

The Making of Comedy: raw material, desperation, scripts, hatred, editing, fame

Where does comedy come from? TV comedy, situation comedy, stand-up comedy, jokes, comments, anything that makes anybody laugh comes from people with a sense of humour (they think, or hope) making something funny out of their experiences, the things they see around them. And that means comedy comes from anything and anywhere, anytime.

When I was a kid there were lots of jokes going round the playground. I remember asking my friend where these jokes came from. He told me there was a little old man up in the North of England who worked night and day making up jokes which he sent down to us kids in school playgrounds all over England and Ireland, using a special network of trained and trusted assistants. I considered myself a really funny person and for a year or so I dreamed that one day I would be chosen as one of these trusted assistants, but I never got the call from the little old man in the North of England, and maybe that's one reason why I can never remember jokes – I always forget the punchline.

Ray Galton and Alan Simpson were one of the most successful comedy writing teams ever. They met in a British hospital TB – tuberculosis – ward in the 1950s when they were both convalescing from the disease, and being in adjoining beds, surrounded by death and disease, and having narrowly escaped death themselves, they told each other funny stories. It was the natural thing for them to do. That's how they were. And then having nothing better to do, or not being able to do anything better than what they were born to do, which was write comedy scripts, that's just what they started doing. And then along came their greatest creation, Antony Aloysius St. John Hancock – otherwise known as Tony Hancock.

Charlie Chaplin grew up in just about the worst possible circumstances any child could grow up in: his father was a gypsy and a drinker, and his mother was a music hall singer performer who gradually lost her mind. Charlie and his elder brother Sydney received hardly any schooling in the Kennington district of London, near the River Thames. They started performing very early, in music hall, on the streets, anywhere they could make some money. They were both complete naturals, but Charlie was the genius – probably the greatest comic genius that we know of, because his genius coincided with the development of cinema, because he went to California, and so his genius was recorded. But it

wasn't that simple – he had to develop his comedy and his film making and his dramatic and his musical and his nearly balletic skills out of the crappy humour of the day, slapstick, and he had to find his comic *persona* – the person he became when was funniest, and most tragic – the little tramp. And then he had to start writing and directing and starring in a series of the best comedy films ever made, and we're going to discuss some of those processes in Week 2 and Week 3 of this seminar.

In Neil Simon's play, and film, *The Sunshine Boys*, which is about a comedy duo who work together for many years, the actor Walter Mathau, who plays the comedian Willie Clark, is on his way to make a TV commercial. Going up in the elevator he starts to tell his nephew, who has heard this same speech for about 25 years, what is funny. As Willie sees it, certain words are funny, just because they are, just by themselves. They don't have to do anything or mean anything. They're just funny. They make people laugh. So to be funny, to get a laugh, you have to know the words that are funny. As Willy tells his nephew, "Words with 'K' in it are funny. You didn't know that, did you? If it doesn't have a 'K', it's not funny." Then he says, "Pickle is funny." Here's the speech:

Willy, a main character, gives his nephew a lecture about comedy:

Fifty-seven years in this business, you learn a few things. You know what words are funny and which words are not funny. Alka Seltzer is funny. You say "Alka Seltzer" you get a laugh . . . Words with "k" in them are funny. Casey Stengel, that's a funny name. Robert Taylor is not funny. Cupcake is funny. Tomato is not funny. Cookie is funny. Cucumber is funny. Car keys. Cleveland . . . Cleveland is funny. Maryland is not funny. Then, there's chicken. Chicken is funny. Pickle is funny.

(The green font above is me trying to find a pickle colour because I thought maybe that would be funny too. Are some colours funny?)

Today you can find the scene on Vimeo, here, with the full speech:

<http://vimeo.com/28688111>

(Later on, after I've uploaded this, the copyright cops may have come in and this might not be on Vimeo or even on YouTube. If that happened, maybe it would be because words beginning with V and Y, like Vimeo and YouTube, are just not funny. Which goes to prove Willie Clark's point, that K-words are funny,

but Willie could be wrong).

Peter Cook and Dudley Moore were funny. I mean, really funny. I think. And they were funny because not only did they look funny, but because they were funny together, they had funny faces, and they wrote very funny scripts – and they could improvise. They were also funny because there was always a bit of an air of danger about their work – they didn't observe the boundaries too closely. But they weren't funny because they used words with a K in them. In fact they often used the word Funny, as in Strange, or 'funny peculiar' as it is known to aficionados of humour.

Here they are in 'One Leg Too Few', written by Peter Cook. The scene is a theatrical producer's office:

PETER: MISS RIGBY! STELLA, MY LOVE! WOULD YOU PLEASE SEND IN THE NEXT AUDITIONER, PLEASE? MR. SPIGOTT, I BELIEVE IT IS.

ENTER DUDLEY, HOPPING ON ONE LEG

PETER: MR. SPIGOTT, I BELIEVE?

DUDLEY: YES – SPIGOTT BY NAME, SPIGOTT BY NATURE. (KEEPS HOPPING)

PETER: YES... IF YOU'D LIKE TO REMAIN MOTIONLESS FOR A MOMENT, MR. SPIGOTT. PLEASE BE STOOD. NOW, MR. SPIGOTT YOU ARE, I BELIEVE, AUDITIONING FOR THE PART OF TARZAN? DUDLEY: RIGHT.

PETER: NOW, MR. SPIGOTT, I COULDN'T HELP NOTICING ALMOST AT ONCE THAT YOU ARE A ONE-LEGGED PERSON.

DUDLEY: YOU NOTICED THAT?

PETER: I NOTICED THAT, MR. SPIGOTT. WHEN YOU HAVE BEEN IN THE BUSINESS AS LONG AS I HAVE YOU COME TO NOTICE THESE THINGS ALMOST INSTINCTIVELY. NOW, MR. SPIGOTT, YOU, A ONE-LEGGED MAN, ARE APPLYING FOR THE ROLE OF TARZAN – A ROLE WHICH, TRADITIONALLY, INVOLVES THE USE OF A TWO-LEGGED ACTOR.

DUDLEY: CORRECT.

PETER: AND YET YOU, A UNIDEXTER, ARE APPLYING FOR THE ROLE.

DUDLEY: RIGHT.

PETER: A ROLE FOR WHICH TWO LEGS WOULD SEEM TO BE THE MINIMUM REQUIREMENT. DUDLEY: VERY TRUE.

PETER: WELL, MR. SPIGOTT, NEED I POINT OUT TO YOU WHERE YOUR DEFICIENCY LIES AS REGARDS LANDING THE ROLE?

DUDLEY: YES, I THINK YOU OUGHT TO.

PETER: NEED I SAY WITH OVERMUCH EMPHASIS THAT IT IS IN THE LEG DIVISION THAT YOU ARE DEFICIENT.

DUDLEY: THE LEG DIVISION?

PETER: YES, THE LEG DIVISION, MR. SPIGOTT. YOU ARE DEFICIENT IN IT – TO THE TUNE OF ONE. YOUR RIGHT LEG I LIKE. I LIKE YOUR RIGHT LEG. A LOVELY LEG FOR THE ROLE. THAT'S WHAT I SAID WHEN I SAW YOU COME IN. I SAID 'A LOVELY LEG FOR THE ROLE.' I'VE GOT NOTHING AGAINST YOUR RIGHT LEG. THE TROUBLE IS – NEITHER HAVE YOU. YOU FALL DOWN ON YOUR LEFT.

DUDLEY: YOU MEAN IT'S INADEQUATE?

PETER: YES, IT'S INADEQUATE, MR. SPIGOTT. AND, TO MY MIND, THE BRITISH PUBLIC IS NOT READY FOR THE SIGHT OF A ONE-LEGGED APE-MAN SWINGING THROUGH THE JUNGLY TENDRILS.

DUDLEY: I SEE.

PETER: HOWEVER, DON'T DESPAIR. AFTER ALL, YOU SCORE OVER A MAN WITH NO LEGS AT ALL. SHOULD A LEGLESS MAN COME IN HERE DEMANDING THE ROLE, I SHOULD HAVE NO HESITATION IN SAYING 'GET OUT. RUN AWAY'.

DUDLEY: SO THERE'S STILL A CHANCE?

PETER: THERE IS STILL A VERY GOOD CHANCE. IF WE GET NO TWO-LEGGED ACTORS IN HERE WITHIN THE NEXT TWO MONTHS, THERE IS STILL A VERY GOOD CHANCE THAT YOU'LL LAND THIS VITAL ROLE. FAILING TWO-LEGGED ACTORS, YOU, A UNIDEXTER, ARE JUST THE SORT OF PERSON WE SHALL BE ATTEMPTING TO CONTACT TELEPHONICALLY.

DUDLEY: WELL... THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

PETER: SO MY ADVICE IS, TO HOP ON A BUS, GO HOME, AND SIT BY YOUR TELEPHONE IN THE HOPE THAT WE WILL BE GETTING IN TOUCH WITH YOU.

HE SHOWS DUDLEY OUT

PETER: I'M SORRY I CAN'T BE MORE DEFINITE, BUT AS YOU REALISE, IT'S REALLY A TWO-LEGGED MAN WE'RE AFTER. GOOD MORNING MR SPIGOTT.

And here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbmkY1tBvMU>

Now for a piece of a Chaplin script, City Lights (Reel 4):

CUTTING CONTINUITY
 "CITY LIGHTS"
 A - VERSION
 REEL FOUR

A.			Part Four.
1.	12 ft.	0 frs.	Start and Framed Leader.
2.	19 ft.	2 frs.	Fade in - medium long shot - exterior - house - auto enters left Millionaire steps out.
3.	7 ft.	0 frs.	Medium shot - Millionaire enters left with back to camera - walks to porch - Tramp enters walks to Millionaire.
4.	4 ft.	6 frs.	Title - "I like your car".
5.	2 ft.	15 frs.	Medium shot - Millionaire and Tramp.
6.	4 ft.	10 frs.	Title - "Then keep it, it's yours".
7.	50 ft.	3 frs.	Medium shot - Tramp and Millionaire - Millionaire sits down on steps - butler opens door left - picks up Millionaire exits thru door - pushes Tramp out - Tramp stands by door with back to camera.
8.	4 ft.	8 frs.	Medium shot - interior - Millionaire walks to chair sits down - butler standing by.
9.	9 ft.	7 frs.	Medium long shot - exterior - Tramp by door sits down on steps.
10.	6 ft.	6 frs.	Half figure Tramp seated.
11.	23 ft.	15 frs.	Three-quarter figure blind girl enters left carrying basket of roses - camera pans little as she exits right - Tramp seated on steps in background - rises.
12.	5 ft.	10 frs.	Three-quarter figure Millionaire seated in chair - butler standing by.
13.	3 ft.	3 frs.	Title - "Where's my friend ?".
14.	5 ft.	7 frs.	Three-quarter figure Millionaire seated in chair - butler standing by.
15.	5 ft.	6 frs.	Title - "Let him in, he's my guest !".
16.	6 ft.	5 frs.	Three-quarter figure Millionaire seated in chair - butler standing by exits right.
17.	14 ft.	4 frs.	Three-quarter figure Tramp standing by stairs - door on porch opens - butler enters - Tramp turns back to camera exits thru door in background.
18.	5 ft.	4 frs.	Medium shot - interior - Millionaire seated in chair - Tramp enters right foreground and goes to Millionaire.
19.	4 ft.	4 frs.	Title - "Let's buy some flowers".
20.	15 ft.	6 frs.	Medium long shot - Millionaire seated - Tramp standing by exits right foreground.
21.	4 ft.	3 frs.	Medium long shot - exterior - butler standing by door - Tramp enters and exits right.
22.	2 ft.	12 frs.	Medium long shot - Tramp enters left - camera follows as he runs to background to blind girl.
23.	29 ft.	9 frs.	Half figures blind girl and Tramp.
24.	3 ft.	7 frs.	Title - "Here's ten dollars".
25.	2 ft.	9 frs.	Half figures Tramp and blind girl.

"Medium shot - interior - millionaire..." - comedy is a serious business.
 And finally, Tony Hancock, transporting the words on the page -

'THE MISSING PAGE'

First broadcast: Friday 11 March 1960

TONY: Well, you see, this bird is in the room with this bloke when her husband walks in and...

(The readers in the library turn and shush them. TONY now mimes the action of the book to SID, with SID reacting appropriately. TONY describes the girl's shape. Then a man with big shoulders. Does the man kissing her passionately. Jumps back. Opens a door. Does melodramatic step into the room as the husband with the melodramatic 'ha-ha!' The husband has a terrific fight with the lover. Strangling one another, etc. Finally the husband draws a gun and shoots the lover several times. Does the lover doing the death scene. Kicks the body. Jumps on it. Then does the girl pleading on her knees. He throws her on one side. Has a struggle with the gun. The gun gets forced against her. Goes off. Another big death scene from the girl. She dies. The husband is remorseful. He tries to revive her. Jumps up. Puts hand to ear. Turns round and puts hands up as the police come in the door. Holds out hands for handcuffs. Imitates the judge sitting at the bench. Describes the wig with his hands, bows to three sides of the court. Raps gavel three times. Puts black cap on. Grabs back of collar to indicate being strung up. By now the LIBRARIAN has come onto the scene and has watched the last half of this pantomime. TONY suddenly realizes he is there and with great embarrassment busies himself collecting some books.)

LIBRARIAN: What do you think you're doing?

TONY: And just what do you mean by that?

LIBRARIAN: This is a library, not the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. I've been watching you. You've been creating a disturbance ever since you came in here.

TONY: I was merely describing to my friend what his book is about.

LIBRARIAN: We get a thousand people a day in here – supposing they all did it? A thousand people a day in here, gesticulating. We can't have that in a public library.

TONY: I was not gesticulating.

LIBRARIAN: You were gesticulating... and I've had complaints. It's very distracting. You'd better get your books stamped up and leave.

- to this: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPDH3t1L37g> (from 6" 25')