

Have you heard the one about...?

PAUL REDFORD reports from 'Humour, Art and the Brain', a one-day festival held at the Theatre Royal, Winchester.

WHY do we find things funny? What is the psychological basis of humour? Why can't we tickle ourselves? 'Humour, Art and the Brain', the second in a series of Art and Mind events, set out to explore the nature of humour with the aid of psychologists, neuroscientists, sociologists and artists. And the self-proclaimed 'unfunniest person in Winchester' (she faced tough competition) was trained with the help of experts to become funny by the end of the day.

The results of a worldwide study of jokes and laughter were presented by Richard Wiseman (University of Hertfordshire). Drawing from a web-based project and explorations across cultures, Wiseman took us through the findings, including the world's funniest joke (see www.laughlab.co.uk). And evidently, 6.03pm is the time that jokes get the most laughs!

It seems that most laughter occurs not at jokes, but at life. Laughter, according to Harry Witchel (University of Bristol), is primarily to do with incongruity and unpredictability. This is the reason we can't tickle ourselves. When we know what our hands are doing, we know the effect they will have. But why do we laugh? Laughter

is not only a human facet; Witchel argued that laughter is apparent in primates and even rats. Witchel says it is a false-alarm system, a social signal that something that looks painful, aggressive or insulting is not real.

Psychologist and humour consultant Eduardo Jauregui put forward the case for humour as a complement to social embarrassment. He sees humour as an aesthetic emotion (highlighting the art theme of the day). Accidental blunders (mistakes, botched attempts); appearance defects (inelegance, tackiness); accidental invasions (private spaces, private parts), ruining another's performance (practical jokes, satirists); fictional comedy (misunderstandings, idiotic behaviour) are all about unaesthetic behaviour.

Christie Davies (University of Reading) then attempted to deconstruct the nature of ethnic humour. Davies argued that there are universal patterns in ethnic humour in almost all societies. The jokes are universal, but the targets are culturally varied, with the

focus of the jokes always a close neighbour. Davies then moved on to disaster humour, where disasters and accidents (9/11, the space shuttle disaster, Princes Diana's death, etc.) are the focus of jokes. This type of joke did not exist before the 1960s and the emerging universality of television, and this is the key to understanding them, argued Davies. Television tells us what to think and how to feel; humour is the way round this dominant discourse. When presented on television, shocking events are often interspersed with triviality: with adverts, with sport, with sitcoms. This incongruity can find its way into the disaster jokes: according to Davies, they often include reference to brands and corporate images.

In the evening a roundtable session brought back all the presenters and John Lloyd (creator of *Not the Nine O'Clock News*) to discuss the role of satire in sitcom. Then, after a day's training with Richard Wiseman and Mervyn Stutter, the unfunniest person in Winchester returned, having been taught the skills of delivery, presentation, timing and confidence... But it seems there is still a long way to go before we fully understand the complexities of humour.

■ Dr Paul Redford is at University College Winchester.