

THERE'S NO ALTERNATIVE TO COMEDY

The Newcastle Comedy Festival is upon us for a third year. Actor, writer, local historian and Alexei Sayle lookalike CHRIS GOULDING - a man who has experienced stand-up comedy at the sharp end - marks your card

FIREWORKS at this time of year aren't all that unusual, but go down to Newcastle's Quayside on the night of November 1, and you may see the beginning of something a little out of the ordinary.

Accompanying the display will be a specially commissioned sound-track of familiar TV and radio show themes to help launch the city's annual Comedy Festival as it explodes into life for a third exciting year. And you may encounter the odd surprise guest, too!

Festival organisers are claiming that this is now the largest event of its kind in the country - and the host of attractions ranges from household names such as Julian Clary and Sean Hughes to some acts being seen here for the first time.

A total of over 60 shows will play at nearly a dozen venues in 11 jam-packed days of fun and frolics between November 1 and 11.



Chris Goulding

with the event's rapid success and I spoke to Dave while he was in London appearing at the capital's legendary Comedy Store.

"What we try to do is bring acts to Newcastle who wouldn't normally come," he explains. "We went in big right from the beginning two years ago. That's why it is now the largest festival of comedy in the country."

Well, he should know. Since he founded it in 1990, the Comedy Cafe (based at the Tyne Theatre on Newcastle's Westgate Road) has

gone from strength to strength. But a lot has changed since those heady days when comedy was being hailed as the "rock 'n' roll of the Nineties".

"Alternative comedy? There never really was any such thing," says Dave. "Only the media ever called it that. It's all just comedy - and that is whatever makes people laugh."

Undoubtedly the most unmissable gig is the one and only UK appearance in 1995 of American Stephen Wright, who appears at the Tyne Theatre on the festival's opening night. A serious cult figure in the USA, with film credits including *Natural Born Killers* and the voice in *Reservoir Dogs*, the deadpan surrealism of Wright's one-liners has brought him stardom on the comedy circuit and numerous appearances on network TV.

The distinctly international flavour this year continues with some of the most bizarre acts in Europe making their debuts on Tyneside. Perhaps origami isn't the first thing you might think of if you were trying to impersonate Madonna or Luciano Pavarotti, but Italian quick-change artist Ennio Marchetto does it all with paper.

Watching this genius wrap, fold, tuck and tear both paper and his body through a lightning succession of merciless caricatures like some living cartoon makes it easy to realise why he was such a huge hit both at the Edinburgh Fringe and the Montreal Comedy Festival.

Look out also for Harry Hill, whose *Fruit Corner* show on Radio 4 is the funniest thing the BBC has done for years. Now a rising star, Hill was first seen in Newcastle at the city's Comedy Cafe – a key venue on the nation's comedy circuit.

The fact that two of the festival's directors – Dave Johns and Paul Sneddon – are themselves professional comedians may have something to do

That view is very much reflected in this year's festival by a return to the region's more traditional comic roots. Several gigs are being played in working men's clubs by, amongst others, local clubland legend Terry Milligan and his nephew Mike Milligan – a slick and irreverently witty product of the Nineties boom, who is very much from the same mould as his uncle.

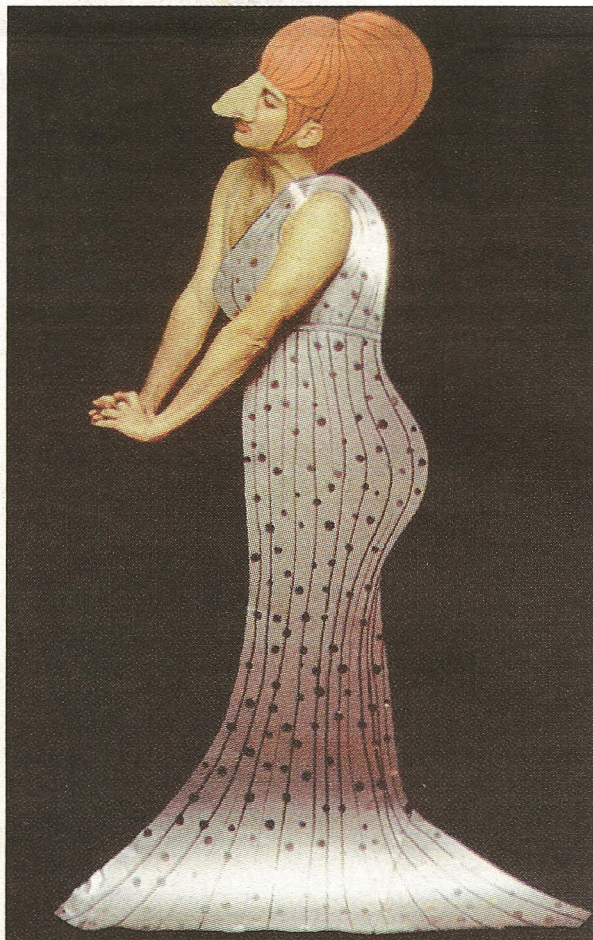
The fact that these club evenings will be compered by local-lad-made-good Mickey Hutton – nowadays more used to appearing on TV's *Hearts of Gold* – underlines the cross-over between the old and the new.

To bestow a true festival atmosphere, there will also be a number of outdoor events – including the Natural Theatre Company, who are to hit the streets with their own brand of wandering quirkiness; don't be surprised if you encounter groups

of outlandish cone-headed aliens in the city centre.

Even the river becomes a venue on Bonfire Night itself, when Arthur Smith's ferry cruise, *Carry On Up The Tyne*, takes to the water.

But when I spoke to him, the hard graft still wasn't over for Mr Johns. He says festival co-organiser Christine Alderson has given him the job of collecting 100 milk bottles to use for launching the fireworks rockets on opening night. It would seem that a comic's work is never done. ■



Ennio Marchetto in one of his many guises

• For a festival brochure containing full details of all events, ring (0191) 281 7448.