

SATURDAY  
**THE AC**  
**spectrum**  
MARCH 21, 2015

**LUNCH**  
Courtney  
Barnett

**4**

**FILM**  
Shaun  
the sheep

**16**

**POSTCARD**  
Oslo  
Davis

**21**



**Doubled  
over**

Why two stand-ups are better than one. PAGE 8



## COVER STORY



Clare Kermond

# United we stand-up

Here's the microphone, there's your audience ... now make them laugh. Given the pressures of the comedy festival, it's no wonder so many performers are bringing a friend.

"It's like combat. Look at the metaphors: You kill when it works; you die when it doesn't."

- Robin Williams

**S**tand-up comedy is the stuff of anxious nightmares: on a par with arriving at work in your pyjamas or falling off a cliff is the thought of finding yourself alone on stage, expected to make people laugh.

It becomes much less terrifying, of course, if there is another body up there with you.

More than any other creative pursuit, comedy has long attracted the double act: think Fry and Laurie, French and Saunders, Belushi and Aykroyd.

And on the local stage, there's been a host of double acts such as Roy and HG, Jane Turner and Gina Riley, Scared Weird Little Guys and Elbowskin. It's not hard to see the appeal, both in writing and performing, of sharing the load.

Colin Lane, half of what was one of Australia's longest-running comedy double acts, Lano and (Frank) Woodley, knows well the benefits of working in a team, as well as the pitfalls.

"You have 50 per cent of the success but also you have 50 per cent of the blame, which is much better than 100 per cent," he says.

It's been almost nine years since Lano and Woodley called it quits, but Lane is still seen by many as "missing" his other half. It's both a measure of their success and, one suspects, a thorn in his side.

About the time of their final tour, Lane was entertainingly blunt about the reasons for his split with Woodley after nearly 20 years. "I used to be a Frankophile because I loved everything Frank, but now I'm a Frankophobe," he deadpanned. "He's a dickhead in real life. So, sometimes, that gets a little bit tiresome."

Woodley, clearly amused by Lane's explanation, offered his own take on the split by saying "we knew the cracks were forming when we'd get to an airport to book in and the person behind the counter would say, 'Look, I'm sorry but we can't sit you two together,' and we'd both go, 'That's OK'."

These days Lane is a little more philosophical about the split. "We each evolved during our partnership. He became smarter and I became stupider."

In his latest venture, Lane is again part of a duo, this time with David Collins, best known as one half of another comedy pair, the Umbilical Brothers. The Umbis are still going strong: as Collins puts it, working with Lane is like a fling, while his work with Shane Dundas is the long-term marriage.

"This is kind of like an affair to me. I'm still in love with the old thing but this new thing is so different and fresh and new. He's got hair, he sings to me, he dances for me. I guess we're still

in our honeymoon period, it'll go sour at some stage, but ... he's incredibly nice, he buys me flowers, well, blossoms because of the Japanese thing."

The Japanese thing is *The 3 Mikados*, the pair's outing for this year's Melbourne International Comedy Festival. In this version, Lane and Collins turn up to act in Gilbert and Sullivan's classic comic opera, *The Mikado*, and find themselves without a supporting cast, trying to put on the entire elaborate production helped only by a female actor, leading lady Esther Hannaford, and an orchestra of one, musical director John Thorn.

Lane and Collins wrote the show together and it's fitting that they are tackling the work of a comic duo from another era. Composer Arthur Sullivan and librettist W.S. Gilbert wrote 14 comic operas in the late 1800s, enjoying huge success. But while *The Mikado* is probably their best-known work, it was also nearly their undoing. Sullivan refused for some time to write another opera with Gilbert, saying he wanted to work on more serious, emotionally complex operas. After several months and pressure from many quarters, he relented and the pair came up with *The Mikado*.

For Lane and Collins there's been no such breakdown of the creative partnership. The pair, who have known each other for many years, happily riff about the nature of comic writing, the history of comedy in Australia and how much fun they're having working together.

"Shane was never comfortable telling me an idea sucked, whereas Colin calls me an idiot several times a day, and I love him for it," Collins says, laughing. "Yes, Dave," Lane agrees, "but who's the bigger idiot, you, or me for working with an idiot?"

Collins reveals that he's an old hand at Gilbert and Sullivan, having played Ko-Ko in *The Mikado* at the age of 11. He appeared in another five or six G and S productions as a teenager. Lane, on the other hand, is very new to the tongue-twisting world of comic opera. Collins gloats that when they began rehearsals in Sydney recently, Lane was on the edge of nervous tears. "Back at the hotel he was like a baby. He thought he'd never be able to learn all those lines."

Gilbert and Sullivan's works are known for their sharp, witty lines; many phrases - such as "let the punishment fit the crime" - are still in use today. Modern productions are also known for adding contemporary references - expect to hear about four-wheel driving parents at school pick-up time in this version.

Collins predicts the audience for *The 3 Mikados* will be a "beautiful mix", with some there for him, some there to see Lane and many Gilbert and Sullivan fans. "I think we'll be attracting an audience that is often ignored at the festival, and the [Spiegel]tent is the perfect venue".



“This is kind of like an affair to me.”

DAVID COLLINS

Each is also working on side projects, including Lane's work with Brian Nankervis and Sue Thomson on a series about Turkish migrants in Australia and Collins writing a children's show, set to screen on ABC3 this year.

Given they each have such a long history of working as one half of a duo, it's little surprise that Lane and Collins have also been using that experience as comic fodder for another project, a TV show called *Duo Schmo*, which they are writing.

As Lane says, they each know plenty about the best and worst of working in a long-running partnership. During their interview he often turns to Collins with questions such as, "did you ever do this thing to Shane where...?"

Lano and Woodley had the "three-show rule". If the other partner wasn't convinced about a joke, you had three shows to make it work.

"We've got all the war stories and war



David Collins and Colin Lane have teamed up to do *The 3 Mikados*.  
PHOTO: SIMON SCHLUTER



wounds. Unfortunately, it's the bad stories that are often the most interesting ones. No one wants to hear about the triumphs," Lane says.

He says to work in a duo means constant collaboration but also constant compromise, or at least - he adds darkly - the appearance of it. "Because it's not a duo thing, to bring a fully finished idea to the partnership. You have to at least let them think they've got some role in it."

"It feels like a natural, comfortable fit, David and me, because we are from duos so we know the pitfalls but we also enjoy the experience as well. It's much more fun being on stage with somebody else. It helps you and in a syrupy kind of way you enjoy the good times but you can also survive the awkward times as well. If things are going a little bit shit you can at least look over at each other."

*The 3 Mikados* is at The Famous Spiegeltent, March 26-April 19.  
artscentremelbourne.com.au

## Twice as funny

Double acts in this year's comedy festival share the pain.

### ELBOWSKIN

Ernie Austin and David Adams, aka Dave Elbow and Ernie Skin, began honing their comedy together in high school. Their first gig was to a local council that, days later, was sacked. Hopefully the teenage comics gave them a few laughs on the way out. This year, the pair will perform in their 13th comedy festival, after many years of sitting in the audience. "We'd save up all our money for the year and go and see whatever we could, but always Rod Quantock," says Adams. The two friends have carved a niche out of performing comic songs and putting comedy together with good food and drink, often beer. "We realised five or six years ago that we should write about what we know, and we know heaps about beer." When they're not touring, the pair try to stick to a routine, meeting at each other's house ("depends on the weather, Ernie's got a nicer backyard") and limbering up with the *Age* quiz before trying out material. "If a song's not working it's normally pretty obvious, there's no argument," says Adams. "We've got each other to bounce ideas off, it makes it a less lonely job. Especially being on the road by yourself, that would be tough, very lonely. And if a gig's not going well, at least you can turn to each other and treat it as rehearsal time."

### THE PAJAMA MEN

Mark Chavez and Shenoah Allen, now the Pajama Men, met at an audition for an improvisation show in high school. Although the pair both lived in Albuquerque, New Mexico for many years, more recently they have collaborated long distance, with Chavez living in Vancouver, Canada, and Shenoah in London. Chavez says as well as working via long Skype sessions, the pair spend a large part of each year touring and make good use of that time together. He says working as part of a duo has always suited him. "I'm not the best judge of what's funny, I need someone else around. When we're together, we always start to improvise, no rules." And when they aren't together, Chavez says he often notes down whatever it is that makes him laugh. While they do disagree, Chavez says it tends to be about the minutia, and it adds to the process of refining work until it's at its best. "If we just agreed on everything then our work would soften up." Shenoah agrees, saying the collaboration also adds to the risks they will take in



Max and Ivan, aka Max Olesker and Ivan Gonzalez.



Elbowskin duo David Adams and Ernie Austin, aka Dave Elbow and Ernie Skin.

their improvisation. "We have this strength together. I can really rely on Mark and he allows me to go out on thinner and thinner limbs."

### MAX AND IVAN

For Max Olesker, it was the dream of going to Melbourne for the comedy festival two years ago that finally gave him the confidence to give up his "day job" and pursue comedy full-time. He and Ivan Gonzalez had started working as a double act back in university in London, but each graduated and started working at "real jobs", with Olesker writing for *Esquire* magazine and Gonzalez working in a games design studio. Bizarrely, Olesker also enjoyed early fame as Britain's youngest pro wrestler, Max Voltage the Human Dynamo. Quitting his job to come to Melbourne paid off, with the duo nominated for the Barry award that year. Olesker says he has always preferred working in partnerships to working alone. "It focuses the mind. I always set myself difficult tasks but left to myself I'm an expert at not getting anything done." The pair take a disciplined approach to writing their comic plays, elaborate projects in which they play all of the characters. "We keep basically full-time hours. You could be getting up around four and having breakfast of last night's pizza, but that way madness lies," he says. But they draw the line at sharing a house, as they've seen plenty of friends in the industry do. Each of them also pursues solo work away from Max and Ivan, with Max still writing for *Esquire* and Ivan working in long form improvisation.

### LAZY SUSAN

Working as a duo is new to Celeste Dring and Freya Parker, who began life together as Lazy Susan early last year. For their character-based comedy, described by some as rom-com, the pair tend to start with their own ideas and then come together to work on them, improvising.

recording their sessions and editing. Dring says the appeal of working in a team lies in support and in refining ideas through collaboration. "There are compromises and sometimes it's hard to find the time together, but comedy can be a bit lonely and demoralising by yourself: it's nice to be able to support each other and have someone to bounce off." Parker says good comedy starts with play, so it's easier to do with others. Parker's comedy icons include Monty Python, French and Saunders and Vic and Bob, while Dring's early comedy viewing came from whatever her brothers were watching: anything from *The Young Ones* to Peter Sellers in *The Pink Panther*.

The Melbourne International Comedy Festival runs March 25-April 19.  
comedyfestival.com.au



Celeste Dring and Freya Parker, aka Lazy Susan.



The Pajama Men, Shenoah Allen and Mark Chavez.