they presented flamboyantly rude and crude characters often declaiming sexual innuendo and offensive dialogue. All of human life was here to be mercilessly plundered – pompous twits, feral low-life, the devious, the sex-starved, the deceivers, the pretenders. Mistaken identity and deception, disguise and reveal, shock and horror were the staple plot devices. The plays presented a delicious opportunity to ridicule the pretentious and the pompous whether they were from upper or working class. These characters and narratives formed the basis of every 20th Century Coyote play to follow and beyond – all performed from the privileged status of a comfortable middle class drama student.

The intentions of social correction through satire that the Restoration playwrights espoused were, in truth, lofty aims not prioritized by the Coyote troupe, although desires

to introduce more satirical wit were discussed (and dismissed) at subsequent company meetings. These extra-curricula shows served as a release from the more formal academic rigours of university life, such as they were, and served as an opportunity for showing off increasingly skilful comedy techniques, which was their passion. However, the Restoration themes that presented social unease and injustice appeared attractively contemporary given the political climate of the Thatcher administration. To the politically leftish-leaning students, there were a large number of scandals to expose and a multitude of rich people to satirize in the mid-1970s and it appeared entirely appropriate to resurrect a sixteenth-/seventeenth-century genre in all its grotesque excessiveness.

As an undergraduate studying Drama (B.A. Hons) at Manchester University (from 1975 to 1978), the group's founder Peters met his first recruit fellow drama student Rik Mayall when both housed in the Manchester University Hall's of Residence at Owen's Park, Fallowfield. What united the pair was their love of the absurd, the surreal, the irreverent and the cheap burgers from the so-called *Arm-pit* – the nearby Canadian Charcoal Pit take-away. Also they both had a penchant for silly voices and like many of their generation, quoted large sections of Monty Python sketches, which were seen as de rigueur 'coolness' in the mid-1970s. The Manchester Drama course also encouraged students like Peters and Mayall to experiment off-curricula, as impromptu performances were staged every week – especially Monday evenings – at the famous Stephen Joseph Studio – the ramshackle converted church that stood at the heart of the more formal, polished Manchester University (Owens) campus. Many of the unsung troupes of this time engaging in bizarre and risqué absurdism at the Stephen Joseph Studio certainly had an

influence on the new intake. It has to be said that the artistic atmosphere of the University Drama Department at this time (1975–1978) was indeed rich with innovative talent and certainly contributed to a general atmosphere of invincibility and experiment – a ‘we can do anything’ attitude. This was not the usual empty student arrogance – many of these particular graduating students subsequently did make a name for themselves in the performance and media industries.<sup>2</sup>

In its own way, the scruffy studio (and the drama students that inhabited it) stood as a metaphorical two-fingers to the straight-laced academics that surrounded it. The quite unmerited superiority complex that the Drama students felt was exemplified by the fact that they were allowed to call their lecturers by their first names – not a privilege open to many others studying at Owens. Perhaps it was also the chip-on-the-shoulder envy that they were not at Oxford or Cambridge. Those interested in comedy saw their rough, crude experiments at the Studio as an antidote to the Cambridge Footlights (1883–present) and Establishment Club (1961–1964) ‘cleverness’, relying more on vague parodies or grotesque caricature rather than well-constructed sharp political or social satire.

However, it was not until their second year when Mayall and Peters moved from Owens Park Halls (with two mutual friends from the English course) into Lime Cottage, Wilmslow Road in increasingly fashionable East Didsbury, that the seeds of Coyote were sown. Myth had it that Lime Cottage once housed the servants who attended the larger, grander house next door. The Cottage entered student mythology as HQ for anarchic

meetings and wild parties. Two of Rik Mayall's former school pals from the King's School, Worcester – Mike Redfern and Mark Dewison – who had just enrolled on the first year also to study Drama at Manchester University were frequent visitors to the Cottage. As they were of like comedic mind, they were also enlisted to join the embryonic comedy band that was to become 20th Century Coyote – a suitably appropriate bad pun named by Hollywood film fan Peters – mainly because he possessed the 20th Century Fox theme music on vinyl. The music became the signature tune that opened and closed all Coyote shows. Needless to say, copyright was not cleared.

The final member of the troupe, fellow second year Drama student Ade Edmondson, was recruited rather late in the day (October 1976) mainly due to a suspicion that his humour was a little too refined for the group's anarchy – especially as his favourite comedy inspiration at that time was alleged to be Tom Stoppard. However, as Rik Mayall put it in an interview with Martyn Palmer (1994), Ade had to be included because, 'he had a red corduroy jacket, with strategic rips in it, with little John Lennon glasses and really ripped trousers. He was totally cool as far as I was concerned – and he had a motorbike'.

A section of an episode of the documentary series *Comedy Map* (BBC 2007) hosted by Peters and Redfern traced The Cottage as the inspiration for *The Young Ones* (BBC 1982–1984). Anarchic parties, un-washed dishes and motorcycles being driven up staircases all figured in the lives of the residents of The Cottage and future television storylines. As Mike Redfern put it:

It really was living in filth, living in squalor, living a party life and fitting studying around it. (BBC 2007)

As Peters concurred:

We didn't know how to look after ourselves. It was the first time we were away.  
(BBC 2007)

Crucially, the BBC programme omitted the central information that 20th Century Coyote was created there.<sup>3</sup> Peters registered the name on 1 January 1977 (as a theatrical agency in error) at The Cottage address some three months after the group first performed at Band on the Wall. Presumably it still is registered there even though The Cottage and adjacent mansion were demolished in the 1990s to make way for a nursing care home.

### **Coyote uncaged**

The respected, if slightly dilapidated, jazz venue Band on the Wall, Swan Street was home to Manchester University's semi-professional undergraduate theatre troupes (such as Snoh Fun and Jester) since March 1976. The new owners, local jazz musician Steve Morris and his business partner Frank Cusick had bought the old George and Dragon pub in 1975. They had the fore-sight to offer the space to all musical genres not just jazz and rode the new and post-punk wave with great effect – The Buzzcocks and The Fall played there. They also had the foresight to encourage the growing student population through the doors in any way possible, including lunchtime drama.

It should be stressed that the idea of visiting a pub or club to watch theatre, not to mention comedy, was a rather rare, radical and imaginative alternative-use concept in the mid-seventies. The marketing of comedy as the ‘new rock and roll’ was an unthinkable distant notion. However, the novelty of theatre activity in a pub was now worthy of press attention. As journalist Alan Sanders put it under the subheading ‘Fringe Benefits’ in the Manchester arts paper *New Manchester Review* (a fanzine and listings magazine which was the precursor for the now defunct *City Life*):

Three cheerful Mancunians told me that they had thought their scene was ‘playing 501 at darts, playing cards’. They had never seen anything like this before, but would now ‘go out of their way to see it’. As one put it, ‘I count myself as working-class, and theatre always seemed something middle-class and not for me. I didn’t know what to expect, but it was good; I enjoyed it’.

(Sanders 1976)

This reinforces an argument not always clearly delineated with respect to northern-based comedy in the 1970s – that the performers, offering non-elitist, unstructured free entertainment, had stumbled unwittingly upon the *Zeitgeist* of the time – an alternative type of ‘punk’ entertainment. It was surely no coincidence that on 4 June 1976, The Sex Pistols played Manchester’s Lesser Free Trade Hall in what came to be regarded as one of the most influential rock shows ever. Something new was in the air and those in the ‘arts’ vicinity could not help being infected by the fallout.

A full-time union official said ‘I think this is giving us the indication to go to the theatre. I would never have gone, you know, but the kind of plays which are put on here (Band on the Wall) are giving people the indication that there is something better in life than television, and things of that nature... what we have seen here has generated an interest’.

(Sanders 1976)

Described on the hand-drawn posters adorning the Band on the Wall club walls and windows as Lunchtime Theatre, the Coyote shows certainly had their roots in cabaret and vaudeville. The Coyote press release announced that:

Band on the Wall, Swan Street, already established as one of the leading jazz centres in the North, has for some time now been experimenting with lunchtime pub drama.....the actors work from unscripted scenarios especially formulated for pub audiences. (Press release 20th Century Coyote, 5 November 1976)

The shows *were* specially formulated, as detailed below. However, with no sense of destiny, the Band on the Wall was also seen by the Coyote troupe as a possible route to apply for a much-valued Equity card (The Actors Union). This valuable commodity recognized the performer as a professional and allowed the holder to work on stage and television. Equity was a ‘closed-shop’ union at the time and membership required four professional contracted engagements. It was common knowledge that being described as

a Variety artist was an easier route to gain an Equity card as it had less onerous membership restrictions. This could explain why many shows at this time, including those at Band on the Wall, were described as ‘Cabaret’ or ‘Variety’ performances. However this quest for ‘The Card’ was to prove fruitless for the Manchester University drama pub performers – the Thursday, Friday and Saturday lunchtime shows were not officially contracted. Unsurprisingly, handing round a bucket at the end of the performance was not recognized by Equity as paid professional work.

As resident company at Band on the Wall since October 1976, a new Coyote show was initially devised every fortnight and staged Thursday, Friday and Saturday lunchtimes. This was a punishing schedule for those expected to write essays and attend the odd lecture and the time-scale was eventually amended so as to produce a new show every three weeks. This was reason enough to ‘employ’ a stage manager and props gatherer – Joanne Bolt (daughter of screenwriter Robert Bolt of *Man for All Seasons* (1966) fame) – although ‘employ’ meant no remuneration, just the kudos of involvement in the grand comedy experiment.

What was unusual at the time about 20th Century Coyote is that it combined *all* the elements described above – the surreal, the absurd, bawdy Restoration farce, fractured TV sit-com with *long-form* theatre improvisation – a rather inflated academic term simply meaning – ‘making it up as you go along’.<sup>4</sup> The Coyote shows were amalgams of all these forms – often improvised round embryonic plots and recognized character personas, but usually, with an absurd twist. The ‘genre’ was closest to farce and

slapstick<sup>5</sup> – unsurprising when Peters and Mayall were both enthusiastic advocates of Laurel and Hardy. Its appealing energy was due to the likelihood that anything could happen during the 40-minute shows – and frequently did. If things went wrong, this was seen as strength not weakness.

Crucial to the success of the group was that the members of Coyote possessed complimentary and at the same time antagonistic performance styles that helped develop and cement stock comedy personas and which in turn suggested narrative. Mayall often played the immature spoilt child – sex-crazed and frustrated – constantly sparring with Peters – loud, surreal and crazy – an homage to the Marx Brothers; Redfern often played the sardonic voice of ill-reason; Dewison the dark, brooding and sinister interloper; Edmondson – weirdly white collar and off-beat – the bank manager with a grass skirt. It was a glorious character mix that helped create imaginative, original comedy conflicts.

For example, in their second show *The Church Bizarre – a Fete worse than Death* (1976) the farcical plot of multiple tragedies at a church fete saw the arrival of a non-naturalistic, expressionist Death figure, costumed in full black cloak with accompanying scythe.

Whilst displaying a rather pathetic *Danse Macabre*, Mayall as Death sarcastically complains that he has more important things to attend to than a bunch of country yokels who had drunk too much cider – there were plane crashes to organize. This juxtaposition of heightened farce with stylized personification more at home in a mediaeval mummers play was an imaginative juxtaposition of styles. The visitation of Death was ‘borrowed’ from the Ingmar Bergman film *The Seventh Seal* (1957), which was performed as a play-

text by the Drama students in their first year. The Death character was resurrected years later, Mayall playing the role in *Maurice Dobbs Makes a Movie* (Peters 1988) and *Wishbone* (1989) films written and directed by Peters. It was also used as a character and plot device in episodes of *The Young Ones* and *Bottom* (BBC 1991-1995) television series.

### **Dead Funny**

The first official Coyote show *Dead Funny* was performed Thursday, Friday and Saturday lunchtime 14–16 October 1976 to approximately 35–40 people per show – each performance lasting approximately 40 minutes. Rehearsals, including full dress rehearsals, were usually arranged in the evenings following lectures and all Coyote members attended to shape and develop the scene-by-scene skeleton template originally drafted by Peters and Mayall at The Cottage.

There was no external director guidance - this was collaborative, collective play making. Characters were allocated and extra scenes added (from thirteen scenes in Draft One to 26 scenes in Draft Two) all by mutual agreement. When the troupe rehearsed briefly in the space, extra business was added, for example: using the supporting columns at Band on the Wall to help the many surprise reveals. At that time (before refurbishment) the sightlines to view the stage were rather poor but the columns were used by Coyote to mask characters and help delineate an entrance/exit point – a type of Brechtian wing area.

The original, hand-scrawled scene-by-scene templates for *Dead Funny* still exist and provide a useful insight into how the seemingly improvised comedy was carefully structured. In brief, the narrative presents a farcical tale about a murderous doctor on the run, mistaken identity, curious workmen and a policeman investigating a dead body at a party that isn't dead at all. Below I summarize the lined A4 scene-by-scene template sheet (Draft Two), headed on the first page by the character note that: 'everyone stupid'. I have attempted to reproduce the original pagination, margin notes, quotation marks, (incorrect) scene numbering, underscoring and higher case lettering – an indication of key dialogue and the importance of the main action – what academics might describe as Inciting Incident and major Turning Points.

1        20th century Fox (twice.) Mark

2        Rick + Mark enter – Discuss Party – Don't see Body

Describe Dr Jeckyll-Hyde Knackers in detail from paper.

EXIT BOTH.

3        APPEAR – SPEECH – Perfect woman – FIT ON certain words – TITS -  
have a fit on. TWITCH –innate insanity – “I'M SANE as the next man.”

5        ABOUT TO CARVE when they enter – pushed away from body.

\*TITS + rhyming words

Who are you talking to?

6        Pretend to be postman. –

EXIT + leave.

7 Mark + Rick – talking about party – Broom business // Drugs – //What did  
at party Girls.

8 Discover body by Rick sitting on it. Panicky. More excited. – get a drink  
from the bar – Gin and tonic.

9 Silly things to do – “Hula Kula” More panic.

10 Knock – think its Police – “Drugs squad” Draped.  
Vice squad”. tablecloth.

just a 11 . Im “Table Mender” – “Have you a Table”  
mention. with a meat cleaver “man eating bicycle pump”

I’m the  
Dr.

12 “Excuse us a moment – I (Lloyd) approach the body

\* about to cut her bits off

What’s wrong with her – pull back the cover

13 Get rid of me \* She’s sleeping Fit – lips

14 What to do? – coffee table – Ring – The number –  
Removals 22222  
“They can’t come”

15 Knock Removals Man – Garden Shears.

“Doesn’t he look like Doctor” to audience

Mike  
Pantomime – ‘Oh no he doesn’t’ like Table Mender”.

Oh No – “I’m French” – “J’habite” he’s French.

16 In a huddle Mark + Rick – just about to cut tits – Table falls.

- what are you doing? – I rush out.

EXIT.

17 Stand up as statue by the chimney –

put her in the chimney and burn her.

You look like postman.

I'm not – more authoritative

Enter

Knock I burst

Weapon sabre.

in – What are you doing? – Dancing Instructor with limp.

Dancing Instructor. I'll give her a dance – she's too tired

Looks ill – I'll look at her I'm a doctor – prove it – Marlene Dietrich –

He's German we can trust him – “maybe she is ill?”

Go get some hot water and towels:

What's the matter it worked. I reenter  
early send  
them off  
again.

18 I'm alone – another bit of raid –

19 knife raised reenter

Mark + Rick – shriek

20 I pop Tit – shriek

19 Turn round see Mark, Rick – we all shriek.

We're all shrieking; Mike sits up

20 We turn round I shriek – Then Mark + Rick shriek.

21 When we find out not a woman – shriek together

22 When policeman we shriek

23 Mike's speech – ball + chain.

24 Final speech 1 Who you were – who many years on trail

What you doing how you find out “Hot tip” \*

Arrests me

25 Then – pleased applause congratulating police – list of charges

Turn to Mark + Rick > 1 not reporting a dead

body – not alone a policeman/woman – not dead at all.

list of charges lot of them. Impersonating “Let alone a table mender”

26 Moral of this story. 20<sup>th</sup> century Fox Music

interrupts

The moral of this story A stiff in time saves Crime

Interruption

20<sup>th</sup> century Fox “Then play it”

again comon then.

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Even on a cursory reading, it is evident that this earliest of alternative comedy shows could not be described as ‘non-sexist, non-racist’. The pantomimic scenario is deliberately crude and rude and owes more to a Ray Cooney sex farce or Carry On film than ground-breaking comedy. The reception to the show was mixed – and continued to divide the audience. Indeed, at the time there were vocal critics – some of them Manchester University students – who found the humour crass and infantile compared to their more lofty, well-made dramas that had preceded Coyote’s residency at Band on the Wall. One current student at the time described the material as ‘garbage’ although admitted to still having enjoyed it. A pejorative criticism, that became the common currency of back-handed insult for this form of character comedy years later, was that the

humour was ‘wacky and zany’ – the latter word interestingly derived from late sixteenth-century Italian word *zani* which was the stock name of servants acting as clowns in Commedia dell’Arte. Probably it was a more appropriate observation than the critics intended.

However, the Coyote troupe knew in their bones this was the start of something big, as Rik Mayall said after the Saturday performance on 16 October 1976.

It’s great ‘cos we can at last show our potential, show what we’ve got.

What was difficult to see at the time was the prevailing cultural context of mid-1970s Manchester. First, *Dead Funny* was a product of its age – more deliberately ‘punk’ rebellion and rudely anti-establishment than politically correct polemic. Also, and notwithstanding 1960s’ trail-blazers in this area <sup>6</sup> it was amongst the first of its breed to present non-elitist (anti-elitist), free, comedy entertainment in a pub – certainly in the north-west. It celebrated being intellectually lightweight and easy to digest with a pint. Also the humour was more self-deprecating in reality than comes across on the page – all the characters were male, infantile losers, incapable of establishing serious relationships. This is a predictable consequence considering the absence of any female acting members of Coyote.

The template of the male loser inadequate was to become a staple stock character type in virtually every sit-com then and now. Without making too many profound connections,

it perhaps mirrors the well-documented sociological and psychological phenomena surrounding the increased insecurity of men's status in British society.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that this form of character-led TV comedy continued to attract criticism specifically its tendency to be male dominated and overtly sexist.

Indeed Alexei Sayle – a regular character in *The Young Ones* – was a vocal critic of the banality of this type of 'brainless bimbo' comedy. (Allegedly Sayle used the term to describe *Bottom*.) This was an example of an increasing antagonism in the 1980s between the politically driven stand-ups at The Comedy Store and London club circuit, and those delivering physical character-based comedy. This is probably due the fact that the latter didn't comfortably fit the 'non-sexist, non-racist' template. It could also be argued that because of the multitude of celebrated male performers at the time (*French and Saunders* excepted) that it fuelled, however tendentiously, the divisive 'women aren't funny' controversy. Indeed the criticisms increased as the comedy transferred to the small screen, for example, the banning of *The Dangerous Brothers* sketch *Kinky Sex* on *Saturday Live* and the plethora of disparagement aimed at the short-lived *Filthy Rich and Catflap* series (BBC 1987). Relatively contemporary performers of this form of comedy such as *The League of Gentleman* (BBC 1999-2002) continue to face similar scrutiny. As Gamze Toylan identifies in her article on *The League of Gentlemen* in which she quotes Linda Badley (1995):

...‘postmodern’ texts depict the ‘postmodern sexual terror’, which ‘has become part of a much larger anxiety about gender, identity, morality, power, and loss of control, [...]’

(Toylan 2012: 47)

I would argue that those anxieties are not solely confined to the postmodern era, but were also evident in the pre/early postmodern era of the mid-1970s. Indeed the consequence of these anxieties was that the tension between the ‘non-sexist, non-racist’ purists (or those imposters hiding behind that title) and the character-led non-purists certainly increased when television found it easier to assimilate the latter rather than the former.

### **Coyote rampant**

Following the success of *Dead Funny* – over £10 collected in the bucket was a success not to be sniffed at by impoverished students – 20th Century Coyote produced six more alternative Cabaret shows at The Band on the Wall over a seven-month period. These were:

*The Church Bizarre – a Fete worse than Death*

*Who Is Dick Treacle?*

*Phantom of the Cabaret*

*The Typing Error*

*The Anniversary Show*

*Ron and the King’s nubile daughter*

*Day of the Deckchair* – (written and performed by Peters and Ade Edmondson) was a spin-off show presented at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 1978).

All the shows presented a similar formula of grotesque and instantly recognizable character types, farcical plots and improvised dialogue guided by pre-constructed scene-by-scene structures. Certainly a cult following was created and the troupe were offered extra bookings (a gig in Guide Bridge, Ashton Under-Lyne). Accounts compiled by Peters reveal that after expenses (props, costumes publicity posters, photographs and even ‘acting wages’ (£5.00) the ‘Balance of Expenses Sheet No. 4’ revealed that on 19 March 1977, The 20th Century Coyote company had net assets of £20.37.

In the final analysis, Coyote created its own curious comedy sub-genre – a complex and original mix of extended sketches, improvisatory routines, direct audience address, monologues – a grotesque, slapstick sit-com for the stage. The shows were intentionally ‘naughty’ and risqué, embarrassing even – a deliberate antidote to the academic rigors of the well-made plays the students were obliged to study. Perhaps it is more than coincidence that Gamze Toylan describes *The League of Gentlemen*’s ‘genre hybridity’ as:

.... complex, with its roots in the English comedy tradition that blends the grotesque and absurd.....music hall and variety theatre, as well as specific creators like Monty Python. The comedy style, distinct and dark in its own right, interweaves the pleasure of breaking taboos, the formation of oppositions such as

exclusion and inclusion, and the usage of comedy of social embarrassment and bodily wit, which in turn combines the feelings of pleasure and discomfort.

(Toylan 2012: 47)

I would argue that precisely the same amalgam of styles and influences characterized all the Coyote shows – a direct antecedent of the *Gentlemen*. The shows as a whole certainly served as a template for many characters developed on subsequent stage and sit-coms in the 1980s, including Rik (the ‘c’ now dropped) in *The Young Ones* (BBC2 1982–1984).

As the BBC comedy website (2012) puts it:

It was the style and the characterization of *The Young Ones*, rather than its stories, which was entirely new. Never before had violence of such degree, squalor, physical foulness, blood, sex and death, all been used as such a regular part of a flagship comedy programme.

(Anon 2012)

But of course it had all been seen on-stage at *The Band on the Wall* in every one of the Coyote shows some five years before the first *Young Ones* episode (in 1982).

### **Coyote migrates south**

20th Century Coyote never formally disbanded – in fact the name was used as by Mayall and Edmondson at the Comic Strip as late as 1981. But as Mayall and Peters entered their

final year at university in September 1977 the commitment to performing together as the original five-some waned. Their decision to leave Lime Cottage – that incubator of anarchic ideas – and look for alternative accommodation in Manchester effectively meant that the central energy source of the troupe had dissipated. The Cottage – the catalyst location for constructing all the skeleton plots – had been passed to the next generation of Drama students. Concurrently, the location that spawned the atmosphere of rebellion – The Band on the Wall – was also looking to move on and concentrate more on lunchtime music than ‘cabaret’ theatre.

However, Coyote members continued to work together in a range of productions either as part of their drama course curricula – for example, *The Government Inspector* and *A Winters Tale* (Peters and Mayall were the clowns) – or as part of extra-curricula shows such as Edward Bond’s *The Sea*.<sup>7</sup> Following graduation in 1978, Peters, Mayall and Edmondson moved to London to seek work as actors. Their search happily coincided with the opening of The Comedy Store (in 1979) and Comic Strip (in 1980–1981) comedy clubs. Rik created anarchist poet Wick who professed his love for Theatre and Vanessa Redgrave, which featured on *Boom Boom... Out Go the Lights* (1980–1981). He also created Brummie investigator and philosopher Kevin Turvey, which was picked up by the sketch show *A Kick Up the Eighties* (BBC 1981–1984). He partnered Edmondson to form the loser perverts, *The Dangerous Brothers* – a stage act that appeared in the TV late-night sketch show *Saturday Live* (Channel 4). The characters and titles of some of their sketches provide the evidence of the Coyote legacy, for example, *Torture* and *How to Get Off with A Lady*. One of the final sketches entitled *Kinky Sex* was a pure Coyote

derivative banned by Channel 4 for being ‘too sexy and too violent’. Adolescent, slapstick and anarchic were some of the kinder comments the material courted – exactly the same criticisms that 20th Century Coyote had attracted some four years previously.

In between television drama work (including a Mike Leigh film *Home Sweet Home* (Leigh 1982) and the iconic *Boys from the Blackstuff* (BBC 1982), Peters teamed up with another ex-Manchester graduate and school friend Gary Brown to form comedy duo Foot and Mouth. They were regulars at The Comedy Store playing, amongst other characters, pompous aristos Anton and Giles – two twits who would have been well at home in any Coyote show. Brown and Peters also ran a comedy club in Covent Garden’s Lamb and Flag pub (in Rose Street) for a short season. They hosted the best of the new comedians at the time including early bookings for Clive Anderson, Paul Merton and Rik Mayall’s anarchist poet Wick.

Mark Dewison and Mike Redfern also moved to London to pursue acting careers and both received work as theatre performers. However, in more recent times they subsequently both re-trained, Dewison as a counselor and Redfern as a management training consultant.

Mayall and Edmondson collaborated together on a 16mm film directed and produced by Peters – a non-naturalistic adaptation of The Velvet Underground’s off-beat verse song ‘The Gift’ (1980) featuring Edmondson as *shmuck* Waldo and Mayall as groping boyfriend Bill. It was scheduled to be screened on BBC2 in the 1980s but was pulled due

to it being considered too 'punk' by the BBC executive producer. Rik Mayall also appeared in a film entitled *Le Chat in the Loo* (1980) written and directed by Peters, a parody of Bunuel/Dali's surreal masterpiece *Un Chien Andalou* (1929).

Peters and Mayall last worked together for the recording of the Radio 4 play *A Higher Education* (2000) written by Peters in which Mayall appeared as the corrupt Professor Don Cruikshank. This off-beat satire, that also features Helen Lederer and Philip Glenister, owes much to the Coyote style combining heightened character types with a farcical, pantomimic performance style. Also like Coyote shows of the past, and unusually for radio drama, some scenes were improvised 'live' when recorded. The play was nominated for a Richard Imison First play award and has been repeated many times most recently on Radio 4 Extra on 5 December 2012. Plans for Peters and Mayall to collaborate and write a contemporary stage version of the play have been discussed as recently as February 2013. It hardly needs emphasizing, if more proof were needed, of the longevity of the Coyote legacy.

### **Coyote – the final howl**

Given the plethora of talent from an unusually gifted intake of Manchester drama students in the mid-1970s, it was perhaps inevitable that 20th Century Coyote was to be somewhat overlooked.

And indeed, there will be critics who argue that Coyote was a rather inconsequential footnote in the great comedy naissance of the 1980s and 1990s. This article attempts to evidence the contrary view and to argue that the tremors of influence from this short-lived company troupe were quite profound and continue to vibrate even today. For instance, a direct line can be traced from the character-led innovations of 20th Century Coyote, through *The Dangerous Brothers*, and then to *The Young Ones*, which instilled an anti-mainstream slapstick into the mainstream. Their male-dominated excesses paved the way for the ‘new-laddism’ comedy of the late 1980s and 1990s (exemplified by David Baddiel and Frank Skinner), through TV series such as *Men Behaving Badly* (BBC 1992-1995) and beyond to the *Little Britain* (BBC 2003–2006) series of character-led grotesques. One personality trait that appears to unite many of the characterizations in these shows is the frustrated, male loser – rude, crude and unsuccessful at any personal relationship. This certainly can be traced back to the scenarios of *Dead Funny* – and Restoration comedy and Commedia dell’Arte before that.

Significantly, the Coyote experience also adds weight to the contested theory that live theatre is indeed the primary engine that fuels innovation – a factory of ideas – that television eventually appropriates. The fact of the matter is that the majority of the comedy sketch shows and sit-coms of the 1980s and 1990s had their roots in theatrical experimentation. The invention of the characters and the development of slick timed routines could only come about from months on the club and pub circuit – television has no facility for lengthy rehearsal. This was as true for *The League of Gentlemen* as it was for 20th Century Coyote and beyond. And it was not the stand-ups alone who were

leading the charge of the alternative comedy brand in the 1980s – the character-led comedians, as exemplified by the 20th Century Coyote boys, were certainly in the avant-garde.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Vic and Bob were mostly resident at The Tunnel Palladium, The Mitre, Deptford,  
London (1984–1989).

<sup>2</sup> Alumni from the Manchester University 1974–1979 intake include: Tom Watt (sports  
broadcaster), Gary Brown (BBC Radio producer), Ben Elton (writer and performer), Paul  
Bradley (actor), Maggie Philbin (TV presenter), Shelagh Stevenson (playwright), Tony  
Clark (theatre director), Mathew Evans (TV director).

<sup>3</sup> What the edit of the BBC programme also intentionally overlooked was that Mike  
Redfern did not live in The Cottage until he ‘inherited’ the property in 1978 after Mayall  
and Peters moved out.

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<sup>4</sup> Often long-form improvisation is traditionally initiated by a word, phrase or character or as the *Harold* form is defined: punctuated by games. (see Chin 2009: 4)

<sup>5</sup> In a recent face-to-face interview with the author (11 February 2013), Rik Mayall insisted that Coyote shows and all subsequent derivatives (*Dangerous Brothers*, *Young Ones*, *Bottom*) had little to do with ‘slapstick’, which suggested staged buffoonery. Mayall prefers the physicalization to be viewed as ‘real violence’ because that was a more accurate description. Looking at scrawled notes Peters made following a company meeting (30 November 1976), there were suggestions from some members to ‘cut down on the slapstick’ in favour of more wit and satire. There is no evidence that subsequent shows reflected this proposal. A suggestion to bring in women and an (outside) director was also rejected as ‘superfluous’ (Peters’ notes 1976).

<sup>6</sup> Such as *CAST* (Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre) a left-wing, variety-based agit-prop theatre company toured art centres, pubs and small theatres in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

<sup>7</sup> Directed by Maggie Philbin soon presenter of *Multi-Coloured Swapshop* (BBC 1976–1982) fame, helmed by Noel Edmonds.