Twitter Thread by Joz Norris



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I have finally recovered emotionally enough to tell the story of a Zoom corporate gig I did earlier this year which ended with the client interrupting what I was doing, asking me to do something else, and me responding by playing "Happy Birthday" on the clarinet and hanging up.

I was booked to do half an hour of comedy over Zoom for the furloughed employees of a financial tech company. I was given some instructions - "Make fun of Harry for his haircut, and for Phil Booth [names changed] for his lack of one!" I took this to mean that Phil Booth was bald.

I was also specifically asked to do my "Star Wars routine." This was a routine I wrote for geek comedy night @DearHarrySpock in January that requires in-depth knowledge of Star Wars Episode IX, but the client said "Quite a few of my staff will really love it!"

I was also told that all the employees would have been sent a hamper containing Champagne and chocolate biscuits, and decided to incorporate this into my act so I had one as well, so I went out and bought a bottle of Champagne, a hamper and some chocolate biscuits.

My approach to comedy usually revolves around getting things wrong, being stupid, messing up, making mistakes, being silly. I wasn't sure how to communicate this tone in the context of a Zoom corporate without it just looking like everything I had planned to do was going wrong.

My housemate came up with a brilliant idea, that I pretend to be a children's entertainer booked in error, thereby setting up a silly, ridiculous tone from the start so that everything that followed would look deliberate rather than like I was just getting things wrong.

So I set about writing a bespoke half-hour routine in which I played a character called Mr Boingo, who was dressed as a hot dog. There was going to be a great bit where I asked where Phil Booth's hair was, and made everyone search their homes for Phil Booth's hair.

Eventually I would find Phil Booth's hair (a wig) under my desk, and become upset and start crying because I didn't understand how it had got there. Then I would stick my head into my hamper and come out transformed into a wacky baby in a basket, like so.



I joined the Zoom link I'd been sent 20 minutes before the gig so I could run the premise past the client and ask for his co-operation with it. At one minute before the gig start time, the client called me to ask where I was. He had sent me the wrong Zoom link.

I quickly said "I'm going to pretend to be a children's entertainer called Mr Boingo booked in error - can you go along with it and pretend to be annoyed at the mix-up?"
"Why would I be annoyed with what you had prepared for us?" Said the client.
"It's going to be funny," I said.

"But I don't understand why it would be funny for you to do something that would make me annoyed," said the client.
"Don't worry about it," I said, and joined the correct Zoom link. This is the first point at which the client can see that I am dressed as a hot dog.

"Hello everyone, it's me, Mr Boingo! Where's the birthday boy?" I shouted. Confusion reigns. There is silence. "Oh no, I've been booked in error! I thought this was a birthday party!" I said. "Can you all say Hello, Mr Boingo?" About two people said "Hello, Mr Boingo."

"I could barely hear that, let's try it again!" I said. About three people did it this time. "Have you all got your hampers?" I said. My plan was to get someone to pass me a hamper "through" their webcam, and then pretend I had stolen their Champagne and biscuits.

"What hampers?" said one of them.
"I thought you had hampers with Champagne in them," I said. Silence.
"I'm drinking some vodka," said one of them. I held up my hamper and Champagne.
"Well I've got Champagne," I said. Silence. I decide to move on to my Phil Booth's hair routine.

"Nice haircut, Harry!" I say. This gets a laugh. "Now where's Phil Booth?"
"Here I am!" says a man with long hair.
"Oh, you've got long hair," I say.
"Yeah, I need a haircut," says Phil Booth.
"Ah, right, I see what's happened here," I say, then there's a pause as I have a think.

Despite it no longer making sense, I ask everyone to search their homes for Phil Booth's hair. Nobody does. I hold up a wig and start crying.
"Do your Star Wars routine," says the client. I ignore him, and decide to press onto my wacky baby bit.

I stick my head into the hamper and transform into a wacky baby. A couple of people on the call go "Urgh." I try to play peek-a-boo with one of them, so he goes and gets his eight-year-old daughter and brings her onto the call to play peek-a-boo with me. It goes on for a while.

The middle of this gig is a blur. I think I fell back on some old stand-up routines, but I don't think they went very well. About twenty-five minutes in, I notice one guy has a cartoon picture of a school classroom as his Zoom background. "Why've you got that?" I ask.

"I quite like classrooms," he says.
"Do you hang out in a lot of classrooms?" I ask, not really thinking about how that sounds.
"What do you mean by that?" he says, defensively. There's a pause while I think.
"Are you a teacher?" I ask.
"No, I work for this fintech company."

"Oh yeah," I say, and try to move on. The client interrupted me again.
"Do your Star Wars routine," he says.
"Ok, who likes Star Wars?" I say. Silence.
"It's ok," says someone.
"No big Star Wars fans here?"
"It's alright," says someone else.
"Who's seen Episode IX?" Silence.

"This routine doesn't really work unless you've seen Episode IX," I say.
"I thought it was just about Star Wars," says the client. It's coming up to half an hour now, so I find the two people who've been enjoying it the most and ask them to sing Happy Birthday in Dutch.

I play along on the clarinet, which I was keeping out of shot for emergencies, and then wave goodbye and hang up.
My housemate has been listening from outside the door to the entire thing, and has found it very funny. As I leave my room she starts clapping and I burst into tears.

In between bouts of sobbing I said "I spent ten years getting good at a particular way of doing things and a particular way of making stuff, but I can't do it any more. It's all gone and now I'm just a stupid man being stupid, and it's not funny any more."

And that's why I don't do much online comedy.

Still got paid, though. Nice clients, would recommend.