Stand-up Comedy and Disability: a paradox or a means to an end?

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Abstract
Culture is a dynamic process which has its roots in the past and is constantly being altered in the present (MacDonald, 1991). Disability culture acts as a tool to facilitate inclusion of disabled persons in society and provides an alternative outlook towards disability (Barnes, 2003). Stand-up comedy can be used as a cultural medium to achieve these goals. It also highlights the differences between “laughing at disabled people” versus “laughing with disabled people” (Jaeger & Bowman, 2005). However, a paradoxical relationship exists between comedy and disability – jokes on disability can be considered unethical, whilst at the same time disability comedy can act as a source of entertainment and an empowering experience for disabled persons (Albrecht, 1999). The works of Laurence Clark and Nina G. who are both disabled stand-up comedians are analysed in relation to how they portray disability in their shows and the techniques they use to make the audience laugh. This paper also provides an overview of how non-disabled comedians portray disability in their stand-up comedy shows. Even though, there is a dearth of literature about this topic, examples are given of how non-disabled comedians make use of superiority humour to laugh at disabled people (Bingham & Green, 2015). This paper draws arguments in favour and against political correctness in stand-up comedy and analyses the role that disability studies plays in this cultural field. Ultimately, this paper concludes that an answer to the question: “Stand-up comedy and disability: a paradox or a means to an end?” is highly subjective and depends on every individual’s opinion and standpoint.

Key words: Culture, Disability, Stand-up comedy
1. **Introduction**

Culture is considered as a very complex and difficult concept to understand. It is a dynamic process which has its roots in the past and is constantly being altered in the present. Cultural products are modified by individuals who are influenced by the different social institutions in the communities in which they live (MacDonald, 1991).

In Britain and the United States, disability culture evolved from mainstream culture with the aim of combating oppression towards disabled people and providing an alternative outlook towards disability (Barnes, 2003). One of the cultural representations which has significantly evolved throughout the years is disability comedy. In view of this evolution, stand-up comedy has become a perfect medium for highlighting the difference between two important notions: laughing at disabled people as opposed to sharing laughter with disabled people (Jaeger & Bowman, 2005).

I have chosen to analyse the issue of disability in stand-up comedy following my experience at a recent stand-up comedy show held in Malta. Disability was mentioned repeatedly by non-disabled comedians and at times it was linked to the use of offensive words. This has aroused my curiosity to research this subject and gain a better understanding of the role that disability plays in stand-up comedy.

**1.1 Aims**

The aim of this essay is to explore the manner in which disability is represented in stand-up comedy by both disabled and non-disabled comedians and the audiences’ reactions to, and perceptions of, these representations. As far as disabled comedians are concerned, the aims will be achieved by an evaluation of the work of two specific disabled comedians, namely Laurence Clark from Britain and Nina G. from the United States. To provide a backdrop for this discussion, the essay commences with an overview of disability and culture and the interplay between disability and comedy in Britain and the United States. This essay concludes with an
analysis of the role of political correctness in stand-up comedy and the role that disability studies plays in this cultural product.

1.2 Terminology

The choice of terminology is vital in reaching the aims of this essay especially since it attempts to analyse how stand-up comedians use language (amongst other tools) to portray different imageries of disability. In this regards, the terms ‘disabled person’ and ‘disabled comedian’ are used instead of ‘person with disability’ and ‘comedian with disability’. The term ‘disabled person’, which is used by the British Disability Arts Movement and The Disabled People’s Movement refers to disability as a social construct where the presence of external barriers restrict disabled people from being fully included in mainstream society (Martin, 2012). On the other hand, the phrase ‘person with disability’ is not used in this essay as it may imply that disability lies within the person, thus indirectly reinforcing the discourse of the medical model of disability (Clark & Marsh, 2002).

2. Culture and Disability

The meaning of ‘culture’ evolved throughout the years. Williams (1961) produced the “social definition of culture” (as cited in Riddell & Watson, 2003, p. 5), clearly indicating that culture and society cannot be separated as they provide a way of life for a particular group of individuals. Thus, in agreement with Turner’s (2006) statement, culture has significant influence on every individual’s identity, both on a personal level and also collectively through its effect on values, habits and beliefs.

Consequently, society’s culture affects how disabled people are perceived. According to Oliver (1990), the main representations of disability in the dominant culture are the medical and tragedy models of disability and as Phelan, Wright and Gibson (2014) reported, these models are still the main portrayal of disabled people to this very day. Both models represent disability as a metaphor for deviancy and abnormality by separating the impairment from the social and political experiences of the disabled individual (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000). This objectified
representation of disabled people brings about the concept of ‘otherness’ in which non-disabled persons construct themselves as ‘normal’ as opposed to this disabling imagery (Shakespeare, 1994).

The negative portrayals of disability were challenged with the birth of the social model of disability (Oliver, 2004). The aim of this model was to shift the focus on the barriers created by society (Thomas, 2002). Thus, disabled people became aware that the hurdles that they confront are not due to their impairments but caused by social practices which hinder their inclusion in society. However, this model was criticised for separating the concept of impairment from disability (Thomas, 2004). In other words, the social model was portraying disability as a social construct but limited the exploration of the impairment within society (Shakespeare, 1994). The emergence of the affirmative model challenged the negative representations of disability through the projection of positive identities amongst disabled persons by accentuating images of strength and pride (Cameron, 2008; Swain and French, 2000). This model of disability emerged from the Disability Arts Movement and The Disabled People’s Movement, the aim of both being to portray positive disability representations in mainstream society (Cameron, 2011).

Ultimately, cultural representations of disability have changed throughout the years as disabled people are working hard to exhibit their abilities within a framework which promotes disability pride (Cameron, 2008). Even though it is difficult for disabled people to access mainstream society, art acts as a vehicle that facilitates this process, allowing them to showcase their talent whilst simultaneously deconstructing disabling cultural representations. The following section provides an analysis of comedy as a cultural representation of disability.

3. Comedy and Disability

There is a complex and paradoxical relationship between comedy and disability (Shakespeare, 1999). On one hand, jokes on disability can be considered unethical in view of the dominant disability discourses in which disabled people are portrayed as dependent and helpless individuals. However, on the other hand, intertwining comedy and disability can act as a means
of entertainment whilst at the same time empowering disabled people to provide an alternative disability discourse (Albrecht, 1999).

Initially, disability humour consisted mainly of disabled people being laughed at by acting as fools (such as the court jester) and participating in freak shows (Grande, 2010). This type of destructive humour further evolved into non-disabled people making fun of disabled people’s impairments (Haller & Ralph, 2003). These types of jokes are still being told in the present day and are usually the result of the fear that non-disabled persons have of acquiring an impairment. In such cases, humour acts as a means of “constructed defence” (Coogan & Mallett, 2013, p. 248), where disabled people are considered as the ‘others’. These acts constitute to ‘disabling humour’ which reinforces the medical and tragedy models of disability.

Eventually, constructive disability humour emerged when disabled people were able to “reclaim humour” (Clark, 2003, p. 2) by telling jokes on issues related to different aspects of disability, without reinforcing any negative imagery. This type of disability humour focuses on the equality of disabled people through comedy (Haller & Ralph, 2003).

The evolution of disability humour resulted in a transformation, by virtue of which, disabled people moved away from being the comedy targets to becoming comedians themselves (Lockyer, 2015a). Moreover, apart from making people laugh, some disabled comedians have ulterior motives, including that of providing an alternative narrative of disability which conforms to disability humour (Mallett, 2010).

### 3.1 Stand-up Comedy

In Britain, the birth of stand-up comedy occurred at the Victorian musical halls in the 18th and 19th centuries, whilst in the United States, stand-up comedy was initially incorporated in different sources of entertainment (such as burlesque and vaudeville shows) held in the late 19th century (Lockyer, 2015b). Stand-up comedy is an art which consists of a monologue addressed to an audience with the intent of making them laugh. This monologue consists of fast paced jokes which are written, produced and performed by the comedian him/herself. At times, the jokes are
memorised but projected to the audience in a manner that feigns spontaneity. Some degree of improvisation is nevertheless required, depending on the audience’s response and interaction. Most stand-up comedy shows involve a single comedian, although there are groups of comedians who perform shows together. Stand-up comedy usually invokes current social issues and may involve the use of different props, sound effects and body movements (Stebbins, 1990).

The term ‘stand-up comedy’ does not refer exclusively to a performance in front of a live audience - it also includes radio programmes, stand-up videos and comedians participating in serious discussions. However, for the purpose of this paper, I will be focusing on traditional stand-up comedy, performed to a live audience in bars, stand-up clubs, theatres or arenas (Lockyer, 2015a). The venue plays an important role in stand-up comedy as the proximity of the stage, the layout of the audience and the presence of alcohol can facilitate or inhibit the two-way interaction between the audience and comedian (Harbridge, 2011).

Laughter in stand-up comedy provides an indication of the audience’s response to a particular joke: “[stand-up is] the only kind of creative life in which the work and the reward come at exactly the same moment” (Nichols, as cited in Gopnik, 1993, p. 102). Thus, laughter provides the comedian with an instant measure of the extent to which his/her aim of thrilling the audience is being reached. The next section delves into how disabled comedians participating in stand-up comedy use different techniques to entertain the audience and to challenge dominant disability discourse.

### 3.2 Disabled Comedians in Stand-up Comedy

In view of the paradox that exists between the immorality of laughing at disabled people versus the amusement that the ‘abnormal’ instigates in society, there is scepticism as to whether stand-up comedy can act as a tool for disabled people to express their comedy skills and portray a positive disability outlook (Shakespeare, 1999). However, the last decades have witnessed heightened media and academic attention towards disabled comedians participating in stand-up comedy. There are several popular, disabled stand-up comedians, such as: Liz Carr, Francesca Martinez and Mat Fraser. Some of these comedians exhibit their talent not only in disability
shows, such as the Disability and Deaf Arts [DADA] festival, but also in other mainstream festivals (for example the Edinburgh Festival Fringe) (French, 2015).

The aim of some disabled comedians is just to make the audience laugh on social issues which do not focus on disability (Crisafulli, 1996). However, there are other disabled comedians who apart from making the audience laugh just like any other comedian, they also aim to raise disability awareness through their comedy (Bingham & Green, 2015). These comedians use authenticity in their acts by referring to real life experiences. Disabled comedians also make use of reverse disability discourse by challenging negative disability assumptions and disabling language. In this way, they shift the gaze away from the impairment itself towards socially constructed disabling stereotypes. They also affirm their disability through different strategies depending on whether the impairment is visible or not. This tactic helps to connect with the audience, making it feel at ease with the opportunity to laugh with the disabled performer (Lockyer, 2015a). Furthermore, these strategies allow disabled comedians to define their identities and to be in control of how they represent disability through their comedy (Lockyer, 2015a).

Ultimately, the ability of disabled comedians to share laughter with the audience, promotes inclusion and acts as a way of decreasing social differences. Sharing laughter rejects the idea of laughing at disabled people and instead promotes unity and equality:

> Stand-up is the best way to get your point of view across and champion whatever and normalise it, to show an audience, I’m different but we’re sharing laughter. If you share a laugh with someone, you’re friends with them instantly. Hadchiti, as cited in Lockyer, 2015a, p. 1407

The manner in which disabled comedians interact with the audience, together with the barriers encountered in stand-up comedy are analysed in more detail in the next section. The work of Laurence Clark and Nina G. who are both disabled stand-up comedians are explored in relation to how they portray disability in their shows.
3.2.1 Laurence Clark

Laurence Clark is a British comedian with a physical disability. His main aim as a comedian “is to make people laugh, not to educate people; if they go away with that as a by-product then great, but my main job is to make them laugh” (Clark, as cited in Lockyer, 2015a, p. 1404). He launched his career in a small number of accessible venues available at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and since then he became a renowned international ‘sit-down’ comedian (Martin, 2010). As a matter of fact, Clark believes that the name ‘stand-up comedy’ is a misnomer, as comedy can be equally produced by a performer who sits rather than stands. Similarly, Michael O’Connell and Maysoon Zayid, who are both disabled comedians, contest the name of this type of comedy (O’Connell, 2016; Zayid, 2013).

Structural accessibility poses a significant barrier to comedians who, like Clark, have a physical disability. Discussions amongst different comedians usually take place in inaccessible places such as the middle of a staircase (Lockyer, 2015a). As a result, disabled comedians encounter difficulties in socialising and discussing future performances with other comedians, reducing their chances of pursuing stand-up comedy at a professional level. At times, some comedians need to be carried up or down the stairs to access the venue or the stage, which can unfortunately increase the audience’s discomfort towards the disabled performer. This feeling may be eliminated with the use of relief humour, which involves the comedian addressing his disability at the start of his performance to act as a form of liberation (Cockburn, 2012). In fact, Clark refers to his slurred speech immediately at the beginning of the show: “No, I’m not pissed” (Clark, as cited in Day, 2012, n.p). In this way he affirms his disability and at the same time gives the audience approval to laugh with him.

Laurence Clark makes frequent use of incongruity humour in his shows. This type of humour twists the inconsistencies in social norms and practices into a joke. One way of using this type of humour is by naming one of his shows: “Spastic Fantastic” (Kent, 2009, n.p.) as he believes that through comedy he can transform the negativity associated with this word into a means for empowering disabled people. Thus, Clark is making use of reversed disability discourse to show how some aspects of disability can be transformed into jokes without degrading disabled people.
Furthermore, in another show, Clark challenged the assumption that disabled people are in need of charity by going around London to collect money for ridiculous reasons, such as: to kill puppies or to financially help a rich businesswoman. Despite the fact that these were not valid charitable reasons, some people still donated money to help Clark because of his physical disability (Clark, 2012). Thus, Clark wanted to show that disabled people are still associated with the charity model of disability.

Superiority humour is used by Clark to defend disabled people from disabling humour and negative attitudes. Clark produced a show called “The Jim Davidson Guide to Equality” (Clark, 2005, n.p.) as a reaction to the discriminatory attitude demonstrated by Jim Davidson (a non-disabled comedian) when he stopped his show upon detecting disabled persons in the audience. Clark challenged Davidson’s superior attitude by claiming that he would also interrupt his own show if Davidson had to show up in the audience. Thus, through comedy, Clark portrays his assertiveness in the fight for disabled people’s rights and in the struggle against social oppression “If Jim can do comedy about us then I don't see why disabled people can't do the same in return?” (Clark, 2005, n.p).

Laurence Clark’s portrayal of the public’s disabling attitudes may invoke awkward feelings in the audience as some members may easily identify with these attitudes (Clark, 2014). However, Clark demonstrates his ability to connect with the audience, whilst simultaneously promoting critical thinking through “thought-provoking laughter” (Reid, Hammond Stoughton & Smith, 2006, p. 640). Moreover, through comedy he finds a way to enhance the public’s understanding of what disability entails whilst ensuring that the audience laughs with, not at, disabled people (Shain, 2013).

### 3.2.2 Nina G.

Nina G. is “America’s only stuttering stand-up comedian” (Nina G., as cited in Dalmas, 2015, n.p). She calls herself a “BOGO”, short for “buy one get one free”, poking fun at the fact that apart from her speech impairment, she has a learning disability. Nina G. is also a disability activist, an educator and author of children’s books. As a comedian, she performs both on her
own and in a group called “The Comedians with Disabilities Act” (Nina G., 2016, n.p.). Nina G.’s primary goal is to raise disability awareness through comedy. Thus, as opposed to Clark, laughter comes as a by-product from the comic manner in which she portrays disabling stereotypes (Bingham & Green, 2015).

Nina G. always starts her acts with relief humour by immediately referring to her disability to make the audience feel at ease in her presence: “I am America's only female, stuttering stand-up comedian. You can clap for that!” (Nina G., 2016, n.p.). Thus, similar to Clark, Nina G. fully embraces her disabilities through the affirmative model of disability - she is not embarrassed by her stuttering and does not try to hide it. Nina G. uses the stage to show that disabled people are competent individuals who embody their disability and she comically challenges any members of the audience who show that they do not tolerate her speech impairment on stage. Moreover, she points her finger at the rest of society for the barriers that exist: “I am comfortable with this. This is the way I talk and it’s other people that are the issue” (Nina G., as cited in Bingham & Green, 2015, p. 18). In this way, she uses superiority humour as both a defence manoeuvre and as a tool to encourage the audience not to engage in any disabling attitudes. By referring to her own daily life experiences, she tries to deconstruct negative disability stereotypes, including for example, the expectation that disabled people are dependent and asexual individuals (Bingham & Green, 2015).

Although, Nina G. does not experience any physical barriers, she has to face the negative attitudes of various members of the audience, which normally originate from their poor understanding of the nature of her disabilities. When members of the audience heckle, telling her that she does not have “real disabilities”, she twists this into a joke by saying that disability is defined by “a physical or mental impairment that substantially results with having to deal with assholes” (Nina G., as cited in Dalmas, 2015, n.p.). Thus, again Nina G. highlights the negative attitudes of society and invites the audience to allow her reconstruction of disability to be part of their lives (Bingham & Green, 2015).
3.3 Non-Disabled Comedians in Stand-up Comedy

There is a dearth of literature which deals with the manner in which non-disabled comedians portray disability in their shows. From my personal experience of the shows that I have attended, disability was at times portrayed negatively with the use of degrading and offensive terminology.

Some non-disabled comedians make use of superiority humour when talking about disability, thus portraying disabled people as inferior individuals (Bingham & Green, 2015). An example of this is Jimmy Carr’s jokes on the Paralympics: “I don’t know how to describe it to people who didn’t see the Paralympics. It’s sort of like a children’s book where all of the broken toys have a picnic” (Carr, 2010). Carr, a well-known comedian, was also criticised for his degrading comment on the English soldiers: “Say what you like about these servicemen amputees from Iraq and Afghanistan, but we're going to have a f**king good Paralympic team in 2012” (Carr, as cited in Dessau, 2009, n.p). In view of the outrage that this joke had caused, Carr apologised for his comments (Dessau, 2009). However, he still remains popular for his frequent use of degrading jokes against disability (Clark, 2005).

Superiority humour is also used by other non-disabled comedians such as Frankie Boyle, who used the term “mongoloids” (BBC News, 2010, n.p.) in one of his performances and Ralphie May, who is featured in several YouTube videos making fun of disabled people. His targets are mainly persons with intellectual disabilities, whom he calls “retards” (May, 2013, n.p.), based upon his conviction that this word describes them best. Thus, as mentioned previously, disability comedy is used as a prosthesis to belittle disabled people rather than informing the audiences of the real experiences of living with a disability (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000).

Disabling humour is still popular amongst audiences. It tends to generate laughter through the degradation of disabled people, by fuelling the comedian’s and the audience’s egos. Unfortunately, it may also reinforce the negative assumptions that exist on disability and disempower disabled people from challenging these cultural representations (Barnes, 1991).
The presence of disabled comedians has helped to counterbalance and challenge the negativity portrayed by some non-disabled comedians in stand-up comedy. Furthermore, through the promotion of the social and affirmative models of disability and the human rights model, disability activists are increasingly voicing their concerns and seeking legal advice about the use of disabling humour. It must be said however, that political correctness, explored in the next section, plays a key role in stand-up comedy. Disability comedy that targets the social situation rather than specific disabled individuals may be deemed politically correct and may not have the negative consequences that disabling humour might otherwise bring about (Wilkinson, 2009).

### 3.4 Political Correctness

Political correctness refers to the avoidance of language and behaviour which can insult or disadvantage particular groups in society. The application of this concept in comedy has resulted in the limited use of disabling humour, which in turn brought positive changes to the disability sector.

On the other hand, political correctness is being widely criticised by both disabled and non-disabled comedians for “suffocating comedy” (Redkar, 2016, n.p). Nina G. (2015) claims that when the audience tries to be politically correct, it instils awkward feelings towards the comedian: “No, you not laughing at us shows that you still have remnants of discrimination and bias, because you're not treating us like everybody else” (as cited in Dalmas, 2015, n.p). Hence, political correctness can actually act as a drawback for disabled people. As a matter of fact, there are other disabled comedians who refuse to be politically correct as their aim is to induce critical thinking through their jokes: “we wanted to be a little bit irreverent in the sense that we didn’t want to be politically correct” (Wambach, as cited in Diimig, 2015, p. 26).

Political incorrectness often draws media and political attention. Carr’s joke on the English servicemen, for instance, elicited several negative reactions from authorities. However, when Carr apologised, he was criticised by those who felt that his joke was an eye-opener of what these soldiers have to endure: “Carr was not mocking war heroes, but underlining the horrific injuries of young soldiers on the frontline” (Dessau, 2009, n.p). This example shows that a joke
can have a multitude of interpretations, which may give rise to conflicting views of which interpretation is deemed politically correct. However, I feel that albeit sensationalised, political correctness is rarely enforced - some comedians continue to get away with being offensive towards particular groups of people in society.

4. The link between Disability Studies and Stand-up Comedy

Internationally, disability studies has become an established area of study, whilst disability comedy is being increasingly used as a form of activism. Hence, the work of both fields can intersect to promote the emancipation of disabled people.

Disability studies is not involved in giving a voice to disabled comedians since they already have access to the stage where they can put across their message to raise disability awareness and promote equality through humour. However, disability studies can facilitate the experiences of disabled comedians in the stand-up comedy field (Brewer, Brueggemann, Hetrick & Yergeau, 2012). Such facilitation is being promoted mainly through research. Disability scholars have conducted research with disabled comedians to highlight their experiences as performers and the challenges they encounter. However, more research and more critiques are required on the frequent use and effects of disabling humour in stand-up comedy. On the basis of such research, disability awareness programmes can be organised to promote disability humour, barrier-free environments for disabled comedians and more opportunities for them to succeed in this field.

Disability studies also promotes disability art through a trans-disciplinary approach towards culture. This leads to the creation of new conceptual frameworks which reflect the lives of disabled people in the contemporary world (Derby, 2012).

Furthermore, as Nina G. says “humor is a great way to disarm people in training” (as cited in Axis Dance Company, 2015, n.p). In other words, disability scholars can engage disabled comedians to educate the general public on disability through the use of comedy. In this case, comedy can serve as a tool that informs and unites people together to create an inclusive society.
5. Conclusion

This analysis outlines varying examples of how comedy portrays different aspects of disability. In some cases, disability and comedy interrelate to reinforce the negative representations of disability through the creation of disabling humour. In other cases, disability comedy acts as a vehicle to deconstruct the dominant disability discourses and to inform the general public as to what disability actually entails. Thus, referring back to the title “Stand-up Comedy and Disability: a paradox or a means to an end?”, this essay concludes that the answer to the question is highly subjective, depending on an individual’s opinion and standpoint. Combining disability and comedy can prove paradoxical, perhaps to the extent of concluding that both fields should not interact. On the other hand, the said combination may serve as an empowering tool for disabled people and a learning experience for the public.

On a personal note, this essay has given me the opportunity to research a niche aspect of disability which has proven to be a complex and highly researched topic. In Malta, some disabled activists make use of humour to raise disability awareness and promote equality, however the idea of having Maltese disabled comedians in stand-up comedy is still non-existent. I believe that comedians and disability activists should emphasise the fact that laughing with disabled people can be politically correct and can even have a two-fold effect, namely entertainment and the generation of positive imagery of disability.
6. References


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