

INTRODUCTION

‘God is a comedian playing to an audience too afraid to laugh.’

– Voltaire

IN THE EARLY 1990S, Morrissey of The Smiths assembled and fronted an iconoclastic rock band with a semi-retired Penny Rimbaud. Poly Styrene of X-Ray Spex was in it, and so were a young Mr Scruff, novelist Will Self and one of The Proclaimers.

The idea was to create a new genre of rock music without resorting to the tired clichés of electric guitars, drum kits, or comprehensible lyrics.

The unorthodox results were unleashed weekly in Manchester pubs and at least twice upon baffled Glastonbury Festival audiences. In spite of the highly talented roll call, The Roquentin Society, as they were called, never managed to transcend cult status. Morrissey’s project is recorded in music history only occasionally as a curiosity. It is looked upon by young music fans with a sense of baffled awe: somewhere between *wo* and *wha-?*

Before you dash off to read about this in *Mozipedia*, I ought to confess that no such musical event ever happened. I made it up. But to hear about something similarly improbable, we shall direct our attention to the world of comedy.

Club Zarathustra was a very real cabaret creation, developed between 1994 and 1997 by comedians Simon Munnery, Roger Mann, and Stewart Lee. It was founded to showcase non-stand-up forms of comedy, and would eventually take the myriad forms of sketches, opera, monologues, poetry, pyrotechnics, dance, stunts, and high- and low-tech gadgetry. It was usually hosted by Simon Munnery's character, The League Against Tedium, and took place as a weekly club night in London. It also enjoyed two Edinburgh Festival excursions and a television pilot.

'At its best, it was wonderful,' remembers Kevin Eldon, who was one of the main performers. 'I'm very proud of what we tried to do and what we succeeded in doing.'

Likewise, Roger Mann looks back on it as a 'fantastic show [and] the only thing [he] ever wanted to be in.'

'How it was even spelled was one of its instant mysteries,' recalls *Independent* theatre critic Dominic Cavendish of the show that was sometimes promoted as *Kluub* Zarathustra*. 'A notoriety swiftly built up around it, bolstered by the fact that the show started just before midnight'.

Over the years, it featured pop comics, violinists, punk rockers, postmodern interpretive dances, brightly-coloured wigs, malfunctioning homemade contraptions, lectures, film screenings, slide shows, and melting ice.

* The *K* was quickly jettisoned, perhaps because the *uu* was confusing enough. Even so, the evening was playfully described in canonical promotional literature as 'Komedy Kabaret'.