

Stand-Up Comedy in Malta

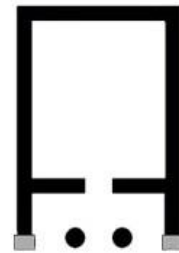
Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone

antae, Vol. 4, No. 2-3 (Oct., 2017), 192-203

Proposed Creative Commons Copyright Notices

Authors who publish with this journal agree to the following terms:

- a. Authors retain copyright and grant the journal right of first publication with the work simultaneously licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution License](#) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal.
- b. Authors are permitted and encouraged to post their work online (e.g., in institutional repositories or on their website) prior to and during the submission process, as it can lead to productive exchanges, as well as earlier and greater citation of published work (See [The Effect of Open Access](#)).



antae

antae is an international refereed postgraduate journal aimed at exploring current issues and debates within English Studies, with a particular interest in literature, criticism and their various contemporary interfaces. Set up in 2013 by postgraduate students in the Department of English at the University of Malta, it welcomes submissions situated across the interdisciplinary spaces provided by diverse forms and expressions within narrative, poetry, theatre, literary theory, cultural criticism, media studies, digital cultures, philosophy and language studies. Creative writing and book reviews are also encouraged submissions.

Stand-Up Comedy in Malta

Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone

University of Malta

There have been several staggered attempts in the past to get a stand-up scene going in Malta, and whether it currently qualifies as a “scene” at all is still open to question.¹ There is, however, clearly something emerging, albeit in its fledgeling stages. Laugh Out Loud Productions, on hiatus since 2014 (but with plans to resume operation in the near future) had taken an initiative in 2004 to invite stand-up comedians from the US, UK, Australia, and elsewhere—going on to organise events on a regular basis and exposing Maltese audiences to live performance of a form rarely seen locally.² The turnouts suggested that, while there was, as yet, a dearth of local performers, there was at least a keen demand on the part of audiences which made itself felt. One notable attempt to establish a local unit of performers committed to stand-up—the Wembley Store Boys—had succeeded in building up some kind of base, but was abandoned and failed to take root. Nonetheless, undeterred, a number of venues have since sprung up that have announced themselves willing to host stand-up events, and a handful of performers are becoming recognisable presences on the budding scene. Though its extensions and efforts have been tinged with a degree of tentativeness, a circuit is steadily asserting itself, generating expectations through its systematic insistence. There is evidently an audience for it, though the turnout is not consistently reliable across the types of venue. This essay will offer a descriptive overview of the emerging scene as it currently stands, along with an account of the kinds of humour most frequently to be encountered, including a more focused commentary on a few of the more regular comedy performers by way of example. I will draw upon theories of humour and approaches from within the field of comedy studies, and will occasionally take a comparative view (with the UK scene in particular) through which avenues for its further progression might be suggested. The overview will allow us to broach the question of stand-up comedy’s status in Malta at the time of writing—could this even be termed a “scene”? And in its current state, where improvising space for experimentation takes place alongside establishing the foundations for further growth, what would it take to reinforce the relationship between the amateur and the route to professionalism?³

¹ I encountered some reservations on this point, in conversation with one of the performers. Personal correspondence, 29 April 2017.

² Roberta Grima, one of the LOL founders. Personal correspondence, 3 June 2017.

³ Supporting its availability as a career choice and profession path might seem to impart a certain “gravity” to the form, one that is not, however, inconsistent with its history (and that of the professional clown), and would allow for its continuing development. Institutionalising comedy may appear to be an odd paradox, particularly in its function as a “safe space” for critique to flourish, which is one reason preserving space for the amateur remains important. How far that “safe space” may fall “outside” the institutional framework may of course itself be questioned in its suggestion of an authorised license (the ‘all-licensed fool’, in William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, ed. by G.K. Hunter in *William Shakespeare: Four Tragedies* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), pp. 514-783 [i. IV. 195]).

Spaces and Audiences

The first step in forming a scene or circuit is taking stock of the available spaces to play. While the challenges of the Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park may have provided a welcome free platform and public space for politically-motivated comedians like Tony Allen, there is not quite the equivalent of this in Malta. The finding or carving out of a space is therefore of paramount importance. The current hosting venues are keen to provide that space, but are still feeling their way with regard to setting this up and designing an appropriate layout. There are no venues exclusively dedicated to stand-up—it usually takes place in spaces provisionally set up, such as the Eden Comedy Club events at the Bowling Alley or at the Hard Rock Café (where a standard “cabaret” set-up is adopted), or as entertainment in restaurants, where the customers are paying for food and drinks, not for the comedy. The comedians on such nights find themselves vying with many other things for the audience's attention, not an unusual situation on any stand-up circuit; however, this does come with certain difficulties: comedians might be faced with resistant, or—worse—indifferent audiences, who had not anticipated entertainment of that nature, and might be irritated by its intrusiveness. Malcolm Galea, an active performer who has been there from the start, notes that:

It's much easier if people are there specifically for the comedy. If people are dining (especially in groups) it's not fair to expect them to just shut up and listen to you—especially if they might not get to see each other very often or if English isn't their first language. A setting like Casey's last time would be preferable. Bars (as opposed to restaurants) like Django and Rookies (both no longer open) and Electro Lobster Project are better. However, I don't mind the challenge.⁴

Of course, one might reasonably expect an audience that has paid to watch the performers to be more ungrudgingly forthcoming with its attention: ‘The worst audience, said the late great Eric Morecambe, is the one who hasn't paid’.⁵ Failing that, however, there is a benefit to having an audience that wants to be there, and is prepared to watch the show.

Open-mic nights are increasingly regular events at a number of venues, such as Camarata and Maori, both in Valletta. These have primarily featured poetry readings and storytelling, with the occasional stand-up. Open-mic nights centred around stand-up are few, though Casey's, a bar in Gzira, has launched an initiative to provide a friendly space for monthly try-outs, and welcomes people who have never done any stand-up before. This injects a vitalising vein for the scene, encouraging newcomers and providing a safe space. This is by no means the gong-happy audience of the Comedy Store in the days of UK alternative comedy, with its combative atmosphere giving it the air of an energetic ‘gladiatorial contest’.⁶ This is, rather, a forgiving and receptive audience, low on aggressive heckles, and often including supportive friends of the performers at the mike—ones who are ready to laugh, and who also generous with their feedback after the show. It's not quite cutting one's teeth on a pub circuit facing challenges hollered by heckling and belligerent punters, nor does it have the hostility which

⁴ Malcolm Galea. Personal correspondence, 5 June 2017.

⁵ William Cook, *The Comedy Store: The Club that Changed British Comedy* (London: Little, Brown, 2001), p. 284.

⁶ Oliver Double, *Stand-up! On Being a Comedian* (London: Methuen Drama, 1997), p. 182.

came to be associated with stand-up, and is reflected in some of the trade terminology, such as “killed” or “died on my arse tonight”. This is not unique to the open-mic nights—Marie-Claire Pellegrini remarks that, in her experience, ‘in Malta most audiences have been very kind’.⁷

The inaugural open-mic comedy night at Casey’s (11th May, 2017) was attended by a diverse crowd—indeed, only three of those who took the microphone (out of about twelve) were Maltese, and the audience was equally weighted towards an international inclusivity. Many of the performers had no aspirations to be stand-up comedians, being just amateurs wanting to try their hand at making an audience laugh. Nonetheless, a lot of work had gone into much of the material, and there was a liberating and warm welcome extended to all who wished to participate. This was held together by Andrew Bonello as compère, whose local reference points were UK-centred; the idea of a “local” space could effortlessly shift with the performer, and this ease of contextual shifts enabled the space to be open to diversity in a potentially empowering manner. An effort was made by some to acknowledge the Maltese context of performance, but for the most part those who did not do so explicitly gave enough of a sense of their own contextual framework to let their audience in.

Trying-Out

A number of the performers currently doing stand-up have approached it through the route of actor-training in other performance contexts, and have a robust background in theatre. These skills lend it a reliable sort of “polish”, and help to raise the perceived “professionalism” of the “scene’s” status—this also affects audience expectations. Nonetheless, all of the Maltese stand-up performers around right now are amateurs in terms of this particular form of live comedy. They are not “amateurs” in the sense that word has assumed in the Malta Amateur Dramatic Company (MADC), where it is retained as a nod to that organisation’s roots, rather than as a stated and embraced approach (the MADDC has rigorous auditioning procedures and methods). We should, instead, take “amateur” here to entail its Latin roots (“*ama*”).⁸ The performers currently writing material and taking their turn at the mike are determined lovers of the craft, and are honing their skills before an audience rather than in rehearsal. However, they are also amateurs in the sense that this is not a profession (though it might be supplemented by professionalism in other areas of performance-training), however polished their style and delivery may seem. Systematically growing the scene may be, but it has not yet achieved the level of stability required for it to be a viable career move. Pellegrini, for example, is a nurse in her full-time employment—this does not get in the way of her also self-identifying as a comedian. Galea has made writing and acting into his profession, but stand-up is a sideline for him.⁹ He manages to combine the two, using confident audience-

⁷ Marie-Claire Pellegrini. Personal correspondence, 15 May 2017.

⁸ ‘Amateur’, in *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2nd ed., ed. by Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 48.

⁹ Personal correspondence, 29 April 2017. He has, however, voiced an intention to make it a more central pursuit, which would involve finding another avenue and taking a detour through the Edinburgh Fringe: ‘This

control techniques that are indebted to his considerable experience in theatre. I will return to these examples for further comment below.

Maintaining a margin for amateurs has always been important in stand-up, where even professional comedians often reserve a space to “try out” new material before taking it to full-paying audiences. It was of course fundamental to the struggles and birth pangs of UK stand-up as we know it today, with early 80s alternative comedy finding a home in pubs and strip-clubs, nestled amidst comedy performance art (such as Randolph the Remarkable), bands, punk performance poetry, and comedian-pranksters like Malcolm Hardee. Stand-up comedians in these early days would delight in suprising the audience with novel takes on form, and would offer something that could not simply and unreservedly be classed as “purely” stand-up—or, rather, it had the ability to challenge preconceptions and expectations for stand-up (which had been previously dominated by racist and sexist jokes of the “mother-in-law” formula). Keith Allen, for example, could defiantly stand before an expectant audience and smash crockery over his head.¹⁰

The open-mic nights are, in this regard, a particularly vibrant channel, accessible to amateurs and open to trying out. There are venue-specific struggles, where the space has to be re-negotiated to accommodate the event—for example, the Casey’s night took place in a close-packed room, with a microphone and a speaker turned onto its side as a makeshift ‘stage’ in one corner, a little elevated platform which constrained movement. It was a basic set-up, with its own particular dynamic; while a few had been lucky to grab some of the limited seating, most people stood around and were there for the comedy. The cramped conditions were not the most comfortable, but worked towards intimacy. The whole thing, however, felt very “DIY”, in a gloriously haphazardly-put-together but celebratory way, evincing a spirit similar to that of the “DIY” turn—associated with comedians like Josie Long.¹¹ This edged its way to the forefront as an indie-“alternative” in the UK in the noughties, and has since been a driving and inspiring force in precipitating a rise in open-mic comedy nights.

Influences and Traditions

Malta’s stand-up scene is taking root in fits and starts. In comparing it to the emergence of stand-up in the UK, I am implicitly observing that there is room for stand-up to stumble, falter, diverge in a variety of interesting ways, not necessarily involving (but not excluding either) carefully-controlled slapstick—though the words might seem to suggest physical awkwardness of that kind. However, Malta’s local scene possesses a contextual specificity of its own. For one thing, in the absence of an established local stand-up tradition, there is a connection of influence with established scenes elsewhere. It is not the case that there has

August I’ll see how I go at the Fringe and hopefully I’ll pursue it further next year’. Personal correspondence, 5 June 2017.

¹⁰ See Oliver Double, *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-Up Comedy* (London: Methuen, 2005), p. 57.

¹¹ Tim Jonze, ‘Laugh? I nearly DIY’d’, *The Guardian*, (August 2007).

<<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2007/aug/04/comedy.edinburghfestival20071>>. [Accessed 3 October 2017].

been no comedy tradition in Malta—there have been comic actors who became household names (such as Johnny Navarro and Charles Clews, performing both on stage and radio, and establishing their own brand of sketch comedy). This runs alongside a few British traditions, such as panto, which took root, outliving colonialism to develop their own local flavour and peculiarity, and holding an enduring appeal that has long gone beyond the English “expat” community. There have also been several extremely popular sketch shows, such as Zoo’s brand of comedy, which included satirical sketches and character comedy, and which delighted in its lack of subtlety. Bla Kondixin specialises in satire. However, Maltese stand-up comedy in recent years has tended to claim less continuity or affinity with local comedy traditions than with the US and UK scenes.

A set of readymade conventions and expectations are imported in particular from the US and the UK, and despite this scene’s fledgling status, the bumpy history of stand-up in those other cultural contexts—which included a search for a form, and for an appropriate response to said context—is not quite as relevant in terms of its impact as the mass media-disseminated commodity being received as if it were a “fully-formed” and reified trend.¹² Indeed, there is some aspiration to reproduce those conventions and reinforce expectations, to some degree curbing the license of the amateur. With the more “formal” events in particular (that is, not open-mic nights, but rather having a setlist compiled well in advance), the audiences’ expectations—expectations not shaped by familiarity with particular comedians, but rather by pre-established conventions—are carefully catered to. This has other consequences: in particular, there is a significant lack of stand-up in the Maltese language.¹³ This is in part due to the personal preferences and proficiencies of individual performers, but emerges as more surprising when viewed as a general tendency. It perhaps owes as much to an anxiety that the Maltese language might not quite lend itself to the form (as having little proven precedent in that line) as it owes to the added inclusivity the English language affords where there is a diverse audience (the latter being the more convincing justification).

¹² Moreover, several Maltese performers interested in pursuing stand-up have set their sights on earning their stripes in the UK or US—sometimes implied is a feeling that this is a more assured route towards success, even in Malta. Chris Dingli, Steve Hili, and Malcolm Galea are amongst those who have performed, and/or are planning to perform, stand-up outside Malta. When asked, Galea elaborated a more nuanced view of this, re-directing it towards the comparative availability of “opportunities”: ‘I wouldn’t say it’s a more assured road towards success *per se*. In the UK and the US there are thousands of stand-ups so success of any form is always going to be extremely unlikely. [...] However, you’re likely to have more opportunities to perform abroad so as regards practice and networking, doing sets abroad has its merits. On the other hand, since it’s still a growing market in Malta, you’re more likely to stand out than you would in the UK or US’. Personal correspondence, 14 June 2017.

¹³ For example, Jean Paul Borg, one of the organisers of the Camarata open-mic night (open to all kinds of spoken word performance) remarked on this striking absence: ‘Everyone is welcome, and yes we had stand-up comedians more than once. However, we never yet had stand-up comedians performing in Maltese’. Personal correspondence, 30 April 2017.

Inclusivity...?

A number of compelling and influential—if unsettling—theories of humour locate its particular power in its ability to redraw or reinforce the exclusivity-inclusivity boundaries: for example, Thomas Hobbes' account of laughter as striking downward in a display and assertion of superiority.¹⁴ Laughter as a collective shared experience is also fundamental to theories such as Henri Bergson's, but such collectivity is often founded on exclusion: 'Our laughter is always the laughter of a group'—a 'closed one'. More insidiously, and even as it works on the side of flexibility against too much 'inelasticity', in Bergson's view it also has the capacity to provide a corrective pressure to bring the stray element back 'into accord with society'.¹⁵ Where the laughter meets collective approval, this bolsters its power, as it may come to ground and cement the preconceptions of those sharing particular ideologies, seeming to reassuringly confirm them (offering that shared viewpoint some comforting validation and legitimisation through laughter).¹⁶ Indeed, Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greaves would suggest that laughter is better at doing this than it is at challenging preconceptions: 'Comedians are not the kind of people you want to put in charge of protecting minority views. As a breed they're instinctively with the mob'.¹⁷

Maltese stand-up cautiously—even evasively—treads this inclusivity/exclusivity boundary. Maintaining English as the language of choice makes it a more generously inclusive scene—and this, surely, is something to be nurtured, in terms of the openness to different people from different backgrounds, cultures, and countries, where mutual respect structures these relationships (as in the night at Casey's). However, unified laughter is easier to achieve when one does not depart from a dominant (a lack of political engagement is not tantamount to being "apolitical"). The potential downsides amount to the fact that a reluctance to acknowledge the exclusionary possibility of comedy may curtail its critical and self-critical force, and may lead more generally to the uncritical acceptance or homogenising assumption of that disturbingly 'totalitarian' all-encompassing "we" that Bill Readings, following Lyotard, cautions against.¹⁸ Pursuing the insidiously 'totalitarian' (and the way it combines the suggestion of a totalising reach with authoritarianism), we might seek an analogy in the workings of 'authoritarian' fiction as analysed by Suleiman, where the ideology supporting the text rests on (and advances) an unchanging value-system, which enshrines, assigns, and assumes 'nonproblematic meanings'.¹⁹ The avoidance of any conflict or possibility of dissent whatsoever does tend to have as its consequence an associated reticence to broach potentially-divisive political and social justice issues like racism, gender, and human rights. Yet, humour as a solidarity strategy could work as a protest mechanism, directed upward at a

¹⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by C.B. MacPherson (London: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 125.

¹⁵ Henri Bergson, 'Laughter', in *Comedy: 'An Essay on Comedy' by George Meredith, 'Laughter' by Henri Bergson*, ed. by Wylie Sypher (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 61-190, p. 150.

¹⁶ See Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015), pp. 58, 190.

¹⁷ Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greaves, *The Naked Jape: Uncovering the Hidden World of Jokes* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 192.

¹⁸ Bill Readings, 'Pagans, Perverts, or Primitives', in *Judging Lyotard*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), pp. 168-191, pp. 174-6, 186.

¹⁹ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre* (Princeton, NJ: University Press, 1983), p. 67.

target in power, ‘from below’.²⁰ The temptation to retreat to conventions that would deliver something safely familiar, even in terms of material, is strong. The influences cited tend to be the more visible and less confrontational comedians, which has the advantage of not risking the alienation of a section of the small audience usually present. The small audiences that can be counted on here (a much smaller turnout than visiting professional comedians attract)²¹ could make a divisive strategy such as that used by Stewart Lee appear too great a risk.²² This may be one reason for the otherwise surprising lack of politically-engaged stand-up comedy in Malta. There is no such lack of political satire in onstage pantos and sketch shows (for example, the annual predominantly English-language *Comedy Knights* at the Salesian Theatre in Sliema; and the Maltese-language *Bla Kondixin*), where satire is guaranteed a firm home, although this usually targets party politics (often in isolation from wider social issues, and sometimes tailored to the expected partisan allegiance of the particular locality).²³

The Acts

Marie-Claire Pellegrini is one of the few performers on the scene who would identify herself as a “comedian”—as previously mentioned, her day job in nursing is her main profession, however, and unlike Jo Brand—that other comedian who was a nurse, and who is amongst Pellegrini’s declared influences—she is not about to abandon her profession for comedy.²⁴ The current conditions of the scene do not, at this moment in time, provide sufficient opportunities to encourage full-time dedication to comedy. Moreover, Pellegrini does not keep the two lines consistently or entirely separate—her day job furnishes her with a rich vein of raw material for her comedy. Her routines are mostly anecdotal—not, however, in a way that cues in shared recognition as does “standard” observational comedy, but rather one which draws upon her rather extraordinary and sometimes extreme experiences as a nurse. Although such incidents are probably occurrences she is accustomed to, she takes a step back and foregrounds the funny side. No doubt it would provoke more laughter of relief or release through shared recognition if performed to a room of those in the nursing profession, but that basis for camaraderie with her regular audience is not there. Despite this, the assertive way in which she controls the audience, coupled with an easy-going confidence and openness,

²⁰ Marjolein ’t Hart, ‘Introduction’, in *Humour and Social Protest*, ed. by Marjolein ’t Hart and Dennis Bos (Cambridge: University Press, 2008), pp. 1-20, pp. 8-10.

²¹ Michael McIntyre’s first stand-up date in Malta sold out within ninety minutes. See Chris Peregine, ‘It Happened! Michael McIntyre Adds Extra Night In Malta After Tickets Sell Out’, *Lovin Malta*, (March 2017). <<https://lovinmalta.com/news/it-happened-michael-mcintyre-adds-extra-night-in-malta-after-tickets-sell-out>>. [Accessed 29 September 2017].

²² Stewart Lee, however, has the rare luxury of playing to audiences now for the most part attuned to his work, and who are almost homogeneously *Guardian*-reading left-liberals—so the confrontational stance is itself freed up to be playful. As Quirk points out, Stewart Lee is in a position where he can, to some degree, ‘select’ his audiences—‘and Lee has a novel way of attracting them: “I [...] always try and put some bad quote on a poster—like ‘monotonous, boring and repetitive’ or something—if I can find something like that, to just try and thin the audience out a bit”’ (in Quirk, p. 72). This ability to be selective is a luxury not quite available to Maltese stand-up comedians—at least not just yet, still struggling as they are to build up an audience-base of any sort.

²³ See Anne Marie Galea, ‘Turning Tragedy into Comedy’, *Times of Malta*, (January 2017). <<https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20170108/arts-entertainment/turning-tragedy-into-comedy.635987>>. [Accessed 3 October 2017].

²⁴ Marie-Claire Pellegrini commented on her influences in personal correspondence, 15 May 2017.

compels belief, trust, and warmth. The result of this is an odd oscillation between comfort and discomfort—discomfort because of the deep-seated fear or awareness we all harbour that, as Larkin puts it, ‘all streets in time are visited’,²⁵ and each of us at one time or other might find oneself on the other side of that merciless clinical gaze.²⁶ This persistent anxiety creeps in whenever we find ourselves indulging in the *schadenfreude* we can allow ourselves for the interim—yet it feels like walking a precarious tightrope over a crevasse, where we are not allowed to avert our eyes from the unpleasant objects below. She does not whitewash her account, which is often visceral, and obscenity serves a function as a mark of “authenticity” when employed within this framework. There is something disconcerting therefore about Pellegrini’s comedy—but she does not conceal this from us. There is also—on the other hand—something comforting about being able to distance ourselves from the exposure of the medical encounter through humour. This distance would seem to generate the optimal conditions for a ‘momentary anaesthesia of the heart’—an aptly clinical turn of phrase for a state that Bergson suggests is a requisite for laughter.²⁷ Yet Pellegrini also personalises the powerful nurse’s gaze, humanises the clinical, opens it up to our own critical scrutiny. She describes, for example, her own early experiences as a vulnerable student nurse, reversing the assumed power-relations in recounting her efforts to handle the (sometimes unreasonable) demands of patients.

Malcolm Galea draws upon extensive theatrical experience, including panto, to find ways of engaging an audience. His comedy persona is a pleasant one, immediately and disarmingly friendly. His persona veers between bashful and brash, confidently asserting his presence and establishing rapport in a manner that paradoxically seems to proclaim an equal footing with the audience. He lays bare and affirms the awkward moments—the embarrassing and the obscene, with a glee that declares itself semi-confidentially, only to banish shame in a loudly cathartic moment (he would probably insert a fart joke here). Much of the stand-up I have watched in Malta has indeed tended to be cheerfully obscene, provoking laughter which may achieve something of a collective release at the lifting of inhibitions (still perhaps assumed to be a feature of a repressive “Catholic” society), and the sheer transgressive joy that comes with not beating around the bush—there is very little innuendo-based comedy.²⁸ Malcolm Galea has one routine that relies upon awareness of the “Catholic context” for full effect, conjuring up a scene of an incident involving his baby in a church.

Chris Dingli’s persona in his own act is likewise eminently likable, though as a *compère* he eggs the audience into more participation and will invite challenges. Also an established presence on Malta’s theatrical stages, Dingli is increasingly devoting himself to solo-comedy. His own act takes the form of relating personal experiences, styled as ‘semi-

²⁵ Philip Larkin, ‘Ambulances’, in *The Witsun Weddings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 33, ln. 6.

²⁶ See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. Alan Sheridan Smith (NY: Vintage Books, 1994).

²⁷ Bergson, p. 64.

²⁸ There is something of the carnivalesque in the liberating focus on the ‘bodily lower stratum’. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 370.

autobiographical’, riffing upon the theme of fatherhood.²⁹ He has been working on building up and refining material and gathering sponsorship for his related show *Bad Dad*—which has already been performed in Malta and in the UK—with a view to touring the States.

There is a personal touch to many of the acts, adding that impression of “authenticity” so prized in stand-up (yet which may be problematized, as—paradoxically—being itself partly constructed).³⁰ Persona in stand-up can be a powerful tool, helping to shape our impressions and expectations.³¹ Nicolà Abela Garrett has constructed a persona with a particular voice and stance—elements which go into making up what Tony Allen terms ‘attitude’.³² She has invested a lot in this aspect of her performance, with a persona who is aggressively assertive, sometimes defensive, as if to hint at a half-offered vulnerability. This nuanced persona relays and gives direction to the intimately “personal” touch that seems to be at the core of her comedy, dressing it up quite literally (she has a consistent “costume” for her stand-up appearances³³). She sometimes plays two contexts against each other—the UK and Malta—and seeks out cultural incongruities to draw upon. This assumes a degree of knowledge of both contexts, something that can usually be relied on before an audience in Malta. On the other hand, some of her material is more locally rooted, less generalisable, than that of the others mentioned here—she comments on regional differences and traditional perceptions, as well as political-partisan loyalties. This gets a laugh from the Maltese people there (though unlike many of the others mentioned here, she does antagonise and challenge), but tends to require an audience attuned to fine distinctions and features which run deep in the Maltese social context, as well as knowledge which may not be readily accessible to those visiting the island. The balance/tension between aiming for the generalisable “recognition” of observational comedy and the need to contextualise is perhaps intensified in the case of a small country like Malta, where debunking or playing off of “internal” national/regional stereotypes as a comedy technique needs more work to make the transition to a wider audience.

Moving Forward

A lively space for amateurs is worth preserving and developing on its own terms, and facilitates growth and change, as does too the inclusivity of the “local” scene. However, the establishing of a more solid network, with support such as that derived from arts funding, and venues which are flexibly open to re-design in a way that is more conducive to a stand-up dynamic, would provide further grounding for what is already settling into place, and it

²⁹ See ‘Send “Bad Dad” Chris Dingli to North America!’, *The Malta Independent*, (April 2017). <<http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2017-04-17/newspaper-lifestyleculture/Send-Bad-Dad-Chris-Dingli-to-North-America-6736173099>>. [Accessed 3 October 2017].

³⁰ See Double, *Getting the Joke*, p. 80.

³¹ See Quirk, pp. 127-129.

³² See Tony Allen, *Attitude: Wanna Make Something Of It? The Secret of Stand-Up Comedy* (Somerset: Gothic Image Publications, 2002).

³³ Personal correspondence, 29 April 2017.

would promise room for progression.³⁴ There is currently a wide and seemingly-unbridgeable gap between the “local” scene, and the expensive yet sold-out tours of visiting comedians, like (most recently) Jimmy Carr (2016) and Michael McIntyre (2017). Local comedians, in contrast, sometimes seem locked into their regular spots (which are not, in fact, regular or consistent enough to be relied upon), with not much scope or opportunity to take their material and act further. On the other hand, Malcolm Galea observes that while ‘abroad you’re not likely to get paid for gigs until you’ve been at it for a number of years[,] local stand-ups can expect to get paid by their third or fourth gig’.³⁵ This encourages a degree of (or suggests a prospective opening onto) professionalisation of the comedian’s role. Moreover, the limitations are not fixed or inevitable, and the emerging interest in stand-up has shown a certain robustness in persisting despite conditions that are less than ideal. Institutional support, and the provision—on a very practical level—of funds and more suitable spaces would help give a more stable home and form to the elements already there.

Conclusion

Writing this has entailed certain difficulties—I have been deliberately careful not to cast too penetratingly critical a gaze (in either sense of the word “critical”) on a scene that is as yet in its vulnerable germinal stages, struggling to assert itself. We might indeed return to the lurking question, casting a shadow over the discussion from the start—can we speak of a stand-up “scene” in Malta, even a budding one? Or has this entire article been premature, founded on anticipation? The hopes, I believe, are justified: not only are certain crucial and basic elements emerging—audience, space, performers honing their skills—but these elements are also circulating, settling into place, establishing relationship dynamics and networks (a circuit?), and displaying an insistence that suggests it might be here to stay. Professional actors like Malcolm Galea, Chris Dingli, Nicolà Abela Garrett, Philip Leone-Ganado and Colin Fitz are bringing their skills to bear and adapting them to a different arena, a few like Marie-Claire Pellegrini are focusing their attention more specifically on comedy, and the introduction of open mic nights provides a supportive access-point for newcomers and amateurs—this last is an especially encouraging step *en route* to developing and expanding the scene, as well as helping to sustain and stoke public interest in it.

³⁴ For a discussion on the way space design may impact a performance and its reception by an audience, see Quirk, pp. 65-90.

³⁵ Personal correspondence, 14 June 2017.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Malcom Galea, Marie-Claire Pellegrini, and Nicolà Abela Garret, who generously made themselves available for comment, and contributed to the article not simply through their willingness to be interviewed, but also through their active and inspiring participation in the scene as performers (after all, this article would not exist without their commitment to what they do). I would also like to thank Jean Paul Borg and Roberta Grima for their additional comments as organisers, and Andrew Bonello for being on hand to verify the accuracy of some of my impressions from the Casey's night. This article is dedicated to all of the enthusiastic performers who are helping to lay the foundations for a stand-up "scene" in Malta. I am also grateful to Kurt Borg for reading and helpfully commenting on an earlier draft of this article.

List of Works Cited

Allen, Tony, *Attitude: Wanna Make Something Of It? The Secret of Stand-Up Comedy* (Somerset: Gothic Image Publications, 2002)

'Amateur', in *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2nd ed., ed. by Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984)

Bergson, Henri, 'Laughter', in *Comedy: 'An Essay on Comedy' by George Meredith, 'Laughter' by Henri Bergson*, ed. by Wylie Sypher (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 61-190

Carr, Jimmy, and Lucy Greaves, *The Naked Jape: Uncovering the Hidden World of Jokes* (London: Penguin Books, 2006)

Cook, William, *The Comedy Store: The Club that Changed British Comedy* (London: Little, Brown, 2001)

Double, Oliver, *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-Up Comedy* (London: Methuen, 2005)

———, *Stand-up! On Being a Comedian* (London: Methuen Drama, 1997)

Foucault, Michel, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. Alan Sheridan Smith (NY: Vintage Books, 1994)

Galea, Anne Marie, 'Turning Tragedy into Comedy', *Times of Malta*, (January 2017). <<https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20170108/arts-entertainment/turning-tragedy-into-comedy.635987>>. [Accessed 3 October 2017]

Hart, Marjolein 't, 'Introduction', in *Humour and Social Protest*, ed. by Marjolein 't Hart and Dennis Bos (Cambridge: University Press, 2008), pp. 1-20

Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan*, ed. by C.B. MacPherson (London: Penguin Books, 1968)

Jonze, Tim, 'Laugh? I nearly DIY'd', *The Guardian*, (August 2007). <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2007/aug/04/comedy.edinburghfestival20071>>. [Accessed 3 October 2017]

Larkin, Philip, 'Ambulances', in *The Witsun Weddings* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010)

Peregin, Chris, 'It Happened! Michael McIntyre Adds Extra Night In Malta After Tickets Sell Out', *Lovin Malta*, (March 2017). <<https://lovinmalta.com/news/it-happened-michael-mcintyre-adds-extra-night-in-malta-after-tickets-sell-out>>. [Accessed 29 September 2017]

Quirk, Sophie, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015)

Readings, Bill, 'Pagans, Perverts, or Primitives', in *Judging Lyotard*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), pp. 168-191

'Send "Bad Dad" Chris Dingli to North America!', *The Malta Independent*, (April 2017). <<http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2017-04-17/newspaper-lifestyleculture/Send-Bad-Dad-Chris-Dingli-to-North-America-6736173099>>. [Accessed 3 October 2017]

Shakespeare, William, *King Lear*, ed. by G.K. Hunter in *William Shakespeare: Four Tragedies* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), pp. 514-783

Suleiman, Susan Rubin, *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre* (Princeton, NJ: University Press, 1983)