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A Terrible Beauty is Born: Comic Critique in Terry Galloway's *Just the Funny Bits*

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"So, that was my childhood. It left me permanently scarred, at times, suicidal, paranoid and schizophrenic. All the *great stuff* of *comedy*." So saying, Terry Galloway ends *Just the Funny Bits*, the introduction to her production, *Out All Night and Lost My Shoes*, a collection of seriocomic vignettes. The wry rhetorical wink noted above is characteristic of Galloway's work—a compelling admixture of performance art and stand-up comedy. By performing autobiography, Galloway performs her marginality, constructing and contesting the differences that mark her as a deaf woman with a history of mental illness. And by performing this material humorously, she empowers herself and her audience, aptly illustrating humor's dual function as both entertainment and cultural critique.[1]

Although marginal humorous performance originated in the discourse of the physically deformed "fools" of ancient times, it is only in the last several decades that "disability humor" has become popular with diverse audiences. Comics who perform their marginality in this way typically feature physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy (Geri Jewell), so Galloway's focus on both mental and physical difference is new territory for many audiences. Additionally, as mentioned above, Galloway is not a stand-up comic per se. Rather, she is a performance artist with an acerbic wit, using her dark and

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[1] For extensive discussion of the politics of performing marginality, see chapter five of *Performing Marginality*.

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disturbing humor in service of her agenda—to give voice to an all too often muted population.

Galloway achieves this through a succession of provocative characters, all of whom are created as extensions of herself, each speaking her own inimitable brand of truth to power. Initially, Galloway appears as herself in "Just the Funny Bits," describing the horrifying circumstance of her birth at the hands of indifferent physicians and her resultant physical deficits. Dressed in a loose-fitting dark jacket, vest and baggy pants, she presents a relatively desexualized persona who illustrates in excruciating detail her adolescence as a social pariah. She remembers:

> When I was twelve, I had a hearing aid that was the size of a Sony walkman….It fit between my boobs like a third boob. I'd just gotten these boobs and….I'd just started my period. I was fat as a pig. I had hairy legs and hairy underarms because my mother wouldn't let me shave….Like most kids I had a dork kid hairdo and I had broken my two front teeth playing a game of war. And I had to wear kid eyeglasses—always broken, of course. And I wanted desperately to be normal. So I would take my hearing aid and I would hide it under my blouse. But it is a microphone, so there would be feedback….Wherever I would go, everything came along with me, and nothing came along quietly. So I would take a step and it would be, "Bounce bounce, beep beep, bleed bleed."

By literally re-membering her awkward teenaged body and re-inhabiting that painful psychic space, Galloway allows us a glimpse of the shattered child she was while simultaneously amusing us with the incongruous image. Indeed, she elicits both laughter and pathos, deftly establishing identification with her audience. Through the portrayal of her stigmatized, fragile self, she invites us to see the insecure child we each harbor within.

Galloway does what fools have always done—she serves as an honest mirror, reflecting our foibles and frailties. She also fulfills the fool's function as a social critic, launching a critique of patriarchy, western medical practice, and "normalcy" in general. In her passionate commitment to both her subject and her audience, Galloway educates by entertaining.

Although she follows the tradition of marginal humorists such as Jews, African Americans and others who strategically foreground their difference in order to critique mainstream culture, Galloway does not use self-deprecation in order to elicit laughter. Instead, she parodies culturetypes, painting humorous portraits of taboo topics like suicide and schizophrenia. Her piece, "The Etiquette of Suicide," for example, features Galloway's parodic portrayal of Amy Vanderbilt, dispensing advice such as "Whether stark naked or formally attired, *always* wear your pearls." Peering at the audience through horn-rimmed glasses, twirling her long strand of pearls, and wielding a butcher knife, Galloway issues the following directive:

> Should you choose the shake-and-bake method perfected by Sylvia Plath, try to arrange that the hours of your demise fall between 10 PM and 4 AM, hours more convenient to family and friends because you will, after all, be monopolizing a *major kitchen appliance*.

Through wordplay, impeccable timing, and a persona who speaks with perfect aplomb, Galloway turns her lens on suicidal ideation, using humor to critique a culture poorly equipped to deal with mental illness and death. Yet even as we laugh at her jokes, Galloway's performance makes us acutely aware of our membership in such a culture. As Galloway's audience, we are entertained, but we are always held accountable, disquieted by our complicity in perpetuating a system that marginalizes the mentally disabled.

In perhaps her most revealing vignette, "Moments of Near Suspense," Galloway performs paranoid schizophrenia. Extremely agitated, she fears her home is being invaded by an intruder. Whirling about the stage in a frenzy of panic and abject terror, Galloway allows us to peer in at the keyhole, observing the replay of life as she once lived it. After building to an apoplectic climax, Galloway calmly notes: "For two solid years I lived like that and nobody noticed." Once again, we are made culpable, part of a society that is at best, indifferent to the suffering around us. We are no longer laughing or even smiling. We are ashamed.

In her final piece, "Sherrie Loose (with special guest Mr. Handchops)," Galloway performs institutionalized mental illness.

Clad in a robe and disheveled wig and sporting large bandages on her face, Galloway shares her "ventriloquism" by shoving potato chips into the "mouth" of her hand puppet and pouring beer on her head while yelling the lyrics to "Singin' in the Rain." Finally, she smashes "Mr. Handchops" with a hammer, sobbing, "And then we both cry because it hurts me more than it hurts him." With fervor and finesse, Galloway bares her soul, forcing us to confront the pain of dissociation and alienation.

Just as Judith Butler asserts that "Gender is only real to the extent that it is performed," Galloway illustrates that her particular marginalized identity is only "real" to the extent that *it* is performed[2]. By rhetorically constructing and performing her marginality onstage, Galloway makes mental illness real for her audience. Through exaggeration and amplification, she shares the damaged selves of her past, always offering a subtle yet incisive critique of the culture at least in part responsible for such pain. Terry Galloway shows us what it means to be physically and mentally different in a world which prizes "normalcy." She delights us, draws us in, then relentlessly exposes our fears and hypocrisies as we are forced to consider our role in reifying the stigma of disability. When we face Terry Galloway's honest mirror, we might not like what we see. But lucky for us, she will never let us turn away.

[2] Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." In *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, Ed., Sue Ellen Case, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990: 270-283.