



Omid Djalili at Liverpool Philharmonic

Reviewed by Fat Roland and Simon Belt January 2012

Firstly, Fat Roland 's take on the performance

Omid Djalili's appearance at the Liverpool Philharmonic did nothing to dispel my belief that stand-up comedy is a bit broken. I once went on a stand-up comedy course in which I was taught to brainstorm, to use the mic, and to find the funny. The course leader used clips of television comedians – think charity balls, gigs in palladiums, Saturday night fodder – as an example of stand-up. But the course leader was wrong to do this as television comedy is not stand-up.

Since the explosion of stand-up in the 1990s, many of us only see stand-ups on big stages inside our small television screens, presented by Russell Howard who then goes on to listen to similar comedians recycle their stage material on blokey panel games.

It may have been Ben Elton who once said he stopped doing peak-time TV routines because he would use up a year's worth of material for one week's shoot, and then would have to write the same amount of new material every week until the show's season ended. Inevitably, the quality was compromised.

True stand-up lives in the clubs and small theatres because television eats material. It also dulls down comedians to echoes of their past selves, as several DVD releases from Peter Kaye can testify. Compare Kaye with, for example, two comedians who carefully control their public exposure: Stewart Lee and Daniel Kitson. Lee seems to wilfully sabotage any potential for mainstream success, while Kitson stays well away from the cameras: both retain a huge amount of credibility as a result.

And so after a warm and affecting support act by Boothby Graffoe, I find myself watching Omid Djalili's comeback **Tour Of Duty**. Since he last trod (or more accurately, belly-danced) the boards, Djalili has bagged his own BBC1 show, been all over telly advertising and has performed in front of Prince Charles. Oh and the numerous movie roles. He ought to be everything I think stand-up is not.

Most people know Omid for feigning an Iranian accent before letting his "English ponce" roots show. He seems almost afraid of the ethnic comedy now, although that is what he is best at. And so he holds onto older material, such as angry Persian outbursts that still tickle the funny bone, and his Nigerian traffic warden routine which is played to perfection despite that accent being long-since done to death by the likes of Felix Dexter and Jocelyn Jee Esien (the latter also played a Nigerian traffic warden).

Djalili must be aware, however, that race-based comedy is becoming old hat. What more is there to say after the likes of Little Britain and Curb Your Enthusiasm? Actually, loads. In this routine, Omid has suicide bomber schools, knock-knock jokes for people who live in tents, and a silly but effective Ahmed-Mohammed-Ahmed-Mohammed call-back joke. Is he really saying anything new though?

What he does do is pull back before he gets too close to the edge. He flits, so he'd rather throw a random bit in about Ed Miliband than find the dark humour in the Middle East's painful transition of power. It's almost a shame because surely this is the best time in the world to be an Iranian comedian. So much material.

Omid Djalili is a gentle comedian. He is not angry – I'm not sure he ever has been. He's no Doug Stanhope, an American comedian who rails furiously and relentlessly at the juxtaposition of Britain being a supposed bedrock of democracy and the inherited wealth of the royal family. Omid's more Bill Cosby than Bill Hicks. That's also a positive thing because he is hugely comical and a very natural entertainer.

As an add-on at the end of the evening, Omid does his microphone-penis belly dance. For old time's sake. This is a familiar set for people who prefer a milder comedian, and although the memory of the routine will fade quickly (while, for example, a Kitson routine from years ago is still emblazoned across my mind), that doesn't stop the talented Djalili being top of the crop of our goggle-box-blunted stand-up stars.

And [Simon Belt](#) 's take on the performance

Although I've never been to a school reunion before, this performance was what I imagine they'd be like - a largely nostalgic trip down memory lane. We feel quite familiar and comfortable with who and what Omid Djalili is now - a somewhat offbeat character in some funny films with interesting plots. Well, obviously we're not familiar with Omid in a familial way, but we think we know who he is from his widespread public persona, and yet we all probably wanted to see the Omid of old rather than the DVD version he's become. He said he wanted to be back 'after having tried some new things' which is something of an understatement - a prolific list of activities that includes breaking box office ticket sales at the Edinburgh festival, appearing or

starring in over 50 TV shows and films.



Using his appearance in **The Infidel** alongside David Baddiel as an example that he's part of a dialogue between Jews and Arabs left me wondering how dated his script was. The gulf between where society is and what was considered a radical comedy sketch 15 years ago is clearly bigger than I'd realised as the joke just didn't have any real purchase like it once did.

It was a truly other world moment - like Claire from **Clare in the Community** on Radio 4 had taken control of the microphone. His

Arab and the Jew

show was 15 year ago, and it came across as a naff plug to buy his DVD. Spending the last few years knocking around the BBC and performing for

We Are Most Amused

to celebrate Prince Charles' 60th birthday has clearly taken its toll.

When trying to recover ground by mentioning that the Iranian part of him may mutter something about not being a fan of the Royal family when meeting Prince Charles was timid, and certainly an interesting sign of the times as to how conservative life in Britain has become, and how successful the Royal family have been in recovering ground after the Diana moment. Again playing on the Iranian theme, Omid seemed to be gauging the mood of the moment by mentioning the development of Nuclear Power in Iran, which definitely made people pay attention in anticipation of something edgy and daring, but the mention of it was all we got, no going for the throat on that issue, well not this early in the tour. Alas, a very mild dig at Tony Blair being the the Middle East peace envoy given his record of support for the recent invasion of Iraq. It was the sort of comment that eases heated discussions at the Christmas lunches you expect your gran to make rather than biting and edgy comedy.

I know I come across as somewhat disappointed in terms of the content of his routine, and I was disappointed which may be my fault. I had in my mind that Omid was part of the radical comedians I associate with the 80's and 90's, anti-Thatcher, anti-Racist, all for 'the struggle' and the like so hearing a rather safe script wasn't what I was looking for. However, Omid's timing and delivery and on occasion his desire to go for it were truly delightful to see - a master craftsman of technique *stylistically at least*.

Early on in the routine, there was a seemingly spontaneous engagement with someone who'd given Omid the name of the tour - the ***Tour of Duty***, which was in response to an appeal he made on Twitter for suggestions for a name. It was all very hip to the groove of social media, as was the stage backdrop with a picture of a smart phone with 5G connection on the Omid network and twitter feed, so a little bit new and innovative. His picking out the guy from the audience (complimentary tickets I think, so nice touch), he then gave him the full and proper compliment by insulting him as the skinny odd looking guy. This was followed by saying that he'd said he was shy and asked not to make a big thing of it, which Omid knew meant he shouldn't give him the microphone as that would surely result in 10 minutes of scouse ramblings as that's what scousers are like - a flash back to his stand up background that felt truly alive and interactive. Hopefully Omid will introduce more of that edgy material going forward.