

# Laughing matters

NICOLA RICHARDS describes Cardiff Central Library's successful first foray into stand up comedy.

Cardiff Central Library was opened by the Manic Street Preachers in 2009. The plaque on the wall quotes a line from their song Design for Life: 'Libraries gave us power'. When we were looking for an event to attract young people into the library we were very conscious that we wanted to do just that – to demonstrate to young people that libraries are a place where you can be empowered, learn new skills, participate and have fun. Cardiff Central's events programme focuses on encouraging people to think about libraries in a new way, so we wanted something different that was also relevant within the city context. We wanted to encourage young people to participate, we wanted the library to be associated with something that would look cool to young people... and it had to have very limited costs (no surprise there).

## Partnership working

Cardiff Comedy Festival was in its second year. The organisers are Scott Fitzgerald, Tom Wakeham, Asa Malmsten and Matt Price, who run a regular stand-up club, Phoenix, in Cardiff. Scott has big ideas for making the Comedy Festival huge and he is supported in this aim by this year's headliner Rhod Gilbert, currently one of the hottest properties in comedy. This definitely looked like something that we wanted to get involved in.

After a little networking we were able to make contact with Scott and after a little brainstorming we realised that although librarians and stand up comics may not seem like natural partners, we had something to offer each other. We had the venue, he had the festival platform and comedy skills, and so an idea was born: a series of comedy workshops for young people aged 15-19 and then a show in the library for young people to perform their first stand up gig. Scott roped in a couple of his stand up colleagues, Matt Price and Johnny Disco. Following several meetings we thrashed out a programme. In terms of promotion for the event we decided to rely heavily on digital media through sites which young people were likely to access i.e. our facebook page, local radio stations, what's on, events, young people's organisations, regional and community websites and forums in the belief that young people were more likely to become aware of the event through the web. We did feel that there was a slight risk as we had consciously not embarked on a full-scale print promotion of the event, instead relying on press releases and the digital promotion. The workshops and



show were also featured in the Comedy Festival programme. Fortunately the workshops received good coverage in the press and young people started to sign up to take part.

## The programme

**Workshops:** The workshops took place over three days and 20 young people took part in total. As part of the workshop the young people were taught storytelling techniques. They were encouraged to tell stories to each other, comedy was deconstructed, different comedic skills looked at, microphone technique was also featured and then the young people were encouraged to try out their material. There were young people who were nervous about standing up in front of the group. Matt, Scott and Johnny encouraged them to talk about what they would have done if they had felt ready for an audience and bolstered the young people with their praise and constructive feedback. One of these young people went on to perform the funniest set of the show, in front of a packed library.

**The show:** Saturday night was show night. We put 30 chairs out and worried about filling them. Slowly young people started to arrive. A trickle became a flood. Staff ran about pulling chairs off the floor, until it became standing room only. Matt acted as compere and made a point of telling the audience that they had wanted to create a safe environment for the young people to perform their first stand up gig. Pubs were not a possibility because of the age of some of the young people and so what better place than a library? He also apologised in advance on behalf of the would-be comics for any swearing that the audience were about to hear IN A LIBRARY!

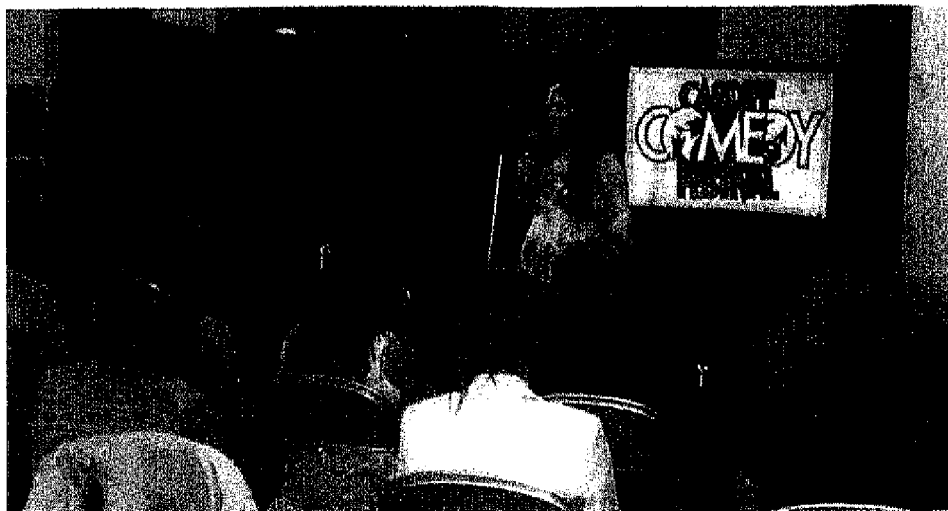
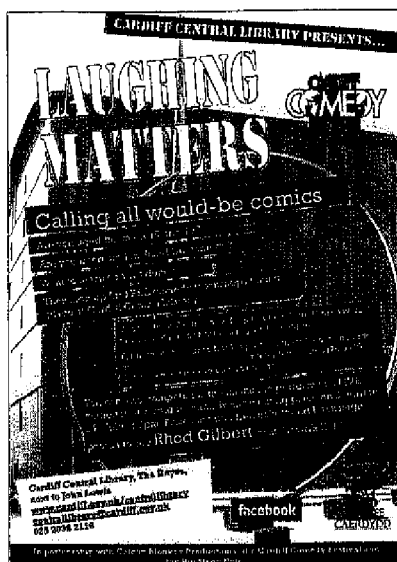
Alec Crane, a 16-year-old boy from Caerphilly, kicked things off and performed a routine based around his ginger hair and, yes, there were a couple of swear words, but he was funny, performing to a packed crowd, surrounded by books (some of which were comedy books by the way) and he was enjoying himself. The spectators, mostly young people, were enjoying themselves too and learning to associate the library with something that they definitely couldn't call stuffy, boring and not for them.

Alec was followed by ten other young people – both boys

### A Partner's Perspective

'I am hugely pleased with the outcomes from our collaboration with the library and am keen for our partnership to continue. Rhod Gilbert is going to try and make it to the library for Laughing Matters – The Return next year. I think that we're all looking forward to it.'

Scott Fitzgerald



**Bethan Pepper performing her first stand up routine (above); 'backstage' before the show (page opposite); event poster (left)** (Pictures: Cardiff Library)

and girls. Not all the young people who participated in the workshops felt able to perform, but some of those who didn't feel ready still came along on the night. There were perfectly understandable nerves for some, but there were some hilarious jokes including one about Amanda Holden and her habit of clapping like a penguin. The library was filled with laughter and applause. The night concluded with a performance by the Plastic Seat company, an act that premiered their debut one-hour show at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2009.

## Feedback

Rhod Gilbert met some of the young people the next day before the finish of the festival – a gala gig at St David's Hall, a Performing Arts and conference venue in the heart of the city centre. He said "Certainly for young kids to get involved, comedy tends to be in pubs, or at least starting off. I think getting kids involved is a great little thing and if nothing else it's great fun." Scott mirrored Rhod's views: "The whole plan was to get a lot of young people who want to be comedians and don't really have a forum to express that. When you go to a careers day, no-one can advise you on stand up comedy. The young people were actually dead set and focused on being stand up comedians. They had stuff planned, they knew what they liked. The

standards were really high. The fact that we could create a safe environment for them to perform in the library was fantastic."

## Project outcomes

Learning outcomes for the young people included:

- Participation; • Presentation skills; • Comedy timing;
- Theatrical skills; • Storytelling skills; • Confidence gains;
- How to make the audience relate to you; • How to tell a joke; • How to find your own style.

In addition no one could argue with the creativity shown by the young people. They had fun, were inspired, were innovative and pushed the boundaries as they experimented.

Benefits for the library and library service were:

- Key marketing messages through the event – Libraries are cool, Libraries are relevant (you can have fun in them)
- Visits to the library by non-members
- Press interest – radio and newspaper
- Successful partnership working
- Advocacy gains in appearing relevant within the context of the city's programme of events

## What would we do differently next time?

We would definitely cater for success and not failure. Running around at the last minute trying to accommodate the spectators is not to be recommended. It would have been a lot less stressful if we had discreetly removed chairs if the event had proved less popular. The event could have been enhanced by providing a milk bar for the young people. It would certainly have added to the sociable atmosphere. We could have stepped up the promotion of the library, possibly having a desk open for potential joiners at the show, and been more proactive with the stock tie-in opportunities.

## Recommendations and conclusions

- **Do your homework:** Research what's going on in your City/Community and look for opportunities within this framework. We looked at up and coming events in the city and looked for possible tie-ins for the library.
  - **Find the right partner:** Be effective in your networking and look for people whose agendas will help you deliver your own (and if they can make you laugh even better!)
  - **Be innovative:** Don't be afraid about trying something new.
- The Comedy workshops and stand up show proved to be a very positive experience for everybody. Stand up comedy is definitely something that worked at Cardiff Central Library and we'd recommend it to anyone!

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## Young People's Feedback

"It was the first time I had ever thought about doing stand up. I went to the library on Saturday and it went really well. I was a little nervous, of course, but when you get up there it becomes really natural."

Sam Patterson, 17

"It was absolutely nerve wracking, but I enjoyed it. I tried to compare it to a skydive – you are kind of nervous but when you do it you get that rush."

Richard Morgan, 19

"It went really well – it was an amazing feeling. I have always thought it possible, but never knew if I was funny enough to do it. It lasted about four minutes, most of it was anecdote based. I was shaking with nerves."

Becky Hill, 16



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