

Performance, Expectation, Interaction and Intimacy:

On the Opportunities and Limitations of Arena Stand-up Comedy

for Comedians and Audiences

Abstract

Live stand-up comedy has become increasingly popular over the last few years. A significant trend related to this heightened interest in stand-up comedy is the diversification of stand-up comedy venues. In addition to small rooms in pubs and small/medium-sized designated comedy clubs, stand-up comedy is now often performed in large arenas with audience capacities of 10,000 plus. Through a series of semi-structured interviews with stand-up comedians and stand-up comedy audiences this exploratory empirical article examines the appeal of arena stand-up comedy, and its limitations, for both stand-up comedians and stand-up comedy audiences. Thematic analysis of the interview data highlights three main themes: arena stand-up comedy as a particular type of comedy; arena stand-up comedy as expected comedy; and arena stand-up comedy as lacking interaction and intimacy. The article concludes by reflecting on what the analysis suggests about how we should understand contemporary live stand-up comedy performance and reception.

Introduction

In the late 1980s Betsy Borns observed that stand-up comedians' "headline status is obvious" (Borns 279) and stand-up comedian Judy Carter argued that stand-up comedy is "big business" (Carter 153). The popularity of stand-up comedy is not restricted to established stand-up comedy scenes in Anglo-American regions. It is becoming increasingly popular in countries where stand-up comedy as a particular type of performance is less established. For example, in recent years there has been a "mushrooming" of stand-up comedy in South

Africa (Seirlis 513). In August 2009 the *Croatian Times* reported that the first stand-up comedy festival in Croatia was to take place in September 2009 (“Stand-up Comedy Festival to Bring the ‘Punch-line’ to Zagreb”), and, since 2010, a successful stand-up comedy movement, *Comedy Estonia*, has existed in Estonia (see Laineste 77). Even in countries with established stand-up comedy circuits, stand-up comedy is becoming increasingly more popular. Comedy critic Brian Logan argued in *The Guardian* newspaper in 2010 that, since 2009-2010, there has been an "explosion" in British stand-up comedy and that its popularity has "hit the stratosphere." Such "explosion" can be linked to the celebritization of stand-up comedy which is driven by mediatization, personalization, and commodification (see Driessens 9-13). This is evidenced by the expanding number of television programs based on stand-up comedy (e.g. *Michael McIntyre’s Comedy Roadshow* (BBC 1 2009-present) and *Comedy Rocks with Jason Manford* (ITV 1 2010-11)). It also includes the increasing number of stand-up DVDs available and sold (“It’s Manic Monday”) and books written by stand-up comedians reaching the top of book charts (e.g. Michael McIntyre’s *Life & Laughing: My Story* gained top position in the *Sunday Times* bestseller list in the first week of its release (“McIntyre Tops Bestsellers’ List”). Additional evidence of their popularity includes stand-up comedians acting as commentators on serious discussion television programs (such as *Question Time* (BBC 1 1979-present)) and their substantial presence on social media (e.g. Twitter). Further, comedy agent and television company, Avalon, almost doubled its pre-tax profits in the first six months of 2011 to £4.67 million (compared to the same period the previous year) (“Avalon Doubles its Profits”).

One of the most prevalent ways in which this "explosion" is evident is in the increasing number of multi-date arena-style tours by stand-up comedians such as Peter Kay, Lee Evans, Michael McIntyre, Alan Carr, John Bishop, Russell Howard, Eddie Izzard, and Jason Manford. These stand-up comedians perform in large arenas including the Manchester

Arena, Motorpoint Arena Cardiff, Echo Arena Liverpool, London O2, Wembley, Aberdeen Exhibition and Conference Centre, Odyssey Arena Belfast, and the NIA Birmingham. Such arenas have seating capacities of 10,000 plus. As arena stand-up comedy has yet to receive scholarly attention, this exploratory empirical article examines the positive and negative experiences of performers and audiences when performing and/or attending arena stand-up comedy. The article focuses on three main features of arena stand-up comedy: (a) the impact that arena stand-up comedy is having on stand-up comedians' performances; (b) the appeal of arena stand-up comedy for performers and audiences; and (c) its limitations for comedians and audiences.

The Importance of the Venue in Stand-up Comedy

Mary Douglas argues that the meaning of a joke is dependent on a number of important factors, which include the specific text of the joke itself, the context in which the joke is told and the process of telling the joke. As Douglas argues, "the joke form rarely lies in the utterance alone [...] [it] can be identified in the total social situation" (93). The stand-up comedy venue is a significant feature of this "total social situation." Stand-up comedy can be performed in a wide range of venues. These include small function rooms at the back of (or above) pubs and bars that may hold audiences of 10-100 people and purpose built comedy clubs which may house audiences up to 300-400 (e.g. The Comedy Store, Mumbai, India). In addition there are small-to-medium-sized theatres with up to 500 capacity (e.g. Bathurst Street Theatre, Ontario, Canada) and medium-to-large theatres with a maximum capacity of 4,000-5,000 (e.g. Challenge Stadium, Perth, Australia). The stand-up comedy venue portfolio has been recently extended to include large indoor arenas with capacities up to 21,000 (e.g. Manchester Arena, Manchester, UK).

The stand-up comedy venue can facilitate, or hinder, the stand-up comedy process (Borns 131; Double 45; Harbidge 128; Quirk 219-238). The physicality of the venue is recognised as having significant impact on the stand-up comedian/audience relations, intra-audience activity and what is permitted in the performance space (Harbidge 131-133; Quirk 219-238). Lesley Harbidge argues that stand-up comedy venues where there is close proximity between the performer and audience are “conducive to performer/audience interaction, as well as crucial intra-audience activity” (131). However, it is not simply the close proximity of performer and audience that can create a collective informal experience. Harbidge also highlights that the presence of alcohol (e.g. pairs or groups of audience members purchasing drinks for each other) and the layout of seating (e.g. chairs positioned around tables mean that the audience members can discuss the performance) can facilitate the collective social experience (see also Lockyer and Myers 181-183).

The “science of the room” is highlighted in Sophie Quirk’s analysis of stand-up comedy venues with a maximum capacity of 500. Through interviews with stand-up comedians Quirk argues that the furnishings, layout, and décor of the room can influence the audiences’ emotions, attitudes, and behavior. A “good room” according to comedians is one that: (a) does not challenge the authority of the performer (e.g. a room without fruit machines and without doors in distracting places); and (b) enhances the flow of energy through the room (e.g. acoustics that amplify the laughter, a full room, a colourful room) (226-229).

The Rise of Arena Stand-up Comedy

Performing stand-up comedy in large venues has a longer history in America than elsewhere. For example, American comedian Steve Martin grossed over \$1 million for his tour in 1977, which saw him perform to an audience of 500,000 in large venues in 50 American cities (Double 40-41). Another country where large venues are used for stand-up comedy

performances is Germany. For example, Mario Barth, a German comic, performed at a 70,000 capacity Olympic Stadium in Berlin in 2008 and 2011 (“Comics ‘Will Be Playing UK Stadiums Soon’”). The first UK comedy arena show took place at the 12,000-capacity Wembley arena in London in 1993 as part of Robert Newman and David Baddiel’s national tour (Smith; Walker). Reviews of this innovative show commented on how the comedians adapted to the larger performance space: “the duo used their newfound space well enough. In addition to the screens, there was a revolving inner stage and plenty of rock ‘n’ roll theatrics – poses struck, hysteria milked and Newman’s grand entries by trapeze and motorised skateboard” (Wareham). The first multi-arena tour was Eddie Izzard’s Sexie tour, a decade after Newman and Baddiel’s one-off show. In 2005 Lee Evans was the first solo stand-up comedian to perform to an audience over 10,000 at the Manchester Evening News Arena (“Comic Evans Breaks Crowd Record”).

Stand-up comedy is now a staple ingredient of arena programs and sits comfortably alongside music events and family entertainment, which traditionally have been the mainstay of arena programs. Peter Walker has observed that stand-up comedy “has never been bigger” and that large arenas describe stand-up comedy “as their fastest growing moneyspinner”. In 2010 Logan observed that, when the London O2 opened in 2007, comedy was not included on the show listings and was not a genre that was considered – but in 2010 live comedy accounted for 10% of the venue’s sales. Performing multi-date arena style tours is as equally lucrative for stand-up comedians. Peter Kay’s recent sell-out tour, “The Tour that Didn’t Tour – Tour,” sold over 1 million tickets, was spread across two years, and included twenty sell-out consecutive dates at the Manchester Arena and ten at the London O2 (“Peter Kay’s £35m Tour Gets Even Bigger”). The stand-up comedy division of Nakatomi Logistics, Peter Kay’s company, received profits of £7.2 million between March 2010 and March 2011 (“Peter Kay Makes £7.2m From Stand-up”). Further, Michael McIntyre grossed around £21

million from his 2012 “Showtime” tour which included 73 arena shows in the UK and Ireland (including ten shows at the London O2) to over 600,000 people (Richardson).

Despite this increasing popularity in arena stand-up comedy, some authors have criticised this new stand-up comedy performance space. Arena stand-up shows have been attacked for their lack of intimacy (“The State of the Industry”). Further, in 2010 Logan referred to stand-up comedy’s “natural habitat” as “the low-ceilinged, beer-soaked bar,” and Lawrence Mintz has argued that it is in small comedy clubs or small night-club rooms “where interaction between the comedian and the audience is more prominent” (78). Comedy agent Hannah Chambers maintains that comedy rooms with 1,000 to 3,000 capacity “work best in terms of atmosphere and getting a proper income” (“Peter Kay Makes £7.2m From Stand-up”). Further, in a *Time Out* article published in 2009 comedy critic, Kate Copstick, contends that, although “you might get screens at Wembley and the O2, if I’m going to spend an evening glued to a screen then I’ll buy the DVD, get something decent to drink (for less than £5 a plastic cup) [...] Cheaper than a ticket, and I can fast-forward through the padding.” Such observations suggest that large arenas proffer little comic opportunities for the stand-up comedian and stand-up comedy audience.

Although such criticisms exist, to date, there is a lack of research which examines the appeal of arena stand-up comedy from the stand-up comedians’ and audiences’ perspective or explores possible limitations of such venues for the stand-up comedy process. This paper rectifies this imbalance by specifically examining how performers and audiences experience arena stand-up comedy, the appeal of arena stand-up comedy, and its potential limitations, for both comedians and audiences.

Methodology

Data Collection

To examine the experiences and appeal of arena stand-up comedy and its possible limitations a series of semi-structured interviews was conducted with stand-up comedians currently performing on the British live comedy circuit and with stand-up comedy audiences.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face (with one exception which was a telephone interview) and took place between March 2011 and March 2012. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with stand-up comedians and twelve with stand-up comedy audiences.

The stand-up comedian interviewees were Jo Brand, Susan Calman, Scott Capurro, Ishi Khan-Jackson, Stewart Lee, Ria Lina, Michael McIntyre, and Phil Zimmerman. These stand-up comedians differ in terms of the length of time they have been performing stand-up comedy (e.g. Stewart Lee has performed stand-up comedy since 1988 and Susan Calman since 2006). Also, they differ in terms of the size of venues performed in (e.g. the largest venue Jo Brand has performed in is the NIA Birmingham with a capacity of almost 13,000 whereas the largest venue Phil Zimmerman has performed in is the Hackney Empire, London, with a capacity of 1275). Such diversity of experience strengthens the research as it facilitates understanding from different perspectives. Stand-up comedians were recruited to the research via three main recruitment strategies. These were the researcher's personal contacts, requests made via the stand-up comedians' management company, and "snowballing sampling" (Sturgis 179-180) which involved asking those who had participated in the research if they knew anyone else who may be willing to participate in the research, and following-up on suggestions made. The location of each interview was determined by the stand-up comedians' preference. Interviews were conducted in a variety of locations including a comedy club, recording studio, theatre, pub, and a coffee-shop.

Twelve stand-up comedy goers were also interviewed. Interviewees were recruited via a two-pronged approach that included an online survey – by survey participants indicating

at the end of the online survey that they would be willing to participate in a semi-structured interview about their experiences of being a live stand-up comedy audience member – and again via the snowball sampling technique.¹ According to the participants' preference, the interviews were conducted in either the interviewee's home or place of work. "Cultural sensitivity" (Seiber 20) was factored into the research design by allowing all interviewees to determine the location of the interviews and ensuring travelling time and expenses for participants were kept to a minimum. A range of attitudinal, behavioral, and experiential questions were included in both the comedian and audience semi-structured interview guides.

Following the advice of Nigel Fielding and Hilary Thomas (257) and Jane Stokes (119) the semi-structured interviews were digitally recorded (with interviewee consent). Interviews were professionally transcribed using intelligent verbatim transcription immediately after the completion of each interview in order to maintain research momentum, to provide a permanent record of the qualitative data, and to facilitate analysis.²

Data Analysis

The transcribed data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis (Aronson; Seale 314). This approach to analysis "focuses on identifiable themes and patterns of living and/or behaviour" (Aronson). The analytical technique employed the popular "scissor-and-sort" (or "cut-and-paste") approach often used by qualitative researchers. This involved reading and re-reading the transcripts to identify those sections relevant to the central research aims. This was followed by inductively developing a classification/coding system for the major themes identified and highlighting the parts (phrases, sentences, or longer extracts) within the transcripts that corresponded to each theme using a color-coding technique. Once the coding process was complete the color coded copies of the transcripts were cut and sorted, so all

parts within each transcript that related to a particular theme were placed together ready for analysis (Fielding and Thomas 260).

Findings and Analysis

Arena Stand-up Comedy as a Particular Type of Comedy

A prominent theme to emerge from the stand-up comedian interviews was the way in which arena stand-up comedy facilitated a particular type of comedy. The larger performance space proffered by arenas, which includes a wide and high-raised stage, lends itself to stand-up comedy performances that are predominantly physical in *delivery*. Jo Brand observes that when performing in large arenas, stand-up comedians “all walk around. Like Michael [McIntyre] does a lot of acting out of stuff, doesn’t he, but even if they don’t, they use the space, they go up and down, they go to the edge” (personal interview 16 Nov. 11). When describing arena stand-up comedy Susan Calman explains how comedians alter their delivery in the large arena performance space:

Peter Kay is great at sliding across the stage, all of that. So if you look at people the bigger the venues that they get, you see that they change. If you do a huge room, you have to be aware of the fact that people are far away, their attention span will lessen, so you have to have more jokes per minute. You can’t rely on their good nature to a certain extent, people get very bored and people talk amongst themselves, so actually it becomes more difficult because you have to keep their interest. Now the easiest way to do that is through your physical performance, which is why I think you see a lot of comics become much more physical the bigger the room gets, that’s what I do.

(personal interview 21 April 11)

Further, Ria Lina concurs:

I think in a smaller venue, you have to be more real whereas in a bigger venue, you have to be more caricatured. If you're playing at the O2, you can't swallow your punchlines, you've got to perform them to the back row, just like in the theatre. Even though you're amplified and probably shown up on a big screen, you still have to perform it, which is what makes Michael McIntyre such a great stadium performer. He's acting things out, he's got his walks, he's got his physical performance, and that's actually what we like about him. (personal interview 12 March 12)

When asked about his performances in arenas such as the London O2, Michael McIntyre described how the large arenas facilitate a more “convincing” performance:

I just see the big space and I think what can I do in this? How can I fill this? This is great fun; I can play in all this. I mean that's why I don't hold a microphone because I can express myself better. You can get laughs by impersonating people and doing impressions of things with your body, and if you've got a big space, you can act things out more convincingly. So I'm not thinking, what can I do to entertain all these people; I'm thinking oh great, I've got this big stage to play on. (personal interview 30 Nov. 11)

Such comments link to Quirk's (228-229) observations in relation to the “science of the room” which highlight the importance of the flow of energy through the room in stand-up comedy. Using the full space of the stage, for example, by elaborately running, skipping or sliding from one side to the other, can transmit vitality and dynamism to the audience. Larry Miller has observed that, as comedians improve, and “the more sincerely you work on your talent, the energy starts to come out of your body and you can touch people from two feet away, then eight feet [...] And they know right when you walk out, that energy can touch them” (in Borns 27). Strategically using physical comedy to convey energy in arena stand-up

is thus a helpful tool in connecting with the large audience. It also makes arena stand-up performances distinct – in small venues, with smaller stages, or no stage at all, performing exaggerated physical comedy would be difficult. As Ross Noble argues, “if you’re gonna play big theatres then you might as well do a show that they couldn’t see in a comedy club. Because otherwise, you’re just playing to more people” (in Double 44).

The influence of arenas on the performance of stand-up comedy is not limited to the delivery of the jokes or comic narratives, they also are perceived as having an impact on the *content* of the stand-up comedy performance. When considering arena stand-up comedy performances, Susan Calman explained “really if it’s that many people [tens of thousands] you have to choose the most generic stuff you can that hopefully will get the most laughs” (personal interview 21 April 11). Jo Brand also observed that the comedians performing in arenas tend to perform observational comedy which has universal appeal:

They’ve kind of broadened out the comedy; in a lot of ways they’ve removed the politics from it. You have broad observational comics like Michael McIntyre obviously, and Russell Howard doing these enormous venues, where they can pull in thousands and thousands of people because they have a much more general appeal than certainly stand-ups of my generation did. (personal interview 16 Nov. 11)

Such universal appeal is paramount when attempting to sell over a million tickets in order to fill large arenas night after night, as was the case with Peter Kay’s recent multi-date multi-arena tour, “The Tour that Didn’t Tour – Tour.” Oliver Double argues that observational comedy, “in which the comedian talks about everyday phenomena that are rarely noticed or discussed”, is a useful tool for encouraging sharing of experience between the stand-up comedian and audience and to “work properly, the routine must be based on shared experience” (116). With audience sizes of 10,000 plus in arena stand-up observational

comedy can help to unite the large diverse audience through shared acknowledgment, recognition, and experience. Creating the sense that the audience is a community or homogenous is paramount “if the laughter is to come easily” as it “loosens the audience and allows for laughter as an expression of shared values rather than as a personal predilection” (Mintz 78). In his analysis of why people laugh and the meaning of laughter, Henri Bergson identifies three fundamental features. One of these refers to the social aspect of laughter and the importance of feeling connected to others in the creation of laughter. Bergson argues that:

You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo. Listen to it carefully: it is not an articulate, clear, well-defined sound; it is something which would fain be prolonged by reverberating from one to another, something beginning with a crash, to continue in successive rumblings, like thunder in a mountain. Still, this reverberation cannot go on forever [...] Our laughter is always the laughter of a group. (11)

Establishing the feeling of a homogenous group is particularly important in large arenas. Despite being able to accommodate large collective audiences, the spatial relations of arena stand-up comedy can emphasise the personal. Drawing on Edward Hall’s 1966 theory of proxemic relations, which purports that perception of space is culturally defined, Keir Elam argues that, although once inside the theatre (or arena) audiences become members of the mass audience, each audience member has his/her “own well-marked private space, individual seat, and relative immunity from physical contact with his fellows (and even from seeing them). The result is to emphasize personal rather than social perception and response” (64). Therefore the arena stand-up comedian has to counteract the feelings of personalization generated by the specific spatial relations of large arenas in order to produce the conditions conducive to social laughter. One method of mitigating these feelings of personalization is thus to include material that can be understood, and shared, by the whole audience. However,

for Jo Brand, this results in comic material that although funny, is also “palatable,” “packaged,” and “non-threatening” and performances that have “no challenge in what they do, there’s just an endless stream of polished routines” (personal interview 16 Nov. 11).

Further, the actual physical space of large arenas is perceived as discouraging comic material that is ambivalent and confusing. As Stewart Lee explained:

It’s difficult to project doubt to the back of a stadium, it’s very difficult to ask questions to that void of people. You can’t go out to 8,000 people in a weirdly acoustic like ‘enorma-dome’ and do stuff where it’s not clear what you’re trying to do, it’s just not ... well, no-one’s ever tried it, but I suspect you can’t do it, because doubt and confusion and ambivalence don’t read very well. (personal interview 19 July 11)

Thus arena layouts and the lack of proximity between the performer and audience, with the stand-up comedian on stage and audiences physically distant from the stage (particularly those sitting at the back of the arena), lend themselves to jokes and comic narratives that are characterised by clarity and are easily digestible. In large arenas interaction between the stand-up comedian and the audience is minimal (see the arena stand-up comedy as lacking interaction and intimacy theme below), thus jokes that confuse audiences, or those that ask for verbal responses from the audience (either in dis/agreement), or jokes for which audiences may need to seek an explanation from the comedian are not conducive to large arenas. Thus the physical layout of the arena and the large audience can result in a dilution or negation of more obtuse or challenging comic material. In his analysis of the formal relations between different types of performance activities, Richard Schechner argues that a theatre performance mediates between play, which “is ‘free activity’ where one make’s one’s own rules” and ritual, which “is strictly programmed, expressing the individual’s submission to

forces ‘larger’ or at least ‘other’ than oneself” (15). The combinations of play and ritual are governed by rules, which Schechner refers to as “frames.” Some “rules say what must be done and others what must not be done” (15). Schechner argues that all performances, to a greater and lesser extent, are framed by spatial dynamics and their associated conventions (18). The above comments from stand-up comedians suggest that arena stand-up comedy, despite its relatively novel status, is already perceived as being governed by specific frames regulating what is and is not possible, or favorable, in terms of arena stand-up comedy delivery and content.

Arena Stand-up Comedy as Expected Comedy

A second theme to emerge from both the stand-up comedian and audience interview data refers to the way in which stand-up comedy performed in large arenas creates a certain type of expectation – the expectation that the stand-up comedian will be able to deliver a high-quality humorous performance. In her analysis of theatre audiences Susan Bennett observes how a “horizon of cultural and ideological expectations” are brought to any performance by the audience, and that this “horizon of expectation is never fixed and is always tested by, among other things, the range of theatre available, the play, and the particular production” (98). Expectation is an important feature in the comedy process. In his 1905 book, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud identifies specific conditions that will generate comic pleasure. One of these important conditions is “an *expectation* of the comic, by being attuned to comic pleasure” (282; emphasis in original). Explaining this mechanism of comic pleasure Freud maintains:

Anyone who starts out to read a comic book or goes to the theatre to see a farce owes to this intention his ability to laugh at things which would scarcely have provided him with a case of the comic in his ordinary life. In the last resort it is in the recollection of

having laughed and in the expectation of laughing that he laughs when he sees the comic actor come on to the stage, before the latter can have made any attempt at making him laugh. (282-283)

Double (45) argues that specific features such as the staging and the size of venue can impact on the audiences' expectations. One stand-up audience goer explained clearly the differences in expectation and intent between small venues and arenas:

I think you'd go out with a different evening in mind depending which you go to, which of the two types of event you choose to go to. When I go to an arena or large venue I'm going because I know the comedian, I like them, and I'm prepared to spend £40 / £50 on seeing them. In smaller venues you're going with friends and you're going to have a sociable night out whatever, whereas in a big venue you're going there not to chat to your mates, but to have a show, and you're going to get your money's worth. I think there's absolutely a different intent. (Deborah King, personal interview 16 March 11)

Similarly, another stand-up comedy audience member made a distinction between the different expectations he goes to stand-up comedy performances with, depending on the venue:

If you're going to the small venues where you don't know the comedian, you don't know anything about them, they're getting no money, you're paying no money, so you don't know what you're going to get. That's different from going to see someone like Bill Bailey in an arena, because you'd expect that to be brilliant just because of his standing, where he is in his career. So you might not know the jokes he's going to tell and everything, but you know the kind of humor you're going to get and you know it's going to be good. (David Jacks, personal interview 20 July 11)

Phil Zimmerman, who is both a stand-up comedian and comedy club promoter, recalls how the perceived status of the comedian, and the extent to which s/he is familiar to the audience, will impact on how the performance is received:

We've had big names on and I've felt that the performance wasn't that good, it was a bit disappointing. Because obviously you've got someone famous on, everyone's expecting it to be really great. But the audience reaction they seemed quite happy with it, it was considered a good night, it was great, they'd seen this famous person – they were happy. Whereas if the act that had been on the stage had been someone less well known and performed at a similar level, I wonder if they'd have gone away quite so happy. (personal interview 11 Oct. 11)

In their analysis of the appeal of live stand-up comedy for audiences, Sharon Lockyer and Lynn Myers (175-177) identified that one of the main attractions was that audiences “expect the unexpected.” The unpredictable nature of live stand-up comedy related to not knowing who is going to be performing at open mic nights (often performed in small venues), not knowing who will be supporting a headlining act, the unpredictable nature of the comedian's actions, the content of the performance, and the ways in which the stand-up comedian responds to the dynamics of the specific audience. Thus the stand-up comedy audience derives excitement from “expecting the unexpected.” Expectation is still important in arena stand-up comedy, but, crucially, it operates in a very *different* manner, as a “knowing expectation.” Here expectation relates to anticipating that the stand-up comedian will be entertaining, and this expectation is based on the audiences' prior knowledge and experience of the stand-up comedian's performance. The comedian and comedy audiences comments mentioned above reaffirm Bennett's analysis of theatre audiences. Bennett observes that audiences are “prepared to pay for (and indeed then expect) a special kind of theatrical event when icons of the profession are involved” (100).

Such expectation can be heightened by the comedian's name positioned in large brightly-lit letters at the back of the stage, dry ice smoke rising from the stage, large screens projecting the performance, and dramatic music and announcements prior to the stand-up comedian emerging from the dry ice smoke center-stage. This complex combination of theatrical framing devices is highly significant as it constructs the performance in a way that directs attention exclusively to the stage, which is a feature of a "good room" (Quirk 226). Further, in his semiotic analysis of performance, Patrice Pavis argues that music is an important theatrical element as it adds "emotional illustration" to the scene/act and "segments and articulates the narrative, and indicates the movement from one word to another" (175). In their work on the theory and practice of scenography and performance, Alison Oddey and Christine White acknowledge that audiences' sense of presence is amplified by large images that are projected or transmitted before, during, and after the performance. Large images which are projected on huge screens (which Oddey and White argue look similar to a window), provide the audience with a "particular visual field and viewing angle" which "encourage the viewer to participate" (19). Further, Bennett observes that lighting and stage effects, which she refers to as "external signs" (140), can "heighten the theatrical experience for the audience" (111). Therefore, in relation to arena stand-up comedy, combining a range of established theatrical techniques and effects may serve to encourage the audience to believe that what they are about to see and hear is a very good (funny) performance, as it reinforces (or heightens) the status of the stand-up comedian. As one stand-up comedy audience goer explained: "If it's somebody who's big enough to do something on a large scale, it's pretty exciting to see them at work" (Michael Shute, personal interview 19 May 11).

Audience expectations can have benefits for the stand-up comedian performing in arenas. Ishi Khan-Jackson argues: "I think it's harder to perform to an audience who aren't

specifically there to listen to you” (personal interview 21 March 11). Such observations reflect the assessment of Newman and Baddiel’s Wembley arena show in 1993. Giles Smith observes:

Newman and Baddiel’s removal to the big stage, though seemingly an act of almost foolhardy bravery, actually eliminates for them comedy’s essential risk. As Baddiel says: “I would never want to play a gig in front of 12,000 people who were all out for a night of comedy. But 12,000 people who are all Newman and Baddiel fans seems to me manageable.”

Dolf Zillmann and Joanne Cantor’s Disposition Theory of Humour and Mirth points to the significance of the audiences’ disposition to both the joke teller and target of the joke in determining the outcome of the joke. It purports that “the more intense the positive disposition toward the disparaging agent or entity, the greater the magnitude of mirth” (100). Thus arena stand-up comedy audiences who have paid a significant amount of money to see a comedian with whom they are familiar, and are positively predisposed to (or “fans” of) the stand-up comedian, are likely to respond in a positive manner (in this case with laughter) to the stand-up comedian and his/her arena comic performance. Thus the arena stand-up comedy audience is likely to be a receptive and accepting audience. The amusement will also be intensified if the audience has a “negative disposition towards the disparaged agent or entity [the target of the joke]” (100). Arena audiences, largely constituted by supporters of the stand-up comedian, may feel united in their recognition of their collective fan status. In his analysis of performance spaces, Schechner argues that arenas, stadiums, churches, and theatres promote social solidarity more than any other venue, as “one ‘has’ a religion, ‘roots for’ a team, and ‘goes to’ to the theatre for essentially the same reasons” (14). Such cohesion in arena stand-up comedy audiences, while benefitting the individual audience members, as they are sharing the same comic moment (see Lockyer and Myers 181-183), can also

significantly benefit the stand-up comedian in their attempts to create a collective unified audience. For example, Susan Calman described how “audiences become one, the best audiences become one massive group. If you have a smaller audience, they tend to remain in their diverse group” (personal interview 21 April 11). Such audience dynamics are fundamental to stand-up comedy because, as Double outlines, “much of what stand-up comedians do is about sharing: shared feelings, shared experiences, creating a sense of community with the audience” (116), which supports Bergson’s view of the social aspects of laughter, as outlined above.

Further, Stewart Lee outlined the benefits of a larger audience for stand-up comedians:

A larger audience is much, much easier because there’s always going to be someone laughing, and for me it’s much easier – larger rooms – because what I do, normally a minority of people find it funny, or even in an audience that like you, a minority of people will go for the thing first of all. But if there’s 1,000 people and 10% of the room like you, that’s a 100 and then you can start the ball rolling from there. In a room of ten people, 10% of them is one, and that one person will be much more nervous about laughing on their own and being exposed. (personal interview 19 July 11)

Similarly, Ria Lina notes:

The bigger the crowd, the easier it tends to be, because the greater likelihood is that a percentage of the audience are going to love you from the moment you step on stage, and laughter is infectious. Like yawning, laughter is infectious. (personal interview 12 March 12).

Reflecting on his performances at the London O2 Michael McIntyre purports: “Well, it works great because it’s a huge room, but it’s packed with lots and lots of people right up into the roof” (personal interview 30 Nov. 12). As noted above, Quirk (228-229) has observed how a “good room” for stand-up comedy is one that enhances the flow of energy through the room, and a full room can facilitate this energy. Further, Robert Stebbins has argued that “density encourages the contagious spread of laughter” (36-37). Thus such energy and contagion is likely to become amplified by an arena where the audience is “packed” and seated “right up into the roof.” Such observations and stand-up comedian expectations may suggest that larger venues proffer comedians greater creativity and flexibility in terms of material content. Due to the large number of audience members in arena stand-up comedy, if controversial or taboo topics are joked about and only a small proportion of the audience laughs, the number of audience members laughing is likely to be significant enough to enable the comedian to justify the joke’s inclusion in the performance. Thus arena stand-up comedy may extend the performance opportunities for taboo-breaking and making jokes about uncomfortable or problematic topics.

Arena stand-up Comedy as Lacking Interaction and Intimacy

In addition to discussing the benefits of arena stand-up comedy for the performer and the audience, interviewees also highlighted what they perceived as the limitations of stand-up comedy performed in large arenas – the lack of interaction and intimacy between the stand-up comedian and the audience. Comedians and audiences referred to the lack of, or limited opportunity for, communication and intimacy between performer and the audience.

According to Borns (16) two fundamental ingredients are essential to stand-up comedy: laughter and interaction between the performer and the audience. The important interaction between the stand-up comedian and audience in the creation of the “comedy experience” is widely recognised (Carter 150-151; Harbidge 128-129, 140-141; Limon 12; Ritchie 164-166;

Stebbins 53). Stebbins argues that intimacy and communication are needed “for the production of good comedy” (38). The final theme to emerge from the interview data reflects the importance of such interaction. Ria Lina observes that, the “bigger the audience gets, the less interactive it gets and the more you rely on your written material” (personal interview 12 March 12). Reflecting on her performances in large arenas, such as the NIA Birmingham, Jo Brand maintains:

The audience just becomes an amorphous mass of nothingness for me, there’s no intimacy ... Because in terms of my material, I do one-liners and I know that they work, and so, when I do a great big place, people laugh at them and it’s lovely, but it doesn’t seem like you have a relationship with them really because you can’t go, hey, you in the third row, what’s your name and what do you do. (personal interview 16 Nov. 11)

Similarly, Susan Calman observes:

The bigger the room you are in, the more difficult it is. Tommy Shepherd who runs the Stand Comedy Club up in Scotland firmly believes that you should have no more than 300 people at a gig because you need to see the whites of a comedian’s eye. If you do a gig for 10,000 people, it’s really tough to communicate with them; you’re one person standing on a stage, you end up having the dual screen, so they may as well be watching on DVD ... If you’re in a 300 seater you can use certain tricks, you can compère the audience, you can interact with them, you can find comedy amongst those 300 people, and you can touch them; you can go and talk to one of them. (personal interview 21 April 11)

Communicating with the audience, which arena stand-up comedy is perceived as inhibiting, was regarded by some stand-up comedians as one of the most pleasurable features of their

performance. Ria Lina argues that the “most buzzy” part of a stand-up comedy performance is where “interaction happened because so and so was there and that person was there, and this person heckled” (personal interview 12 March 12). If heckling does occur in arena stand-up comedy this can also lack spontaneity due to the lack of physical proximity between the performer and audience, which can result in some members of the audience not hearing the heckle, so that that stand-up comedian has to repeat the heckle to the audience. As Jo Brand explained:

If someone heckles you at the back, you can't hear them and neither can the people sitting near the front because it's such a long way away, and so you find yourself having to go, can you just say that again a bit louder and then they do it a bit louder, but then you have to tell the people who couldn't hear at the edge, so you're in this ridiculous situation of losing the spontaneity of the moment. (personal interview 16 Nov. 11)

This theme of arena stand-up comedy lacking interaction and intimacy was also prevalent in the stand-up comedy audience data. When comparing small venues and large arenas, one comedy goer explained how “the intimacy of a small venue I would say creates an atmosphere that I find more enjoyable” (Chris Baker, personal interview 10 May 11).

Another highlighted that in arenas “you lose that sense of intimacy and directness that you expect with comedy. I certainly wouldn't sit all the way at the back of some big arena and end-up just having to watch in on a screen, because it's absolutely pointless” (James Jones, personal interview 29 March 11). A different stand-up comedy attendee explained how in a large arena she “didn't connect completely with what they [comedians] were doing because I was right at the back” (Anne Mills, personal interview 06 May 11). Further, another stand-up comedy goer described how:

It's happened a couple of times where I've watched Lee Evans and I've watched Michael McIntyre, been to the O2, when I watch the DVD back, I found the DVD funnier because I lost something when it was in a venue that big; there was something that wasn't quite there. I expected it to have an extra and it didn't. I kind of lost that connection with the comedian. (Martin Holmes, personal interview 22 July 11)

Such comments resonate with Stebbins' view that that "best comedy, like the best conversation, is carried out with a frontal view of the speaker and thus of all his or her facial expressions and gestures" (37). Further, such responses sit in stark contrast to comments made by Comedy Promoter, Mick Perrin, who has argued that due to technological developments, such as high-definition big screens and advances in sound technology, stand-up arena gigs can be more "comfortable and intimate" for audiences ("Peter Kay's £35m Tour Gets Even Bigger"). They further suggest limitations to Oddey and White's view that large screens can create a sense of audience presence (19).

Conclusions

Although the data collected and analyzed in this article derives from interviews with stand-up comedians who are currently performing on the British live comedy circuit and comedy audiences who attend live comedy on the British comedy circuit, the analysis has resonance for both stand-up comedy performed in large arenas in other countries with developed stand-up comedy scenes, such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, and in countries with emerging stand-up comedy scenes, such as South Africa, Croatia, and Estonia. The analysis highlights the opportunities and limitations offered by arena-style venues for stand-up comedy performers and audiences, and, by implication, simultaneously illustrates the appeal and limitations of small and medium-sized venues.

The discussion has explored the experiences of arena stand-up comedy from the perspectives of both comedians and audiences. The three themes that emerged from the interview data – arena stand-up comedy as: (a) a particular type of comedy; (b) expected comedy; and (c) lacking interaction and intimacy – demonstrate clearly the appeal of arena stand-up comedy and its limitations for both stand-up comedy performers and audiences. Although the analysis is based on a small-scale empirical exploratory study, due to the dearth of academic research on arena stand-up comedy, it does provide interesting insights into this increasingly prevalent and popular stand-up comedy venue.

The first theme identified in the interview data – arena stand-up comedy as a particular type of comedy – refers to the ways in which performing stand-up comedy in large arenas encourages a specific type of comic delivery and content, delivery that is largely physical and content that draws on observational comedy. Although these are existing performance techniques and comic styles, as stand-up comedians who perform in large arenas become more accustomed to the new performance spaces and the comic possibilities provided by arenas, we may witness an extension to the stand-up comedian's tool-box or comic repertoire. New comic techniques and modes of delivery may be developed in order to adjust to the new performance space. In his 2011 blog Logan notes, as “comedy gets used to the promotion [from pubs and clubs to large arenas], here's hoping we see more acts respond, in more ambitious ways, to the grand scale on which their work can now be performed.” This will be especially important if the prediction that “stand-up shows in arenas will continue to boom, after a ten-fold increase in the market in a decade” (“Peter Kay's £35m Tour Gets Even Bigger”) is correct. Audiences' appetite for, and desire to attend, arena stand-up comedy will need to be sustained, and developing new performance strategies to encourage more interaction and intimacy between the comedian and audience may assist in sustaining audiences' interest. This will be particularly important given that the analysis illustrates that

the lack of interaction and intimacy between the comedian and the audience is the main limitation of arena stand-up comedy. Thus arena stand-up comedy performers and audiences are likely to witness a continual evolution in the expected and accepted performance and cultural markers of stand-up comedy that its foray into large arenas has facilitated.

Taken together, the three themes identified in the comedian and audience interview data suggest that live stand-up comedy is entering a new phase in its chronology. Arena stand-up comedy provides an interesting addition to Double's (20-40) historical overview of the development of (British) stand-up comedy. Double traces the development of stand-up comedy from music hall entertainment, to variety shows, to working men's clubs, to designated comedy clubs, and other small venues such as pubs, arts centers, and students' unions. Double argues that these were the roots of the flourishing live British comedy circuit which, by the end of the 20th century, was increasingly commercially successful (39). Arena stand-up comedy significantly adds to the development of the stand-up comedy circuit. The performance and audience dynamics outlined in the analysis suggest that arena stand-up comedy is moving towards a stage in its historical development which sees "stand-up comedy as spectacle." Arena stand-up comedy is as much a visual accomplishment as it is verbal and aural due to its physical style of delivery and other dramatic visual strategies used (e.g. lighting and dry smoke). As the analysis illustrates that arena stand-up comedy encourages a particular type of comic delivery and content, discourages intimacy and interaction, and fosters a particular audience expectation, the most recent stage in the evolution of stand-up comedy also places emphasis on, and heightens stand-up comedy's status as, an "event." As Michael McIntyre explains when referring to performing at the London O2:

People are excited because it feels like an event. It feels special, so they can relax and sometimes when people have invested a bit more, i.e. driven there and parked, and

you can eat there, and it's a proper big night out, and I think people have a great time.

(personal interview 30 Nov. 11)

Further, successful arena stand-up comedians, such as Michael McIntyre, have demonstrated that stand-up comedy can “work as mainstream entertainment” (“Peter Kay’s £35m Tour Gets Even Bigger”). The specific and tangible impact of this mainstreaming of stand-up comedy on the wider comedy industry appears to be contradictory. For example, while Stewart Lee argues that such mainstreaming is positive because, for the “first time for 30 years what is the mainstream has been so clearly defined, and I think that actually helps everyone else to position themselves, or not, if they don’t want to” (personal interview 19 July 11), he simultaneously highlights that such mainstreaming can be problematic for those stand-up comedians who are perceived as being, or performing, something “different” to arena stand-up comedians. When referring to arena stand-up comedians Stewart Lee explains:

My worry is that they establish a kind of gold standard of what stand-up is supposed to be, and sometimes now people see something that’s not like that and they think the person doesn’t know what they’re doing, that they’re at fault in some way because they’re not this thing. (personal interview 19 July 11)

Due to the focus of the research, the analysis has specifically focussed on stand-up comedy performed in arenas. It is certainly not the intention to suggest that this is the most important type of venue for the stand-up comedy industry. On live stand-up comedy circuits small and medium sized rooms, clubs and theatres, and medium-to-large theatres have an equally valuable role to play. Many of the stand-up comedians who currently perform in large arenas began their comedy career performing in smaller venues. As Quirk observes “it is the live circuit of small-to-medium gigs which fuels the upper echelons of the comedy industry, training and nurturing the talent that big business will adopt. In this sense, those small-to-

medium rooms are fundamental to all levels of stand-up production” (221). The analysis illustrates how the recent move of live stand-up comedy into large arenas simultaneously extends and restricts the performance opportunities and experiences for stand-up comedians and audiences.

Endnotes

¹ This online survey examined stand-up comedy audience attendance and preferences, and whether there is a relationship between attending stand-up comedy and psychological well-being. See Lockyer and Myers (170-173) for a discussion of some of the survey findings.

² All stand-up comedian interviewees permitted the use of their names in the write-up of the research. Stand-up comedy audience interviewees have been given pseudonyms.

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