

# It's okay to call me a spastic, says comic Laurence Clark

Stand-up comedy today may not be something for the faint-hearted but how far can comedians push the boundaries of taste before they are considered unacceptable?



Laurence Clark

A controversial show coming to Carlisle next week may raise a few eyebrows but its creator is keen to show that people shouldn't be offended.

Laurence Clark's Spastic Fantastic is described as a show that flies in the face of a society that seems more concerned with political correctness and language than actually listening to disabled people.

It's being brought to the city by Prism Arts, a charity based at Warwick Mill near Carlisle, which supports disabled groups in Cumbria to realise their creative potential.

Political comedian Laurence, who was born with Cerebral Palsy, has been called a "sit down comic" by Cherie Blair and is a regular at the Edinburgh Festival.

Last year he began his attempt to reclaim the word 'spastic', a word that has been banished from British culture, through the power of stand-up comedy and hidden camera stunts.

As a word that originates as a medical term, Laurence says that the word spastic has followed him his whole life, from his first school to a playground taunt.

"Having seen a few stand-up comics in my time, I reckon I must be one of the few who, until now, haven't constantly used the word 'spastic' in their act. But if anyone's got that right then surely it's me?"

"It's a word that seems to have dogged me my entire life. My first school was actually at the time called the 'Percy Hedley School for Spastics'.

"They even had it written on a big sign by the entrance to remind all us students as we came in each morning!

"The teachers, doctors, care staff... pretty much everyone there would commonly refer to me as a spastic.

"I reckon my audiences will either be rolling in the aisles or stunned into a perplexed silence. I can't wait to find out which it will be!"

His in-your-face style challenges his audience to accept his unique viewpoint and delivery style.

"Black people, gay men and lesbians have all reclaimed negative terms that were used about them in the past," he said. "It's about humour, irony and seizing power by taking ownership of words that were once used destructively. In other words, it isn't what you say so much as who's saying it to whom."

Bringing comedy to Carlisle is a new venture for Prism Arts and while Glenys Braithwaite, development worker for Prism Arts, realises the controversial nature of the show, she hopes this won't stop people from enjoying a quality night of comedy. "Laurence appeared at a disabled arts festival at Rheged a couple of years ago and I thought he was really funny," she said. "There are plenty of people who say that you can't say this or that about disabled people but you never ask the disabled people themselves. People can be more concerned with being pc."

On the night Laurence will be supported by stand-up comedian Paul Betney, who has Parkinson's disease.

Glenys has already come up against some opposition when trying to promote the comedy night.

She said: "Some places I have taken fliers for the show have not been happy because of the title of it.

"Before I saw him I did wonder if he would be funny but he is a great quick-witted comedian in his own right.

"Other comedians may feel uncomfortable but because he has Cerebral Palsy it gives him a licence to say what he feels.

"People have been trying to get away from this term but it is actually a medical term.

"If you have experience of looking after people with Cerebral Palsy or Parkinson's then I think it will make you laugh or cry."

Laurence has already performed in Cumbria before, bringing The Jim Davidson Guide to Equality to the Theatre by the Lake in Keswick in March 2006 – a title referring to how Jim Davidson cancelled a show in 2003 because disabled people were sitting in his front row.

Now Laurence cancels if Davidson is on his front row.

Prism Arts works in partnership with DaDa in Liverpool on some projects and this show is part of DaDa Fest 2009 taking place in Liverpool.

Laurence Clark, Spastic Fantastic! with support from Paul Betney, is being shown at Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery in Carlisle on Friday November 27 at 8pm.

Tickets cost £7 (£5 concessions), available from 01228 618700. The event will be signed and the venue is accessible for all.

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