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INTERVIEW

Marcus Brigstocke: *God Collar Live*

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'I've got a God-shaped hole and none of the deities seem to fill it.'

(Marcus Brigstocke)

Southampton's Nuffield Theatre was packed for one of Britain's most popular unknown comedians, Marcus Brigstocke. For a number of years, Brigstocke has built a small but loyal fan base of middle-class bohemian lefties and know-it-all students, both of which have come out in force to see Radio Four's pompous poster boy.

Brigstocke looked like he could easily be one of his own fans. Gone was his usual stage wear of geography teacher tweed and it was replaced with jeans and a floral shirt ('Do television,' he advises, 'The amount of free clothes you get!'). Before the show he discussed the state of comedy with *Comedy Studies*: 'My attempt over the last few years has been to bring lecture and stand-up shows into sharp relief,' he explains, with the trademark stare of an irate teacher, 'Comedy is instructive.'

God Collar premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe and subsequently toured the UK. 'The great thing about the Edinburgh festival is you can write a show and it's a statement,' he says. The show is about God, religion and those who get caught up in-between. 'There probably isn't a God, but I wish there was. I've got some questions I'd like to ask him,' proclaims the show's tagline. And



Marcus Brigstocke. Photograph by Ian Tomey.

question he certainly does, the show being more of an open letter than a letter bomb.

The first act begins with Brigstocke in typically indignant mood, pointing his finger at everything from spiritual subjects to iPhone users. His introduction is a video sequence of interlocking religious symbols and sounds, some purposefully juxtaposed for effect, but it falls short of laugh-out-loud funny. Brigstocke enters the stage and, to his credit, holds it remarkably well. This crowd is his crowd and he knows this: 'The most important things in stand-up are the audience, your brain and your mouth: stand-up is a conversation between you and the audience,' he says before the show. It is this common ground that is the key to tonight's show, as Brigstocke is not one to shy away from a controversial topic.

As Brigstocke begins his act it appears that no faith or so-called expert on religion is safe from his ire. Anyone who is familiar with his radio shows will know that his contempt for these people is not the result of an underlying prejudice towards those different to him; he simply stands to point out their hypocrisies and failings. The problem is that by going on the offensive, Brigstocke essentially becomes no better than his targets; as he spouts his opinions on their ideals he sounds quite preachy (but with this audience he is already preaching to his flock). His assertion that atheists are not as clever as they think they are is very funny and especially apt for the evening.

The second act is a much more sombre affair. Brigstocke lowers his rifle and looks at the effect that the ideas of religion and spiritualism have on people, especially children. He talks proudly about his own children and their response to the idea of religion, but the show changes gear when he talks about his best friend, who had died some years before: a friend who had booked his first gig and was a major influence on his career. He stepped outside of himself for a few minutes to discuss how spiritual thinking affected his personal response to the whole event. For a comedian to speak so impassionedly about something so life affirming absolves his decision to choose emotion over laughter at this point. It is on this reflective trail of thought that the show ends, and Brigstocke leaves the stage to warm, if not rapturous, applause.

Brigstocke is an intelligent and passionate comedian. As he says before the show, 'I've managed to turn righteous indignation into comedy,' and for *God Collar* he certainly goes some way to support his own self-promotion. He does have some memorable punchlines ('Religion and war are like Ant and Dec: there's no point of one without the other,') as well as the ability to make an audience feel unnerved by his material but still laugh (just ask the guy who was outed as being circumcised). He is also never one to shy away from a controversial topic. For a one-man show predominately about religion and spirituality, he does manage to find humour in other places and people, not just deities. He can rant with the best of the religious fundamentalists.

The problem is that some of the show was not as funny as perhaps it should it have been. 'I am slightly embarrassed, but only slightly, that some lines have made it into the show, but they're going in, they need to be said'. For a comedian to forgo jokes in order to make a point sounds more like a lecture than a comedy show; indeed, Brigstocke admitted before the show that 'Comedically it's difficult to get people to change their ways, you're confronting people on their own terms', and you have to give him credit for being willing to use his voice to make a point.

One or two moments in the show caused genuine surprise at how far he was willing to go in his attacks. 'Some comedians talk about what they can't say,' says Brigstocke 'that's just self-indulgent'; his opinions are well informed, but they can still shock. The encore (which turned out to be a Q&A) felt very flat, especially given how tight the rest of the show was, but it did offer Brigstocke the opportunity to show his spontaneous comic skills.

Brigstocke admitted that the show did not have a point; it was more just a musing on the bigger ideas. 'Comedy can in essence change things, it can continue an idea,' he said before the show. While this performance may not have changed the world at least Brigstocke can be happy that his show has got people thinking; and when it comes to the complexities, contradictions and complications of religion, there cannot be a better point to make than that.

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