Theories Of Comedy and What Makes Humans Laugh

It is famously known that, when you explain a joke it immediately becomes un-funny, but over the course of human history many philosophers have theorised why we laugh and what makes us find certain things funny and other jokes not so funny. The relief theory has stood out too many people and had become one of the most popular theories in the comedy analytic world. relief theories based itself within the relationships between the audience and the comedian. It’s hard to define what makes humans laugh but relief theory encapsulates a very good point of view which has its benefits and areas of rebuttal.

Laughter is the best medicine is a commonly used phrase that may be true when it comes to relief theory. The premise that which relief theory stands on, is that the only reason we laugh and find humour in things because we reduce stress through doing so. Relief theory lies its basis through we de-stress through laughter, which also can explain nervous laughter in awkward situations. nervous laughter can occur in high tension situations where you can’t help but laugh. This theory is also prevalent when we find something funny, we experience relief when we laugh about it. Experiments have shown that people suffering asthma and airway related illnesses have experienced lessened symptoms when laughing, (Wilkins, 2009) which heightens the relief theory’s standpoint. Relief also comes apparent within the classic joke structure, where the setup of the joke creates tension from the unknown, and the punchline relieves the created tension and thus cause the laughter that we all enjoy.

Stress relief is very prevalent within modern society and can be seen in most comedy products today and great example can be found everywhere. One of the most apparent manipulations of Relief theory can be found within Hannah Gadsby's hour special “Nanette”, where she outlines the theory perfectly. Gadsby describes her role as a comedian by someone who creates tension and relieves it which causes an audience to laugh and with her own words, she’s “pretty bloody good at it”. she delves deeper into her own psyche and relief theory and how it can damage a comedian “I’ve been mastering the art of tension since childhood. I didn’t have to invent the tension. I was the tension. I’m tired of tension. Tension is making me sick.'(Nanette, 2019) These insightful comments Gadsby makes in relief theory hold great truth on mental tolls comedy and tension can have on someone. Relief theory can also relate to video formatted comedy and there is no better example of relief theory on a screen than slapstick. Slapstick produces large amounts of tension specifically the works of icons such as Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, also modern slapstick comedians such as Rowan Atkinson and internet creator Gus Johnson. Slapstick creates stress where it leaves the audience in discontent while the characters are in perilous situations and the humour comes from their ridiculous solutions to life-threatening problems. Gus Johnson’s video “My Pool” highlights the modernist version of a slapstick by portraying a father who can’t swim falling in the pool with all his finances, it’s a very stressful situation in reality but in the skit, he heightens the relaxed nonchalant nature of dads creating the comedy in the reaction of the situation. this is where the humour is found by having the dad relieve the stress by being relaxed in a possible life-threatening situation (My Pool, 2019)

While Relief theory may sound like its infallible there are many areas where it does not hold up. In my personal experience of visiting open mic nights, there are some comedians who tell risky

jokes involving many taboo subjects, while yes this does make the room very tense it does not induce laughter, where relief theory states there should be laughter in order to release the tension. Now this may be due to the comedian’s lack of ability to release said tension but nonetheless the theory fails to hold up here. Another personal anecdote in why this theory is necessarily always prevalent is because when the average audience member is watching a comedy in any form, they don’t usually feel tense or stressed, and not stressed or tense about anything the comedian is saying.

As a stand-up comedian who has written many jokes before I’ve manipulated the Relief theory to my benefit. I specifically did this in a set I wrote that I entitled “Dead Dogs Can Be Funny” which I started by using said phrase at the top of my set clearly setting the tension. by starting with a controversial statement that contradicts the audience's perspective and expectations did create the tense aura, but I relieved the tension by giving an anecdote on my experience of losing my pet and the humour that I found in it. through my personal experience dealing with relief theory, I noticed when I made the controversial statement, I felt the audience wait in bated breath and throughout my story the tension was released and came to an onslaught of laughs.

The world we live in is a tense one full of a lot of many trials and tribulations that make life difficult, but comedy allows us to relieve that stress and we do release it through laughter. Relief theory may not be the all-inclusive reason why we laugh or find things funny, but it allows us to take a step back from some of the less funny things in life and just simply laugh.