

Stand-up Tragedy

Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* shows how comedy is broken, and leaves us to pick up the pieces.

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Hannah Gadsby builds her break-out Netflix stand-up special *Nanette* around an ingenious transgression. After wryly unwinding the basics of her autobiography—she's a lesbian from Tasmania, where she faced intense bigotry—she enacts a second coming out, of sorts: She's quitting comedy. "It's probably not the forum to make such an announcement," she says impishly, "in the middle of a comedy show."

To an American audience, it verges on obscene to repudiate comedy like this. "We have praised [humor] so much that we have started an insincere cult," the now-forgotten humorist Frank Moore Colby grouched in his 1904 book *Imaginary Obligations*. A hundred years later, the cult is a full-fledged religion. As Ken Jennings writes in *Planet Funny: How Comedy Took Over Our Culture* (released just a few weeks before *Nanette*), "our god" is "funniness." He cites, among other data, a recent survey finding that 88 percent of millennials define themselves by their sense of humor. "Don't get me wrong," says Jennings. "I'm still laughing, but it feels unsustainable."

Gadsby is fine not laughing. After announcing her resignation, she starts calling back to material from earlier in the performance—commenting on it directly, echoing a phrase, extending a metaphor—to reveal new, painful layers of meaning. Near the beginning, we hear a funny story about an encounter with an ignorant homophobe; much later, we learn that it ended with Gadsby getting brutally beaten. She had minimized her trauma to get a laugh from the audience. For Gadsby, this kind of self-erasure is an expression of deep shame—but the alternative, raging polemic, is no better. "I don't want to unite you with laughter or anger," she says. "I just need my story heard."

The response to *Nanette* has been ecstatic. Critics have called it “radical, transformative,” and “devastating,” a “game changer” that “rewrites the way we tell jokes.” On Twitter, where close-captioned stills have circulated as memes, people like it even more. I share the enthusiasm: I saw Gadsby perform a version of the show in New York, in April; cried during the gay parts; and sent my parents. The special’s “rapturous reception,” wrote Rachel Syme in the *New Republic*, “may be a sign that the industry is changing, or at least that it is in desperate need of change.”

Something is changing, but it’s broader than the comedy industry. *Nanette* challenges an idea of comedy, humor as truth-telling, that passed as common sense until pretty recently. Over the past two years, that idea has come in for a bruising—if not on the stage, certainly in the public square, where buffoonish politicians, racist trolls, and abusive comedians have stoked a debate about the perils of irony. This show ought to be seen as a product of that debate: When you take the anti-irony train all the way to the end of the line, one place you can end up is *Nanette*.

But the tracks branch in many directions. The trails that minority groups have blazed through American popular culture—the ways these groups have figured out how to entertain the general public without sacrificing dignity—form a vast network. The stand-up tradition in which Gadsby has worked is one path, but there are others, and they’re seeing plenty of new traffic.

Stand-up itself was once a new path: the means by which members of one American minority, heterosexual Jewish men, exploited and transformed their image in popular culture. “To be a Jewish comedian ... meant to think of civilization as a scam,” John Limon writes in his theoretical examination of the art form. Stand-up was a sort of consensual scamming, a mutually sadomasochistic relationship between performer and audience: The comic “wishes to humiliate them and they submit; but they think he is childish for craving their unchallengeable approval, and they know this.”

Limon links the development of stand-up to the rise of the suburbs, an idealized American pastoral environment. The aim of the early stand-ups

was to forge—in the midst of the squalid city, a swamp of mistrust—a little suburbanoid paradise. The way to be true was to acknowledge, communally, that no one was true. Or, as Gadsby puts it, “Nobody is leaving this room a better person. We’re just rolling around in our own shit here.”

That sentiment, arguably the mission statement of Lenny Bruce, lands in 2018 as a punchline, a heresy. It wouldn’t get the big laugh it does, though, if the audience weren’t primed for it—not by professional comedy but by the past few years of news, which have steadily fed suspicion that humor itself might be part of how the big scam works.

Nanette is highly alert to this context. After suggesting that uptight white men might benefit from (repurposing an earlier refrain) a “good fucking,” Gadsby excuses herself for the “locker room talk”: “Just jokes, just banter.” It’s one of the first times she veers from placating the crowd to bullying it—at the performance I saw, she screamed it at an individual male audience member—and it conjures up a whole linguistic crisis. The phrase *locker room talk* lost all its credibility in one appalling instant, but *just jokes*—and *just kidding*, not to mention *just trolling*—have lost theirs, too, over time.

There were clear inflection points: in August 2016, for example, when Trump joked that “Second Amendment people” would be the only remedy to judges appointed by his opponent. In response to that comment, in a viral Twitter thread about *just joking*, a lawyer named Jason P. Steed declared that “nobody is ever ‘just joking’ ” because “humor is a social act that performs a social function” (with the “big caveat” in tweet No. 20 that humor “is complicated” and “always a matter of interpretation”). Steed’s thread was touted in left-wing media, where Trump-as-comedian remained a source of anxiety until we had to deal with Trump-as-president.

Other commentators, in the panicked months after the election, set out to tear the veil of irony from the ideology of the alt-right (which had been squabbling over its ideology for months). The violence at Charlottesville, Virginia, seemed to fulfill the darkest of these warnings, to prove that all the trolls had *meant it* since the beginning. In a prescient essay published in the *Baffler* in the rally’s immediate aftermath, Angela

Nagle judged that “ironic dodges” had now become “foreclosed to the alt-right.”

Anxiety about humor in politics turned out to be good practice for anxiety about humor in comedy. When Louis C.K.—an icon of comic abjection—was exposed as a serial sexual harasser, critics reassessing his work all but classified him as a troll. Far from “brutal honesty,” his art now felt “like a smokescreen,” David Sims wrote in the *Atlantic*, “less truthful and even more self-involved.” Slate’s Willa Paskin described *Louie* as “a kind of propaganda for the decency of Louis C.K.” This spring, when Bill Cosby was convicted of sexual assault, Wesley Morris branded Cliff Huxtable “a smoke screen for his ghastly conquests” in the *New York Times*.

Those denunciations apply specifically to confirmed sexual predators. The shift in critical thought, however, has reflected—and presumably propelled—a shift in the practice of comedy. (*Nanette* has a critical sibling in Lauren Berlant’s essay about Al Franken, on the thin line between joking and predation.) It’s no longer merely childish for a performer to crave approval from an audience: We know that that approval can be converted into real power and abused.

It’s not so funny to go around presenting yourself as an honest huckster, as the only pervert or scammer who’s willing to admit it.

But you don’t *have* to redeem that squalid city, the swamp of mistrust in which stand-up took root. You can leave it all—the city, the stand-up—behind; you can walk out of Sodom. *Nanette* plays out as a farewell not only to comedy, but also to the city and its meanings: the melting pot, the violent mob. Gadsby explains that the idea for the show originated in a small town. It’s there that she met the eponymous Nanette, a humorless barista (a “furious thumb in an apron,” as Gadsby put it at the live performance I saw). Gadsby’s case for humorlessness is also an apology for the rustics: the Nanettes, the Tasmanians, above all Gadsby’s mother—whom Gadsby echoes in her epilogue when she asks that the audience think “with minds of their own.”

That reluctance to “unite” her audience may be the most radical thing about Gadsby’s act. If “the theme of the comic,” as Northrop Frye writes, is “the integration of society,” *Nanette* is nearer to the tragic: a tale of

society's disintegration, centered on someone who has both perpetrated and suffered from its dysfunction. It really does hit the beats of tragedy, climaxing in an anagnorisis—Gadsby's realization, about her coming out, that she "froze an incredibly formative experience at its trauma point and turned it into jokes"—followed by a peripeteia, utter humiliation, her cry that it would have been "more humane" to kill her than to subject her to the life she has lived. After resolving on a kind of exile (she can "fit in" nowhere), she pleads with the audience to "take care of my story," striking a familiar chord:

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart

Absent thee from felicity a while,

And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain

To tell my story.

Though capital-T tragic wisdom may be rare in stand-up, Gadsby is not alone among comics in her affinity for the deadly serious. Jason Zinoman of the New York Times, in his list of the comedy highlights of 2017, noted that "the most memorable moments of the year were not funny," and included among them the finale of *Nathan for You*, which—like *Nanette*—restores humanity to the butt of a joke through straight-faced storytelling. In Vulture's list of the best stand-up specials last year, Jesse David Fox gave the top spot to Jerrod Carmichael's pensive *8*, writing that it made him wonder, "How funny should stand-up be?"

This seriousness can, like Gadsby's, be a kind of feminist protest. Rachel Withers, reviewing *Nanette* for Slate, cataloged "a wave of female comedians," including Amy Schumer and Cameron Esposito, "turning around to say, 'Actually, that's not funny' of their *own* jokes." *Eighth Grade*, the first feature film from Bo Burnham—whose stand-up material has dealt obsessively with the phoniness of comedy, and who directed *8*—tracks a teenage girl at a meme-saturated school learning to assert herself both against and through humor.

Some of these comics are looking to generate solidarity; others are emphatically introverted. In *8*, Carmichael repeatedly labels interpersonal responsibilities—to a hypothetical girlfriend, to a

hypothetical child, to the black community—“exhausting.” Gadsby, similarly, says she identifies less as a lesbian than as “tired,” and describes feeling alienated from gaudy gay pride celebrations. She has mentioned in an interview with the *New Yorker* that *Nanette* is, obliquely, about receiving a late diagnosis of autism.

The breed of stand-up *Nanette* renounces is central to comedy as we think of it, but it won't be for much longer. For all the evolution it has undergone, it still reflects the viewpoint of its postwar forefathers: the old wisdom—distinctively Jewish but broadly useful in urbanizing America—that, in a society where no one trusts each other, only an avowed shyster can be trusted. Now that we're all avowed shysters, nobody is.

That doesn't mean that it's time, as Gadsby suggests, to demote “laughter” to a sweetener in the “bitter medicine” of “stories.” (As an artistic prescription, this is so vague that we'll never know if anyone follows it.) But we should be optimistic, because there are numerous American performance traditions that are funny, and dignified, and they will eat old-fashioned confessional stand-up alive.

Look back at Sodom. As E. Alex Jung wrote recently in *Vulture*, queer comics in New York have developed a distinctly gay paradigm that is beginning to dominate stage performance there and in Los Angeles. These comics, for the most part, are aesthetes, transgressing through an obsession with—not a crusade against—the superficial. This is what Billy Eichner, John Early, and Guy Branum are doing when they fetishize pop culture, and what Julio Torres is doing in his fantasies of fairy-tale luxury.

There's an element here of abjection through narcissism, standard rolling-in-the-shit fare for young Brooklynites—but also way more. John Early, at a recent performance, ramped up from jokey jokes to a virtuosic minute-long spoken lip-sync to a video of Janet Jackson. Torres' best *Saturday Night Live* sketches are not only *about* beauty but the closest thing to beautiful on that show. Eichner can be downright cruel. It's camp, concerned far less with “brutal honesty” than with the beguiling artificiality of culture itself.

Look, too, to the way black American artists have dealt with the problem of pleasing the crowd. In the early 20th century, as black intellectuals

began charting a course for black art, they wrestled vigorously with how to rescue comedy from minstrelsy. It was a central debate of the Harlem Renaissance, producing—among much other critical writing and fiction—*Not Without Laughter*, Langston Hughes' 1930 celebration of the binding power of humor in black communities.

Among contemporary comedians, Donald Glover deals constantly with this tension. His main projects are focused less on laughter than on its borderlands: atrocity and festivity, sometimes simultaneously, always linked to their racial contexts. *Atlanta* is very often not funny and might be mistaken for a heart-baring “sadcom”; its moroseness, though, is deliberately impersonal. When it chooses to go full comedy—as in its episode-long BET parody—it does so at the expense of mass appeal, in proud loyalty to the subcultural. That's delightful in itself.

None of this is to suggest that the “bitter medicine” isn't important, or that Gadsby has misdiagnosed the pathologies of stand-up. Her argument that marginalized people should not have to put themselves down “in order to seek permission to speak” is undeniable. Nor do I believe that the alternate comic traditions I've mentioned accommodate the full range of human experience. It's worth noting that gay male camp can be a *terrible* frame for women's pain. (Early's Janet Jackson lip-sync is ... complex.) It's worth noting, too, the black artists—like Dick Gregory and Hughes himself—who have leaned back from comedy during periods of struggle.

But when Gadsby talks about “permission to speak,” she is talking about permission from a mass, undifferentiated audience—something that seems less and less desirable, or even possible. (Berlant, in her essay on Franken, suggests that the necessary trust is missing.) It also seems less necessary for today's comics to succeed. Among female comedians, “weird” female stand-ups in New York ditched mainstream clubs to carve out the spaces where the interesting stuff (including queer comedy) is taking place. Mikaella Clements at the Outline has detected a dyke camp sensibility entering pop culture, led by gay women and “not particularly interested in being palatable for or even attended to by straight people.” Paskin recently suggested that the playfulness of female-led television—its ability to deal with serious themes in diverse

registers—has depended, for better or worse, on its freedom from a male audience.

The niches for niche humor are not predetermined. They can, with effort, be created. That's the force of Taylor Mac's 24-hour-long, ultra-campy revisionist history of American popular music—not comedy, but obviously better. In comedy proper, Maria Bamford, Fred Armisen, and Tim Heidecker are among the artists testing what it means to invent and affirm subcultural fandoms. If we can't find community in consensual scamming, maybe we can find it here: in subcultures, of identity and of taste; in shared ambivalence toward a common inheritance; with minds not of our own, exactly, but not of the mob, either.