

A battle of Witze

Miranda Moore *travels to Berlin to find out why the English-language comedy scene there is booming*

In the graffitied basement of a bar in the Kreuzberg area of Berlin, an intimate crowd is slowly settling into an assortment of thread-bare sofas and mix-matched chairs. For the last two years, the 'We are not Gemüsed' open-mic session has been drawing in savvy Berliners and anglophone ex-pats looking for a sophisticated brand of comedy – in English.

In three years, the city's English-language comedy scene has grown from one night a week to seven weekly sessions at various locations across the city. A regular at 'We are not Gemüsed', Stefan Danziger did his first stand-up show in 2011 after a tour group he had been guiding suggested he give it a go. He has since developed his own brand of historical comedy, and has performed internationally in Amsterdam, London, Poland and Edinburgh.

Although he started doing comedy in German, Danziger soon ventured into English to maximise the number of shows he could do. Although high-brow political *Kabarett*, popular entertainment, satire and comedic plays are well established traditions, 'stand-up comedy is very new in Germany,' he says.

Even now, many of the open-mic nights are still essentially variety shows, with comics vying for space alongside musicians, jugglers and magicians, and facing audiences who aren't always familiar with the comic set-up, says German-US comic Vincent Pfäfflin. 'They tend to laugh shortly and then clap. So you have the clap break; it ruins your timing. In English, you add another joke and another joke and they keep rolling, but you can't do that if the audience claps,' he adds. 'English audiences are more schooled in stand-up comedy and have much more knowledge about how it works.'



In January, Pfäfflin won the Comedy Grand Prix, a German-language contest that began in 2011 and now attracts TV audiences of 3.5m. He has found that people's reactions differ depending on the language he is using. One of his jokes is about the porn industry and the set-up gag has him watching pornography as part of a feminist research project. It's a standard joke that enables him to hit the audience off-guard with a final punchline that is highly critical of the porn industry. 'In English, people applaud it with warmth, because it's an ethical joke,' he says. 'In German, people are more taken aback.'

Although things are beginning to change, German audiences are used to particular comedic styles, agrees Georg Krammerer. 'German humour tends to be more top-down' – take Mario Barth, for example, who has a huge following but has also been widely criticised for perpetuating gender stereotypes.

'If the comedian shows vulnerability on stage it makes the cliché German audience uncomfortable. But I'm always looking for the emotional connection, the moment when the comedian shares something about themselves,' says Krammerer, whose

COMIC EXPORTS: *Stefan Danziger on stage (above left); and German comic Henning Wehn (above right), who tried stand-up for the first time after moving to the UK and is now a regular on British TV*

inspiration comes from the US and UK. 'You can make darker jokes in English, because there are still some topics where a German-speaking audience would react, like, "oh my god, that was too much". But in English people just think it's hilarious,' agrees Danziger.

Translating the joke

Danziger's comedy is rooted in historical insights and his own personal view of modern history. He grew up in East Germany and the USSR/Russia, has studied interpreting as well as ancient archaeology, and speaks six languages, including Greek and Swedish. But humour is notoriously difficult to translate, so does he use the same material in both languages? 'It's hard to find a joke that works exactly the same way in both languages, but you can adapt them. 70% of my jokes are in German and English,' he says.

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In one joke, he reimagines James Bond as a German: there would be a lot of paperwork and the films would be short because he would be so efficient. It plays to well-known stereotypes; audiences get it whether he's performing in German or English. Then he considers an East German Bond who doesn't need a licence to kill, just to spy on his neighbour. In German, it gets a big laugh, but the joke falls flat in English. Once you have to explain a joke, it doesn't work.

Danziger also finds it easier to do accents in German, which helps to set the scene for his socio-political material. 'When I do jokes about East Germany in German, I can do the special Saxon accent, which everybody knows, but that would never work in English,' he says.

Is German a funny language?

In 2006, the British comic Stewart Lee wrote an article defending Germans against the prevalent British view that they have no sense of humour. Essentially, he argued that the structure of the language makes humour more difficult. The piece was criticised by academics for its pseudo-linguistic analysis and 'ethnic prejudice', yet the German comics I speak to repeat many of Lee's claims, based on their own experience of doing stand-up in the two languages.

One of the suggestions is that punchlines don't work as well in German because the verb, rather than the object, is at the end of the sentence. 'In English, the last word of the sentence will be the punchline, while in German you will be at the punchline and then have the verb coming after that,' affirms Krammerer. 'The joke still works but it just slightly skews the timing.'

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It is clearly something the comics discuss regularly. Those I speak to believe that English lends itself particularly well to the direct, spoken-word humour of stand-up. 'You need less syllables to say the same thing in English, which is a very basic thing, but the shorter you can make your sentence the better it is, usually, for your timing,' says Krammerer. 'And there are more words in the English language that have a broad range of meaning, which makes it easier to create some ambiguity, and that often helps the joke.'

He believes that English is 'more forgiving for spoken-word comedy', and Danziger agrees: 'In German, you have to set the words in the right position, but no one speaks very proper English. It's a very tolerant language.'

Bilingual punning

With audiences at the city's anglophone comedy nights speaking both languages, a whole new area of bilingual punning opens up. Or so it might seem. But I am informed the clever wordplay of comics Caroline Clifford and Paul Salamone, founders of 'We are not Gemüsed', is a rare success in that area. Other attempts have been dismal failures. When a group of US, UK and

OPEN MIC: Vincent Pfäfflin performs (above left); and Sameheads bar, where 'We are not Gemüsed' is held (above)

German comics brought their show to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2013, they called it 'The Wurst Käse Scenario', punning on the English 'worst case' and German Wurst Käse ('sausage cheese'). No one got it.

'It's important not to do jokes just for the locals if you want to perform internationally,' says Danziger. 'If you want to do this professionally, you want to do it in English,' adds German-Pakistani comic Toby Arsalan, who grew up in South Africa and now lives in Berlin. 'English-speaking comedy is massive.'

Personal choice

Whether you believe that the structure of a language can make it more or less funny, it seems intuitive that culture and comedic traditions do come into play here. Ultimately, however, a stand-up's language of choice will be personal. Arsalan bores himself when he speaks German: 'I'm not as creative, I'm not as funny,' he says. While Pfäfflin's laid-back laconic style is, he says, more suited to English. 'For me, American English is very relaxed and in the back of the throat. I can sing better and use these vowels to express emotion. If I switch to German, it's more consonant based and fast – the sounds form your mouth more tightly.'

Danziger, on the other hand, is more comfortable working in different languages, tweaking his material as appropriate. He is now keen to try stand-up in Swedish because 'there is a good comedy scene in Sweden and in Scandinavia generally'. And perhaps that – rather than any quirks of language – is key.