

‘Something as ugly as this joke’

Stanton B Garner Jr

More than any other play he has written, *Comedians* has identified Griffiths in the popular, theatrical and academic imagination. From its opening at the Nottingham Playhouse on 20 February 1975 (under the direction of Richard Eyre) to its subsequent opening in London at the Old Vic (24 September) and in the West End (Wyndham’s Theatre, 27 January 1976), *Comedians* was widely acclaimed in the popular press. It soon became the work by which most North Americans were introduced to Griffiths as a writer. A production directed by Mike Nichols opened on Broadway at the Music Box Theater on 28 November 1976, and, although this particular production received mixed reviews, it was widely considered one of the season’s most significant plays. Jonathan Pryce, a previously unknown actor who had originated the role of Gethin Price in Nottingham, earned a Tony Award for his performance, and a film version of the play was briefly considered (Griffiths’s television adaptation of the play was broadcast as part of BBC’s *Play for Today* series on 25 October 1979). The play has been revived a number of times – a highly acclaimed 1993 revival of the play by the West Yorkshire Playhouse moved that summer to the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith – and it has been performed in translation around the world: *L’école des comiques* was performed by Le Théâtre National de Belgique in May 1976, *Komiker* was produced in Hamburg in January 1978, and the play has subsequently been staged as far away as Shanghai. In March 1987 *Comedians* was presented by an all-woman cast at the Everyman Theatre in Liverpool;

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in April 1992 it was performed at the Court Theater in Chicago by an all-black and Hispanic cast in a production directed by Barney Simon of the Johannesburg Market Theatre. Griffiths adapted the play for both productions (Chicago comedian Aaron Freeman helped him with the latter adaptation). The play's influence has extended beyond the theatre: until it was withdrawn in 1993, *Comedians* was on the Associated Examining Board A-level exam list, and Griffiths accepted a dozen or so invitations a year to discuss the play with students and teachers.

It is easy to see why *Comedians* received such widespread popular interest. 'I wanted it to be like some of my television plays,' Griffiths has commented, 'more immediately accessible to people who haven't had a background in revolutionary theory or revolutionary history or whatever'. Shifting terrain from the history of socialist struggle and the Left's internal debates, Griffiths chose a topic more fully grounded in interpersonal interactions and hence (as the play's amenability to cultural translation suggests) more generalisable. At the same time, while *Comedians* may not be 'overtly' marked by revolutionary theory (given the scarcity of socialist writings on the topic of humour, this isn't surprising), its concerns and techniques draw upon the central preoccupations of Griffith's work as a whole. Indeed, part of the play's achievement is its demonstration that comedy and laughter constitute sites of often intricate political and ethical negotiation. Laughter, for Griffiths, is a social act that is caught up in questions of inclusion and exclusion, liberation and entrapment, involvement and distance. Griffiths explores the politics of this ostensibly apolitical field while using the devices of comedic performance to engage his audience with unusual directness. Through a series of reflexive gestures *Comedians* asks us to think about its own dramaturgical foundations, raising questions about performativity (comic and otherwise) while exploring the instabilities and interfaces of realism as a political aesthetic.

The idea for *Comedians* came to Griffiths in a Manchester bar, where he fell into conversation with a couple of stand-up comedians who had been taping sessions for a Granada TV series entitled *The Comedians* (this popular show, which ran between 1971 and 1985, featured stand-up comics delivering jokes from the workingmen's club circuit to a studio audience). These comedians mentioned an older comedian, veteran of the local club circuit, who ran a class for local comics upstairs in a pub. Griffiths, who had been fascinated by stand-up comics since he first encountered them in local halls during the late 1940s and early 1950s, was drawn to this anecdote. In addition to the question of what it took to be a stand-up comic

(and how someone would go about teaching a skill that seems so instinctual), the anecdote underscored a contradiction within the profession as a whole. While the comedians spoke of this teacher as someone whose practice was grounded in principle, their own careers were based on jokes that pandered to the audience's basest prejudices. Griffiths found himself reflecting upon the tradition of stand-up comedy and the contrasts between the antagonistic stance of much contemporary comedy and the tradition's earlier roots in a music-hall, working-class culture, in which comedy (in the hands of comedians like Frank Randle) was used to confront and come to terms with shared concerns. These reflections were also personal, for the issue of comedy foregrounded for Griffiths his own involvement in the contradictions he encountered:

'What none of us really explores inside the liberal cultural tradition is contradiction. And the contradiction that increasingly preoccupied me was: "Why do I laugh until my frame shakes at something as ugly as this joke?"'

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