



Ivor Cutler has been around for quite a few years now, and is well known throughout not just his native Scotland, but the rest of Britain as well for his poetry, prose, songs, humour, and perhaps most of all, for his pure stagemanship in presenting this varied diet to an audience who often does not know quite what to expect. An evening of his work was presented by him in the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, recently, as part of his (surprisingly) first tour of Scotland. With a minimum of props to offset his mildly eccentric garb, he held the attention of his audience throughout the performance. It became apparent that all that was needed were the tools of his trade - harmonium, piano, and stool, as what we were seeing on stage was very much the man, rather than an act, as Ivor Cutler's work is so much a part of his personality, that to think of them as separates would be ridiculous. Some of his work is shown here, and what it means or is about is perhaps shown best in the interview which we had with him earlier that night. It is futile to try to give an impression on paper of a personality and to do it justice. Let me just say that the impression left after his performance was of a very young sexagenarian with an irrepressible capacity for innocent playing.

AG.

RUCKSACK

**If you have big breasts
you will fall over.**

**Unless you wear
a rucksack.**

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ivor cutler

Interviewed and Reviewed by Ian Iae and (occasionally) Angus Graham

Brig - You've been involved in a wide variety of types of entertainment. Who do you see as your audience?

I know who my audience has been in the past, but I think my audience is one which is not necessarily intellectual. I think it's people who have not forgotten what it's like to be and see like a child. Rather like all the kind of people who feel at one with the little boy in "The Emperor's New Clothes".

Brig - Which would you prefer, to do stage-work, television, or to have poetry published?

Well, you know, you get a meal and there's meat and two veg., and meat on its own or veg on its own. I like doing them all, I think, but I suspect that I prefer a live audience to television because of the quality of feedback. I like to have the house lights up-as far as is decent be-

"Having a Grope"

ause, I mean, if there's two people having a grope at one another or something, you know, they'll want the lights down - so that I can watch them (the audience) and make it a two-way communication. I know it sounds crummy but they're also working in the quality of the listening.

Brig - Would you rather perform in a theatre or, like in the "Playhouse" last summer, slotted in between two rock bands?

Well, I was asked up to get slotted in, and that's okay with me. It was fascinating, especially when I discovered who I was playing to, which I didn't discover till afterwards, thank God, because I would have been scared to death to have been in front of guys of fifteen and teenyboppers or whatever. They would have killed me if they hadn't liked me. I was lucky.

It doesn't make a hell of a lot of difference. The main advantage of appearing in front of two thousand five hundred people is that you make more money more quickly compared with about one hundred and ten people in the "Traverse". And how many times you'd have to play there to make it up to two and a half thousand and so on. My ego needs are not such that I want to be performing in front of people every night. I enjoy it, certainly, but not to exhaust myself doing it.

Brig - Do you find touring tiring?

Touring tiring? That's nice. Yes. Touring's tiring but this is the first time I've ever done a tour so it's unique in my experience.

Brig - What was your musical background?

We used to sing a lot at home. We were no musicians. I tried to learn the piano but my mother stopped me - I was three - because I had the poker in between two notes and I was trying to lever them. Maybe she thought I was too enthusiastic, better curb him. I'm fairly self-taught I would say. I used to go to the Mitchell Library in Glasgow, the music part, and sit there going through all the songs hoping for cool things like flattened sevenths, (laughs), and so on in Russian folk songs and Spanish songs, and I got a whole load of these and I started off playing an acoustic guitar. Then when I was in the R.A.F., in the NAFFI at night, there would always be a piano and everyone would be in there and you'd watch the

other guy and learn a few chords, and that's it. By accident I got on to the harmonium, but that was many years later, when I got married.

Brig - How did you get into the recording business?

I'm a painter. I fell in love with painting when I suddenly discovered how to draw, after about eight years, and I wanted to leave teaching to paint all the

"How do I make Money?"

time and I thought "How do I make money?" so I thought "Oh, I'll write songs and then people will sing them and I'll get royalties." So I went round peddling songs for a couple of years and no one in Tin Pan Alley would touch them, till this firm called "Box and Cox". They used to turn out six best sellers a week. They used to write songs - you know, "Red Sails in the Sunset", that kind of thing. I went in to Box and he'd never seen anything so funny in his life, he told me afterwards, and I said to him, diffidently, "Do you listen to the songs?" It was about five o'clock and they'd had a hard day's work and he thought "Here's a joker" and he said "Yes, come in." So I said, "May I take my coat off?" and I took off about four coats because I felt the cold. Dead silence. "What kind of song would you like?" And he said "Oh, sing anything". So I sat down at the piano with my back to them and I sang some songs about some guy with a hole in his head, or something, and when I finished I said: "Do you want to hear some more?" "Just a minute", they said, and they got some other fellow, a partner, and they sat there and said "Just keep playing some songs". So I kept playing some songs, then I heard a funny noise so I turned round and Box was lying on the floor and his face was purple. They said: "He wants to laugh but he daren't in case you get offended", because you get funny people going into Tin Pan Alley and they didn't know whether I was a wierdo or not. I said "I meant to be funny, you can laugh" so he laughed and let it out. I was quids in then because he has a taste for left-footers. He tried to get Spike Milligan and Peter Sellers - he knew a lot of people in the business - to sing my stuff and nobody wanted to sing it, so one day I said to him "I'd better sing it myself" and he said "Why not?" Then we got guys along from the telly and the radio and that's how it started.

You make me think of Seamus Heaney. Some-

"Why do you write Poetry?"

one asked him "Why do you write poetry" and he said "I write it for the noise in my head", and I thought "You fool, now everybody'll know how to do it!" But not everybody is as musical and I came to writing from being a musician so my ear was in pretty good nick. And I put words together and my ear is very much working all the time so what you're getting is a nice noise and musical people's tastes are like mine, I presume.

Brig - I saw the Dave Allan programme "Great British Eccentric" (he sighs loudly at this). How representative was it of what you're

trying to do?

I suppose in bits but of course the set-up was very unnatural, but some of the stuff was quite good about me and Phyllis (April King) at the Zoo and sitting in front of one animal and drawing another animal. Our best one was sitting in front of an empty cage which said "No animals are being exhibited here at present" and drawing a still life of the cage. And really sweating blood on it, drawing fine, delicate lines. Foreigners in particular would come and look over our shoulders: "Qu'est-ce que c'est?" (He makes suitably french noises). We dressed up... I don't know... Gosh, I remember wearing a bowler hat to the Zoo once, and Phyllis with a picture hat and the dainty summer dress and all that, and me with the suit and a little stool, sitting, drawing, looking dead grim and concentrating, and people looking over my shoulders. It was a gas.

"Eyes of a Child"

Brig - Your method of getting your ideas across seems to me to involve primarily breaching how adults have organised their ways of seeing things.

That's smack on. Yes, in a way you're saying what I said to you earlier, those who can still see with the eyes of a child and people who, in order to feel grown up, wear the three piece suit, the tie and all that, and "I know I'm a man, I shave daily and keep my hair this length". Conventional, I think it is called. These people come along and I pull the mat out and they get very angry, and very rightly so, rightly so for them, because their security depends upon having the three piece suit and when I meet such people there's instant non-communication.

Brig - How would you feel about somebody else reading your poetry onstage, considering the way you use your voice as part of the overall effect?

I'll wait until that Rubicon comes. I'm not sure. I suspect that, done cunningly enough and if I trusted the person, I might be willing. But what's to stop people giving a private reading of my poems? I know that when I used to be on the radio a lot of people did take-offs of me all over the place.

Brig - With poets like Hugh MacDiarmid and Dylan Thomas, so much of the effect depends upon the accent. I sometimes find it hard to imagine a different voice reading your poems.

I don't know. People have said this but it's all one to me because it's on the page, but I'm inside me so my viewpoint is different. It has been said that the words are not the same without the voice. Sad, isn't it? Because when I'm dead there'll be only the words, and people will say "What was the fuss?" I feel that I'm not much of a poet and that inter-pret's the words and that the words can't stand up in their own right. That makes me feel sad. I think I'll go and commit suicide now.



Thanks to Virgin Records publicity dept. for the opportunity to interview, and for the complimentary tickets.



My initial reaction to Ivor Cutler was perhaps only one of jealousy at his success, for it is sometimes difficult to see exactly what he has got to offer which I, you or the next wo/man in the pub cannot. Perhaps this can equally be applied to all who attempt to sell their humour.

Listening to "Jammy Smears", Cutler's latest recording on Virgin Records, has not altogether removed my doubts. Whereas the record is occasionally brilliant and often acute it is also frequently banal.

There is a tendency here lamely to rehearse former successes, - to rely on the "funny voice" and "absurd" ideas for safe laughs, and then slip in some 'serious' poetry much of which can be detected, in between the slapstick and the naughty bits.

The real genius of the Cutler vision is in its real-life absurdity, (how's that for pseud's corner), and yet this is an absurdity which is touched with irony, ("I knew I would be obliged to save this life, human though it was"), touched with sadness. Look beyond the laugh, gentle reader

The harmonium grinds on and I find myself getting sentimental. Let's celebrate Cutler as a poet if we must, but not as a novelty. Phyllis King was good too.

**I aint got no common
sense:
Neither has nobody else.
I put my brains on the
table,
And poke them about
with a fork.**

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