CARNIVALESQUE COMEDIANS

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Alan Filewod has pointed out how the theatre industry has been radically reconstituted in Canada over the past decade, particularly with the development of lucrative entrepreneurial commercial theatre (Canadian franchises of Broadway and West End "megahits"). Since capital is derived "not from the production of innovation and new work, but from spectacular replication of international commodities," he remarks, "the responsibility for developing new work has been off-loaded onto the artist-subsidized Fringe festivals, in which, as Mima Vulovic has archly pointed out, artists compete to pay for the privilege of working for free" (Filewod). The performance art movement of the seventies with its collective development of material—rather than the traditional pattern of a director imposing an interpretation of a writer's text on a group of people involved in separate processes (acting, lighting, scenic design, costumes)—has led to today's current alternate theatre which often associates high technology with popular and high art theatre, or operates on the basis of improvisations and works in progress, yet always fostering interaction with the audience, spectator as participant. Canadian theatre in the 1990s has been chiefly characterized by auto-performance, which started in the dozen or so Fringe festivals, and which is a unique phenomenon that displaces the conventional distance between writer and speaker, between creator and performer. Moreover, there has been an unprecedented explosion in parallel genres or rather fields of stage entertainment: for example, those of the clown, the variety sketch, the monologue, the stand-up comic. That auto-performance has broken out of alternate theatre and is now appreciated by mainstream audiences can be deduced from various signs such as the granting of the 1993 Governor General's Award for Drama to Guillermo Verdecchia for his *Fronteras Americanas*.

There are all-male groups of comedians such as Toronto's The Kids or The Vacant Lot, and all-female ones such as Edmonton's

Sensible Footwear. Style and text vary, ranging from cerebral, elaborate, and even technically sophisticated sketches/performances to physical and musical work reminiscent of turn-of-the-century vaudeville. Among this new breed of writers who perform their own plays, or performers who write their own shows, is the particular category of the solo writer/performer. Among the best-known anglophone performers narrating their own life experiences we have Sandra Shamas, Karen Hines, James O'Reilly, and Brigitte Gall. Their performances lie within a tradition of popular theatre that can be traced back to the satirical monologues of the Middle Ages and even further back to the political satire central to much of Greek and Roman Old Comedy.

Although solo performance can be very cheap to produce—for much stand-up comedy all you need is a microphone—it is painstaking work even without taking into account the labour of conceptualising and writing the material. Quebec actress Lucie Villeneuve reminds us of the hours of work required to arrive at the necessary precision of text, of rhythm, of gesture: "Le jeu dramatique n'exige jamais autant de précision: une scène dramatique peut être plus ou moins dramatique, elle "passera" si le comédien est dedans, alors qu'une scène comique est comique ou n'est pas" (Villeneuve 107).

Drama critics and sociologists alike have been trying to account for the popularity of auto-performance. Audiences clearly enjoy a well-told story, are attracted by the illusion of authenticity and intimacy that the confessional mode entails, but above all, they are drawn by the desire for a communal ludic experience. Attempting to explain why and how today's comic monologuists make people laugh is an extremely delicate procedure. Even a director such as Sandra Balcovske of The Second City in Toronto with its revue format, who is expected to recognize what is funny, what works, and on whose judgment actors rely, confesses that "sometimes you know and sometimes you haven't a clue" (Behnan 39). Visual humour is, of course, very important (as fans of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Harpo Marx are quick to point out), but so is text. Gilbert Rozon, producer and president of the Montreal Festival *Juste pour rire/Just For Laughs* puts it in first place in his recipe for humour: "Il est à peu près temps que je dévoile l'un des secrets de la réussite d'un producteur d'humour heureux. Croyez-le ou non, et cherchez-le en mille, j'ai nommé le texte. . . la base même de ce métier repose sur un crayon et une page blanche" (Rozon 118).

Yet, since humour and irony are communal discourses, specific tropes are recognized and understood in ways that are particular to given communities. An audience may not recognize a performance as ironic or humourous simply because the perspective is too incompatible with their own. What is clear is that laughter is a social phenomenon. We smile when we are alone and laugh when we are in pleasant company. A smile is complicity, but laughter is communication: generous, it involves the whole body. Similarly, theatre can be defined simply as that which happens between performer and spectator. It implies a certain art of presence, of organicity, of exchange, and of desire. Theatre-goers have a desire to belong to a community; performers have a desire to create one. Such a community is created through laughter, the laughter that sweeps through an audience (Lefèbvre, 78-79).

Solo performer Karen Hines, whose performance-generated writing under the guidance of Sandra Balcovske resulted in the popular show *Pochsy's Lips*[1] which first played in Fringe festivals across Canada in 1992 and was then produced in Toronto and New York City, owes her success to her persona, which artfully combines the traditions of the white clown (the circus), the *bouffon* (the court), the innocent Columbine and the melancholic Pierrot (both originally from the *commedia dell'arte,* but the latter becoming a popular figure in fairs and pantomimes). With her face painted white, mask-like, her mouth painted into a bright red bow, her eyes blackened, her body swathed in gauze, skating around her hospital bed on her IV contraption, our Pierrot-Pochsy is indeed, as *NOW* magazine aptly puts it, "the perfect clown creation for our times . . . wrapping disturbing and macabre content in the slick heart-tugging package of popular song and advertising" (Kaplan and Lawless).

Director of Canadian clowns Michael Kennard and John Turner (Mump and Smoot), Karen Hines is not the only one to place herself within the tradition of clowning, a form of popular theatre with longstanding stylistic conventions. There is also Sandra Shamas.[2] With her histrionic gestures and facial expressions, those incredibly extensible eyebrows, that almost Tex Avery capacity to make her eyes pop, a modern-day equivalent of the comic mask tradition, Shamas, resembles great burlesque comics like Charlie Chaplin or Harpo Marx, "types"—often representing the marginal, inadaptable elements of society. Often perceived as an assault on decorum, or the accepted codes of (good) taste, Shamas's monologues deal frankly (some would say crudely) with the

body: tampons, condoms, toilet paper rolls, underwear, leg-shaving, and gynecological examinations are standard fare. Her style and methods belong to that of the burlesque, with its earthy, even grotesque exaggeration; it functions as what anthropologist Victor Turner has called "the distorting mirror which causes us to examine our social problems, issues and crises" (105).

Like other forms of popular theatre, stand-up comedy often raises and promotes dialogue on difficult and at times politically charged issues such as racism, sexism, homophobia etc.[3] Stand-up comics function as moralists, some of whom, it is true, are conservative and reinforce the social status quo through stereotype-based monologues (on mothers-in-law, lawyers, scatter-brained secretaries, talkative wives etc.), but also others who are radical and whom we could call agents of protest (Stebbins 5). Shamas is one of the latter. Her strategy is to depart from traditional comedy in the construction of hierarchical relationships. Traditional comedy is at the service of those in power, often the audience's own class, and despite the subversive facet of comedy, the resolution often reinforces the status quo (Bird and Nyman 8-9). In a reversal of this tendency, Shamas's sketches disrupt traditional power hierarchies. It would be simplistic to say that the butt of the joke is generally the person who in real life has all the power, yet her sketch on the gynecological examination for instance (travesty pushed to the limits of the burlesque, even the grotesque), challenges the fundamentally vertical conception of the male doctor/female patient relationship (authority/submissiveness) that can make certain medical examinations humiliating for women. Subverting the serious into the humourous neutralizes the intimidating. In the best tradition of popular theatre, Shamas's sketch works to "demystify the alien and threatening and level the hierarchies that underpin privilege" (Byrd and Nyman 8). The ensuing laughter is a communal activity that occurs because she has created a safe space in which people can come together and share experiences.

Why exactly do comic monologuists like Sandra Shamas, Karen Hines, and Brigitte Gall make people laugh? How do they manage to "create an optimal space where both mainstream and alternative audiences can see themselves," albeit "not always in predictable or comfortable ways" (Hengen)? Perhaps it would be useful here to state the obvious. These comedians are all women rather than men, and furthermore their performances are grounded on the stance of heterosexual and not lesbian women. This is what engenders a certain carnivalesque experience in which the keys to

their success would seem to be identification, demystification, and transgression.

Brigitte Gall, called by critics the gentlest of today's solo performers, created the show *Swingy Meets the Wall*, situated "somewhere in the twilight zone between stand up comedy, comic monologue and one-character drama" (Mietkiewicz) which played at Tarragon Theatre's Extra Space in October 1994. Gall continues to enchant audiences with her vignettes that cleverly target the totality of categories to which an audience can belong: age, origin, social background, geographical location, profession. One spectator will identify with her re-enactment of life on the farm, another will find familiar the mangled syntax of Central European relatives, still another will recognize the pitfalls of secretarial work. As farce, stuffing green chewing-gum up her nose in church cannot fail of course, since even those of us who have no children ourselves were children once. The key to Brigitte Gall's success does seem to be her "knack for viewing commonplace experiences through a simultaneously mocking and evocative lens" (Kaplan and Lawless 1994).

Karen Hines, too, reaches out to the audience by putting a string of clichés (Harlequin Romance coupled with Hallmark greeting cards) into the mouth of Pochsy, creating complicity between herself and the spectator at the expense of her persona. A product of mass and pop culture, Pochsy's monologue functions as a series of *clins d'oeil*, as when she fantasizes about "finely muscled men wearing nothing but jeans and babies."[4]

Shamas's sketch on men's underwear also functions in this way. Why choose men's underwear? First of all, if we base this on the study conducted by sociologist Robert Stebbins, the choice corresponds to the stand up comic's role as inventor, his/her need to find new subjects or premises amenable to conceptualization in humourous terms (7). Women's issues, or simply things that make up the routine existence of women, such as laundry, are slowly being accepted as good comedic material. But this choice of material is also linked to the stand-up comic's role as spokesperson, belonging to and speaking for a particular social group or category, often a minority group stigmatized by religion, race, region, gender, or sexual orientation. Through examples of situations taken from the routine existence of the category, the audience "may come to understand something about what it means to be handicapped by society's sexual and cultural rules pertaining to sex or minority status" (Koziski 71).

Shamas is clearly speaking for heterosexual women, and it is her female perspective that makes people laugh. For the women in

her audience, what produces laughter is the exhilaration of recognition, the familiarity and yet the counter-expectation (as Shamas points out to CBC TV commentator Adrienne Clarkson, none of us is the way women are usually depicted in art or the media).[5] Whether it be doing men's laundry, desperately hoping for a menstrual period that is late, deploring a stage of sexual inactivity and ruing the fact that one has been taking the Pill for nothing, or simply being dethroned when an idolized baby brother arrives on the scene, all are situations from everyday life that women can identify with.

But it isn't only the women in the audience who laugh. Many of the men do, too, even the ones who don't feel entirely comfortable. If for women the shock is that of recognition, for men it is that of discovery. It is not only the surprise of counter-expectation pertaining to the "second" sex, the revelation of what lies behind the socio-cultural image that men have projected onto women. It is also the discovery of a different perspective, the surprise at being perceived not as the norm but as the Other.[6] Instead of being included in a shared code, they find themselves object of a communal gaze that modifies their perception of themselves. By choosing to focus on men's underwear from a fresh perspective, wondering why the slits in briefs are never designed for left-handed men, musing on its potential functions (as a change purse, for example!), Shamas is, in effect, defamiliarizing and recontextualizing. The laughter generated through these modes of strategic positioning that provoke counter-expectation brings us to wonder whether the main strategy isn't that of transgression. Doesn't laughter in general come essentially from the existence of a prohibition, of a censure? From the transgression of or revelation of a censure? (Ducharme 86)

Shamas's shows are in fact a systematic transgression on multiple levels. The premises, as we have seen before, belong to the domain of the private. Often labelled women's bathroom or toilet humour (as opposed to "high" humour), because of the focus on intimate areas and functions of the body, such as menstruation and contraception, Shamas revels in the "caleçonnade," the metonymical expression used in Quebec to designate any gag centred round the part of the body situated below the belt, a term which pushes to an extreme the knockabout farce known as the "pantalonnade" (named after Pantaloon, the stock character in the *commedia dell'arte*).

The focus on the body is but a part of Shamas's strategy of bringing "the unsaid, the private, the naughty, into the public, giving it a name and in this way making it real" (Byrd, 10). She

does not hesitate to infringe on other taboos, such as the topic of death, which remains unmentionable in Western (particularly North American) society. In her second show, in which she deals with her father's funeral, she focusses on the difficulty of choosing which of his hideously patterned suits to bury him in. Such material is unthinkable for most comics in a society in which it is indecent to evoke the concept of death, let alone proceed to banalize it.

To reinforce the choice of topics that do more than just transgress traditional codes of decorum, Shamas uses language that is extremely familiar, slangy, earthy, often crude (getting laid, puke, what the fuck).[7] The audience's laughter stems from the resulting fusion of identification, counter-expectation, and delight in the liberating powers of transgression.

Although comedians like Shamas are often criticized for "aiming low," for going for the "easy laughs," for choosing to tell jokes about "basically toilet humour" making it allegedly difficult for those who aim "high" and who attempt to do something sensitive and poetic (Snyder 43), they actually find their roots in a centuries-old comic popular culture, which Mikhaïl Bakhtin traces back not only to the Renaissance and Middle Ages, but all the way back to Antiquity. Central to this popular comic culture is the carnival, situated in the interzone between art and life, blurring any distinctions between performer and spectator, and based on the principle of laughter and total liberty (Bakhtin 7).

Bakhtin reminds us that in total opposition to official feast days, "carnival celebrated temporary *liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions*. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal" (10, emphasis mine). Shamas's premises, her crude language, gestures and body positions, derive from the carnivalesque tradition which incorporates those specific forms of vocabulary and gesture unfettered by the standard rules of decorum and decency in order to abolish among individuals any real or virtual communicational distance (Bakhtin 10).

Shamas's recourse to the life of the belly, a term popularized by Bakhtin to describe the activities of the lower part of the body (copulation, gestation, ingestion, digestion, defecation), is one of carnival's strategies of grotesque realism which seeks to deflate the sublime. The low(er body), the earth, rather than the head, the high, the cosmic, signifies the reversal of the lofty, the presence of the tomb, but also a new beginning. What in her work could seem

a profanation (the derision of her late father's taste in clothes, for instance), is in reality the carnivalesque coming together of the profane and the sacred, as in the rites of former societies which would mix celebration and mockery of the divine—for the serious and comic aspects of divinity, of the world and of the human race were all equally sacred (Bakhtin 6).

Placing the work of comic monologuists such as Sandra Shamas within the context of such a tradition can enable us to perceive better the complex nature of the laughter they generate. It is, above all, festive. Not individual but general laughter, universal, the laughter of a community, if only for the space of an evening. The laughter is joyful, but also ambivalent, for it mocks, and does not exclude those who laugh. Within the levelling dynamics of such reversals, parodies, travesties, deflation, profanation, by mocking the Other, we mock ourselves.

NOTES

[1] The script of *Pochsy's Lips* can be found in published form in *Canadian Theatre Review* 75 (Summer 1993) 36-46.

[2] For her first one-woman show in 1987, called *My Boyfriend's Back—There's Gonna Be Laundry*, she wrote all of her own material, produced the show herself, rented the theatre, took charge of the advertising etc. The rave reviews and box-office success across the country allowed her to finance the sequel in 1989: *Laundry II: The Cycle Continues*, and take it to the Old Vic theatre in London, England, where it seduced audiences and critics alike. When the third instalment of the cycle, the show *Laundry III . . . Wedding Bell Hell* opened in February at Toronto's 1000 seat Winter Garden Theatre, 75% of the seats available for the 17 originally scheduled performances were sold out a week before opening night.

[3] According to Cynthia Grant, founding member of the Company of Sirens, their aim is to "heal their audiences through humour" (Kym Byrd, 35).

[4] *Canadian Theatre Review* 75 (Summer 1993) 46.

[5] *Adrienne Clarkson Presents* CBC, 1991.

[6] In her interview with Adrienne Clarkson, Shamas confided that she proceeded with that sketch by looking at men as a dog would, in other words, by subjecting them to a totally external scrutiny, like something unknown, even alien.

[7] Shamas relishes mixing linguistic registers, treating slang like poetic material by projecting onto a screen titles which contain an abundance of alliteration: Frank: finding him — fondling him — f— him (sic). It is worthwhile to note the divergence between the oral language, which is freely obscene, and the written

language, which is censored. Is audience puritanism more attached to the visual? This could be the subject of another study.

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