



Sketch comedy demands physical transformation, limited time frames for context and set up requiring shorthand visual cues. The audience doesn't want tedious exposition, so the Pythons or Dawson dressing up as housewives gave audiences a comfortable base.

The housewives in these cases worked very differently, of course. Whereas the Pythons relied on juxtaposition (these housewives are making jokes about Sartre), Dawson would draw on and exaggerate aspects of everyday life, a furrow that Peter Kay would later plough for all it was worth. Although not as globally successful, Dawson's housewife, complete with nuanced mannerisms and a sense of empathy, is arguably more subtle and subversive than that of Cleese, Palin, et al.

Modern day dress-up seems to work on number of levels in both stand-up and TV comedy. It's the TV-tried and tested shorthand to present a character that, through their clothes and accessories, can be recognised or at least provide context from the get-go.

Simon Munnery uses this approach with, for example, his security guard and Alan Parker Urban Warrior characters, and even though Munnery's surreal performances work best when they subvert expectations, you're at least coming from a place where the fundamentals of the character don't need to be introduced and fleshed out with much more than an opening sentence.

Graham Fellows as John Shuttleworth/Brian Appleton relies on even more subtlety in character detail, with a regionally-specific dialect and subtle variations in clothing all helping to round out his creations. This is a process that sketch and character practitioner and Edinburgh regular Caroline Hardie also looks for in her creations.

Hardie, whose regulars include an Australian feminist and a cockney Queen, admits that characters provide a safety net. "Costumes can change your body," she says. "You can go from looking lost and dishevelled in an over-sized coat to a power-crazed loon in a fitted jacket."

Hardie is also aware of the distance that the character can put between you and the material being performed. "It's a bit trite, but you're not 'you' when you're in costume. If a joke dies, don't blame me, blame 'her'," she says.

The details of a creation are of paramount importance. "I have been known to panic because I'm missing a hair clip that's intrinsic to a character," says Hardie. "It's not of course remotely important to an audience that's never 'met' a character before. But to me, when I see a portrait in my head of pretty much every character I do, if something's missing then it feels wrong."

Comedian Doc Brown agrees. "Half of any performance is about appearance and what you wear significantly speaks for you," Brown says. "It always bugs me when I see discrepancies in costume on screen. For example, when you see some movie where there's supposed to be a working class character on a council estate, and all their clothes look way too new and made by brands you've never seen on the street, it doesn't ring true. The wrong outfit can be the difference between someone believing in your performance and not quite buying it."

Brown pays a lot of attention to what he wears to perform. When asked if that practice comes from any particular influence, he says, "Probably [well-dressed English American rapper] Slick Rick. Not that I dress anything like him onstage – he basically dressed like Henry VIII – but I just remember him being asked in an interview why he dressed so flamboyantly and he said, 'Coz no one wants to pay to see a bum.' I took that to heart and decided to always look good at every single show with no exceptions."

Character can encroach on one's public, or at least the public performer's, persona. What began as an occasional character for Rich Hall now blurs into his panel show appearances, and the lines between his real self, Moe from the Simpsons and Otis Lee Crenshaw can be fuzzy.

A comedian I've performed with, Travis Elkin, performs a character similar to Crenshaw around the comedy clubs of the deep south in the States. Coming from a rural Louisiana background, Elkin – now a typical, educated city dweller – tours as Travis FromLongville, a persona that opens up comedic avenues for him.

"My character, at its basic level, is who I really am," says Elkin. "I'm able to express my own perspective in a way I wouldn't do off stage. I would never want to offend anyone, but if Travis FromLongville offends someone in order to