

Why so Serious?

**Institute of
Art, Design +
Technology
Dún Laoghaire**



WHY SO SERIOUS?

TEACHING COMEDY IN FILM SCHOOLS CONFERENCE

24 – 26 APRIL 2023

FINAL REPORT

Why so Serious? Conference Report

EVENT DETAILS

The 'Why So Serious? Teaching comedy in film schools' conference took place from 24 to 26 April 2023 in the National Film School, Institute of Art, Design and Technology Dun Laoghaire, Dublin, Ireland. It was hosted by IADT and supported by GEECT, CILECT, FilmEU and NAHEMI.

The conference organisers recognised a notable absence of discourse surrounding the teaching of comedy. They believed that convening comedians, writers, researchers, and academics with a keen interest in comedy could offer fresh perspectives on teaching methods and filmmaking within the realm of comedy. The conference featured a diverse range of presentations, case studies, and panel discussions that delved into various aspects, including teaching comedy, creating comedic projects, mentoring students in best practices, and gaining a deeper understanding of writers' rooms. The primary objective of the conference was to redefine the approach to comedy and establish it as a fundamental component of film education.

Organising Committee: Barry Dignam Deirdre O'Toole Jean Rice



PROGRAMME CONTENT

The conference spanned 2.5 days. It was held in Studio 1 at the National Film School within IADT. The conference covered a mix of content from film, television, and animation, making it a well-rounded event.

There was a total of 11 invited speakers, and an additional 4 speakers who submitted their contributions. The keynote address was delivered by Jill Condon, adding a notable highlight to the programme.

Throughout the conference, discussions explored a range of topics related to comedy in these entertainment sectors. It provided a platform for industry experts and academics to share their insights and experiences. The conference featured contributions from these speakers, offering a diverse perspective on the current state of comedy in film, television, and animation.

Overall, this conference played a significant role in promoting dialogue about comedy in the entertainment industry. It facilitated knowledge exchange and set the stage for potential future collaborations in this ever-evolving field.

In addition to the talks and debates, intense workshops were facilitated by speakers. The programme was delivered as follows:

Sunday 23 rd April	Monday 24 th April	Tuesday 25 th April	Wednesday 26 th April
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	09:30 Registration	09:45-10:15 Peter Evers <i>Satire</i>	09:45-10:15 Robert Šveda
	10:00-10:15 Barry Dignam <i>Welcome & Practicalities</i>	10:15-10:45 Rory Connolly <i>Hack your Brain and Become Funnier</i>	10:15-10:45 Suzanne Regan <i>The Whole World is Watching</i>
	10:15-11:15 Keynote Jill Condon <i>From Writers' Room to the Classroom</i>	10:45-11:30 Possidónio Cachapa & Jorge Paixão da Costa <i>The Structure of Comedy</i>	
	11:15-11:45 Break	11:30-12:00 Break	10:45-11:00 Break
	11:45-12:30 Ted Wilkes <i>Funny That – (re)Structuring the Modern Comedy</i>	12:00-13:00 Workshops <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ted Wilkes - <i>(re)Structuring the Modern Comedy</i> Jill Condon – <i>Writers Room</i> 	11:00-12:00 Lena Byrne & Shane Langan (Sow You Entertainment) <i>Animation Roundtable</i>
	12:30-13:15 Fergal Costello <i>Graduate Insight</i>		12:00-13:00 Paddy Breathnach (director) & Emma Norton (producer) <i>Case Study - "The Dry"</i>

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	13:15-14:15 Lunch	13:00-14:00 Lunch	13:00-14:00 Farewells & Lunch
	14:15-15:00 Ben Mallaby <i>Final Take – Improvisation in comedy</i>	14:00-15:00 Workshops <ul style="list-style-type: none">Ben Mallaby - <i>Improvisation</i>Rory Connolly – <i>The Anatomy of a Joke</i>	
	15:00-15:45 Ailish McElmeel (Deadpan Pictures) - <i>Industry Focus</i>		
	15:45-16:00 Break	15:00-15:15 Break	
	16:00-17:00 Sarah Gunn <i>FilmEU Pilot Case Study</i>	15:30-16:30 Workshops <ul style="list-style-type: none">Jill Condon – <i>Writers Room</i>Rory Connolly – <i>The Anatomy of a Joke</i>	
		16:30-17:30 Workshops <ul style="list-style-type: none">Ben Mallaby - <i>Improvisation</i>Ted Wilkes - <i>(re)Structuring the Modern Comedy</i>	
19:00 Welcome Meet- up <i>Walter's, Dun Laoghaire</i>	Free time	20:00 – 22:00 Conference Dinner <i>Oliveto's, Haddington House, Dun Laoghaire</i>	

Contributions

The conference programme featured a blend of invited speakers from both academia and industry, encompassing the fields of film, television, and animation. In addition to these established speakers, there was an open call for contributions that commenced on January 24th, 2023, and concluded on February 14th, 2023. To accommodate potential contributors, a two-week extension was provided, as was initially planned. This extension included a repeated call for submissions, ensuring a broader range of perspectives and participation in the conference.

Contributions were sought on all aspects of teaching comedy. Suggestions for topics was provided in the call and included:

- Teaching comedy
- Case studies of comedy modules
- Writers room in the classroom
- How to structure and film comedy
- Comedy in pre-production, production, and post-production
- Economics of comedy
- Pathways for graduates in the comedy industry
- Writing for television and cinema
- The future of comedy
- Best Practices / Best Kept Secrets

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Submissions were to be 200 words on why their topic would be interesting and inspiring to participants. Submissions were emailed to a dedicated email address whysoserious@iadt.ie.

Workshops

On the latter half of Wednesday, the conference schedule featured a series of four workshops. To cater to the high demand and ensure widespread participation, each of these workshops was conducted twice. This allowed attendees to choose from four available time slots to attend the workshops.

Given the enthusiastic response from delegates, it's important to note that each attendee could engage in a maximum of three out of the four workshops due to scheduling constraints. Fortunately, the feedback received from these workshops was overwhelmingly positive, reflecting their value and effectiveness in enriching the conference experience.

Workshops

- Jill Condon – Writers Room
- Rory Connolly – The Anatomy of a Joke
- Ben Mallaby - Improvisation
- Ted Wilkes - (re)Structuring the Modern Comedy

Contributors

Jill Condon – Keynote Speaker

In her excellent keynote address, Jill Condon shared a remarkable journey that began with her stepping into her first writers' room as a novice scriptwriter and eventually finding herself in the classroom. Through her narrative, she eloquently conveyed the full spectrum of experiences she encountered along the way, from the accolades and fame to the challenges and moments of trepidation, all intertwined with the good times.

Jill's keynote offered a fascinating insight into her successful transformation of the classroom into a professional setting that resonated deeply with her, a Writers' Room. She delved into the pivotal skills she honed during her time in the industry and how these skills seamlessly translated into the teaching environment. Her address provided valuable guidance on motivating and nurturing students, emphasizing the importance of creating cohesive writing teams. Paddy Breathnach and Emma Norton – Case Study of The Dry

"The Dry" served as a compelling case-study in the world of television production. This Irish comedy- drama TV series, directed by Paddy Breathnach and produced by Emma Norton under the banner of Element Pictures, provided an illuminating glimpse into the intricacies of bringing a TV series to life.

This case-study delved into the strategies, negotiations, and creative decision-making that were instrumental in securing these crucial commissions. It shed light on the collaborative efforts, challenges faced, and the creative vision that ultimately brought "The Dry" to television screens, offering valuable insights for educator and filmmakers.

Emma Norton

Ailish McElmeel

One session at the conference, led by Ailish, focused on the art of pitching a new show and the expectations of the comedy writing industry. Ailish shared practical advice on creating effective pitches for new shows, offering insights into the essential elements that catch the eye of industry professionals. During the session, Ailish also discussed the evolving trends and preferences within the comedy writing industry. This information provided attendees with a better understanding of how to align their creative work with industry demands.

Fergal Costello

Fergal Costello, an IADT and National Film School graduate, shared insights into his career path, which included commissions with RTE, the BBC, and various independent production companies. He also proudly mentioned winning a BAFTA for his work in comedy.

Fergal's career journey was a valuable discussion for attendees, offering a glimpse into the ups and downs of working in the comedy industry. His experiences with both public broadcasters and independent companies provided a well-

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rounded perspective of the field. Through Fergal's experiences, attendees gained an appreciation for the challenges and rewards of comedy production, as well as inspiration from his BAFTA win. His story served as a reminder of the potential for success within the comedy world.

Ted Wilkes

In his presentation, Ted Wilkes sought to use the concept of "Character is Structure" to reshape the way writers think about constructing their story, emphasizing the need to consider both character and structure together from the very beginning of the creative process.

Ben Mallaby

During Ben Mallaby's presentation, he shared the following insights:

In the context of comedy production, it was observed that granting actors a final take "for them" had consistently resulted in the emergence of unexpected and comedic moments. This often led to script revisions and an elevated quality of material. Notable examples of this approach can be observed in recent advertising campaigns for the AA and in the short film "Meeting Dad".

Furthermore, the presentation highlighted the significance of improvisation as an effective tool for building confidence and gaining insight into the actors' creative process. It was argued that these improvisation exercises, commonly used in the classroom, can also prove beneficial for students in terms of their writing and direction skills on set. By promoting flexibility and experimentation, they can reduce rigidity in the creative process.

The presentation detailed a method for adapting on-set improvisation techniques to a classroom setting, providing attendees with a valuable framework for integrating these practices into their teaching and creative processes.

Róbert Šveda - To Understand Comedy - Nationality, identity and humour

Róbert is well known for his work in fiction television including the prize-winning crime series "The City of Shadows" – TV Markiza, the drama series, "Convicted", "Dr. Perfect", "Behind a glass", "How I Survived", "Chlap", "Crime Angel", "Specialist" and "Mordparta". Róbert has also worked in the medium of documentary including on the award-winning series "The Greatest Criminal Cases of Slovakia". He has adapted classics from Austen and Rostand for the tv series "Immortal" and directed comedy series such as "Radio fresh", "Sekerovci family", and the new comedy crime series "Ghost". He is teaching at Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava and is a head of department of Film and TV Directing.

Suzanne Regan - 'The Whole World is Watching'

During her presentation, Suzanne explored an intriguing concept that shaped comedic development in 20th-century United States. This concept viewed humour as a reflection of nationally and culturally shared experiences, often leading to comedy rich in stereotypes and cultural misunderstandings.

Suzanne delved into the fascinating history of comedy in the U.S., citing examples that defied conventional wisdom. For instance, despite initial scepticism from U.S. network executives who believed that a comedy starring Cuban Desi Arnaz might not resonate with Mid-Western viewers, "I Love Lucy" became a resounding success both in the United States and internationally through broadcast and syndication.

The presentation also highlighted how prevailing opinions once argued that a comedy featuring an African American family would struggle to find international appeal, a notion that was dispelled by the tremendous success of "The Cosby Show."

Suzanne further challenged the belief that in-depth analysis of international relations was the purview of the evening news, citing the unexpected global popularity of South Korea's "Crash Landing On You." Irish humour, exemplified by "The Banshees of Inisherin," also made its mark, garnering attention even from the prestigious Oscars.

To encapsulate the essence of comedy, Suzanne offered a set of straightforward "rules." These rules emphasized the importance of collaborative creative environments, the universality of human foibles, the joy of shared laughter, the significance of reaching a broad audience, the role of camaraderie and beverages in storytelling, and the ultimate rule of comedy: never follow "the rules." Suzanne's presentation provided a thought-provoking journey through the world of comedy, challenging preconceived notions and celebrating its enduring appeal.

Rory Connolly

Many people say they are not funny, that they could never write comedy. As a comedy writer, Rory is frequently asked about how he comes up with his ideas. He proposes that everybody can write comedy even if they are not a naturally gregarious and sharp-witted person.

Rory explored the idea of training your brain to think comedically. To look at events in your own life or external things you

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have witnessed and turn them from tragic to comedic. To take tools from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and use them to find your inner funny. Then, when one has collected these comedic perspectives, look at how they can use comedy writing structures to turn them into jokes, characters and storylines. The teaching of comedy often works off the academic perspective of exploring the history of comedy or the scripting of comedy, Rory discussed that exploring your own self is a rich way of finding humour and a comedic perspective.

Possidónio Cachapa

Bio: Portuguese writer, screenwriter, and university teacher at Universidade Lusófona de Lisboa. Cachapa has a PhD in Film Adaptation Studies and teaches as an Assistant Professor in master's and undergraduate degrees at the Cinema and Media Arts department of Universidade Lusófona. Cachapa collaborates with CICANT, the research centre connected to Film and Multimedia studies. He has authored several novels, short stories and chronicle books. He has worked extensively as a screenwriter for feature and short films often working as a writer-director. His literary work has been translated and published in several countries, namely Spain, Italy, Bulgaria, Sweden, France. Some of his books have been adapted for cinema and theatre. Working in the education field since 1991, he has also developed other works in the area of teachers' development and training with several schools and universities.

Jorge Paixão da Costa

Bio: Film Director/Professor da Costa was born in Lisbon, 1954. He graduated in Cinematography at the University of Stockholm in 1982 and attended the Masters School of the European Film Academy in Berlin in 1992. With a PhD and Master's Degree in Communication Sciences, from Lusófona University and Nova University, da Costa was the director of four cinematographic works: the feature films Adeus Princesa (1994), O Mistério da Estrada de Sintra (2007), Jacinta (2017) and Soldado Milhões (2018). Between 2008 and 2009, he was director of the film magazine Premiere. He has also directed more than twenty television productions of fiction and documentaries, including television series, films, soap operas, sitcoms, short films and documentaries. He is a Professor at the Lusófona University of Humanities and Technologies since 1997, having lectured at other European universities

.Sarah Gunn

As part of the European University Alliance, FilmEU, students participated in a challenge module that invited them to pitch their creative concept ideas. Sarah, an experienced industry expert, played a crucial role as a mentor throughout this process. During her presentation, Sarah highlighted a compelling Pilot Case Study that showcased the journey of these students. Her mentorship was instrumental in helping these young talents transform their raw ideas into polished pitches, instilling in them not just technical skills but also confidence and resilience.

Peter Evers – Satire Needed

Peter Evers emphasized the significance of satire in both the realms of art and politics. His engaging discussion catered to the audience's need for:

- Laughter
- Shared joy
- Relief
- The ability to see the ridiculous ridiculed
- Disruption of presumptions
- Accessibility to challenging subjects

Evers also delved into the concept of "Advanced Stupidology," an elective offered by the Graphic Design programme at IADT. This elective employs a unique research methodology that combines Slow (Critical, Deep, Fact-Checked) and Fast (Playful, Quantity over Quality, Pattern Making, Cliché) approaches. To illustrate his points, he drew examples from Irish satirical online publication, Waterford Whisper News, and the popular show, Last Week Tonight with John Oliver. Evers also explored the intriguing question, "What is Ridiculous?" in the context of satire.

Lena Byrne and Shane Langan

During a lively and engaging discussion, two distinguished speakers, Lena and Shane, delved into the fascinating realm of comedy within the context of animation, with a specific focus on its application in children's television shows.

In this insightful dialogue, Lena and Shane shared their expertise and experiences, shedding light on the unique and captivating world where humour and animation converge to entertain and educate young audiences. They explored the intricacies of crafting humour that resonates with children, discussing the art of weaving laughter and entertainment into narratives that not only amuse but also convey valuable lessons and messages.

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The discussion provided a deep dive into the creative processes and challenges associated with producing animated comedies tailored for young viewers. Lena and Shane offered practical insights into the nuances of character development, storytelling, and visual humour that are essential for capturing the hearts and imaginations of children.

Throughout the discussions, attendees gained a richer understanding of the vital role that comedy plays in shaping children's television and how it can leave a lasting impact on young minds. Lena and Shane's perspectives and anecdotes provided a compelling exploration of the dynamic intersection between animation and humour, highlighting the magic that happens when creativity meets laughter in the world of children's entertainment.

DELEGATE PROFILE

There were altogether 71 participants from 14 countries, including 23 students, 6 students joined from a DOCTUS programme on Day 1 and the remaining students were from the MA Screenwriting and Kinoyes courses

MARKETING & PROMOTION

The website was registered as <https://www.whysoseriousconference.com>. Content on the website included a registration information page with a link to a survey monkey where delegates could register.

Promotion

- The National Film School Facebook (2.3K followers)
- The National Film School Instagram (32.2K followers)
- The National Film School Twitter (N/A) pages
- IADT website, Social Media, etc.
- Internal IADT mailing list of personal contacts from organising committee
- CILECT email database (central and via regional chapters)
- GEECT website <https://geect.wordpress.com/2023/03/29/iadt-conference-why-so-serious/>
- NAHEM Website and mailout.

DELEGATE & SPEAKER FEEDBACK

"What a brilliant week. Loved meeting you and connecting with all these great academics."

"I had a brilliant time, and I am really looking forward to running into everyone again in the future!"

"The Conference was fabulous! I learned so much from extraordinarily accomplished people gathered - both formally and informally! And I so appreciate the extraordinary amount of work done to bring us together! - a stellar group from all over Europe and the US. But most important it was the warm welcome and continuous support received from our colleagues at IADT that made me feel truly at home. Presentations and workshops at the Conference have positively impacted my teaching."

"Very grateful to you and the rest of the team for giving me a platform to speak."

ACCOMMODATION & SOCIAL EVENTS

Accommodation

The conference hotel was the Royal Marine Hotel in downtown Dun Laoghaire, a 4-star luxury historic hotel which was first built in 1863. Dating back to 1828 however, a hotel known as Hayes Hotel stood on this magnificent site overlooking Dublin Bay.

Social Events

The conference held a welcome reception for delegates, where 30 people joined. Delegates enjoyed refreshments and finger food and traditional Irish music. The conference dinner was held in a local high-quality restaurant for 45 delegates and speakers. Dinner included sharing starters which served as a wonderful icebreaker, a main and dessert and wine and soft drinks.

FINANCES

Registration fees included 3 nights' accommodation (single occupancy) with breakfast, welcome event, conference dinner and lunches. See Cost Report