

“...my comedy is like a horrible vulture feeding of the carcass of human misery, so I’m laughing.”



Stewart Lee is, ironically, one of the biggest comedians working in the UK today. Despite years of stand-up based around the fact he felt he wasn't as popular as he should be, his wry persona, deadbeat delivery and general disdain for the audience has seen him offer a refreshing kind of stand up; one that progresses the medium, rather than striving for imitation.

Lee brings his new show *Content Provider* to De Montfort Hall this February as part of the comedy festival, headlining for two nights at one of the city's largest venues. It seems that the audience he berates for not understanding his comedy may be finally getting the joke. "I am very lucky that an open-minded, clever, tolerant, inquisitive and loyal audience have stayed with me, and self-seeded themselves, for decades now," Lee explains. "But, on the other hand, I always come back with new shows that develop on what they have come to expect, and I never short change them."

Content Provider is also a book by the same name, a collection of the best of Lee's newspaper columns over the past five years. In much the same way as his stand-up, Lee pushed the barriers of what a column is supposed to be. "Having accepted the jobs, I tried to discharge them to the best of my abilities, whilst at the same time trying to bend the rules and push the fringes of the 'funny column' genre where possible."

For those who have read his *Observer* pieces, his articles have covered wildly varying topics, from advising Corbyn to take advice from Putin, to a piece purporting to be about the Olympic legacy, only to be mainly about a decomposing cat. The absurdity of his comedy has become increasingly popular, as is much of what was previously deemed 'alternative comedy', meaning it has begun to move into the mainstream. Yet much of his work has been met with intense hatred, with big Lee-bashers including the *Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph*, something he revels in by posting their reviews on his website and even using them to advertise his books.

Lee's strength lies here; his seeming disregard for anything that might offend him. When the audience doesn't laugh, he explains why they should. When there is a bad review, he uses it as marketing material. "I may pretend to hate doing stand-up," he says, "But I really do my best." His persona's cynicism and superiority is the result of meticulous craft, and those who don't respond to his work are often missing the point entirely.

Content Provider is in very much the same vein as most of Lee's work to date, examining what we know about being a column writer and dismantling it. "A decade or so ago I got a bewildering text asking me if, in the light of attending the Kilkenny Comedy Festival, I had any 'content' which I would be willing to 'provide' to local 'content providers'." This was my first encounter with the phrase, and I came to understand that they were asking me if I had any text or film or audio, which I could give to mobile phones or websites," Lee explains. "We like to imagine we are artists, us writers, but it is funny to see what you do described as if it is just filler to put onto gizmos, which I suppose, increasingly, it is."

Described as an attempt to "understand modern Britain", *Content Provider* in its live form will inevitably have to incorporate Brexit. Little more than a month after the vote that divided the country, the Edinburgh Festival began and comedians had to adapt to the new, untrodden landscape of a post-Brexit Britain.

"People that I had routines about had been instantly forgotten," Lee explains. "As it is, it's evolved into something that sort of addresses that issue - what kind of content do I provide to an unstable divided society?"

The society comedians were reflecting before had changed drastically, and so in turn did their shows. Lee was clearly in the Remain camp, something reflected in his columns leading up to the vote, but how does he - rather than his persona - feel about the reality of Brexit now it's happening?

"Anecdotally, racism is on the rise. Austerity is, it's official, going to be prolonged and worsened. There will be no cross-continental plan, that includes us, for the Syrian refugee crisis or climate change and environmental pollution. It may be that people will get what they wanted out of Brexit in the end, and feel like the sacrifices have been worth it. But for now there are a tense few years ahead. That said, my comedy is like a horrible

vulture feeding off the carcass of human misery, so I'm laughing."

Fortunately, so is everyone else. Lee sold out both his stand-up show and book festival talk this year in Edinburgh, and has become an increasingly iconic figure in comedy. And so naturally, his return to Leicester's Comedy Festival is hotly anticipated. "My first ever paid out-of-London gig was Leicester Poly with Jerry Sadowitz in 1990. I remember the hotel room had little soaps and shampoos that you could take away with you. I had never seen anything like it." Who said Leicester wasn't a luxury destination, eh? We also have the pleasure of being credited as the place in which he met his wife, fellow comedian Bridget Christie, in 2005. Yet, there's one thing missing this year.

"Leicester has changed in 26 years. I miss the German progressive rock shop, *Ultima Thule*, by the station, which is online now, and was run by two identical twin brothers who really knew their stuff."

Europe's longest comedy festival this year will see Lee share the stage with other big names including Jimmy Carr, Susan Calman, Dane Baptiste and his former comedy partner Richard Herring. Sadly, it doesn't look like a Lee and Herring reunion is on the cards.

"We would need to rehearse properly for ages, and there is no time or financial incentive to do that, and also the basic relationship of the double act doesn't make sense for two men of nearly 50, predicated as it is on an essentially adolescent relationship. That said, I think it might be funny to do it in our 80s."

Well, at least we can keep it in our diaries for the 2040s. And, if he is right, Stewart Lee will no doubt prove to be as popular then as he is now. "I'm lucky that my stage persona makes more sense, rather than less, as I get older." If this is a hint at a move towards grumpy old man territory, then it is a humble remark. Lee is in a league of his own, brilliantly breaking down audience expectations of comedy and outwitting us at every turn. But of course, what we think isn't the point anyway. "People can come if they want but it is what it is and it's not my fault if they don't like it."

Stewart Lee: *Content Provider* will be on 8th & 9th February at De Montfort Hall.

STEWART LEE CONTENT PROVIDER

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