



Comedy: Stand-Up, Lesbian

by Tina Gianoulis

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Historically, one of the functions of comedy has been to serve as the rebellious voice of oppressed people. Joking about serious and even painful issues can be a palatable way to critique the social and political norm. Sometimes pushing the limits of taste and acceptability to find humor in unlikely sources, the comedian is often the misfit who points out society's foibles from the perspective of the outsider.

Minority comedians performing for minority audiences frequently use inside jokes to create solidarity among those outside the mainstream. Even when they perform for mainstream audiences, however, minority comedians can be agents of social change, because part of the magic of comedy is that a good joke forces the audience to identify with the joker. As comedian Lea Delaria remarked, "I'm here to educate those heterosexuals who are lesbian-impaired."

Not requiring a playscript or supporting cast, stand-up comedy is based on the relationship of one individual to the audience. Using her viewpoints and vulnerabilities as material, the stand-up comedian can be both an educator and a gadfly--and sometimes the butt of her own jokes. Lesbian stand-up comedy provides an excellent example of how comedy can foster social and political awareness in both minority and mainstream communities.

Although stand-up comedy has long been a staple of nightclubs and variety shows, in the 1980s a new comedy explosion began. Perhaps driven by hard economic times or a mean-spirited political climate, audiences were searching for laughter and more and more people wanted to stand up on stage and try to make them laugh. While in 1978, there had been twelve comedy clubs across the United States, by 1988 there were 320, featuring over 2,000 performers.

San Francisco became one of the major comedy meccas and, naturally, gay and lesbian comics were a major part of the Bay Area stand-up scene. Perhaps lesbian comics felt they had something to prove, since the feminist movement had been accused of having no sense of humor. "Wrong," the new lesbian comics seemed to say, but added, "you may not like what we're laughing at."

Early Lesbian Stand-up Comics

There had, of course, been lesbian stand-up comics before the 1980s comedy scene. African-American comic Jackie "Moms" Mabley began doing stand-up comedy during the 1920s Harlem Renaissance. By the late 1930s she had developed her trademark character, a salty old lady with a rubbery face who told broadly off-color jokes in a gravelly voice and did not hesitate to lambast sexist men and white racists.

When she achieved national prominence in the 1960s, Mabley's comic persona was not an out lesbian, but her outrageous character made fun of society in a way typical of lesbian humor.

Robin Tyler



A portrait of comedian Kate Clinton by David Rodgers. Courtesy Beach Front Bookings.

Another of the most notable early lesbian stand-up comics is Robin Tyler, who started her act impersonating Judy Garland in gay bars in pre-Stonewall New York City. There were few women in stand-up comedy in the 1960s, and although she was always out as a lesbian in her act, much of Tyler's early identification was with the straight female comics of the period, such as Totie Fields and Joan Rivers.

Having come of age at a time when there was little support for women, let alone lesbians, in the stand-up field, Tyler created a persona who is more defensive and hostile than most of the later lesbian funnywomen. ("You can be replaced by a tampon," she snarled to male hecklers in the 1970s.)

Still, Tyler's wise-cracking New York acidity paved the way for dozens of successful lesbian comics who followed her. In 1978, Tyler became the first out lesbian to appear on national television when she performed in a Showtime comedy special hosted by sister comedy pioneer Phyllis Diller.

Criticized by many lesbians for her abrasive manner and non-cooperative approach to politics, Tyler left the stand-up stage to devote her energy to organizing women's music festivals and other events, including the Millennium March on Washington, D.C. in May, 2000.

Stand-up Comics since the 1980s

The enormous popularity of stand-up comedy since the 1980s has encouraged hundreds of lesbian comics to try out routines on dozens of stages around the country. The following profiles of a few of the most successful will give an indication of the diversity of the lesbian community as well as of their comics.

Kate Clinton

Kate Clinton began doing stand-up comedy in 1981, always as an out lesbian. Born in upstate New York to a middle class, white family, Clinton gathers material from her own 1960s Catholic girlhood, from the queer community itself (she called the 1990s focus on gay marriage "mad vow disease"), and from current political events.

One of the most topical of the well-known lesbian comics, Clinton keeps her act up to the political moment and skewers the establishment in shows with titles like "Out Is In," and "Correct Me if I'm Right."

Clinton has not focused her career on the hard-edged nightclub side of stand-up comedy, preferring instead to perform at festivals and university venues, where she is welcomed by both lesbian and mixed left-wing audiences.

Clinton's savvy humor also brings her frequently before mainstream audiences. She worked for a time as a writer on ABC's popular *Rosie O'Donnell Show* and has appeared as a comic and a commentator on *Arsenio Hall*, *Nightline*, and *Good Morning America*. She also appears regularly on the PBS gay news show *In the Life*.

Lea DeLaria

In contrast to Clinton, with her sharply satiric wit and well-scrubbed appearance, Lea DeLaria is most often described by reviewers as "a big, butch dyke." Loud and raunchy, DeLaria made her name in stand-up comedy with her over-the-top delivery and her apparent willingness to offend everyone. She mortified some conservative lesbians at the 1992 Gay and Lesbian March on Washington, D.C. when she referred to Hillary Clinton as "a first lady you could fuck."

Although she began her act in 1981, performing in San Francisco comedy clubs as a brashly out lesbian, she did not come out to her own parents until six years later. DeLaria's first loves are singing and acting, and

her success in stand-up comedy has led her to film and television appearances, including cameos in the movie *The First Wives Club* (1996) and the television situation comedy *Friends*.

She played a major role in the feature film *Edge of Seventeen* (1998). She exercised her acting skills still further to play a straight woman in the 1997 Broadway revival of Leonard Bernstein's musical *On the Town*, where she received rave reviews for her acting, singing, and dancing.

Ellen DeGeneres

Probably the most famous lesbian comic in the straight world is Ellen DeGeneres. DeGeneres began her career as a stand-up comic in the 1970s. With dead-on timing and an appealing accessibility, she performed her wonderfully loopy routine in comedy clubs and television specials until 1994, when she was offered her own situation comedy on network television.

Although many lesbians in her audiences had their suspicions about her sexuality, DeGeneres was never out either doing stand-up comedy or in the first two years of her ABC show.

Ellen was an uneven comedy with a funny, but strangely sexless heroine--until the third season. After a long buildup of hints and clues, the show's heroine Ellen Morgan came out as a lesbian on April 30, 1997 in an hour-long special that was watched by 45 million viewers.

Although many lesbians and gay men were thrilled with the first lesbian situation comedy, others criticized the white-bread conservatism of the show. The network, however, considered the comedy just too controversial and its heroine and star "too gay." Citing poor ratings, ABC canceled it suddenly at the end of the third season.

After a break to recover from the disappointment of the cancellation, DeGeneres has returned to stand-up comedy. Her act is still both sharp and silly, full of the comic's trademark long and hilariously rambling stories, and it now contains an honesty it lacked before, since it includes jokes about her life as a lesbian.

As a visible role model, however, DeGeneres has become an icon to young, mostly white, lesbian audiences; and some critics claim that this adoration from the audience has had the effect of blunting the edge of the comic's stand-up routine.

Suzanne Westenhofer

Before DeGeneres's coming out episode, Suzanne Westenhofer might have been named the lesbian most likely to play one on television. Slim and pretty, with long, curly blonde hair, Westenhofer complained to Anderson Jones of the *Advocate* that, "I don't look enough like a lesbian to play a lesbian!"

Nonetheless, she has a funny, sardonic act featuring jokes about the experiences and dilemmas of ordinary lesbians. Tellingly, her appearances are given such titles as "Nothing in My Closet But My Clothes" and "I'm Not Cindy Brady."

Westenhofer began her career by winning a contest in a New York City piano bar with a three-minute comedy routine. Only a few years later, she was the first out lesbian to have her own specials on HBO and Comedy Central. A confident and personable performer, she regularly appears on television on *Evening at the Improv* and *Out There*.

She was involved in serious talks with network executives about starring in her own situation comedy with a lesbian heroine when the coming out controversy over *Ellen* sent the major networks scurrying back to safer themes.

Marga Gomez

Marga Gomez began her show business career helping her parents in their song and dance act on the East Coast Latino nightclub circuit. She later moved from New York to San Francisco where she joined Lilit, a feminist theater collective. In the 1980s, she honed a smart and urbane comedy act that she took to the gay clubs and comedy stages of the Bay Area.

Along the way she co-founded Culture Clash, a Latino comedy group, and created a one-woman show, "Memory Tricks," where she lovingly and humorously recreates the joys and pains of her childhood.

Gomez' routines vary from character portrayals to sassy repartee. Lesbian comics are political almost by definition, and Gomez also pokes fun at her audiences, who, she says, "just love to be part of the *struggle*, so they'll come see a Latina if she's spinning plates on sticks--'We must support her!'"

As with other stand-up comics, Gomez pursues aspirations other than stand-up comedy. She acted in the 1998 film *Sphere* and has performed on television many times, notably in Tracy Ullman's HBO series *Tracy Takes On* and *The Rosie O'Donnell Show*, as well as in comedy specials on PBS, Arts and Entertainment, Comedy Central, and Showtime.

Sandra Bernhard

Now better known as an actress and performance artist, Sandra Bernhard began her career as a stand-up comic. After performing in Los Angeles-area comedy clubs, she landed a regular spot on Richard Pryor's television show in 1977. When that show was cancelled, she returned to the comedy clubs, where she attracted a devoted audience intrigued by her unconventional looks and entertained by her satirical takes on popular culture and sexuality.

Bernhard has sometimes described her sexual orientation as bisexual or lesbian and has sometimes resisted all labels. Nevertheless, she has become something of a gay and lesbian icon. In the 1990s, she appeared as an out lesbian on Roseanne Barr's sitcom and she embarked on a widely publicized, erotically charged friendship with Madonna.

Bernhard's acerbic humor is frequently directed at the emptiness and absurdity of celebrity, and she regularly skewers pretension of all kinds. Her act is irreverent and satirical. Nevertheless, she always includes a positive message about self-acceptance and the value of difference.

Rosie O'Donnell

Although Rosie O'Donnell was not publicly out when she embarked on a career as a stand-up comedian in the mid-1980s, she got her start in show business by performing at comedy clubs. In 1984, she won the comedy championship five consecutive times on *Star Search*. Subsequently, she produced and hosted VH-1's *Stand-Up Spotlight* (1988), a series that featured up-and-coming stand-up comics.

The secret to O'Donnell's success as a comedian was her likeability, her empathy, and her ability to create a non-threatening persona, the same qualities that made her talk show (1996-2002), which netted her a long string of Emmys, such a runaway success. Her ability to communicate with mainstream America made her decision to come out as a gay parent in March 2002 all the more significant.

Conclusion

Although many lesbian comics are still closeted onstage, there are now many out lesbian stand-up comics who perform regularly in cities from Seattle to Provincetown. Comedians such as Karen Williams, Lynn Lavner, Gail Hand, Julie Goldman, Lisa Koch, and Georgia Ragsdale give voice to the humor in the lesbian

condition and crack jokes as a means to make serious and sometimes poignant observations about the lesbian experience.

In addition, comedy troupes such as Hysterical Women and Five Lesbian Brothers perform skits and improvisational comedy with a lesbian focus. Many comedy clubs in cities with large gay and lesbian populations have weekly gay comedy nights. Every day new lesbian stand-up comics are born as women continue to take the stage and try to achieve the age old goal of comedy--to translate pain into laughter.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.