

No Laughing Matter?

There are few issues more divisive in the comedy circuit right now than the issue of rape jokes. With such a delicate subject matter it is understandable that passions on both sides run high, but the crux of the matter seems to fall to a simple question: How far is too far? JOSH STEPHENSON reports.

Rape is not funny...are rape jokes? It's a simple question, but one that has caused much debate over the past few years as the growing prominence of rape jokes has started to concern many. The question itself comes from support organisation Stand Up for Women, as they launched a new campaign to coincide with the Fringe Festival to raise awareness for the damage that rape jokes can cause. They have gained the support of other women's support groups and also the backing of some of the country's top comedians: Jenny Eclair, Jack Whitehall, and Josie Long have all put their names to the campaign.

Words by Josh Stephenson. Photo: Robert Bejil



One of those support groups is Zero Tolerance, a Scottish charity whose mission is to prevent violence against women. Liz Ely is the developmental officer at the charity and she sets out the reasons why Zero Tolerance supports the campaign. “We support the petition because we think it’s important to challenge rape jokes in comedy because those kind of jokes support a culture that allows violence against women to continue,” says Liz. The idea of rape culture is one of the major reasons activists are so vocal in their opposition of rape jokes. And Zero Tolerance is no exception. “By coming together in a comedy club and laughing at jokes about rape, not only is that traumatic for women in the audience who will have survived, but it also allows people who are in the audience to accept that it is ok by not challenging violence against women,” explains Liz. “So we see it as part of a wider culture where women are afraid to come forward because they don’t want to challenge those particular kinds of attitudes.”

Certainly the statistics around rape culture are damning. According to the Home Office, 25% of women in the UK have been sexually assaulted and women are worried about rape more than any other crime. More damning still is that a study carried out by Amnesty International found that one third of the public believe that it’s a woman’s own fault she was raped if she was drunk, flirting, or wearing revealing clothes. With so many worrying trends developing in the country, you wonder why a comedian would want to potentially contribute to this culture. “I think people thought that to be edgy you had to shock people as much as possible,” says Liz. “Whereas I would say if you want to be edgy you ought to

be challenging society’s norms rather than upholding them. All rape jokes do is uphold problems that have been in our society for hundreds of years and I don’t see what is edgy about that at all.”

These feelings have led to a backlash against these types of jokes and at the forefront of it is the growth of feminism in modern comedy. This year’s Fringe Festival has seen many female comics put a feminist slant on their work such as Adrienne Truscott’s ‘Asking for It: A One-Lady Rape About Comedy Starring Her Pussy and Little Else!’, Andrew Watts’s ‘Feminism For Chaps’, and last year’s Best Show Winner Bridget Christie returns with ‘An Ungrateful Woman’. Christie, in particular, has had plenty to say on the issue: “I’m not saying you can’t talk about rape, or even include it in a comedy show, because comedy reflects life after all,” says Christie. “Sarah Silverman, for instance,

"It's not edgy and it's not funny."

has a clever routine about rape, but it’s when men do rape gags and that’s the whole point of the joke, it’s just not funny. It’s nasty and threatening, and I think people are beginning to say they don’t want to hear this kind of comedy.”

That is a point that Liz agrees with. She also sees the public hitting back against this sort of humour and that is typified by the campaign. “Over the last few years, more and more people have come out and said that these jokes are a problem. I think they are still too common, but things like Twitter allow people to respond when they see things they don’t like,” says Liz. “So things are improving and people are starting to realise that it’s not edgy and it’s ultimately not funny.”

You don’t need to look too far back to see examples of this backlash. In 2012, an American comic, Daniel Tosh, was

Statistically someone in this audience will have been sexually assaulted



Photos: David Cheskin, Candy Palmater



caught up in a huge storm when he responded to a heckler who disapproved of his material by saying, 'Wouldn't it be funny if that girl got raped by like five guys right now? Like right now? What if a bunch of guys just raped her...?' Needless to say the internet exploded as people criticized and defended Tosh in equal measure over his remark. Lindy West, famed feminist blogger at Jezebel, claimed the problem stems from a lack of self-censorship: "This fetishisation of not censoring yourself, of being an 'equal-opportunity offender,' is bizarre and bad for comedy. When did 'not censoring yourself' become a good thing? We censor ourselves all the time, because we are not entitled, sociopathic fucks." Jim Norton, a US comic, disagreed with that perception believing that an audience needs to be given some credit: "Reasonable people can sense when you're trying to be funny and when you're trying to be angry. So if you're trying to be funny, it's as Matt and Trey said at South Park, 'it's either all ok, or none of it is ok.'"

This is the position taken by digital agency Too Far, who are dedicated to showing the best gritty, in-your-face humour and aren't worried about offending people. Co-founder Ricky Letovsky believes it is not the job of the comedian to worry about offending people in the audience. "I don't think it's the comic's responsibility to get to know each and every member in the audience. Let alone every fucking Twitter user out there," says Ricky. "I think a comic's responsibility should begin and end with them trying to be funny and original." Ricky argues that something this campaign fails to take into account is that certain people do come to stand-up shows looking to be offended. "Stand-up is hot now. If you look around the clubs, you'll likely see a lot of young couples out on dates or groups of guys out for some drinks," explains Ricky. "Some come because they appreciate the art form. Some love to see comics get up on their soapbox and speak the truth. Others just come hoping to be shocked. They come for the same reason they ride the rollercoasters at Disneyland. They come for the thrills."

Too Far believes that offensive stand-up comedy can be more beneficial than harmful to society and it's just another

way of holding people to account. "I think assholes need a good ribbing. Gun advocates, bigots, religious nuts...You've got to be the Dalai Lama not to meet aggression with aggression. So for those peace-loving, liberal hippies, making fun of someone who preaches violence and hatred is all they got," jokes Ricky. As for the notion of whether certain topics should be off-limits to comedians, Ricky is pragmatic. "I don't think anything should be off limits. It's really how you approach the subject. Rape. The Holocaust. The N-word. Anything can be made funny, but I don't think comedians should go around inciting hatred and intolerance," says Ricky. "The audience is not full of dummies. Your tone will tell us if you are a closeted Anti-Semite, Bigot, or Homophobe. Just ask Mel Gibson and Michael Richards." Zero Tolerance however, doesn't believe this to be true and Liz believes that boundaries are an important part of comedy: "Humans at all times put limits on the things that they say and what they do. We don't live in a world where we are free to do or say absolutely anything that we want and I don't understand as a comedian why you would want to put somebody through some unnecessary trauma just to make a joke."

Ultimately, the debate surrounding rape jokes will not be settled simply by signing a petition. It will not be decided by warring comedians as they try to find their own personal level of freedom of expression and how far they are willing to go for a laugh. It will be decided simply by the audience and if they want to hear them anymore. Looking through the comments of people who have signed the petition, there is certainly now a vocal contingent who don't believe these jokes have any place in comedy. There was one comment that stuck out ahead of any of the others though and it came from the comedian Marcus Brigstocke, who perhaps has found the way to balance the debate between self-censorship and expression. He simply said: "Self-censorship is one of the most important aspects of free expression. Take responsibility, get it wrong, learn, and then be willing to change" ■

"A comic's responsibility should begin and end with them being funny."

Stand Up for Women can be found here at their website <http://www.standupforwomen.org.uk/> and you can sign their petition over at <https://www.change.org/>

Too Far is a Canadian digital comedy agency and if you have the stomach for it you can check out their material over at <http://toofar.tv/blog/>