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Take me seriously. Now laugh at me! How gender influences the creation of contemporary physical comedy

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This paper unpacks some of the complexities of the female comic project, focussing on the creation of physical comedy, via multiple readings of the term “serious”. Does female desire to be taken seriously in the public realm compromise female-driven comedy? Historically, female seriousness has been a weapon in the hands of such female-funniness sceptics as the late Christopher Hitchens (2007), who (in)famously declared that women are too concerned with the grave importance of their reproductive responsibility to make good comedy. The dilemma is clear: for the woman attempting to elicit laughs, she’s not serious enough outside the home, and far too serious inside it.

Keywords:

Comic body; feminist humour; physical comedy; gender

Introduction

The female-gendered subject is a heavily loaded site of inquiry. She invokes a density of scholarship, a plurality of feminisms, her body a contested locus of meanings and meaning-making. This paper unpacks this contest by suggesting how multiple readings of the term *serious* have implications for female bodies in physical comedy. If, as Mack Sennett declared, the body of mother is too serious (*sacred*) for pratfalls (Dreiser 1928), then the female body in the public realm is a trivial simulacrum (*she matters less*): “[s]he might be a Booker Prize winning author, politician, scholar, miner or comedian, but let’s cut to the important question: *what does she look like*” (Goldsworthy 2013, 22). Overshadowing this dilemma is the seriousness (*no laughing matter*) of the contemporary feminist project and its apparent incompatibility with comedy (Wilt 1980). I use these multiple meanings of seriousness to illustrate how such challenges operate simultaneously on the female comic body, often situating it as a permanent other within the field of comic performance. Drawing upon contemporary exemplars and interviews with key practitioners, I suggest that, although the female physical comedian faces significant challenges, it is possible for female bodies to be simultaneously funny and serious, and seriously (*truly*) funny.

Before the gag

Peter Brook’s foundational text, *The Empty Space* (1968) begins with an oft-quoted aphorism:

I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged. (Brook 1968, 11)

Over forty years later, British stand-up comic Catie Wilkins describes in an interview how an M.C. once introduced a fellow comic, saying: “this next act is a woman” (Moon 2012, 219). The theory may have changed —such sexist language as Brook’s would be almost

unthinkable now—but the reality of performance practice remains the same. The atomic unit of theatre is the movement of a man in empty space. If something different occurs—“the next act is a woman”—attention must be drawn. Female is used as an adjective that changes the default subject, which, on investigation, is clearly predicated as male. For the female-gendered comedian, her gender has made a statement before the gag as it were, whether the gag is verbal or physical. Such a statement instantly renders her less able to be taken seriously, as both her work and her judgement are qualified by her gender:

Women artists are frequently seen to be incapable of making "objective" statements in the same way as their male counterparts. Interpretation is bound up with the subjective and the personal, with the experiences of being bound within a body marked female. (Ashby 2000, 46)

It follows, then, that when scholars examine comic bodies they are in effect analysing what causes *male* bodies to be funny, as in texts from Henri Bergson (1900) and Alan Dale (2000). Seen in this context, iconic French physical theatre trainer Jacques Lecoq's ideal of the “neutral body/mask” as a basis for building comic performance is revealed as highly questionable:

When a student has experienced this neutral starting point his [sic] body will be freed, like a blank page on which drama [and comedy] can be inscribed. (Lecoq, Carasso, and Lallias 2000, 38)

Physical comedian Sue Broadway was informed at the outset of her career that this “freedom” was not readily available to her gender:

For a start, they said, the clown is androgynous and it is impossible for a woman to be androgynous. She carries her sex around with her as a constant. (Broadway 2005, 76)

The strategies employed by some successful female comedians demonstrate the difficulties of being in a comic body where the performance of gender seems to dominate any other performance. Indeed, utilising Butler's (1990, 270) famous suggestion that gender is “an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts,” we can understand how these bodies attempt to un-perform their gender before the gag. In the field of stand-up comedy Phyllis Diller is an exemplar of this strategy, wearing a “disguise to diminish her gender ... [a] shapeless garment to cover her body up and to keep the attention on the comedy” (Lavin 2004, 22-3). In Diller's own words:

And the reason I developed things like [wearing a bag dress] was because I had such a great figure. So I had to dress so that they couldn't see any figure because I wanted to make jokes. (Kohen 2013, 16)

While Diller attempted to camouflage her gender, others opt to perform another gender than their own. Vesta Tilley, whose vaudeville-era male impersonations were highly celebrated (Wandor 1998, 171) was one such drag king. However the comedic efficacy of such strategies is questionable:

Male transvestism is an occasion for laughter; female transvestism only another occasion for desire [since] ... it is understandable that women would want to be men, for everyone wants to be elsewhere than in the feminine position. (Doane 1997, 184)

Peggy Shaw, of celebrated female comic duo *Split Britches*, is also equivocal about the comedic power of female-to-male drag:

[...] wearing a suit, I have to work ten times as hard to get laughs. ... whereas Bette [male performer from clown troupe Bloodlips] would come out ... in a frock and it was hysterical. (Personal communication, July 28, 2012)

Even if transvestism is not explicit in comic performance, gender play is often assumed. A turn-of-the-nineteenth century critic described how famed “fat woman” comic Marie Dressler performed her physical feats with “the courage of a bad boy” (Glenn 2000, 58). In a 2011 *New Yorker* article, comic actress Anna Faris is described, only half-facetiously, as being “funny like a guy”. The implication is clear, for women to be funny, they have, to some extent, to take on characteristics of the male, valorising Martin Grotjahn’s assertion that “[t]he modern comedienne appeals to us without frightening us by impersonating a man in clever disguise” (1957, 99).

Peta Tait (2005, 132-3) notes that in contemporary circus performance, the small number of female comic performers in this genre take on “conventional male clown types” involving “accidental slapstick, hapless stumbling and bumbling without malice.” Louise Peacock (2009, 77-8) describes the work of the two “most famous” contemporary female clowns, Nola Rae and Angela De Castro, as “traditional” physical clown strategies such as interactions with inanimate objects and foregrounding bodily functions. However, like their female vaudevillian antecedents, they “regularly perform as masculine characters, or as characters costumed and made-up in such a way as to make gender seem insignificant.”

Some female physical comedians go one step further, re-performing their gender so that they are, in effect, women playing men playing women. Indeed it could be argued that Diller, with her “platinum fright wig and garish frock” (Kohen 2013, 11) could also be considered in this category. Mae West stands as the most prominent historical exemplar of the female drag queen (Balcerzak 2013, Visconti 2014) whilst in the contemporary comic canon, the all-female world of the television series *Absolutely Fabulous* showcases Jennifer Saunders and Joanna Lumley, whose Eddie and Patsy characters form a double drag act involving larger-than-life gaudy costumes, massive drug and alcohol consumption and an undercurrent of narcissistic nastiness (Saunders 1992). It seems that, for these comedians, the noise of their gender is too loud to be ignored; to be taken seriously in their field, gender must be played with, mutated, re-presented in some way. Why is this so? What, exactly, is the problem with the female comic body?

Sacred mother/ awkward Other

In her thoughtful response to the tenure of Australia’s first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, Anna Goldsworthy mused upon why the female body seemed to be the cause of so much collective anxiety:

Is it because we have designated the female body our prime sexual site—thereby engendering a curious double vision in the way women view their own bodies, as both objects and subjects of desire? ... Or is the problem that we owe a female body our existence and the debt is too large to forgive? (Goldsworthy 2013, 9)

Indeed, says Julia Kristeva, who concludes that “[f]ear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power” (Kristeva 1982, 77). The womb, source of all “generative power,” is a prime location for understanding Kristeva’s ubiquitous concept of abjection, which is useful in understanding the anxiety around the female body.

The abject permeates borders that divide binary concepts and this destabilises the ego, inciting horror, in Kristeva's terms, analogous to the experience of the living being confronting the corpse:

In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away... It is not the lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. (Kristeva 1982, 4)

Kristeva's analysis of the abject in literature turns to Joyce and the compromised position of the female body, which is interchangeable with the maternal body:

[...] feminine body, the maternal body, in its most un-signifiable, unsymbolizable aspect, shores up, in the individual, the fantasy of the loss in which he is engulfed or becomes inebriated, for want of the ability to name an object of desire. (Kristeva 1982, 20)

Like the corpse, the female body cannot be signified, they are both an "'other' without a name, which subjective experience confronts when it does not stop at the appearance of its identity" (Kristeva 1982, 59). This inability to be given a signifier, to be named, has deep implications for the female comic body, as I have argued elsewhere (Boyle 2013). As a repository of abjection, unnameable and liminal, her body is slightly blurred, out of focus. We can't quite see her, or place her comfortably in our comic ontology.

The abject female body is not merely un-signifiable, she is also connected, inextricably, to the womb. As Kristeva postulates, abjection is the ego's struggle to come to terms with physical embodiment, manifesting in revulsion of that which evidences bodily life:

Excrement... stand[s] for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. (Kristeva 1982, 71)

However there is a particular kind of abjection engendered by menstrual blood, which, in contrast to excrement:

[...] stands for the danger issuing from within the identity... it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalisation, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference. (Kristeva 1982, 71)

For the pre-menopausal female physical comedian, whose body produces such a threat each month, there is thus a form of abjection specific to her. Mack Sennett, an iconic performer/director in slapstick cinema who directed Normand and Chaplin, invoked this fear when he famously maintained that "no joke about a mother ever got a laugh" but old maids could be subjected to "anything this side of torture and [still] get a laugh" (Dreiser 1928, 186-8) In the slapstick film context, the prohibition on mother-jokes extended to the treatment of the young heroine, putative mother of the hero's children (Dale 2000, 95). This is because "physical comedy itself is seen as a form of impurity, as if pratfalls, even though at the level of character and story they are clearly unintentional, imply that the heroine is altogether too physically available" (Dale 2000, 101).

This quandary is present in the physical comedy of Mabel Normand, one of the most celebrated female slapstick artists of what James Agee termed the Golden Age of comedy (1958), a star of the Keystone movies and the subsequent Mack and Mabel films. Normand was famously an inspiration for Charlie Chaplin (Scheinmann 2013, 2); however her comic

turns apparently never reach the iconic heights of her mentee. Here Dale compares the two comedians' lazzo¹ in the short film *Mabel's Married Life*:

Mabel re-enters for some more tumbles at the end, but she doesn't have the same clarity in the slapstick that Chaplin has. Her pratfalls aren't physically characteristic, as even the dummy's are. (Dale 2000, 103)

The key word in this analysis is “clarity”. Despite her centrality to the comic world – she is no mere prize for the pratfalling hero, but an active participant in the slapstick – for Dale, her physical comedy is not as clear, and hence, ultimately, as successful as Chaplin's or, indeed as the lifeless mannequin featured in the film's climactic scene, which sees Chaplin and Normand engage in a punch up with a bottom-heavy mannequin that swings back when hit, knocking each of the real bodies in the scene to the ground. By unfavourably comparing the clarity of Normand's performance to the mannequin, Dale is invoking Bergson's (1900)² body-as-machine principle and in a sense he is correct – Normand's pratfalls are somehow floppier, less mechanical than Chaplin's and are indeed less funny. However, this “floppiness”, which has the effect of tempering her falls by lowering her centre of gravity and allowing her body to hit the ground with less damage, is the result of her designation as “putative mother of the hero's children” for whom care must be taken. Normand's physical presence is predicated on her role as wife – as the title of the film implies. Her signature physical gesture is an impetuous fling of her arms out wide, either embracing her bumbling husband or, in his absence, the world in general. She's a lover, not a (slapstick) fighter.

Buster Keaton was strong in his conviction that there were limits even in the anarchic, consequence-free world of slapstick:

[...] there are just certain people you just don't hit with a pie. That's all there is to it. If I had a *grande dame* who is dogging it, putting it on. She's a grey-haired woman but she was so overbearing and everything else that the audience would like to hit her, then you could hit her with a pie and they'd laugh their heads off. But if she was a legitimate – an old lady and a sincere character – you wouldn't dare hit her. (Terkel 2007, 120)

Compare Keaton's statement about the “legitimacy” of characters disqualifying them from being pie-in-face victims with the aforementioned saw from Mack Sennett regarding what one could “do” to female characters in a slapstick setting, and there's an interesting conclusion to be drawn. The body of mother is too serious (sacred) to engage in slapstick, unlike the body of an unmarried older woman. Ergo, an old maid—a woman who has not used her uterus for the function it was intended—is illegitimate, insincere, a worthy target for pies and not a serious (real) woman.

Is this Catch-22 situation still operating on the female comic body? In an interview, physical comedian Leon Cain muses on the gendered differences in the contemporary slapstick world. Significantly, he draws on the trope of the hobo or tramp clown as exemplified by Chaplin as his frame of reference:

I guess there's something more serious about an outcast female. Like, it's easier to laugh at a trodden on male ... But if you see trodden on female with a child, that's not so funny. (Personal communication, December 10, 2012)

Even though the male genitalia do, obviously, contribute to the production of children, the grimace of pain and the exaggerated hunch of the male comedian who has just been assaulted in that area can be framed as a comic moment. Could the same be said of a punch to a

pregnant woman's belly? The late atheist-provocateur Christopher Hitchens (2007, 2) quotes Kipling with a straight face in his *Vanity Fair* article when naming women's "higher calling", that is, the production of children, as a barrier to their funniness. In his conception (pun intended), the female body is reduced to one organ: the chronically un-funny uterus.

If the female body is not performing mother, that is, if she is situated in a public rather than private/familial frame, another gendered performance threatens the comic project: the performance (or otherwise) of beauty. At the dawn of the 20th century, critics saw "female comic performance as a problem to be analysed, as a manifestation to be dreaded and pitied, as a detraction from the possibilities of feminine charm and beauty" (Jenkins 1992, 248). Situating beauty and funniness as mutually exclusive is a recurring trope in humour scholarship, as Hannah Ballou (2013) notes. Indeed female practitioners have based their craft upon this assumption; Susan Glenn (2000), Kristen Wagner (2011), and Harry Jenkins (1992) identify the use of "ugliness" as a comic strategy:

Female comics working in the theater in the early twentieth century frequently made the "flaws" in their appearance a central element of their acts, establishing a tradition that would be continued by film comediennes. Especially on the vaudeville and burlesque stages, comediennes saw their lack of physical beauty not as an impediment but as a source of comedy. (Wagner 2011, 37)

Glenn (2000, 58) details how female artists of the vaudeville and silent-film era deliberately "sacrificed" their beauty, pulling "grotesque" faces and "lumbering around" the stage often engaging in "'contortions of the most violent kind'". Phyllis Diller was sure that "it helps a stand-up comic to have something wrong – to either have buck teeth, no chin, weigh five hundred pounds, have funny hair, or be too skinny or too tall or too something" (Kohen 2013, 16). In this comic proposal, the female body is abject, in Kristeva's terms, but deliberately so, utilising what Deborah Covino describes as "performative abjection" (2004, 7). That which the ruling discursive order brands as revolting – the grotesque, unruly female deviant – is celebrated and utilised for comic effect (Russo 1995, Rowe 1995).

However, this self-conscious dichotomising of the performances of beauty and comedy places the female comic body in a double bind. If she is beautiful, she cannot be funny; if she is not, funny she may be, but how seriously can she be taken as a woman? On the available evidence, not very. As Broadway notes in an interview, "women are trained to judge themselves by visual aesthetic benchmarks" (Personal communication, July 20, 2013). In his aforementioned *New Yorker* analysis of contemporary Hollywood comedy, Tad Friend cites producers who claim that feminine vanity proscribes female funniness while simultaneously insisting that the lead female in a comedy must be "adorable." Even the preeminent voice of Germaine Greer weighs into the debate, foregrounding the size of Australia's then female Prime Minister's bottom over her policy stance (Greer 2012). British stand-up Jo Brand describes her perception of how her body is read throughout her performance:

I think that the fact that you're a woman means that as soon as you appear on a stage, you're being assessed by the men for your potential attractiveness. That is infused through society so many times over that it's not even worth mentioning. (Sobott-Mogwe 1999, 138)

The gravity of the pretty/funny dilemma is demonstrable by the impact it has upon practitioners of the craft. In an interview, comedian Louise Brehmer shares a very personal experience of being gendered female and trying to make physical comedy:

It's purely my own insecurities about my own body shape. ... That's a block that I have. And I suspect that women probably face that more than male physical comedians. Not to say that

that guys aren't worried about their appearance. I think that for me there's just a whole lot of issues that go with that. (Personal communication, August 20, 2012)

Lucy Hopkins' award-winning one-woman show *Le Foulard* stages a female comic body in multiple guises. In an interview she, too, acknowledges how regulated gendered performance haunts the female comic body:

... as women, we always have our self image present with us, following us around, in a way that men don't nearly as much. They just don't. ... If a woman doesn't have her self-image it's a bit weird. (Personal communication, May 10, 2013)

“Weird” because such a woman would be unsubscribing, somehow, from a key feature of female gendered performance: constant monitoring of how her body image is projected. She continues by supporting Brehmer's summation regarding the implications of this haunting for women trying to make their bodies funny:

But I think the elephant [in the room], the blind spot, is that a lot of male teachers [of physical comedy] don't appreciate that women struggle with beauty, they're like “look, you're blocked here, you're blocked here, with their students” and they don't know that of course they're blocked, because they're living with that [the struggle with beauty]. (Personal communication, May 10, 2013)

In an apparent reframing of this debate, Ballou (2013) argues for the addition of a funny “heteronormatively sexy female body” to the comic pantheon, contending that such a body can exploit the gap between the expectations of un-funniness and the reality of comic situations such a body may create (183). Here her best example is of statuesque queerlesque performer Ursula Martinez turning her toned, naked body from the audience to display a tuft of toilet paper wedged between her buttocks (2013, 179). In some sense, Ballou's pretty/funny body is the contemporary (thus edgier, more overtly sexual) manifestation of the slapstick ingénue as exemplified by the aforementioned Mabel Normand, and including such performers as Elaine May, the young Joan Rivers, Carol Burnett and Mary Tyler-Moore (Kohen 2013). This trope sees the comic body perform femininity in a Western, heteronormatively correct fashion: “tall, thin, beautiful, white, cisgendered and professionally lit” (Ballou 2013, 185) whilst simultaneously engaging in Bahktinian grotesqueries.³

Do male physical comedians ever perform a comparable “correct” version of masculinity before or around their comic proposal? If so, is this performance as potentially exhausting as “the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, makeup, and dress” that Susan Bordo (1993, 166) identifies as a key part of the heteronormative performance of femininity? It can be seen that the female physical comedian is sometimes working a triple shift as it were, firstly working to overcome the disruption caused by the abjection inherent in her female body, then simultaneously maintaining and/or breaking established codes of gendered performance (through neutralising or double drag acts) and then offering her comic proposal.

After the gag

The feminist movement has long struggled with an imposed image of seriousness (earnestness) at the expense of humour. Indeed, Wilt (1980, 173) has described the meeting point between comedy and feminism in literature as a “collision” between two incompatible movements. The contours of this collision trace a division amongst comedy scholars around the question of whether comedy is inherently subversive or conservative. The form can be understood as a means to critique and overthrow power structures or as a deliberate hegemonic device to manage anarchic tendencies in the populace by giving transgressive

behaviour a sanctioned outlet: “while a custard pie may not seem like much of a weapon, humor has, in fact, historically been understood as an effective means of social control as well as a way of commenting on and changing perceived flaws in society” (Wagner 2011, 36).

The subversive model of comedy understands transgression in comedy as being purposefully anarchic, a tool in the fight against patriarchal, colonial and racist agendas, and it is this model that is most often utilised when scholars analyse comedy created by women. Most analysis of, specifically, *female-authored* comic performance is overwhelming concerned with transgression for social change, whether the comedy is in the form of film and stand up (Hubbell 2002, Lavin 2004, Rowe 1995, Starcevich 2001), or slapstick:

In many ways, comedy is an ideal genre for women to push boundaries and challenge traditional gender roles, as the genre has long been used as a means of masking transgression and of rendering acceptable a wide range of behaviours. ... While other forms of comedy were not as transgressive as slapstick, the genre still provided an excellent forum for boundary-breaking women. (Wagner 2011, 35-6)

It seems that for these critics, it is not enough for female comedians to be funny, they must also be attacking the patriarchy. Dominica Radulescu’s (2008) analysis of Caterina Biancolelli’s celebrated performance of the trickster maid Columbina in seventeenth century Commedia dell’arte performance is a case in point. Biancolelli’s performance was full of verve and wit but Radulescu is focussed upon how this performance operated to overthrow the tyranny of patriarchal gendered roles.

Two contemporary comic performances that literally place sexual organs centre stage, provide an illustration of how gendered difference can affect the choices performers (and critics) make when staging and reading bodies. The light-heartedly lewd *Puppetry of the Penis* which features men manipulating their genitals into various shapes turns a “boys’ bedroom prank into a theatrical extravaganza, celebrating with tongue-in-cheek innocence the flexibility of the phallus” (Sharp 2003). In contrast, Adrienne Truscott’s *Asking for It*, in which the New York-based performer gives a stand-up comedy routine naked from the waist down, is positioned as funny, but with a serious intent: “[t]here is a point to this provocation ... disguising a steely agenda beneath a charming layer of fluff and, yes, jokes” (Jones 2013). The difference between the intended function of both works is marked. *Puppetry of the Penis* operated as a simple exchange of bodily acts operating in a permanent present tense: we do, you laugh, transaction over. *Asking for It* was temporally fluid, part of a movement that did something to the audience and in turn inspired the audience to do something.

As I have previously maintained, this positioning of the female comic project only serves to compromise it (Boyle 2013). Just as Mary Russo’s grotesque woman glories in her liminal state, laughing on the sidelines with Bakhtin’s carnivalesque hags (Russo 1995, 73), the self-consciously transgressive female physical comedian can never truly occupy the normative subject space. She is never enough as herself. As comedian Michele A’Court noted on her blog in 2014 “[c]omedy still seems to be a place where we’re regularly made to feel “other”, where we’re asked the kind of questions that make you wonder if maybe you weren’t supposed to turn up”. Further, paradoxically, assigning a serious, counter-patriarchal function to female-authored comedy means the female comic never really takes herself seriously as a comedian, as Lois Weaver, the other half of *Split Britches*, explains in an interview:

See as women, we need to take ourselves seriously. Because nobody else does. So then when you do comedy, you need to not take yourself seriously. And that’s the problem ... the oppressed need to be taken seriously, and in order to be successful [in comedy] you have to NOT take yourself seriously. (Personal communication, July 28, 2012)

Beautiful-ugly-everything

How can such dilemmas be resolved? Is the female comic project ultimately doomed or is there, as a closer reading of Russo (1994) supports, a ‘third way’ of understanding the function of comedy?

The extreme difficulty of producing lasting social change does not diminish the usefulness of ... symbolic models of transgression, and the histories of subaltern and counter-productive cultural activity are never as neatly closed as structural models might suggest. (Russo 1995, 58)

In other words, there is a potential model that sees the comic engaged in a painstakingly slow dialectical struggle with society’s image of itself – never effecting change on a grand scale, but yet, over time, gradually modulating the systems of power, much as a mutant gene precipitates a centuries-long process of evolution, indeed Bordo (1993, 28) extrapolates from Michel Foucault to characterise gradual shifts of structural power in this way. As Andrew Stott explains, comedy “reflects dominant ideological codes, but ... it can also be the vehicle that challenges them” (2005, 102). In this model “humor that does not posit a corrective norm but continuously plays with the terms of norm and perversion” (Williams 1997, 374) can gradually help to redefine those very terms. Feminist humour, then, can be a playful undermining of the phallogocentric binaries of ideal/other, subject/object, normal/deviant to be a source of humour, working to “expand the discourse that mires social constructions of gender and open a site of playfulness that has been denied to women for far too long” (Hubbell 2002, x).

The maternal body and the “flawed”/beautiful body can be these sites of playfulness. In this sense, and in the spirit of Butler (1990), I propose a re-framing of the constructs of “mother” and “beauty/ ugliness” that acknowledges that they are, ultimately just that, constructs, or *disguises* that the physical comedian can manipulate for comic purposes. Such a re-imagining of the maternal body is challenging, but not, despite what Sennett says, impossible in contemporary physical comedy, as exemplified by Jennifer Saunders, who, as Edina Monsoon in *Absolutely Fabulous*, mother to the long-suffering Saffron (played by Julia Sawahla), falls headfirst down stairs, farts and vomits and engages in various scatological and sexual pratfalls (Saunders 1992). In this comic world, mother is a disguise that Saunders assumes to frame her physical absurdity, playing with audience expectations as she does so.

Similarly, beauty/ugliness can be conceptualised not as fixed physical facts but rather as fluid disguises. When the female physical comedian self-consciously highlights putative flaws in her appearance for comic effect, as identified earlier, she is really saying, “Isn’t it funny that I’m not beautiful the way women are meant to be.” In this way, she reifies a singular, restrictive concept of gender performance. In contrast to this rigid approach, Lucy Hopkins speaks of herself as having a range of performance options, some beautiful, some ugly:

When you accept how ugly you are, then you’re free, because then you can be beautiful and ugly, but you have to accept the thing you’re most afraid of which is that you’re ugly. I reckon. When I could go [speaking of herself] you are so ugly, I could go [onstage]. Then I’m not and then I’m everything. (Personal communication, May 10, 2013)

The freedom Hopkins identifies, connoting multiple possibilities for the female comic body, is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in the work of Miranda Hart, where she frames her body as beautiful or otherwise, dependant on the comic circumstance (Hart 2009).

In her television show *Miranda*, which she created, writes, and stars in, her body is grotesque (in the Bakhtinian sense) and sexy, ungainly and adept, often in a single episode. The initial comic proposal is her bodily presence; invoking Bergson's aforementioned body-as-machine principle, her joints and muscles seem to be disconnected from her brain as she trips over most obstacles. However this bumbling inability to deal with inanimate objects is juxtaposed with sudden lightness, as she dances, leaps and occasionally gallops through her world. Her actual physical shape – tall, larger-than-television-standard – presages what we assume will be a deliberately unsuccessful performance of heteronormative femininity for comic purposes, and initially she follows this script, flirting ineptly, kissing inappropriately (on the mouth for a friendly hello!) and unable to stay upright when Gary (played by Tom Ellis) the object of her desire is present. This performance is then destabilised by her sudden sexiness, and the audience becomes aware of the palpable attraction between her and Gary, only to be confounded by a pratfall or fart joke at a pivotal romantic moment.

It is interesting to note that the only character in the dramatic personae who mocks Miranda's physical presences and unmarried status as an inept gender performance is her mother. She is also, for the audience, the most unsympathetic in this fictional world. Knowingly and with sometimes virtuosic control, Miranda puts on the mask of beautiful/ugly/good/bad/lover/other, and by the very act of her "disguise", stakes a claim for her own, undisguised body, as being worthy to be taken seriously and thus to be seriously funny.

Female practitioners of comedy sometimes advocate a pragmatic 'shut up, let's get on with it' attitude when queried about the issues inherent in the female comic project, from Tina Fey (2012) who sends her questioners to the cheese table, to New Zealand comic Michele A'Court (2014) who "never wants to be asked the question again," to British stand up Catie Wilkins, who posits that "ultimately we should stop having the debate at all, as it makes it look there might be a real issue in terms of talent, and there isn't" (Moon 2012, 220). The tenor of such arguments seems to be that just because female comic performance is challenging, doesn't mean it can't be done. I argue that the corollary is also true. There are dilemmas at the heart of the female comic project that must be acknowledged in order for this project to reach its fullest potential. Through understanding the challenges of her gender, all frames become available for the female comic body and she is, in Hopkins' terms, free to be beautiful, ugly, everything.

Notes

¹ A term appropriated from *Commedia dell'Arte* referring to small units of physical comedy, often improvised, that do not advance the narrative but serve to showcase comic virtuosity.

² Henri Bergson's (1900, 3) century-old idea establishes that physical comedy is most potent when the body is least human, that is, when it can be imbued with the rigidity of a machine, forsaking the fluidity of the natural body and maintaining its trajectory with mechanic observance when impeded, say, by a slippery banana peel. Here Bergson ascribes the natural body with elasticity and an inability to be iterated that contrasts with the endless repetitive automaton.

³ From his seminal text of carnival theory, Mikhail Bakhtin (1968) identifies the grotesque comic body where the elements of the so called lower bodily stratum are foregrounded. This comic trope finds humour in the ineluctable urges of that stratum – the hungry stomach, the lusty genitals and the needing-to-be-voided bowel and bladder. Performance in this mode showcases the "uncivilised" body's struggle with discipline of social conditioning (Foucault and Sheridan 1977), hence the use of nudity and bodily functions.

Notes on contributor

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