

A German doing stand-up comedy in Britain?

Don't make me laugh! Well, he will, actually, says John Fleming

Paco's five steps to success

Mensan Paco Erhard was performing a comedy show at the Edinburgh Fringe called A 5-Step Guide to Being German when we met – to have a chat over a pot of English breakfast tea. He had just got the first review for his show – a four-star review – but, the previous day, he had told me his show had not been successful.

“I didn't do as well as I could. I am a German. Germany has got an inferiority/ superiority complex. We basically have this feeling that nobody likes us and we have to stick together but that we are better than everybody thinks we are. So, out of that inferiority complex comes a feeling of superiority and we have had that for too long. Germany has to change.

“The English are like the Germans. They no longer know who they are – the British Empire has gone, they can't define who they are. The Scots are like the Bavarians. The Scots know very well who they are, what their traditions are and I would love Scottish-type patriotism for Germany. It's a positive, very inviting patriotism. I like Scotland. I like America – I like how positive they are. I studied Literature and Philosophy at the German equivalent of the Open University, so I could travel. I lived in America when I was 17 and loved it – North Carolina – very friendly people and I watched lots of stand-up comedy on TV. That is where it started for me.

“I tried to be a writer for a long time but that meant I just stayed in trying to write and never went out meeting people I could write about. I was not quite normal. I got wrapped up in what I wanted the writing to mean rather than just telling a story. I did the whole writing thing until I was in Valencia when I saw an ad for a hotel entertainer in Magaluf and I thought... That's what I'm going to do.

“When I was in Majorca, I realised I liked being on stage and met my girlfriend of the time, who was British. She had lived in Tenerife and persuaded me to do some compering and comedy for British audiences there who were not, on average, all that clever. Wonderful people and I really enjoyed compering for them but, whenever I tried my stand-up, if I made any reference to anything that was outside Jordan and The X-Factor, they did not get very much out of it. If you add in a lot of racism and a bit of sexism, then you have a good comedy act for Tenerife.

So did he add in racism and sexism?

“Well, I went to borderline things where I thought, I can still live with saying this and feel morally OK with it and not hate myself. But there was some stuff I could never have done with a clean conscience. It wasn't that terrible, but I would not like doing it for a long period.”

And did he get stick from predominantly English audiences for being German?

“Oh yeah, plenty! Sometimes I would say to someone in the front row: Don't worry. Being German is not contagious: it's not like you're going to wake up at five in the morning with an incredible urge to invade Poland...”

“But, often, if I said that, the audience just sat there puzzled because, as my girlfriend explained to me, they had no idea what

Poland had to do with anything. These were not 18 year-olds; they were all older people but, to them, the Second World War was just England v Germany and England won 5-1.

“I had lots of material I could never do and so, just over two years ago, I came to London to do 'proper' comedy. And, of course, my selling-point in Britain is that I am a German. There is an English obsession with Germany, but I think it's getting less and less. It's more or less the media who keep it going.”

But there is a feeling here in Britain that the Germans do not have a sense of humour.

“We do have a sense of humour but there's a much bigger internal division between the different states and between people's behaviour in public and in private than in any other country I know of,” he replies. “There is the personality you have in private and the face you show to the outside world. In the workplace, there's no place for humour or screwing around. In private, you can be a completely different person.

“I was at a wedding in Hamburg a few months back – my girlfriend's friends – and the father of the bride was told I was a comedian and he tensed up. He thought I would go round later making jokes about it and anarchistically destroy everything that he saw as beautiful.

“I think in Germany, there's a fear of chaos. Humour is great, but it has its place; it is dangerous if there is too much because it might just corrode everything. That's what I love about Britain. Things are more relaxed.

“Here in Britain, I want to be a comedian first and a German second. I do not want to be a comic German. I want German to be the adjective and the noun to be Comic.

A few days after our chat, Paco got a second review for his show which he felt had not worked well.

The Broadway Baby reviewer gave Paco Erhard's 5-Step Guide to Being German a 5-star review.

