

Only joking!

An English friend of mine once worked for a company in Germany. He was taken aside by his manager one day and told that his behaviour in the office would have to change. To his great surprise he was told quite firmly that he had to stop telling so many jokes.

Notwithstanding the possibility that quality, rather than quantity was the problem here, the moral of this story is plain – in most sensible countries like Germany there is a time and a place for humour and that time begins after the working day has ended.

In the UK the idea of being reprimanded for trying to amuse your colleagues is, well, laughable. You are more likely to have trouble if you didn't make at least the occasional odd light-hearted comment. I worked in a factory in Scotland where the clowning was almost non-stop. Grown men would stick improvised 'tails' on each other, your belongings would be hidden, everyone had a 'funny' nickname and your bonus depended on how funny you had been that year. Alright, I'm only joking about that last bit but it did sometimes feel as if the 'comedy' was the serious business of the day.

Humour is to the British what politeness is to the Japanese, deep-rooted in our cultural history, intricately woven into the fabric of the language, and, for the natives, as automatic as breathing. British comedy is not necessarily superior to that of other nations (well, some think it is) but it is certainly more abundant. Puns and wordplay are positively ubiquitous, from shop and restaurant names (try the magical Turkish food at 'Abrakebabra') to newspaper headlines and advertising slogans. Even bad '**corny**' jokes are popular, hidden in our Christmas crackers and written on the sticks of ice-lollies. And if the Eskimos have 40 words for snow, the Brits may have almost as many for laugh – **chortle**, **titter**, **giggle**, **guffaw**. There's even one just for actors who '**crack up**' on stage - '**corpse**'. Humour is even competitive - a national 'battle of wits'. What other country has an annual comedy awards ceremony (watched by 10 million people)?

<http://www.britishcomedyawards.com/index.html>

So how does Japan compare? I once went to a performance of traditional rakugo where about half the elderly audience spent much of the performance asleep. As the performer finished though, they promptly woke up and applauded enthusiastically (?). I also once spent a perplexing lunchtime in the audience of *waratte ii to omou*. Sorry Tamori, I know it's OK to laugh but I'm afraid I didn't.

There are some similarities though – Britain has a fine tradition of double acts (manzai) - though minus the head slapping. And we do have different schools of comedy with Osaka's equivalent in the UK possibly being Liverpool, though this would be vigorously debated as almost every city in the UK boasts its own comedy heroes and local comic flavour.

Humour is a notoriously poor traveller and can be one of the biggest challenges for the student of British culture but it's definitely an effort worth making. The BBC offers free tickets to recordings of its comedy shows, which should prove a fascinating and unusual experience.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/tickets/index.shtml>

To get you in the mood, why not do a search on Youtube to sample some British comedy. May I suggest the following key words:

Blackadder
Victoria Wood – Two soups
Father Ted
Monty Python Fish dance
Talc and turnips

I hope you come across something amusing but if you don't **get it** (find something funny), please remember that humour is a matter of taste and entirely subjective. Or to misquote the bard:

'Nothing is funny or unfunny but thinking makes it so'.

Or, to misquote Tamori san:

'It's OK not to laugh'