



MAKE 'EM LAUGH



What are the challenges and rewards of introducing humour to dance? **Marianka Swain** explores the funny business



London Burlesque
Week 2011

! : How many dancers does it take to change a light bulb? A: Five! Six! Seven! Eight!

"I love shows that give me a good belly laugh," says Kate Prince, artistic director of ZooNation Dance Company. "Hip hop is traditionally about posturing and power moves, but you can only sustain that for a short time. I started in musical theatre, so I'm always looking for ways to combine storytelling with movement and engage an audience over a two-hour performance. Comedy is a crucial part of that."

"At first, humour and dance might seem contradictory, but when you consider that great dancers find creative ways of expressing the human experience, it makes total sense," states choreographer Debbie Raisler. "Yes, lots of dance forms are courtship-based, but you can make a connection with someone through laughter as well as seduction or romance. The challenge is to balance humour with artistry; you don't want one to detract from the other."

Kate's biggest inspiration is *Singin' in the Rain*: "We have so much to learn from the dancers of that era – they were perfectionists, but wonderfully entertaining as well. You have

farce, slapstick, satire and character gags alongside extraordinary, seemingly effortless dancing. If you took away the comedic elements, the movement would still be



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CHOREOGRAPHER DEBBIE RAISLER

compelling, and vice versa." "It takes enormous skill to achieve that," notes Debbie. "Comedy is a craft as much as

dramatic acting or dancing, and you need impeccable timing, ability to structure a gag and find the perfect pay-off, and self-awareness to understand your comic strengths." Rather than triple threats, Gene Kelly and Donald O'Connor were quadruple threats.

However, not everyone has that skill level; you only have to look at *Strictly* to see performers who can sell a gag but lose the steps in the process, or, worse, those whose dancing is unintentionally funny.

"You do have to maintain ownership of the joke," cautions burlesque performer Betty D'Light. "Burlesque is empowering, because you have control over everything – your look, your character, your routine – but it's also a high-wire act. If you're unsure about what you're doing, people sense it and they go from laughing with you to laughing at you."

"I love it because you don't have to be the media image of a 'perfect woman' – skinny, spray-tanned, meek. As long as you're confident in your body and who you are, the audience responds to that. Adding sassiness and wit definitely helps, because it shows you're relaxed and happy, and the tongue-in-cheek vibe demonstrates that it's not going

to be an intimidating experience." Burlesque promoter Chaz Royal thinks a combination of self-deprecation and assurance is key: "If performers can make fun of themselves, they form a bond with the audience, but we also want to feel they're in control – that they can set us off with a simple facial expression or the smallest movement, and that there's thought and skill behind the humour."

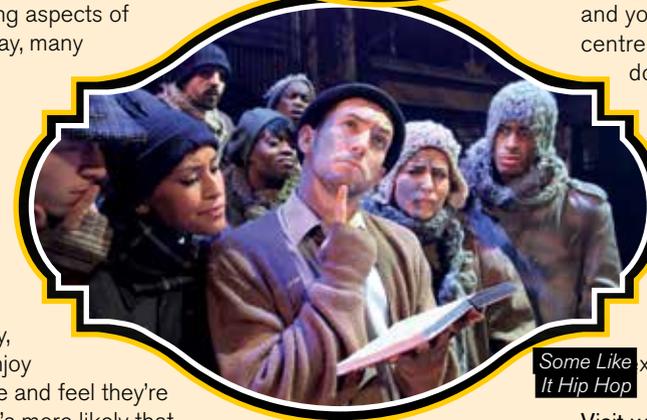
"The comedic variety aspect definitely helped bring burlesque into the mainstream. Despite what many people think, the sexy striptease is probably only 50 per cent! Humour was always an intrinsic part of burlesque's popularity – in the 19th century, the most risqué element was the satirical number criticising aspects of society, and today, many performers do parodic songs and dances or stand-up segments. You ideally want to get your message across in an entertaining way, and if people enjoy the performance and feel they're in on the joke, it's more likely that message will resonate with them."

"I do think dance can make important points, but I wouldn't want my agenda to overtake a show," says Kate. "*Some Like It Hip Hop* challenges gender

assumptions and *Groove On Down The Road* gave kids a really great opportunity to express themselves, but, above all, both shows are entertaining. That's my personality – even if I'm



ZooNation in *Some Like It Hip Hop*



Some Like It Hip Hop

through dance but also capture the fun vibe of our workshops." "Hooks like humour can be incredibly beneficial to dance, both in the performance itself and in terms of wider appeal," observes Debbie. "Look at Diversity on *Britain's Got Talent* using pop-culture references – you don't have to know anything about the technical side of dancing to enjoy that." Kate agrees: "It's a great way to engage young people and attract new audiences. I tell dancers to bring something of themselves to the characters and the movement, and a lot of them use comedy as a way in. "Dancers have had a fantastic evolution from background performers to artists, and you need charisma to hold centre stage and sell what you're doing. At its best, dance is an ever-developing form of expression that has something to say about the world we live in, and humour is a fantastic link between the escapism of amazing movement and our everyday experience of real life." ●

Visit www.zoonation.co.uk to find out more about ZooNation shows. The World Burlesque Games take place in London on November 20–24. Visit www.worldburlesquegames.com for more details.