Stand-up Comedy – A Form of Experimental Theatre?

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Abstract: *My paper argues that Stand-up Comedy can be seen as a form of Experimental Theatre - and perhaps even the most popular form of experimental theatre. It is debatable if it is what we call professional theatre (being generally written and performed also by non-professionals), but it undoubtfully belongs to the category of Experiment, due to multiple reasons, such as its minimalist means (one person, one microphone, one empty space), its live, unpredictable presence and its capacity to shock and, perhaps most importantly, the unpredictability of the audience responses. Stand-up Comedy CAN be considered a form of experimental theatre with a declared, even professed direction and aim: to make the audience laugh - and, obviously, to encourage self-reflection on major themes. The Stand-up Comedy of the third millennium works an instrument of Social and Cultural Inclusion, Gender and Sexuality Inclusion, touching and playing with subjects such as Race, Ethnicity, Disability, Social Injustice. Today we are facing the occurrence of new Stand-up Comedy themes (such as coming out, for instance) and the results of putting these themes on stage is effective and useful for our society. And, due to the unpredictability of the audience response to such provocation, it is always experimental.*

Key words: *stand-up comedy; humour; laughter; experiment; popular.*

Experimental theatre – theories and specifics

In order to prove that stand-up comedy, which is in my opinion a traditionally non-traditional form of performance, can be seen as a form of experimental theatre, I will first look at the ways experimental theatre has been defined. Among the first theorists (or perhaps proto-theorists) of experimental theatre, there are pivotal names such as Antonin Artaud, who created the concept Theatre of Cruelty, aimed at provoking subconscious reactions in the spectator (Artaud 1938); Bertolt Brecht, who conceptualized the Epic Theatre and the alienation effect (Hecht 2022); Jerzy Grotowski, who coined the term Poor Theatre, focused on a minimalist theatre and the essential actor-spectator relationship (Grotowski 1975); and Peter Brook, the theorist of *The Empty Space*, who professed the simplicity of the performance (Brook 1968). According to all these theorists, experimental theatre (or avant-garde theatre) is obviously a form of performance that rejects tradition. Going further, the rejection of traditional dramatic conventions is accompanied by the aim to explore something new: new structures and themes. Rather than relying on linear narratives or strict separation between actor and audience, it emphasizes direct experience (of both the actor/stand-upper and the audience) and formal innovation.

A number of academics and theorists provide critical analysis and historical context for experimental and avant-garde theatre movements, such as Peter Bürger (Bürger 1984), James Roose-Evans (Roose-Evans 1989), Shomit Mitter (Mitter 1992), Christopher Innes (Innes 1993), and Richard Schechner (Schechner 2020). According to these personalities, the main characteristics of experimental (aka non-traditional) theatre seem to be the direct participation of the audience (spectators are no longer passive observers, but active participants and co-creators; they are often directly addressed by performers, leading to the disappearance of the 'fourth wall'); the unconventional space (performances often take place outside classic theatres in site-specific locations, such as abandoned buildings, parks, or warehouses); the non-linearity of narratives (the fragmentation of time and story); and interdisciplinarity (more specifically, the integration of contemporary dance, visual arts, electronic music, video art, and emerging technologies like AI into the performance). In the following, I will show that all these requirements of experimental theatre are fulfilled by stand-up comedy.

But first, let us see what stand-up comedy is and how it is theorized.

Stand-up comedy – theories and specifics

The simplest definition of stand-up comedy might be the one given by Oliver Double: "a performer talks to an audience aiming to make it laugh" (Double 2014, 11). Judy Carter offers another definition: "a performer goes beyond their personal fears and shows their authentic selves in front of an audience, transforming their own problems into jokes" (Carter 2020, 21). A third definition comes from Jay Leno:

A performer goes beyond their personal fears and shows their authentic selves in front of an audience, transforming their own problems into jokes. Stand-up comedy is the cheapest form of entertainment; all you need is a comedian, a microphone, and some chairs and tables. People love to laugh. (Double 2014, 12)

To conclude, stand-up comedy seems to be the cheapest and also the easiest kind of show. It is an unrepeatable form of art and its success is certified by the quantity of laughter it elicits.

Because stand-up comedy was dismissed as 'low art' for a long time, its formal academic theorization is relatively recent, except for Bergson's classical theory of *Laughter* (Bergson 1911) and Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* theory of play (Huizinga 1938). Although Huizinga does not direct his work specifically to laughter, I consider that his concept of ludicity implies and includes an element of laughter. Still, thinkers and practitioners of stand-up comedy such as Double (Double 2014), Quirk (Quirk 2015), Weaver (Weaver 2011), and also the behaviourists McGraw and Warner (McGraw & Warner 2015) have analysed its structure, psychology, and social role with the same rigor applied to classical theatre. Wilkie's *Performance, Comedy and Aesthetics* (Wilkie 2016) positions comedy within the broader framework of traditional performing arts.

More recently, The Cambridge Companion to Stand-up Comedy, edited by Double (Double 2025), adds clarity and underlines the relevance of stand-up comedy as an academic subject and field of study. Theorizing stand-up comedy has been my academic preoccupation for the last few years (Nedelea 2020; Nedelea 2022). To conclude, stand-up comedy has been analyzed from different academic perspectives, such as: historical (Double & Washbourne 2025; Krefting 2025), political (Quirk 2025), social (Lockyer 2025), psychoanalytical, philosophical, and psychological (Mintz 1985), and, last but not least, from queer (Gilbert 2025) and gender-related (Tomsett & White 2025) perspectives.

Is stand-up comedy a form of experimental theatre?

First and foremost, stand-up comedy is traditionally non-traditional. It was born as a form of non-traditional theatre: from the very beginning, it did not take place on a traditional stage and was not necessarily performed by professional actors (the stand-upper can be a professional actor, but does not have to be one). Stand-up comedy can happen anywhere – although it 'traditionally' happens in a bar. It can take place on an improvised stage, a bar, a real stage, but also in a stadium. It is based on improvisation and on the audience response – unlike a theatre play, which has a strict text and a clear script. It happens *hic et nunc* and every performance actually depends – at least to a certain extent – on that night's specific audience. It has to be direct, honest, and everything that happens, including all kinds of accidents, must be taken into account because the audience expects the performer to react to them – unlike in traditional theatre, where the actor pretends that accidents did not happen and tries to make them invisible.

One of the main characteristics of experimental theatre is the direct participation of the audience. The stand-up comedian breaks the 'fourth wall' by default. The performer acknowledges the fact that the spectators are there, and they are no longer passive observers. Usually, the performer asks them direct questions during the warm-up routine and sharp, funny comments are made. Thus, the spectators become active participants and co-creators of the show. The spectators in the first rows even expect to be directly addressed by performers.

Every comedian is different in this matter, and a relevant example is the famous British stand-upper Jimmy Carr, who has developed a personal 'tradition'. For decades, during Jimmy Carr's performances, the audience has been offered a phone number at the beginning of his shows and invited to write questions and messages during the break. The famous comedian replies to their funny texts in the second part of the show. In this particular way, the audience takes an active part in writing (or rewriting) the show.

Another feature that is characteristic of experimental theatre is the unconventional space. Experimental performances often take place outside classic theatres, in "site-specific" locations such as abandoned buildings, parks, or warehouses. So does stand-up comedy: it can take place anywhere, as already stated. The only visual sign that must remain is the microphone held by the comedian in their hand.

The non-linearity of narratives is another trait of experimental theatre and also stand-up comedy. Usually, stand-up gigs do not have continuity (I have personally never experienced a stand-up show with continuity). There are, of course, routines, stories which can last for 10-15 minutes, and ideas the comedian comes back to during the show. There are also one-liners that jump freely from one subject to another. Generally, the jokes have no common subject, the fragmentation of the story being a typical feature of stand-up comedy.

Interdisciplinarity is another feature of experimental theatre that can be found in stand-up comedy. Many comedians include music in their shows – and a relevant example is Adam Sandler. The famous American comedian also relies on visual elements in his gigs, a good example being his 2024 Netflix show *100% Fresh*.

In conclusion, one can argue that all the main characteristics of experimental theatre are fulfilled by stand-up comedy.

Now, let us play the devil's advocate. There are a few inherent elements of stand-up comedy that might not seem quite experimental. For instance, stand-up comedy is based on a particular convention: the monologue convention. Usually, in a stand-up performance, there is much more monologue than dialogue with the audience. Also, in terms of text delivery, traditional stand-up has a rather fixed and rigid structure: a setup followed by a punchline. On the other hand, experimental theatre tends to destroy predictable structures, while stand-up depends on them to function. Then there is also the commercial intent issue: stand-up is often oriented toward immediate entertainment and profitability. On the other hand, experimental theatre prioritizes aesthetic research or intellectual provocation, often ignoring audience comfort.

There are legendary stand-up performers who used the stage to question the nature of stand-up comedy itself and even to explore the limits of discomfort. Such examples of experimental approaches in stand-up are the anti-comedian Andy Kaufman (who might read *The Great Gatsby* until the audience left, turning their boredom and anger into art) or other representatives of the craft, such as Stewart Lee, the meta-comedian Hannah Gadsby, and the absurdist Bo Burnham.

Other contemporary performers who push the boundaries of stand-up, transforming it into a form of performance art or experimental theatre, include: Natalie Palamides (who pushes physical and emotional boundaries, making the audience feel vulnerable and active in the creative process), Jordan Brookes (who relies on physical unpredictability and the 'empty space' theorized by Peter Brook, Kim Noble (whose work is closer to extreme performance art than a comedy club, using technology to document real-life obsessions), Stewart Lee (who turns a stand-up set into a Brechtian social critique and meta-theatrical experience), and Drew Michael (who rejects the "classic" interaction with the audience – the fundamental premise of stand-up – to create an introspective, cinematic experience).

Conclusion

Stand-up comedy, a traditionally non-traditional genre within the realm of performance, can be considered a form of experimental theatre due to a multitude of elements such as the audience's direct participation, its minimalist means (one person, one mic, one unconventional space), the non-linearity of narratives, its unpredictability, multidisciplinarity, and capacity to shock. However, it only truly becomes 100% experimental theatre when it stops trying to merely make people laugh and starts exploring why they are there and what human communication means in that space. The answer to the main question (which is the title of this paper) is that traditional stand-up fully becomes experimental theatre when it deconstructs its own rules.

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