

Several nights a term, Wolfson College has a funny turn. The College's Wolfson Howler nights have attracted some of the nation's biggest names in stand-up comedy and are giving Cambridge performers a new venue to test their mettle

# A real howl at Wolfson

THE COMEDY started even before getting in the door of the Wolfson College's bar.

"You've got to be kidding," the Porter quipped, when a visitor asks him for directions to the Wolfson Howler, which turned out to be only a few steps away.

The real laughs won't start for almost another hour – socialising off-stage is of equal importance to what happens on-stage – but once the comedy night gets started, there will be no shortage of wry one-liners.

Tonight, five comedians – four amateurs and one pro – will command the small stage set up in the back of the bar. In turn, each will stand in the glare of four bright spotlights and do their best to make the gathered crowd of several hundred chuckle, chortle and guffaw. The challenge may well be as tough as any they'd face in an exam hall.

After a quick comedic intro from Cambridge student and compere Liam Williams, a female student takes the stage to get the evening rolling with her "Serial Killer Love Poem." Her poem is creepy, irreverent and quite funny, and within the space of her first few lines the audience responds with what must surely be music to any comedian's ears: laughter.

It's a good environment to try out a new act. "You have to have quite a forgiving audience. The students need a supportive and kind audience," says Wolfson College's Student Ents Officer Kat Millen, who organises the Wolfson Howlers.

Each Wolfson Howler features one national act as the headliner and three to four students – not necessarily from Wolfson – who do shorter sets as the openers. "It's not difficult to find students," says Millen. Groups like Cambridge Footlights help to provide a large pool of local talent.

Although Wolfson members pay a smaller entrance fee, flyers advertising

the evenings make it clear that "everyone else" is also welcome.

The first Wolfson Howler was held in February 2008. A Wolfson PhD student at the time, Chris Lander, noticed that while sketch comedy thrives in Cambridge, stand-up comedy venues are rare, so he decided to start his own. He booked acts he thought would go well in front of student audiences. "He's had great success," Millen says.

Lander now works full-time as a booker for Avalon UK, one of the UK's leading comedy agencies. He can't say enough about the quality of the acts he's booked to perform at Wolfson. "They are some of the best comics in Great Britain," he says.

He rattles off a list of the performers, including: Brendon Burns, who won the Edinburgh Fringe's 2007 if.comedy award (previously called the Perrier); Glen Wool, who is headlining the Edinburgh and Beyond comedy tour sponsored by Avalon and Paramount Comedy; and Isy Suttie, who has appeared regularly on Channel 4's *Peep Show*. (Isy will perform on 1 December)

Simon Brodtkin was the College's headline act on 27 October. He is a core cast member of ITV sketch show *Al Murray's Multiple Personality Disorder*, which will air in January. At Wolfson, Brodtkin performed in the persona of a teenage yob and used much of his set to gently tease the 'brains' in the crowd about their studies.

"Every comic has really loved the Cambridge audience," Lander says. "They're quite comedy literate and very polite. They don't heckle and aren't rude; it's the Cambridge way."



Wolfson Howler comedy nights are regularly sold out.

Being on the same stage with national acts presents an opportunity for the students not often available to amateurs. Landers' bosses at Avalon have charged him with keeping an eye out for Cambridge talent. Compere Liam Williams has already been spotted while performing at the Howlers. "When Brendon Burns came he watched all the student comics," Lander says. "When Liam did his set, Brendon called his agent while Liam was on stage. That led to him getting a couple of gigs."

On average, Wolfson Howlers are now being held three to four times a term. Millen says that's about the maximum number of shows the small team of student volunteers who plan and publicise the events can handle. Wolfson is geared toward postgraduate and mature undergraduate students – she herself is working on a PhD in biochemistry.

She thinks the effort is worth it. "If a night goes well, you feel good that you helped to make it happen."

Although she admits that comedy wasn't a big interest for her before the Howlers started, she is now a bit star struck. "I've seen some fantastic

acts. You don't have to pay £20 in London, because you can see the same people here. It's so nice to just chat to them at the bar. It's surprising how friendly these big acts are."

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