

## Book review

**Double, O., & Lockyer, S. (eds.) (2022). *Alternative Comedy Now and Then: Critical Perspectives*. Palgrave Macmillan.**

Oliver Double and Sharon Lockyer edit a volume that contributes significantly to an in-depth approach of alternative comedy in Britain, starting from its origins in 1979 and continuing until 2022. The volume's authors dedicate their chapters to multiple aspects of alternative comedy, including venues, performances, reception, and prospects. The volume adopts an interdisciplinary perspective on alternative comedy, approaching the genre through comedy studies, theatrical studies, communication and media studies, political science, anthropology, and sociology. Thus, the volume can be read even by readers unfamiliar with the concept of alternative comedy.

The volume is organised into four parts and consists of twelve chapters. The titles of the parts are clear and concise, except for the fourth part, "Alternative Comedy Today", whose vague title does not immediately offer the readers information about the topics described therein but, along with the other three parts, prompts them to delve deeper into its chapters. The "Notes on Contributors" section at the beginning of the volume assists the readers in understanding the ways the authors have treated the subjects described. Since many of the authors of the volume are comedians, readers can expect a detailed authors' point of view about the topics described, albeit, to a certain extent, a subjective one.

Furthermore, the volume contains a detailed index, with keywords about comedy, in general, and the topics discussed, in particular. It is positive that every author has included notes at the end of each chapter. The notes provide complementary information, contributing to the overall approach taken in the book and helping the readers familiarise themselves with every aspect of alternative comedy described each time.

The volume begins with Chapter 1, "Alternative comedy now and then: Critical perspectives" by Oliver Double and Sharon Lockyer. The chapter presents the origins of alternative comedy, from its birth in 1979, considering the sociopolitical context of that time. The authors examine the phenomenon considering advantages and drawbacks, which helps the readers reach their conclusions about the essence of alternative comedy, differentiating it from the mainstream performance and representation of that time. A brief description of a working men's club, which is a central concept in the chapter but not a universal category, could help readers unfamiliar with British social clubs. The chapter ends with the most crucial part, namely a concise book outline describing each following chapter, thus being a reference point for them. The outline contains the book's purpose, approach, and reasoning. In that way, the readers have already been introduced to the foundations of alternative comedy and have understood what will follow.

Chapter 2, "Alternative comedy timeline", by Oliver Double, presents a ten-page table containing a concise timeline of 57 years, starting with the founding of CAST, one of the biggest influencers of alternative comedy (Alternative Cabaret), and ending with the year 2022, when the current volume is published. The descriptions of the historical context, alternative comedy events, and sociopolitical events of the time help readers examine all of them in combination.

This chapter shows Double's dedication to providing a detailed timeline of the history of alternative comedy.

Part I contains Chapters 3, 4, and 5. Each chapter focuses on one alternative comedy venue in the UK: the Meccano Club, the Tower Arts Centre, and Cabaret A Go Go, respectively. Chapter 3, "The Meccano Club: The business of alternative comedy", by Oliver Double, besides focusing meticulously on how the Meccano club worked, helps readers understand the first steps taken towards creating comedy clubs in general, which promoted the popularity of alternative comedy. Double succeeds in describing how the ideology of alternative comedy got priority over the business-like environment, especially by describing the work of one of the club's owners, Monica Bobinska. That ideology is reflected in the Meccano club's values, such as its reputation amongst performers and critics, its intimacy between the audience and comedian, its audience diversity, and the comedians' progression over time.

Chapter 4, "'A local show for local people': Alternative cabaret at the Tower Arts Centre, Winchester, UK, 1981–1984" by Richard Cuming, highlights the places outside London that were crucial to the development of the alternative comedy scene and focuses on the venues located at the Tower Arts Centre, in Winchester. Cuming employs Foucault's (1967) dipole of utopia-heterotopia to show the intertwining between the multiple venues hosting comedy performances. He also employs the performance archaeology to help the readers immerse themselves in the actual performance described in the chapter via the re-enactment and deconstruction of the two poems in the text. The venues in the Tower Arts Centre share characteristics such as experimentation, and keep their distinct features at the same time. Thus, they contribute to the development of alternative comedy in the history of the genre.

Chapter 5, "The story of Cabaret A Go Go" by Ray Campbell, provides valid and rich information about the development of Cabaret A Go Go. Campbell connects the cabaret's history with the preceding post-punk and alternative cabaret (consequently alternative comedy). The connection with the avant-garde movement of that time helps the readers progressively understand how Cabaret A Go Go was founded. Campbell also analyses the cabaret's poster tradition that further helps the readers understand the way Cabaret A Go Go was working. By employing social theory and the concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), Campbell succeeds in placing Cabaret A Go Go to the flux of alternative comedy's history while highlighting commonalities with other venues like CAST: New Variety. By being one of its founding members, the information Campbell provides helps readers understand the cultural impression the cabaret made at that time.

Part II contains Chapters 6 and 7 and focuses on alternative comedy from the performers' perspectives. Chapter 6, "Trends with benefits" by Brian Mulligan, focuses on the description of the benefit shows which support (financially) greater causes, such as the Miners' Strike in 1984-1985. Being part of the comedic duo "Skint Video", Mulligan successfully describes in detail the origins and purpose of the benefit shows and their contribution to the development of alternative comedy. He highlights what separates the benefit shows (move people to raise money) from pure comedy (make people laugh). Throughout the chapter, the pictures included, the figurative language used, and the playful tone of the title sections make the benefit show description as vivid as possible for the readers.

Chapter 7, "Alternative Cabaret in conversation", is an edited transcript of a conversation between the core members of Alternative Cabaret, Andy de la Tour, Jim Barclay, Pauline Melville, and Tony Allen. Oliver Double moderated the conversation and contextualised it for the current volume. The chapter begins with vital information about the formation of Alternative Cabaret, which helps the readers familiarise themselves with the term and understand the ensuing dialogue. The conversation between the core members, which includes their past experiences, starting with their stand-up comedy participation and ending with the group's

disbandment, is presented in a way that makes the readers feel like a part of the live audience at that time.

Part III contains Chapters 8 and 9 and focuses on the interpretation of alternative comedy from the perspectives of the UK press and various commentators, respectively. Chapter 8, “Pressing for no change? Political correctness, the defence of the ‘mainstream’ and class in the UK newspaper responses to the emergence of ‘Alternative Comedy’” by Neil Washbourne, describes the way the press viewed and presented alternative comedy to the public. The chapter consists of two parts. The first part focuses on a quantitative analysis of the press coverage of alternative comedy. Washbourne divides the data into three categories concerning the meaning of alternative comedy, its funny status, and its connection with political correctness. Through a detailed literature review, methodological descriptions, and newspaper extracts, the readers are presented with a well-rounded approach, albeit with specific gaps, such as the need for the Lexis-Nexis database explanation. The second part focuses on a qualitative analysis of the press coverage of alternative comedy and consists of four categories. The categories include the internal contradictions in political correctness, the post-political alternative comedy, the connection between alternative comedy and the working class, and the Daily Mail’s coverage. Again, the newspaper extracts included as well as the limitations of the coverage help readers understand how the news had presented a different, undervalued image of alternative comedy to the public.

Chapter 9, “The dramatic script of Alternative Comedy” by Jonjo Brady, focuses on the place of alternative comedy in the politics of antagonism, a stance adopted by various commentators, and in the politics of affirmation, as highlighted by the author himself. By analysing Harry Enfield’s Loadsamoney character and based on the resistance-recuperation dipole, Brady describes, at first, how alternative comedy was treated through the politics of antagonism. The neoliberal standards and the connection to political change, through the voice of the Jaded Militants, have rendered alternative comedy capable of highlighting the social illness of contemporary life instead of condemning it. On the other hand, Brady supports the politics of affirmation which focus on alternative comedy’s transformative potential, boosting the genre’s creativity. The concluding section helps readers understand the “dramatic” dimension of the dramatic script by highlighting that the two kinds of politics (antagonism and affirmation) are not separate but represent two ends of the same continuum. These ends are realised together in Loadsamoney’s character and the alternative comedy’s transformative potential.

Part IV includes the remaining three chapters of the current volume (Chapters 10, 11, and 12) and revolves around contemporary realisations of alternative comedy. Chapter 10, “Alternative comedy in Finland: Juhani Nevalainen, musician not comedian” by Marianna Keisalo, focuses on stand-up comedy in Finland. Keisalo’s semiotic anthropological approach, the notions of comedy, metacomedy, and anticomedy, and the bipartite approach of convention (Sconce, 2013) and invention (Keisalo, 2018) meticulously describe the way Juhani Nevalainen breaks the conventions of alternative comedy – associated with stand-up comedy, as Double and Lockyer described at the first chapter of the current volume – by declaring on stage that he is a “musician not comedian”. By additionally analysing the audience reception of that matter, Keisalo presents in detail how Nevalainen was different from the mainstream represented in Finnish stand-up comedy scene and how his audience was perceiving him to be as such.

Chapter 11, “‘Less dick jokes’: Women-only comedy line-ups, audience expectations and negotiating stereotypes” by Ellie Tomsett, returns the readers to the UK and draws their attention to the under-researched topic of women-only comedy. Tomsett follows an interdisciplinary approach when researching three clearly defined research questions: the reasons for women-only events and the reception of women-only events as alternatives by both performers and

audiences alike. This approach, from both audience and performer perspectives, describes women-only comedy's place in a male-dominated industry. Tomsett successfully answers the questions by highlighting the victories and the persisting problems women face in that industry. There is much work to do so that women can eventually acquire the same status as men in the comedy industry.

Chapter 12, the last chapter of the volume, "New alternative comedy: Productive crises c.2005-present" by Sophie Quirk and Ed Wilson, analyses two crises evident in alternative comedy from 2005 until 2022: the crisis of creativity and credibility and the crisis of representation and equitability. Focusing on both the artistic and political aspects –evident in alternative comedy altogether– Quirk and Wilson describe the two crises separately at first and altogether at the end of the chapter. The crisis of creativity is presented as performer-centred because the authors focus on performers' use of metacomedy to reflect on the genre. The same holds for the crisis of representation presented through the actions FOC IT UP comedy club took to reinforce the diversity of both comedians and the audience and restrain marginalisation. The two crises presented together contribute to the authors' examination of alternative comedy's means to survive as the years pass.

In conclusion, Double and Lockyer have edited a volume that can serve as a point of reference for any researcher of alternative comedy. The diversity of the topics described, as well as the well-rounded (performer and audience-based) approach to aspects of alternative comedy in and out of comedy clubs, fill a research gap that had existed on alternative comedy until 2022.

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