

The Comedy Unit - BBC Manchester

Over 250 writers and performers attended the launch night of the Northern BBC Comedy Unit on 30th October 2003 at Jongleurs in Manchester.

The following is the transcript of an informal master-class given by **Kenton Allen**, BBC Editor of Comedy ; **Graham Linehan**, Writer of Father Ted, Black Books, Big Train ; **Susan Nickson**, writer of Two Pints of Lager and a Packet of Crisps ; and **Fred Barron**, the creator of My Family.

'Grin' Transcript:

K = Kenton G = Graham S = Susan F = Fred

K Your day to day job is writing comedy. How do you actually go about it?

G When I work with Arthur, we get together at around 12, we read papers for about 5 hours and then we write for an hour ... and then we play computer golf. That's basically it. Actually that's not quite true. Arthur's always had a real work ethic, so when I'm working with him I'm at my most productive. We work for 4 or 5 hours every day.

K But do you have a routine when you're on your own?

G Yes. I do the day I just described, except for real.

K Without the writing?

G With the writing. But, but very little writing. I just do just enough so that I won't feel guilty. And then I play computer golf!

K And Susan, do you have computer golf?

S I don't have computer golf. I have "This Morning", when it used to be with "Richard and Judy". That was a great 'putter offer'. Now, I like Terry and Gaby! Watching those shows are my way of putting things off. It's the nature of writing, that you procrastinate and procrastinate until it gets to 4 o'clock and...and then it's tea time.

K And does that happen with a team-written show?

F Yes. There's just a lot more of us doing it. The way I work is, I panic. I put things off as long as I can because basically, we all know we're funny and writing is just making choices.

G I don't know I'm funny...

K But Fred, you say you know you're funny – I'm not sure Graham and Susan know that they're funny. That's a very confident American thing to say.

F You write to prove you're funny. That's the reason you write.

Grin Transcript

Grin Transcript

ear, you have a sense of structure and you can tell a story. I'm hoping that there will be more opportunities to get into the system without just saying 'I have to create my own show and I'll stand or fall on this thing.'

K Susan, you entered the Lloyd's Bank Film Challenge didn't you?

S Yes, that's where it started off.

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be because you're throwing away everything else to save the joke, throw it away. You'll use it somewhere else either in that script or in another script.

K Fred, how did the character of Larry Sanders come about?

F I think we knew the world, God knows we knew Garry and we spent a lot of time with the Tonight show and it kind of evolved. We were writers but we were also producers. We were doing a show that was not just the script. If you just fall in love with your script, you're gonna be screwed. So much is going to happen when you get the actors, and then you start re-writing to their voices. When you start seeing magic happening on the screen that you never dreamed of then you start writing to that. Like in Seinfeld, Kramer – we didn't have a clue who he was. So all we had was he was gonna come in, in a different way, every week. And then through Michael Richards we started saying 'Oh...here's who he is.' I think what we do is a grand collaboration. That's where I come from. If you can use that collaboration with the actors, with the director, with other writers, the world starts to flesh out itself. Kris Marshall in My Family came in with a very different rhythm than I'd originally imagined. And his was better. So why not write to that?

K Susan, did you radically re-write what you'd originally envisaged when the actors came on board?

S I was incredibly lucky in that I got the cast that I really wanted, other than a couple of people who were unknown before. But you still have to re-write it when an actor comes up to you and says 'Well I'm not happy with this line because...' . They've got their own ideas of what the character should be. As it goes on you get to know the actors and realise what they're good at. And so you start writing more into the show, say visually specifically because you know what they can do. I found out this series that one of the girls can make a 3-leaf clover with her tongue. So it was like straight away, I'm sticking that in the script.

K And Graham, you've written your script, you think you know what the show is and then you get actors on board. Does the show then change from what you'd originally envisaged?

G Yeah absolutely. I'm not sure how important that is for people here today though. I think one of the problems that happens with writers is thinking ahead of themselves when they're writing, for example 'Oh what if an actor doesn't like this'. The most important thing at this stage when you write a first

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you'll ever read. It's absolutely amazing. Her first chapter is actually called 'S****y First Drafts.' I think if people are at that stage where they've got a great idea, one of the worst problems is the embarrassment you feel when you're writing down stuff and you think 'Who the hell am I? This is just s*** and these people aren't real and I'm lying and everyone's gonna find me out...' Anne's great at talking about that kind of feeling.

S But when you actually submit stuff to a TV company though, don't you think you should have a list of actors who you'd like to play your parts, just so that the reader can think about actors' voices when they're reading it?

G That's a way you can do it. I've done it that way myself. But I think there's that way, and there are other ways. Personally my favourite thing is to create characters and then when an actor's name is mentioned, you go 'Oh yeah, he could play that character.' And it makes you think of them in a different way.

S But when you're sat there writing these lines out, haven't you got a voice in your head that's saying the lines?

F Yes, but it's not an actor's voice. It's my voice.

S It's not your voice, it's somebody else's

G Mine tells me to kill people. Yes, you have a voice. But it should be the character's voice, surely?

When we were writing Father Ted, whenever I was wr

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K That's compared to 6 a year.

F Yeah.

K You did 26 last year.

F There's no real plus except that you get a rhythm going. One of the nice things about having a team is you can be watching it – every script isn't written before you start - so you can discover stuff along the way. So if somebody starts emerging, you can say 'OK let's re-write the script that we're gonna shoot in 2 weeks, change that and give this actor or this actress more.' 'Oh – this relationship's working, let's play with that.' You get much more of a chance to improvise. Also, I've said this before, but team writing is, at its best, like a jazz combo – a really tight combo, where everybody's a great soloist, and you feed off each other. There can always be a better joke, there can always be a better idea out there. And you're just playing with the big kids. It's great fun. One other thing that I think is very helpful that I've noticed since I've been in the UK is there don't seem that many ways for young, talented writers to get into the business without getting his or her own show. And it's a drag, because then it's all make or break, you're thrown into it. The way the American system of team writing works is, it's almost like an apprenticeship system, where you start out at the table, and you might get a script, but you're always working at somebody else's script. You're punching things up, you're there on the floor, you're talking to the actors, and you evolve. And you evolve in a situation where you've got friends, you've got a safety net - so you're not gonna land on your ass. I mean it's not gonna be awful. At worst you'll come away and you'll say 'I wasn't embarrassed today.'

G I think though that like every form of writing, that's got advantages and disadvantages, because I'm sure you admit that lots of American shows, just like lots of British shows, don't...

F Are s***...

G Yeah, are s***. And it's because of a certain homogenisation in the way jokes are constructed and that people suddenly think it'll be funny to say 'Girlfriend' after every line or something like that, d'you know what I mean?

F Yep.

G ...and having a group of people who'll support you in putting 'Girlfriend' at the end of a line...

F And saying...yes. Very dangerous.

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it's kind of 'Let's see where they go.' But as you say, the first draft is usually absolute crap and after that you can just say 'Well let's take this bit out and let's sculpt the storyline into something that's coherent and useable.'

K OK. Let's move on from there and look at a clip of My Family which Fred created.

CLIP OF "MY FAMILY"

K What Fred has managed to do is create a pre-watershed comedy that appeals to an enormous audience. Its average audience is 8 or 9 million viewers a week. It has the same 16 to 34 year old demographics as Pop Idol. And it's incredibly important that we as comedy writers and producers and directors and actors, embrace the prime time audience before 9 o'clock, as well as go off and do our other things after 9 o'clock. It's an extraordinary achievement that they made 26 shows of my Family last year, and that a massive new audience for comedy is coming back time and time again for that show and for a sitcom.

F What I wanted to do with My Family was basically that the Seinfeld generation now have our own kids. It was interesting why My Family was originally created because I wanted to write about parents. After the first series it became about me and my wife and my kids. When I stopped being Nick and I became Ben, I was where the stories were coming from. I mean one of the goals was to create a kind of Seinfeld with kids, but it wasn't gonna be about who wrecked the roast, those typical sitcom family things, but it was just gonna be about the normal, everyday crap that you have to go through, and how can you survive with these people you've got to live with? What I thought was interesting, talking about how some things evolve, that in the original pilot of My Family, there was one Ben and Susan scene that was maybe 30 seconds long, the bedroom scene. And when we saw that when Robert and Zoe were together, maybe second rehearsal, it was so clear that there was a magic there. And they had that bedroom, the kind of fantasy bedroom where you felt safe – you wanted to hear them talking, you wanted to hang out in that bed. In which case it became about Ben and Susan because of that bedroom scene, and part of the fun of

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K It's when you saw the chemistry between the two actors ...

F But it's not just the chemistry. I saw the heart of the show. I mean chemistry is great, but then you've to build on that and say it isn't about a fam

Grin Transcript

K Well done.

G But she did it once and we thought she was so funny at it, that we did it ad nauseum after that, y'know. But I wouldn't be as brave as you (Susan) are in not writing. We didn't leave anything to chance. And I think if you're starting off, it's probably a good idea to really write every single thing that people say and do. Although what you shouldn't do is tell the actors how to do a line. If you've written it correctly, then the scene will be leading up to them doing the line in the exact right way you want them to do it.

F Oh you are so lucky.

K Fred- why? You have a different take on this?

F I'm trying to think of how diplomatic I can put this. No, the idea that you can trust them all the time.

G Oh I'm not saying trust actors – never do that! I'm saying that you can write in such a way that, for instance, you can write picking up this glass is important in a scene, I think it's a bad thing to write 'Close up of glass'.

F Oh I see what you mean.

G The thing to write is 'He sees the glass' in one line, and then the director will put in a shot of the glass. So you're not actually telling anyone how to do their job, but you are writing it in such a way that you're creating a little visual note. You're showing people what's important. And things like putting 'GLASS' in capitals and nothing else in capitals will help things like that along. Seriously it really works, because people go 'Oh – glass – that's important!'. Because sometimes people read scripts don't they, in the way of 'Blah bla-blah, bla-bla-bla-bla, bla-blah – Glass.' 'Blah bla-bla-bla-bla, bla-bla bla-blah – Drinks.' 'Blah bla-bla-bla-blah', they tend to skim and stuff like that. So you've got to write in a very punchy way.

K So you put in as much detail as possible?

G Yeah, there was very little improvisation. I'm sorry – that sounds very arrogant but we just liked all our jokes and we didn't want anyone else to do them. If someone could beat it, you certainly used that, but if not – no.

K Well that's how team writing works, presumably Fred?

F Yeah. I mean, the goal is to make it funny and true at the same time. And generally what the writers and I try to work with, we always try to figure out what happens, 'what it's about'. But then 'what's it really about?' I mean what's going on in the characters that makes this even worth writing about?

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G And I am joking about actors as well - of course they bring the character to life and give great suggestions and so on.

F Yeah.

G But I do think as a writer and not as a director/writer, or as Woody Allen and actor/writer/director – your only responsibility is to make the scripts as funny as they possibly can be.

F I can remember when I first started, it was like I thought I had to anticipate everything. So I would say 'Graham – parentheses – thinking about his brother lost in Vietnam.'

G Hello. I was thinking about him!

F And the actors would just sit there with like a pen, and just cross out every stage direction and I'd be like 'Don't do that.'

K I'm afraid we've run out of time so you could you please join me thanking Graham, Fred and Susan for being so open and honest about what they so brilliantly do and for giving up so much of their time.

Thank you very much.

APPLAUSE