



## Language of Comedy

### *Innuendo*

#### **David McGillivay:**

English is full of words and phrases that have more than one meaning, and this is very useful for comic purposes. So, for example, let's say we have, er, somebody in a film or a play who is talking about one thing, and the person listening to him or her misinterprets it and thinks that the person is talking about something completely different. Now, that's a basis for comedy, isn't it? And if the misinterpretation is sexual as well, that's even better for a British audience, because, of course, we've always been sexually repressed.

There's nothing new about, er, innuendo; it's been with us for hundreds of years and, er, Shakespeare used innuendo in a number of his plays. There's a very good example in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Now, that play has a play within a play, and it's called *Pyramus and Thisbe*, and that's the story of two lovers who are separated by a wall, and in the play each character – including the wall – is played by an actor, and, of course, in Shakespeare's day they would all have been men. And at one point *Pyramus* says to the wall, "Cursed be thy stones for thus deceiving me." Now, it doesn't quite work today as a double entendre, but when you bear in mind that in Elizabethan times testicles were 'stones'... well, it's a very funny, very clever play on words, and you can imagine the audience reacting to this very well. Innuendo changes from generation to generation because, of course, society changes. Now, one of the greatest, cheeky comics of all time in this country was Max Miller, and his particular skill was in making a double meaning out of words which sometimes only had one meaning. Um, for example, there's one, er, quite famous joke on his LP, *Max At The Met* – I won't give you whole joke because it's a bit of a shaggy dog story – but the lead up to the punchline is, "I want it for my little Chihuahua." Now, um, I mean, you're smiling even now, but, but why? There is nothing funny about the word Chihuahua except that to British ears it sounds funny, and when it's put in a joke it sounds sexual. So, that was Max's particular skill; he was a, he was a genius at doing that; a dirty comic who never said anything dirty, and that's very important.

Today it's very different; comics come out on stage and they call a spade a spade. Now, in the case of the *Carry On* films this is a case of talking about 'getting it up' and 'having it off'. Now, in those days those jokes were very, very funny; er, today innuendo is probably a dying art, there are only very few comics who still practice it. Innuendo is essentially a lad's humour. It's the kind of humour that blokes use to make each other laugh, and I think it always has been. That humour is changing now, you know, comedy is not, er, anymore a boy's game, you know, and that's another of the reasons why we're possibly saying goodbye to the double entendre.