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Chapter 8

Comedy, Performance and the Panel Show

Alex Clayton

The notion of the carnivalesque, most famously mobilised in Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of the social institutions that gave rise to the work of François Rabelais, has long informed our sense of what comedy has absorbed from its historical precursors (Bakhtin 1984). It is almost a truism to invoke the idea that comedy, with its topsy-turvy logic and suspended morality, generates something like a festival atmosphere. But *how* this effect is concretely achieved, what we might call the craft of comedy, is less well appreciated. Indeed, much comedic performance, most especially group comedy premised on improvisation, takes pains to conceal its craft, sometimes even fabricating the impression that we are simply witnessing a bunch of friends messing around. This chapter is an attempt to develop a better grasp of that hidden work by identifying avenues of possibility and means of comic expression available to the seasoned improviser, specifically in the format of the TV panel show. It is also a demonstration that the nascent genre of close appreciative analysis in television studies need not restrict itself to varieties of fiction. Falling outside the categories of drama, documentary, and factual entertainment, the panel show – like the quiz show and the talk show – has drawn little academic attention (Mills 2015: 110) and has inspired no sustained passage of theory or criticism. That is what I intend to offer here.

Analysis of screen performance tends to rely on a distinction between invention and execution: typically, the crafting of the line of dialogue and the act of delivering it. The habitual focus on screen drama means performance tends to be equated with delivery. However, this is barely tenable when discussing improvisation, where invention *is* the execution, or at any rate they are not easily distinguishable (invention is, at least, not an event

that has appreciably preceded execution). Moreover, the word ‘performance’ contains a shadow notion of putting on a front, dissembling or pretending in some way. For instance, it does not sit easily with such behaviour as spontaneously laughing or being surprised, because calling this a ‘performance’ might imply (even if we do not want, or if it is not important, to suggest) that it is somehow faked for entertainment purposes. (Making your laughter *available*, or *showing* yourself surprised, might be better ways of putting it.) These are two reasons why an analytical appreciation of improvisatory performance is challenging to undertake. What follows is an attempt to delineate some of the comedic activities undertaken by performers in this context. They might be thought of loosely as performative modes of comedy, although the distinction between them is more analytical than practical. In Robin Nelson’s terms, I am offering not ‘know-how’ but ‘know-what’ (2007: 37). This is not a guide to being funny, nor a description of choices consciously entertained by performers in mid-flow. Seasoned comedians combine and move intuitively between these modes as professional cyclists shift unthinkingly between gears. It is nonetheless incumbent on the analyst of comedy to know and be able to say what its practitioners are doing.

Before that, a few words may be needed about the genre of the panel show. A direct descendant of the Victorian parlour game, it remains strikingly popular in a British context. The panel show – ‘in which a number of celebrities (often comedians) answer questions or carry out tasks on a particular theme’ (Mills 2015: 109) – was initially dominant in the UK on radio, as indicated by the success and longevity of such BBC Radio 4 shows as *Twenty Questions* (1947–76) and *I’m Sorry I Haven’t A Clue* (1972–). Programmes such as the word-definition game *Call My Bluff* (BBC, 1965–88), the charades-based *Give Us A Clue* (ITV, 1979–92), and the topical news quiz *Have I Got News for You* (BBC, 1990–) were forerunners of the genre on television. Its potential as a comedic platform for free-wheeling improvisation, held in check by rules and restrictions, was perhaps most vividly demonstrated

by *Just a Minute* (BBC Radio 4, 1967–) and *Whose Line is it Anyway?* (Channel 4, 1988–99).

This handful of shows represents the most obvious inspiration for a genre that has mushroomed in British broadcasting post-2000.

The format I nominate as contemporary exemplar is *Would I Lie to You?* (BBC, 2007–), and the particular episode from which I will draw examples is the opening episode of the show's fifth season, first aired on 9 September 2011.¹ The format is simple: in front of a live studio audience, contestants arrayed in two teams (led respectively by comedians David Mitchell and Lee Mack) read out or recite a claim about themselves, typically something they have supposedly done in the past, and/or their relation to an object or person; the opposing team interrogates this claim by asking questions and querying the response; then, on the basis of the claimant's elaboration, the team must judge whether he or she is telling the truth. There are several rounds in which points are scored, and winners are commended at the end of the show. However, as is standard in panel shows, nobody cares about the scores. The sole purpose of the competition is to provide a platform for fun.

The main activity of the show is the elaboration and querying of licensed fibs and disguised truths. There are various pleasures available in this. Since the veracity of the claim is not revealed to us until the end of the round, there is the option to play along and try to discern the bluff (a deliberately weakly supported truth or an insistently supported lie) from the double-bluff (an insistently supported truth, or a lie so incredible in its details that, perhaps, 'it could only be true'), or otherwise to catch out the claimant in a contradiction or embellishment too far. Similarly, sharing ground with the talk show, there is the potential for mild pleasure to be found in celebrity self-exposé, at least mild suspense at its possibility, as when an embarrassing story is revealed as a true disclosure. However, the primary appeal of the format is the support it offers for improvised exchange and repartee.

As with any panel show, the choice of line-up is therefore an important factor. Comparable to the performance dynamic of a rock band or a football team, any particular line-up will yield different possibilities of collaboration and interaction, and potential for clash and overlap. Engineering this chemistry, so far as it is possible, is a matter of trying to find a sparky dynamic between different personalities, temperaments and voices. This is one reason, perhaps, for the use of regular ‘captains’ who provide some constancy in the selection and arrangement of teams. In this respect, season five of *Would I Lie to You?* builds from a solid base. Its two regular team captains, Lee Mack and David Mitchell, have by this point in the series developed a rapport, having settled into a dynamic (perhaps inspired by Ian Hislop and Paul Merton on *Have I Got News For You*) that emphasises their contrasting performance styles (for instance, Mack’s quipping vs Mitchell’s trademark ranting), persona type (extrovert vs introvert), vocal quality (raucous vs nasal) and social background (northern working class vs southern upper middle class). These contrasts lend texture to the interaction between the team captains as well as providing source material for light-hearted teasing and mimicking. On the whole, however, the show’s brand of humour is rather gentle, more collaborative than confrontational, as reflected in the set design which places the teams in stalls at an obtuse angle to (rather than opposing) one another. In the centre, the host, Rob Brydon, is placed at a desk that joins the two stalls, forming a shallow arc. Brydon’s persona anchors the show by complementing without overshadowing either of the two main performers. His dryness of delivery, for instance, strikes an affinity with Mitchell’s sardonic humour, while his warmth and gregariousness chimes with Mack’s natural confidence. The other guests are picked and positioned around this triangle of big personalities.

In the episode I’ve chosen to discuss, there is a definite PAC (Parent–Adult–Child) strategy to team composition. Mack is joined by sitcom star Miranda Hart and TV personality Nick Hewer (then an advisor on *The Apprentice* (BBC, 2005–)); this combination offers an

enjoyable contrast between personae that are respectively vivacious (with a hint of the bubbly schoolgirl) and sober (shades of the stern headmaster). On the other side, Mitchell's team comprises the comic actor Rebecca Front and the comedian Jack Whitehall. Front's dry wit is underused here; for whatever reason, she is granted little screen time in the final edit and her main function seems to be to provide a kind of grounding presence, slightly mumsy against Whitehall's cheeky-boy act. Whitehall, on the other hand, is given quite a lot of screen time, despite being a risky choice for Mitchell's team, since his posh persona threatens to usurp David's usual position as the object of wisecracks aimed at his well-to-do background. (Indeed, at one point Brydon observes that Whitehall is 'making David look positively working-class': 'I barely need to be here this week', Mitchell replies.) As a tactical counter to this potential overlap, Mitchell and Whitehall's performances emphasise differences in age and sexuality, through gestures and attitudes such as Mitchell's crossed-armed sensible questioning as against Whitehall's effusive hand movements and occasionally 'camped-up' poses.

I now move into trying to define some of the characteristic activities that comprise comedic performance in a group context, with reference to the focus episode – although I offer these activities as exemplifications relevant to other episodes, other panel shows, and, beyond that, to countless other modes of comedy and varieties of sociable occasion.

Magnifying

In service of the aforementioned group dynamic, one activity repeatedly undertaken to comedic effect in the episode is to amplify aspects of a persona through speech and gesture. For instance, when Whitehall casually refers to his mum as 'Mother' – an archaic appellation with aristocratic connotations in a contemporary British context – he closes his eyes in embarrassment upon seeing Mack's keen grin: the image is cut back and forth across the eyeline to convey this, and the studio audience greets it with laughter. By way of recovering

from this slip, a mortifying betrayal of excessive poshness – or, more importantly, by way of turning a comic profit from it – Whitehall then plays up both elements, the poshness and the mortification. First he repeats ‘He knew me through Mother!’ in an accentuatedly patrician accent, then he puts his hand over his eyes, demonstratively leaning over and turning away, almost sinking below the level of the desk. This little piece of improvisation works to prolong the humour of the moment by stretching the distance between ‘who he is’ and how he ‘wants’ (or rather, doesn’t want) to appear. It also contributes to the sociability of the occasion by acknowledging the values that prompted the laughter, rather than, for instance, going for a comically hardened defence that admits no shame (e.g. ‘That’s what I call her, OK?’ – which might have worked on a more combative panel show). The business nudges his persona into the more endearing territory of ‘posh-despite-himself’ rather than stubbornly ‘posh and proud’ (or mock proud). The latter might have worked in a different context, but the former is more fitting for a show that is, after all, built around the prospect of the telling giveaway.

In the course of the episode, each performer (with the exception of Rebecca Front) finds the opportunity for self-magnifying a distinguishing trait. For instance, when business advisor Nick Hewer is given the task of persuading the opposing team that he and *Apprentice* boss Alan Sugar ‘wind down’ after filming by playing table tennis on the boardroom table, he uses the occasion to magnify the characteristic scrupulousness of his TV persona by noting, straight-faced, that the boardroom table is, in fact, ‘slightly bigger than regulation size’. Hewer is not principally known as a comedic performer, but his talent for deadpan is apparent in the gesture with which he punctuates the line, a delicate scratch of an eyebrow, using ring finger and little finger to ‘cover the lie’ by suggesting false modesty in the boast. David Mitchell, meanwhile, aware that his persona incorporates the pedantic and may verge on the supercilious, plays an aside when interrogating Hewer about the logistics of the impromptu match. Having observed that ‘you have to back off quite a way when playing table tennis

properly’, he seemingly checks himself mid-gesture and turns to the studio audience to add: ‘... I happen to know’. The aside foregrounds his propensity for smugness by acknowledging self-deprecatingly that he has just claimed common knowledge as specialist knowledge. It also magnifies another element of his persona, that of the unpractical bookworm, by implying that his sporting knowledge begins and ends with ping-pong.

Riffing

No small part of the comedian’s craft in a format such as the panel show is to spot latent comic possibility in passing detail and work with others to help tease it out. Like a jazz group’s extemporisation around a melodic phrase, comedians engage in collaborative ‘riffing’, the development of comic potential through features such as echo, analogy and extension. One such occurrence takes place during the round where Jack Whitehall is defending the unlikely (although, as it turns out, true) claim that he was once commissioned to paint a portrait of Gyles Brandreth’s cat. Miranda Hart senses some potential for anthropomorphic suggestion by asking Whitehall if the cat ‘posed’ for him, to which Whitehall replies that he was required to do live sittings with the cat rather than work from a photograph. This generates some hyperbolic incredulity from Hart as she mocks the idea that a cat would be so compliant as to hold a photogenic pose for three hours, and to illustrate her point she does an impression of a posing cat. Hart renders her life model with front paws tucked under its chin such that it seems like it’s *trying* to look cute – a touch of animal vanity – although in combination with the upright pose and glassy eyes there’s also more than a hint of stuffed meerkat. This frozen quality of her impression prompts an exasperated counterclaim from Mitchell: ‘You can totally do a sitting with a cat, cats are very sedentary!’ he exclaims. ‘They stay in one place all the time! You can’t *command* the cat, but you say, “Oh here’s a good moment, it seems to be...” [trails off] It’s not a *wasp*!’ Mitchell’s objection picks up two threads from Hart, namely mobility and obedience, and tests them for

further comic potential. The humour in the fleeting idea of ‘commanding’ a cat, which Mitchell accompanies with a regally sweeping hand gesture, has something to do with picturing the hubris of a painter trying to boss around his animal subject. Going in another direction, the equally brief juxtaposition of cat and *wasp* is pointillist improv of the first order, capturing not only an extreme of perpetual motion (in contrast to which the notion of a cat being ‘active’ seems absurd) but also pitching a cherished pet against a reviled pest of whom one wouldn’t commission – and couldn’t produce – a portrait.

Jousting

As we see from the above example, the adversarial set-up of the panel show gives the impetus for bouts of comedic mock-jousting: the attempt to outdo, undermine or knock down your opposite number, all in a spirit of festivity and, in a distant echo of the medieval court, with the blessing of the presiding host. One such bout takes place in the ‘This is My ...’ round when Lee Mack is assigned to support the (false) claim that he once cut off the female mystery guest’s ponytail on the school bus, having mistaken her for his friend Paul. Mack gets into trouble by trying to cover for the impression that the guest is considerably younger than he is, with the ‘clarification’ that they were in fact on the way to different schools. In true jousting spirit, Mitchell seizes on this weakness and tries his advantage, asking Mack to clarify that he was therefore on a public bus and had attacked a young girl he didn’t know. Mack picks up on Mitchell’s tone and remarks that it’s starting to sound like a court case, telling him to ‘back off’. Trying another tack, Mitchell picks at Mack’s assertion that he had intended to cut off Paul’s ponytail because he had found it annoying, adopting a highhanded tone to lecture him: ‘it’s up to people how they have their hair; it’s not up to *you*, is it, Lee?’ Mack immediately deflects: ‘Trust me, David, if it was up to me, you wouldn’t be having your hair like that.’ Mitchell pauses a moment with crossed arms and a smile that declares no wound, then unfurls his hand as if returning a tribute: ‘Likewise.’ It may be a cliché and

misstatement to say that comedy is ‘all about timing’, but the timing is essential here, both of Mack’s near-instantaneous bite-back and the steady beat Mitchell takes before neutralising it. The pleasure is not just in quick wits but in a battle of wits, where that battle has an evolving shape governed by comedic intuition (and supported by predictive back-and-forth editing). Mock-prosecution gives way to mock-reprimand before getting mock-personal. Jovial badinage takes the guise of a slanging match, and, in a final twist, an insult takes the guise of a compliment.²

Conjuring

The shifts enacted here are bound up with another important aspect of comedic activity that might be called transformative suggestion. To take an instance from the focus episode, Lee Mack has challenged Jack Whitehall to prove his artistic credentials with pen and paper in support of the cat portrait claim. The disruption of the normal terms of engagement, as Whitehall takes quietly to the drawing task beneath his desk, is marked by a direct-to-camera statement from the show’s host, Rob Brydon: ‘I should at this point, uh, tell viewers at home that, uh, whilst we do like to receive your paintings, we can’t return any of them.’ While a somewhat obscure connection, for viewers of a certain age who grew up watching children’s television in the UK the line will momentarily transport them back to a childhood sense of bafflement at this apparently churlish broadcasters’ rule. As team captain David Mitchell, sitting beside Whitehall, observes his teammate’s progress beneath the desk, Lee Mack pipes up and we cut over to his team for the duration of his remark: ‘People who have just turned over are gonna be thinking “What on earth is David looking at?”’ And indeed, on return to Mitchell’s team we see an image transformed – and Mitchell compliantly plays along, cocking his head and folding his hands, gazing at Whitehall’s lap with an expression that is two-parts innocent to one-part sexually curious. Mack’s interjection conjures a visual gag out of dead air (Figure 8.1).



Figure 8.1 David Mitchell (right) keenly observes whatever it is that Jack Whitehall (left) is doing under the table. *Would I Lie to You?* (BBC, 2007–)

Further instructive instances of transformative suggestion can be found when David Mitchell is charged to defend the (false) claim, ‘I killed a rat with my BAFTA’. (BAFTA = British Academy Film and Television Arts, shorthand for an award bestowed by that organisation, although the phrase ‘plays’ much better using the acronym as shorthand.) Mitchell renders a scenario wherein he spots a rodent loitering by some bin bags and instinctively grabs the coveted statuette from a bookshelf. Mack spies an opening (see Jousting, above) and asks for confirmation, with a wolfish lick of the lips, that Mitchell keeps his BAFTA ‘on display’. Rather than deny the implication of vanity, Mitchell shifts mode to sarcastic amplification (see Magnifying, above): ‘Oh absolutely, it’s got lights round it...’ He trails off but the suggestion is given momentary volume by some impressionistic hand movements that sketch the impressive size of the non-existent display case. While the ostensible target of the joke is Mitchell’s vanity, his comedic intuition knows the humour to

derive from maximising the distance to be traversed by the imagination, from picturing the BAFTA as a lumpen object so unloved that it can serve to kill a rat to picturing it as a cherished artefact and basis of an elaborate shrine. Having made them incompatible – if the BAFTA is in a cabinet in Mitchell’s ‘me-room’, it is hardly ready-to-hand – these notions of the sanctified and the disposable are then incongruously fused together, mere moments later, with another improvised gesture. In a visual demonstration of his eccentric rat-killing technique, Mitchell describes and shows how he held the award at arm’s length, hovering it above the rodent – rather than, say, hurling it. The gag remains fleeting and unembellished, but I gather the logic was, picking up on the idea of it as a holy object, to evoke the notion of the BAFTA as crucifix. The conceptual density of this suggestion, with its melding of the glamorous and the occult, the modern and the medieval, where hunting a rat is akin to dispelling a demon (unseen, unwanted, beastly), together with its sheer impracticality as a method of pest control, gets an appreciative response from Mack. I offer it merely as one element of an overall comic texture where hundreds of ideas and images are conjured, modified, pushed apart and brought together – so densely woven as to go virtually unnoticed.

Playing Up

In a panel show, the conventions of the format provide the basis for extemporisation and repartee, the ground for flights of fancy. For instance, the taken-for-granted structure of having a succession of different rounds (marked by formal introduction and wrap-up via cards and/or teleprompter) is important for giving the show an underlying rhythm and for manufacturing a periodic tone of ‘settling down’. Without the end-of-round prompt and cut-off, escalations of comedic energy could only end with the inherent disappointment of fizzling out. Furthermore, rounds ensure concentration, both in the sense of providing a literal statement on which minds are focused and in the sense that the discussion will end up

distilled as a mere few minutes of screen time, enacting a healthy pressure on contestants to make their ruminations and observations snappy, compression at any rate being generally favourable to humour. Finally, the conventions of the game temporarily suspend and in part supplant ordinary conventions of social nicety, such that contestants are effectively licensed, for instance, to insult and shout at one another. This is important for panel shows not because rudeness with impunity is inherently funny (in a sense it is not rude if it is licensed), but because it fosters a mode of comedic exchange less encumbered by the fear of hurt feelings and the delay of thinking twice.

But there is more still to the panel show's insistence on structure and to its constant reminders of its routine ways of proceeding. The pleasures of screwy digression or madcap fixation on irrelevant detail, for instance, can only emerge against a baseline sense of how things are normally, logically, or most directly done. As a simple example, during the cat-portrait segment in the focus episode, Nick Hewer reports that he happens to know the wife of Gyles Brandreth (the supposed commissioner of the portrait) and asks Jack Whitehall to confirm her name. With a sideways look, Whitehall names her as Michelle, which could either be a factual report, a wild stab in the dark, something that by chance Whitehall happens to know even though the story is false, or (if he were canny and wanted to throw them off the scent) a deliberately incorrect name even though the overall story is true. In response Hewer gives a tight smile and with a dismissive shake of the head turns to his team captain, Lee Mack, who looks back at Hewer in expectation and asks: '*Do* you know Brandreth's wife?' Hewer shakes his head no. The humour in performance comes from the constancy of Hewer's expression, as the gesture of an apparent breakthrough imperceptibly gives way to back-to-square-one resignation with the realisation that there was, as it turned out, no way to verify Whitehall's answer. But there is also a satisfaction in the inventiveness itself, in recognising the initiative to turn the tables on who is expected to bluff, on the game's convention of

earnest enquiry. That the parameters of a game are after all malleable, that there are countless ways of playing it, is one of comedy's perpetual affirmations.

For this reason the 'rules' of a panel show are necessarily baggy, open to question, and much comic mileage can be made from the querying and bending of what can seem quite arbitrary and fluctuating rules.³ Despite this, or alongside it, there is the counter-requirement for there to be some figure of authority or maintenance of order against which contestants have the opportunity to be unruly. This figure typically takes the form of the host (for instance, the schoolmasterish Stephen Fry in the long-running BBC series *QI* (2003–)), but in *Would I Lie to You?*, where the host Rob Brydon is often quite silly and has his own turn at being a claimant, the baton of authority is, as it were, passed around between the various contributors. Part of the task of effective performance on this show is therefore to recognise when it is time to wield the authority stick. David Mitchell, for instance, has a good line in stop-this-madness bluster that places him in turn as a potential comic butt. Despite his trademark cheek, Lee Mack can also be found, on occasion, trying to bring things back on track. In the focus episode, it is very often Nick Hewer who adopts the role of 'the grown-up in the room' – for instance, when being quizzed about the aforementioned table-tennis-in-the-boardroom claim. When Rebecca Front asks Hewer where he and Lord Sugar kept 'the bats', Lee Mack gets in quickly with 'She's left now, hasn't she?', a sly reference to the formidable Margaret Mountford, Hewer's former co-advisor on *The Apprentice*. As the studio audience responds with laughter, Hewer turns to ask him sternly if he is referring to Margaret. (There is some well-judged editing at this moment that presents his face in profile, accentuating the accusing turn.) 'Not Margaret, no no, no no, not her,' Mack replies, disingenuously, shaking his head, as if he's been caught out by a schoolteacher. Then, when Hewer turns back to engage the question, Mack – encouraged by the audience response – shifts immediately to nodding and mouthing to the opposing team something like 'Yes, Margaret, I'm talking about

Margaret ...' It's as if Mack has become a naughty schoolboy once again, and makes us complicit in his mischief (Figure 8.2).



Figure 8.2 Lee Mack's impish grin. *Would I Lie to You?* (BBC, 2007–)

In fact, this little business engages all the modes or aspects of comedic performance I have so far discussed in this chapter. Mack's behaviour here *magnifies* both the impudence of his persona and the sternness of Hewer's. It *riffs* on the audacity of the original interjection by play-acting duplicity and by the gratuitous confirmation of what we well knew to be Mack's intention. It *jousts* with Hewer by undermining his claim to authority, and *conjures* the scenario of a detention schoolroom where a disruptive pupil is mouthing behind the teacher's back. Finally, it *plays up* against the mock-authority of Hewer and gently teases the convention of the game whereby team captains are expected to side with their own side and conspire against the opposition.

The Image of Community

In addition to all of this, Mack's naughty schoolboy turn exemplifies a characteristic movement, in panel show performance, and in ensemble comedy more generally, between what we might call centripetal and centrifugal playing. Any seasoned troupe performer knows that a balance must be struck between 'playing out' (performer to audience) and 'playing in' (performer to performer). There is arguably no pure form of 'playing in', of course, so long as the engagement between performers is staged and offered for the audience's view. However, there is a risk that extended internal playing, especially when it features in-jokes or indulges troupe interests, almost to the exclusion of the audience, can be read as a kind of 'turning away'. Conversely, too much 'playing out', exemplified by direct or near-direct address, can make a panel show seem too much like a series of individual variety 'spots' or miniature stand-up routines. This runs the risk of too heavily reinforcing the distinction between the virtuosic performer and the audience 'out there'. This may be appropriate for some kinds of comedy, but it runs counter to the ethos of this particular variety. It is, for instance, important to the panel show format that its participants are shown to be having fun, becoming a kind of internal audience to whatever is unfolding around them. The proliferation of reaction shots constructed through the editing in *Would I Lie to You?* offers the pleasure of seeing one comedian, momentarily placed as connoisseur, enjoying the work of another contestant as she or he builds on what has come before. The vision of a mutually appreciative community is the format's most direct appeal to utopian feeling (Dyer 1979). This, along with the abundance of teasing and good-spirited fault-picking, projects the image of something like a family. The alternation of 'playing in' and 'playing out' is what issues the invitation for us to join that community, to complete the circle of participants.

The forging of that invitation is exemplified, in the focus episode, by some extended shenanigans featuring an item of oversize clothing. It is typical of the show's egalitarian spirit that its host, Rob Brydon, has a turn at making a truth claim. On this occasion he brandishes a

huge bright orange sweatshirt, claiming (with slightly robotic intonation, as if feigning embarrassment, at any rate offering a tonal counterpoint to the cutesiness of the idea) that he and his wife wear this garment together when ‘cosying up on a chilly evening’. They call it their ‘cuddle jumper’. There is studio laughter here and a cutaway shot to a laughing Jack Whitehall, briefly gazing out in delight and disbelief to the live audience, screen-left, before channelling our attention back to Brydon. This cutaway is a small detail, an intuitive editing selection, but important for the utopian feeling mentioned above. Whitehall here appears to share an exchange with the audience, laughing with them, as one of them, one of us. His out-of-frame exchange invites us, via a kind of double surrogacy (the performer for the studio audience, the studio audience for the television audience), to consider ourselves passive participants in the moment, much as he is, and not as dislocated viewers.

The editing now alternates between reaction shots of all the contestants – leaving no one out, in a gesture of inclusivity – and shots of Brydon as he unfolds the sweatshirt and displays it frontally (for the home audience via the camera, and for the live audience behind the camera, a choice that further unites their perspectives). His unfolding finally reveals that the cuddle jumper has two holes for two heads. Among the various reaction shots that accompanies the ensuing laughter, we might notice Miranda Hart turn instinctively to the audience as she giggles and claps along with them. Lee Mack asks for a demonstration of this artefact, and volunteers his teammate Nick Hewer (who, true to his persona, feigns reticence) to model the jumper with Brydon. The humour in the sight of this pair sporting the bright orange sweatshirt – Hewer perched on Brydon’s lap, as Hart observes, like a ventriloquist’s dummy – largely comes from Hewer’s performance of compromised dignity. But the highlight is the set of reaction shots of David Mitchell, howling with laughter at this spectacle, unable to contain himself. The festive atmosphere is capped when, in a moment of ostensible improvisation, Lee Mack cuddles up to his teammate Miranda Hart inside *her*

sweater and they miraculously start speaking at the same time, like cartoon conjoined twins who complete each other's sentences (Figure 8.3).



Figure 8.3 Rob Brydon (left) plays Tweedledum, Nick Hewer (right) plays Tweedledee.

Would I Lie to You? (BBC, 2007–)

If there is an element of serendipity about this final surprise, the path has been prepared by virtue of many astute choices, from casting, to team distribution, to editing, to the choice of stimulus material for the round. Above all, however, the achievement of the panel show, when it works, comes from the trust placed in its performers, and the way their comic instincts are productively channelled and combined to form the image of a creative, teasing, laughing community. I hope in this chapter to have made a start towards a suitable appreciation of the activities that comprise this craft, which has for so long gone unrecognised: the *construction* of carnival, the art of merrymaking.⁴

Notes

¹ Limiting discussion to a single episode allows my observations to be more readily checkable, restricts cherry-picking, and illustrates the dexterity with which the performers in that episode move between different comedic modes. As at the time of writing the episode is available to view online: www.youtube.com/watch?v=paKvWxTNI_w

² The notion of ‘incongruous intentions’ as a manifestation of the comic may have pertinence here. (See Clayton 2012: 52–54)

³ This is not so evident in *Would I Lie to You?*, perhaps, but one need only think of Radio 4’s *Just a Minute*, and of the weekly rule questioning and discovery of loopholes that has been a constant of the show for more than 50 years.

⁴ I am grateful to the editors of this volume for their attentive comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.