

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

Thomas Frederick ‘Tommy’ Cooper (1921 –1984) was a British comedian and magician. He was a member of The Magic Circle, and respected by traditional magicians and conjurers.

When you first see Tommy Cooper in action, he probably seems too big (1.93 m. tall, 95kg.) and hearty, too honest, even too *good*, to be funny, especially when you prefer your humour cool. Eventually you realise that cool humour is OK for a smirk, but that when you really need to laugh not from the head but from the stomach you need uncool, that’s when Tommy Cooper is your man.

Tommy Cooper was far ahead of just about every comedian of his generation and a sharp rival to most of the comedians of the new wave of the 1990s and since. Once he had his act down, he just refined it, but it didn’t change and neither did he, much. Tommy Cooper is without a doubt a cheesy, variety-based, conservative, safe, unchallenging, comedian. The sort of comedian your mum would like.

But he performs on a knife edge. Not on a fine line between in-your-face challenge and arrest - he’s just not that kind of comic - but between what is even more terrifying - absolute failure - and barely surviving. So often a Tommy Cooper performance either looks as if he’s just arrived for a talent competition, or he’s been pulled from the audience because the regular performer has had a heart attack, or he’s being given one last chance to prove he can still be funny before he retires or gets banned from the club.

The Tommy Cooper routine is based on the premise that he is a conjuring act. He wears the Fez, which is a red Moroccan or a Turkish hat with a tassel, a suit and a bow tie. That’s his stage outfit. He’s a big man – not fat but big – and he has a big face, broad features, a clown’s mouth and nose, and a voice that’s a bit nasal, a bit drunk-sounding, slurred, with a North of England accent. He’s very working class, a man of the people.

The conjuring never quite works, because the comedy, and the patter, and his own delight in them, are more interesting than the rabbits and doves he produces out of hats, but it’s a handy prop. Thus Tommy Cooper masters disaster, plucks laughter from the jaws of embarrassment (and so on).

The Split Personality Sketch: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5effaImHsU>

The Duck Trick, the Leaf... <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yNzkMqBToc>
The Flowerpot routine: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jw7OFxHDBX8>

On 15 April 1984, Cooper collapsed and soon after died from a heart attack in front of millions of television viewers, midway through his act on the London Weekend Television variety show Live From Her Majesty's, transmitted live from Her Majesty's Theatre. His stage persona required that his act intentionally go wrong <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcE-XZEfeFs> for comic purposes, leading to some initial uncertainty about whether this collapse was real.

2. **Shimura Ken** [志村 けん] (b. Higashimurayama 1950-) is a Japanese comedian, another out-of-date, unfashionable, but, in his day, very funny comic. The English lesson: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ic53hhFllPM> 5' 17'

3. **Mr Bean**: either he makes a disaster worse, or he escapes from a disaster that never was.

- The Library: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwOrp6Q7kCE>
- Hair by Bean of London (1)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8t4b4ZGcxg>
- Bean rescues modesty from non-existent threat: (Bean on the beach)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZWCSQm86UB4>

Comparing comic styles: the same sketch, by Mr Bean, then Shimura Ken:
Bean exam: air date 1 January 1990
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ocd1D8fwdjU>

Shimura 試験 (The invigilator says the date is 1992)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyDmAlyLw6g&playnext=1&list=PLDJ9R-Yc_PpfGrzprWMJ9T7YRoh31rrea&feature=results_main

Walter Mathau again: The audition [DVD from start]

Charlie Chaplin: The Circus: in the mirror maze, cops on his tail
http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x9xbdo_charlie-chaplin-the-circus-the-mirror_fun

