



Tomlin, Lily (b. 1939)

by Tina Gianoulis

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Comedienne Lily Tomlin is perhaps less well-known for being herself than for the many other memorable personages she "becomes" during her performances.

She first gained national fame on television where she appeared regularly from 1969 through 1973 in the breakthrough comedy *Laugh-In*, portraying the goofily caustic telephone operator Ernestine and the plucky five-and-a-half-year-old philosopher Edith Ann.

As Tomlin's career has advanced, her characterizations have multiplied to include a wide variety of quirky personalities from all walks of society. From Crystal, the hang-gliding quadriplegic, to Trudy, the bag lady, to Agnes Angst, the fifteen-year-old punk performance artist, Tomlin's characters are all survivors of life, each with her or his own brand of pithy wisdom to share.

Rubber-faced and intensely focused, Tomlin manages to convey the universal silliness of the human condition while respecting the essential dignity of each of her characters.

Born Mary Jean Tomlin on September 1, 1939 in Detroit to parents Guy and Lillie Mae, who had immigrated there from the hills of Kentucky, Tomlin often refers to herself as having been "the best white cheerleader in Detroit." She began acting in plays while a pre-med student at Wayne State University, and soon left college for New York and a comedy career.

In New York, she studied acting with Charles Nelson Reilly. She was working days as a waitress and office temp and evenings performing stand-up in nightclubs when she got her first television break in 1966 on *The Garry Moore Show*. Her appearance there led to her success on *Laugh-In*, which in turn led to television specials and film roles.

In 1975 she was nominated for an Academy Award for her work in Robert Altman's film *Nashville*. Although some of her films were widely panned (most notably, *Moment by Moment* in 1978 and *Flirting with Disaster* in 1996), she received good reviews in many, including *The Late Show* (1977), *9 to 5* (1980), *All of Me* (1984), *Big Business* (1988), and *Tea with Mussolini* (1999). She also scored in a recurring role in television's *Murphy Brown*.

However, Tomlin's first love has been her one-woman comedy shows, which she has performed as television specials and on Broadway and other stages around the country. In such shows as *Appearing Nitely* (1977), *Lily--Sold Out* (1981), and the Tony-winning *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* (1985, revived 2000), she has developed and refined her comedic style.

Equally important to the success of these productions have been the incisive scripts written by Tomlin's longtime partner, director, and collaborator, Jane Wagner. Wagner's words, channeled through Tomlin's chameleon performances, give the shows their power, not only to entertain, but also to unite the audience in delighted empathy.



Lily Tomlin at the Trevor Project's Cracked Christmas Event in 2003. Photograph by Angela Brinskele. Courtesy Angela Brinskele. © Angela Brinskele.

From early in her career, many of Tomlin's gay fans recognized her as a lesbian. Their perceptions were boosted by a sketch in Tomlin's 1977 stage show, *Appearing Nitely*, where she portrayed an inquisitive reporter interviewing Tomlin herself about her role in *Nashville*. How did it feel, the reporter wondered, to play a heterosexual woman in the film? Tomlin's tongue-in-cheek response, that she had been exposed to heterosexuals and observed them throughout her life, delighted the lesbians in the audience.

Many media-savvy dykes also chortled happily at the private joke when Tomlin was cast as Miss Hathaway in the 1993 film *The Beverly Hillbillies*, the same role played by lesbian actress Nancy Kulp in the 1960s television series. Others were pleased to see Tomlin in an overtly lesbian role as Georgie in Franco Zeffereilli's *Tea with Mussolini* in 1999.

However, Tomlin has never come out in a dramatic public way. Rather, she has eased out of the closet with little fanfare. Magazine articles that used to refer to Jane Wagner as Tomlin's "best friend," now call her Tomlin's partner, and her queer fans continue to receive her warmly; but Tomlin herself does not often speak of her private life.

She does, however, frequently put her body and talent where her politics are, supporting feminist and gay causes. For example, in a comfortably ironic voice, she narrates the acclaimed documentary *The Celluloid Closet*, the 1996 history of gays in the cinema.

Bibliography

Allen, Jennifer. "Lily Tomlin: There are New Signs of Intelligent Life on Broadway." *Life* n. s. 8 (November 1985): 17-21.

Burke, Tom. "Lily Tomlin: The Incredible Thinking Woman." *Cosmopolitan* 190 (April 1981): 262-268.

Minkowitz, Donna. "In Search of Lily Tomlin." *The Advocate* 589 (November 5, 1991): 78-82.

Sorensen, Jeff. *Lily Tomlin: Woman of a Thousand Faces*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1989.

Young, Tracy. "Tomlin-Wagner." *Vogue* 175 (November, 1985): 396-400.

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*.