



## The Arts

# How laughter and language matter when supporting people with cancer

What is the best way to make an audience squirm in their seats with discomfort? Starting a stand-up comedy routine with a joke about cancer certainly appeared to work for performers at this summer's Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the world's largest arts event. A trio of comedians used their shows to crack jokes about breast cancer, whereas the focus of jokes was cervical cancer in *How To Save A Life* by Glass Half Full Theatre, but all shared themes about how people speak about cancer, and how they are spoken to after receiving a cancer diagnosis.

Alex Petropoulos, who was diagnosed with breast cancer 2 years ago and has now been given the all-clear, joined forces with fellow stand-up comedian Aidan McCaffery to stage *A Sense of Tumour Makes Everything Alt-Right* as one of the Free Fringe events at the Southsider pub. While the duo's contrasting topics made for an interesting show title, McCaffery's jokes about his brother's descent into far-right politics didn't fit with Petropoulos' more polished routine about cancer, with her jokes flowing better on the pair's opening night. Mandy Tootill has been in remission for 10 years after her breast cancer diagnosis, giving her a wider perspective for her show, *Twin Peaks*, at Summerhall, the arts venue in the University of Edinburgh's former Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies. In contrast to Petropoulos and Tootill, Ingibjörg Rósa—an Icelandic comic making her Fringe debut with *Sense Of Tumour* at the Free Fringe in The Brass Monkey pub—is still receiving chemotherapy for her breast cancer, which was diagnosed in January, 2019, following a series of tests in the days leading up to Dec 25, 2018. "I got cancer for Christmas," she joked. Whereas Petropoulos and Tootill dived straight into jokes about cancer, Rósa and Stephanie Silver, the writer of *How To Save A Life*, performed at Underbelly in Bristo Square, took a different approach, concentrating on romance and dating before introducing their main topic. Silver's script did not mention cancer until a doctor gave Melissa, the character played by actress Heather Wilkins, her diagnosis. Until then, the dialogue had danced around the idea with phrases like "changes in the cervix" and "abnormal cells" as Melissa focused on the impact on her life of living with the uncertainty of going through the tests.

Language played an important role in all four shows. The most impressive aspect of Tootill's performance was her word-play: she described a mammogram "a bit like a tit panini" with your breast placed between two metal plates; she explained how one of her chemotherapy drugs

"made my pee red, a bit like beetroot does, but in more of a 'biohazard – toxic' kind of way"; and how the bourbon biscuits she was given at the cancer clinic were "the most serious of biscuits" and how "a custard cream would have just lightened the mood". Many of Petropoulos' jokes revolved around body parts. "I had breast cancer—pretty awkward, isn't it?" she said. "But it felt good to get that off my chest." Like Petropoulos, body-part jokes played a large part in *How To Save A Life*, to the extent that it felt like an exercise in how many times the actresses could say "vagina", but Wilkins brought great energy to the role and the plot cantered along at pace. Rósa's wordplay was more subtle, making good use of juxtaposition. She joked about spending Christmas, 2016, alone and how bad it was when Wham! pop star George Michael—"the first love of my life"—died, before pivoting to being alone again for Christmas, 2018, joking that things couldn't be any worse this time—and then revealing her cancer diagnosis.

Another common element was how a cancer diagnosis can alter conversations with family and friends, as



Ingibjörg Rósa

Edinburgh Festival Fringe took place August 2–26, 2019, in Edinburgh, UK  
<https://tickets.edfringe.com/>  
 For more on **How To Save A Life** see <https://glasshalf.full.space/>  
 For more on **Alex Petropoulos** see <https://www.thesun.co.uk/fabulous/6013097/breast-cancer-battle-friendship/>

For more on **Mandy Tootill** see <http://www.mandytootillcomedy.com/>

For more on **Ingibjörg Rósa** see [https://www.instagram.com/ingibjorgrosa\\_lonewolf/](https://www.instagram.com/ingibjorgrosa_lonewolf/)

observed by Melissa in *How To Save A Life*. Petropoulos also commented on the issue: “People talk to you differently when you’re a cancer patient. I made a list of all the things you shouldn’t say to a cancer patient: my nan had breast cancer and she died; I once had a scare, it turned out to be nothing, it’s so scary, I know how you feel; breast cancer, that’s the best cancer right; or, my favourite, everything happens for a reason... yeah, the reason is so I can punch you in the face. Someone came up to me after another show and said, ‘You missed out the worst part, when the doctor’s fiddling with your nipples and you’re trying not to look him in the eye.’”

Perhaps the most serious theme the shows had in common was the importance of checking our bodies for changes and the need for cancer screening. Silver, whose day-job is as a paediatric nurse, was explicit on this point. “The take up rate for smear tests is at its lowest in 10 years, since [Big Brother television series contestant] Jane Goody died,” she told *The Lancet Oncology*. Silver’s message is delivered implicitly in her play, with Melissa delivering monologues about her abnormal periods, heavy bleeding after sex, and stomach cramps, focusing on how they have affected her relationship with boyfriend Toby, played by James Ford. Towards the end of the performance, her best friend—Maria, portrayed by Katerina Robinson—has a cervical cancer screening

test after being scared by her friend’s diagnosis. Maria is referred to a colposcopy clinic following an abnormal smear and has laser ablation to remove precancerous cells. For Petropoulos and Tootill, discovering their breast tumours became the source for several body-awareness jokes. “I found a lump, but I quickly learned that there’s no easy way to tell your doctor that you were feeling yourself up,” explained Petropoulos. “‘Were you doing a self-exam?’ Sure, I wasn’t watching porn and going to town. Porn gets a bad rep—you never know when it’s going to save your life.” Tootill had a similar experience; she discovered a lump on the eve of her 30th birthday while playing with her breasts during “a lull in the storyline” on television soap opera *Coronation Street*. After feeling the lump, Tootill’s partner, who is a nurse, told her to get it checked out by her general practitioner (GP), who in turn sent her to see a consultant. Both the GP and the consultant told her not to worry because she was so young, but after having a mammogram and biopsy, Tootill was diagnosed with cancer.

Comedy can be a useful tool to relay serious clinical messages to audiences and to encourage people to take part in screening programmes. “Any performance or media that draws attention to the need for continuing research into cancer has to be a good thing,” said Nicola Smith, Senior Health Information Manager at Cancer Research UK. “It is also important that people find it as easy as possible to talk about things when they have been affected by cancer. Portraying cancer through drama or comedy may help to make this easier for some people. Talking about your health can be tricky but the earlier stage the cancer is spotted, the better, as treatment is more likely to be successful. Encouraging people to talk openly about their health and get to know what’s normal for their body is always positive whatever form that takes—and for some people using comedy might work.”

For Karen Roberts, Chief of Nursing and Allied Health Professionals at Macmillan Cancer Support, the language and interaction style used with people with cancer are both important things to consider. “There’s no such thing as a ‘typical’ person with cancer, so people have different preferences when it comes to discussing it,” she explained. “Talking about ‘battling’ cancer helps some people remain upbeat, but others find the effort of keeping up a brave face exhausting and feel unable to open up as a result. Cancer throws all kinds of things your way and struggling to find the words can make it even more challenging. What is most important is that people with cancer feel able to talk and are listened to about the language they prefer, helping those around them to ‘get it right’ and enabling them to ask for the support they need.”



Peter Ranscombe

Mandy Tootill

Peter Ranscombe