

# The British comedy revolution

By Lars Mjøen

When does the real *sense of humour* emerge in a young person? The one that shapes your character and outlook for the rest of your life, establishes intellectual affinities and measures out a healthy distance to the trivialities of daily life? Laughter is supposed to add to your good health – unless, of course, you laugh yourself to death at a young age.



Lars Mjøen is a comedian, actor, musician and author. He began his entertainment career in the public broadcast NRK in the 1970s. Mjøen is best known as a member of the prolific comedy trio KLM, alongside Trond Kirkvaag and Knut Lystad. With Kirkvaag and Lystad he made four classic television series about the absurd adventures of the three explorer brothers Brødrene Dal.

In my own case, I believe my sense of humour emerged somewhere in the 1960s. I was in my late teens at the time when I was first exposed to the new wave of absurd British comedy – a wave that would revolutionise the genre of comedy across the western world.

I had come of age towards the end of the Chat Noir era in Oslo. Leif Juster and Arve Opsahl were the comical heroes of the time, their punch lines dealing with drunken men, Enerhaugen, Einar Gerhardsen and what was *Mot norr malt*.

Then, in the second half of the 1960s, something started to change. Wesensteen had been to Britain and evidently snatched a few ideas from a set of up-and-coming comedians. This was long before any of the original sketches had been shown on television here in Norway. Anyhow, the impressions they had taken in changed the Norwegian comedy fundamentally. A new era brought radio and TV-shows like *Hørerøret*, *Lysthuset*, *Kunden har alltid rett*, *Og Takk for det*, *Supperådet*, *Feriebiskop Fjertnes* and *Marve Fleksnes* to our attention. Rolv Wesenlund and Harald Heide-Steen became our Norwegian heroes. But where did they find their inspiration?

Among much else they must certainly from *The Goon Show* – the radio show involving Peter Sellers and the totally “insane” Spike Milligan; they must have seen *Beyond the Fringe*, the theatrical with Peter Cook and Dudley Moore (1962) and listened to their serialised radio show, *Not only but also...* where they created the characters Pete and Dud.

Rosenborg cinema, around 1967: Along with a friend I was there to see a screening of *Bedazzled*, with the aforementioned Cook and Moore. The film was about a man who sold his soul to the devil and was tempted by the seven deadly sins.

But to an audience nourished by the traditional Christian morals of the time, it was also about a new, absurd and thus fearless way of treating such a serious topic. We nearly laughed our heads off, even more so when discovering that we were among the very few who laughed. A different way of looking at the world emerged in the minds of two boys that evening, as well as a friendship sealed for life. Isn't humour a way of defining your shared understanding of life? And could one really be wholehearted “best friends” at all if not sharing each other's sense of it?

To me, that evening in Rosenborg cinema became a watershed, inspiring a dream to create similar things myself. That dream would later be accomplished, and in the meantime I sought out everything I could find of recent British comedy. I would soon pick my favourites in the game: John Cleese, Michael Palin, Terry Jones, Graham Chapman and Terry Gilliam. “This is the humour of my generation”, I felt at the time. And indeed, it was something that would leave a lasting impact on my own life.

With the exception of Woody Allen, there is no comedian or comedians who has mattered more to me than Monty Python's Flying Circus and their anarchistic-absurd satire, camouflaged as utter nonsense but containing a large share of deeply intelligent social commentary. This was the perfect mix to somebody who, as a young man, was in search of – yes, precisely – *The Meaning of Life*.

I cannot remember precisely when and where I saw the first programme of the Flying Circus. I can only remember that I was speechless thereafter! I had not dared to laugh throughout the programme for fear of losing any ingenious point, and when it was over (following two additional sketches after the end titles – how radical was that?!), the only thing I could utter was an overawed “Oh Bloody Hell!!!!”

Since then I have enjoyed them all, again and again, at vinyl, CD, video cassette, DVD – never tiring of them; and how many comedians can you say that about?

For how could anyone forget *The Norwegian Blue*, *Ministry of Silly Walks*, *Nudge Nudge*, *The Argument Clinic*, *Leonardo and the Pope arguing over The Holy Communion with two Jesus's*, *Fawlty Towers*, *The Holy Grail*, not to mention the film that was honoured last year by British viewers as the funniest film ever: *Life of Brian*. “The film which is so funny that it was banned in Norway”, as the Swedes promoted it at the time. And

the debate which followed until it was finally legalised (with a warning that the film was certainly not about Jesus but about Brian) probably marked the beginning of the end of Norwegian film censorship as we knew it.

A common observation when seeing old comedies anew is that most of them fade quite quickly. Sometimes it is almost impossible to grasp why they really made you laugh in previous years. But some favourites survive.

I hope the Monty Python group have seen to it that re-runs of their old TV-shows are well paid. After more than forty years there is always a Python show on a

television channel near you, and not many years ago Eric Idle wrote *Spamalot*, the musical version of *The Holy Grail*, which still attracts large and exhilarated audiences in London.

Humour is about form, trends, age and shared references in addition to the required comical talent. An

essential reason why different generations rarely understand each other's humour is that young people seek to demonstrate their independence of their parents. And, as with clothes and music, they do it with their own humour. After all, you cannot laugh at the same things as your Mum! I remember thinking precisely that while yawning as a sixteen-year-old in the venue of Chat Noir with my excited actress-mother watching Juster and Arve Opsahl on stage.

For there is no justice in this business: the old must succumb to the new, no matter if the former continues to deliver. At the end of the day, the audience demands change. Not necessarily for the better – as long as it is different!

A wise man once said: “People get the comedians they deserve”. Today, yet again, body liquids and genitals have gotten the upper hand over satire driven by political and social interest. Sketch-based comedy has been in decline for some time, perceived as too expensive, in favour of stand-up-comedy of American inspiration. One comedian, one microphone! Much less expensive to produce in times when ever larger profits are required by the owners of more and more commercial TV-networks.

But of course, this is my judgement only. Fortunately, humour is magnificently subjective at heart; only what I think is funny is really funny...!

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