

Book Reviews

Edited by
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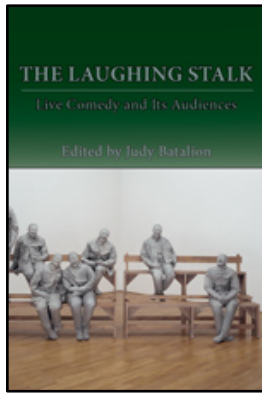
Editor's Note:

The reviews in this section were edited by Tracy Wuster, with the exception of Joseph Csicsila's review of *Southern Frontier Humor: New Approaches*, which includes an essay by Dr. Wuster and was edited by Judith Yaross Lee and Leah Cole.

If you are interested in reviewing books for *Studies in American Humor*, or if you have books for us to consider for review, please visit our website at studiesinamericanhumor.org/ and check the book review section.

The Laughing Stalk: Live Comedy and Its Audiences.
Edited by Judy Batalion. Anderson, SC: Parlor, 2012. 302 pp.

Reviewed by
Eric Shouse



In colonial times individuals who failed to adhere to the approved moral code were placed in stocks and subject to public ridicule. With the moral reprobate's legs firmly ensconced in heavy wooden boards, mischievous children were free to remove his shoes and tickle his feet. Although these "laughing stocks" are not the etymological root of the term "laughing stalk," they make for an instructive pun. The vast majority of scholarship aimed at understanding comedy has held its object of study firmly in place, approaching humor as a text or a script. With few notable exceptions (e.g., Jason Rutter's *Standup as Interaction: Performance and Audience in Comedy Venues* [1997], Robert Provine's *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* [2000], Joanne Gilbert's *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* [2004]), few scholars have paid careful attention to the embodied experience of shared humor and laughter.

The Laughing Stalk: Live Comedy and Its Audiences removes comedy from its metaphorical bondage by allowing performers and producers to speak about their experiences with different audiences. For example, at one point in the book, Judy Batalion (the editor, who is also a stand-up comic) and Shazir Mirza (a Muslim comedian from the UK) discuss Mirza's experience performing stand-up in Kosovo.

Mirza explains how an audience can see the humor in a performance even when they don't fully comprehend the jokes. According to Mirza, when an audience identifies with a performer, the "performance itself can translate . . . they laugh at the mannerisms, at expressions" (90). Every comic performer knows how important these extra-linguistic elements are to the reception of comedy. In rare instances, like Mirza's performance in Kosovo, persona and style can even carry the day. However, these non-linguistic components of humor have received remarkably little attention from the scholarly community.

In her introduction, Batalion provides a concise but important theoretical framework for the unique approach taken in this edited collection. Drawing on Teresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect*, Batalion supports an understanding of humor that turns traditional text-based approaches on their head by highlighting the "predominance of mood over thought . . . such that a person's reactions to received information are based on their emotional state rather than on the content of the information" (9). In other words, the book's approach argues the texts that have received the lion's share of interest from humor scholars are oftentimes less significant to the experience of live comedy audiences than the manner in which those texts are performed in a particular time and place. Following this introduction, the bulk of the book is divided into four parts with various performers and theorists describing a wide variety of comic performances.

In the first section, "Locating Live Comedy," Alice Rayner explains how timing not only determines the success or failure of particular jokes, but how the audience itself is a temporal accomplishment. Theater designer Iain Mackintosh explicates how space, lighting, color, proximity, and music can all help or hinder the transmission of affect. Matthew Daube describes how audiences came to desire the evocative first-person style of stand-up comedy that continues to be the mainstay of U.S. comedy clubs as a result of the greater conformity required in the post-World War II workplace. This section concludes with the previously mentioned interview with Shazir Mirza, who relates her experiences performing in different cultural contexts around the world.

The second section, "The Culture of the Audience, and Audiences of Culture," begins with Lesley Harbidge's discussion of the awkward silences that were an essential part of Steve Martin's live stand-up performances. She argues that laughter may not always be contagious, even when a general mood of enjoyment and connectedness is present. Gavin Butt interviews transsexual comedian David Hoyle about the therapeutic possibilities that open up when performers are ruthlessly honest and vulnerable and about how queer audiences have responded to his cult talk show *Magazine*. Diana Solomon explains how eighteenth-century audiences demanded prologues and epilogues to tragedies like *Macbeth* during which performers (often women) would deliver "mini-narratives" similar to contemporary stand-up comedy. Rebecca Krefting finishes off this section with an essay that challenges Christopher Hitchens's controversial assertion that women are not funny. She argues that women are often *perceived* as less funny because comedy exists within a larger cultural economy in which there is no incentive for audiences to identify with a woman's point of view.

The third section, “The Industry, or, the Audience in the Making of the Comedy Show,” begins with a piece by Sable & Batalion, a hip-hop comedy duo who compare their best and worst live performances (during which they ostensibly performed the same script to massively varying reactions). This approach reveals how non-textual elements such as time, place, and audience expectations—as well as the (in)ability of performers to adapt to these elements—impact the reception of their performances. This is followed by an interview in which Batalion asks Julia Chamberlain, a major comedy producer and booker in the U.K., about how audiences differ depending upon “context/place/club/time” (166). Kevin McCarron, a stand-up comic and academic, provides a nuanced account of the role the audience plays in helping a comedian co-create an act. Canadian comedian Nile Seguin offers a concise and humorous taxonomy of hecklers. Artist Sarah Boyes contributes some thought-provoking photographs of spectators at a stand-up performance. The section concludes with an excerpt from Michael Frayn’s farce *Audience*, which revolves around the experience of various audience members watching a play.

In the final section, “Live Comedy in Context,” live performances are compared to other forms of media and low comedy is compared to high art. Elizabeth Klaver discusses live comedy and the popular television program *Ugly Betty*, highlighting the manner in which both playfully manipulate an audience’s discourse competence. Frances Gray explains the role of surveillance in English comedy, wherein audiences vicariously experience the thrill and anxiety that accompanies being found out. Novelist and stand-up comic AL Kennedy contrasts the experience of writing and performing for audiences at book readings and comedy clubs. Scott Jacobson, a former writer for *The Daily Show*, relates his experience of trying to write with both the studio audience and home audience in mind. Kéline Gotman and Samuel Godin explain how new technologies have enabled comedians to speak to “deferred” audiences (e.g., Sacha Baron Cohen), while simultaneously subjecting them to greater potential scrutiny (e.g., Michael Richards). The book concludes with an interview of performance artist and UCLA professor Andrea Fraser about the use of comedy to critique art and scholarship and a transcript of “Inaugural Speech,” a performance she gave to commemorate the opening of an art exhibition along the US/Mexico border.

The Laughing Stalk: Live Comedy and Its Audiences is an important work that should influence the field of humor studies. By focusing on the embodied interactions that take place between joke tellers and their audiences, this collection of essays opens up new possibilities for theorizing comedy. As the U.K. comedy booker Julia Chamberlain explains, an audience that makes a deep connection with a comedian will “laugh at the bits between the jokes, the silences, the minute expressions, the nonverbal communication. It’s absolutely magical when that happens, for the performer and the crowd” (171). This collection captures a good deal of that extra-textual magic by allowing performers and individuals intimate with their work to talk knowingly and seriously about the craft. I recommend this anthology highly to anyone interested in humor, performance studies, and/or stand-up comedy.