Language of Comedy

Crafting a Joke

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I think what makes something funny overall is, erm, an element of surprise. So, that you set something up and then you reveal… I suppose that's how 'pull back and reveal' got coined, but I think it's to do with subverting the audience's expectation. So, that can work in so many different ways. Erm, I think, in stories it can work by building; you can build and build and build and then just reveal something that the audience wouldn't have seen coming, and with one-liners as well it is exactly the same principle.

Language is about the only thing that you've got, erm, with comedy. I mean, you've got your body and your face and you can, kind of, use it to express yourself, but it really starts and ends with language, and the most important thing is to be specific and clear and never let the audience lose track of, of what you're saying. And s-, I used to think, when I started out, that it was better not to be specific, so that the audience felt involved and, so if you did something generalised they'd all be able to, kind of, get on board, but actually the more specific you are the better. I don't mean surreal, but I mean just talking about a concrete thing. For example, it's better to talk about a seagull than a bird, and they can all picture it.

Erm, but language itself, when it comes to the punchline, is so important, and I think, the, the best thing to do is have the final, er, the final reveal, or the most important element of the punchline, or the noun, erm, or the actual, sort of, hub of it, at the very end of the sentence, so that… that's why it's called a punchline, I guess, 'cause you, sort of, [punches fist into hand]. But, i-, you can, erm, you can, kind of, erm, dilute it if you add something after that you don't need. So, for example, I've got this bit, erm, where I say that I asked my mum if I might be adopted because I've always thought that I might be, for various reasons, like me looking Jewish and them all liking Shredded Wheat and stuff and I don't like Shredded Wheat – nothing against Shredded Wheat, but I just don't like it. And, erm, that I sit my mum down and say, er, am I adopted, and it's quite a frank discussion, and she says, "No, of course you're not adopted; we never would've chosen you." Erm, so, I suppose the idea with that is that she's reassuring me initially, and the audience thinks, "Oh, what a nice mum, she's…" and then the reveal is that she'd rather have any daughter other, other than me [laughs]. So, the 'you'; it's very important that the 'you' comes last in that.

I think, when I'm writing there are certain words that come to mind that you throw out automatically, erm, and you always try and think of, perhaps, more unusual words or words that conjure up… I think, ideally you want a word that conjures up an image, and it can be a

retro thing. Erm, so, there's a bit where I say that a guy has a ginger beard… I think, in episode four of my, of my radio show a guy's got a ginger beard and he's got, like, the face of a robin, and I say, "Not a robin with a ginger beard." So, I've, kind of, used… and I really wanted 'ginger beard' 'cause I thought a robin, the idea of a robin with a ginger beard was funnier than a robin with a black beard or a blonde beard. And a robin is quite… 'robin' is a good word, erm, because it's just a clean word with two syllables, and there's n-, I don't know why it just seems like a funnier word – 'robin' – than something like 'starling'. 'Cheetah' isn't as strong as 'penguin'. 'Pig' is great; 'hen' is good, erm, whereas 'pebble' is just, it's too wishy-washy.