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Iben Hjejle ... Iven
Lars Hjortshøj ... Hjortshøj

Director of Photography
Jacob Banke Olesen

Production Designer
Rasmus Thjellesen

Editors
Morten Egholm
Martin Schade

Composer & Sound Design
Kristian Eidnes Andersen

Title Music
Bent Fabricius Bjerre

Written by
Casper Christensen & Frank Hvam

Producer
Louise Vesth

Director
Mikkel Nørgaard





THE TEARS OF A KLOWN

by Sergio Angelini

Klown (Klown) began its ongoing journey through the Danish media landscape as a determinedly edgy and risqué TV sitcom in 2005, simultaneously trading and trampling on the image and reputation of entertainers Frank Hvam and Casper Christensen. Given that they are its creators, main writers and stars, this begs the question: just how near the knuckle is this depiction of 'Frank' and 'Casper' meant to be? If pushed, to the uninitiated one could describe the duo to British viewers as a bit like the Ant and Dec or maybe the Vic and Bob of Denmark. Like those cheeky Brits, they are national celebrities known to the public for their work in stand-up as well as situation comedy and variety – Christensen even hosted the local version of Vic and Bob's mock panel show *Shooting Stars* as well as the Danish editions of such gameshows as *Deal or No Deal* and *Don't Forget Your Toothbrush*.

Like most of the regular cast, Frank and Casper are billed as 'themselves' but what we get are specular versions of their public personas, reflected in a very darkly-hued, albeit often screamingly funny, metafictional conceit. Indeed, the 'iteration' of the two celebrities as presented in *Klown* is relentlessly mortifying, their misadventures designed to reveal a seemingly endless list of shortcomings. Frank is the foolish if often well-meaning protagonist, sometimes naïve but also stubborn once he gets an idea in his head. Casper, his best friend and business partner, usually plants the seed of said ideas, which invariably get blown out of all proportion because they play on Frank's many and varied insecurities. It is Casper's selfishness and unbridled libido that usually gets them into trouble but as he is a born survivor, he usually proves sly, conniving and savvy enough to get out of their scrapes. Frank, lacking Casper's zest, energy and low cunning, is the designated patsy. Often stripped of all dignity and left only sporting his trademark white vest and Y-fronts combo, he invariably has to pick up the pieces and face the music alone (which, in the film, lands him with a six-month prison sentence).

Playing with Yourself

Television sitcoms have historically often invited an unusually high degree of audience identification by linking the lead actor with the role they play. These include such genre-defining classics as *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-57), *Hancock's Half Hour* (BBC, 1956-61) and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-77), continuing through to the likes of *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988-98), *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989-98), *Everybody Loves Raymond* (CBS, 1996-2005), *et al.*



Klown however belongs to a narrower subset of these, a band of self-reflexive sitcoms stretching back to the earliest days of TV comedy in which the stars really are meant to be taken to be playing a close version of themselves. One of the first examples of this was *The Burns and Allen Show* (CBS, 1950-58), starring married comedy duo George Burns and Gracie Allen and featuring, occasionally, their real-life children Ronnie and Sandra. Burns would break the fourth wall throughout, commenting on the narrative of the episode, a somewhat Pirandellian approach that succeeded in making the show more intimate by feathering in audience participation as part of the joke within the fiction. From at least a familial standpoint, the nearest British equivalent to this at the time was *Life with the Lyons*, which featured the husband-and-wife team of Ben Lyon and Bebe Daniels (who was also the head writer), and their children Barbara and Richard. All were billed as ‘themselves’ and were hugely successful at it, the show proving a hit first on BBC radio (1950-61), then migrating in parallel to TV (BBC/ITV, 1955-60) and in the middle of that also getting spun off into a couple of movies too. This playful approach became downright postmodern in *Kelly Monteith* (BBC, 1979-84) and *It’s Garry Shandling’s Show* (Showtime, 1986-90), which brilliantly deconstructed the sitcom by having its characters know that they were a fictional reality, slipping in and out of it throughout. The metafictional universe inhabited by *Klown* is more grounded though and is probably mostly inspired by Shandling’s glorious media satire *The Larry Sanders Show* (HBO, 1992-98) and Larry David’s sphenetic *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (HBO, 2000-11), with their consummate blurring of the real and the fictional.

Ultimately though, if one wanted to sum *Klown* up for the British viewer (and in the process do it something of a disservice), what it really feels like most of the time is Simon Nye’s *Men Behaving Badly* (ITV/BBC, 1992-98) crossed with the strictures of the Dogme 95 ethos.

Dimension Dogme

Like *The Office* (BBC, 2001-03) and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Klown* adopts a *cinéma vérité* style with its handheld camcorder video shooting. That naturalistic, deliberately unadorned aesthetic is one that in Denmark we associate with the Dogme movement and the films of Thomas Vinterberg and most especially Lars von Trier, and in the case of *Klown*, the link is a direct one. Not only is Zentropa, von Trier’s production company, behind the series (and the spin-off movies) but the great polemicist has himself been involved directly. Having already appeared as himself in one episode, he then went on to co-write ‘It’s a Jungle Down There’ in collaboration with Christensen, delivering one of its best episodes (it is included in this release). It deals with Frank and Casper’s sense of abandonment when their respective partners Mia (Mia Lyhne) and Iben (Iben Hjejle, who was Christensen’s off-screen partner at the time) go off together for secret classes with a sex therapist. Behaving as usual like adolescents, Frank and Casper go and spy on them and are found out, and what emerges

is a funny and very von Trier dissection of male attitudes to, and sense of ownership over, women’s bodies (the group leader scolds Frank on his use of proprietorial slang: “‘Muff’ is very condescending. The vagina is a temple of desire”). The willingness to address big and controversial themes in a naturalistic comedic context in a completely unforgiving manner is what really gives *Klown* its edge, though as a result many viewers are likely to watch each ensuing catastrophe through their fingers.

Kringe Komedie

‘Fremdschämen’ is the German term that adds the squirm factor to *schadenfreude*, so that instead of extracting satisfaction from somebody else’s misfortune we actually share his or her sense of awkwardness, embarrassment and yes, even shame. Indulging vicariously one’s own social discomfort lies at the heart of the comic sensibility of *Klown*, which, from 2005 to 2009 across six seasons and 60 episodes, would see Frank get himself into an embarrassing hole every week – and then just keep digging. He is often remarkably obtuse about the most trivial things. In one episode, not wishing to go swimming, he blurts out, “seen from an evolutionary standpoint, going in the sea is a step backwards. It’s like admitting defeat.”

The show handled a variety of treacherous topics over the years, ranging from homophobia, paedophilia, pornography, breast and testicular cancer, prostitution, racism, masturbation, mental health, intravenous drug use and even cannibalism. In one episode, Frank, at Casper’s instigation, aggressively tackles a player at a celebrity football match (Mads Mikkelsen appears as himself), only to learn that when pushed headlong in the bushes the man landed on a needle and contracted HIV. If the tone can seem callous in a very *Seinfeld* way (there is even an equivalent of the ‘soup Nazi’ in one episode), in the sixth and final season some real emotion does sometimes creep in among the awkwardness. When Mia is arrested for drug trafficking, after heroin is found in the teashop she co-owns, Frank breaks down when it looks like she might spend years in jail. The situation is only resolved when, in typically soul-destroying fashion, Frank finds a sex tape that gives Mia an alibi, much to the couple’s chagrin and the amusement of the local drug squad. Most of that season was also devoted to Casper’s mental health issues as he succumbs to depression, which goes from him not being able to get out of bed to ultimately being hospitalised. This is handled with notable restraint, though the show’s trademark matter-of-fact style doesn’t impede Casper from still being his usual self (on learning that Mia has never reached orgasm, he insensitively opines, “Just relax your snatch. That’s what it’s all about”).



The Horror! The Horror!

In the closing moments of the 60th and final TV episode, Frank endured another body blow to his self-esteem – having planned to ask Mia to marry him while on holiday, the engagement ring was lost and had to be retrieved from the intestines of their recently deceased friend Bodil (long story...). Frank proposed anyway, and predictably was rebuffed. *Klown: The Movie*, released in cinemas with great success the following year, picks up the story shortly after but makes many of the modifications and ‘upgrades’ usually associated with a movie spinoff. The aspect ratio widened from 4:3 to 1.85:1 and the narrative scope expanded too, taking our protagonists on a perilous journey downriver. In an early scene, Frank is thrown out of a book club for admitting to not having read the current text, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and before long, he and Casper undertake a canoe journey that will mirror Marlow’s search for Kurtz. Ostensibly Frank is trying to prove his worth as a parent, having discovered not only that Mia is pregnant but also that she is considering an abortion (“I worry you don’t have potential as a father”). This pays off a plot strand from the second year of the show, in which Mia and Frank tried unsuccessfully to conceive and ended up buying a dog instead (‘Muffi’ sadly later perished when their home went up in flames due to an unfortunate footwear fail on Frank’s part).

Told to look after Mia’s 11-year-old nephew Bo (Marcuz Jess Petersen) after her mother has to be hospitalised (this was due to Frank inadvertently blinding her in one eye due to a misfiring ‘pearl necklace’ incident), that night he immediately fails his in loco parentis test by fleeing the house when they are burgled, leaving the boy behind. Desperate to win Mia’s trust, he then in effect kidnaps the lad by insisting on bringing him along for a pre-organised holiday with Casper to prove his parental bona fides. This, despite the fact that this infuriates Casper as it is due to ‘climax’ with the smoking of allegedly the world’s best spliff at the Skanderborg Music Festival and visiting a brothel that is only open to a specially invited (and all-male) coterie one night a year. Several catastrophic misjudgements ensue, mainly revolving around the size of Bo’s penis and Casper’s sexual escapades, with Mia and Iben turning up at the worst possible moment to scold them. Having the boys reach their come-uppance through the intervention of their female partners is a trope admittedly overly used in the TV show. However, it works much better in the more expansive film, their appearance feeling much less contrived thanks to not being constrained by the shackles of the 25-minute sitcom running time.

In taking the boys ‘on the road’, the movie follows the traditional and well-travelled trajectory of cinema spinoffs that goes back at least as far as 1955 with *The Lyons in Paris* and may have reached its nadir with *Holiday on the Buses* (1973) and *Are You Being Served?* (1977), which saw the staff of Grace Bros. jetting off to the Costa Plonka (in the

1970s, British cinema was so risk-averse that some two dozen sitcom movie spin offs were released). This approach continues to be used successfully, as seen in the likes of *Kevin and Perry Go Large* (2000), with the boys heading off to Ibiza; *Mr Bean’s Holiday* (2007), taking place in France; and *Sex and the City 2* (2010), which controversially had the girls try new fashions in Abu Dhabi. The latest to join the fray, *Absolutely Fabulous: The Movie* (2016), sees Patsy and Edina on the run on the Riviera.

This narrative strategy – providing added value by enlarging the canvas of a sitcom to entice viewers to pay to see in a theatre something otherwise available for free on the now not-so-small home cinema screen – is utilised modestly but effectively in *Klown: The Movie* with its extended use of the Ry lakes in Skanderborg giving it a very different feel from the television series. Also, the added length provides extra room to breathe in between calamities, the extended scenes between Bo and Frank being especially good, not least because we know that our hapless protagonist has finally met a truly faithful friend. Which of course makes Casper jealous, and leads to a final gag so excruciating that it may have required reassurances to be made to the BBFC!

In *The Muppet Movie* (1979), the furry friends decide to go Hollywood, as would the Danish duo in their second spinoff movie, *Klown Forever* (2015), in which Casper heads to LA for a solo career after his breakup with Iben, with Frank following in the hope of getting him back. However, that is another story entirely...

Sergio Angelini edited the educational quarterly Viewfinder for a decade and was the reviewer of TV home video releases for Sight & Sound magazine from 2005 to 2014. He currently blogs on crime and mystery fiction at Tipping My Fedora (bloodymurder.wordpress.com). Previous print publications include contributions to, Gilbert Adair Festschrift (Verboracious Press, 2014); Mysteries Unlocked (McFarland, 2014); The Cult TV Book (IB Tauris 2010); Investigating Alias (IB Tauris 2007); Directors in British and Irish Cinema (BFI, 2006).



A person in a canoe is shown on a misty lake. The person is wearing a hat and a jacket, and is holding a paddle. The water is calm, and the background is a soft, hazy landscape. The overall mood is serene and quiet.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Discs and Booklet Produced by Kevin Lambert and Anthony Nield

Executive Producer Francesco Simeoni

Production Assistant Liane Cunje

Technical Producer James White

QC Manager Nora Mehenni

Authoring & Subtitling The Engine House

Artist Danny Hellman

Design Obviously Creative

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Sergio Angelini, Alexander Martin, Neil Rodrigues, Sigrun Rodrigues,
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