

Comedy, Storytelling and Other Shaggy Dog Stories

This article by comedian Sian Bevan came my way as a publicity blurb for an event at the Scottish Storytelling Centre. The relationship between stand-up and storytelling seems to be in the air at the moment so I asked Sian if I could use it.

My parents have started going to comedy clubs. This makes me happy, but I know the sight of my wee Welsh mam sitting in the audience can strike fear into the hearts of some filthier comedians. There are those who seem to quickly edit their sets, others just go for it, and there's a brave few who try and get my 64-year-old dad involved in the show.



But I know that many are pleasantly surprised that people who walk in with walking sticks and white hair not only have a sense of humour but like the odd shagging disaster story. Well, to be honest, I usually hope that they just don't get some of the dirtier ones. Particularly mine.

However my parents are the exception among their friends. They're the brave explorers with a wayward daughter who've been given a map into a world they think doesn't want them. They know comedy's changed and they've heard enough bad (and not enough good) jokes to stay away. But, these same potential audience members email each other x-rated jokes every day and would happily enjoy a night of storytelling, which many would say is stylistically bound up tightly with modern stand-up.

Where's the line between comedy and storytelling? There's many a comedian who owes a fair amount to the storytelling tradition: the art of drawing in an audience and creating a world for them explore (albeit often a filthy world where at least one person will be sexually disappointed). But what about the current world of telling tales? That clean, pretty place where performers spin yarns to the sober, and where the audience will listen politely to any stories they're told they'll like?

There are still a lot of stereotypes about both comedy and storytelling, with one plagued by images of cackling hen parties and gags about wanking and the other surrounded by pictures of pipes, fires and jumper-clad tales of the sea. However, things are being changed by some brilliant nights, such as The Storytellers Club, which celebrate the art of the story and allows the comedian some space before racing to the next punchline in order to satisfy an impatient audience. They've shown that storytelling doesn't have to be innocent, while offering a route into comedy clubs for wary punters.

In a new night, based in Scotland, we're taking things a bit further and bringing together people who tell stories for a living and the filthy comedians used to entertaining drunk people. We'll be mashing them together in an evening dedicated to the beautiful overlapping area between the two worlds, celebrating our similarities and differences. Like drunken pensioners sitting by a fire made of sex, smoking pipes and yelling obscenities. Or something. All the performers are being encouraged to nudge their way towards the opposite genre, with the hope that the audience won't be able to tell who comes from which background.

There are too many people worried about going to see stand-up in clubs after hearing rumours of being picked on, offended and terrified for their lives. There are also too many punters who think storytelling is a gentle walk in the park that won't provide enough adrenaline to warrant entertainment. Maybe, just maybe, we can prove those preconceptions wrong and open up comedy and storytelling to a whole new audience.

Sian Bevan