Abstract

This thesis is based on fieldwork conducted at three different comedy clubs in, and around, London, UK during spring semester 2014. In this thesis, I discuss how humour is inherently social, and that the comical is closely related to the social situation within which it occurs. I defy the view that it is possible to locate the humorous in a social situation through textual analysis, as the humorous needs to be negotiated by the participants involved. I aim to show that even in a laughable setting as the stand-up comedy show, there are several social and socio-spatial factors that must be manipulated and negotiated for the jokes and comic material to function.

Stand-up is interactive. The audiences' willingness to verbally respond and interact with the performer onstage is vital. The performers and people working at the club try to frame the environment as friendly and informal as possible for the audience, and manipulate certain elements within the show to make them feel relaxed and willing to laugh and participate. This manipulation consists of both how they carefully lay out the room as a tight and intimate space, as well as interact informally with the audience to communicate unity and cohesion between everyone in the venue.

By positioning myself among the club workers and performers I was able to analyse how they carefully craft their performances in front of the audiences and how they interact with them, both before and during the show. The informality in the show has to be performed in the social encounters between the club workers and the audience. A textual analysis provides insufficient explanations of how humour in interactions is carried out. It ignores how the listener reacts to the jocularity, what the intentions and goals of the joke-teller was, as well as how the joke-telling affects the conversation and the social situation they are in. In order for the audience to enjoy themselves and laugh, they try to frame the comedy show as an informal and cohesive event free from societal norms. The goal is to reach a mutual understanding of the situation.

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I also would like to thank my advisor, Jan Ketil Simonsen, for extensive feedback and continuous motivational guidance throughout the writing process. Further, I would like to thank my fellow students, who really have proved to be inspiring and supportive through the last year of tedious writing. I especially want to thank Vilde Steiro Amundsen, who has been both a motivator and a critic of my writing. This thesis would not have been complete without her thorough feedback and expertise in grammar check.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my mother who sadly could not be with me during the time this thesis was written. You are in my thoughts, thank you for all the laughs.

Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.

- Victor Borge

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INTRODUCTION: PERSPECTIVES ON HUMOUR AS PERFORMANCE AND TEXT

> People laugh and tell jokes, and if you can learn the humor of a people and really control it, you know that you are also in control of nearly everything else. (Hall 1973:52)

Understanding of a people's sense of humour can often be a key to that society's structure, if we are to believe the late anthropologist Edward Hall. I believe he is correct. Humour, and especially comedy, can tell you a lot about a society and its norms. In society, the comedian works as a social commentator, as well as a grotesque picture of it (Mintz 1985). The anthropologist, Mary Douglas (1968), saw the joker, or comedian, as a privileged person who could point out irregularities within the social system of society without getting into trouble. There is a great level of authority involved in fulfilling this role. As Hall said, there is much prestige in 'controlling' humour. This authority, however, is not asserted to someone easily, but bases itself on both the comedian's relationship to his audience and his positioning in society (Douglas 1968). I am not as interested in how the comedian's authority affects social structure, as I am interested in how it is created, formed, and maintained in social encounters.

Authority through the use of humour can only be confirmed by an audience. It is not related to legality or traditions, but rather how one negotiates interaction among others and manipulates role performances (Koziski 1984). I chose to do my study on stand-up comedy

with a focus on the club show (henceforth referred to as 'the stand-up comedy show' or 'the comedy show'), which is located in a venue, where a number of comedians come up onstage one by one, introduced by a Master of Ceremonies (when referring to both Master of Ceremonies and comedians I use the unified term 'performers'), and perform their jokes in a fixed amount of minutes. A comedy show is not successful in eliciting laughter and enjoyment on its own, as "successful humour is a joint construction involving a complex interaction between the person intending a humorous remark and those with the potential of responding" (Holmes & Hay 1997:131). There has to be a collective affirmation of the joker's intent, and a mutual understanding of the situation as humorous. The person intending the humorous remark must persuade his audience in acknowledging the situation as humorous.

The importance of conducting the fieldwork inside the comedy venue is evident for my project, as I aim to show the different social dynamics inherent in humorous conversation. It has been pointed out in different humour theories that it is possible to locate the humorous in a situation on a textual basis, and provide a simplified effect model. Like many other sociologist and anthropologist, I disregard this argument. It robs the audiences of their critical voices and their role in the construction of humour relations, as these theories view joking and laughter as correlated, and not as something socially consensual between people. By conducting ethnographic research as an observant participant, I was able to observe social relations being constructed on a local level between actors within the comedy club setting, where the use of humour and jocular remarks is the central form of communication.

I will analyse how the mutual understanding of the situation as humorous within comedy venues is constructed between participants, and how it is maintained. A lot of academics have argued for a more interactional view on how humour occurs in comedy shows (Boxer & Cortés-Conde 1997, Brodie 2008, Lockyer & Myers 2011, McIlvenny & Mettovaara 1993, Miles 2014, Rutter 1997, 2000, Scarpetta & Spagnolli 2009, Seizer 2011), as they analyse a comedian's performance in terms of jokes and general interaction with the audience, and how he relates to his audience. I, however, will focus more on how the interactional setting in the comedy venues is laid out from the beginning, and how the relation between the audience and the comedians is carefully crafted throughout. In the comedy clubs I did my research, the comedians usually came and went rapidly during the night, as they often had more shows to do the same night. The comedy show as a whole was mainly organized by the promoters[1] and the compere (English term for Master of Ceremonies in

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[1] This is a unifying term I chose to encompass all the different people working at the venue who helped out organizing the show. This includes the manager, assistant manager, audio engineer, bouncer, bartender, cleaning

comedy shows). They were both present for the entire shows, making sure everything went smoothly and making sure the comedians coming in had good working conditions before they entered the stage, a fact that was mostly ignored by the academics mentioned. I will use the analytic terms *performance, play,* and *framing* to analyse how they interact and negotiate a mutual understanding of the situation with the audience. With a greater focus on the planning and strategies by the promoters and the compere, I will discuss how humour in social interaction

Both stand-up comedians and anthropologists play a significant role in assessing and scrutinizing the world as we perceive it. Both present their worldview to others, looking for someone to respond. It is mainly this that makes stand-up comedy such an interesting field of anthropological enquiry for me; when I am observing a comedy show, I am also observing anthropological analysis in action. Watching a comedy show in a locale give us a chance to watch society study itself, as it involves society cutting out a piece of itself for inspection (Turner 1979), and it brings tacit knowledge of our own society out in the open (Koziski 1984). How this inspection is carried out is manifested in how the performers, promoters, and audience interact, and how they negotiate consensus.

A brief history of stand-up comedy as a performance genre

Stand-up comedy, strictly speaking, contains "an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience, unsupported by very much in the way of costume, prop, setting, or dramatic vehicle" (Mintz 1985:71). This definition of stand-up comedy is too narrow to encapsulate the complexity of what is going on during a comedy show, as Mintz himself points out, as it is entwined with rituals and dramatic experiences.

How one chooses to define stand-up comedy is often connected to when one thinks the genre began. Double defines stand-up in much the same way as Mintz, but points out that stand-up happens "within the context of formalized entertainment, but without being contained within a larger narrative structure" (1991:52). Without these two elements, Double says it can be argued that stand-up has existed for centuries through storytelling or soliloquies in stage dramas. But stand-up comedy like we know it today, had its beginnings in working

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staff, etc. I saw no problem in unifying them under one term as a lot of the tasks involved does not have to be done by only one person; a bartender could often be in charge of the sound, and the manager could often stand behind the bar counter selling drinks.

class establishments in the Western world.

Stand-up comedy in the modern sense is regarded as a phenomenon that sprung out of live entertainment in USA. From itinerant clown troupes of Ancient Greece, to American vaudeville and burlesque shows among the American population in the 19th century, rose the comedic performer, of which Mark Twain is regarded by many as the pioneer. The first comedians used their stage time telling jokes, anecdotes and riddles. As the American society became more educated and eventually introduced to broadcasted media, comedians became more political (Koziski Olson 1988), and comedians like George Carlin became countercultural representatives in their performances (Zoglin 2015), thus reaching a significant role within the entertainment industry.

Stand-up in the UK started somewhat similar as in the USA. Comedic performances started first in Music Halls in the 19th century, where performers entertained the audiences with funny songs within tavern, then were introduced in greater variety shows, where the performers enacted comedic sketches in-between musical performances and other forms of staged entertainment. It was first in the 1930's that the comedic actor became less theatrical, and started doing jokes in his own voice, adopting the comic persona. In the 1950's, the variety shows started closing, and comic performers started to work in Working Men's Clubs, which had exploded in numbers from the 1920's and onwards and was including more and more live entertainment to please their clientele. The comic speakers at the different clubs were soon hired to do performances at neighbouring clubs, which was the start of the club circuit (Double 1991); thus started the evolution of comedy clubs and club comedians in the UK.

Breaking with the satirical revue traditions of Oxford and Cambridge University, where the comedy group Monty Python started, the solo stand-up comedian was becoming more and more popular among the working classes in the UK. With inspiration coming in from overseas, the first American-style comedy club was opened in London in 1979, named The Comedy Store (Zoglin 2015). Today, stand-up comedy shows in the UK ranges from small open mic shows in bars, to great comic road shows including the country's biggest comedic celebrities. Stand-up comedians has also taken the step outside of the club sphere and into the televised genre, as panel shows such as *Have I got News for You*[2] started in 1990 and proliferated from there (Davies 2008), with shows like *QI*[3] and *Never Mind the*

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[2] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0098820/
[3] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0380136/

Buzzcocks[4]. The home of stand-up comedy, though, still is behind walls inside bars and clubs. Stand-up as a live entertainment genre is historically connected to British drinking culture among the working classes, and it was in bars I found my field of study.

The field

I lived in Tottenham in the northern part of Greater London, while the comedy clubs I visited where located different places in and around the UK capital.

Backyard Comedy Club

Backyard Comedy Club (BYC) was the first club I visited in London, and the club where I did most of my field observations. It was located in the East End of London, in the slightly gentrified working-class area of Bethnal Green, and was run by the manager Daniel. One of the people I chatted most with was James, who worked as the assistant manager and was in charge every night Daniel was not present.

Being located in the East End, not far from the popular area of Shoreditch, the venue was characterized by the non-traditional and hip bar interior. There was a colour pattern of black and red on the walls and pillars through the entire venue, combining with unpainted light wooden materials, like the wooden background wall behind the bar and the pallets nailed to the wall up on stage in the show room.

Figure 1 - The bar space (photo taken by author)

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[4] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0115286/

Figure 2 - The show room (photo taken by author)

BYC operated with three fixed shows a week, with club shows running on Fridays and Saturdays, while they had Showcase-nights on Thursdays where amateur comedians could try out their best material and already established performers could try out new material.

BYC was also one of the first purpose-built comedy clubs in London. The club started in 1998, when TV star, Lee Hurst, decided to open a comedy club in his local area where he grew up in. He was inspired by a project he collaborated on in the 1980's called the Backyard Cabaret, which hosted variety-shows in a tavern not far from BYC. Hurst enjoyed great success running BYC, but later, in the 2000's, the property surrounding the club was to be bought in order to build a hotel on the premises. After much negotiation, Hurst agreed to let his venue be demolished, as long as the comedy club was built exactly as it stood on the ground floor of the building and that he was still in charge of running the club as normal after the re-opening. In 2010, demolition and the re-building process began, but the time of completion was postponed numerous times, until they were able to re-open BYC in April 2013, eight months before I arrived. Today, the club is run by Daniel, while Lee is often doing shows at BYC.

Last Minute Comedy Club

Last Minute Comedy Club (LMC) was a club that ran three shows monthly in three different villages in the county of Hertfordshire outside London. The club was run by the manager,

Paul, who organized shows every first Friday, Saturday, and Sunday every month, and who was the compere at every show. Friday shows were held at the Woodside Hall in Hitchin, the Saturday shows were held at Letchworth Arts Centre in Letchworth, and the Sunday shows were held at The Orange Tree Inn in Baldock.

Most shows I attended were held in Woodside Hall in Hitchin, which was the longest-running and biggest show of the three, in terms of number of seating. Woodside Hall, a bricked community centre, was the home of the operatic society "Hitchin Thespians", with a big show hall and an adjacent bar area.

Paul started the shows back in 1993, originally in a venue called "The Sun Hotel", before he moved on to Woodside Hall. "I thought it might last for a year," Paul told me. "But 20 years later, and I'm still there" (Interview 03.05.14). The success of the shows in Hitchin gave him offers from other villages to put on similar shows. The result was the Letchworth shows that had been running since 2008, and the Baldock shows that had been running since early 2013. Paul ran and hosted every show himself, and especially the Hitchin shows were quite popular within the local community. A lot of the regular audiences I approached characterized LMC as a big part of Hitchin's small community identity, and that the shows even got visitors from neighbouring villages.

Figure 3 - Paul testing the sound over the speakers in the show room (photo taken by the author)

Angel Comedy Club

Angel Comedy Club (AC) was a club I visited a few times during my stay in London, which was a small, but very active club ran by comedians, in Islington in London. It operated with free entry into shows, and instead received money from donations made every show from the audience. One of the managers, and a regular compere, that I communicated with the few times I was there was named Barry. They ran different entertainment events every day of the week, spanning from amateur improvisational theatre shows to one-man stand-up shows featuring well-known performers, while their regular club shows ran during the weekends.

AC shows was established by Barry in 2010 as a weekly show, located above the Camden Head pub in Islington. They expanded to three shows a week in 2012, until April 2013, when after a successful week-long comedy festival held in the venue they started doing shows nightly. The club was run by Barry and fellow comedians who wanted a club to promote upcoming talents in the comedy industry.

Methodological reflections

During my fieldwork I used participant observation as the main method of data collection, combined with interviews I did with some of my informants. By staying in the venue and watching the show, I was able to observe the performers, promoters and audience interact with each other, and let myself be emotionally entwined in the extremely fast-paced social situation which is the comedy show. I used a mobile camera to record some of the stage performances; performer-audience dialogue, especially, goes on in a very fast pace and the use of recording devices was vital to record the dialogues in verbatim. The interviews were done towards the end of my stay in London, where I went through earlier episodes with my informants, asking them to describe their view of the events discussed.

Positioning of role

I decided to position myself among the promoters of the club, because their constant presence gave me the opportunity to remain in the venue the entire night and observe the show taking form. Although the promoters did not directly take part in the show, they could still stay in the room and observe the comedians and the audience, which suited me fine as an observer. Following the comedians or the audience around at all times, on the other hand, would prove difficult. The audience usually arrived a short time before the show started and many of them

would leave quite promptly after the show was over. The comedians proved even more mobile during the shows; many comedians did multiple shows in one night and would therefore arrive just before they were supposed to go onstage, and leave again right after to catch the underground train to the next venue where they were performing. The only performer that always stayed through the entire show was the compere. The promoters at the different venues agreed to let me stay and observe the shows for free, granted I would help out with tasks and chores before, during, and after the show.

Helping the promoters also made it easier for me to be a participant in my research methods than with the two other groups. I maintained a 'moderate form of participation', where I was able to balance myself between being participant and being an outsider (Spradley 1980). As stated earlier in the introduction, audiences might feel uneasy in this unfamiliar environment, and a foreign anthropologist observing them while they laughed would most likely not help alleviate the tension. By asserting myself with the promoters, standing with them and observing the show from the back, I put on a role that people recognized and it gave me a somewhat natural role in the setting. Based on how many patrons who asked me for the directions to the restroom during my stay, I would say I was a convincing promoter. By obtaining this methodological viewpoint, I was able to observe both particularities and greater elements of the show that I never would have acquired if I had only gathered tape recordings of the shows in question.

Regarding "home-blindness"

One factor I needed to address while conducting my fieldwork was my involvement in the comedy business back in Norway, which could make me blind to the otherness and cultural differences that are necessary for writing an adequate anthropological analysis (Strathern 1987). Before traveling to London, I had been involved *Stand Up Trondheim* (SUT), an organization that fostered both young and established talents within stand-up comedy and organized local shows in. My role and position in SUT entailed both performing and helping out with the organizing of the shows. When I picked the role of the promoters I chose a role that I was familiar with, and I had to be cautious to not take any particularities regarding my role for granted.

My choice of role gave me an analytical distance to the events I observed. Although I worked with the promoters, I only met them at show nights, and they viewed me originally as a student they were helping with his thesis. I was also not obliged to do certain tasks, like serving drinks. I only helped organizing the show before it started, and helped to clean up

when it was done. During the show I was relieved from doing any work so I could observe the stage performances. In order to still keep an insider role, I never wrote field notes in front of my informants, but scribbled down all my thoughts when I was alone and saved the analytic writing until I got home to my computer. Being a participant also brought me closer to how the promoters organized shows, and I was able to get a closer look at different elements I would not have considered back home in Trondheim. Helping out organizing the shows, and the promoters giving me feedback on things I could do better, secured me a position within their ranks and let me learn how they handle different elements during a show. Finding the middle ground between passive observer and active participant half way and picking a moderate participatory form opened the way of observing the promoters from the inside, but still gave me the analytic distance I needed.

The biggest challenge of this "home-blindness" was to prevent myself from taking any of my observations for granted. In order to maintain a balance between being an insider and outsider I had to be explicitly aware of happenings around me, and not succumb to selective inattention (Spradley 1980). I mapped out different routines in how the show was carried out, and was able to note abnormal happenings that occurred during the show by watching people's reactions. If one keeps a distance between the informants' and the researcher's analytic models, one creates the foreignness needed when the geographically and culturally exotic factor is lacking (Strathern 1987). This made me reflect more on what I observed, balancing between the "insider" view and my own (Emerson, Fretz, Shaw 1995). Further, this analytical distance helped me discover the different strategies the performers and promoters used to frame the comedy show as an informal event within a social space, which I was unacquainted with and found fascinating. I was able to locate the foreign in the familiar.

Theoretical reflections

Here I will present different theoretical frameworks related to humour and humour research. Firstly, I present some social theoretical views on the functions of humour in society, to give the reader insights in academic understanding of humour and laughter in social interactions. Thereafter, I will present 'the classical theories of humour', and their theorists who focus on all forms of humour as something that can be explained through fixed modelling and be conceptualized under one unifying theory, of which I disagree. Lastly I shall provide my own theoretical framework by using concepts such as 'framing', 'performance', and 'play', to

explain how humour and laughter cannot be thoroughly analysed when separated from the social context it occurs.

Humour as…
… a break from ordinary life

There are numerous and extensive studies on humour and its functions in society. A lot of these studies view humour, joking and comedy not as a direct part of everyday life, but rather as a break from it. Berger (1997) explains humour, or "the comic", as an intrusion into the everyday life of people. You can listen to a dirty joke told by a colleague at work, you can laugh at a funny face your child is making, or you can have a giggle at your own misfortune when you slip in the shower. You can experience all these episodes in one day, in between more serious daily routines. The comic is "an antithesis to serious concerns" (Berger 1997:6), which is why joking done in the right manner might relieve some of the emotional pain during funeral rites (Douglas 1968, Launay 2006). Huizinga (1950) regards the same separateness from ordinary life when it comes to *play*. The first main characteristic of play is that it is free, and the second characteristic is that it is not 'real' life. Play, in the same way as the comic, is free of institutional rules and steps out of ordinary life into a sphere of 'just pretending'. Although the comic and play are not completely alike from a theoretical point of view (the former intrudes into ordinary life while the other steps out of it), they share some of the same functional properties. The theatre, for example, is a place where people go to have a good time after work, not a place that is supposed to compete with work for people's attention (Schechner 1988). They give people a break from the struggles of everyday life and let them experience something else.

Through time, the humorous is often perceived through its mismatch with social order, and was therefore, by many, viewed as a danger to society if it was not controlled. In early Christianity, authors saw laughter as a diversion from weeping over the sins of the world, and Thomas Hobbes, e.g., saw laughter as one of man's least favourable attributes, causing increased self-esteem on the expense of others (Berger 1997). Humour is often used to play upon institutional and social conventions, like the verbal uses of scatological matters and breaking of sexual taboos. One way of controlling these impulses was to gather them in explosive festivities such as the medieval carnival, where the people took to the marketplace to feast. These carnivals were known for holding the lower strata of life the highest, where both faeces and sex took part. The marketplace was a free sphere of interaction for the participants, where society's social order was turned on its head, and where unity through the

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human body was celebrated over the hierarchies of social class (Bakhtin 1984). Just because humour and laughter was sometimes viewed as something threatening to society, it did not mean that it did not occur from time to time. It appeared often more secluded or under a strict control within time and space. Berger (1997) states that incorporation entails containment, and within containment there are room for all sorts of revolutionaries. Under a certain control, the comic can remain sustainable without challenging the structure of society.

… social and political commentary

Aesthetic dramas are known for evoking emotions in their spectators, where harsh, violent and extreme realities might be played out and give the audience time to reflect over these realities instead of intervening or flee (Schechner 1988). Comedy is no exception, and might give its listeners a different view on social and political conditions in the world, attacking hierarchy and social structure (Douglas 1968). All the way back to the political satires of Ancient Greece, and comical rites in the cult of Dionysus (Berger 1997) to the political oriented comedians and the modern TV sitcom, comedy has been a way of representing different contemporary societal values. Comedy as a dramatic form might channel problematic or tragic subjects in a humorous way to make them more bearable. The American comedian Greg Giraldo (2009) mentioned that New York comedy clubs held shows just days after September 11th and that a lot of people came out seeming eager to laugh. As well as analysing social reality in a different way, humour might help alleviate the pain people experience from tragic events.

Comedy can use humour and wit to challenge and/or comment on institutional conventions in everyday life. By watching the stand-up comedian Jerry, and the other characters in the popular American sitcom *Seinfeld*[5], challenge social norms (for example, is it socially accepted to bring food you brought to a party back home with you if the hosts forget to serve it?), the audience are allowed to laugh at conflicting awkward social situations they might find relatable in their own lives. By laughing at these characters, the audiences are actually laughing at themselves (Paolucci & Richardson, 2006). Likewise, a lot professional stand-up comedians provide an arena where they can say things about society which would be too extreme or volatile to say outside of the humour context (Koziski 1988). The American comedian Louis CK, for example, is known for uttering extreme descriptions of his two daughters when onstage. When he tells his audience that his youngest daughter is a "fucking

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[5] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0098904/

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asshole" (2008) because she sometimes refuses to do what he says, the audience might laugh because it is extremely rude to talk about one's children in that manner, but also because some of them are familiar with the everyday challenges of being a parent. Comedy often takes form as 'the ugly' in society and social reality (Berger 1997), whether it is the egotism of characters like George Constanza in *Seinfeld*, or the scatological proprieties of the medieval carnival.

… as maintenance of social order

Some would say that humour as relations can ensure status quo. There have been anthropological studies on joking and laughing, like Radcliffe-Brown's (1940) studies on joking relationships in tribe communities. He states that, for example, in marriage between two people from different clans, the husband relates to his wife's family with both social conjunction and social disjunction. He will be grateful of her parents for giving him a wife, but he will also not share some of the same interests as them. There are two ways of handling this, Radcliffe-Brown says, (1) the man and her wife's parents might show each other deep respect and try to avoid each other as much as possible, or (2) they communicate harmoniously through joking. A joking relationship often allows one person to tease the other while the other shows friendliness in not taking it as an insult. The avoidance and respect in (1) and the joking and the friendliness in (2) are both maintenance and reminders of the social disjunctions and conjunctions in the relationship between parents and son-in-law. The joking appeals both to the separateness and togetherness in these relationships and helps to prevent conflicts coming out in the open.

Other anthropological studies argue that joking in relationships are more than just a mechanical referent to that given relationship, but rather helps to create it. Radcliffe-Brown's approach in his studies has received criticism of being insufficient and too narrow-minded in viewing joking just as matter of cohesion in relationships and not exploring how joking emerges in different social contexts (Douglas 1968, Launay 2006). In the Faeroe Islands (Gaffin 1995), people in fishing villages use taunting as means of singling out people who are easily provoked. By teasing each other, they are able to map out whether a person lacks self-control or not, and if these people might be a potential threat to social order. In the Faeroe Islands, "… self-control and social control blend into one idiom" (1995:163). The Faeroese fishers use joking in a strategic way to ensure cohesion. In Dyulan funerals, the grandchildren of the deceased grandmother are able to joke about her in order to amuse her children in mourning. But still, the quality of the grandchildren's joking depends on their strategies

(Launay 2006). The practice of joking is not predetermined, they help create and change relationships as well as maintaining social order.

It is necessary to mention that a lot of this joking relationships and teasing between people often needs to be negotiated. A joke can only be analysed through the total situation within it has been told, and we must explore the social conditions for how a joke can be perceived and permitted (Douglas 1968). In the Gisu tribe in Uganda, people can communicate through light-hearted joking, as well as abusive insults. These insults are called *bukolo*, and it is a specific relationship between two joking partners. Unlike the joking relationships described by Radcliffe-Brown, which are practiced to avoid conflict, the *bukolo* derive from it. Every *bukolo* starts with a peace pact between two enemies, and from then on they are allowed to insult one another on occasions. On special occasions, like Christmas, they might "snatch" property from another, like taking a cow and kill it, without the other responding with antagonism. These practices are done to test their relationship as joking partners, but during times of illness they do their best in avoiding each other in fear of the sick person to die (Heald 1990). Heald argues that in the license of joking there is also a form of restraint, the joke partners can only joke with each other because they have forsworn vengeance. The joking needs to be negotiated in relation to the social conditions of the given situation.

There are a lot of different perspectives on the functions of humour and the role it can play in both societal structure and in our everyday lives. There are, however, linguistic views that suggest humour as structured text, where humour and laughter is reduced to textual proprieties. There are numerous examples where different humorous expressions follow a certain pattern, like written jokes. Either way, they entail so much more than that. As Berger (1997) explains, a lot of humorous situations that we perceive during a day are intruding factors; they are breaking patterns rather than following them. Humour and laughter plays such a significant and extensive role in modern societies that it becomes problematic to reduce it to a simple pattern that evokes stimulus-response with the recipient. I present what is called the 'classical theories of humour' to explain the textual views on humour, before I present the alternative theoretical framework I will use in my thesis.

The classical theories of humour – textual vs contextual

The 'classical theories of humour and laughter' (Rutter 1997; Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004), or 'theories of humour origin' (Meyer 2000), as they often are called, are: superiority, relief and incongruity theory. These theories are quite similar in, not what they are including in their

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theoretical body, but what they are lacking (Rutter 1997, Meyer 2000).

Superiority theory is the notion that humour derives from the enjoyment of the misery and failings of others where laughter is a way of expressing superiority over others (Meyer 2000), and the ludicrous is to be found in the non-destructive defects and the ugliness in lived experience (Keith-Spiegel 1972). One of the more estimated theorists on superiority theory is Thomas Hobbes (1994) who states that laughter is a 'sudden glory' where subjects applaud themselves by comparing others to a deformed thing. Although it has been proven that humour with factors of superiority historically existed (Morreall 1982), it is hardly a general theory of humour and laughter. Not all forms of humour are of a superior sort, like the pun (Morreall 1982), which is a play on words, not on hierarchy.

Relief Theory is often associated with Freud's (1960) psychoanalysis, and bases itself on the idea of release of excess energy and relief of stress. Freud himself stated that human beings save energy which is used to suppress forbidden emotions and thoughts, and through joking, the conscious super-ego is allowing excessive energy to being channelled out (Freud 1928). There are examples on when relief plays a part in joking and laughing, like when your mother drops the turkey on the floor at Christmas dinner, and instead of crying out in frustration she cracks a joke about it. It turns a tense situation into a safe one, and excessive energy is released. However, as superiority theory fails in its narrowness, relief theory fails as a general theory of humour in the exact opposite, its comprehensiveness (Morreall 1982); humorous situations can take on many different forms, and Freud's physiological explanation is too abstract. In addition to Freud's theories never being proven biologically, relief theory doesn't separate between different contexts like workspace or schoolyard, but work from one scientific perspective (Rutter 1997).

Lastly, we have, what is considered the most widely accepted classical humour theory in modern times, *incongruity theory*, which sees humour as a mismatch between concepts and real experience, and that laughter is an expression of the incongruity (Schopenhauer 1909). Other classifications of the theory are Kant with "[laughter] is an affect resulting from the sudden transformation of a heightened expectation into nothing" (2000:209), or Bergson's (1914) idea that the comic happens when something 'un-mechanical' suddenly acquires a mechanical character. When a friend one is strolling down the street with suddenly trips and falls, the fall is both a transformation of a mechanical character and a transformation that breaks with our expectations, and it might elicit laughter. In jokes, there is often a strong feeling of incongruity; Rutter (1997) defines the incongruous joke as consisting of two objects both connected to the same concept, where, at the end of the joke, only one of the objects is

revealed as consistent with the concept, thus 'unmasking' the incongruity. Consider the following joke:

> (1) A grasshopper hops into a bar.
> (2) The bartender says to the grasshopper: "Hey, we got a drink named after you",
> (3) and the grasshopper says: "You got a drink named Steve?"

In this example, (1) and (2) are the 'objects', and the concept around the name grasshopper becomes apparent, as it is both a name for an insect and a drink. In the end of the joke, (3) the incongruous comes into being. There was a clear correlation between the grasshopper coming into the bar and being told about Grasshopper the drink, but this image crashes as we find out that the grasshopper actually has a 'human' name. The incongruous separates the two objects, but still keeps them both inside a logical frame considering "Grasshopper" and "Steve" are both names within this situation. There is mismatch between the concept we have established from the first two objects and the third one, it violates our expectations.

Still, we find that incongruity theory does not apply to all types of humour. It locates the incongruous in an incongruous joke, but does not really explain how topics become incongruous. People do not only laugh at things that are unsuspected; a grown man can laugh after winning a game of checkers, and a baby can laugh from being tickled (Morreall 1981). It is rather a theory of joke structure than of humour and laughter (Rutter 1997), and is therefore more applicable in locating the humorous in, say, jocular elements in audio-visual media (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004).

What theories such as these are doing is to pose abstract and textual analysis of jokes and the comical and remove the humorous from the social situation it transpires. Like other critics of humour theories, I am not trying to say that comical situations do not include traces of incongruity, superiority or relief; I am only saying they are insufficient in explaining humour and laughter from a general theoretical point of view. Joking and humour are perceived, negotiated, and confirmed as humour within the joke-situation, both by the joke-teller and the audience, and the definition of the joke-situation is both socially and culturally bounded. A sexual joke can be witty when told by an adult, while hilarious if the same joke is told by a child. Because of their children's sexual liberty, the child's joke might not be perceived as equally funny in Trobriand society (Zijderveld 1968). The humorous and the comic do not lie within the textual utterance alone, but is a result of the total situation (Douglas 1968, Brodie 2008, Meyer 2000), which occurs within a cultural and social structure (Zijderveld 1968; Francis 1988). When you tell a good friend a funny story he does not laugh

at, you might retort with: "I guess you had to be there."

Next I will present theories that I will apply in this thesis to give the study of humour a more socially fragmented character. A theoretical view of 'performance' can help to illustrate how people act according to the totality of the situation they are in, and the concepts of 'play' and 'frame' are two closely related bodies of theory that might explain how people perceive and define the social situation with other people.

Theoretical framework – Performance, play and frame

Performance can be quite hard to define, considering it can include performance events, where the structure and dramaturgy of the event only can be viewed within its own context, to the performativity of every interactional event in everyday life – extraordinary as well as mundane. Performance, hence, is an inclusive concept (Schechner 1988), but where is one to draw the line when it comes to performance and stand-up comedy? I have chosen to incorporate three theoretical views on performance, all of which explains performance by using a theatrical metaphor, to define different levels of performance in comedy: Performance theory within anthropology, by Schechner (1973, 1988, 2013) and Turner (1979, 1983, 1987); folkloristic theories of performance, by Bauman (1986; 1992), Brodie (2008), and Georges (1969); and symbolic interactionism, by Erving Goffman (1959, 1969, 1974).

Firstly, Schechner and Turner are regarded as the pioneers in performance and theory, where they classify performance as between theatre and anthropology. Especially Turner was interested in performance within ritual, mainly in what he classified as the liminal and liminoid state. Performances, according to Schechner and Turner, are observable in that they are temporal and structured, but also part of an ongoing process. A comedy show is always temporal and structured within a performance space, but the show as event is repeated at different times in different places. In both regarding Schechner's view on theatre and Turner's view on liminoid, in this thesis I try to explore the comedy show as ritual-like phenomenon which is separated both socially and spatially from the rest of society by taking form as a structured and sequential event encapsulated in space and time. Further explanation on this follows in Chapter 1 and 2.

Secondly, the folkloristic theories around performance are quite similar to performance theory, but I have chosen to separate them as the folklorists apply a greater focus on performance as events and performance as verbal art. Bauman (1986) sees performance as a display of expressive competence which creates an altered view of reality for the audience

watching, as well as some sort of emotional release for them. In addition to performance being a scheduled event which is both temporally and spatially bounded, it is, perhaps most importantly, formally reflexive (Bauman 1992); that the communicative system of performance as verbal art is capable of self-conscious manipulation of its internal features. I will examine how the promoters and performers try to elicit this emotional release with the audience during the show, and how they constantly manipulate present elements in the room in order for them to do so. The goal of a comedic performer is to evoke laugher in his audience. As I will show in both Chapter 3 and 4, a comedy show is solely based on a dialogic and interactional form of performance, which involves the comedic performer at all times to stay reflective of his performance devices while talking to an audience.

Lastly, it is difficult to ignore the theories of sociologist Erving Goffman when it comes to performance, and his theories of impression management and strategic interaction within social encounters proves viable in the study of organizing and performing in stand-up comedy. Goffman's concepts of front stage and backstage are evident in both Chapter 3 and 4 as they deal with the relationship between performer and audience in terms of intimate relations and shared understanding of the situation, as well as more cunning strategies where both the promoters and performers deceive their audience in doing as they wish. Performance is bound to the social context it occurs in; separated from other parts of lived reality not connected to the performance going on at the moment, as it is bound within a temporally and spatially separated reality, and where 'actors' within the situation behave, act and perform according to the social context they are in. In order for the audience to enjoy the show, they need to temporarily suspend their defences in order to grasp the performer's worldview (Koziski 1988). In a stand-up comedy show, then, there is both a level of performance in the stage-genre sense of the word, and in more strategic face-to-face interaction.

Play, same as performance, is a hard concept to define. But the play element can be incorporated in many different parts of culture, and I aim to prove that the stand-up comedy show is no exception. Huizinga (1950) saw play as prior to culture, as both humans and animals have an ability to play. Based on Huizinga's theories of play, Turner observed a strong presence of the play element within both rituals and ritual-like séances. Both are separated from 'real life', they are both temporally and spatially bounded, both in play and ritual there are embedded rules, and both have the ability of being repeated, or as Huizinga puts it: "it becomes tradition" (1950:10). Play in stand-up is especially evident in the separateness from the rest of society, as the people taking part in both play and stand-up are sharing the seclusion together, and the separateness gives its participants freedom from

society's norms as well as the chance to create their own internal order (Huizinga 1950).

One of the key elements of the play element within comedy is that the humorous situation is not evoked by, say, a verbal joke being told, but through internal logic and negotiating between the participants that what they perceive is humorous. When Gregory Bateson (1972) was visiting a zoo in 1952 he watched a couple of monkeys playing. They were wrestling and biting each other, but Bateson could tell that they showed no hostility towards each other while doing so. The monkeys were playing. And if they were able to act in a manner which normally would be denoted as an aggressive bite but rather was make-believe, the monkeys would have some ability of meta-communication. This is something the play theories have that the more textually oriented theories of humour lacks. In both everyday humour and in stand-up, the people participating have to agree to that this is humour, as well as this is humorous. Laughter is not a simple response to a stimulus created from a joke told. Laughter is a social phenomenon (Bergson 1914), and can even be contagious (Glenn 2003; Provine 1992) without anything funny being said. The funny and comical is not purely elicited within a social group, but is constantly negotiated. There has to be mutual understanding of the event as humorous.

There is also a problem in the wide conceptualization of play when it comes to stand-up, as Huizinga (1950) himself states that play should not be assimilated to humour and laughter. Although playfulness often is correlated with jokes and laughing, some forms of play is experienced as deadly serious from the participants' point of view, e.g. in sports and board games. As I will show in this thesis, a comedy show is taken very seriously by the people organizing them and the ones performing. Also, not all situations within the comedy show are playful; are the intermissions in the show playful, for instance? If they are, they differ in their playfulness in comparison to when the show is on and they are watching a performer on stage. Nevertheless, the show itself is playful, as people arrive at the venue and paying entrance fee with goal of watching entertainment, something other than real life on the outside.

Frame, or framing, is closely related to play, as Bateson (1972) coined the term when explaining the factors inherent in a playful situation. He created a concept called the "the picture frame" (1972:186), which delimits a set of messages that needs to be interpreted, not as abstractions, but as parts of the situation they are uttered in. In the same manner as you should not judge a picture by the wall its frame is hanging on, you should not interpret a framed message as something external to the framed content. In the comedy club, there is thorough work put in to frame the situation as a comedy show. The show might display

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different verbal acts of course language, sexual content, and public ridicule, but during these shows there are numerous signs put in to communicate to the audience that it is all for fun. Framing, then, is a way of legitimizing the playful character of the comedy show, in order to convince people that messages conveyed are not to be taken seriously.

The concept of framing also leads to an emphasis on people's social experience, and how they define the situation based on these experiences. Goffman (1974), inspired by Bateson, said that social frameworks provide background understanding of events. The audience's understanding of the social situation they are in can differ a lot between before the show and when the performer enters the stage. Their understanding may also differ from when the performer tells a joke and when he asks a person in the audience a specific question. In addition to legitimizing the situation as playful, framing can also determine different segments in the show and when the show goes from one segment to the next.

With a greater focus on the framing and defining of situations, and people's performance, I provide a more thorough analysis of how people locate and perceive the situation as humorous through interaction. What is important to remember is that humour and jocular situations are always performed in front of an audience. The audience does not passively recognize the situation as humorous, but is constantly perceiving the situation and decoding what they are seeing. Even though Bergson (1914) saw humour as something living acting mechanically in the individual sense, he still stressed that laughter is a social phenomenon that happens in society, and that laughter is in need of an echo. By doing my fieldwork in comedy clubs, I was able to examine social joking both from theatrical-performance point of view, as well as everyday-life-performance point of view. One cannot separate something as inherently social as humour and laughter from the social situation in which it occurs. By using theories related to performance, play, and framing, I will discuss how humour in social situation involve a great deal of social factors, like establishing of social relations, continuative negotiation of the situation, and strategic interaction, instead of being evoked through some sort of joke structure.

Liveness and intimacy – Emic concepts

Liveness and intimacy are two emic concepts that will be quite central throughout this thesis to explain the interactivity between performer and audience. *Liveness* is a term first used by a performer named Laura Lexx in my interview with her: "I think there's something electric about the liveness in interacting with the audience" (Interview with Laura 02.04.14).

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Liveness, in this explanation, conceptualizes the shared experience of a performer and her audience when they are interacting, encapsulating it in the here and now. Performance events are unique, as they occur only once in space and time with one particular set of social interrelationships (Georges 1969). In live stand-up, then, even though the situation is play-like, there often is a sense that the situation as interactive is real. Although 'presentness' (Reason 2004), might be a better term when it comes to live entertainment, I believe there is a strong feeling of liveness when direct communication occurs between the stage and the audience section. *Intimacy*, or *feeling of intimacy*, is a term used by a performer named Kevin Shepherd when he explained to me several strategies he used to evoke feelings of unity between the audience members and between the audience and him. Intimacy, in this thesis, entails both spatial and social forms, as there is very little distance between the stage and the seating inside the venue, as well as a sense of unity between the performer and the audience in shared laughter and interaction. This 'illusion' of intimacy is built on the performer's wish for the audience to actively grasp what he is saying and the intention of his message, and the performer's manipulation of both language and performance to make it so (Brodie 2008). There is also a strong feeling of intimacy in the show's spatially seclusion from the rest of society, as the performer and audience feel united by being "apart together" (Huizinga 1950:12). Both liveness and intimacy will help to analyse the establishing and maintaining of unity between audience members and between audience and performer.

The importance of framing a comedy show – A brief look on the 2008 recession and how it affected London comedy clubs

In 2008, a heavy financial crisis hit both North America and Europe, caused by excessive financial loans by banks, collapse in the housing markets, and in Europe, the single currency also played a part in the crisis that unfolded (Pettinger 2013). The entertainment industry was one of many industries that were affected, and was for a long time. Daniel told me the BYC had struggled packing their shows after re-opening in 2013, as people were still careful with their spending. Big events, such as arena concerts and great theatre productions, were thriving (Jones 2010), while smaller events like club comedy was facing immediate less interest from customers. For Paul, the recession hit like a bomb in Hitchin:

> I couldn't get more people into my shows in Hitchin for a while, then suddenly, audience numbers halved overnight. There was a collective paranoia, and people just

stopped spending money on going out the way they had done before. They didn't stop going out, but every pound and penny became more important to them. So they were more likely to go and spend a lot of money on something proven, rather than spend a smaller amount of money on something they perceived to be a risk. And that's what happened with the whole middle-ground of stand-up comedy, which is where my clubs are at. (Interview 03.05.14)

Although a lot of comedy clubs were struggling, stand-up comedy as a genre still endured with famous comedians, popularized through televised comedy, selling out several thousand seated arenas all over the country (Naughton 2012; Chortle 2013; Czajkowski 2013). This new form of live comedy was a threat to a lot of smaller clubs in the UK.

Both Paul at LMC and Daniel at BYC lost a lot of customers during the recession, and particularly the young audiences stopped coming to the clubs.

What I lost was a younger audience. I lost people that maybe were going to watch comedy for the first time. They would go to their local comedy club, now they're more likely to go to the O2, or something like that, and spend a lot of money on an act that they've seen on TV. Hopefully, it turns around again. (Interview with Paul 03.05.14)

The decrease in young audiences attending club shows is perhaps not that surprising, considering the increase in unemployment in the wake of the recession hit the young working masses the hardest (Bell and Blanchflower 2011). The comedy club crisis was affected by other factors as well. TV comedy had been taking over and the number of comedians per club increased in the UK (Czajkowski 2013), the same happened in USA in the 1980's where overexposure on TV made more unqualified comedians try out their skills onstage, leaving the genre devalued (Naughton 2012). Still, it is hard not to consider the recession as a key factor to the sudden drop in audience turnout. It made people more aware of their spending, and going to clubs not sure how successful the night would be was too much of a risk.

When I arrived in London early 2014, both Daniel and Paul was starting to improve their business again, and both told me it was because of the neat way they ran their shows. They only hired performers they knew were good, and they both organized their shows down to the smallest details. Paul told me: "There's a risk about [going to a comedy club] if you don't trust the club, and how I've tried to build my clubs is that you [as a customer] KNOW it's going to be a good night out" (Interview 03.05.14). Daniel said the same and pointed out that the way one organises a show can be the one factor that makes people want to come back.

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The comedy show, as I will argue, is not just a performer telling humorous material in front of an audience, but consists of many socio-spatial elements which constitute the comedy show as an eventful whole. Both Daniel and Paul carefully frame their comedy show to make it an enjoyable experience for everyone present, which makes people want to return the next show. There are numerous strategies and ways of planning involved in carrying out a comedy show. As I will illustrate throughout this thesis, framing a comedy show involve establishing a mutual understanding of the situation.

I will start off the analysis with chapter 1 – 'One Night at the Club' as a case study to map out, describe, and format a comedy show from beginning to end. This chapter will provide a broader understanding of how a comedy show in the venue is carried out as a sequential event and how this structure defines the show.

In Chapter 2 – 'Creation of space, creation of interaction' I will describe and analyse how the promoters organize the room and how they manipulate the spatial proprieties to benefit the show. The promoters use the formatted show room, with chairs and tables carefully lined up in front of a stage, to create an informal and intimate atmosphere to make the audience feel relaxed when they enter.

In Chapter 3 – 'Framing unity and liveness' I describe the distinct ways the promoters and performers interact with the audience in an informal manner, and how they frame the situation as cohesive. They try to perform unity towards the audience, in order to reach and maintaine a mutual understanding of the situation.

Finally, in Chapter 4 – 'Reception and deception', before I conclude the thesis, I recount how the promoters and performers use both overt and covert strategies to guide the behaviour of the audience. There are numerous ways for a comedy show to go wrong when dealing with an audience, and they try to prevent conflict by observing the audience and singling out potential disruptive factors. This chapter also analyse how promoters and performers handle the conflict in interacting friendly and informally with the audience, and also maintaining authority over them at the same time when sanctioning unwanted behaviour.

Chapter 1 – ONE NIGHT AT THE CLUB

In this chapter I will describe what I see as a typical comedy show from start to end. I have taken empirical examples from different situations I have observed and compiled them together into a general case description of what a comedy show might look like. It will be taking place in BYC, but it will contain ethnographic data from many individual shows, some even observed at other comedy clubs, and some of the people described are given pseudonyms. The description is divided into thirteen different sections in chronological order, and each section is marked with a timeslot to map out its duration, with the start of the comedy show as a point of departure. A comedy show is a quite fast-paced and intense social event that can be hard to describe with the written word, but hopefully, this description will give the reader some insights into the comedy show as a social event and how it comes into form.

<u>1. Organizing the show space</u> *-2.00 to -0.45*
I arrived at BYC around two hours before the show started, said hello to the people in the bar, and went straight into the show room to help the other promoters in organize the seating. Inside, I met the assistant manager, James, who was lining up chairs and tables in front of the stage. After we said hello he instructed me on how many people they expected and how many chairs and tables we would need. "Okay, we're expecting around 46 people today, so we're gonna need 12 tables. Let's make it three rows of four tables from the front to back." Blair, another promoter, and I started adding chairs and tables in front of the stage. When we had

finished, James assessed the structuring of room closely, and decided that there were a few details that needed to be corrected. "Can we push all the rows a little bit to the right? Right here along the wall is where the comedians walk up to the stage and we could need some more space. Also, the gap between the first and the second row needs to be bigger, we want people to be able to walk between the tables when they're going to the toilet." We went straight to work, and a few corrections later we were finished, just a little over an hour before we opened the doors.

After the tables and chairs had been set in place, it was time to check the sound and the lights, which was done from a mixing table inside a booth next to the tables and chairs. Firstly, James checked the lights to see if they could be dimmed and brightened. He brightened the lights over the chairs and tables to a bright setting, and dimmed the lights over the stage. This was done so the audience would not have any problems finding seats when they opened the doors. Secondly, James checked the sound on the microphone inside the booth which they used to introduce the host of the show with. "How does that sound?" he asked. We confirmed that the sound was adequate. "Good. Blair, can you test the mic onstage?" Blair went onstage and spoke into the mic: "Testing, testing, hello, hello. 'Welcome to Backyard Comedy Club!'" James and I were standing different places in the room to evaluate the sound. "A little too much echo", James said and went back into the booth to correct it. When the lights and the sound was quality checked, everyone went back to the bar.

2. Opening the doors *-0.45 to 0.00*

People were entering the venue and assembling in the bar area, and while James and the others man the bar, the bouncer was in charge of collecting tickets. Forty-five minutes before the show started, Carl, the bouncer, walked between the tables with a list of names that has reserved seats for the show. One of BYC's rules was that, if you had reserved tickets you had to be at the venue at least forty-five minutes before show time, if not you would receive a late-fee of £3. Carl went from table to table. "Hi there, have you reserved tickets?" "Yes, we have. Four tickets." "Alright, what name are you listed on?" "Moore, Peter." After Carl had confirmed their booking, they were given a stamp on their hands, and Carl went over to the next table. Some people had not booked tickets in advance, but were going to buy tickets at the venue when they arrived. Carl told them to wait a bit: "When I'm done with my round, I will be at the doors (to the show room) and you can come over then and pay." After Carl was done, he walked to the entrance of the show room, sat behind a small desk, brought forth a

box of change and started selling tickets.

Twenty minutes before the show was supposed to start, James came over and asked me to join him in the show room to make some final touches before the audience entered. Inside, the tables were lined up perfectly and the lights were dimmed. James asked me to light candles and put one on each table, then went into the sound booth, plugged his phone into the sound system and put on his playlist; "When Love Takes Over" by David Guetta started playing at a low volume. The compere of the show, Colin Flanagan, a balding man in his late thirties wearing a white shirt with a black jacket, was sitting at a nearby table with Aaron Watson, the first of many comedians who were going to enter the stage that night. There was only fifteen minutes until show-time and James went over and told them they were going to let people in any minute now. "Okay, we'll move to the back of the room", Colin said in a friendly voice. After a candle light had been placed on every table, James went over the doors, ready to welcome the audience coming through the doors.

In the bar area, Carl rose from his chair and walked closer to the bar. It was time to let the people in. He signalled to the promoters in the bar to muffle the music for a bit, before he lifted his hands to his mouth and yelled: "Ladies and gentlemen, the show room is now open!" Immediately after, the sound of chairs moving and people mumbling to each other filled the room, as people took their drinks and headed for the show room. People formed a line outside the doors as Carl checked if everyone had a stamp, and Blair was standing behind him holding the doors open for people to pass through. Inside the doors there was a corridor maybe five meters long with another set of doors at the end. Behind these doors was James, who stood there and welcomed the audience. The first groups of people sat down at the tables furthest away from the stage, and the next groups sat down at the row in the middle. The front row was the last one to be filled up. If people seemed unsure of where to sit, James happily assisted them in finding seats. Soon, everyone was seated and ready for the show.

3. Marking the start of the show *0.00*

At 8pm, the show was ready to start. There were two groups of people that arrived five minutes before the show started, and two extra tables had been placed in the back behind the third row. The atmosphere was good, there was upbeat music playing silently in the background, the audience's chat had decreased and they were waiting in anticipation for the show to start. Colin was talking to James, and they both concluded that it was time to go on stage. James went into the sound booth. He turned off the background music, dimmed the lights and brightened the light on the stage. The audience gazed towards the stage, and the

chatting died out. These markers of changing the context did not just communicate to the audience that something was happening, but that their focus should also be turned towards the stage. James picked up the microphone inside the booth and said: "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Backyard Comedy Club. Please, go wild, go crazy, for your compere, Colin Flanagan." The audience cheered and applauded as Colin almost jogged towards the stage. When he entered it, he smiled to the audience, grabbed the mic, placed the mic-stand behind him, and said: "Thank you, thank you so much. Are you all well?" The audience cheered in response. The show had begun.

4. First section – The introduction *0.00 to 0.15*

The compere often uses the first section to get to know the audience, to communicate with them directly and "warming them up" before the first comedian comes on stage. This "warming up" is called "working the room", and consists of two functions: (1) it gathers information about certain people in the audience for the comedian to use in a comedic way, and (2) it helps to establish relations between the comedian and the audience, and helps to make them all feel like a homogenous group (Mintz 1985). Working the room is mostly associated with the compere, while the comedians he introduces will do more pre-written jokes. Colin started off the show by saying: "Hello, hello, Bethnal Green, are we alright?" The audience gave a big cheer in response. "Fantastic, fantastic. It's so nice to be here, you seem like a lovely audience. Give us a cheer if you've been here before." A few people in the audience cheered. Colin pointed towards the back of the room: "Two people, who have moved their chairs to the back, to avoid the stage." People laughed in response, they seem to know that a lot of people avoid sitting in the front in fear of being ridiculed by the comedian. Colin continued: "Give us a cheer if you have never been here before." A little more people cheered. Colin looked down. "Sat right in the front, this is gonna be fun", he said with a smile as people chuckled. The crowd seemed to like Colin, and there was a positive energy in the room. He was gathering information about the audience as well as turning that information into humorous feedback to the audience.

Like many of the people in the back suspected, Colin also interacted with people in the front directly while he was onstage. He turned to a man in the front row who was smiling nervously; "And you can't see this, but this man here is giving me a look like he's saying 'Mate, don't fucking talk to me.'" After the laughter died out a bit, Colin turned to the man personally while still talking loud enough for people to hear. "Hi, there mate. What's your name?" The man answered his name is Derek. "Derek? Really nice to meet you, Derek. What

do you do?" "I'm a kick-boxing instructor." "You're a kick-boxing instructor? Fuck, I'll take my chances with these people instead", Colin said before went to another table, and the audience laughed aloud. Although Colin was only talking to one person at this point, he was still referring their conversation to the rest of the audience. For example, he repeated Derek's response when he replied: "You're a kick-boxing instructor?" into the microphone so the whole audience could hear Derek's response before he moved on to the joke. At the same time Colin was gathering information, he included the rest of the audience in on their conversation.

Colin was not only working the room, he also mixed some of the audience interaction up with "material". "Material" is the term comedians use for pre-written jokes they have brought to the show, and all the material a comedian performs on a given night, is called his "set". After Colin had been talking to a few people in the front for a while he suddenly changed the subject: "Well, anyways, I went to the gym yesterday. Anyone here go to the gym?" For Colin, it is possible to switch to another subject without formally acknowledging it to the audience. A comedy show is always going in a fast pace, and for the performer, most of the unnecessary chat is removed. However, Colin can start on a new subject by using something an audience member said as a point of departure: "Are you from Newcastle? I used to live in Newcastle…" The material created some variety in Colin's performance, as well as it made the transition when the compere leaves the stage and the comedian enters easier.

While Colin was onstage, James and the rest of the promoters tended to various tasks in the venue and made sure the show went on smoothly. Some stayed out in the bar and served the few people not going to the show, some were in the kitchen making food, while some were in the show room watching the performance. James was standing at the back most of the time Colin was on, and once the show had started he and Blair had to quietly carry out a table and chairs for a couple of latecomers. After a few minutes James had to return to the same table to politely ask the people to keep the noise down, so they would not disturb the show. The people around the table apologized and kept quiet from then on. During his performance, the focus was on Colin and he had most of the power and control over the audience's behaviour, but James and the others were ready to help if needed.

5. The first section - The first comedian onstage *0.15 to 0.35*
After Colin had entertained the audience for a good 15 minutes, he decided that it was time to introduce the first comedian of the night. He placed the mic back in the mic-stand and said: "Alright, ladies and gentlemen, we have a fantastic show for you tonight. Are you ready for

your first act?" The audience cheered and whistled in confirmation. "Wonderful! Please start applauding." The audience started to applaud. "This first guy coming up is a good friend of mine, and a great comedian. Please welcome to the stage, Mr. Aaron Watson!" The audience's applaud intensified when Aaron's name was mentioned, and they cheered, and whistled as he walked onto stage. He was a bearded young man, probably in his early thirties, and he entered the stage while he smiled and waved to the crowd. Aaron and Colin shook hands as they switched places while the ruckus from the audience was still going on. A young man in the front yelled out "Yeah!" Aaron grabbed the mic and before the cheering died down completely, looked at the young man, and said: "Thank you, my good man," before he turned to the rest of the crowd: "And thank you, Bethnal Green. How are we all doing tonight?" The audience cheered in response. Colin made sure that the transition from the compere to the first comedian went on without the show losing any momentum. By making the audience cheer loudly he raised the energy in the room, and made sure there were no awkward pauses when he and Aaron switched places.

Aaron had a lot jokes and comments on different subjects rehearsed in his set before he went onstage. He started off his set by saying how nice it was to be there and joked about the eastern parts of London. "I grew up here in London, and I've gotta say, the East End has changed. Before, this area was filled with dog shit and murder," he said, and then looked around in the show room. "now, there's fucking clean tables and candles?" The audience laughed merrily in response. After he had talked about his relation to East London, Aaron started talking about his recent marriage, before he launched into a wild story about a trip he did to Amsterdam with some friends. All through the jokes and the storytelling he had eye-contact with the audience, and sometimes he commented on the reaction from some of the audience members: "Ha, I can see you two are married as well. You have the correct 'fuck-all' posture of a married couple". He also included some people in his storytelling: "Have you been to Amsterdam, my friend? I see you have a dragon tattoo on your arm, so I just assume that you used to live there. Not voluntarily either, you just went there for a long weekend and couldn't find the train back to the airport." After about twenty minutes he told the audience: "Alright, people, my time is up. Thank you so much for listening", before he left the stage and Colin re-entered again, while the audience cheered and applauded.

6. First interval *0.35 to 0.50*

After Aaron walked off the stage, Colin came back up to announce the first interval. When Colin entered the stage again, he grabbed the mic and said "Aaron Watson everybody, give

him another hand." The audience cheered once again. Colin stepped a few inches away from the mic and applauded with them, before he grabbed the mic and told the audience: "Now it's time for our first interval, ladies and gentlemen. Go to the toilet, buy more drinks, and we'll see each other back here in about 15 minutes. Please give it up for the acts you've seen in this section." The audience cheered another time, before Colin walked off-stage, the light onstage got dimmed, the lights over the audience brightened, and the background music came back on. Right after, the people in the audience started moving, and there was a murmur among the tables that soon transformed into loud chattering, and the audience dispersed to take a break.

While some people stayed in their seats, others moved out into the bar area. Soon there was a line to the bar, and the doors to the toilets opened every ten seconds from people entering and leaving. The bar area that was almost completely quiet during the performances were now buzzing with noise and chatter. People next to the bar waiting for their turn were talking loudly. "The compere is a lot better than the last time I was here." "They have great pizza here, the one with Parma ham is the best one." "Are you going home after the show, or should we go someplace else?" Meanwhile, in the show room, James and Blair were gathering empty glasses and garbage from the tables. James asked me: "Jahn, can you clear the tables in the back there? Then Blair will get the rest while I go check how they're doing in the kitchen." Just as he said that, the doors from the bar area opened and another promoter named Kelly came in with two pizzas. "One Margherita and one Chorizo", she said. "The Margherita is over there in the corner, and the chorizo is going to the last table on the second row there." Aaron had put on his jacket, and said goodbye to James. "Thanks, mate. I have to go, I have another show in Soho." "Alright, thank you so much. You did a great job." Aaron saluted the other promoters in the room before he left through the doors. Soon there were food on at least one fourth of every table, and the show room was beginning to fill up again as people came back from the bar area with drinks in hand.

A little later, the bar was still busy when two young gentlemen came in through the entrance and walked over to the bar. James came out from the show room and greeted them. They were comedians. "Ben," and "Don," they said. James answered: "Nice to meet you. Alright, the interval is over in about eight minutes." He pointed towards the doors to the show room. "There's the entrance. If you want to sit down there are seats available for you in the back of the room. Let me know if you need anything from the bar." Ben and Don thanked James and headed for the doors. When they came inside, they met and shook hands with Colin, who wanted to write down their names. "Okay, Ben, and... Don. Okay, great guys." Colin continued to look over his notes, while Don and Ben sat down in the back with a beer

each and talked together.

After the interval had passed fourteen minutes, Colin came over to James and asked when they were going to start the show again. James answered: "Very soon, we still miss three people on one of the tables in the middle there, we'll give them a minute." Two minutes later the people missing returned to their seats, and James gave signal to Colin that they were about to start. Colin lined up, prepared for being introduced again, while James went back into the sound booth. The lights over the audiences got dimmed while the light on the stage brightened. When the music was turned down, people in the audience stopped talking. Then James' voice appeared over the speakers: "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome back to the stage, your compere, Colin Flanagan." By now, everyone in the audience was facing the stage and applauded and cheered as Colin smilingly took to the stage one more time.

Figure 4 - The audience is waiting for the show to start again at BYC (photo taken by the author)

7. Second section – The introduction *0.50 to 1.00*

The beginning of the second section was quite similar to the first one, Colin energetically welcomed the audience back and made sure they were all well. "Welcome back to the second section, ladies and gentlemen." The audience cheered back. "Did you all have a nice interval?" The audience replied "yes" in unison. People seem more eager to respond to

Colin's questions in the second section. "Fantastic. How about you, Derek? What did you do during the interval?" "I went to the bathroom," Derek replied. "Did it go well?" A couple of ladies on the right end of the second row snickered at Colin's question. Derek laughed as well. "Yes. It was very nice." The audience and Colin started laughing. "What a posh response about a wee", Colin shouted out, before he said with a sarcastically exorbitant high-class voice "'Did it go well in there?' 'Oh yes, it went very well, thank you. Best piss I've had in years.'" Derek burst out laughing together with the rest of the audience. Colin successfully made sure that everyone was going to enjoy the second section.

After about ten minutes of storytelling and audience interaction, Colin felt the audience was ready to welcome the second comedian. "Ladies and gentlemen, are you ready for your second act of the evening?" The audience replied with a "yes" and some people were cheering. "Alright, we actually have two acts for you in this section. The first one is a young guy, he's not been in the business long, but he's very talented. Before I put him on, I want to see how loud we can get to give him the best welcome. Let's start with a slow clap." Colin started slowly clapping and the audience joined in. Without a break in the applaud Colin said: "Very nice, now a little more loudly." Their applause intensified. "Great, now let's hear you clap as loudly as you can!" The audience started applauding thunderously. "Now, let's get some cheer!" People started cheering. "Now, let's get some wooing." A lot of the people, especially the women started shouting "woo!" Right when the noise from the audience was loud enough, Colin shouted: "Ladies and gentlemen, keep it going for Mr. Don Tran!" The audience cheered loudly as a young man with dark hair entered the stage, and shook hands with Colin as he took over the mic.

8. Second section – The second comedian(s) onstage *01.00 to 1.30*

Don established himself as a different comedian than Colin. He was calm and relaxed when he grabbed the mic and he only said one "thank you". His set consisted of one-liners and puns that he told with a mellow and deadpan voice. One of his jokes was: "They say that a broken clock is correct at least two times a day. And it is at those times in the day that I usually try to sell my broken clocks." The audience seemed a little puzzled of his calmness at first, but after the first joke was told they burst out in laughter. Colin and James were standing in the back laughing as well. Don kept reciting his one-liners while never speaking directly to the audience, and the audience laughed all the way through. The only disturbance was when a drunken man on the second row yelled out something inaudible towards the stage, but Don ignored it and it did not stop the rest of the audience from enjoying Don's performance. After

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ten minutes, he smiled and said: "Thank you for listening", and walked off-stage to great cheer and applause.

Colin came back up, shook Don's hand one more time and shouted "Don Tran everybody! We got one more act for you before the next interval. Let's start clapping again." Colin and the audience started the slow applause, before the noise exponentially grew to a great cheer, before Colin yelled: "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Mr. Ben Price!" A young man with a shirt and a tie, and with short brown hair, entered the stage. He took the mic and thanked the audience for their warm welcome. Ben used more audience interaction in his set than Don, but he did not do as well. At some point he commented on the pants on one of the young men in the front row: "I see you're wearing chinos." "Yes", the man replied. Ben added: "Cool, yeah I wear chinos too. Well, maybe not for the last five years." Some people laughed, but not everybody. This was not the first joke from Ben that went a little unsuccessful. Ben laughed and asked: "Should I just walk offstage?", and a young woman in the middle of the audience blurted out a high pitched "yes." The rest of the audience started laughing, and some women put their hands over their mouths laughing shockingly while looking around, wondering who the guilty one was. Ben wittingly lifted the mic-stand and held it over the audience like a periscope and said: "Don't worry, ladies and gentlemen, we will find out who said that." The laughter intensified, and although Ben did not find the girl in question, the rest of his set received better response than the start. "Thank you so much for your patience", Ben said with a grin as he walked off-stage, and Colin re-entered.

9. Second interval *1.30 to 1.45*

"Ben Price, everyone! Let's hear some noise for him." People applauded and there were a few whistles here and there. "Alright, everyone," Colin said loudly. "We're gonna have our second interval of the night. Again, go to the toilet, go get some more drinks and we'll kick of the last part of the show in around fifteen minutes. Be back by then, apart from that, have a great interval. Now, make a cheer for the acts you've seen this section." The audience 'whooped' and applauded before they started moving towards the bar area. James and Blair were standing on each side of the room assessing the state of the room. They were wearing earpieces they used to communicate with each other. James put his finger to his ear: "Okay, just remove the empty glasses on the front row." Luke pointed at some empty bags of crisps (potato chips) at a table close by. "No, just get the glasses. I'll get it." Colin was sitting in the back looking at his phone when a young man in a dark shirt wearing a cap came through doors. Colin got up and the two men shook hands, sat down and talked. The man was the

headliner, the last comedian to go onstage and the one to do the longest set of all the comedians. He and Colin seemed to know each other from before and they talked loudly and laughed together. They only got interrupted by James who came over and greeted the headliner himself, before he instructed Colin that it was time to go onstage again.

10. Final section – The introduction *1.45 to 1.55*

For the final time that night, the music died down, the light onstage brightened, and James' voice sounded over the speakers: "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome back to the stage, your compere, Colin Flanagan." What seemed like a slightly drunker audience than in the first two sections put their hands together and welcomed Colin back onto stage. They cheered and applauded louder than the first time Colin entered the stage, almost two hours ago. Colin grinned as he took the mic out of the mic-stand. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome back to the last section!" A collectively "Whoop!" from the audience followed. "Had a nice interval, Derek?" "Yeah," he responded. "Wonderful, where are you from exactly, mate?" "Oh, I'm from East London." Colin snickered: "Fucking hell, a kick-boxing instructor from East London, I am fucking playing with fire here." Derek and the audience laughed. Colin had taken instant control onstage.

Colin was talking about an episode where he was caught urinating in Richmond Park when the same guy who interrupted Don Tran earlier yelled out something again. "What? Who was that?" Colin replied. He got eye-contact with a larger man on the second row. "You, what did you say, sir? You've been a little noisy tonight, haven't you?" Colin said as the audience listened quietly. A couple of elderly ladies sitting two tables away from the interrupting man looked a little tense as they listened. "I have also pissed in Richmond Park," the man said loudly for everyone to hear as he raised his glass. "Well, I'm glad we have something in common," Colin answered, and around half of the audience laughed. "but people have paid to see this show, and you are a disturbance right now." The man put up his hands: "Alright, alright." "Where are you from, mate?" asked Colin. "I'm from Coventry!" Colin did not hesitate in responding: "Of course you are, you daft cunt." The rest of the audience joined in for a good laugh, and the ladies on the second row exchanged relieved smiles to each other. Colin looked back at the audience and said: "Unbelievable. Well, as I was saying earlier…" and continued on his original material. The drunken man in the second row kept quiet the rest of the show.

After about ten minutes, Colin placed the mic back in the mic-stand, and placed the mic-stand back in front of him: "My friends, are we ready to welcome our final act of the

evening?" The audience cheered in response. "Great, this guy is a good friend of mine and a fantastic comedian, you people are in for a treat. Now, Derek, when I point at you I want you to start the applause," Colin looked at the rest of the audience, "and when I move my hand from Derek to the rest of you, I want you to join in. Does everyone understand?" "Yes", they replied in unison. "Okay, are you ready, Derek?" "Yep." "Okay, let's do this." Colin pointed at Derek, and he started applauding, soon the rest of the front row joined in. Colin then moved his hand towards the rest of the audience: "Now, the second row." The second row started applauding and along. "And the third." The third row joined in. Colin now shouted to be heard over the noise: "And now the last tables in the back!" Now everyone in the audience was applauding. "Now let's hear some more noise!", Colin yelled. The audience whistled and whooped, and Colin uttered in a loud voice: "Ladies and gentlemen, please give a big welcome, for Mr. Damian Clarke." Colin stepped away from the mic as Damian walked onstage to great applause. They gave each other a handshake before Colin walked off and Damian took over.

11. Final section – The final comedian *1.55 to 2.25*

Damian took the mic and greeted the audience with a smile and a hello. "How's everybody doing?" The audience made cheerful noise with applause and whistling to confirm they were having a good time. "That's great. I'm Australian." A guy at sitting by the right wall on the first row cheered. "Yo," Damian said as he pointed at him. "We're fucking everywhere, aren't we?" The audience laughed, and some were smiling and nodding their heads. "I've been here two years, and I don't know about you, but in the beginning I had trouble with timekeeping." He turned is gaze back at the audience. "Because in Australia, we call it 'eight-thirty', you know. But here in the UK you call it 'half-eight'," The audience started chortling. "And I know why, it's shorter, it's easier to say, and I love it. But no one tells you what it means. Someone said to me: 'Okay, I'll meet you there at half-eight'. I showed up at four!" The audience laughed merrily, and Damian had started off his performance nicely.

From start to end, Damian was an energetic comedian who engaged the audience in the subjects he brought up. He made fun of the English' obsession with tea: "Last summer was the hottest one in a while, it was thirty degrees out, and I saw people drinking tea. Why? I would never do that. 'Phew, wow, you know what I'd fancy right now? Boiling water with a bag in it.'" He also commented on the interior of the venue, especially the wall behind onstage where the promoters had hanged up a number of pallets in an artistic fashion: "Backyard Comedy Club, look at that, no expense spared," he said as the audience guffawed.

"I guess this is how most backyards look like in East London, huh? A bunch of stolen pallets and shit." Damian was cruising through his material in great speed, and there were rarely any long periods without laughter. After about half an hour, Damian chose to take his leave. "Thank you everyone, thank you so much for listening." The audience made a big noise for Damian as he walked off-stage.

12. The compere closes the show *2.25 to 2.30*

When Damian walked off, Colin came up one last time to announce Damian again, and to close the show. The two performers shook hands and they shared a couple of words together before Damian left the stage, with the audience still applauding. Colin grasped the mic: "Ladies and gentlemen, the fantastic Mr. Damian Clarke!" The audience gave a loud cheer. Colin turned back to Derek. "Have you enjoyed the show Derek?" "Yes." "Wonderful, I enjoyed it too. Ladies and gentlemen, we are at an end of the show. Before I go I have something to show you." Colin held up a card for all the audience to see. "This is a membership card. You can get it here for only £26, and then you get in for free one show a month for a whole year. A whole year! That is twelve shows for only £26. That is a good bargain. Now, you have been a fantastic audience, ladies and gentlemen, please give it up for the acts you've seen tonight!" The audience clapped and whistled back. "My name is Colin Flanagan, safe travel home, good night!" He went off-stage with the audience applauding one last time.

13. Re-organizing the room *2.30 to 2.45-3.00*

Moments after Colin left the stage, music began playing again over the speakers, the lights in the room got lit, and the people in the audience started to move and head out while the promoters started cleaning up. James approached Colin and thanked him for his efforts. Colin thanked him back for his hospitality, and gathered his clothes ready to leave: "Thanks again, James, I'll see you tomorrow." More and more people were leaving through the doors, while a few was still in their seats finishing their drinks. There were clear signs that a show must had taken place; the chairs and tables were disorganized and all the tables were full of empty glasses and garbage. James came up to me and said: "Okay, you'll start collecting plates and glasses, and I'll bring a mop to clean up." James looked annoyed. "Someone broke a bottle in the back", he grumbled. As we were cleaning up, the last of the audience told us goodbye. The show room was now empty. James went into the sound booth and turned the music off, turned the lights on, and blew out the candles on each table and collected them. Blair came in as we were gathering empty crisp bags from the tables and dropping them into garbage bins.

"Everything okay here?" Blair asked. "Yeah, we got it under control", James replied. I asked them what they thought of the show. "It was good tonight", Blair said. "The compere was really good, good at handling the crowd. He's the compere at tomorrow's show too," said James. "but with a different headliner. It was a successful night, but we're expecting more people tomorrow." We let the tables and chairs stay as they were, they were going to be re-organized before the show the next day. James turned off the light and we went out in the bar area. Although there still were customers in the bar, there was calmness over the venue as more and more people were leaving, going home or to another spot in London to keep drinking.

Performance, ritual, and the liminoid

The stand-up comedy show is organized as social and sequential performances limited within space and time. Like all other performances, like pop concerts or sermons, the comedy show contains the same dramatic structure of gathering-performing-dispersing. A number of people gather in a special place to watch and to take part in a performance, to do something agreed on, before they disperse again (Schechner 1988). For this sequence to be obtained properly, different sorts of actions are required. These actions range from the promoter organizing the room and welcoming guests, to the audience member showing her ticket and get seated, and to the comedian keeping his time and have a comedic set prepared. All these actions are carried through every show in one way or another. Hence, they are not only actions, they are performances themselves.

The promoter greet the guest to show himself as polite and make her feel welcome, the audience member shows her ticket to prove that she can enter, and the comedian has a set prepared to show both the audience and the promoters that he is a professional artist. These performances are not just doing, they are "showing doing" (Schechner 2013:28), and they are articulated by having a beginning and an end. Both the promoters and most of the audience show polite and good behaviour when they are mingling, but when they are in different rooms, their own backstage, they have more freedom to comment more honestly on the situations they have experienced (Goffman 1959). By establishing limits and framing the situations, the comedy show as a socially and sequential performance is constructed.

Ritual markers like giving people a stamp on their hands, announcing the opening of the doors signify, and dimming the lights when the show is about to start are ways to signal to the audience that they are taking part in an event. Even entering the building involves

ceremony (Schechner 1988), and both visible and audible markers like this helps to separate the lived experience of the situation from the ordinary life outside of the venue. By 'showing doing', the promoters and stage performers are able to frame the situation as a comedy show.

Although the comedy show has a certain ritual character in being sequentially and finite, it is important not to analyse it as ritual. Victor Turner (1987), in his fascination of van Gennep and the liminal, saw performance in rituals as *social dramas*, which shared much of the same structure as van Gennep's *rites of passage* (2011) and Schechner's gathering-performing-dispersing, and could explain the dramaturgy in both pre-industrial rites as well as theatrical performances: First there is *breach*, where norm-governed social relations are suspended; then there is *crisis*, where a challenge occurs where people involved pick sides against the apparent threat; and lastly, there is *redressive or remedial procedures*, where the conflict during the crisis is solved and there is re-aggregation of the participants back into society, which often have taken upon itself a new state. But as Turner (1983) realized, as this model is applicable to studies of pre-industrial socities, it is insufficient in the studies of what he calls leisure-time in modern and complex societies. This is what separates the comedy show from ritual joking in tribal societies. In order to make the liminal, or liminal-like, phase apply to both industrial and pre-industrial societies, he introduced the term *liminoid*.

The *liminoid* (Turner 1979; 1983) share the same important characteristics as the liminal, but differ in that liminoid: (1) usually is optional and people's involvement in the liminoid phase is not bound by their social status in society, and (2) usually do not involve a personal crisis that needs resolution, and is (3) connected to people enjoying leisure time from work, rather than participating in a collective changing of people's social status or changing of society's structure as a whole. Liminoid phases, thus, are not cyclical, but are, often collective, activities for people to enjoy a break from society's norms and social hierarchy. The comedy show works as a liminoid phase by being separated from the rest of society in the show room, where the audiences are allowed to enter and enjoy comical performances as a collective, both with other audience members and the performers onstage.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Separation		Liminoid										Re-aggregation

Figure 5 - Model of the sequential comedy show using Turner's theories of the liminoid

In Figure 4 I tried to simply illustrate the dramaturgical model of the comedy show described in this chapter, where the numbers represent the different sequential units numbered throughout and the colours depict the different phases. It is hard to establish when the show as a liminoid experience starts and ends, does it start when people are entering the venue, does it end when the compere walks off the stage for the last time, are the intervals still part of the liminoid state? I have chosen to set the liminoid state to start when the lights gets dimmed and the music stops (unit 3) to mark the show as begun; during these visual cues people usually stopped talking with each other and faced the stage, giving their attention to the show which is about to start. The intervals are kept as a part of the comedy show itself, as people are only momentarily suspending their attention to the stage, and they are still bound by the seclusion in space and time considering everyone are supposed to be back in their place after the 15 minutes have gone. Intervals serve a purpose in live entertainment, where the audiences are able to see and mingle with each other, and confirm the "gathering" (Schechner 1988:174). The point of re-aggregation is at unit 13, after the compere had taken his leave from the stage, and people start to get up to leave the venue. People are allowed to talk again, and a lot of them put their clothes on and leave the premises, and hence, leaves the secluded space and time of the comedy show.

Much like Turner, in my fieldwork I showed great interest in the transition from one phase to another. Especially before and during the start of the comedy show, the promoters and performers use a great deal of both social integrative and manipulative strategies to successfully alter the collective situation from one state to another. People who have been coming into the venue as smaller social units are to become one social unity. The sequential build-up of the comedy show, in a liminoid manner, is a way for the promoters and performers to signal to the audience, and themselves, that they have entered another sphere of social reality. In the following chapters, I will show how both the physical lay-out of the venue, the face-to-face performances between the different participants in the show, and the strategic interactions between them, are used as resources by the promoters and performers to frame and maintain the situation as a comedy show.

Chapter 2 – CREATION OF SPACE, CREATION OF INTERACTION: PREPARING AND FRAMING THE VENUE AS A COMEDY SHOW

> "Culture viewed as speech, gesture, and action is performance; and performance not only requires but commands its own kind of space." (Tuan 1990:236)

The venue of a comedy club and its interior is a setting supposed to promote social cohesion and give the participants in the room a safe environment where joking about both trivial and taboo subjects can be told. Going to a comedy club is a break from ordinary life; you leave the seriousness of society on the outside and enter a room where this seriousness does not exist in the same form. The show is a playful environment which is secluded, where the patrons enjoy each other company as being apart together from the rest of society (Huizinga 1950:12). A comedy show at a comedy club poses a different lived reality than the reality outside its exterior walls and social context.

The reality within the comedy club and the reality of everyday life in society can coexist separately, but it is a high risk of conflict if they should mix. In October 2009, the famous British stand-up comedian Jimmy Carr got into trouble for telling a joke about British war amputees at one of his shows, and after a lot of criticism from family members from war amputees he had to formally apologize (Telegraph 2009).

In an interview a few days later, Carr blamed the mainstream media for blowing the case out of proportion and taking his joke out of context. He said that people who attended his shows knew what they were paying for, and that the families who responded with anger were not at the show, but had been called up by journalists who recited the joke for them and asked them what they felt about it. "I can't think of anything more inappropriate", Carr stated (Moss 2009). The journalists had taken a joke that Carr told at a show and brought it out from the show space into public space. The joke, which was originally told to a paying audience, was served to a much larger non-paying audience through mainstream media, and people reacted furiously. Carr's performance was no longer in his control. The line between performer and audience in face-to-face interaction, and the audience's capacity to engross themselves in a staged performance as something other than its real-life model (Goffman 1974) was swept away by this violation. As Yi-Fu Tuan mention in the epigraph above; performance requires and commands its own space.

The main difference between these two audiences was that the paying audience had entered an environment framed for playful joking and interaction, the public audience had not. In the previous chapter, I described how Colin continuously made fun of Derek the kick-boxing instructor, how Aaron Watson commented on the posture of a married couple sitting close to the stage, and how Damian Clarke made fun of the British and their obsession with tea. These jokes were told by the comedians to an audience of strangers, still the audience laughed at it all. The comedy venue, like in theatre, might be considered a 'performance nest' (Schechner 1988), which is a place where people gather, perform, and then disperses. The practices of getting into the venue frames the comedy show as a performance; people who are going to watch a show at BYC need to arrive at the venue, collect tickets, buy refreshments, get in line, and get seated in front of the stage. They have to put an effort into entering something. The performance nest allows an audience to enjoy jokes without feeling morally ashamed, or feeling he should intervene on what is going on onstage (Schechner 1988). They are there to be entertained and are willing to listen to the comedian.

A comedy show needs its own performance space in order to create a playful frame and a performance nest where the comedian and his audience can joke together about different topics without going against the moral consensus of society. Joking, on the metaphysical level, is a form of death and rebirth, and should be handled with autonomy (Douglas 1968). The performance nest is supposed to make conflicts evident, at the same time, its bottom line is solidarity (Schechner 1988). The reason why show space and public space are incompatible is because they view the same lived reality differently. This reflection

can be harmful if exposed to society and its norms, and needs to be contained. At all the comedy shows I attended in London, none had windows were you could look out to the streets, and those who did used curtains to block it out. As the medieval carnival was a world in itself where utopian freedom was present (Bakhtin 1984), the comedy venue is a space separated from the rest of society where joking about serious topics is both acknowledged and accepted.

Significant characteristics of performance spaces

I believe that, what the promoters describe as "intimacy" (cf. Introduction p. 20), moulds the interaction between the performer and the audience during a comedy show, and that the intimate is shown on different levels. Based on my observations, intimacy within the comedy club can be constructed through different performances which help to frame the situation of the comedy show as an intimate one. The first performance form is what I chose to call the spatial intimacy performance, which concerns the spatial limitations and the interior attributes of the show room that is laid out and used by the promoters and performers. The second performance form I call the sensory intimacy performance, which entails the power of technological advances in the room, like lighting and sound, and how they can create feelings of intimacy by applying to the senses of the spectators. The last performance form concerns elements of intimacy in both verbal and non-verbal communication within social interaction between performer and audience, and will be further analysed in detail in Chapter 3. These performances are meant to secure that the audience feels close to the comedian and each other, and that they feel apart together.

Spatial intimacy performance: Ensuring community

How the venue is organized prior to the show is crucial for club managers and comedians alike, in terms of providing a well-structured space where comedians and audience can interact. The use of space and the goal to produce a social setting is one of the foundational differences between stand-up and informal joking (Rutter 1997). These uses of space can range from the size of the venue and the show room, to how the tables and chairs are organized.

The fact that the venue should be spatially small is one thing that a lot my performer informants agreed upon. For example, they all prefer low ceilings. By having low ceilings, the sound from both the comedian and the laughter from the audience do not disappear or die out

as easily as in a room with a high ceiling. Matt, a compere, told me low ceiling are important to: "to keep the audience feeling enclosed […] The laughter goes up. And it's hard to get an atmosphere if there is too much space." (Interview with Matt 23.05.14) Similarly, many performers stress the fact that the audience members themselves should be seated compactly together. Kevin, a London-based comedian in his thirties who mostly works as a compere at different shows, said that the audience being sat close to each other and close to the stage is a key factor: "[…] so if people are close together they can hear the person next to them, that they don't know, laughing, they feel safe to laugh, because laughter is, I think, a group activity […] people will laugh as a pack" (Interview with Kevin 30.04.2014). Unlike a lot of theatre productions where there are different classes of seats and the price you pay for them (Schechner 1988), in most comedy venues, like BYC, the seats are one class and one price. Spatial intimacy is, in this context, vital for the people in the audience to feel, and act, like a social unit.

BYC operated with tables and chairs organized neatly close together, but another distinct trait of the room they used was the mobile walls they had handmade from pallets, wooden planks and black cloth, which was used to "shrink the room".

Figure 6 - The mobile walls at BYC (photos taken by the author)

Daniel, the manager at BYC, told me the function of the walls was to "shrink the room", or rather to make the "show-space" within the show room seem smaller and make it more compact and intimate:

> What we know from 15 years of experience is that you can have a small crowd in a big room, but they can have just a good night as a big crowd in a small room. It's about how you lay out the room, […] By being able to shrink the room down, it means if we have a night of a hundred people, or two hundred people, they feel absolutely lovely,

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they look around and it looks really busy. But if we have twenty or thirty people, […] we can shrink the room and those people feel they're in a very cozy, very nice environment. (Interview with Daniel, 22.05.2014)

By being in control of the setting, one is able to manipulate the information the audiences receives and give the performer some sense of security (Goffman 1959). In this example, Daniel is able to make the show setting seem spatially dense and intimate even with few people in the audience. Studies have showed that audiences subjected to humorous content in spatially dense rooms usually enjoy the humour more, and is more likely to be self-conscious and motivated to behave correctly (Aiello, Thompson, Brodzinsky 1983). In addition to making the audience feel comfortable, the intimate format of the performance environment also works to absolve the promoters and their venue from any critique if the show is going poorly. "In some clubs you can blame the room, […] We make sure the comics have the best opportunity to do a good show, and by doing that, it means that the comics really don't have the excuse that it's anything to do with the room or the venue, it's then only on their gags" (Interview with Daniel, 22.04.14).

The photos in Figure 6 show how the walls have several purposes. First of all, it makes the room seem smaller by placing them as close to the tables as possible. Second, the walls are constructed also to contain stacks of chairs in three different cages. They are used for storage, as well as markers of space. Third, the walls construct a "show-space" and thus also create a "back-space" where the promoters can stack tables and store other tools like garbage bins and trolleys. These walls do not just shrink or expand the interactional show-space, they articulate it.

The promoters organize the seating in the show-space, and the way they organize it depends on how many people they are expecting. The mobile walls make the show-space fit the audience, and the storage behind the wall gives the promoters the chance to quickly store excess tables and chairs. On February 15th, before the show, Daniel went over the numbers of people they were expecting that Saturday night, and assessed how many chairs and tables they would need. The night before had been successful with around 80 people in the audience, but that night they were only expecting around 60. "It's weird how Fridays are busier than Saturdays," Daniel told me. "One would think more people would be out on Saturdays, but they probably have their own thing going on." Carl and I were told to remove the chairs and tables we did not need, stack them behind the walls and push the walls forward.
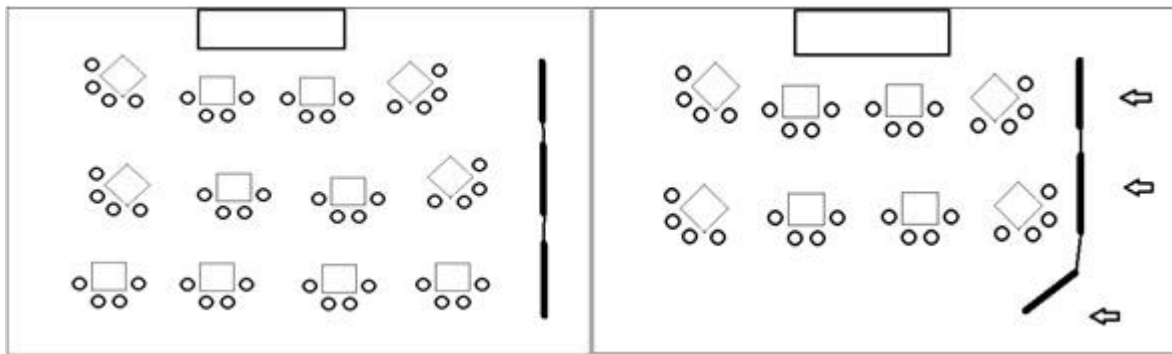
Figure 7 – The rectangular at the top represents the stage; the cubes represent the tables; the circles around the cubes represent occupied seats, and the thick lines to the right represent the walls (Illustrations made by the author)

The illustrations are made to explain how we organized from the remnant seating from the night before (left) to the new seating that day (right), I have, however, simplified the illustrations by using smaller amounts of chairs and tables than we actually did that night. The dynamics between shrinking and expanding the show-space is the same no matter how many or how few people arrive. When a lot of people are expected one night, the promoters applies more space between the tables for people to move in (*i.e.* when audience members are going to the bathroom or promoters are bringing out food during the intervals), but when less people are expected, they do not need the same amount of space and the chairs and tables can be placed closer together and closer to the stage. While Carl and I were removing the excess chairs from the show-space, Daniel came in and looked over the room and told us to move all the seating a little bit to the left and move the wall inwards in the same direction: "But make good space between the tables and the [left] wall, we want a nice passage for the comedians to go through when entering the stage." Much like interior designers, Daniel is always imagining the audience's and the comedian's movement when he is organizing the room, and assessing how they can both make an intimate atmosphere in the room as well as making people able to move efficiently between table and chairs. 60 people came in that night, as prophecy foretold, but there were also 20 people who dropped in without tickets, so Carl and I had to make the show-space fit 80 people again. The walls, as markers of space as well as a storage unit, help to keep fluidity in the show-space.

Sensory intimacy performance: Guiding the way

Within the physical prepared realms of BYC the promoters also need technical equipment like sound and lighting to create an intimate atmosphere and guiding the audience through the performance. Much like the spatial performance, the sensory intimacy performance makes the audience and the performers onstage feel closer together within time and space, but this 'illusion' of intimacy appeal more to the senses than the sheer physicality of the walls surrounding the show-space. The goal of the sensory performance that the promoters and the comedians put on is mainly to underpin the intimate relations between the audience members and between the audience and the comedians, and also instruct the audience on how to behave in certain situations.

During a show, the only lights that are brightly lit are stage lights, which are directed towards the stage to illuminate the comedian on it, as well as guiding the audience's focus of attention. In all the comedy clubs I visited in London, none operated with a fully lit room where the lights covered both the comedian and the audience. At BYC, the lights are lit at the audience section and dimmed at the stage during intervals, and *vice versa* during the stage performance. At the same time, at BYC, I noticed how the back space behind the mobile walls was darkened through the whole show. Though James, Daniel and Carl always went behind the walls to assemble some chairs and tables for latecomers, I never observed audience members go behind the walls and collect chairs themselves. Same as the mobile walls, the lighting articulates the show-space and separates it from the back space, and the darkness behind the walls is telling the audience that this area is out of bounds. It affects the character of space (Tuan 1990). When the lights above the audience section are dimmed and the light on the stage is simultaneously lit, it is the promoters' and the comedians' way of telling people the show is starting again. It brings the attention to the audience without having the promoters walking around telling people to keep quiet. The lighting instructs the audience on what is happening and at the same time guides them on how to behave.

The performer onstage is supposed to have the authority to speak during the stage performance, and the lights help to encapsulate his performance as authority as well as entertainment. When the only lit lights are facing the person onstage, it tells the audience that he is in charge, but the lights can also be used against the audience to make them behave. Although the majority of the light in the room should direct the energy towards the stage, Kevin thinks that the audience section also should be a little bit lit: "[…] dim light in the room so it's not pitch black, because if it's pitch black they [the audience] think they can get away with murder. They need to have a little light so they think they can be partially seen"

(Interview with Kevin 30.04.14). At lots of venues, the stage lights are so strong that the comedian cannot see the majority of the audience, and one thing you can do to keep them in check is to make them feel watched, although they are not. The lighting signifies restraint, whether it is the light directed at the stage, or the dimmed light in the audience.

The illumination of the comedian is vital in making him perceivable, but in London comedy clubs there are usually no show-rooms with amphitheatre style seating, so, in addition, the comedian is often dependent on a stage to stand on in order to be seen. Same as the lighting in the room, the stage as a physical entity creates an analogous formalized distinction between performer and spectator, i.e. comedian and audience member (Brodie 2008).

The stage works as a natural point in the room where attention should be paid, as the person standing on it looms over the people in the audience section. It is an embodiment of the comedian's symbolic supremacy, and it is one of the only physical factors in the room that is not altered from show to show. The stage is a signal to the audience that they do not have any right or obligation to participate directly in what is going on onstage (Goffman 1974). Either way, the stage is not very high from the ground, because even if the comedian is the authorial agent in the room while the show is going on, he is dependent on a spatial closeness to the audience.

Figure 8 – A performer and his audience (Photo taken by the author)

In a comedy club, the audiences are not just active, they are interactive (Brodie 2008). Comedy clubs as a social environment share a lot of traits with the modern theatre, where

human beings apply ready-made spaces for performances (Schechner 1988). When a person who has never seen a comedy show before enters the show-room, he is still able to recognize the classical theatre style of chairs facing a stage. It articulates the show-space as a show-space.

The performer also uses a microphone to amplify her voice over others, and during the comedy show it is a tool for both showing authority and expressing intimacy and unity. By using a microphone and a stage, the comedian is able to establish himself as louder, and more perceivable than the rest of the people in the audience. It allows the comedian to control the situation in the room more thoroughly by drawing focus to oneself (Brodie 2008). At the same time, the mic allows more expressive forms of performance to take part onstage. With an amplified voice, the performer can be heard clearly, both when she whispers and when she talks loudly. This 'conversational speech' (Lockhart 2003) gives the audience the impression that they are taking part in an actual face-to-face conversation with the comedian. It creates the illusion of a small group discussion, despite the audience's actual size. Still, the sight of a microphone is a clear signal to the audience that the person going up on stage will have the authority to speak. Together with the stage and the chairs facing it, the mic helps to frame the social situation before it has even started, and helps the audience member to associate himself as a listener to what the performer has to say (Georges 1969). The mic, both as a tool and as a symbol, is a device used to further articulate the intimate, but yet distinct relationship between comedian and audience.

While the mobile walls and the structuring of chairs as a compact unit are supposed to communicate social unity, the stage, lighting, and microphone are meant to express the hierarchical differences between comedian and audience. Although they all help to create an intimate atmosphere within the show-room, they also communicate the different roles people are meant to identify themselves to, and the behaviour that is expected of them.

Comedy club behaviour and bar behaviour – the challenges of shifting frames

Drinking is often an essential part of going to a comedy show, but there is a fine line between enjoying alcohol and drinking too much. Family and friends go to a show to drink and have a good time together, but at the same time, alcohol consumption and the bar culture in the UK is not always entirely compatible with going to a comedy show. Perhaps the best audience a comedian can perform in front of is a relaxed, but also a focused one. Alcohol consumption can make audiences relaxed, and the allowance to drink beer and wine makes the comedy

show seem more informal. But excessive drinking can make people unfocused on what goes on onstage and create trouble for the performance. The framing of the comedy show and framing of bar experience are closely related, but pose two different modes of behaviour.

To meet people for drinks in bars is a well-known phenomenon in British pub culture. The pub plays a central part in English society, from the many working class pubs in Victorian society, to the traditional English pubs today which are popular places of interest for visiting tourists. It still serves as an environment where people can enjoy other activities in more neutral and communal surroundings than at home or at work. Both the comedy show and the bar share characteristics with what Oldenburg (1989) calls 'the third place'. What characterizes third places is that it is an inclusive place with no formal criteria for any form of membership. And, according to Oldenburg, the natural activity within third places is conversation. Though people who are sitting alone drinking in bars are quite normal to sight, he is correct in that the bar is a place for friends to gather and chat. The comedy show is a place where people meet and watch a show together, and a bar, which is known for hosting entertainment like concerts and so on, is a friendly and neutral place for a comedy show to be held.

Although the pub and the comedy club both share the same venue and try to establish a safe and friendly environment for people to interact in, they pose two different behavioural contexts. In the previous chapter, a drunken man was being noisy and almost threatened the positive relationship going on between the audience and Colin, which made Colin react. Still, the bar is dependent on selling the audience alcohol to profit from the show and keeping it running. In response, promoters and performers have different tactics and strategies to deal with the audience's alcohol consumption and the risk that comes with it. The spatial separation between the bar and the show room, and the organizing of the show room plays a vital part in making the audience not overdrink. I use the term 'show room' to describe the room where the show is taking place, the term 'bar' to describe the adjacent room where they sell alcoholic beverages over the counter, and the term 'venue' to describe the whole venue where the different rooms and interactions take place.

Rutter (1997) explains how the bar and the show space are both part of the comedy experience, but that they inherently pose two different forms of behaviour. The show behaviour implies sitting down while listening and responding, while the bar behaviour connotes drinking and chatting between groups. The bar space and show space were separated at most of the comedy clubs where I conducted fieldwork, and one of the advantages of keeping them separated was to prevent drunk people from entering the show room before

assessing if they were sober enough to come in. At one of the shows I attended at LMC in Hitchin, Paul had to deal with an old and extremely drunk gentleman. The show was almost finished, and the drunken man asked if he could watch the last 10 minutes. Paul said: "Yes, if you drink a glass of water first." The man went to the bar, got a glass of water, and drank it as Paul watched from the entry doors to the show room. When he had finished the glass, Paul let him in. Paul, who was used to dealing with drunks, told me:

> He was extremely drunk. When they asked him at the bar what he wanted, he answered 'Brown stuff'. He didn't even remember the word 'beer'. But he showed me he could behave himself, and there was only a few minutes left of the show. I let him in for free and told him to take a seat at the back. (Paul 07.02.14)

Paul used the bar as a setting where he could estimate if the man was too intoxicated to be allowed entry. The adjacency of the bar and showroom gave him the backstage assistance he needed to handle the situation without disrupting the performance of the show (Goffman 1959). The man was in a grey area between the two behaviours. He was in a condition which could make him a disturbance in the show room, but at the same time he expressed that he wished to watch the show. When he proved to Paul that he was able to listen and respond to what he said, he was allowed to enter.

The separation of the bar and the show is often vital for the show to go undisturbed without the noise from the bar and the people buying drinks. When I asked a compere, Laura Lexx, what she felt was important in a venue, she replied that the bar should not be in the same room as the stage, and if it was "it should not be lit up as bright as the stage" (Interview with Laura 02.04.14). One thing that defines a well-structured venue for comedy is that the stage is the only eye-catching feature in the room. People buying drinks in the middle of a show can also be a problem. In 2008, the popular musician Van Morrison wished to ban the audience from drinking alcohol during his concerts (Cooper 2008). The reason was that he was tired of people walking back and forth to the bar while he was playing. There was a constant shifting of frames between watching a concert and going for a drink. During a comedy show at BYC, people would sometimes get up to get drinks from the bar, but most of them waited until the intervals. The comedy show is similar to theatre and opera in structure. This is one of the factors separating comedy shows from popular music concerts. Same as in concerts, the bar at a comedy show is "omnipresent" (Rutter 1997:75), but instead of a constant flow of people moving to the bar and back to the performance, the comedy show operates with intervals where the audience moves as they like. The separation of bar and show

can equally separate the behaviours they generate.

Even if the bar and the show room are spatially separated, they are both spaces were drinking is an expected activity. They are both 'third places', and it can be hard to separate these quite similar social frames. Drinking in a comedy club is always encouraged, but regulated (Rutter 1997), and although it can create disturbances, the promoters know that drinking can make people more relaxed during a performance. Cooper (2008) also explained to Van Morrison in her article: "[…] a tipsy crowd is usually an enthusiastic one." But what is it that can potentially make the alcohol consumption of certain audience members get out of hand? Rutter (1997) describes how a comedy club can appear more informal than other venues. Although the show room is separated from the room where the bar is, the show is still taking place within a bar establishment. The exterior of the bar usually states that this place is a bar, rather than a comedy club. At the BYC, it did not say Comedy Club on the exterior walls, but "Backyard Bar and Grill". Even though the show nights were usually the busiest, they still hosted the comedy shows only on weekends. During weekdays they were an ordinary bar with food and drink sales, and other events like quizzes or cabaret nights might be hosted on given nights. For people visiting the bar often, it might be difficult for them to alter their behaviour from room to room, maybe especially after a few beers.

The comedy show and the show room are not fixed places, but they come into being every time a show is on. Nowhere do we find a performance space that is constant (Schechner 1988), at BYC they shift between being just a bar to a venue where they host a comedy show. A new meaning and purpose is done to the space where people interact; people, the promoters in particular, are 'writing on the space' (Schechner 1988:156) in making it a comedy club. The interior of a comedy club is often quite similar from club to club, with the typical stage with a microphone and a section of chairs turned towards it. A lot of people have been to, or are familiar with, comedy shows and how they progress from beginning to end. Many people know that if they attract attention to themselves from stage or from others they can be subject for ridicule. They will always interpret what is going on by paying attention to their surroundings, and act according to prior experiences (Bruner 1986). Negotiating the balance between being in a bar and resorting to bar behaviour needs to be learned by the people within the comedy show context (Rutter 1997). One way of negotiating this balance is making the show space recognizable, which will make it easier for the audience to interpret which behaviour is appropriate for this context, and thus making them feel more comfortable in their surroundings. By altering the spatial contents of the show-room, it can help people shift from one framed experience to another in terms of behaviour.

It seems that organizing of the spatial and interior format of the comedy show is of great significance, not only in order to make an intimate setting for the audience, but also to inform the audience that they are entering something other than the bar context. The risk of discrepancy between these two behaviours can be rectified by the neatly and conservative way they organize the venue.

Chapter 3 – UNITY AND LIVENESS: FRAMING GROUP COHESION

James looked over the crowd before him. The audience of 50 to 60 people were sitting in groups and chatting normally, except for a group of young men sitting in the front row. They were out on a bachelor party, and in addition of being a bigger group, they talked a little louder than the rest. It was 7.45pm, and Laura came up to James. "Should we start?" she asked, and James replied "Yeah, they seem settled down. I'll introduce you." James went into the sound box, turned off the music in the background, dimmed the lights as he brightened the lights onstage, and picked up the mic. The talking among the audience started to fade out a little.

> **Excerpt 4-1: Laura at BYC 22.02.14[6]**
> **James [over the speakers]**: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Backyard Comedy Club. Please, go wild, go crazy, for your compere, Laura Lexx!
> **Audience**: [W:C:A] {Laura enters the stage and takes the mic out of the stand}
> **Laura**: <u>Hey, Bethnal Green</u>, are we alright? [C] <u>That's great.</u> Look, there's a sea of

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[6] To transcribe performances and interactions between performer and audience, I have adopted parts of Ian Brodie's (2008) transcription model in order to illustrate variety in audience response as well as the rhythm in the interactions and mass communication going on, and placed them in excerpts. Bracketed characters ([L]) indicates audience reactions: A=Applause, Aw=Awing, C=Cheers, L=Laughter, O=Ooing (to express recognition of a taboo topic), S=Silence, W=Whooping. Small bracketed characters [l] indicate that only a marginal part of the audience is doing the audible reaction. Colons (:) indicate that more than one reaction is occurring simultaneously, while an arrow (→) indicates transition from one reaction to another. Underlined words indicate that the last reaction is still audible, but that the performer is still talking over it. Gestures, and other non-verbal cues are described within curly brackets, e.g., {looking back at the audience}, and altering of voices are put in quotations. Ellipses in brackets [...] indicate a part of the section which is not transcribed.

cock in the front row. [L] <u>Yes, my gosh</u>, gosh, excellent, {turns to young man sitting in the front row} look at you, you got a 'man-sit' going on, are [L] <u>you all settled</u> in this evening?

YM: Um, yeah.

Laura: Are you? You can tell, cause you still got your balls, and your displaying them proudly [L] <u>before me</u>. So that's going well, well done, well done, so when's the big day?

YM: Ninth of March.

Laura: Ninth of March? He still remembers it. {turns to the rest of the audience} Hello, rest of the room, are we all right? [C] {Looks at a woman sitting in second row} <u>Very good</u>, wait, tea? Are you drinking [L] <u>tea? Bloody hell</u>, Bethnal Green, I didn't know what to expect, but it certainly wasn't this [l]. What a classy gig, what a classy gig. I think there's a fine line between being classy and trashy. I think it's the difference between Chanel being your perfume, and your name. [L] I don't want to sound like a snob, but I am, so let's continue from there. {turns to a young man in the second row} Hi there, you still got your coat on? Are you alright? [l] Oh, now you look too nervous to take it off, feel free, feel free.

YM2: No, I'm alright.

Laura: You're alright, that's great [l], it's like first day of school, this, I won't make you do something you don't want to. [L] {turns to couple on the left end of the first row} <u>And we got a</u> lovely couple here, are you on a date, are you married, what?

Man: We're on a date.

Laura: {energetically} You're on a date! How [W:C] <u>lovely</u>. Be careful, unless you might turn out like this {points to YM} poor 'fella' [L]. {turns to YM} <u>No, good for you</u>, good for you, how long have you been with your lovely lady?

Groom-to-be: Five years.

Laura: Five years! Gosh, and she didn't find anyone else? [L] <u>I'm joking, I'm joking</u>. Five years is a lovely time. {turns back couple} So how many dates have you been on?

Man: Three.

Laura: Three? {Smiles and nods} Hello. [l] {Turns to the rest of the audience} If they're still there by the third act, then we know it's not happening, don't we? [L]

During my fieldwork, it seemed evident to me that the cooperation between compere and promoters were of a central and vital importance for designing the interactional framework between audience and performer. There is a need to establish that stand-up and informal joking differs greatly in that stand-up comedy shows takes place as events. As Rutter (1997) clarified, the use of space and the goal to create a social setting is one of the key differences between stand-up comedy shows and regular informal joking. The common goal of the performers and promoters was to create feelings of unity in an interactional and closed off setting. A group formation of strangers attending an event, where they have never met each

other before and never will again, will often stand out as a contrast to all the other external group formations the participants are part of, and it is through this formation the locally generated group will often cast its strongest shadow (Goffman 1961). In this chapter I will illustrate how they both interact with the audiences in eliciting group cohesion.

The similarity between event-based and everyday joking is that joking happens between people who share an affiliate bond. Joking and humorous interaction does not happen in a vacuum, but is introduced between people who negotiates the joke told, assessing it based on the situation they are in, what relationship they have with the other, and evaluating the total situation on general past experience (Coates 2007). If joking between participants is to be successful, the situation needs to be framed by the participants as playful and performed as such. Everyday joking between friends and colleagues can be established through numerous interactions during the entire day, but at comedy shows, where the participants are mostly strangers, the jocular relationship needs to be thoroughly designed through copious framing of interaction, and performance of playful intimacy. A social event consisting of mostly strangers sometimes needs another stranger who is invited to socialise and bring the group together, anchoring the group formation and preventing the participants from drifting back into past relationships and group affiliations (Goffman 1961). In a comedy show, the compere interacts with the audience and brings people together around a common focus. It is his job to make the people feel at ease, and make them feel part of the events going on. He is, nonetheless, dependent on the audience's participation to elicit this group formation. There needs to be common ground between the audience and the performer and a shared understanding before social act of joking can successfully transpire.

I opened this chapter with an excerpt containing the opening lines of the London-based comedian and compere, Laura Lexx. She was introduced onto stage by James, and the audience cheered and made a lot of noise when she entered the stage. Laura opened by speaking directly to the audience as a whole; she asked them questions, and took a break in talking and awaited their response; she talked directly to specific audience members and awaited their response, before she repeated their answer and responded back again. The different layers of interaction and performance shown in this excerpt are too many and too dense to sum up in this introduction. In addition to differ from trivial joking, stand-up comedy is also different from a lot of other stage performances in terms of the level of audience interaction. The audience is not quietly sitting there until they give a standing ovation and applaud during the curtain call, they shift between laughing, listening, and responding to the performer's inquiries. There is framing of performance, and there is framing of response.

There are elements of intimacy, unity and, what Laura calls, 'liveness' in the way certain comperes and promoters interact with the audience. They are constantly framing the social situation as playful. Throughout this chapter I aim to show how both comperes, promoters, as well as comedians, use different interactional methods and communicate with the audience through different channels during the show, in order to generate feeling of intimacy, 'liveness', mutual trust and consensus between performer and audience members.

Laughter as response, communication, and interaction

In the Seinfeld episode "The Switch" (1995), Jerry, the stand-up comedian and the protagonist of the show, is dating a woman that does not laugh. During a dinner out with her, he cracks a joke about a film they just saw together, and the woman does not even smile. She simply says "that's funny". Later in the episode, Jerry shares his frustration with his friend Elaine, telling her how odd it is that someone would not laugh at something they thought was funny: "She said: 'that's funny'. 'That's funny'! How can I be with someone that doesn't laugh, it's like… well, it's like something." For Jerry, the natural reaction to something funny is laughter, and commenting on the hilarity in a subdued tone is considered as odd and abnormal.

Comedians and comperes rely on feedback from the audiences during their shows, and the most common way of receiving feedback is through the audience's laughter. The quality and progression of the show is dependent on continuing audible feedback between the performer and the audience. In excerpt 4-1, the audience continuously respond to Laura's comments, often in the form of [L] or [l]. "It's definitely giving the comedian confidence and energy I think. That boom of laughter, it gives you that adrenaline rush to go into the next bit and sell the next bit," Laura told me when we discussed the importance of laughter.

The feedback from the audiences and the interactions between performer and audience depend on maintaining "high energy". 'Energy' is here an emic concept which revolves around the audible intensity and density from the performer's comments and utterances and the audience's response, and *vice versa*. Through laughter, the audience is able to channel their response and show their appreciation of the comic in interactive feedback. One analytic concept which might encapsulate this energy is *flow* (Csikszentmihaliy 1975), which is observable amongst many of the participants in play and ritual. Flow is action by action, it is governed by an internal logic, and rules, motivations, and the will to participate are some of the framing devices. By following the rules, the participant loses his ego and follows this

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flow, and he gives and receives feedback on his actions.

What Csikszentmihaliy is describing here might be classified as a social merge amongst the participants within the activity; that the performer and audience fulfil their roles according to the rules and motivations inherent in the social situation. It is similar to what Goffman (1961) classifies as *euphoria*, where the subject becomes engrossed in the situation. What he is obliged to attend to in the situation, and his actual perception of it, coincides, and he is fully enmeshed in the social interaction. As members of the audience is, to some extent, obliged to laugh, it can bring them into a sort of euphoric state if they are able to reach the mutual understanding of the situation as humorous. As I will discuss, this state of communal interaction is not always apparent in comedy shows, but it is without a doubt something the performers and promoters want to achieve. Even some of the audience go to the comedy clubs for this purpose, as a group of regulars at BYC told me: "We like going here, because the audience is usually less 'judgy' here." When I asked what they meant by that, one of them told me: "At some clubs, people seem more demanding to be entertained than wanting to participate and laugh. Backyard is not like that, everyone here usually seem to want to have a good time." This group of people were also aware of the communal feeling that can arise in laughter and participating during a comedy show, and classified it as a common goal for everyone involved.

But what is the function of laughter during a comedy show? Why is the comedian dependent on continuous feedback? Kevin explained to me that how the show turns out is based on the feedback he receives from the audience.

> **Kevin**: You can hear two-hundred people laugh and think "alright, that's two-hundred people laughing", and at that point that is my favourite joke, because it got the best reaction. So that is how you gauge on how the gig is going, because the level of laughter you hear is your only gauge. […] Cause you can't see a lot of them as well, the factor is that you can only see the front row. So if they're smiling at you for twenty minutes, it's horrible, it's horrible […]
>
> **Me**: So a loud response is kind of vital?
>
> **Kevin**: Yeah, essential really. (Interview 30.04.14)

Based on Kevin's explanation, the cornerstone of interaction between performer and spectator within the comedy club is audible feedback. Hence, one of the "rules" to keep up the flow during a show is that the audience is supposed to laugh at the performer's jokes they find funny. Same as with Jerry Seinfeld, laughter is both expected and considered a natural

reaction when something funny is uttered. The fact that he is unable to see big parts of the audience makes him reliant on an audible response to his jocular points and messages. A collective response gives the compere the confirmation he needs that the audience is with him. Matt Green, a comedian and compere based in London, explained to me that laughter is a social mechanism, and that he saw laughter as "a wave", and that the audiences had to be "crammed together" like a group to make them "laugh as one". Henri Bergson (1914) uses similar natural metaphors when he describes laughter as "in need of an echo, Listen to it carefully: it is not an articulate, clear, well-defined sound; it is […] something beginning with a crash, to continue in successive rumblings, like thunder in a mountain" (1914:7-8). Using natural phenomenon as metaphors, both Matt and Bergson describes laughter not as messages filled with connotations and different meanings, but as a response model which signals group cohesion. Such is the function of laughter between performer and audience. The laughter indicates if the majority of the audience accepted and approved the performer's jocular message, it underlines shared understanding of the social situation.

It is, however, important to note that laughter is not just a passive response to the performer's jokes and humorous comments, e.g. in a stimulus-response model (Rutter 1997), but works as communication between the interactive parties. The fact that 'canned laughter', which is the laugh track that plays over when something funny happens in TV shows, proved to produce more laughter among the subjects watching, without the subjects rating the jokes as any funnier (Glenn 2003), and that laughter itself is contagious (Provine 1992) shows that laughter is more than just mere response to something that is perceived as funny. Matt told me that when there is silence during a show, some members of the audience might feel a little tense: "They think: 'why is no one laughing?', even though they are not laughing themselves" (Interview 23.05.14). It is a part of the interaction, and it is expected. In the empirical examples found in this thesis, laughter is also a source of communication between audience and the performer. The audience is consciously laughing where they think laughter is appropriate. To illustrate, here follows a fragment of one of Kevin's performances where he talks about dating women on the Internet:

Excerpt 4-2: Kevin at BYC 28.03.14
Kevin: I managed to sleep with a woman with a vaginal piercing [S]. Yeah, it turns out, if you've got a fanny like a scrapyard, I'm not interested [L]. I did not know that about myself, ladies and gentlemen [l]. I mean, sex is already confusing enough, there's no need to add shrapnel to the [L] equation.

What is most interesting, for me, in this example, is that there are examples within this conversation where the audience starts laughing before Kevin has finished his sentence, and Kevin responsively jumps into the next joke before the laughter dies out completely. And also, in most lines where laughter occurs, the laughter is built up, with a few people starting the laugh before the rest joins in, and then fades out. It shows that this interaction takes place in real time, and that the participants within are alive to the situation, responsive to what they perceive, and controls their level of audible response according to others in the room. It is evident that there is active communication through feedback between the parties in the situation, and that they try to reach a shared understanding of the situation.

Framing social unity and play – promoter/audience interaction

It has been mentioned earlier how behaviour in the bar space and in the show room differ from each other, and should be kept apart. I will now illustrate how the promoters frame social unity through friendly and non-threatening interaction with the audience prior to the show, with focus on the transition when the audience is let from the bar into the show room.

Most of the promoters at BYC seemed quite professional and service-minded when they interacted with the members of the audience outside of the show room. Their services consisted of selling, and buying, beer, and showing the directions to the toilet. However, the level of informality and intimacy in the interaction between promoters and audiences varied from outside to the inside of the show room. Especially in the transition between outside and inside of the physical space of the play frame, it was necessary to symbolically mark the transition from one form of behaviour to another.

At BYC, James always operated quite professionally when he was working in the bar area before the show. He was moving effectively when he served food, and took drink orders at the bar counter. When it was time to let people in to have a seat, James would enter the show room and stand alongside the wall next to the back row of tables. When the audience was let into the show room, James greeted every person entering with a smile, and if anyone was hesitant on where to sit, James would approach them and direct them to one or more vacant tables where they could sit together. There was also a difference in behaviour between the promoters themselves inside or outside of the show room. In the bar area, James and Blair could have a loud conversation behind the bar counter on things that needed to be done before the show, while in the show room the talk was more quite, often done by whispering or using ear-pieces to communicate from different corners of the room without having to shout. There

is certain dynamic in behaviour that occurs between behaviour in the bar space and behaviour in the show space.

At LMC, there was no separation between bar space and show space before the show, so the transition from outside to inside happened already at the front doors to the entire venue where Paul sat collecting entry fees. I observed Paul as he greeted people at the doors and politely ask them for money, or membership cards, and joking while he did it. When two women in the fifties entered, Paul said energetically: "Good evening! Membership cards?" One of the ladies confirmed and produced their membership cards. "Excellent, that will be eight pounds please." As one of the ladies handed him the money, she told her friend: "The prices here hasn't changed since the 90's." Paul looked up from his cash box. "It hasn't changed since the last time you were here, no." The ladies and Paul shared a laugh before they proceeded into the venue. Paul greeted all his customers with a friendly and informal tone from the start, establishing that the people were entering a jocular setting. Paul's shared laughter with the people he made fun of, meta-communicating that these jokes were meant as friendly and only for good fun. Informality was communicated the minute the audiences entered the venues.

Figure 9 - Paul welcomes the audience at the doors

Meeting the audience before the show commence might be a way of connecting with them early on and also at a different level. Paul explained that collecting money at the doors is a

good way to get to know the audience before the show:

> Working the doors is actually my favourite part of the evening. I get to meet every audience member face to face before the show starts. It gives me the opportunity to establish a bond with them early on, and they will immediately recognize me when I go onstage as compere later in the evening. Me sitting here, chatting to them as they come in, also gives them a little taste on what they can expect from the show. (Paul 07.02.14)

Many comperes need a little time to introduce themselves when they enter the stage the first time. Paul introduced himself an hour before the show started. He met every single patron that came through the doors and took their money as he had a quick chat with them as well. In his opening encounters (Goffman 1961; Schiffrin 1977), Paul firstly identify the people coming in as visiting customer by greeting them and asking them for membership cards, before he displays a social recognition of the situation as informal and humorous by cracking a few jokes. Further, there are no bouncers or no other forms of visual security present, there is only Paul sitting there with a beer on the table and a welcoming smile. The customer only has to pay the entry fee, and can move on into the bar as he likes. There is coherence between the setting, and the appearance and manner (Goffman 1959). The customer is to believe he is entering an informal environment, and Paul's welcoming nature establishes that.

The casualness the promoters have to perform in front of the audience is not limited to just verbal communication and appearance, but also gestures. One evening at AC, Barry, his helpers, and I had just completed setting up the table and chairs and prepared to welcome the audience inside. While Barry announced to the audience that they could now enter, I moved myself over to the wall besides the stage and observed the audience entering. I leaned against the wall, crossing my arms, and a lot of the audience members made eye-contact with me. After a few minutes Barry signalled from the back of the room that he wanted to speak with me. When I came up to him he whispered: "You can't stand like that against the wall. People are already quite self-conscious when they enter, and your posture might seem a little intimidating to them." "I didn't mean to look threatening," I responded. "Of course not." Barry said. "But you look like you are." Any sign of formality in comedy clubs can be counterproductive for the positive atmosphere the promoters try to create. Instead of informal tone in conversations functioning as a suspension from formality, the promoters at the different comedy clubs strive to rid the setting of visual formal strictness and make it appear

more casual.

These ways of ensuring a non-confronting setting for the audience is the promoters' way of establishing the social consensus between the audience members that they are in a playful frame. Entering a room packed with chairs in front of a stage are often framed as a situation where people are supposed to be watching a show in quiet, their experience with this type of framework guides the audience in a particular behavioural direction (Goffman 1974). The promoters try to behave according to the playful tone that is supposed to be present in the social frame and context, signalling informality which can give the participants a sense of license to release emotions and feel at ease (Goffman 1961). In Bateson's terms (1972), by treating the audience in a friendly and informal manner, the promoters are signalling to the audience that 'this is play' in the comedy club context. The informal tone between the parties, and the equal treatment of every patron, produces social unity and cohesion. The elimination of authoritative denotation and use of intimacy in interaction frames the social situation as informal and open for participation from the audience. The comedians and promoters I have observed often tried to suppress their status, and distancing themselves from their role (Goffman 1959) as authoritative figures through the whole show.

The initial meeting between compere and audience

By this point, the audience have entered the venue, bought drinks, chatted before the show, entered the show room, and taken a seat. Right before the compere enters the stage, the promoters will turn down the music playing over the speakers, dim the lights above the audience and increase the spotlights on stage, before a promoter announce the compere over the speakers. These functions as symbolic markers of change of context, of definition of the social situation; it is marking a transition from one state of interaction to another. It can be interpreted as separating and marking sacred time from secular time (Turner 1979). From one second to the next, the audience's point of attention is diverted from the conversation between themselves and their friends and family around the tables, to directing their view to the stage. It is up to the compere to 'set the mood' and establish the format of the interaction now taking place. A compere will always open her performance onstage with expressing (1) high energy, (2) enjoyment of being present, and (3) interest in the audience. Showing an extreme openness and friendliness to the audience is important to frame the connection between them as playful and adhere to the 'liveness' of the show.

Kevin opened one of the shows at BYC in the following manner:

Excerpt 4-3: Kevin at BYC 28.03.14
James: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome the Backyard Comedy Club. Please, go wild, go crazy, for your host, Kevin Shepherd. [Kevin walks up to the stage] [W➔C:A]
Kevin: [pulls the mic out of the mic stand] Hi there, Backyard Bar, are you well? [W] That's great, it is so nice to be here. By cheering, how many of you have been to Backyard Comedy Club before? [C] And how many of you haven't been here before. [C] You guys seem slightly happier. [l]

This excerpt shows how Kevin incorporates all the three points mentioned in his first words with the audience. There was a significant level of (1) high energy going on in a feedback loop between the stage and audience section in this situation. As the audience was cheering, Kevin grabbed the mic and walked to the edge of the stage, directed his other arm out towards the audience in a welcoming fashion, and asked loudly: "… are you well?", in which the audience gave a big cheer in response. The level of high energy incorporated in the opening of the show differs from a lot of other forms of stage performances. In contrast to a lot of theatre productions where the audience is obligated to keep quiet when the show starts, the audience at a comedy show is urged to create noise and ruckus when the compere enters the stage, a level of energy that the compere is supposed to match in his stage performance. In the excerpt, Kevin shows (2) enjoyment of being present when he says: "That's great, it's so nice to be here." He immediately reaches out to them in the moment, signalling that it is happening here and now. This is to give the audience a feeling of liveness; the collective experience they are sharing is something bound to the present, and hence is unrepeatable (Reason 2004). Both when asking how the audience is doing, and asking how many have been to BYC before or not, Kevin is showing direct (3) interest in the audience. For the interaction to occur, he must show a cognitive recognition of the others in the room (Schiffrin 1977).

Perhaps the most important point of expressing unity and liveness in the room is for the compere to establish the expectation and demand for response from the audience. His questions for the audience in excerpt 4-1 came with an expectation of getting a response. At another of Kevin's shows, he entered the stage and grabbed the mic and said: "Thank you, thank you. Good evening." There was still a little noise coming from the audience's applauding when Kevin said "Good evening", and there were just a few people that seemed to catch up with what he was saying and responded. The rest of the audience was quiet. After about two seconds Kevin repeated, with his hand reaching out towards the audience: "Good evening." The audience responded with a clear "Good evening." "Alright, jolly good," Kevin said, and continued on. He did not proceed in his performance before he had received a clear response on his greeting from the audience. The conversation between performer and

audience was established, and they could all carry on with the show.

Matt told me once that it is important for the compere to demand a response from the audience when he enters the stage, in order to communicate that some degree of interactivity is expected of the audience. Kevin's repetitive greeting has a special significance in establishing a relation and communication between him and the audience. In an interview with Kevin, he explained that a comedian's dialogue with the audience should take the form of a more or less regular, everyday face-to-face interaction. His willingness to get a response illustrates that. Schiffrin (1977) claims that in opening encounters, it is expected that the listeners give the narrator response to show his presence in the conversation and that he is properly involved. Comperes, like Kevin, want the audience on their side from the moment they step onto the stage. In his opening lines, Kevin shows that he wants to be understood and recognized by the audience, in order to establish that they are part of the same dialogue (Rutter 1997). The fact that he and the audience has told each other "good evening", establishes that they now have started a conversation.

Establishing rules of interaction

Despite the framing of license to express emotions and informality in the comedy show context, there are still explicit rules given to the audience in regards of how to behave properly. These rules are presented to the audience by the compere and, to some extent, the promoters as social norms that need to be followed in order for everyone to have a good experience of the show. These norms include potential disturbances in the show, like cell phones, talking between audience members, and excessive drinking. In events such as a comedy show, people who attend the event but are not performing usually take on a role of listener, and all the duties such a role involves (Georges 1969). A comedy show, however, involves much participating from the audience, and it can be difficult for them to define their role as listeners. How interactive does one have to be, and what does it involve to be interactive? In a social setting seemingly so free of adherence to given rules, the audience's attention and behaviour must be guided to suit the performance going on (Marinis and Dwyer 1987).

Of all the comedy clubs exemplified in this thesis, only BYC had specific rules on basic ways not to behave, on their personal website. Under the header 'FAQ' (2015) they inform their visitors that mobile phones must be switched off during the show, intoxicated customers might be denied entrance and that talking during or disturbing the show is not

allowed.

The more standard way of communicating the rules of the show to the audience is by the compere informing them before he starts the show. The compere will go over the rules in his first section onstage, and there is a number of ways in which he can do it. The compere might start with establishing one or more rules in his first joke onstage. Kevin, e.g., usually starts his show with greeting the audience before he says: "Ladies and gentlemen, if you got a mobile phone, can you switch it off? And if you still got the 'Crazy Frog' ringtone, can you fuck off?" Here, Kevin is still communicating his message in a jocular frame, as well as instructing the audience on what to do. People did not respond with reluctance or felt threatened by Kevin's remark, they laughed and there was not a single phone that made noise during the entire show. Kevin chose a ringtone well-known for being extremely annoying to most people in order to gain agreement and acceptance from the audience when he posed one of the norms he wanted them to remind them of.

Another compere, Steve Allen, chose to do a longer introduction of the rules to his audience at BYC just before he was about to introduce the first comedian:

Excerpt 4-4: Steve at BYC 15.02.14
Steve: So, alright, as host of this evening, I have a few rules to go through. My job is to get you basically settled and focused. There are three rules for being a good audience member, you can afford to forget two of them, but one of them is very key. First rule, turn off your mobile phone, it's better that you check now than letting them go off later, obviously. But it's not the end of the world or whatever. Rule number two, don't heckle, at least not in a "dick-ish" way, as long as you mean it well I guess we will all cope with that. Rule number three is the only rule you really need to pay attention to, don't sit there and have a chat to the person sitting next to you, cause it pisses everyone else off, sitting around you. And if you remember that, we're all up for a good night, are you up for this? [C]

Both these two introductions poses request for following established norms, but not in a controllable manner. Steve chose a longer presentation on three rules, but demonstrated early that two of them were of secondary importance while the last one was primary. He demonstrated that there are norms which a good audience member should follow, but that some are less important than others. Something as serious as presenting limitations on the audience's behaviour requests a distancing of the serious denotations it creates. Steve presented the norms for the audience in a way that insinuated that following them would benefit everyone, signalling that not talking to other audience members was a case of consideration of other audience members and respect for social consensus in having 'a good

night.'

All play frames have rules that need to be established for the playing to go on (Huizinga 1950), and there is a difference between determining the rules inside or outside the play frame. The rules listed on BYC's website are guidance to people who are considering going to a show and needs information. The information given is straight-forward and denotative. The explanation of the rules that Kevin and Steve gives the audience during the show is much more informally presented, and especially Steve's explanation takes on a more intimate way of communicating. The explaining of the rules does not take the same form of seriousness as the rules pointed out on the website. The framing of the situation communicates that the rules are supposed to be followed, but they are still stripped of the denotative argumentation that the 'outside' rules of the website is posing. Just like picture frame metaphor used by Bateson, the messages given inside the comedy show frame are both inclusive and exclusive, and messages inside the frame are not to be regarded in the same way as messages outside of it.

There is a cohesive power in a group when they explore the cultural values in society they also are secluded from. As Turner said: "To look at itself a society must cut out a piece of itself for inspection. To do this it must set up a frame within which images and symbols of what has been sectioned off can be scrutinized, assessed, and if need be, remodeled and rearranged" (1979:468). Both in anthropology, sociology, and folkloristics, stand-up comedy are viewed similar to a lot of other forms of popular culture, as means of societal analysis, examinations and reflections. But in stand-up, there is also a much more interactivity, compared to e.g. motion pictures, between what the teller tells and what the spectators spectate. This is perceivable, especially, when the compere is jumping from interacting directly with the audience to telling jocular stories about her own life. She is bringing different audience members into the performance, and interweaves them with her own experiences in the world, creating a community around the same goal and cause; encapsulating and examining different topics and life-stories found in contemporary society.

At all the clubs I attended regularly during my fieldwork, the promoters and comperes always worked towards the goal of making the show as successful as possible by focusing on the audience and their being in this secluded context. As in the liminoid state, the whole situation is built up in a sequential manner, cut out in space and time, wherein interactivity and freedom is the key. The show is not rigid, nor is it spontaneous. The promoters and comperes carefully set up the show framework in a sequential format. There is a gathering, performing, and dispersing, as Schechner (1988) puts it. And the plural reflexivity a social

group have of each other, according to Turner (1979), is only visible through performance.

The play framing through rejecting the ridiculing statements as 'untrue' or 'not serious' gives the ridiculing a safe platform for expressing points that would be considered aggressive and hostile in other situations. The seclusion of the situation and the discharging of the words expressed suggest that the utterances are not a threat to social order; it does denote what the biting words usually denote. The power in the words is real, but only in the moment.

Audience participation

Audience interaction is a vital part in stand-up comedy shows, which helps to ensure feeling of social unity between the participatory parties involved. Stand-up comedy is a format where the participants are able to analyse everyday topics, to share a plural reflexivity (Turner 1979). Like promoters and their spatial and sensory intimacy performance presented in the previous chapter, audience interaction is an intentional act by the compere to get socially closer to the audience in his performance. The compere intends to suspend the hierarchical distance between stage and audience section, and likewise suspend the seriousness revolving the different topics discussed during the show. And the interaction is not just for establishing trust between performer and audience, but also between audiences themselves. "You can say, in simple terms, a compere's job is to take a disparate bunch of people, all different people from different places that don't know each other, and turn them into a group, turn them into an audience." (Interview with Matt, 23.05.14) Like the external stranger who helps to create the group formation in social encounters (Goffman 1961), the compere's job is to gather the disparate people in the audience, and gather them around a mutual understanding of what is going on. The function of audience interaction is to erase the borders of unfamiliarity between him and the audience, between the audience members, and take part in the show and share the togetherness.

There are different ways of interacting with the audience, and I have identified some patterns in the interactions, which I see as distinct forms differentiated into three topics, and I have called them: 1) intimacy; 2) comments on the locale, locality and audiences; 3) and interactional dialogue with the audiences. I have organized these categories in terms of channels used by the compere to communicate between herself and the audience, and the level of how direct the interaction is. Interaction through 'intimacy' is not very direct in interaction, which bases itself on including the audience through choice of words when the performer tells his jokes. Interaction through 'comments on the locale, locality and audiences' is more direct;

the compere passes comments on looks and behaviours of himself, the audience or the visual and geographical setting they are in. Through 'interactional dialogue with the audiences' the compere is very direct in her interaction; she speaks to particular people in the crowd with the rest of the audience watching and participating. My argument is that all of these three forms of interactions generate a sense of unity and consensus within the group.

Intimacy

Firstly, the language of intimacy is something that occurred to me after speaking to Matt one time; he said that performers use different techniques in choice of words, not just in audience interaction, but also in regular story- or joke-telling. The same night I had seen Matt perform at a small club in Islington, where he performed a joke about his wife and him experimenting in the bedroom:

> **Excerpt 4-5: Matt 12.03.14**
> **Matt**: … we had our first Valentine's Day as a married couple, a few weeks ago, and that night I decided to something a little bit special for her. And she's always had this fantasy, and she doesn't like me telling you this, but she has this fantasy of making love… on a bed covered in money. [S→L] <u>Right, it is</u> a bit weird […] so yeah, I went to the bank, withdrew some money, got home and spread it out on the bed. And when she got home from work, we did it. And if we'll do it again, I will use notes. [L] <u>Yeah, it was pretty uncomfortable.</u> But since then, I have noticed a little change in her. [L→O] <u>{smilingly} that is a genuine joke, people</u>.

Matt told me after the show that the line "she doesn't like me telling you this" is not important for the audience to successfully apprehend the story or understand the jocularity in it, but it is a line he deliberately put in to make it seem like he was telling the audience a secret. "It creates intimacy and confidence between you and the audience. When you attribute your joke to someone like that they feel they are part of something present, not just as an audience watching a show, but an entire entity." (12.03.14) Matt presented his story like it was esoteric knowledge, an inside secret told to make the listeners feel as parts of the group (Goffman 1959). By doing this he erases the distance between himself onstage and the audience in the seats, they take part in the same story, apart together.

This verbal form of intimacy mostly consists of little cues. The stories being told are not always true. Laura told me that she likes to pretend that some stories she tells is truer than they are; "I try and perform that I'm like really embarrassed about the situation, like it's mortifying. And sometimes I [tell the audience] 'It's not even material, it's just my life,' when

it is in fact a 99 percent fabricated story." (Interview with Laura 02.04.14) With embarrassment and saying the line "it's not even material, it's just my life," Laura is signalling to the audience that the story is private as well as truthful, trying to make them feel privileged that she chose to tell it to them, and displaying the finely tuned collaboration that is going on between them (Davies 2003).

Comments on the locale, locality and audience

In the end of excerpt 4-5, Matt tells the audience: "that is a genuine joke" after they started 'awing' at his simplistic joke, showing that he acknowledges their ironic response. This is an effective way for the performer to signal to the audience that the show is live, and that they are all in actual presence of each other and can respond to elements present in the room. In the first extcerpt of this chapter, Laura is commenting on someone drinking tea, and then referring the situation to something she really did not expect to see in Bethnal Green. Similarly, Damien Clarke in Chapter 1 commented on the pallets hanging on the wall behind him and analysed it as probably a common phenomenon to encounter in a place like the East End. Both Laura and Damian are contextualising and framing the reality they all experience collectively as happening right there and then, establishing the uniqueness of the live performance going on (Rutter 1997).

Showing awareness of the locality of the venue is also a way for the performer to show familiarity with the audience in the room, especially in London where the visiting audience often lives nearby. Both Damian and Laura are performing liveness and also intimacy in that they both show active awareness that they are in Bethnal Green in the East End. At one time, I saw Matt compering at a comedy club in Leicester Square Garden, and before the show he told me that there is a big chance that there was going to be foreigners in the audience, considering the club was located in a very popular area for tourists. Early in his introduction he announced: "We are in Central London on a Friday night, we can have any sorts of people here, is there anyone here not from the UK?", and right after he got in contact with a girl from Australia and another one from Germany. Consequently, although the comedy show occurs outside of society's social structure and norms, there is still a sense of communality among the audience in the show room in terms of that most of them are from the same area or share common ground for being there.

In London-based comedy clubs, there can be political and cultural signs inherent in commenting on the location of the club, especially at BYC. Bethnal Green was historically, and still is, one of the poorer areas in London (Aldridge, Bush, Kenway, MacInnes, Tinson

2013), and is on the domestic top position when it comes to child poverty (Vale 2012). A lot of comedians and comperes performing at BYC often take the time of commenting on the state of the area, based on a stereotypical view.

Understandably, there is a stereotypical view of Bethnal Green and the East End being predominantly poor areas, which is source for a lot of humorous gags. Even BYC themselves have an ironic view on their home area, as one of the lines on their advertisement flyers reads "West End shows at East End prices", indicating that their shows are just as refined and high quality as the expensive Musical productions in West End, but at the same price level you usually get in the East End. The area around the venue itself is a piece of the society worth analysing within the secluded space of the comedy club.

Figure 10 – "If we all spit together, we can drown the bastards. RIP Bob Crow." A tribute to the Union leader Bob Crow, who died March 11th 2014, written on a wall not far from BYC. (Picture taken by the author)

Interactional dialogue with the audiences

Perhaps the most extensive indicator for intimacy and shared experience is the interactional dialogue with the audiences, which is the most direct form for the compere to interact with the audience, as he looks at and talks to people in the audience directly in front of the rest of the

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audience. Comperes use this form of interactional talk both for establishing relations with the audience, but also for teasing some selected audience members.

This form of interaction often appear slightly intimidating for the members of the audience, as they fear revealing sensitive information about themselves and being singled out and ridiculed by the performer onstage. Although the compere uses the audience members he picks out to produce laughter in the audience, the level of intentional cruelty is not very high among the comperes I spoke to. Kevin explained how being cruel can hurt the social dynamic between audience and performer:

> I don't think that's the right thing to do because if you want to create intimacy in a room you don't want to make someone feel awkward, you want to talk to them but you want to include them rather than anything else. So yeah, I think including the crowd and making the gig individually is essential. (Interview with Kevin 30.04.15)

The friendliness from the compere is very important early in the show to signal that the situation they are in is just for play. Laura agreed with the notion of being friendly as well:

> Sometimes I like to go out and start talking to the audience without being particularly funny. Just say hello to a few people, and I often do things like 'wow, you got lovely shoes' or 'well, look at your shirt' and then move away quite quickly […] People know you're gonna do that, and they're not defensive straight away. So I think that can help, and especially in the beginning of the night. (Interview with Laura 02.04.14)

During the tense setting surrounding the start of a comedy show it is important for the compere to let people know that they are in a relaxed zone, and it is not scary to be there. There has to be mutual trust between the compere and the audience before the show can get under way. Here follows an excerpt from Steve's lines at a BYC show when there was a lady in the front row that seemed nervous:

Excerpt 4-6: Steve
Steve: Don't worry, I won't pick on you. I'm not a "picking-on" comic, you'll have to look at me though. You'll have to look in this direction [L]. I'm not a "picking-on" comic. I'm a nice, friendly kind of host. In case you didn't know this, the show is built up on three sections, amazing comedy; two intervals, people seem to love those. And one host, me, and it's a pleasure to be here. I used to work in commercial radio, so it's nice to be here in front of a… bigger audience. [S→L]

Steve's interaction with the nervous lady in the front row is a good example on how some comperes like to open the show. With a strong degree of reassurance that the show is not about ridiculing anyone in particular, but that it is about everyone being comfortable and having a good time, Steve went from soothing the lady into joking about himself and his failed career as a radio DJ. He is presenting himself as marginal, giving the audience the power of laughing at his misfortune (Mintz 1985). This is a strategy from the compere to sacrifice a part of himself to the audience to gain their trust. The strategy of starting a friendly conversation with the audience, and perhaps mock oneself, is a safe way for a compere to make sure the audience reaches back. It is a seductive action, making him seem like a teammate (Goffman 1969).

In addition to not seem aggressive when speaking to an audience, many of the comperes I have observed use a kind of format in terms of what questions they are asking. In addition to common questions like "how are you doing?", and "how many of you have been here before?", the compere often asks audience members questions regarding their job status and their relationship status. Matt told me that it is a conscious choice of questioning done by the compere, because: "everyone has an answer to those sorts of questions, and they can lead on to something more specific for the compere to talk about." Kevin added that the questions are also meant for getting to know people in a more gentle and non-confrontational way:

> "Where are you from and what do you do?" is something you could ask anyone. So it's not that it's an unoriginal question, cause I've seen people go up and say "hi, what's your favourite sexual position?" and you're like, where in a conversation, and in trying to create the illusion of intimacy, would you ever start with such a ridiculous question? (Interview with Kevin 30.04.14)

Hence, even in their most confrontational way of speaking to people, a lot of comperes try to seem as non-confrontational as possible when they are speaking directly to audience members.

The jesting, ridicule, and teasing between compere and audience members when it comes to jobs can revolve around people's status in society. The response the audience members give the compere in terms of what they do, can be met by respect from the comedian (e.g., if the job is associated with a high degree of moral prowess) or ridicule (e.g., if the job is associated with low standard or if the job seems odd). To illustrate, here is an excerpt from where a compere, Michael, sequentially talks to three people sitting at three different tables in the front row:

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Excerpt 4-7: Michael at BYC 08.03.14

Michael: Well, let's get to know some of these people in here. {Turns to the table at the right end of the first row and stepped down to shake hands} Hi there, sir. I'm Michael, who are you?

Matt: Matt.

Michael: Matt? Nice to meet you, Matt. You are the biggest guy I have ever met. [L] What do you do?

Michael: I'm a firefighter.

Matt: You're a firefighter? {Turns to the rest of the audience} Well, I can't really take the piss out of him now, can I? [L] The guy's a fucking hero.

Here, in Michael's performance, there is a discrepancy between Michael's intentional planning of making fun of Matt when he asks the question, and the feedback he gets from him. Michael might have made fun of Matt if he answered, e.g., 'garbage man', but Michael judged Matt's job as a morally high one, considering that his career actually involves saving lives. In order not to risk challenging his close relationship with the audience he chose to comment directly to the audience that he knew what it meant ridiculing a fireman. It affirmed the intimacy and its liveness between the compere and the audience members, Michael argued directly to them why it is wrong to make fun of Matt, and the audience affirmed social consensus by laughing in response. At the next table, Michael talked to a tiny man named Lee, who was a little intoxicated, but responded well to Michael's teasing:

Excerpt 4-8: Michael talks to Lee at BYC 08.03.14

Michael: {turns to Lee}And hi to you sir, I'm Michael, and you are?

Lee: I'm Lee.

Michael: Lee. Nice to meet you. You were almost a little late to the show, weren't you? I saw you come in just as we were starting. [l]

Lee: I just had to go for a 'wee' before we started. [L]

Kevin: You don't say? [L] Was it a nice one then, Lee?

Lee: I give it three out of six. [L]

Michael: It's sad isn't it? When you get your hopes up for a nice urination, and it turns out to be a disappointment. [L] I feel for you, Lee. So, what do you do for a living?

Lee: I'm a flour miller. [l]

Michael: You're a what? [l]

Lee: {laughing} I'm a flour miller.

Michael: {looks at the audience} [L] {looks back at Lee} Are you from the past? [L]

In this excerpt, Michael stumbles upon a line of work which, in his performance, falls out of usual categories for modern jobs, as the line "Are you from the past?" indicates. It is, perhaps, a comment on modern society within a big city as London, where jobs are becoming more

and more 'technological' and such 'traditional' work titles as flour millers seems rare. Michael's confusion directed to the audience gives them a sense that he finds Lee's craft surprising, and they concur by laughing at his baffled expression. Lee's laugh also reveals that he is aware of the uniqueness surrounding his line of work. In this excerpt, also, there is social consensus regarding the specific propriety of a given work career. Further at the other end of the first row, Michael started chatting to a man in his late thirties, named Barry:

Excerpt 4-9: Michael talks to Barry at BYC 08.03.14

Michael: Hi there, sir. What's your name?

Barry: Barry.
[…]
Michael: So what do you do, Barry?
Barry: {a little hesitant} Um, I am currently unemployed.
Michael: Oh, okay.
Barry: But I'm looking for a job.
Michael: Oh, really, you're looking for a job? {Turns to Lee} Are there any positions available in the flour miller craft, Lee? [l]
Lee: Um, no, sorry.
Michael: {turns back to Barry} Another dream crushed, Barry. [L]

This example is interesting, as Michael uses the answer from one audience member, and linking it to another audience member he had already included in the show. This is what Kevin explained to me as a "daisy chain", where the compere is able to assess different responses he receives from the audience and linking them together. Based on what Kevin told me, this is a common technique for comperes to gather information they can use for joking, as well as generating feelings of group affiliation and liveness. Michael invites two audience member to communicate with each other through him. Michael was not trying to mock Barry and his state as unemployed, but used his response as a way of integrating two audience members, as well as the rest of the audience, by linking them together on the common ground of job life.

The compere can analyse people's work by locate it on a scale of status hierarchy, like Michael did with Matt in excerpt 4. Here is an excerpt from Steve's interaction with a woman named Nickola where he reacts more cynically on her job:

Excerpt 4-10: Steve at BYC 15.02.14
Steve: ... {turns to Nickola in the middle of the front row}we still haven't met you. We gotta do it, we gotta do it. What's your name?

Nickola: Nickola.
Steve: Nickola. Nice to meet you, Nickola. What do you do for a living?
Nickola: I'm a carer.
Steve: You're a carer, I might need your assistance later [l]. You really brought the fucking ace-career up here. Did you deliberately sit in the front row, going "That's right, I'm a fucking carer." [L]
Audience member sitting next to Nickola: <u>Yes, she</u> did. [L]
Steve: <u>Yeah,</u> "good luck making fun of me and my moral job". [L] <u>So who do</u> you care for? Is it Boris Johnson (the mayor of London)?
Nickola: Hehe, no I wouldn't touch him with a ten-foot pole.
Steve: You wouldn't touch him with a ten-foot pole? You are not a very considerate carer. [L]

A carer helps and provides for other people, often sick or old people, for very little pay. Steve, in the same way as Michael, was referring to Nickola's job as morally high, but instead of making a point of that one should respect that line of work, Steve questioned Nickola's motivations for sitting there. Did she plan to sit there to watch the compere struggle to make fun of her job without the audience feeling awkward about it? Nickola herself laughed at Steve's question, and one of her friends yelled playfully that she did do it on purpose. Steve, nonetheless, considered it a job too hard to make fun of, and made that clear for the audience.

There is a familiarity in conversing about one's profession, and from the excerpt examples we can spot that most people in the audience do have jobs, and even the people with strange jobs or people without a job still provides an incentive for the compere to ask them further questions. As both Matt and Kevin pointed out, all audience members have jobs or do have some kind past experience regarding jobs, it is not an alien topic. The exchanges about jobs can create a commonality between the audience members, and further elicit a sense of group affiliation.

Similarly, asking people about their marital status, or asking if they are a couple, is common in everyday life, and is something comperes use to elicit information about the members of the audience they pick out. The most common way a compere can dive into this type of question is if the audience member in question is seated next to a person they arrived with. At one of his shows, Kevin started talking to a couple and found out that they were married:

Excerpt 4-11: Kevin at BYC 29.03.14
Kevin: So how many- how long have you guys been together?
Woman 2: Twenty-odd years {someone in the audience gasped}.
Kevin: Twenty-odd- {turned to the audience} someone just went 'gasp' [L]. <u>We have</u>

someone who can look into the future, here [L]. {Makes a female voice} 'Oh, God. I know what's gonna happen to them, they are not gonna make it to twenty-one. [L] He's gonna die', ha-ha [L]. So, sir. What's your wife's name?

Man 2: Ada.

Kevin: Ada. And where did you propose to Ada? {Man 2 tries to answer but starts chuckling and puts his hand over his face} {Kevin looks at the audience} Now, this should be funny [L], I can feel it. {Turns back to Man 2} Where did you propose?

Man 2: In the bedroom after we had gone to bed.

Kevin: In the bedroom after you went to bed? So no clothes were worn at that moment? [L] That is the weirdest proposal ever. {Spreading his legs onstage and direct his hands towards his crotch} 'I've got the ring'. [L] And you, Ada, did you like his proposal? {Ada smiled and nodded} 'Yes'. Oh, that's nice, you don't need the romantic glamour and all that. {Turns to audience} Anyone here proposed anywhere more exotic? [S] {Turns back to couple] No, fuck it, you win. [L]

This interaction lacks a lot of formal structure, and can seem like more of a round of story-telling between affiliates than an actual show people have paid money for. Kevin's choice of words signals he is sincere in his interest about the man's proposal, although he cracks a joke about the peculiar place the man chose to ask for her hand. When a girl in the audience reacted by gasping, Kevin stopped in his sentence to comment on it. Right after, he continued talking to the couple, and in-between jokes he also passed some compliments, while also asking the rest of the audience if there were any others who had proposed in weird locations. There is very little textual formality in Kevin's joke delivery and audience interaction, the whole sequence takes form more like an everyday conversation where there is shifting between who talks, and the conduct of the conversation is open for interruptions.

One of the points of asking audience members questions, and getting to know people is to shorten the social distance between performer and audience, but it is also a way of making the spectators feel less anxious about common topics people mention. For example, Michael used Barry's status as unemployed to suggest he should try out in Lee's work, to Barry's, Lee's, and the audience enjoyment. Stand-up is about making certain cultural, political and societal topics more perceivable by scrutinizing it. This also goes for audience interaction, where a person's problems or difficulties can be assessed from a comedy show point of view and, to some extent, be put into perspective. In February there was a big strike going on in London Underground, as the workers were discontent with the Board of Directors who planned to liquidate all ticket offices in service. I could feel a large degree of discontent in the city during the strike. The Underground employees were unhappy with their work situation, the employers were unhappy with the cost of the strike, and the working public was

extremely unhappy to make do with less sufficient public transportation like buses or rail services. Here follows an excerpt from Steve's show on 15th of February.

Excerpt 4-12: Steve at BYC 15.02.14

Steve: {talking to an audience member}So what's your name?

Ian: {in a raspy voice} Ian

Steve: Ian, {does the same raspy voice} "of course it is, Ian" [l]. What do you do for a living, Ian?

Ian: Um… Can I lie? [l]

Steve: Um, no.

Ian: I work for London Underground. [O→C:A]

Steve: {to the audience} Do you work for the mayor's office, is that it? [L] {turns back to Ian} I've never worked for London Underground, but it seems like when you say it, you have to say you work for [raspy voice] "London Underground". [l] So what do you do for London Underground?

A different audience member: Not much! [L] {Ian laughs}

Steve: Hehe, yeah, that's one of the tasks he does. So what do you do, Ian?

Ian: I sell tickets.

Steve: You sell tickets? NOT FOR [L] LONG! Sweet Mary, {turns to the audience} take a picture now, we're gonna see him in a museum one day [L]. That's horrible though, imagine that, a computer can do your job, {to the rest of the audience} by the way, don't google for jokes, they're better than mine [L]. [back to Ian] So what do you do, do you strike? [S→L] How fucked up did you become during that strike that you can't remember? [L] Last two days last week, "I guess I was on a strike, or I was driving the Victoria Line" [L]. Victoria Line is the one that drives itself, isn't it?

Ian: [raspy voice] I don't know, I was in the Mayor's office. [L]

Steve: In the Mayor's office, which sounds like the name of a pub, when you say it [L]? But hey, I'm a big fan of the tube, I'm from the north, so trains running under ground is like sci-fi to me [l]. It's like we're in the future, I love it.

The general discontent I saw in the streets was not present in the interaction between Steve, Ian, and the rest of the audience. On the contrary, the discussing of the strike was teasingly and jocular but in a playful and friendly tone. This is a fine example on how the comedy show is not only an arena for discussing societal topics in a different view, but also how the setting can discharge quite negatively charged topics that a lot of people have strong feelings about.

Framing group cohesion

The themes discussed here illustrate how the comperes use different strategies for interaction, and different channels to express them through, to establish friendly relations with the audience. This reaching out and generating of group cohesion is necessary for the comedy

show to be successful. Laughter and appreciation of humour is a social phenomenon, and in order for the participants to take part in laughing and feel free to interact. Whether the interaction is basic joking or teasing, there has to be a shared understanding of the situation as playful, which is established through a collective motivation of upholding this shared experience of the situation (Goffman 1959). This framework is created through opening encounters where the framework of cohesion and unity is established and maintained.

Chapter 4 – RECEPTION AND DECEPTION: MANIPULATIVE STRATEGIES IN FRAMING THE COMEDY SHOW

> What I always say is that: What you, sometimes, are doing [in a comedy club] is to get [the audience] to do something they don't want to do, in order for them to have a good time. (Interview with Matt 23.05.14)

On March 20, 2015 at 7 pm, I was back at BYC, visiting Daniel in his office. I was in London just for the weekend to conduct a few interviews with audience members prior to the show, and during the intervals. We chatted about how BYC had been doing since the last time I was there, 9 months ago, and we discussed the best way I could conduct my interviews that night. "Feel free to ask people as you like; I'm sure there are someone who is willing to talk to you," he said, and picked up the list with names of people who had reserved tickets. "I know some regulars coming in tonight that I can point out for you, they can tell you a lot about the different times they've been here." I thanked him for his assistance, as he spun in his blue office chair and checked another list on his computer. "There are a couple of groups coming in tonight," he said in a neutral tone. Over his desk, six different screens were connected to surveillance cameras, showing people moving about. Some entered the venue and took off their jackets, others conversed with a cigarette in their hands. Two couples sat at a table, chatting and laughing. A young man laughed at his friend who had just missed a shot in their

game of snooker, "… but I think it will be a good show," Daniel said.

Up to this point, I have discussed how the shows are framed to make the audience feel free to and comfortable with laughing. Although there is a distinct relationship between performer and audience during the show based on mutual trust, the promoters and performers know that the audience do not always behave in a preferred manner. But if they act in a controlling manner in front of the audience, they risk diminishing the non-threatening and intimate relationship they try to establish, destroying the situation they are trying to sustain (Goffman 1959). How can they achieve this control over the audience and situation without compromising the friendly and casual atmosphere? In the same manner as they manipulate both the show and the performance space; sometimes they need to manipulate the audience into behaving in the preferred manner. Comparable to creating the show-space and maintaining social cohesion in the room during the show, promoters and performers use different strategies to achieve the audience's collaboration without appearing intimidating.

Packing the front row – keeping up the illusion

The audience entered the show room at BYC, and quietly they searched for vacant seats along the 4 rows of tables in front of the stage. It was 15 minutes until the show began, and James and some other promoters stood against the walls and watched the audiences sitting down, placing their drinks on tables, and hanging their jackets on the back of chairs. First the third row filled up, before the second and back row filled up more or less simultaneously. Half of the tables still had one or more vacant seats. At last there was only the front row vacant. A group of three friends had taken seat at the far right end, but the four remaining tables were unoccupied. The steady flow of people entering the show room and occupying the nearest tables had slowed down at this point. Couples stood by the back row scouting for vacant tables. James went up to one of the couples with a polite smile, and asked: "Are you looking for seats?" The woman gave a quick smile and responded: "Yes! Yes, we are." James directed his hand towards the stage. "We still have a few tables available in the front", he said. The woman looked at her husband and laughed nervously.

Most audiences like being involved in a comedy show, but they fear being picked out in front of the rest of the audience. When I conducted interviews with the audience before the show, I asked a married couple in their 50s what their expectations were of the night's show. They said they expected to laugh and have a good time, as long as they did not sit in the front row. I asked them why, and the husband said: "Heh, you'll wait and see." Matt thought that,

although the audience only can blame themselves if they refuse to sit in the front row and the show goes badly, it is understandable that some people are reluctant to sit right in front of the stage. "The tradition and the cliché is that you will get picked on. It's a social situation, you know, if they're out with their friends or their loved ones, they don't want to have a bad time." (Interview 23.05.14) But he also pointed out that, either way, a packed front row gives the performers the necessary material to work with, and that the best clubs are where they do everything in their powers to fill up the front row. Despite the fact that they may feel awkward at first, being in the front row can be a fun experience for the audience, and it is for the best for them.

The front row is an odd factor in a comedy show, because it is a specific part of the comedy show process where the audience often shows an observable reluctance to do what the promoters want them to, and still the promoters are determined to make people sit there. Due to the need for intimacy between performer and audience, the front row being filled up is regarded almost as a cornerstone for the show to go well.

> [When you are onstage and there is no one in the front row] you can't see people and when you can't see people you gotta put your hand in front of the light, or just guess at where they're sat and that usually breaks down the illusion, because from where they're sat they can't see that we're blinded, […] they don't know that we're not really looking at their face, we're looking into the middle of nowhere. The front row is essential because they are the people you can see and actually interact with. And they're really the conduit between the stage and the rest of the audience. (Interview with Kevin 30.04.15)

Intimacy between the entertainer and the audience must be maintained, both socially and spatially. What Kevin and other performers and promoters explained to me, is that there cannot be a stand up show without an audience in the front row. In addition to the performer not being able to see anyone in the room because of the bright stage lights, empty seats in the front row creates a visible gap between the audience and the stage. The empty seats break down the spatial intimacy and manifest a perceivable void between the two parties. When the front row is empty, the required intimacy is not achieved.

People sitting in the front row give the performer a possibility to actually *see* the audience, and look them in their eyes when they speak to them. This might extend the feeling of intimacy in the room as the performer is able to talk directly to people and move from table to table (like Michael in Chapter 3) without putting his hand in front of his face. Kevin

showed me how being able to see the people you interact with provides him the opportunity to show interactional gestures, as he is constantly leaning forward when he talks to people in the front row and pointing at them. These gestures, in addition to the conversation going on, indicate that there is intimate and direct communication going on between performer and audience. Here is an excerpt of one of Kevin's shows, where he jumps between talking to a group of people who allegedly watches football together and a lady named Helen sitting at the other end. I also added a picture to show his use of gestures:

Excerpt 5-1 Kevin at BYC 28.03.14
Kevin: […] Okay, what team do you support?
The group: [in unison] Dagenham and Redbridge.
Helen: Yay. {Kevin and the audience turns towards her and she immediately puts her hands in front of her mouth and laughs} **(1)** Sorry. [l]
Kevin: {walks towards her while not breaking eye-contact with the audience}**(2)** That's a standard response, I'm not sure what it means. [L] I'm not sure what's going on, but she obviously likes Dagenham and Redbridge too. I bet they're the best football team that ever-.
Helen: **(3)** They're awful, but the spirit is there.
Kevin: {turns to the group} **(4)** Fuck, I've been pitching to the wrong table. [L] {Kevin started walking towards Helen's table, turned around and pointed at the group} **(5)** You have a nice night. [L] {turns to Helen again} **(6)** Hi there, what's your name, darling?
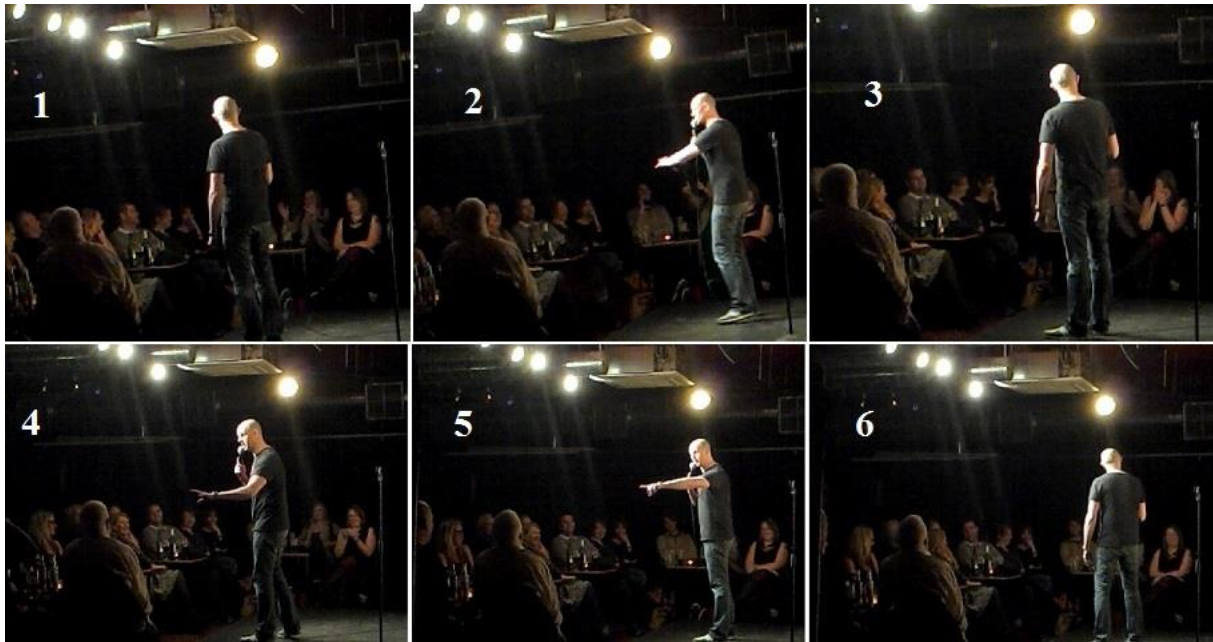
Figure 11 – Kevin talking and gesturing towards different audience members (Photos taken by the author)

In (1) Kevin is aware of Helen in the middle of the far right table putting her hands to her mouth apologising. In (2) he comments on the interruption to the audience, while in (3) he looks at her again when she explains how awful the football team in question is. In (4) he addresses the group he first interacted with, saying: "Fuck, I've been pitching to the wrong table, and walks towards Helen, but (5) turns around one last time, pointing at the group, saying "You have a nice night." In (6), he begins his interaction with Helen. The pictures show how the first row is illuminated in greater extent than the rest of the audience behind them, and Kevin is thereby able to talk to them directly face-to-face, and point at them to signal that he is able to see them. What is equally important in this situation, as Kevin told me after the show, is that the rest of the audience is also able to see the front row as well as the performer. The strategic placing of chairs and the strong stage lighting in interplay helps to make Kevin's performance open for interaction with the audience, and makes the interaction visible for the rest of the audience to see.

At all the clubs I visited, the promoters and performers were determined to make the front row filled up at every show, and sometimes it was up to the compere to make it happen. Paul, at LMC, walked onstage once and the front row was empty, at which he directed his attention straight to the audience and said in a jocular tone:

Excerpt 5-2 Paul at LMC 02.05.14

Paul: Okay, there are two ways we can do this. Either someone comes up and sits in the front row willingly, or I will come down there and fucking pull [L] you out of your seats. So the gentlemen sitting in the second row thought they were okay, and that's not the case right now [L]. But you can decide, where do you want me to take the front row from? That side, that side, or the back?

Man in second row: From behind.

Paul: From behind, you like [L] to take it from the behind? He wanted me to take it from the behind [l], which obviously is the back row, so please give it up for the back row [C:A] coming forward.

After continuing cheering and applause more and more people came forward to have a seat at the front, until there were only a couple of vacant seats left and Paul continued the show. Paul's strategy was to make the situation seem like it was not something he wanted alone, but a collective matter. First, he took a power stance in saying that there will be a front row, even if he has to physically make people sit there. Next, he delegated his power by making someone in the audience decide who should sit there. Lastly, when the man in the second row chose the people in the back row, Paul made the rest of the audience cheer them forwards with him. For every person coming up, Paul yelled out: "Here comes another one, fantastic, give him a cheer", in which the audience gave an even louder cheer. With a mix of authority and including the audience to act on behalf of the collective, Paul successfully filled up the front row before he could go on with the show.

There are also more cunning and deceiving ways of making the audience sit in the front row. Daniel told me they take filling up the front row very seriously and that quite often people will sit there if you explain to them why. However, there are occasions in which persuading people do not work. Even though BYC usually matched the amount of tables to the expected number of people attending in order to fill up the room, there were mismatches and the front row was in some shows left empty. Daniel had a strategy he sometimes employed when he was in charge and feared that the turnout might be lower than expected. He placed A4 paper sheets on each of the tables in the back row reading "RESERVED". When the audience entered the show room, a lot of people were ready to sit down in the back row, but stopped when they saw the signs and a little hesitantly started moving forward. When the front row was filled up, Daniel casually went along the back row and removed the signs. When I discussed this with Daniel in an interview, he revealed that that they do not allow reserved seating at BYC and it was a ploy to move people forward when they enter the room. This also gave the promoters the chance to leave the back row open for potential latecomers.

Strategies like these proved to be effective, but also posed a problem if they did not work. It might be classified as strategic fabrications (Goffman 1974), where a fabricated situation is performed by the promoters to guide the audience towards something they do not initially want to engage in. These strategies are used to deceive people, and the deception is esoteric knowledge for the promoters and the performers. If the audience was to pick up on Daniel's schemes they might feel they are being cheated and the feeling of unity and shared understanding might be lost, leaving the illusionistic intimacy of the show exposed.

In the introductory example with James, his way of showing the couple to a vacant table in the front row was not just a random act of service-based politeness, it was a conscious strategy I had observed James do dozens of times. By acting as the helpful host, he could direct people to tables in the front row and stay put waiting for their response. It was a conscious strategy where he applied politeness and decorum applicable to the framed situation in his task-performance (Goffman 1959). The people in question, feeling obliged to answer his enquiries and not turning down his offer of help in fear of being perceived as rude, often would agree to take a seat in the front. But in the present example, James' strategy did not go according to plan. The couple looked at each other with awkward smiles, and then another couple sitting at a table in the back row who overheard the conversation, said to James and the couple: "We got two seats here, no one is sitting there." The standing couple looked at each other before they accepted the invitation. James turned around with an annoyed face and he gave me a mild and exasperated smile, laughing at his own futile attempt to make the couple sit in the front row.

The performance as a helpful host to disguise one's real intentions can backfire on oneself, as James experienced. Keeping up the appearance of a friendly host is useful in the sense of making people feel relaxed as well as feel they have to respect the host by accepting his gracious help. The couple sitting at the table was not breaking any interactional norms or acting in an inappropriate way, rather they were acting according to the friendly situation by offering to help the couple themselves. James knew that if he had asked the couple to reject the seated couple's offer and sit in the front instead he would have let go of his role performance and exposed the backstage of the situation. He would not be in any real trouble, but the carefully laid misdirection would be in jeopardy (Goffman 1974). James found himself in a situation where his covert goal could not be achieved by performing the role he had put on, and the only thing he could do was to accept the reality or drop his performance.

In the art of deception, action speaks louder than communication (Goffman 1969), and James was trying to guide someone's actions without verbally expressing to do so. Arminen

(2005) writes that strategic actions always contain a covert goal. James' strategy of acting as the helpful host who wants to guide people to a table can be observed as a strategic act; an "attempt to get another party to do Y by doing X; this X does not request Y directly, but implies that it is the next relevant thing to do without saying so directly" (Arminen 2005:136). The way James pointed towards the front row and waited for the people's reply is not at all a command or a direct suggestion. Its goal is hidden behind a veil of politeness and helpfulness, i.e. deceptive actions that mislead actors to act in a specific desired way.

In the same way as comperes avoid appearing cruel to the audience when they talk to them, the promoters try not to send the audience to 'the lion's den' when they make them sit in the front row. Both promoters and performers have informed me that most times, sitting in the front row is not a nasty experience and people who sit there usually enjoy it during the show. But still they need a little push, whether it is by asking people to sit there, or more deceptive ways.

The audience's cooperation also depended on how familiar they are with being in comedy clubs. During my interview with the audience, the married couple I spoke to who did not want to sit in the front row had never been at BYC before at that time. When the show began that night, the married couple sat in the middle row. After the show, I asked a group of girls who had sat down in the front row voluntarily why they did so, and it turned out that they were regulars who knew Daniel and had been coming to the club for years, even before the re-opening. They told me they had no problem sitting in the front: "We always sit there. It's quite fun and exciting to be in the front row." Hence, the audience is not always in a tense mood, and many are rather indifferent as to which row to sit in. The strategies of the promoters and performers described in the above examples are more effective when communicating with members of the audience who are entering an unfamiliar environment and therefore are too protective of themselves to sit in the front row on their own initiative. These are the situations where framing the comedy show as informal and non-threatening becomes most crucial. Even though people do not want to, there has to be a front row. Matt told me: "It's not ultimately about the audience [and them feeling secure], it's about ensuring the gig atmosphere." The show's successfulness is mostly dependent on there being people seated in the front row, and at the same time, the feeling of group cohesion between performer and audiences depend on the voluntary aspect of the social gathering. This is why the strategic fabrications conducted are so important for the show to go well.

The characteristics of audience groups

Matt was sitting in his chair backstage at a club named *The 99 club* in Leicester Square, looking over his notes for the evening. He had agreed to let me follow him around at a couple of shows he were performing at during the week. The doors had opened 10 minutes earlier and the venue was still a bit quiet, when suddenly we could hear loud voices coming down the stairs and a group entered the show room. Matt looked at me and said: "That's probably the group arriving. I'll be keeping an eye on them." "The group?", I asked. "Yes, the manager told me they were expecting a bigger group of people today. They often try to check up on such things before a show, because a group can be a liability. It doesn't have to, but it can be." This was the first time I became aware of groups attending a comedy show and the inconveniences they can make. I had already experienced groups of people that was more noisy and disruptive than others at past shows, but it was at this instance where I understood the performers' and the promoters' ambivalent feelings towards groups. A group can both thwart the show's progression as well as benefit it. Like all other social factors that might influence a show in any way, the outcome of a big group attending a comedy show is solely based on the particular social situation it partakes in.

To define 'group' in a comedy show context is no simple task, but it is possible to draw out some characteristics based on what my informants have told me. Most of the performers and promoters I spoke to defined a 'good audience' as mixed in both age, sex, and group affiliation (couples, friends, family members), in order for the compere to have an array of different types of people in the audience he can incorporate in his act. What constitutes a group in the 'risky' sense are groups of people which: (1) are bigger in numbers, ranging from around 5-6 people or more, (2) they might have other motivations for going out together, like celebrating a specific occasion, and (3) because of this, they might have been drinking a lot before arriving at the venue. Groups of this sort can be a risk because they have been socializing and enjoying festivities prior to the show, and there is a chance that they will bring their party mood with them into the comedy show:

> It's so wrong, because sometimes comedy clubs will pitch to that, they will pitch to that group, you know like stag-dos and hen-dos, they'll pitch to those people. And the dynamic of that group is wrong because you got about fifteen blokes that have never met each other, all competing to be alpha-male. And to do that, you gotta be noisy, and [a comedy club] is just not the right environment for it to happen. (Interview with Kevin 30.04.15)

As Kevin stated, there are elements within bigger groups that can challenge the show in a negative way. The audience may be distracted by the noise, and the performer might feel he must make an effort to overpower the group in gaining the audience's attention, and subsequently losing the intimate and social group cohesion he is trying to establish. The promoters and performers are aware of the unpredictability groups can create in a room, and will try different approaches to prevent any potential conflict.

In Hitchin, Paul enjoyed the routine of sitting by the doors to Woodside Hall collecting the entrance fee, greeting and attending to the arriving audiences, but it was also a way for him to observe people and their behaviour. After about ten minutes of silence, people poured through the doors again, and among them a noisy group of eight men in their 20's. "Hi, there. Membership cards?" Paul asked. "No," one of the men answered. "Wonderful, that'll be 10 pounds, please." As one of the young men handed over the money, he said to Paul: "Is it going to be a good show tonight? It's not gonna suck, is it?" Paul smiled and said: "No, I think you will be pleasantly surprised." The young man laughed slightly ironically in return, and after the group of men had entered the venue, Paul looked at me saying: "I'm going to have to keep an eye on them." Although Paul liked welcoming people, and establishing relations with the members of the audience early on, it was also a way for him to identify people he believed could be a potential threat to the quality of the show and the audience's experiences. "Having run this club as long as I have, I can pretty much spot early on if people are going to be a problem," he told me.

The group of men had obviously been drinking prior to the show, and they continued to consume a lot at the comedy club's bar. Even though it was said in a jocular manner, the young man inquiring Paul about the quality of the show displayed a behaviour that appeared to be somewhat judgmental of Paul and his club. In an environment where mutual respect and friendliness is supposed to be evident, there was already tension between Paul and the young men and Paul feared that the group would spoil the atmosphere and the show.

A group does not have to be a problem for the show's quality or progression, but it is the dynamic of the group in a room full of strangers that poses the potentiality of undesired noise and disruptions. Kevin explained to me that a group can often seem very vocal when attending a show and attract so much attention from the rest of the audience that the audience does not feel properly involved.

Still, there are times when groups can be a good thing:

Groups aren't always a bad thing, because sometimes they can be the spark that ignites the room [...] I've done gigs where large groups arrive late, and up until the large group arrived the gig was going... to the floor, it was rubbish. But then the large group arrived after the beginning, so they don't know the room is slightly awkward and slightly quiet, so they arrive going "whooo!", and from that moment on the room has a totally different atmosphere because they've arrived. (Interview with Kevin 30.04.14)

Hence, a group can be hard to pinpoint in terms of being a negative or a positive influence on the show. Either way, some precautions are usually necessary when expecting a group of people. At BYC, Daniel instructed me how they keep an eye on bigger groups and assess the situation:

We operate with a first-come-first-served system, but if we know there are bigger groups coming, we will try to hold an area for them. We try to gauge the group when they arrive, the make-up of the group, whether it's mostly men, mostly women, if it's a good mix, older, younger, whether or not they have been drinking before arrival. And based on a spot-analysis at that time, it dictates where we choose to sit them. If we think they can be potentially troublesome, we seat them in the back near the exit, so it gives us the easy opportunity of sending in security and take them out if there should be a problem. If they look like they could be a 'good laugh' we may try to seat them close to the front. (Interview 22.05.14)

As Daniel suggests, there is no precise model for how one should handle bigger groups attending a show because it is difficult to predict exactly how they will affect the show. He and the rest of the promoters at BYC would assess each group based on the size and composition in terms of age and gender, and observed collective behaviour, such as drunkenness. Both Daniel and Paul stress that people's behaviour and attitude in the bar before the show reveal how they might behave during the show. Both of them made it clear that it is their past experiences which is the best base on which they can assess and predict how different groups will affect the show.

Paul's mistrust of the group of young men would prove to be understandable. When the show had started at LMC, Paul was interacting with a couple in the front row. I was standing by the wall to the left of the stage, and while the show was going on I could hear a murmur coming from the back of the room. By the entrance to the show room, the group of eight young men stood in a circle chatting. Some of the people in the back row were looking

behind them, searching for the source of the ruckus with annoyance. In the middle of his interaction with the couple, Paul stopped and directed his attention to the group in the back. "Excuse me, gentlemen." The young men turned towards him. "There is a show going on here, and people are trying to watch. Please keep quiet." Some of them just looked at him in silence, while others nodded, meaning that they had taken the message. Paul resumed his performance, but about 5 minutes later the young men were being noisy once again. Suddenly, a female spectator in the back row turned around and shouted: "Will you shut up?!" Paul looked up and added: "Hey! I was not joking earlier!" The men kept fairly quiet for the rest of the first section, though there was some loud whispering. When Paul introduced the first comedian, he walked offstage and went straight to the young men and whispered something to them, before he moved to the wall three metres away where he kept an eye on them for the rest of the first section.

Paul's further handling of the situation showed the non-confrontational way promoters deal with tense situations and resume control. During the interval people went to the bar and to the toilet, and in the muddle that occurred I suddenly noticed that the group of young men and Paul had vanished from the show room. About five minutes later Paul reappeared, went into the backstage area and collected the cash box and left again. When he returned, he told me that he had asked the young men to leave: "I was not happy with the way they were behaving. The best way to deal with people like that is to not give them an option. During the interval, I took them to the entrance where I explained to them why I wanted them gone." Again, this is what the different spaces inside the venue can be used for. Paul took them away from the show room to talk to them outside, away from the show and the rest of the audience. He gave them half their money back, because they had been there for the first half of the show, and they then left. According to Paul, they understood his frustration and apologised, and Paul said they were welcome back at another time. The atmosphere in the club was a bit tense when the young men acted noisy, but Paul realised that making a big scene out of it when kicking them out would not benefit the show either.

One of the most important dimensions of framing comedy show is to communicate the social norms of the interaction and reach consensus on a patterned form of behaviour. As Steve Allen did in the previous chapter when he presented the rules of interaction to the audience, he made it clear how a "good audience" behaves. A group with its own internal dynamics may not follow this pattern of behaviour and can affect the show in negative ways. The day after the show, I spoke with Paul who explained to me one of the key factors of a group that makes them a liability: The young men from the previous night actually worked in

a small company together and the boss of the company had attended a show and liked it so much that he had bought tickets for all his employees. "That's the main problem with groups, that, quite often, some of the people in that group didn't really want to go to a comedy show, but they tagged along with their friends who did." Kevin confirmed such a view in an interview three months later: "You can tell them something that they will find funny three weeks later if they were told outside of that environment, because they're already doing something they don't want to do. They've come with the wrong attitude." (Interview 30.04.15)

In order to take part in the social environment of the comedy club, one has to show up voluntarily. In a setting where the social interaction between the participants is of such importance, the main motivations for going to the show should be to take part in it. All other motivations risk being "noise in the system" (Flaherty 1990:98), in that the motivation is inconsistent with the goal of the majority of the participants. A performer is 'allowed' to react to these kinds of noise, performing as an authorial power figure, if he has got the audience on his team (Goffman 1959); like Paul when he shouted at the young men after a woman in the audience had told them off first. After the young men were thrown out of the venue, there was no trouble during the show at LMC, as both Paul and the rest of the audience were united in their motivations of having a good time together. People will still go to comedy shows in groups, though, and the performers and promoters are aware of this and try to facilitate the show in order to incorporate bigger groups more successfully.

When the spectator becomes the performer – a note on heckling

Even though interactions between the stage and the audiences are vital for the energetic and emotional feeling of community and unity to upheld, the constant feedback from the audiences may be destructive. A "heckler" is a person that disrupts a speech or other forms of spoken word in front of an audience, often with the purpose of showing discontent or overpowering the speaker (Merriam-Webster 2015), and heckling is often considered almost synonymous with stand-up comedy. I never really experienced much heckling during my time at the different clubs, but there was one episode where a female spectator got a little ostentatious during her and Kevin's interaction:

Excerpt 5-3 Kevin at BYC 29.03.14

Kevin: {turns to Girl} I'm just gonna talk to you, since you're obviously being the

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spokesman for the group [L]. And you've got some paint on your arms there, were you decorating?

Girl: I was actually.

Kevin: {To the audience} Well done observation, eh?

Girl: You know what you've just done? You just told everyone that I didn't have a wash [L] before I came in [S].

Kevin: Well, I think they've all guessed from the smell, to be honest [L] [A]. Well, that's fantastic. So you've just bought a house, or what? Why are you decorating?

Girl: Well, I'm moving in with my boyfriend, so, yeah. The parents are gonna come around, 'AAAH'[l→L]. [starts gesturing up and down motions indicating she's painting something].

Kevin: {Looks confused at the audience and then directs his gaze towards the table he was speaking to 2 minutes ago} Sorry, but I think I've found your superior here [L] I'm gonna be over here now {pointing towards girl}. It's been lovely talking to you, have a great evening [L]. {Turns towards Girl} I've got a new friend in the front row now [L]. What's your name?

Girl: Um, 'Titselina Bumfluff'. [L]

Man sitting next to girl: What?

Kevin: {Looks at the audience with a serious glance} Now, we all know that's a joke don't we? [L] {Turns back to Girl} But I'm gonna call you 'Tit' for short [L]. So, miss Bumfluff [L], is your boyfriend moving in with you?

Girl: No, I'm moving in with him, I'm not the 'suckah' (sucker).

Kevin: {Starts laughing} I feel like I should start following you around [L]. You are a Reality TV show waiting to fucking happen [L]. […] Either way, we have gotten to know some people in the front row, it's time we get underway with the show. Miss Bumfluff, whenever you feel like chipping in, don't [L].

During this interaction I was standing next to the stage and very closely to the girl in question. She was speaking very loudly, and by her gestures it seemed like she was challenging Kevin in trying to be funny herself, e.g. by giving a fake name with a certain bodily theme. The others sitting on the same table appeared rather embarrassed about her behaviour; signals she ignored. In the second section of the show, Kevin did a comedic routine about his experience with online dating:

Excerpt 5-4 Kevin at BYC 29.03.14

Kevin: I did struggle with it, I did struggle with online dating. Cause I'm quite young actually, surprise [l], and before that I've always dated traditionally. You know when you go to a nightclub and…

Titselina: [shouts] Did you get a blowjob or what?

Kevin: {Looks at Titselina and gives the audience a baffled look} [L] {Turns back to Titselina} It's not often someone skips right to the floor like that [L]. That's a really odd question.

Titselina: Well, you're being hesitant, you did some internet dating, how long for, did you manage to get a blowjob or what? [L]

Guy at table 2: We're not with her! [L] {Kevin looks to the audience confused}

Kevin: I've had some heckles in my time, and none of them has ever gone {imitates her shouting} "Did you get a blowjob or [L] what? You're being hesitant, did she suck it or what? [L] My mates and I are off our tits, what happened?" [l] I feel like I'm being heckled by Salvador Dali, [l] it looks alright, but I don't know what the fuck it means [L]. […] {turns towards the audience} You know when you see a drunk person, and you think: Maybe in fifteen minutes, she'll be crying in the toilet. [L] {smiles and turns back to Titselina} You are right on the edge [l]. You've got some water on your table there, just… swap the consistency [L].

In the first section, Kevin played along with the girl's interruptions, but in the second he started to worry that she would ruin the show if she was allowed more space. He put her down verbally, and took an authorial stance, as can be observed from the high frequency of audience laughter towards the end of the excerpt. When I talked to Kevin in the following interval, he said:

> Yeah, she almost got a little hostile. It's because she's really drunk, and she feels she's a bigger part of the show than she really is. I had been nice to her that far, so she probably thought it was alright for her to talk. It came up to a point where I had to shoot her down a bit. The moment you can sense that the rest of the audience gets annoyed with her actions and attitude you gotta be a little horrible to her, because the rest of the audience expects you to be […] I don't really mind her talking to me though, I think it's kind of the compere's job to take some of the shit that comes from

the audience. Sometimes it's like walking an excited dog, you just gotta help them let
it out of their system before the next act comes on stage. (BYC 29.03.14)

Kevin had a pragmatic view on heckling, although it is not encouraged in any way it is still a
part of the genre and the compere has to expect it to happen sometimes. The girl's
interference in the show was a potential source for tension, but Kevin was able to incorporate
the disruption into the show, making it a part of the collective experience. In social
encounters, it is possible for a participant to bring troublesome events into the interaction,
redefining and giving it a new meaning for the group (Goffman 1961). It is important for the
compere to know the limits for this kind of disruption. By mocking her, Kevin ensured further
cohesiveness among the rest of the audience following the interactional norms, and displayed
his authority by showing how much control he had of the situation (Goffman 1959). Although
he managed to incorporate the girl's interferences into the show, for the good of the
audience's experience and the performance of the show as a whole, Kevin needed to interpret
the situation and know how to put an end to it.

Performers are people too – when the audience does not want to be involved

The second section had started at AC on a warm evening in May, and Barry had entered the
stage and greeted the audience one more time. Right after he looked to the back, at a guy
standing against the wall. "There's a guy there, looking at his phone. He thinks we can't see
him, but the truth is that from the stage, his face is very visible. Yeah, it basically lights up
like beacon of disinterest." The audience laughed, and the young man put his phone in his
pocket. Barry turned towards the rest of the audience. "Did you enjoy the first half?" The
audience cheered, and Barry put aside the mic stand.

Groups of people talking, couples who do not want to sit in the front row, and young
men checking their mobile phone are all examples of indifference and disinterest, which is the
biggest threat to the quality of a show. Most performers I talked to told me that apathy is
much worse than heckling:

Indifference is much worse than anything else. If you're indifferent to the whole thing,
rather than ruckus because ruckus you can kind of deal with, you can bounce along
with, but just indifference to what's going on, you can't beat it, you can't win as a
comedian if people don't want to laugh. (Interview with Kevin 30.04.14)

Not paying attention creates a new barrier between the performer and the audience, and
likewise, members of the audience who do not take part in the show can disturb the audience

who tries to participate, like the annoyed audience at LMC telling the group of young men to shut up. Similarly, when members of the audience who the performer addresses show reluctance to participate in the conversation, it puts the dialogue at a stop and the orchestrated feeling of unity in jeopardy. The first compere I watched at a club night at BYC was a man named Rob, who was compering in front of a small audience, when he talked to someone wearing a hat:

Excerpt 5-5 Rob at BYC 08.02.14

Rob: … and hi to you there, sir, you got a hat on you. I think you're supposed to take that off when you come inside, that's what my mother told me, at least [l]. So, are you hiding something under there, or are you just a hipster?

Man with hat: I don't like my hair.

Rob: You don't like your hair? [l] Surely, there are better ways of dealing with that than purposely wearing a hat, um, have you heard of hairdressers?

Man with hat: Never in my life.

Rob: Never in your life, okay [l], um, you're just part of the young generation then […] {turns to an older man on the other end} Look at you sir, proper haircut. You wake up in the morning and you're good to go [l]. You don't need a hat, do you? {turns back to Man with hat} Do you like have an array of hats at home? {The man shrugs and keeps quiet} Why am I still talking to you [l]? I'm getting nowhere here, you are comedy's bloody kryptonite [l].

The audience was already a little reserved from the start, as there were very few people in the audience, but at the same time, the young man's reluctance to engage in a conversation with Rob made matters worse. If a participant does not properly involve himself in the situation, and does not perceive the situation as he is expected to, he is likely to create tension within the group (Goffman 1961). When I met Rob during the first interval, he shared his frustration: "Oh, it was horrible. I knew the show could be difficult because there are few people here today, but to top it off some of the audience members are really difficult to talk to. That guy with the hat wouldn't give me anything to work with."

Laura also had some trouble with interacting with some of the audience members at one of her shows at BYC:

Excerpt 5-6 Laura at BYC 22.03.14

Laura: … how about you sir, are you on a date with this lovely lady? [S] Okay, still

no talk [l]. I'll just stick to this part of the room then {turns towards the audience on the far right}

One of the things the compere needs to keep in mind when interacting with audiences is to know when you should back out. Laura noticed that the man in question was rather reluctant in his responds to her questions, and told me during one of the intervals:

> One of the guys I was talking to in the second row was really weird, he never responded when I talked to him, he just stared at me, sometimes smiling, and he raised his glass at me. […] I might stop talking to him, because if I keep trying to get him to respond but fail, it can create a sinking hole of bad energy where they drag the other people sitting around them with them, causing more people to be reluctant to interact. It can create a very tense atmosphere in the room. (BYC 22.03.14)

The choices Laura made were based on how she felt the show was going in the moment. She noticed insufficient response from the man she was talking to, and instead of keeping on talking to him until she received an answer, she decided to abort in order to avoid the rest of the audience feeling the tension. She would not risk the good flow of communication she had going with the audience by talking to someone who did not want to respond.

There are many reasons why audiences are reluctant to participate or pay attention, but one important reason according to my informants is that stand-up has been popularized through televised media. Audience members' reluctance to participate can be interpreted as an unwillingness to accept the liveness embedded in the comedy show. This is another reason why one of the most important tasks of the compere is to talk to people and comment on different elements in the room:

> You know, if someone drops a glass, or someone gets up to go to the toilet right in the front or, someone heckles, or, you know… all of those things, you got to react to them, you can't just ignore them […] There has to be some sense of which the audience is aware that this is happening, live, in front of them. And the reason why it is so important is because it reminds the audience that it is true, that you're a real person, doing a real thing in front of them, doing it in real time. If they start checking their phone, or checking their watch, you can see that, you know, and you have to react to that. Particularly if they start talking, or if they start ignoring you, you're not the television, you're not a film. You're not something they can zone out of, you're a real

person, and you can change what you do depending on what they like. (Interview with Matt 23.05.14)

People in the audience might not be used to or aware of the level of manipulation involved in framing a comedy show. Some audiences are perhaps used to stage performances where interaction is not as important. Matt mentioned TV when making the audience understand that the show is live, and Paul, while I was helping out at LMC, also pointed out TV as a symptom for this dissonance. "TV really has popularised the genre and made it really bland. The stand-up you see on TV is not stand-up, it is heavily staged and scripted and not what stand-up is about." Television might be a factor that challenges the feeling of liveness during the comedy show, where people want to be entertained rather than to participate.

Schechner (1997) describes television as a device that blurs the boundaries between art and life. Everything is put into a show format and the television creates a distance between the viewer and the emotional feedback one would express in the same situation in real life. In this sense, perhaps stand-up comedy has been affected by televised comedy.

This, I believe, is why it is paramount for the performers and the promoters to perform and communicate a shared feeling of intimacy and liveness in front of the audience. The storyteller-like authority of the performer does not occur naturally in the show frame, but through the different practices described they can guide the audience's behaviour and make them feel comfortable as well as focused on what is going on. Like Kevin stated, although heckling and disturbing the show can affect the show in a bad way, not paying attention is worse for the performer. Heckling is still a part of the interaction, it can be incorporated into the performance onstage, while talking and reluctance to respond kills the interaction and the mutual understanding of the situation. There is no feedback, and the performer's authority is demolished. As long as there is a steady flow of communication going on between the parties, the social situation they are in can be scrutinized and through extensive feedback the actors within the situation are able to adapt in their performances.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The intension of this thesis has been to map out the social dynamics involved in the organizing and performing of a stand-up comedy show. Although there most certainly are textual elements in interactional humour, treating it as encompassing knowledge of all humour in social interactions de-contextualises it in a simplistic model-based fashion. My contribution to the discourse on humour offers an alternative to understanding how the social framework of a comedy show is crafted. I have focused on how the promoters and performers frame the show and establish their interaction with audience. By doing my study in the venue and in the setting of the social interactions, I have analysed their team performance on how they organise the comedy show. I simultaneously refrain myself from simply analysing the comedian being introduced onto stage and performing his jokes, as this has been thoroughly analysed by others. By observing the comperes and the promoters I was able to study how they, through extensive planning and by using different strategies, guide their audience towards a preferred pattern of behaviour and produce the knowledge the audience need to successfully be enmeshed in the interaction of the show.

One of the primary points in this thesis is that social interaction through humour is not always carried out as planned, as different elements, like drunken audiences and big groups of people, can disturb the interaction. This is especially evident within a comedy show, where the promoters carefully manipulate the spatial layout to guide the audience's behaviour and

their understanding of the situation. This planning also involves covert strategies to deal with potential disruptions and other threats to the show. The creation of unity and cohesion can only happen through joint construction with the audience through interaction. Together, the promoters, performers, and audience negotiate the situation they are in and try to reach a mutual understanding of what is going on.

Joking and laughter, both in stand-up comedy and in everyday interaction, need to happen within social interaction, as joking and laughter contains several social and affiliate elements. The comical does not follow a fixed pattern of meaning in interaction, but is often spontaneous, and in every funny situation there has to be a negotiation between the participants that the situation they are partaking is humorous. As I have examined, if some people in the audience do not take full part in the comedy show, not only do they not relate to the rest of the audience, but they are potential threats to the comic situation as a whole. Joking and laughter are complete social and participatory acts. If a friend tells me a joke, I do not laugh only because of the incongruity in the joke text. I might also laugh because of the way he tells it, the playful relationship we have, or because of the social situation we are in. Performance, play, and framing are all vital in jocular and humorous conversations.

We can locate the same interactional elements within a comedy club context, as both the promoters and the performers strive to make the audience feel at home in the situation, by interacting with them on much the same level as one would interact with people in everyday situations. Promoters, as well as being service-minded, try to communicate and perform a sense of informality towards the audience in order for them to feel at ease. Performers, in the same manner, interact with the audience as they would have interacted with someone in 'real life'. In between their joking, they ask questions about the audience's work and marital status, and conduct their dialogue with them in the same way any form of informal interaction. If someone interrupts them in their speech, they are able to incorporate the disruption into the conversation instead of having to ignore it. What is interesting is how these ways of interacting with the audience are to some extent routinized. Based on their experience, both the promoters and the performers have strategic ways of interacting with people, to elicit the non-threatening and cohesive frame. There is conscious scrutinizing and manipulation in keeping up this appearance of informality.

Differing from humorous talk in everyday situations, the stand-up comedy show is reliant on a sense of liveness, as well as a strong sense of intimacy. When reaching a mutual understanding of the situation, the performer and the audience do not only have to perceive the jocular content of the situation as humorous, they also need to perceive everyone involved

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as a social unit. Indifference to what is going on within the show poses a threat to the consensus between the participants. Disaffiliate behaviour disrupts the social order within the participant group, creates tension, and can hinder the audience as a whole to reach a social euphoric state. The performance of intimacy and liveness in the comedy show is meant to establish the normative attitude between the participants in the room. Everyone has to be on the same team in the interaction, and performing liveness and intimacy are strategies used by the performers and promoters to make the audience sense they are part of something socially unified happening in the moment. A focused audience is vital for the interaction between performer and audience to occur in a conjoint way.

Humorous interaction, like any form of interaction, involves at least two participants interacting and altering their performance based on the performance of the other. In the textual theories presented in the introduction, the other part was practically silenced, as the joking and hilarity lived a life of their own, only being guided by their inherent logic. In this thesis, I have argued how humour occurs in social situations between multiple parties within a specific setting. The social situations and social interactions within the setting develop based on the participants' understanding of the situation they are partaking in, as well as the performances of the other participants.

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