

## **Nice Face, Shame About the Legs..! Confessions of a Disabled Female Stand-Up Comic**

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At a Cabaret evening a few months ago I made a decision. When I told people about it they all laughed (nervously) or gaped, or said 'you're so brave'. As a woman with a disability these reactions are familiar. Boring even. But I hadn't told them that I feel fine with who I am, that my disability is part of me and shaped my life experience and world view, or that I was travelling alone around the globe checking out accessible venues. I had merely said that I was entering the world of stand-up comedy.

It is difficult to know exactly when the seed of an idea gets sown, extroverts act, creative types write novels or poetry. What possesses the person who will get up and put themselves in front of a bunch of total strangers and undertake to make them laugh - and keep laughing?

Sitting in this 'alternative' cabaret venue, listening to a double act of boys - they were big boys in long trousers, probably graduates - being silly and quite tedious, my attention was drifting. Then I heard the line:

'What's the difference between the Labour Party and a real spastic? Answer: There are no Socialists in the Labour Party.'

The audience giggled and I found myself heckling vigorously. That night I thought - Disability Arts is flourishing - theatre, poetry, music but only a couple of 'Stand-ups' (as they're known in the trade ....) - both men. Thus was born Wanda Barbara.

There are female comics - some very good. I was impressed with the range a couple of years ago at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Yet even they think disability and disabled people are legitimate 'targets' for humour. I went right off Hattie Heyridge, who I do think is funny, when she stuck in a gratuitous and offensive quip about blind people and guide dogs.

I think the reasons are deep rooted. These 'alternative' artists who would shudder at the very notion of being sexist, racist or heterosexist, suddenly lose all their politics on the subject of disability. And the reason they can't be humorous about disability is because they usually fear it. As many of you reading this article fear it. This fear then manifests itself in, at best, stupidity (as with Hattie Heyridge) or the thinly disguised hostility and hatred displayed by the aforementioned boys.

Much alternative comedy was based on people's previously taboo experiences. So we got a lot of stuff about willies, wanking, sexual inadequacy, drink and vomiting and how

generally uncouth men can be. On the other side of that coin was periods, spots, hairdos, clothes, boring sex, school and repression and how generally uncouth men can be ... Some of that still persists and is not funny any more - at least the content could be, but the form definitely isn't.

I knew what sort of scenario awaited me on the alternative comedy circuit, and I've been hesitating about it ever since. My debut, at the bit, broad massive Workhouse, a venue organised and run by London Disability Arts Forum, was sort of 'safe'. The audience was predominantly people with disabilities and a lot of friends, (some non-disabled).

This was just as well because most of my act focused around disability and the essential humour inherent in our lives. Contrary to popular opinion, we are not tragic victims, or brave, stiff upper-lipped individuals. We live complex, even interesting, lives.

What I tried to do was pick up the theme from the point of view of the oppressed person, thus overturning the oppressor's viewpoint and showing its absurdity at the same time. But the act is not vicious. I think this is part of the 'femaleness' of the material - which I devise myself - it confronts without being confrontational and it satirizes without rubbishing individuals. A friend was mortified because I made a small comment about her in the show.

'A real raver, stays up 'til half past nine, every night'!

But we knew the joke - many of the audience laughed (including her). People with disabilities who have to be helped to bed by a district nurse, giving no choice about what time to the individual. People whose levels of pain mean that they have to go to bed early because of sheer fatigue. It's the kind of joke that could only be made by one disabled person about others because in the delivery there is no malice or mockery. A common understanding exists. There is a whole area of humour that belongs to oppressed groups only. Those groups have made sense of the world in their way - by showing how insensible, how irrational, how contradictory much of what goes on around actually is.

What is funny to a disabled audience, however, may leave a non-disabled audience cold. I have had to think about this a lot. Originally, I devised material that was accessible and humorous for the cognoscenti, the audience of people with disabilities. I did not think about taking it beyond the audience - it was enough that a woman had had the bottle to stand up and be counted in this field and had done it successfully within the Disability Arts circuit. New acts create interest, though, and soon I was getting bookings outside my safe and chosen environment. I accepted them knowing the risks, but also knowing what dross there is on the cabaret circuit - I could, and I would do better than many of the current acts. I have had to rethink my material, mainly in order to make it comprehensible to an able-bodied audience. More explanation is needed. But people are often scared to laugh.

This frustrates me, not because I think they should laugh - if they don't find it funny - but because what enables them to laugh at schoolboy 'spastic' nonsense, is also the

mechanism that prevents them from finding disability funny from a disabled person's perspective. So what I do is get up there and say 'I'm a disabled woman'. My existence has been mocked, scorned and misrepresented and by being up here I'm not allowing that to continue. No longer can audiences ignore the experience of people with disabilities, but they have it presented to them in a strong and humorous and most of all political way.

So disability is the central theme which informs what I do - but it isn't only all about that; my presence reminds people that disability can't be ignored. So the stand ups who tell silly, offensive, pointless stories on disability can no longer assume that they have an audience who will collude with them, and that because a venue is upstairs there won't be any 'cripples' there. And only I can use the word cripples - in my way, because while we continue to be used and abused, that language on able-bodied lips is part of the problem. From mine, coming from the disability movement, it's part of the solution.

Think about that next time you run for the bus ...

Wanda Barbara a.k.a. Lisicki