

## ARTS

# The Comedy School: teaching children about knife crime through humour

How do you reverse the knife crime crisis? Send in the comedians, says Dominic Maxwell, who talks to the team devising a joke-packed show for school kids

Dominic Maxwell

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Joseph Otim, left, Sarah Kerr and Toby Repath of the Comedy School, the company behind *It's No Joke!* MICHAEL LECKIE FOR THE TIMES

It's a weekday morning in a north London community centre and two classes of primary-school children are burbling with anticipation about the show they are about to watch. Beats double maths, right? They sit on the floor looking at the colourful cut-outs of an urban street in front of them, wondering what to expect. Keith Palmer, the show's director, stands up to give them a clue. "It is a comedy show," he says, "so if you find some parts funny, do laugh."

What kind of comedy show needs to be preceded with an announcement telling you that you're allowed to laugh at it? The kind of comedy show that's all about knife crime. More specifically, *It's*

*No Joke!* is about “knives, offensive weapons, and the carrying of offensive weapons”, says Palmer. Uproarious, huh?

Still, the children do enjoy themselves during this hour-long play. Sometimes they cry out in warning as characters a few years older than them make some regrettable decisions. And sometimes they roar with pleasure at the rapping, the bursts of familiar music, the recognisable worries about fashion and doing what you know isn't quite right in an attempt to fit in. There are about 40 minutes for the story itself, then 15 minutes or so in which the actors return in character to answer the children's questions. Including, spoiler alert, a streetwise, charismatic boy called Rufus, who first talks about spending “a oner” on a new pair of Nikes, then starts carrying a knife around — “I know it's dangerous, I need it for protection from the gangs where I live” — then finally he comes a cropper when it is used against him.

His friend Gerri, briefly taken with the power and novelty of carrying a knife herself, ends up excluded from school and working in a fried-chicken restaurant. And amid the rapping and the audience participation and the joking and the flossing — this year's dance craze gets a delighted response from these ten and eleven-year-olds from Year 6 — there is a lot of resonant information about the grave implications of carrying a knife, whatever your motive for doing so.

“It was really entertaining, and it had really funny bits, but it had a really important message that got through,” the teacher says to the class at the end. I've been sitting at the back, watching the show for the first time, and I couldn't agree more. I suppose I feared pseudo streetwise warnings not to be uncool by carrying a blade. I suppose I feared the po-faced down-with-the-kids funkiness that *The League of Gentlemen* satirised so well with their spoof theatre-in-education company Legz Akimbo. Somehow, though, *It's No Joke!* stays the right side of that. And when it reminds us at the end that we only have one life, it registers.

At the Q&A session the children are asking questions. To Gerri: “Why did you copy your friend and get a knife?” “Why didn't you tell the police about Rufus?” To Rufus, back from the dead to own up to his errors of judgment: “Are you a rogue man?” “Why didn't you tell your mum to move if there were gangs in the area?” Rufus has an answer to that one. “Sometimes you don't have a choice in the matter,” replies the actor, Joseph Otim, who, along with cast-mates

Sarah Kerr and Toby Repath, makes it look as if this material had been freshly minted for the crisis in knife crime.

Actually, though, Palmer and his company, the Comedy School, have been putting on *It's No Joke!* since 2003. Lenny Henry, Paul Whitehouse, Sean Lock and Phill Jupitus are among the comedians who have supported the Comedy School. In October the comic and actress Andi Osho won her celebrity edition of the ITV quiz show *The Chase* and donated her £15,000 winnings to the Comedy School. Palmer was really touched by that, he says.

And, as he points out when we meet him at his headquarters next to Regent's Park later that day, the need for this show is becoming more acute. We've all heard about how gang culture is becoming more dangerous in inner cities. Just under 15,000 knife crimes were recorded in London between 2017 and 2018. That's the highest figure this decade, and up almost 20 per cent on the previous year.



The show was written after research and consultation with youth groups and the police.

Funding, though, is a struggle. Before the financial crash of 2008, seven London boroughs were regularly using the show. Now, Barnet in north London, which uses the show every summer for a month as part of its junior citizenship programme, is the only borough with a continuing commitment. There is less money going around, police numbers are going down and, although politicians and councils talk

up their commitment to preventive measures, you can see how they might lay themselves open to accusations of frivolity if they diverted funds to a comedy show.

Still, Palmer has made it his life's work to show that comedy can be useful as well as enjoyable. He also uses comedy in courses for people in prisons and for people with mental-health issues. "Comedy makes a perfect medium for educating people," he says. "If people are laughing, they are listening. And if they are listening then the education process can begin."

He has been running the Comedy School since 1998. It's a charity, so the profit he makes from his workshops for businesses — companies he has worked with include Google, Omnicom, the Premier League and London Business Forum — and the workshops and classes he runs for individuals on stand-up, physical comedy, sitcom writing, improv and so on, help to subsidise the community work. He'd love to get some corporate sponsorship, though, not to mention more support from the public sector. He thinks they merit it.

So do several charities set up by those affected by knife crime. Richard Taylor, the father of Damilola Taylor, booked the show in 2005 for an event to mark the fifth anniversary of his son's fatal stabbing. "In the years I have been working with Keith and his team I have seen the value of what they do," he says. "*It's No Joke!* gets across the seriousness of the message it conveys in a way that makes schoolchildren listen and feel involved."

The *EastEnders* actress Brooke Kinsella, whose half-brother Ben was killed in 2008 when he was out celebrating the end of his GCSEs, has spoken at one of the shows. Peter Sinclair, who set up the Flavasum Trust after his stepson Tom-Louis Easton was stabbed to death in 2006, has done research into the impact of the show on its audience. It shows that the number of pupils who think that carrying a knife is a defence drops by 88 per cent after seeing the play. (The report is available on the websites of the Flavasum Trust and the Comedy School.) This sort of evidence is crucial, Sinclair says, for others to take the show as seriously as he believes it needs to be taken. He has seen several educational shows about knife crime. "But this is the only one that uses comedy," he says.

And, yeah, it is funny. How does Palmer keep on top of the tone? How does he sidestep that Legz Akimbo trap? It takes a bit of work, he admits. He and Charlie McGuire first wrote the show, after

research and consultation with youth groups and the police, during three weeks of rehearsal with the original cast in 2003. Since then, whenever Palmer rehearses with new casts, they check that they have the right slang and the right musical and fashion references. It helps to reassure children that you are on their wavelength.

Of course, you won't be on every child's wavelength all the time. "Just like Cardi B, I'm all about the money," says one character in the latest version of the show. "What's a Cardi B?" I heard one child ask her friends, shortly before we all found out the horrible effect of a knife stuck in the liver. Still, it makes you wonder: why perform to Year 6 students when, fingers crossed, they aren't affected by knife crime yet?

Several reasons, says Palmer. They started by doing the show for 14-year-olds. Yet the more he visited schools, the more he found that children were getting younger and younger when they brought in knives. "Year 6 is a fantastic age for it, just before secondary school, just before they are mixing with new kids, making new friends, wanting to impress people, travelling to school for the first time, vulnerable to a new kind of peer pressure. There is a lot going on with them."

Dal Babu, a former borough commander of the Metropolitan Police for Harrow, is a big proponent of the show. Thirty years ago, he says, not long after he started in the force, the challenge was getting schools to accept that some children were being pushed into crime or that bullying was real. "It's a similar issue here with knives. Many schools are in denial that there is a challenge. What we have got to do is look at innovation, at putting across a message in a way that brings together the police, the youth offending team, the NHS, the Crown Prosecution Service."

There are things you can get done through entertainment, he points out, that you can't do when you're the police. Babu once managed to get two rival gangs to sit down in a room together for the first time by asking Quentin Blake to come to speak at their school. By the time you've got secondary-school kids getting into trouble with the authorities, he suggests, it's too late for the message to take hold. "It's never too early."

*It's No Joke!* has been playing in Barnet schools every summer since 2013. Sergeant Shannon Farthing, who is responsible for liaising between the police and local schools, is a huge fan. "After the show



one of the kids approached a teacher to say there was a knife at home. And they were happy for the teacher to tell us. That is invaluable. That is one less knife in circulation.”

Does Barnet have a particular knife problem? “It’s a national problem. We have knife crime, same as anywhere else. It’s trying to stop it in the first place. If we are talking to them when they are in secondary school, it’s almost too late. Year 6, it’s still an age where they can suspend their disbelief in a show like this.”

So the comical is the political. Last month Baroness Newlove, the government’s victims commissioner, argued that children should be taught from the age of seven about the danger of carrying knives and joining gangs. And that, argues Palmer, is where his show comes in.

“I’d say to Baroness Newlove, ‘Give us a call, we are doing what you suggested.’ We need some support to do more of it rather than operating hand-to-mouth. Sometimes it’s difficult for people to get the idea of comedy and knife crime because it’s such a serious issue; they think it’s no laughing matter. But once people see the show, they get it.”

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