

## VI: Festival Set, May 2007

*Here is the set I actually performed at Festival, not the insect observational comedy one I put into the show 41st Best Stand-Up Ever.*

Hello. I am Stewart Lee. I've been asked to come here and do stand-up tonight. And I was reluctant because, as you can imagine, it's difficult to know how to pitch it. It's difficult to know how many of you are here because you are fans of insects, and how many of you are here because you are Resonance FM listeners, and thus fans of improvised and experimental music, and whether there is any crossover between them.

So what I decided to do was to come out dressed as an insect and do about half an hour of stand-up from the point of view of an insect. So I investigated how much it would cost to have an insect costume made, and it was about four to five hundred pounds for quite a good insect costume, and I thought, 'There's no way I can justify that for this because it will make a huge loss.'

But I was supposed to be doing a pilot for the BBC of a stand-up show, so to try and offset the cost, at the last minute I put in that I wanted them to film me doing standup as an insect, and then they withdrew the offer of the programme. So thanks. Thanks for having me here. My TV series has been cancelled. Because of you. I hadn't set up any other work. I thought I was filming a TV series. This is all I have in my diary. Festival.

Now, it is nice to be at this insect-themed event, but usually I start my act like this: 'Hello. I'm Stewart Lee. Later on I'll be talking to you about how my tragic and ultimately fatal addiction to various forms of hard drugs has helped me to overcome my previous dependence on Christianity,' and then I talk about religion, politics and despair. But I can't do that tonight . . .

So I am going to read you the letter I got through after I accepted the booking. This is dated 20th September last year and it's from Miss B. Nicholls.

Dear Mr Lee

I am delighted you have accepted our offer to perform a short stand-up comedy set at our Festival event. Now the contracts are exchanged I was just checking that you appreciated that we require your humorous material on the night to deal exclusively with insects, and insects only. Straying into any other areas of subject material will be considered a breach of contract, and if such a breach of contract occurs, we intend to prosecute you with the full force of the law. I only mention this because at a recent entomological event in Beijing I am informed the comedian told an inappropriate joke about spiders which went thus:

*Why do black widow spiders kill their males after mating?  
To stop their snoring before it starts.*

The joke is inappropriate for two reasons:

- (1) it is crude, and there may be children present;
- (2) the black widow spider (*Latrodectus mactans*) is not strictly an insect, an insect being defined as a creature with a body segmented into three parts, with three pairs of legs.

We would be grateful if you did not step outside your insect remit. If you are stuck, here are four insect jokes you might like to tell. One is about a wasp, two are about bees, and the other is about insects generally. Perhaps begin with the general insect joke, and then move on to the other three specific gags.

*What car does an insect drive?  
A Volkswagen Beetle.*

*Why do bees hum?  
Because they've forgotten the words.*

*Why do bees have sticky hair?  
Because of the honey combs.*

*Where do you take a sick wasp?  
To waspital.*

I hope you find these helpful.

Yours truly,  
B. Nicholls, Festival.

Now, I'm known as a maverick within the world of comedy, I play by my own rules, not the rules of entomologists. If I want to do a joke about a spider, no amount of entomologists are going to stop me. You can threaten me with court and I'm still not scared . . . except with that TV thing cancelled I need this to work out, I need this. I need this. I need Festival.

So I wrote back to Miss Nicholls in a slightly facetious manner, and asked her if there were any particular insects which she thought I should write a joke about.

And she replied:

Dear Mr Lee

For me the most suitable insect for your comedy would be the aphid. The aphid reproduces parthenogenetically, that is to say without mating, so you should at least be able to work clean. I think we at Festival would be happy with a fifteen-minute routine about aphids, perhaps something about the initially mystifying discovery of Russian spruce aphids in Switzerland in 1947, which was ultimately explained as being the result of involuntary migration by wind. I am sure you could think of something amusing about that incident! Perhaps you might like to mention how some ants farm aphids for their juices, but you must be careful that this observation does not

(a) imply any sexual undercurrent;

(b) suggest that the aphid is harmed in any way, as an insect-friendly audience will not like to hear about injury to any insect.

Also, if you do go with my aphid suggestion, please do not draw attention to the potato peach aphid, which carries fifty different kinds of virus, as there may be people at the event who are unconvinced about insects, just casual attendees, and who are not great lovers of insects, and they are sure to take against the potato peach aphid, and by association all aphids, if you describe it in these terms. At Festival this year we are hoping to brush the potato peach aphid under the carpet, metaphorically speaking. These restrictions apart, feel free to say pretty much anything you like about aphids. We in the entomological community pride ourselves on having a sense of humour. In fact, only the other day someone told me this joke:

*What do you call a top pop group made up of insects  
which infest the hair of children?  
You call them The Lice Girls.*

Yours truly,  
Miss B. Nicholls, Festival

P.S. You can use the Lice Girls joke if you like, although it doesn't really make sense. It would be difficult to be sure that the group of singing lice were really The Lice Girls as the gender of the head louse (*Pediculus humanus capitis*) is only discernible in the later stages of its life.

So . . . a number of difficult restrictions placed on me. It was last week, while I was trying to write a funny story about aphids that I began to hate all insects. Try as I might, I couldn't see the humour in insects. And so I come here tonight, not to praise insects, but

to bury them. Except for the ones that like living underground. Burying is too good for them. They will be dug up and exposed to the light.

Of all the creatures in the animal kingdom, insects are the most numerous. Likewise, of all the people in the world, the Chinese are the most numerous. Unlike insects, the Chinese have at least given us fi reworks, fried rice and the bamboo flute. Insects live in swamps, jungles and deserts; they live in temperate zones and in severe mountain climates. Doubtless the insect fans here tonight choose to view this as evidence of their adaptability. I view it as evidence of the fact that insects are lazy and indiscriminate. Don't give them the oxygen of publicity.

So as you can see, I was sitting there, struggling to write jokes about insects, and I was just about to give up. And then I remembered the story of Robert the Bruce. I don't know if you remember the story of Robert the Bruce. Robert the Bruce was fighting a battle against the English, and he wasn't getting on so well, so he ran away and he hid in a cave. And while he was there his eye fell on a little spider, which was trying to swing from one high rock ledge to another. And Robert the Bruce watched the spider once and it didn't quite make it and it fell down. And then Robert the Bruce watched the spider again and it didn't quite make it and it fell down again. And then Robert the Bruce watched the spider a third time, and the third time the spider attempted the swing, it made it from one ledge to the other. And Robert the Bruce thought about what he had seen, and he went back to the battle against the English, and remembering the example of the spider, he spun a huge web out of his own bodily fluids, in which the English soldiers became trapped, allowing Robert the Bruce to crawl stealthily from one soldier to the next, crushing them to death in his enormous mandibles. And so he won the battle and became the king of Scotland.

And that story of Robert the Bruce and the spider always reminds me of the story of Robert the Bruce and the head louse, I don't know if you know it. Robert the Bruce was fighting a battle against the English, and he wasn't getting on so well, so he ran away and he hid in a cave. And while he was there his eye fell on a little head louse, which was trying to jump from one Scottish soldier's head to another. And Robert the Bruce watched the head louse jump once and it didn't quite make it and it fell down. And then Robert the Bruce watched the head louse jump a second time and it didn't quite make it and it fell down again. And then Robert the Bruce watched the head louse a third time, and the third time the head louse attempted the jump, it made it from one Scottish soldier's head to the other. And Robert the Bruce thought about what he had seen, and he went back to the battle against the English, and remembering the example of the head louse (*Pediculus humanus capitis*), and when he got there he was able to infest the heads of the English soldiers, causing itching, leading to secondary infections and thus greatly demoralising the army of Edward II, and in that way he won the battle and became king of Scotland.

And that story of Robert the Bruce and the head louse always reminds me of the story of Robert the Bruce and the potato peach aphid, I don't know if you remember it. Robert the Bruce was fighting a battle against the English, and he wasn't getting on so well so he ran away and he hid in a cave. And while he was there his eye fell on a little potato peach aphid, which was trying to jump from a potato to a peach. And Robert the Bruce watched the potato peach aphid jump once and it didn't quite make it and it fell down between the potato and the peach. And then Robert the Bruce watched the potato peach aphid jump a second time and it didn't quite make it and it fell down again between the potato and the peach. And then Robert the Bruce watched the potato peach aphid a third time, and the third time the potato peach aphid attempted the jump, it made it from the potato to the peach. And Robert the Bruce thought about what he had seen, and he went back to the battle against the English, and remembering the example of the potato peach aphid (*Myzus persicae*), and when he got there he was able to live both upon the potato and peach reserves of the English army, robbing them initially of their staple food, the potato, and then subsequently of their peach, one of life's little luxuries which if denied to serving men can make them turn on their overlords, and in that way, Robert the Bruce was able to win the battle and gain the Scottish crown.\*

The story of Robert the Bruce and the potato peach aphid there, specially adapted for this evening's show, and being broadcast by Resonance FM all around the world, all around the world, and we can only hope that, statistically, there is someone, someone out there somewhere in the world who is now thinking, 'Yes, I always wanted to hear something like that.'

\* Then I improvised the following end . . .