

Drama essays - women in comedy



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The Changing Role of Women in Comedy.

How has comedy between 1950 to 2000 been used by female performers to highlight the oppression and objectification of women in society? What impact has this had on the contemporary female comedian of today?

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Introduction

Comedy is a form of expression which stretches and sometimes breaks boundaries. It crosses all kinds of boundaries, including those of gender. It can be risky because it often ridicules social and moral conventions in a way that challenges and threatens accepted norms, threatening the status quo. This is particularly true of women's comedy.

This paper will examine the way that comedy has been used by female performers during the period from 1950 to 2000, focusing on the themes of oppression and objectification of women in society. It will also analyze the ways in which the experiences of these five decades have affected contemporary female comics.

Chapter One gives a general overview of each decade, to explain the political and social climates of that time as a framework for examining the changes in women's roles. Included will be examples of different women comics whose experiences best represent selected aspects of that time frame.

This will be followed by an analysis of what people mean when they talk of a 'sense of humour' – what, exactly, *is* a sense of humour? Do women have a different sense of humour than men? Most of the literature about women comics touches on this question on some level; some of the literature goes into a great deal of depth. This is frequently done to respond to the assertion that has been made, repeatedly over the years, that women 'don't have a sense of humour'. This statement has been made most frequently by men.

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However, this same assertion has at times been leveled (often in an accusatory manner) by women toward other women.

Chapter One: A Sense of the Times

A. The Decade of the 1950s

The decade of the 1950s was a time of great change. Britain was entering a period of increased affluence and freedom, and many of the old social and cultural structures began to be challenged, particularly by the young. In Hollywood, as well as throughout the United States and North America, post-war sentiment lingered on and mingled with the confusion that accompanies times of great change.

In some places, such as Britain, this turmoil was exemplified by a tendency to pull away from formal religion. In the United States, this period was an era of economic growth mixed with a sense of conservation. At the same time, there seemed to be a professed belief in the old values; however, this belief was tinged with doubt. According to one scholar, the professed belief was 'mixed with a sense of unease that maybe the old values no longer held all the answers' (Sova, 1998, 106).

According to critics Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, the portrayal of women during the 1950s was generally considered to be negative. Women actors and performers were mostly typecast as 'dumb, ugly man-chasers or some image thereof' (Martin and Segrave, 1986, 203).

Some notable performers of comedy of this period include Judy Holliday, Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, and Joan Rivers. Blond comedian Judy Holliday, who
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had been appearing in films as early as the 1940s, continued to so do in the 1950s. She even managed to become a film comedy star in the 1950s, a feat that even Lucille Ball did not manage. Sova asserts that Holliday 'went for the laughs in an innocent manner', something which worked well for her in the 1950s, but which did not work for Ball either then or later (Sova, 1998, 120-121).

Holliday and Ball were similar in that they both played both straight drama, and then switched over later on to a comedic format. Ball, however, was not a larger-than-life presence on the silver screen, and she failed to attract the kind of interest that Holliday did. Hence, she never reached stardom on a cinematic level. Still, Ball is perhaps a more familiar name, even to this day. She went on to revolutionize television with her comedy partner and husband Desi Arnaz. In so doing, it may be said that Lucille Ball set the standard for what was then a fairly new genre, the situational comedy.

Phyllis Diller is another comedian who became known during this period, and has remained known to this day. 'Diller transcended "comediennes" of the day, if not femaleness itself, by announcing her arrival in the mid-1950s in the most outlandish manner imaginable,' asserts a contemporary of hers. He goes on to describe her entrance onto the stage: 'She landed onstage like a flightless goony bird - wielding her cigarette holder, piercing the nightclub air with her manic squawk, all beak and beady chicken eyes, and dressed in a deliberately garish getup' (Nachman, 2003, 216).

Susan Horowitz points out that Diller came out of the 1950s, 'a period which stressed and exaggerated sex-role differences' (Horowitz, 1997, 50). In

addition, it is significant to note that at the time Diller entered the profession of comedy – in the mid 1950s – female comics were practically non-existent. Commenting on her career as a whole, Horowitz asserts that ‘ both Diller’s subject matter – sex appeal and domestic competence – and the manner in which she handles it – self-deprecation – are Diller’s comedic take on the stereotypical 1950’s woman’ (Horowitz, 1987, 62).

This decade also ushered in Joan Rivers, who is described by a colleague as arriving upon the scene ‘ with forked tongue and sharpened talons. . . [she] bit and clawed her way to comic success and has clung to it for dear life’ (Nachman, 2003, 592). Rivers’ comedic approach has been described as ‘ a jolt of contrasts’: her rapid-fire manner of talking, combined with her wide variation of topics, kept her audience members on their toes.

Her comedic style is often attributed to background: she drifted between social classes, never feeling truly comfortable in any one category. Horowitz has described her as ‘ both an insider and an outsider, classy and déclassé – the private school student – whose family cannot pay the bills; the wealthy celebrity – whose act mocks the elite; the elegant lady – who talks about farts and pooping’ (Horowitz, 1997, 93).

Yet not even the most outrageous comedy act could compete with television. The growth of this television’s popularity had a strong impact on every aspect of society. Television had very quickly become more popular than radio, replacing it as the preferred form of entertainment in the home. In addition, more and more people began to have television sets in their homes.

The proliferation of television brought with it a change in style. Martin and Segrave explain that ' where radio relied on women mangling the language, television, in keeping with its visual nature, relied more on physical sight gags to convey " dumbness"'. Thus, this period hallmarked the combination of the dumb, blonde, buxom stereotype. At least on television, as opposed to radio, women were able to articulate clearly (Martin and Segrave, 1986, 204).

B. The 1960s

The movement away from the conservative fifties began and continued throughout the turbulent 60s in America. Revolutionary ways of thinking spread rapidly, and real change transformed the cultural fabric of American life. During this decade, consumption continued in Britain, but had become less connected with utilitarian needs, and more to do with status and comfort.

For women comics, however, the first half of the 1960s was one of the least productive in their history. Although in Hollywood the film industry was opening up more for women, the field of comic stand-up seemed to be at a standstill. Martin and Segrave do point out that there was at least one positive image in American humor to welcome the new decade. This one exception was Elaine May.

Elaine May was an example, and she represented what women could accomplish when given a fair and equal opportunity. May, according to Martin and Segrave, ' provided a sample of what was to follow as more and more female comics cast off the old images and stereotypes and broadened

and extended their place in the field of humor' (1986, 206).

What was noteworthy about May's performance is that she did not try to look ugly, the way so many women comics of this period seemed to do. In addition, she did not rely on self-deprecation the way other female comics did. She and Nichols shared an equal partnership – another rare thing at this time. Ordinarily the woman would play a foil to showcase the other, male, part of the duo.

Among the comics who started to become known during this time, one was Carol Burnett. According to Martin and Segrave, Burnett 'represented a performer who straddled the line between independence and submissiveness' (1986, 308). This was no easy task, given the hostile climate the world of comedy offered women. Horowitz points out that Burnett's style at this time was marked by self-deprecation: 'Burnett's self-deprecating humor was typical of comediennes of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and it served to soften audience resistance to the notion of an assertively funny woman' (Horowitz, 1997, 69).

Dave Tebert, the man who ran the talent department at NBC in the early 1960s, asserted that women were given the same opportunities as men, but that 'they were not aggressive enough or forceful enough to deal with the drunks and hecklers often found in the audience' (Martin and Segrave, 1986, 18). In addition, Bob Shanks, the talent coordinator for the *Paar* show, made an attempt to find female comics. Over a three-year period, however, he interviewed 500 women; only twenty of them were considered good enough to pass. He commented that 'the wit was missing' or that the women lacked 'quickness of response' (Martin and Segrave, 1986, 19).

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Comedy was performance arising from skill and wit, and performance was a male role. Funny girls would not be asked out on dates' assert Martin and Segrave (1986, 19). Being popular in school, having a date to the prom, being seen as attractive and compliant - these qualities were valued in young women and girls. Being clever and witty - key qualities for a comic, were not valued. There, most women of the time felt that given a choice, comedy should be submerged.

When men make clever jokes at women's expense, they may be considered great, insightful comics, assert Martin and Segrave. On the other hand, women who do the same at the expense of men may be labeled such derogatory terms as 'ball-busters or man-haters'. In fact, 'women are not even safe poking fun at other women. They are considered anti-female or catty' citing Joan Rivers as an example of this (Martin and Segrave, 1986, 20).

C. 1970s-1980s

The 1970s was a time of gradual change. According to some, 'the decade of the 1970s was one of slow but steady growth in the number of women entering or reentering facets of the film industry that had been closed to them for decades' (Sova, 1998, 153).

Laugh-In had hit the airwaves at the end of the 1960s, and once it was firmly entrenched, it showcased a variety of women comics. In fact, it was the first time that so many comedians had so much exposure since the days of vaudeville. *Laugh-in* helped a number of comics to get exposure and start

careers. Among these were Goldie Hawn, Ruth Buzzi, JoAnne Worley, Lily Tomlin.

Lily Tomlin brought some unique skills to the industry through her intelligence and creativity. She did this through the creation of new comic characters. In addition, she was able to perform several well-received stage concerts. Her film career has been less successful; this may be partly due to the poor selection of roles she has been given.

The beginning of the Women's Movement in America in the late 1960s and early 1970s of course had an effect on women in comedy throughout the United States and Britain. Comedians who began to appear during this time include Bette Midler, Sandra Bernhard, Madeleine Kahn, and Marilyn Sokol. *Laugh-In* continued to display women comics. In addition, shows like *Shows* like *Saturday Night Live* and *SCTV* helped start the careers of such comedians as Gilda Radner and Andrea Martin.

The 1980s did not see much improvement. 'Comediennes with anything to say were being labeled "hostile" or "too masculine" (Martin and Segrave, 1986, 312).

The most phenomenal rise, however, was the unprecedented number of women who had begun to appear in comedy clubs as stand-up comics. These new women comics dealt with women's issues, such as fashion, menstruation, weight, hygiene, being single, sex and relationships. These topics were often part of the self-deprecating humor that continued to mark women's humor through the remainder of the century.

During this time, it should be noted that very few minority women appeared in this profession. The great exception was Moms Mabley, who managed to overcome exceptional obstacles in gaining acceptance in the world of primarily white male entertainers.

Chapter 2

Women's 'Sense' of Humour

In their 1986 volume *Women in Comedy*, Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave assert that female comics are a rare commodity. The explanation for this, they assert, lies in the commonly held belief that 'women are just not funny... they don't laugh at jokes, nor do they create them'.

To support their assertion, Martin and Segrave describe a magazine article written in 1951. A writer named Robert Allen wrote an article about women and humor for *Maclean's*. Allen bemoaned the fact that women never seemed to know when to laugh at a joke, or they often failed to laugh at all. He claimed he had experimented at home, and that he used different kinds and different styles of humor, but that his 'subjects' never seemed to get the jokes. To be fair, he said he tested people outside his own home, including a 'variety' of other females. Still, he got the same results with that group.

After all this, he stated that the only conclusion he could draw was that women have no sense of humor (Martin and Segrave, 1986, 16-17).

It is interesting to note that it never occurred to Allen that he might be the one who was not 'getting it'. It also interesting to note that Allen's article

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was considered important enough to eventually make it into *Reader's Digest* as a condensed piece – but this did not happen until thirteen years later. Considering the fact that most *Reader's Digest* condensed articles appear within months of the original publication, a lag time of thirteen years is rather remarkable. As Martin and Segrave suggest, ' this illustrated perhaps the timelessness of the idea and the need to present it again in a different decade, to a new audience just at a period when the image of the female comic was beginning to be liberated' (1986, 17).

The humorist James Thurber, writing contemporaneously with Allen, wrote a piece in which he addressed an anonymous Miss G. H., who had sent him some unsolicited comedy material. He responded to her material by suggesting that she ' become a bacteriologist, or a Red-Cross nurse, or a Wave, like all the other girls'.

The most scathing criticism at the time, however, came from a woman. Sarel Eimerl wrote in a November 1962 issue of *Mademoiselle* that ' a woman who really makes one laugh is about as easy to find as a pauper taking his Sunday brunch in the Edwardian Room' (Martin and Segrave, 1986, 17).

It appears that in the 1950s and beyond, women were thought – mostly by men, but also some women – to be lacking a sense of humor. That belief has not been completely eradicated to this day. In her essay ' Gender and Humour', Lizbeth Goodman analyzes the following joke from Banks and Swift's 1987 book on comedy:

Question : How many feminists does it take to screw in a light bulb?

Answer : That's not funny.

Goodman goes on to explain that although the idea of the joke is simple, that there is a great deal more going on. This joke is, in fact, ' an example of an accessible and non-valORIZED form of social critique, which functions as a mirror of the values of the dominant culture' (Goodman, 1992a, 287).

It is also interesting to note that this joke is familiar to us. It has been repeated any number of times in recent years, each time with some detail changed. Often the change is in the choice of target. Different minority groups may be featured as the target, depending on the context of the telling. Therefore, the teller of the joke is implicitly stating that women, too, are a ' minority'. According to Goodman, ' that women are singled out as a " minority" group, despite the majority of women in society, is indicative of the male bias of society and its values' (Goodman, 1992a, 288). Horowitz points out that, like other groups that have suffered discrimination, women are classified as a minority group by affirmative action programs; however, ' unlike ethnic minorities, women are a numerical majority' (Horowitz, 1997, 8).

Goodman also points out that the fact that women are so frequently targeted in jokes in western culture is significant in itself: ' that women are so often the butt of jokes in western culture says a great deal about that culture'. It reveals, for example, that the jokers are usually men. It also reveals that the listeners are deeply immersed in the patriarchal culture. In fact, Goodman takes this a step further. She points out that the listeners are steeped in the patriarchal culture ' to the extent that certain types of responses are " gendered": for instance, loud laughter as opposed to quiet hand-over-the-mouth giggles' (Goodman, 1992a, 288).

Another way to analyze this joke, Goodman suggests, is to take into consideration the fact that the value of the joke does not lie solely within the joke itself. Rather, its value depends on other factors. One of these factors is the context of the telling; the other is the interpretation of the hearer. She cites Adrienne Rich's 1979 reinterpretation of the joke, explaining that doing so 'requires an awareness of the context of the joke's production and an ability to decontextualize the joke mentally' (Goodman, 1992a, 288).

By doing this, the joke can be interpreted in such a way that it is not an insult to women, or an insult to feminism. Instead, it becomes a critique of the simplistic notions that are commonly held about women in society - and especially about women who are feminists.

This ultimately brings us to the rhetorical question about women and humour: *do* women have a sense of humour? Linda Naranjo-Huebl answers this in the affirmative. She also includes an explanation of how this humor is different. 'One of the common findings of all the gender and humor studies is that there does in fact exist something that can be identified as women's humor', she asserts. She then explains that it is a 'distinct' form of humor, 'characteristic of and arising from women's experience that serves distinct communicative functions associated with that experience' (Naranjo-Huebl, 2005, web).

Linda Naranjo-Huebl asserts that 'the stereotype of the humorless female has stubbornly persisted, reinforced by studies concluding that women use humor less often than men'. She puts forth three theories to explain why this stereotype has persisted for so long.

The first explanation has to do with women's use of language. Women are generally brought up to be polite, and the language of humour is often impolite. In addition, humour tends to be aggressive, and women have traditionally been discouraged from expressing any sort of open aggression.

The second explanation for the continuation of this stereotype is that 'much of women's humor has been either censored or misinterpreted' (Naranjo-Hueblo, web). That is to say, women do have a sense of humour, but it has largely gone unrecognized - a situation which is still being rectified today.

Not only have examples of women's humour been censored and misinterpreted, but also the methodology of the studies has frequently been flawed. The methods used, primarily those created by men, tend to favor male forms of humor. The results then falsely 'prove' that women lack a sense of humour.

Naranjo-Hueblo explains one such study, in which 250 undergraduate business students from a major university were asked to answer questions regarding a hypothetical situation. The situation consisted of the students pretending that they were with a colleague; the colleague is carrying a briefcase which suddenly becomes open, resulting in papers flying all over the place.

The students are then asked how they would respond: would they ignore the episode and keep on walking? Would they assist the colleague by stopping to help pick up the papers? Or would they tease the colleague or in some other way express humour? Each student was allowed to choose only one response.

As one might expect, the majority of men chose to respond with humour, while the majority of women chose to help. This creators of the study assumed that one couldn't be helpful and humorous at the same time. Furthermore, it led them to conclude that women did not have as great a sense of humour as men. Naranjo-Hueblo points out the choices do not include the possibility that women may be humorous about the situation as they are assisting their colleague. Furthermore, ' another problem with the study is that it posits " humor" as a one-line quip in a slapstick situation, which is not women's preferred form of humor (Naranjo-Huebl, web).

The third reason women have been found to lack a sense of humour is that humour has largely been defined by men. Women find humour in different sources, often preferring word jokes and puns as well as stories, whereas men prefer much more derisive forms of humour. ' It has always been more acceptable for masculine styles to influence feminine ones, rather than vice versa. . . The powerless take on the trappings of the powerful' (Horowitz, 1997, 9).

Chapter Three: Issues in Stand-up Comedy

- Being a woman
- Traditional gender expectations
- Aggressiveness
- Sexuality and Femininity
- Power and Control Issues
- Modes of Stand-up Comedy
- Self-Deprecation in Women's Humour

- Self-deprecation in the work of Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers
- The domestic goddess

A. Being a Woman

As stated earlier, comedy is a form of expression which stretches and sometimes breaks boundaries. This is very true in the case of stand-up comedy. Stand-up comedy ridicules the norms of society. It challenges convention, and it questions moral views.

in particular has a tradition of ridiculing moral, social, and political conventions. The stand-up comedian is frequently considered as existing on the fringes of mainstream society.

For any stand-up comedian, male or female, a number of factors come into play when they are in front of an audience. What race are they? What is their ethnic background? What is their sexual orientation, or what does it appear to be? Are they disabled, and is that uncomfortable for the audience member? When you add gender into the mix, it becomes that much more unpredictable. The reaction the audience gives to a female stand-up is much different to the one they would give to her male counterpart. The audience seems to expect a man to be funny. When confronted with a female stand-up, they suspend judgment until she can prove that she is funny.

B. Traditional Gender Expectations

Traditional gender expectations are also a very important issue for women comics. Conventional definitions of ' lady-like' behavior are an obstacle. Conventional definitions of what it means to be ' feminine' or to act ' lady-like' are incongruent with the often-inappropriate behavior of women in

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comedy. This is particularly true of such forms of comedy as stand-up routines. In stand-up comedy, women comics cannot be passive and demure on stage, for this behavior will not elicit laughter. Instead, they must be aggressive, sometimes loud, and frequently un-ladylike. They must completely break with accepted social conventions.

Bucking these conventions is difficult for a number of reasons, not the least of which is economic profit. Gender expectations are reinforced, especially by mainstream corporate media, because they are tied into money. The objectification of women ' is a central factor in the sale of commodities, another pillar of the competitive system' (Sakeris, 2001, 227). Women comics by definition break barriers and defy convention. By so doing, they present a number of different challenges to mainstream society, and especially to that portion of mainstream society which will ultimately suffer financially.

In addition, notes Sakeris, ' the ghettoization of women's work and the provision of necessary, but unpaid, labor in the home - all supported by our processes of gender socialization - are central to a capitalist economy as well' (Sakeris, 2001, 227).

C. Aggressiveness

Another aspect that must be considered is the aggressiveness involved in stand-up comedy. Stand-up comedy can be viewed as an aggressive act. In the attempt to elicit laughter, it can be said that the comic is trying to exert control over her audience. Thus, it can be seen as a power struggle. Because of the power associated with the successful use of humor, humor initiation

has become associated with other traditionally masculine characteristics, such as aggression, dominance, and assertiveness. For a female to develop into a clown or joker, then, she must violate the behavioral pattern normally reserved for women (Naranjo-Huebl, 2005, web).

This is in direct opposition to the passiveness that society traditionally expects of women. To get up on stage and act aggressively is something that goes against traditional norms and is therefore suspect. Being female means acting demurely, being subservient while remaining unobtrusive. When a female gets up on stage and performs as a comic, she is aggressive, actively engaging the participants, and demanding for attention.

Women's humour is frequently interpreted as a challenge. This is naturally due to the aggressive nature of stand-up comedy, especially in an audience, which will most probably be comprised primarily of men. Too much aggression can be alienating in the best of situations. When too much aggression is exhibited by a female, the threat is compounded. It can appear to males that this female interloper is trying to seize what they think of as their territory - 'male' territory. This can be disastrous for an act, eventually for a career.

As several researchers have pointed out, comedy is an aggressive activity, and it requires performers to be hard - and women are not supposed to be hard. 'Being pervasively nice is not conducive to comedy which requires satire and ridicule. Women who do break through into comedy are branded with all sorts of unpleasant labels, such as strident, dyke, or frustrated' (Martin and Segrave, 20).

D. Sexuality and Femininity

Another issue, and one which is vitally important, is that of sexuality. Even if she is not talking about sex in her act, this is an issue. The question of a woman's sexuality and her sense of femininity are undeniably central issues to the professional woman comic. What is the connection between comic appeal, sex appeal, and our notions of what is feminine?

Mother, virgin, prostitute: these are the social roles imposed on women.

The characteristics of (so-called) feminine sexuality derive from them: the valorization of reproduction and nursing; faithfulness; modesty, ignorance of and even lack of interest in sexual pleasure; a passive acceptance of men's 'activity'; seductiveness, in order to arouse the consumers' desire while offering herself as its material support without getting pleasure herself'

(Irigary, 1985, 63-4).

Some would go as far as to see parallels between the act of standup comedy and the act of sex. For example, Horowitz asserts that 'sexuality can be loving, mutual vulnerability - as can comedy (Horowitz, 1997, 12). Horowitz and others have suggested that there is an intimacy in the relationship between the comic and her audience that is not unlike the intimacy between lovers.

There are varying levels of frankness in different stand-up routines. This may be seen as mirroring the sexual frankness of the male stand-up comedian. However, it is accepted less easily. As Horowitz points out, 'female comics are expected to go far - but not too far' (Horowitz, 1997, 17).

E. Power and Control Issues

Humour is often used as a means of controlling social situations. In a highly volatile set of circumstances, humour can often defuse the threat by helping to ease the tension. By using humour this way, dangerous explosions of temper can be averted without forcing confrontations. Yet since the end result is the same - the situation is brought to a halt by peaceful means - this also means that humour exerts a kind of power. The dynamics of power are complex and can be difficult to negotiate.

These dynamics are further complicated when it comes to the case of self-deprecatory humour. The comic may *seem* to be relinquishing control by taking her own inadequacies and flaws and putting them out there on public display.