

THE FIRST BIT OF STAND UP I EVER SAW

was by Jamie Campbell at the Hay Festival. It blew my tiny child mind! Just standing on stage and talking, and making the whole room laugh. I thought it was amazing. I'd never seen anything like it. That had a huge impact on me. I was probably about 9 or 10. It was always in my head as something really cool to do.'

At the time of our chat, Luke Smith - aka Frank Foucault - is part-way through his 2015 Edinburgh run performing *Chris and Frank's Secret Hour* alongside Chris Chopping. It is incredible that at just 19 years old Luke is able to draw on over five years' experience of performing stand-up, in which he has achieved what most acts can only dream of in their 20s and 30s. With multiple Edinburgh runs under his belt, regular appearances in competition finals, and an invitation from the likes of the Green Man Festival to perform again this year, his achievements are impressive. Quotes that state that *in 10 years time Luke will be the terminator of all comedians* (Cardiff Comedy Festival) can't exactly hurt either!

'I started doing stand-up at age 14. It was at a school talent competition in a really nice auditorium. It went too well! It shouldn't have gone that well. I got the big whoosh of laughter from 200 people. The material was nothing like what I do now. I was into Michael McIntyre and Russell Howard at that time. I was inspired by them but my material wasn't very good.'

'Then I saw a poster for a workshop during the Cardiff Comedy Festival. Scott Fitzgerald and Matt Price ran it, and that was really where it started. That's where I got into the scene as it were. Then myself, Sam Lloyd and James Dunn set up a night in Newport. We were just a group of teenagers but we booked loads of acts from Cardiff, and they would all come down and do it.'

'At 14 I would write everything down longhand. People would see a 14 year-old on stage and they would think I was brave. They would be encouraging and would laugh. But as I grew up and started to look older I'd do the same material and get nothing. I realised I'd have to change things. I went through lots of different phases. I used to wear a poncho! Then I got rid of that and bought a puffer jacket! I had big curly hair. I went quite angry and angsty for a while. I had a good three years where I didn't know what I was doing and I'd have very mediocre gigs. I wasn't really pleased with my act. I changed the writing style from writing everything longhand, to writing a bullet-point a day. That completely changed me. It became really conceptual, like *imagine if I went on stage and did this... rather than what do I want to talk about today?*

Once described by WalesOnline as *inspired lunacy*, Luke's style is visual and intelligent. In fact watching Luke perform is like witnessing some kind of stand-up comedy evolution taking place, and at 19, his could easily be the way forward. How does Luke describe his style and where does that voice come from?

'Silly. That's the best way to describe it. Silly and visual. I don't say anything about anything. I try to keep opinions out of it as much as possible. And I visualise it. I don't really write anything.'

'For ages I was watching (twice BBC New Comedy Award shortlisted) Jordan Brookes and (WUSA Winner, 2015) Charlie Webster, and I thought *that's what I want to do*. I was influenced by Charlie Webster loads. I wrote stuff and would even try to put on his voice when I performed it. I also love Tommy Cooper and Eric Morecambe. They are huge influences. A lot of people look at my act and think I'm weird and new, and that the material is weird, but when you look at it, it is me taking stuff from the likes of Tommy Cooper.' Other honourable mentions include Paul Currie and Hans Teeuwen, both massively acclaimed for stunning their audiences with crafted creative randomness and for their distinctive takes on the absurd.

Personally, I have lost count of the number of times I have gushed at the likes of Luke Smith, Jordan Brookes and Charlie Webster, about how much of an inspiration they are (add the brilliant Dan Mitchell to this list!). If you catch any of these guys during a comedy identity crisis, then you can't help but leave that gig wanting to be in that gang. But the real admiration comes from the fact that those guys see it right the way through to the stage, indeed the circuit. At the very least, you can only admire the brave soul who strides onto the stage, and says nothing for their opening 4-minutes as he tries to coax a snake out of a straw basket with a didgeridoo. In fact, for large parts of Luke's set there is often no voice at all.

'This is the thing. I don't think I've got a voice. For a while I was trying to manufacture and calculate a coherent voice and it just wasn't working. I was asked to do a monologue during one of the Cardiff Comedy Festivals. I did it as Karl Marx but in the style of Groucho Marx. People really loved it. I cut a mediocre 10 minutes into a good 5 and spread the Groucho Marx stuff throughout the set. It got a really good response and that changed everything. I realised I didn't have to talk from just one perspective. That's where I realised I could do anything I wanted.'

The conversation turns to Luke's charge towards the final of this year's Magners New Comedy Act Award which is fast approaching. He sailed through his Bristol heat in July and now requires Twitter votes to make him one of six finalists to battle it out at Greenwich's National Maritime Museum as part of the Magners Greenwich Comedy Festival between 16-20 September.

BEING FRANK

COL HOWARTH INTERVIEWS THE BRILLIANT
LUKE SMITH ABOUT HIS ON-STAGE
ALTER-EGO FRANK FOUCAULT, AND A
STAND-UP CAREER THAT STARTED AT THE
AGE OF JUST 14.

'...the meek and wanting expressions are of a character built from natural dedication and a mind-set that isn't quite sure of everything. Frank will make you laugh or feel like the world is missing something tremendously funny that only he can show you.'

(Welsh Unsigned Stand-Up Awards, 2015)

'In the semi-final I dropped a vase and it smashed everywhere. I picked it up, and I then had to shag the broken shards, but I cut myself and my hand was bleeding. When I was giving out tea-bags, the people at the back thought I was feeding the shards to the audience at the front. It would have looked really bad from the back! At this stage of Luke's set he is actually making a cup of tea, only he is using an audience member's mouth as the cup. Whilst doing this, he is also conducting an audience rendition of Kum Ba Yah.'

Sounds a bit far-fetched? Then you can watch the whole wonderful thing on the *Magners UK* youtube channel. Just google *Magners New Act Luke Smith*!

To get Luke into the final of this year's Magners New Comedy Act Competition at Greenwich's National Maritime Museum in September, tweet #magnersnewact #votelukesmith now! Voting closes at the end of August!

Also check out Frank Foucault on facebook for details of gigs and other stuff.

'When I was looking for a name I wanted something a bit familiar - a bit music hall-esque and vaudeville. I had a long list of philosophers' names. I was very nearly Harry Nietzsche.'

