

O'Doherty hits pay dirt with soil erosion comedy

Lenny Ann Low

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Grassroots ... Claudia O'Doherty's show has festival appeal. *Photo: Marco Del Grande*
Claudia O'Doherty is not interested in soil erosion.

Sediment migration, gully erosion, tillage - they all bore the Sydney performer deeply.

Which is why she created *What Is Soil Erosion?*, a staged demonstration of a 26-episode TV series she yearned to make.



"But no one would let me because it's too boring and stupid," she says. "So I'm presenting the entire first series in an hour on stage."

While the fictional TV show was branded "boring, formless and unwatchable" by TV commissioners, its stage counterpart has pulled impressive numbers at this year's Melbourne International Comedy Festival, Imperial Panda Festival and Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

Tonight, *What Is Soil Erosion?* begins its latest season at Belvoir St Theatre, featuring lasers, a maligned offstage technician, a lot of facts and O'Doherty's intently serious manner.

"The show's all made-up and silly and full of stupid jokes and I think they work much better if you're very straight-faced about it," she says.

It has been a rapid career rise for the 28-year-old and her brand of absurd, tongue-in-cheek humour.

O'Doherty, whose father is the New Zealand-born artist and musician Reg Mombassa, is considered one of Australia's hottest young comedy performers.

With no drama or art school training, she formed the theatrical sketch group Pig Island with Nick Coyle and Charlie Garber, winning awards and critical praise here, in New York and Edinburgh.

Her debut solo show *Monster of the Deep 3D* won best comedy at the 2009 Melbourne Fringe Festival and the Brisbane Comedy Festival award. She was awarded best newcomer at last year's Melbourne International Comedy Festival, was a nominee for the Philip Parsons young playwrights award and has performed her solo shows in London's West End.

She also co-wrote the book *100 Facts about Pandas* and the upcoming *100 Facts about Sharks* with fellow comic David O'Doherty (no relation).

She is not, however, a stand-up comedian - the performance style that dominates fringe and comedy festivals.



"I don't know if what I do is character comedy - some people say that it is," she says. "I'm just being a more ridiculous version of myself."

She doesn't believe stand-up comedy is tougher or that her style of comedy is any less personal than a comedian telling jokes about their life.

"Everyone is just basically trying to be funny," she says. "It's just a slightly different way to get to the jokes. Stand-ups, they all have a persona. Stand-ups aren't, 'This is exactly me'."

"I think some people are completely comfortable with the idea of talking about themselves and revealing very personal things as their access to being funny. And some people aren't. I don't think either one is more legitimate than the other. But I think, 'Why would anyone want to hear about my life?'"

After day jobs on Australian Museum and Sydney wildlife park admissions desks, O'Doherty now earns a living from creative endeavours.

She's planning next year's solo show for Melbourne, London and Edinburgh, working on a children's play for Arena Theatre Company and each Sunday co-hosts Pig Island's radio show on FBi.

"I feel very excited and very lucky," she says. "The comedy industry isn't as big here as the UK, but you can do stuff with less pressure. It's a bit more piecemeal but it's probably a nicer place to live."