Stand-up as interaction: performance and audience in comedy venues


Abstract

This thesis explores stand-up comedy as live performance focusing on the manner in which audience, performer, jokes and venue combine to make a unique interactive experience. It outlines the failure of previous literature in humour research to move beyond simple stimulus models of joking and laughter. It argues for a shift in the study of humour towards in situ observation which draws on both conversation analysis and audience research. Through the observation of stand-up interaction the thesis demonstrates that audience laughter is organised in a consistent fashion and that the transition between comedian's talk and audience laughter is socially organised. In turn the thesis examines the openings, middles and closings of standup routines. It demonstrates that despite a considerable variety of performance style, comedians' introductions, the commencement of the comedians' routines themselves and the closing of acts, are organised around a set of common features each with a preferred order. Further, it demonstrates the active role played by the audience as well as the performer in maintaining this ordering. It shows how a feeling of "liveness" is built up out of these sequences as they are constructed specifically for and respond to, individual audiences. Looking at the central section of stand-up routines this work demonstrates how jokes told by comedians incorporate a series of rhetorical and performance specific techniques which work towards announcing to an audience that a point of completion is approaching and that laughter is the preferred response. It is argued that this serves to minimise the audience's risk in laughing in a group situation and so is beneficial for both performer and audience. A new system for understanding stand-up is presented which pivots on notions of performance, interaction and liveness.
This thesis explores stand-up comedy as live performance focusing on the manner in which audience, performer, jokes and venue combine to make a unique interactive experience. It outlines the failure of previous literature in humour research to move beyond simple stimulus models of joking and laughter. It argues for a shift in the study of humour towards in situ observation which draws on both conversation analysis and audience research. Through the observation of stand-up interaction the thesis demonstrates that audience laughter is organised in a consistent fashion and that the transition between stand-up comedy is a cultural phenomenon in need of deep readings and thoughtful discourse. My work for this directed study will be done in the spirit of meeting that need, however partially it is able to accomplish the broader aims. EVALUATION Rutter, Jason. "Stand-Up as Interaction: Performance and Audience in Comedy Venues." Diss. University of Salford, 1997. THESIS: Wilson, Nathan Andrew. "Was That Supposed to be Funny? A Rhetorical Analysis of Politics, Problems and Contradictions in Contemporary Stand-Up Comedy." MA Thesis. U of Iowa, 2008. Articles and chapters: Auslander, Philip. "'Brought to You by Fem-Rage': Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender." Acting Out: Feminist Performances. Ed. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan.