Frankie Howerd

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Published by Perennial

Harper Perennial
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road
Hammersmith
London
W6 8JB

www.harperperennial.co.uk

This edition published by Harper Perennial 2005
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First published by Fourth Estate 2004

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 1 84115 311 7

Typeset in Monotype Bembo by Rowland Phototypesetting Ltd,
Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Now, er, Ladies and Gentle-men. Harken. Now, ah, no: harken. Listen, now. Harr-ken. Harr-ever-so-ken![1]

It was not so much the look of someone who did not belong. It was more the look of someone who did not belong up there.

He looked as if he belonged in the audience. He looked as if he had strayed on to the stage by mistake. He fiddled with the fraying fringe of his chestnut-brown hairpiece, fidgeted with the folds of his chocolate-brown suit ('Make meself comfy . . .'), and then he started: 'I just met this woman – no, oh no, don't, please, don't laugh. No. *Liss-en!*' He did not sound as if he was performing under a proscenium arch. He sounded as if he was gossiping over a garden wall.

That was Frankie Howerd. He did not seem like the other stand-up comedians. He seemed more like one of us.

The other stand-up comics of his and previous eras came across as either super-bright or super-dim.[2] Most of them, like Max Miller, were peacocks: slick and smart and salesman-sharp, they were happy to appear far more experienced, more assured and more articulate than any of those who were seated down in the stalls. The odd one or two, such as Tom Foy, were strange little sparrows: slow, fey and almost painfully gauche, they were the kind of grotesque, cartoon-like fools to whom even fools could feel superior.

No stand-up, until Howerd, came over as recognisably *real*: neither too arch a 'character' nor too obvious a 'turn', but almost as believably unrehearsed, untailored, unshowy, unsure and undeniably imperfect as the rest of us. Frankie Howerd, when he arrived, was genuinely different. He was the first British stand-up to resemble a real person, rather than just a performer.

He became, as a result, the most subversive clown in the country. What made him so subversive was not the fact that he dared to make a mockery of himself – any old clown can do that – but rather the fact that he dared to make a mockery of his own profession. He was the clown who made a joke out of the job of clowning.

Everything about the vocation, he suggested, was onerous, absurd, unrewarding and unbearably demeaning. He bemoaned, for example, the routine maltreatment meted out by the management: 'I've had a shocking week. Shocking. What's today? Tuesday. It was last Monday then. The phone rang, and it was, er, y'know, um, the bloke who runs the BBC. Whatsisname? You know: ''Thing''. Yeah. Anyway, he was on the phone, you see. So I accepted the charge . . .'

He also complained about his ill-fitting stage clothes: 'Ooh, my trousers are sticking to me tonight! Are yours, madam? Then wriggle. There's nothing worse than sitting in agony.' Similarly, he never hesitated to express the full extent of his resentment at being saddled with such an ancient and incompetent accompanist: 'No, don't laugh. Poor soul. No, don't – it might be one of your own. [*To accompanist*] It *is* chilly! *Yehss, 'tis!* [*To audience*] Chilly? I'm sweating like a pig!' He also always made a point of acknowledging the poverty of his material: 'What do you expect at this time of night? Wit?'

He never, in short, left his audience in the slightest doubt that he would have much preferred to have been doing something – anything – else. 'Oh,' he would cry, 'I wish I could win the pools!'

He did not even bother to turn up with, in any conventional sense of the term, an act. His act was all about his lack of an act, his artlessness the slyest sign of his art:

> Now, Ladies and Gentle-*men* – no, look, don't mess about, I don't feel in the mood. No. I want to tell you – I've had a terrible time of it this week, and, er, I haven't been able to get much for you – so don't expect too much, will you? No, but I always try to do my best, as you know, but, oh, this week – it's been too much. Still, I've managed to knock up something – I'll do my best, I know you want to laugh – but, *oh*, the time I've had this week! Still, I won't bother you with it – I know you've got your own troubles and – mind you, it was my own fault . . .

These rambling perambulations revolutionised the medium of the stand-up comedian. They turned it into something much more intimate, intriguing and naturalistic, having less to do with the telling of gags and more to do with the sharing of stories.

So great has been his influence that nowadays, more than a decade after his death, the approach seems more like the norm than the exception. We have come to warm most readily to those who convey the core of their humour through character and context, while we have cooled on those who continue to rely on the creaky old conveyor belt of patently contrived one-liners.

Howerd, however, was the one who set the fresh trend. His decision to adopt such an extraordinarily 'ordinary' pose and persona back in the considerably less flexible show-business world of the mid-twentieth-century took real wit, imagination and guts. While his contemporaries remained content to step back and soak up the applause, he chose to step forward and make a connection.

That was his real achievement, his *great* achievement. Frankie Howerd really did make a difference. He was so much more than the casually patronised 'cult' figure, 'camp' icon and *Carry On* fellow-traveller who, according to far too many of the predictably trivial posthumous tributes and all of the tiresome tabloid nudges and winks, bequeathed us little more than a handful of over-familiar sketch shows and sitcoms, a few quaintly hoary catchphrases (all of which, thanks to their increasingly robotic repetition, have long since calcified into mirthless cliché) and a dubious fund of dusty double entendres.[3]

Frankie Howerd – the real Frankie Howerd – was truly special. A brilliantly original, highly skilful and wonderfully funny stand-up comedian – whose talent and impact were as prodigious and profound, in their own way, as those of Bob Hope, Jack Benny or any of the other internationally recognised greats – he deserves to be remembered, respected and celebrated as such.

Consider the extraordinary career: stretching all the way from the late 1940s to the early 1990s, and encompassing everything from the demise of music-hall and the rise of radio to the supremacy of television and the emergence of home video. Howerd stamped his signature upon each one of the media he mastered.

Consider, too, the incredible comebacks: written off by the producers, the press and more than a few of his fellow-performers on not one, not

two, but on three profoundly harrowing and humiliating occasions, he returned each time not only to recover all of his old fame, fans and professional pride, but also to find himself a fresh generation of followers. Seldom has there been such a frail yet faithful fighter.

Consider, most of all, the exceptional craft. One critic called the on-stage Howerd 'a very clever man pretending not to be', and few descriptions could have been more apt. His comedy turned the traditional tapestry upside down: we were shown only the messiness – merely the 'ums' and the 'ers' and the 'ahs' – while the elaborate pattern – what Howerd liked (in private) to call 'a beauty of delivery, a beauty of rhythm and timing – like a piece of music'[4] – was kept well-hidden.

He acted more or less how most of us felt (and feared) that *we* would act, should we ever find ourselves forced into the spotlight up there instead of staying hidden in the dark down here. All of the key ingredients of Britain's peculiar post-colonial character – the defiant amateurism, the nagging self-doubt, the public primness and the private sauce – were caught squirming in the spotlight, stuffed inside a badly-fitting brown suit topped off by an exhausted-looking toupee.

The implicit admission was unmistakeable: 'I'm afraid I'm just not up to this job!' The phases of failure were similarly familiar: the nerve would falter, the words would fail and the half-hearted gags would invariably fall horribly, hopelessly flat. No one born British was ever moved to wonder why there was so much 'Oh *no*!' in the show, and so little 'Oh *yes*!' That was life. That was our life.

Most, if not all, of the humour sprang from this world-weary acceptance of our own insurmountable imperfection. Whereas 'proper' performers would always insist on being allowed to entertain you, Frankie Howerd was prepared to advise you to please yourselves.

The net effect was the creation of one of the most openly, endearingly, reassuringly *human* performances that modern comedy has ever produced. Every grumble, every groan, every grimace and every sudden solemn squeak of admonition would coax from us one more furtive snigger of recognition. We knew what he knew, and what he knew was us.

Howerd knew our sort all right. It is time now for us to get to know him.