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# The Comedy and Legacy of Music-Hall Women 1880–1920 Brazen Impudence and Boisterous Vulgarity

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Sam Beale

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The Comedy and  
Legacy of Music-Hall  
Women 1880–1920

Brazen Impudence and Boisterous Vulgarity

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*Laughter sounds like hope to me, or forgiveness,  
and I bask in my own power to conjure it.*  
Lindalee Tracey, 1997

*Growing Up Naked: My Years In The Bump and Grind.*  
Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre

## FOREWORD

It is notoriously difficult to describe the nuance and temper of a past cultural moment. Despite our best efforts as historians, we look back with little comprehension of the ramifying, intangible implications of past performances. This is particularly true where we have a monolithic, brightly coloured notional understanding of a performance category: the denomination ‘music hall’ tends always to obliterate any descriptive precision about and analytical scrutiny of the entertainment it denotes. Music hall in Britain was, arguably, at least partly responsible for its own fate in this respect, having set out to historicise itself in order to exploit nostalgia for its own past, advertising ‘old-time music hall’ as a performance genre quite early in the twentieth century, possibly before half the audience had realised there was anything ‘old-time’ about it. Some performers—one might cite Hetty King, who appeared on stage doing her trademark male impersonation act during eight decades—passed without a break from headlining on modern variety bills to participating in touring shows whose selling point was ‘the good old days’. Consequently, historians have found it remarkably difficult to shake the appeal of the reified image thus engraved upon the national memory; the incisive, well-grounded critical engagements with the acts and the materials of popular performers from the late nineteenth century are still extremely hard to find.

And as one might expect, this is particularly true of the performances of women on the halls. The explosive expansion of the new platforms for singing and comedy in the middle of Victoria’s reign gave many women a

unique opportunity for self-supporting employment through their comic and musical talents, in a time when work for women was overwhelmingly ill-paid and socially degraded. But popular history has formed a picture of what they did that is confined to jaded impressions of garters and sauciness, of winks and champagne. This book sets out to disrupt the hard boundaries of that caricature by seeking to understand their acts by means of comparison to modern comic performance, as well as contextualising them within precise, fully documented historical analysis. It presents the women whose work it scrutinises within the contested mores of their own times, and also as performers who were an active and creative part of a tradition, using and developing comic techniques which are still important tools in women's humour today. In a clear, engaging and above all an enlightening way, it moves the field on several significant steps.

Professor Emerita and Honorary Fellow  
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April 2020

Jacky Bratton

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction: Reweaving Women's Comic Performance History

This book does not ask if women are funny. It does not ask if there is such a thing as a female sense of humour or ‘what it is like’ to be a woman comedian. In fact, its starting point is bewilderment about the roots of such questions when they appear in comedy reviews or interviews with comedians and an irritation that they are being asked at all in the twenty-first century. In response to this frustration, my research has focused on exploring the contributions women have made to the evolution of current live comic forms of entertainment, centring on the late Victorian and Edwardian music hall in whose fertile ground—along with that of her sister form, American vaudeville—the roots of contemporary stand-up comedy can be found.

### WOMEN IN THE ‘COMEDYSCAPE’: PAST AND PRESENT

Like so much about the Victorian period, women of this era are often narrowly or erroneously represented. Depending on their class and status, they are frequently pigeonholed as pathetic drudges, ‘flowers to be looked on’, or the powerless bondservants of men. As I have identified women who performed on the music hall, I have frequently been struck by their independence and strength of mind; their wit and playfulness; and their professional determination to work as performers throughout London, the UK and beyond. Entirely uniquely for women in this period, music hall offered these performers opportunities to appear regularly in public,

at night, and communicate directly with sometimes very large groups of people. Particularly noteworthy at the outset is the widespread acceptance of their presence as funny women on music-hall programmes. As the names of forgotten female artists have emerged from the archive, it has become clear that surprising numbers of women were earning a living by performing comedy on the popular stage. Despite the entrenched sexism evident at all levels of the industry and moral objections to women appearing on stage, to which I will return below, what was never in question was that they could be and were the creators of comedy. In the 1878 edition of *The Era Almanack*, an annual catalogue listing performers working on the popular stage, roughly equal numbers of men and women performing acts including comic material are listed.<sup>1</sup> Of a total of 1883 performers, 384 were described as ‘women serio-comics’ and 357 as ‘male comic singers’ (Ledger 1878). This publication provides only a partial picture, but when compared to the available figures for women currently making a living performing comedy in the UK, these numbers seem quite extraordinary. A 2014 report on the UK comedy industry published by LiveAnalytics concluded that the percentage of tickets for female comedy events sold had increased from 2 to 14% of the total in the five years to 2014 (Mermiri et al. 2014).<sup>2</sup> In his foreword to the report, arts critic Bruce Dessau describes this increase—to less than a seventh of the total market share—as the ‘most strikingly’ significant change in UK comedy in the last 30 years (ibid.). Only one of these women, Miranda Hart, made it into the report’s ‘Top 10 favourite comedians’ list. She shared the number 10 spot with Frankie Boyle. In 2015, stand-up poet and academic, Kate Fox, calculated that at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival that year there were 116 women and 372 men performing solo comedy shows (Fox 2015). She also observed that the Chortle directory of comedians for the same year listed 1627 men and 275 women. In 2019, Chortle’s figures were 1761 men and 338 women; still not quite one in six ([chortle.co.uk](http://chortle.co.uk)). In the US, a similar gender split in club comedians booked has been recorded (Kachel and Sheaffer 2017) and none of the top ten highest earners in Forbes ‘Highest-Paid Comedians of 2018’ list were women (Cuccinello 2018). The career-making Edinburgh Comedy Awards main prize has had five solo female winners since its inception in 1981; Jenny Éclair in 1995, Laura Solon in 2005, Bridget Christie in 2013, Hannah Gadsby in 2017 and Rose Matefeo in 2018.<sup>3</sup>

Such statistics are reflected by the experiences of women comedians who have reported continuing inequalities in terms of clubs’ booking

policies over the last decade. Lara A. King, winner of the 2012 Funny Women award told *The Guardian* that in her experience ‘People who book comedy nights do tend to think that one woman on the bill is really quite enough’ (Benedictus 2012). In the same year, comedian Catie Wilkins recalled a compere introducing one act by announcing: ‘this next act is a woman’ (Moon 2012, p. 219). He was not joking and the audience’s response was to boo—her, not him. Wilkins told Moon her friend’s gig went very well but that she sees this as indicative of widespread attitudes towards male and female comics: ‘A man will have to be spectacularly bad to actually disappoint, but a woman will have to be spectacularly good just to look competent’ (ibid.). This experience is shared by Australian comedian, Laura Davis. When she began performing club comedy in Perth in 2008/2009 she notes: ‘it was pretty impossible to work on stage as a 19/20-year old woman without most of the audience getting up to go to the bar’ (Goldsmith 2018, No. 273). Harriet Kemsley told Martin Willis of similar reactions on the UK stand-up circuit: ‘I’ve had that in particularly clubby, traditionally male environments, where men will get up as soon as I get onstage and be like, “oh great, a woman, time to go to the toilet”’ (Willis 2018).

Public discourse about under-representation has certainly broadened in the last decade; there is ongoing media interest in repeating the same questions about inequalities in the profession and, following a highly publicised debate in 2014–15, UK broadcasters are gradually including more women on television and radio comedy panel shows.<sup>4</sup> However, as Fox has noted: ‘it’s hardly time to celebrate yet’ (2015). Despite the growing number of women at all levels of the industry, the comedy gender gap remains significant for those touring, even in the countries with the most established comedy circuits. Kemsley notes she is still regularly the only woman on the bill: ‘It makes you a genre’ she says, and ‘puts a lot of pressure on you to be good ‘for women’ rather than to be good for yourself’ (Willis 2018).

Women’s continued marginalisation and under-representation in what Sharon Lockyer calls ‘the comedyscape’ (Lockyer 2011, p. 114) creates a perplexing disparity with the significant presence of women performing comedy on the music-hall stage. They appeared alongside male comics—then, as now, in venues ranging from small rooms attached to public houses to those seating several thousand—and shared with them varying degrees of financial success, popularity, fame and longevity within the profession.<sup>5</sup> Given the evidence outlined above, perhaps the first question this

book should ask is why women working between 1880 and 1920 seem to have had more chance of being booked to perform comedy on popular stages than those working between 1980 and 2020? Equally perplexing, given just how many women were performing comedy on the music hall, is why there has been so little popular appreciation or scholarly examination of their individual and collective contributions *as comedy* to the establishment and development of popular comic forms that continue into the twenty-first century.

### MUSIC-HALL COMIC FORM, STYLE AND CONTEXT

British music-hall comedy and variety performers and US Vaudeville acts are widely accepted as the direct antecedents of the contemporary stand-up form. As Oliver Double suggests: ‘The roots of stand-up comedy are unmistakable in the classic music hall style’ (Double 2013, p. 37). Performers spoke directly to their audiences as they introduced their acts and engaged in direct address in the form of semi-improvised patter or ‘gagging’, in between songs and when audience responses demanded it. The evolution of theatrical ‘gagging’ and attempts to regulate and censor it are explored in Chap. 3. Here it is sufficient to note that it is, as Double suggests, ‘likely that music hall comedians related to the audience exactly like modern stand-ups do’ (ibid.).

Other aspects of music-hall style, form and content varied significantly from contemporary stand-up. Crucially, as a direct consequence of nineteenth-century licensing conditions for places of entertainment, music-hall programmes were dominated by acts involving music, singing and dancing. Unlike theatres, which were licensed by the Lord Chamberlain from 1843 to 1968, music-hall licences were issued by local authorities under the same legislation that applied to pubs, saloons and the like. Consequently, alcohol could be served in the halls and, in terms of the entertainments that could be staged, along with music, singing and dancing, some sketches were permitted but plays or extended spoken dramas were not.<sup>6</sup> Within these parameters, comedians of both sexes invariably sang their comedy, often performing as multiple characters with costume changes for each song, or presenting each song in their act as the specific character type they were known for. For example, coster comedians such as Kate Carney (1869–1950) performed cockney songs written in a style making use of street slang that rooted their acts in a specific locality and class.<sup>7</sup>

All music-hall performers dealt in easily and instantly recognisable types; they did not 'aim to present complex individuals but typical patterns of behaviour' (Kift 1996, p. 45); the individual characterisations they presented were never intended to be nuanced psychological studies. Music-hall nights often lasted 4 hours or more, and included packed programmes of up to 30 acts, performing (on average) seven-minute turns for audiences who were free to leave their seats at any time. As several contemporaneous accounts and Kift's 1996 study have shown, music-hall audiences were, from as early as the 1860s, made up of men and women of mixed classes who formed the 'popular' audience.<sup>8</sup> Success relied on gaining instant authority over an audience through the quick projection of your personality or that of your character, and, for comics—then as now—getting your first laugh right away:

In the music halls you have to make your hit instantly...You must go all out for your audience, for your time is brief on the stage....A music hall audience expects that every turn will be better than the last one; they expect a great deal from the stars. (Maidie Scott, interviewed by *The Era*, August 2 1922, p. 11)

Such performance conventions demanded high-impact performance modes that allowed audiences to shift their focus quickly from the previous act while maintaining their interest and keeping their attention on the stage. To ensure they connected with their patrons immediately, performers were obliged to assert their personalities, to sing or speak directly to audiences and ensure this communication had an authenticity; a down-to-earth, topical and local resonance for them. Within the theatrical conventions of the form, audiences would accept nothing less and within the social and moral conventions of the place and time, all music-hall performers, but women most of all, were forced to develop formal strategies (using language, gesture, costume, music and dance) through which they could perform entertaining, relevant material that appealed to audiences and did not overtly flout the censor or step too far beyond the shifting but ever-present line of moral decency and decorum. A number of the women who are the focus of this study built their careers on their reputations for dancing on that line and sometimes lifting their skirts as they stepped over it.

### ‘REWEAVING’ COMIC HISTORY

All history is, as Lisa Jardine has suggested, ‘constructed narrative’, and central to the task of uncovering women’s performance history is what she describes as ‘weaving, unweaving and reweaving – the slender residue of ‘evidence’ which time has carried down to us’ (Jardine 1998, p. 33). This study has been a process of ‘unweaving’ some of the existing histories of London’s late nineteenth and early twentieth-century popular stage and— notwithstanding the obvious limits to the reconstruction of historical performance—‘reweaving’ the available residue so the narrative centres on the performances and professional lives of the women who are the focus this research. Though many of these women had long careers and some were hugely successful and very well paid public figures, their contributions as comedians have been, to call upon the frequently quoted title of Sheila Rowbotham’s 1973 study of women in Britain, ‘hidden from history’. Despite several scholars of the 1980s and 1990s stating the importance of including popular forms in feminist histories of women performers,<sup>9</sup> women working as comedians on the popular stage in the UK during this period have, with a few exceptions, been neglected in both theatre and performance histories, and their influence either on the evolution of the music-hall form or on the development of British comedy in the twentieth century has received very limited scholarly attention.<sup>10</sup>

Over the last few decades, much research concerned with women’s contributions to theatre and performance has been devoted to text-based theatre, or feminist, post-structuralist or post-modernist readings of the work of performance artists of the 1960s and after.<sup>11</sup> In popular histories, with the exception of a few very well-remembered stars of radio, film and television (notably Joyce Grenfell, Hattie Jacques, Beryl Reid), women performing comedy in the first half or so of the last century have most commonly been affectionately appreciated as useful foils for male comics—giggling, flirtatious eye candy, or the complaisant butts of suggestive jokes—rather than as actively funny women, creating their own jokes about their own experiences. Lana Rakow has argued that women’s popular forms were a critical blind spot for twentieth-century researchers, believing that: ‘The disdain with which both men and women critics have tended to view women’s popular culture has prevented them from seeing how it speaks to the real problems and tensions in women’s lives’ (Rakow 1986, p. 32). An examination of comedy created by women on the music-hall stage after 1880—as the form completed its transformation from

popular (i.e. working class, 'of the people') diversion, to popular (i.e. widespread and fashionable) entertainment—addresses precisely this capacity of popular culture to reflect and reveal the realities of the lives of both those producing and consuming it.<sup>12</sup>

### ANALYSING HISTORICAL PERFORMANCES

To address the challenge of retrospectively examining and interpreting the content and significance of these performances, they first need to be read within what theorist of critical pedagogy Joe Kincheloe describes as their 'historical situatedness in a larger ongoing process' (Kincheloe 2001, p. 682). These performances are exemplary of variations in the style and form of music-hall entertainment, changes to the venues they performed in and to the terms of their employment. They occurred as part of a complex of factors including the London County Council's policy decisions regarding the control and censorship of places of entertainment from the late 1880s; the gradual syndication and commercialisation of music-hall venues during the period; the transformation of lower-class working practices in the last two decades of the nineteenth century; and the slower but, nonetheless, significant changes in opportunities for and attitudes towards women as the nineteenth century became the twentieth. The individual performances examined throughout this book are situated within this tangled socio-political and cultural scene.

The unweaving and reweaving of the details of a past performance must also acknowledge the interpretative orientation of the researcher. Historical performance analysis carries with it inherent uncertainties, not least of these is the difficulty of retrospectively assessing and interpreting author or performer intention and audience reception. The process of selecting material for inclusion in this study has been informed by my own position and while I 'cannot guarantee the historian's neutrality' (Joan Scott 1992, p. 37) and accept Peter McLaren's observation, that 'preventing the historical agent from being a casualty of history is not an easy task' (2001, p. 701), I have attempted to keep in mind the interrelationship between each performer's possible or perceived intentions, my twentieth-first-century readings of these and the project's distinct complication of shifting tastes and acceptability in humour appreciation. I attempt to do so with a growing awareness of the potential impacts of my epistemological position. Like Michael Pickering, I am suspicious both of a methodological approach that assumes my twenty-first-century concerns can be set

aside as I attempt to analyse historical performance events, and of the idea that the past is entirely unknowable (Pickering 2008, p. 202).

### FEMINISING THE COMIC ARCHIVE

Geraldine Harris recognises the potential for making misleading assumptions when engaging in feminist readings of women's performance. There are risks, for example, in interpreting 'performativity, or mimicry or masquerade as strategies of resistance', and of reading these as subversive and non-contingent, based entirely on a performer's assumed intentions, rather than considering staging and context and the effects these also have on audience reception (Harris 1999, p. 75). Such contextual considerations of the work these women produced is critical to ensuring it is examined, as Elaine Showalter urges, 'in its own terms' (1981, p. 198). This has inevitably led to a '*woman-centered* inquiry' (Gerda Lerner 1981, p. 140. Original emphasis) which considers the relationship between this work and the development of women's consciousness, women's history and women's humour. I stated at the start of this chapter that I am not suggesting there is a separate 'female humour'—and I will return to this notion below. However, it is my intention to reveal a positive female comic tradition generating 'its own experiences and symbols which are not simply the obverse of the male tradition' (Showalter 1981, p. 204) and which reflects the lives, experiences and attitudes of women performers and the women in their audiences.<sup>13</sup> Such an aim raises questions about the notion of lived historical 'experience' and our translation of it in the construction of histories and the interpretive bias of individual accounts: '[E]xperience is at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation', says Scott (1992, p. 37).

In some sections of this book it would appear that *only* women performed on the halls as 'my' archive is, almost exclusively, an archive of female performers. In this way, I am, perhaps, 'archiving the already archived' (Gale and Featherstone 2011, p. 19) and I acknowledge the risks inherent in this kind of narrativising and re-contextualising of material to create a new version of the past. However, I agree with Gale and Featherstone that this is an inevitable part of the process of archival research and welcome the opportunity to, as Foucault (1969) urged, 'think about the ways in which the archive might be used to explore the tensions it embodies' (Gale and Featherstone, p. 23). Furthermore, the range of critical and archival sources informing this research has

broadened my sense of the impact and significance of these performers. For Kate Newey: 'Using evidence from scattered archives starts to reveal the kinds of agency these women had' (2016, p. 102). Certainly, contemporaneous and retrospective accounts of performances, interviews and reviews and my analysis of performance texts and comic techniques have created a fuller picture of the influence and impact performers achieved and how this allowed them to explore and expand their roles as women and performers in the public sphere.

The availability of archival material has in part determined the selection of performers/performances. While I share Susan Bassnett's reservation that simply identifying those individuals who were the 'exceptions' to the male rule (Bassnett 1989, p. 112) does not give a full historical picture, it seems inevitable that several of the women referred to here were exceptions: the 'innovative pioneers', as Newey describes them (*op. cit.*, p. 95). They became extremely well known, earned far more than many of their contemporaries, and achieved a status and level of influence within the profession which afforded them some control over the material they performed, the terms of their employment, and the presentation of their public images. The inclusion of such examples is largely what makes this study possible, simply because their lives and work have been documented, and evidence of their performances has survived. Indeed, the lack of scholarly consideration of women's comic performance in the UK may be partly due to the lack of extant primary performance evidence; surely the central challenge for all researchers of historical performance? As Laraine Porter concludes in her study of the representation of women in twentieth-century British film and television comedy, there are 'huge gaps in documentation, historical accounting and records of early women comic performers' (Porter 1998, p. 67). This project has been a process of research, retrieval and re-examination of extant records to fill in some of these gaps, source documentation for previously unrecorded or uncritiqued material and use it to support the development of a critical perspective on women comic performers. Porter suggests the lack of available materials may be because 'either there were numerically fewer female performers than male or they have simply been written out of history' (Porter, p. 68). As noted above, the evidence suggests that there were broadly equal numbers of men and women performing comic material in the 1880s, 1890s and early 1900s, which points to Porter's alternative suspicion, that throughout the twentieth-century comic histories focused overwhelmingly on male performers.