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Too quick for Switzerland

Hazel Brugger has radically changed Swiss stand-up comedy. She is now on the way to becoming a star in Germany – we join her on a road trip.

BENNO TUCHSCHMID

“Bastard!” Hazel Brugger hisses into the dictaphone. She landed in Basel-Mulhouse airport 15 minutes ago. From Munich, where she interviewed Markus Söder, the Bavarian CSU Finance Minister, for the “heute-show”. In other words, a leading German politician for the most popular late night show in Europe’s largest TV market. She now has to get to Solothurn quickly for a gig. On the motorway just after Basel a car moves into the left-hand lane without indicating. Brugger sits in the passenger seat drily recording on the dictaphone: “A VW Polo has just cut us up on the motorway. It wasn’t our fault.” Away from the motorway, nobody is currently overtaking Hazel Brugger. She is constantly moving in the fast lane somewhere between the major German TV scene and the small stage in Switzerland.

Brugger wrote an email two days earlier. She said she would be pleased to do an interview but asked whether she could be picked up at Basel-Mulhouse airport. An interview in the car would be “mega inconvenient” but “brilliant”. Brugger is now sitting in the car. In her left hand she is holding the device to record the interview and in her right hand her mobile phone to navigate. What is happening right now to her career is hard to explain. “I am just feeling the stress of scheduling.”

Germany’s next star

Hazel Brugger, the 23-year-old daughter of a neuropsychologist who grew up in the Zurich suburb of Dielsdorf, is on the point of becoming a comedy

star in Germany. To put this into context, the last and only Swiss comedy star in Germany was Emil. Then there was Marco Rima. In short, Brugger is operating in a vacuum.

From the overtaking lane we take the Augst turn-off towards the A1. Change of lane. Brugger says into the dictaphone: “Glance over the shoulder, exemplary!”

The pace at which Brugger’s career has progressed has increased exponentially over the past year. She has been performing on the stage since the age of 17. She has been the darling of the cabaret scene for years. In 2015, she won a young journalist of the year award for her columns. She then became columnist of the year in 2016. By way of confirmation, last year she also won the “Salzburger Stier”, the Oscar in German cabaret. And, since last November, at the very latest, when she went on tour in German-speaking Switzerland with her “Hazel Brugger happens” stand-up routine, everyone beyond the cabaret scene has also been aware of what a remarkable comedic phenomenon she is.

Brugger has revolutionised the approach to stand-up in Switzerland in no time at all. Until she came along it was mainly good-looking young men who appeared on stage telling cool jokes – Colgate comedy in the style of Fabian Unteregger or Michael Elsener. Brugger’s principle is radically different. She reveals: “Stand-up only works for me when uncool people are uncool on stage.” It is the principle of coming clean based on the American ethos of this genre: painful, pitiless, self-destructive honesty.

Brugger is unique in Switzerland thus far. And in Germany, too, there



are few comparable acts, according to the most powerful man in German TV comedy. Stephan Denzer is head of the comedy and cabaret department at ZDF and therefore in charge of the trio of German comedy shows: “heute-show”, “Die Anstalt” and “Neo Magazin Royal”. In February 2016, Brugger did her first stint as a guest

reporter for the “heute-show”. She visited an election event being held by the German far-right AfD party where she took part in a verbal strength test and engaged in incessant repartee with the AfD troops. It was this appearance that opened doors for her in Germany. Brugger has since been a permanent guest.

An immediate hit in Cologne: Hazel Brugger has caused a stir with her appearances on the “heute-show”.
Photo: Ornella Cacace

Most recently she attended the CDU party conference in December and verbally lambasted the assembled top brass of this major German party. Denzer remarks: “Hazel Brugger is a massive hit here in Germany.” As Denzer likes to keep successful acts for himself, Brugger is to appear regularly on the “heute-show”.

Gaining the upper hand over Jan Böhmermann

The Swiss comedian proved that she is ready for Germany last September when she gained the upper hand over the German late-night presenter Jan Böhmermann. As a guest on his hipster comedy show “Neo Magazin Royal”, she exposed a different side of Böhmermann to the audience. Böhmermann stammered and giggled. He was unable to deal with Brugger. Böhmermann said: “It’s hard being a woman on the comedy circuit, even in Germany. I don’t know if anyone has ever told you that.” Brugger replied: “I thought for a minute you were telling me that woman to woman.”

Brugger now has an apartment in Cologne. Germany is her natural market, not just because she speaks standard German without a trace of accent thanks to her German mother or because, in contrast to Emil, she avoids Swiss clichés but also because comedy in Germany has a different status to that in Switzerland. She says: “If you mention in Cologne that you work on the “heute-show”, it opens doors for you. In Zurich people refused to rent to me because I appeared on Giacobbo/Müller.” She then glances at her mobile and says: “Take the next exit. That was fast.” Yes, Hazel Brugger certainly moves at quite a pace.

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