

Ben Pope (Teme, 2006 – 2011) : President (2013 – 2014), Cambridge Footlights

As President of the Cambridge Footlights (2013-14), Benedict Pope OL stands at the head of a long line of illustrious predecessors: Sue Perkins, Richard Ayoade, Tony Slattery, Hugh Laurie, Clive Anderson, Eric Idle, Graeme Garden, Tim Brooke-Taylor and Peter Cook, to name but a few. Past presidents and past members of the Footlights have shaped the British comedy scene. Comedy is a most demanding art form requiring a quick intellect and an enquiring mind, in tune with matters of the moment, as well as performing skills and an innate sense of timing. Ben, who was Head Boy at Lancing in his Upper Sixth year, is setting out on a career in comedy – and is one to watch.



When did you become interested in writing and performing comedy, and were you inspired by opportunities offered at Lancing?

At Lancing, we were given a lot of freedom to develop our interests and talents. It was a wonderful experience, and you got out of the drama at Lancing what you put into it. I had never done any theatre before and the staff were really encouraging, for both performing and writing our own stuff. About the same time I started acting at school I discovered comedy, largely just from watching stand-up shows that were on TV, and was able to start writing scripts and trying things out on the Lancing stage. A few of us put together a charity sketch show one year, a little of which we'd written ourselves.

You have just completed your studies, graduating in Classics from Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. Classics are a helpful discipline for ‘mind training’ and have been the chosen university subject for successful comedians, including Natalie Haynes, who is a past member of the Footlights. Has the training in Classics helped you to write?

I suppose you could draw a connection. The study of Classics doesn't prepare you for a specific career, but it does give you transferable skills – and therefore many career choices. The breadth of my course meant I studied language, literature, history, philosophy and archaeology, so you're constantly juggling. I imagine some of my lecturers may have seen writing comedy as a bit of a distraction, but I reckon it's all good practice for spinning plates later in life.

How is one accepted as a member of the Footlights? Did you join when you first went to Cambridge?

Most members of the society join in their third year at Cambridge – it's something you work towards. The Footlights are made up of a small pool of people – this year, we've had ten in total (eight members, a treasurer and a senior treasurer). For our Edinburgh show and tour of Real Feelings, however, not all of the members are involved so we have been a cast of five, as well as our managers who liaise with the venues and organise accommodation and publicity, and a tech team.

Your involvement with the Footlights will have enhanced your experiences at Cambridge. How has it fitted in with your studies?

I've thoroughly enjoyed both my course at Cambridge and my time onstage. It hasn't been too hard to juggle the two, and I think it is really important for students to have another major interest to balance out and complement their studies – I'd have been bored otherwise!

How many shows do the Footlights put on?

There are fortnightly shows ('Smokers') in which half the material is written by members of Footlights, and half by students auditioned from throughout Cambridge University. The Footlights also put on three major shows in a year: the Pantomime, a musical written by members of the Committee; the Spring Revue, a 1 ½ hour sketch show; and the touring show. This year, we previewed the touring show in Islington, Little Venice and Camden, in London, as well as in Cambridge, before going up to the Edinburgh Fringe, where we sold out for the entire run. At Edinburgh, our performances were at 4pm – anywhere else that would be strange, but in Edinburgh it works, as there are events throughout the day and night. We've been delighted that our audiences have represented such a mix: from young people intending to go to Cambridge, to middle aged theatre-goers, and people who remember coming to see members of Monty Python when they did their touring show.

Our September tour in the US took in performances in Boston, Harvard, Yale, New York, Philadelphia, Sacramento, LA and San Francisco. In the UK, we are touring the show to a few select schools including Lancing.

There must be stiff competition to become President of Footlights. The Independent newspaper has called it 'the most renowned sketch troupe of them all'. How were you elected?

The title sounds far more impressive than the position is! It's largely an administrative position (ie lots of emails to send!) In the end there are very few people who are really in the running – I was just chosen by the committee the year above me. Nonetheless, the President is the figurehead of

Footlights who must ensure that the quality of its work never falls, and it's a real privilege, and a lot of fun.

Each Footlights President makes a specific contribution. What do you consider to be yours?

The Footlights has a national and international reputation, so my main focus has really been on not tarnishing that in any way. But I have worked quite hard within the university to make the Footlights more accessible, less 'elitist' – on either side of the stage (writing and performing) – and have encouraged more people to take part in its ventures. In the past, it has sometimes been thought to have a 'gentleman's club' atmosphere, but it is, in fact, just a student theatre group.

Lancing College and Shoreham Wordfest are delighted that you will be bringing your touring show, Real Feelings, to Lancing's Theatre (September 30 2014). As well as attending your evening revue, Lancing's pupils studying drama much look forward to the afternoon workshop that you and your fellow performers will run for them. What advice would you give anyone wanting to try performing comedy?

I don't profess to know any of the answers but if I had one thing to relate it would be to go and see as much as possible, write and perform as much as possible – that's really important. It's seems trite but practice really does make perfect. It's the same for a writer, actor or musician: you cannot create in a vacuum. We found the Edinburgh Fringe very inspirational this year as, every day, you're around other creative types doing similar things, seeing their shows and learning.

How do you fund your Footlights shows?

Our main home is the ADC Theatre (Amateur Dramatics Club) in Cambridge, where you can put on a show at almost no cost. This is an excellent facility with very helpful staff – so we make tend to make a profit there. Our Edinburgh run also did well, which helped to fund the US tour.

Real Feelings was written by you and your fellow actors. Do you enjoy collaborative writing?

Yes, immensely. Discussing the tone of the show and batting ideas around has been very satisfying and extremely productive. Six heads are better than one!

Real Feelings, performed by men, has been written by men. Is there currently less female talent in the Footlights?

It very much changes year on year. Last year the touring show (Canada) had three female cast members out of four, whereas this year we have five men. We hold open auditions for the tour show so it depends on the quality of those who apply and whether they work well together. There certainly is a problematic male bias in comedy that trickles down to our audition process – we just see fewer women in auditions and in shows, presumably because there are still fewer female professional comedians as inspiration on TV and in comedy clubs. Nonetheless, the Footlights has regularly produced exceptional female comedians and there is no reason for that not to continue.

Do you want to follow a career in comedy, and will you continue to work with other members of the Footlights troupe?

That's my plan – but this is a very competitive field. In the last decade there's been a comedy boom in Britain so it's a lot tougher than it used to be. That said, if I don't try it now, I will regret it later. Having graduated this summer, I'm hoping to move to London: I plan to do stand up gigs and to take another show to Edinburgh next year, fingers crossed. And yes, several of my co-members of Footlights and I are keen to continue writing together.