

THE
WRITERS'
BULLETIN

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GREGORY
DID NEXT**

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Pulling Mike Tyson's teeth on a trampoline

by John Fleming

Sit-Down Comedy is published by Ebury Press this month. I compiled it. Pulling Mike Tyson's teeth on a trampoline would have been easier. You know you are in for trouble when a publisher suggests commissioning original writing from 20 stand-up comics. Any genre, any style.

"Oh, they're used to writing," is the unspoken encouragement that hangs in the air.

"Oh f***," was my un-asterisked reaction.

Stand-ups are used to feeling insecure all week then appearing in front of strangers for 45 minutes and performing a routine they often cobbled together a year ago. Writing new material risks personal abuse; not writing new material risks failure. It is not a profession for the insecure; yet most comics are.

I am not un-used to the world of stand-up comedy. I couldn't do it myself to save my life. I have no talent. But I know a man who does – Malcolm Hardee. I wrote his autobiography *I Stole Freddie Mercury's Birthday Cake*. Malcolm can walk 15 yards to buy a packet of condoms in a chemist and en route more bizarre incidents will happen to him than a one-legged transvestite footballer experiences in a lifetime. The man attracts comic incidents like a TV executive attracts sycophants. But he can't even remember the decade when some of them happened.

Almost every brief anecdote in his

autobiography was cobbled together from at least three separate conversations when he would remember different parts of the same incident – all of them barely credible but actually true. He is, in the flesh, a very funny raconteur. Write down exactly what he says, though, and it's an unfunny shambles. Even more than most, his spoken speech patterns diverge from grammatical, logical written sentences. And, like all great comedians, it's all in the timing – something that simply doesn't and can't exist on the printed page. I had to re-shape his spoken word structure so that, on paper, the effect seemed like what it was in reality.

The stand-up comics commissioned to write for *Sit-Down Comedy* – experienced as they were in writing for the spoken word – often had no experience at all of writing for the printed page. How can you put a half-second pause into a paragraph to build up the tension or the punchline?

Some of our contributors were published authors with novels (or, in the case of Arthur Smith, copious newspaper columns) under their belts. They needed little help. But some (not all) of the others needed advice or, at least, someone to bounce ideas off.

If, for me, the piece didn't work in some places I told them so honestly and always tried to give – in detail – exact reasons. I also made specific suggestions on how to correct the problems. The writers then had something concrete to consider. They could reject 80% of what I said; partly agree with 10%;

accept 5%; and maybe the final 5% of my suggestions were rejected as bollocks too – but some passing detail might set them off on a totally different creative tangent that neither they nor I had previously thought about. One entire piece came about because I mentioned, in passing, that I admired Bernard Manning's professionalism.

Some delivered polished versions which needed no changes. With others I discussed the general idea before any writing started. Some went through perhaps five drafts, with me making suggestions at each stage. One delivered a free-form poem of over 5,000 words which both the publisher and I found completely unreadable. The writer happily transformed it into prose and (I have not checked this but I suspect) changed not a single word – he just removed the line-breaks. The result, in my opinion, is an almost jaw-droppingly beautiful piece of writing which, strangely, feels more poetic as prose than it did as a poem.

Malcolm's name opened doors, opened telephone lines (except to some of the newer and more affected Armani-suit wearers) and got people to say Yes. Getting them to stay on the trampoline was my problem.

Some suddenly had genuine projects appear which took up their time; many suddenly realised how difficult writing 3,000 to 5,000 words can be. It's an awkward length. Longer than a newspaper article; longer than a long stand-up joke. It needs structure and more than a single thought dashed

off in a night. At the same time, it is too short to fully develop sub-plots. The structure and the detail has to be tight, linear and immediately compelling.

A new stand-up perhaps has ten one-minute jokes. A more experienced stand-up can make those same ten jokes last 30 minutes. A great stand-up can build the same ten jokes with peaks and troughs and sub-jokes into a single hour-long routine which appears to be a unitary, flowing routine. But even that is no preparation for writing a logical, flowing 5,000 word prose piece with a slow build and a climax.

So people entered and fell out of this project like trouserless vicars opening and closing doors in a Brian Rix farce. We had one 'big name' on board for two days. Another, having said for over a year he would do it, told me two weeks before the final deadline that he couldn't. The replacement – a hot up-and-comer – let us down at two days' notice though I felt that was OK as his deadline was so tight.

Almost every contributor in the final book told me, at one time or another, that they were dropping out. One of the final contributors – who eventually wrote a wonderful piece – told me on five separate occasions that he honestly couldn't see how he could make time to do it. And his excuses (pressure of work) were genuine and understandable. Then, suddenly, his first draft appeared – and he wrote two more versions in quick succession.

My worst problem was balancing the Yeses and Maybes against the number

of contributions budgeted for in the Advance. If I assumed everyone who said Yes would deliver and they didn't, I would have far too few pieces. If I wrongly guessed that certain people saying Yes would not deliver, thus commissioned replacement contributors, then they all delivered, I would have too many contributors and not enough money to pay them.

As it was, we ended with 17 instead of 20 pieces but, as almost all tended towards 5,000 rather than 3,000 words, we were OK on our word tally and the publisher was, indeed, worried we would have too much.

There was also a problem on content. The sine qua non of all contributions was that they had to be, in some way, funny. They didn't have to be comic punchline writing as such, but they had to have some comedic sensibility or elements in them. The pieces delivered pushed this description to its very limit but, early on, the publisher and I agreed that quality over-ruled anything. There is one piece in the book which I don't think is remotely funny in any way (Malcolm and the publisher disagree) but it is undeniably a great piece of writing, so I was always comfortable with including it.

The published Sit-Down Comedy book is not quite the one Malcolm and I expected. But, if you commission people with original minds to write anything they fancy in any style in any genre, you're bound to get something unexpected. What we ended up with was a collection of very well-written tales of beheadings, psychopaths, robbers, tramps, bombs in toilets, some gentle poetic fantasy and one piece that I think even owes a debt to Samuel Beckett. It's not the superficial laugh-a-minute gagathon we originally thought we were going to get. It's better than that.



Sort of edited by

Malcolm Hardee

and **John Fleming**

Fortunately, the publisher liked it too.

"How would you like to do another book for us, John?"

"What is it?" I asked warily in the middle-priced restaurant in Pimlico.

"Taxi Tales," came the reply. "You talk to lots of black-cab drivers and compile the best stories they give you."

"Oh, they're used to telling stories," was the unspoken

encouragement that hung in the air...

"I've got a simpler idea," I suggested. "It involves Mike Tyson, three dentists and a trampoline..."

Sit-Down Comedy is published this month with contributions from Ed Byrne, John Dowie, Jenny Eclair, Stephen Frost, Boothby Graffoe, Ricky Grover, Malcolm Hardee, Hattie

Hayridge, John Hegley, Dominic Holland, Jeff Innocent, Stewart Lee, Simon Munnery, Owen O'Neill, Arthur Smith, Linda Smith, Jim Tavaré, Dave Thompson, Tim Vine.

Taxi Tales is published in February 2005.

- www.thejohnfleming.com
 - www.sitdowncomedy.co.uk
 - www.taxitales.co.uk