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The hidden tastemakers: Comedy scouts as cultural brokers at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe

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ABSTRACT

Responsible for selecting which new artists are brought to the public attention, talent scouts carry considerable influence in framing performing arts fields. Yet their practices are hidden from public view, and *how* and *why* they select fledgling producers remains mostly unexplored in cultural sociology. This article aims to demystify the work of such gatekeepers by examining temporary comedy scouts operating at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The Fringe is the world's biggest arts festival and a central tradefair for the British comedy field. Drawing on ethnographic observation and interviews with nine comedy scouts, I examine the positions they occupy in the comedy field and, in turn, how this positioning affects which comedians they propel. I then interrogate the brokerage enacted by scouts. Centrally, I argue that, while some broker between artists and management, *all* scouts are implicated in mediating between artists and audiences. In particular, they act to intensify comedy taste boundaries—making judgments based on assumptions about imagined audiences and directing more legitimate comedians to privileged audiences and vice versa. In this way, scouts act as *hidden tastemakers*, intensifying the scarcity of certain tastes and strengthening the ability of privileged audiences to use comedy in the claiming of cultural distinction.

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1. Introduction

In August 2010, little-known comedy magicians Barry and Stuart were spotted by an enthusiastic BBC TV producer at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Within months the duo were hosting a BBC 1

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primetime show, *The Magicians*, and within a year, they had sold out a national tour. The story is a familiar one at the Edinburgh Fringe, where scores of comedians are “discovered” every year by talent scouts and launched into lucrative and high-profile careers. Although such breakthroughs are invariably constructed as the romantic triumph of raw talent, the reality is more calculated. As Barry and Stuart’s agent, Kerry,¹ explained to me, the duo’s “discovery” had been carefully orchestrated. She had spotted the pair a few years earlier and immediately saw that their brand of comedy magic could fill a conspicuous gap in the market. Earmarking the Fringe as the obvious launchpad, she embarked on a three-year plan. In 2008, the duo played a tiny 60-seater festival venue and, after a string of good reviews, started to sell out. The following August they moved to a 120-seater theatre and sold out the whole run. And in 2010, they moved to an even bigger venue, sold out again, and were duly “discovered” by a television comedy scout. Kerry summed up the strategy:

There were TV execs that I could have pitched till I was blue-in-the-face in London. But if they turn up in Edinburgh and a show’s been selling out for three weeks, you generate the interest anyway. I hate telling that story because it makes it sound contrived. But it is.

In many ways, such manufactured success is nothing new. The Edinburgh Festival Fringe has long been a training ground for the performing arts (Shrum, 1996). Held every August for three weeks, the Fringe is the largest arts festival in the world, attracting 24,071 performers and selling over 1.94 million tickets (Edfringe.com, 2013). Yet in recent years, the Fringe has changed considerably. In particular, comedy has come to dominate the programme. While in 1981, there were just 16 comedy shows, by 2013, this number had risen to 947 (Edfringe.com, 2013). This reflects similar developments in the wider British cultural field, wherein comedy is currently enjoying unprecedented economic growth and emerging as one of the few cultural fields to prosper in the recent economic downturn (Brown, 2012; Salter, 2009). Amid this growth, the Fringe has emerged as the centrepiece of the British comedy field, a vast tradefair in which the majority of Britain’s comedians (and many from abroad) perform for 22 days straight with the aim of attracting audiences, critics and—most crucially—industry professionals.² To help mediate these ambitions the Fringe has arguably generated a new type of comedy worker, the “temporary” talent scout who leaves behind normal occupational duties—as agents, producers, commissioners or venue bookers—for one month of the year and decamps to Edinburgh to scour the Fringe for comedians to fill the ever-increasing slots for comedy on British TV, radio and in live venues. These scouts represent pivotal brokers in the comedy field, selecting which new comedians are brought to public attention and forming a critical link between comedy producers and comedy management.

In cultural sociology, important contributions have been made to our understanding of such gatekeepers. For example, in fashion, much research has addressed the way that buyers and bookers act as intermediaries between producers and consumers (Blumer, 1969; Entwistle, 2006; Mears, 2011). In art, Velthuis (2005) has inspected the way dealers act as similarly important gatekeepers between artists and collectors. In book publishing, Thompson (2010) and Franssen and Kuipers (2013) have both provided illuminating accounts of how book proposals are selected for publication by editors. And in television, important works (Bielby and Bielby, 1994; Kuipers, 2012) have examined the rhetorical strategies employed by buyers and programmers when attempting to legitimate the products they select for broadcast.

However, one emerging area so far ignored in this literature is the work of temporary talent scouts that operate at arts *festivals*. In the performing arts, large-scale festivals are becoming increasingly important distribution systems, acting as virtual tradefairs for their wider fields (Johansson and Kociatkiewicz, 2011). Moreover, by bringing together artists, audiences and critics in one spatially bounded setting, they provide a uniquely attractive setting for talent scouts looking to identify and propel new talent. Yet the professional practices of festival talent scouts are hidden from public view and *how* and *why* they select fledgling performers remains unexplored.

¹ All respondents’ real names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

² The promise of “discovery” comes at a substantial price, however, with the average comic losing £7349 a year promoting and staging a show at the Fringe (Logan, 2008).

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