

Orientation

On 15 April 1984, the British comedian Tommy Cooper collapsed and died from a heart attack while performing his Magic Cloak sketch. Tommy Cooper's performance, played to a packed house and was broadcast live to millions of viewers on the London Weekend Television variety show *Live From Her Majesty's*.

As a 'prop comedian' using conjurer's equipment and tricks Tommy Cooper's stage persona was built around the likelihood that everything that could go wrong would go wrong, but comically. So when he collapsed, the audience assumed that falling to the floor at the back of the stage was all part of the act.

Tommy Cooper collapsed just after his blonde assistant had helped him into the Magic Cloak. He fell backwards, his chest heaving, his head invisible, his legs gradually unfurling until they were straight out in front of him. One arm lifted and fell a few times.

The people in the audience were hugely entertained. They laughed uncontrollably. The theatre ushers and the ice cream sellers and the theatre management and the back stage staff were all laughing along with events, and Tommy Cooper's assistant in the sketch, the comedian Jimmy Tarbuck, who was supposed to be passing him various unwieldy objects – a bucket, a plastic milk crate, a length of wood, a ladder – and was watching the show on a monitor backstage, "...thought he'd just stuck another physical gag into his set. He was a real terror for introducing new bits and pieces without warning. But, as time ticked on, we realised something terrible had happened and I called for a quick commercial break."

The management of Her Majesty's Theatre in the West End of London then accepted that something had gone *seriously* wrong and closed the curtains with a rousing blast from the pit orchestra. Several seconds of blank screen followed as London Weekend Television's master control contacted regional stations to get them to start transmitting TV commercials.

Meanwhile, back on Her Majesty's stage, while the show went in front of the curtain, desperate efforts were being made to get Cooper's massive body into an ambulance. But he had already left.

Here's the Magic Cloak sketch under normal circumstances:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHYNahPkJI8>

Here's the Magic Cloak sketch on 15th April 1984:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcE-XZEfeFs>

And here's a biopic showing Cooper's unhappy private life

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YJuUdXVLQ4>.

Hippo eats dwarf

BANGKOK: A hippopotamus swallowed a circus dwarf in a "freak accident" in northern Thailand, according to a columnist in the *Pattaya Mail*.

The Grapevine column reported: "A circus dwarf, nicknamed Od, died recently when he bounced sideways from a trampoline and was swallowed by a yawning hippopotamus waiting to appear in the next act."

"Vets said Hilda the Hippo had a gag reflex which caused her to swallow. More than 1000 spectators continued to applaud wildly until they realised there had been a tragic mistake."

'More than 1000 spectators continued to applaud wildly until they realised there had been a tragic mistake'.

”

This story is an internet hoax, probably created by the American humour magazine, *National Lampoon*. It has been going round the net since 1994 – because it's too good a story to ignore.

Personal unhappiness seems to be part of comic success, but why? Is all successful comedy fed by personal tragedy? There's no answer to the question *What is funny?* But we still have to ask it.

What is funny? (Understanding comedy)**First Year Seminar**

This may well be the least serious seminar at SILS and yet it is not an easy option. How could it be, given that our central questions are What is Funny? and Why is it Funny?

What is Funny? examines the work, life, background and popularity of a group of British, American, Australian and European comedians and scriptwriters working in all mediums: live (stand-up), radio, TV, and film, and asks some difficult questions, such as why does comedy work better in some media than others? Why do we only have to look at some comedians to know they're funny? How is it that some comedy works anywhere while other comedy is much more local, while some comedians do not travel at all well -take, for example, Mr Bean, undeniably a legend in Britain and Japan, but, in a recent sample of audience reactions in Upper New York State, seen as criminally insane and an utter weirdo.

The main requirements for this seminar are a refined and discriminating sense of humour, an ability to tune into unusual comic methods and manners, and the curiosity to wonder constructively about the nature of comedy and study it methodically. Besides their own understandings, students will bring to the seminar examples of their own national or personal humour and examples of the work of non-Anglophone comedians and be ready to introduce them to the seminar.

Students will write a term essay and extend this in a presentation. The course will utilise all and any media to introduce and study comic material and students are free to reference anybody and anything in presentations and class discussions.

Syllabus

Week 1: Orientation

Week 2: The making of comedy: Walter Matthau, Tony Hancock, Galton and Simpson

Week 3: The Little Fellow: Charlie Chaplin

Week 4: Cheeky Chappies: Max Miller, Benny Hill, Jim Davidson, Derek & Clive

Week 5: Successful failures or total losers? Tony Hancock and Lenny Bruce

Week 6: Oxbridge and Co. Tyrone surrealists: Monty Python, Kevin McAleer, Fillet O'Bacon

Week 7: Oxbridge cockneys: Peter Cooke and Dudley Moore

Week 8: Being someone else: Barry Humphries, Harry Enfield, Sacha Baron Cohen (Declan from Stillorgan)?

Week 9: Masters of disaster: Tommy Cooper, Shimura Ken, Mr Bean

Week 10: Reading Week

Week 11: Course Review ESSAYS DUE

Week 12: Presentations or FILM

Week 13: Presentations

Week 14: Presentations

Week 15: Mystery week (probably more presentations)

Assessment

Papers: Essay + Presentation = 40% You will write one properly annotated and sourced essay of 1,500 words by the deadline in Week 11, and give a related Presentation towards the end of the course.

Class Participation: 30% A seminar is a meeting of minds, a discussion, a debate. You will need to prepare your thoughts and speak your mind in this Seminar.

Others: 30% Please attend the seminar regularly, take notes and hand in your assignments on time.

Students are STRONGLY advised to take notes in this class as success in the essay and in the presentation will require regular, close attention to course content. As far as language ability is concerned, the emphasis will obviously be more on spoken than written English, but an intermediate TOEFL-PBT level around 550-575 would be useful.