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FEM AND FUNNY: THREE WOMEN WHO CHANGED THE FACE OF STAND-UP  
COMEDY

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Richmond, Virginia  
May, 2013

### Acknowledgements

*“You see? A woman’s work is never done.”*

– Phyllis Diller, on seeing a woman mop the stage during a sound check

First I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my family, who have been so caring and so supportive over the years of my desire to pursue theatre, wherever it took me. My mother, father, stepmother, uncle, aunt, and cousin are the greatest a girl could ask for: Susan Weintrub, James Blackburn, Maria DeLong, Hal Weintrub, Laurie Weintrub, and Ben Weintrub. I know if Bernard & Carolyn Weintrub and Elsie Blackburn were here, they would share in my joy of this achievement, too. I also have to thank my family and friends over the years for having a great sense of humor and for always making me laugh.

My friends Lane Green, Teresa Chaperlo-Schmidt, and the many ladies of Toronto, Canada; in particular, Leah Weisz, Nikoline Thomson, and Laura Bruce are all brave women of strength who inspire me with their comedy and sense of adventure every day. To my fellow MFA Theatre Pedagogy graduate students (and for other Richmond-area friends too): you have kept me going these past two years with your friendship, your laughter, and your support. In particular I wish to thank Matt DiCintio, whose friendship and incredible brain inspire me daily, and without whom I would now be writing on these amazing women.

Additionally, I wish to express my thanks to Francesca Lyn and Mandy Stadtmiller, for it was through their efforts that I connected with Lisa Lampanelli, thus allowing me to interview her. Thank you, Lisa Lampanelli, for your time, your graciousness, and your fearlessness. Thank you also to Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers, who combined with Ms. Lampanelli present the triumvirate of comedy here it has been so delightful to research.

To the members of my thesis committee: Dr. Noreen Barnes, Ms. Donna Coghill, and Professor David Toney; you have all provided me with invaluable insight and have challenged me to push my writing and myself to be better. Thank you for that.

Finally, I wish to honor the many educators in my life who have all taught me so much, and who have encouraged me along the way. The incomparable Mrs. Bobbie Booker, Ms.

Juanita Williams, Mrs. Gronberg, Mr. Gronberg, Mr. Doug Finlayson, and now, the incredible Dr. Noreen Barnes. These educators have particularly inspired me with their professionalism, their humor, their achievement, and their feisty streak.

To everyone mentioned above and many more: I simply could not have done this, nor would I be who I am today, without you.

*“One continues. And doesn’t look back. Who gives a shit?”*

- Joan Rivers, on being blacklisted from NBC after gaining her own “Late Night” show

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## Abstract

### FEM AND FUNNY: THREE WOMEN WHO CHANGED THE FACE OF STAND-UP COMEDY

By Rachel Eliza Blackburn, M.F.A.

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013

Major Director: Dr. Noreen C. Barnes  
Director of Graduate Studies, Dept. of Theatre

Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers, and Lisa Lampanelli as performers demonstrate an arc of evolving female empowerment in the world of stand-up comedy. In this thesis I shall study the development of each woman's career by examining her material, progression of her comic persona, and relationship to women's gender roles, both personally and professionally. While there are many other female comics who contribute to the story of women's stand-up comedy in the contemporary period (in particular, Moms Mabley and Elayne Boosler), Diller, Rivers and Lampanelli each represent a distinct shift in how their persona combined with subject matter, allowing women to break new barriers in terms of comic performance. Diller's comedy carved a space for Rivers', and Rivers' comedy carved a space for the likes of Lampanelli. In viewing the trajectory of their effect on

comedy as a whole, we can see how each woman asserted herself in stand-up performance, and forever changed the nature of who was allowed to get up on stage, and also, what they were allowed to say by their audiences. To quote Joan Rivers, “First there was a gasp...and then there was a laugh” (Rivers “Piece of Work”).

## Introduction

In this thesis, I will be looking at the careers of three amazing performers who broke new ground for women in stand-up comedy: Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers, and Lisa Lampanelli. I have chosen these three women because each comic represents a distinct shift in comedy for women, and the breaking of new ground for what women could discuss onstage. The trajectory of comedy from Diller to Rivers, and Rivers to Lampanelli paints a portrait of female comedy as it developed from the 1950s to the present; however, there are many other women who contribute just as vividly and importantly to the overall picture of women and comedy in modern day.

Here, I have attempted to gain a closer look at the elements which provide the foundation for the comic profiles of Diller, Rivers, and Lampanelli: their routine structures, their comic personas, their material, the choices they've made in regard to their careers, as well as how much their personal life may or may not have contributed to their professional lives. To fully appreciate the many layers of their comic styles, a closer look at both their professional and personal influences, their comedic point of view/attitude (both on and offstage), and the trajectory of their comic persona over the course of their careers is required. It is upon this foundation that I have attempted to detect the shifts which have occurred of the female comic's relationship to the stage over time. In looking at Lisa Lampanelli, whose career I researched first, it is apparent that she stands on the shoulders

of women who have come before her. By this same token however, Lisa also represents a style all her own; as do the women that preceded her. But it is evident that each one cleared a part of the stage for the next one to stand on, and finding those links has been part of the joy and delight in undertaking this study. But each comic in her own way has equally shifted what society allows a woman to do onstage.

Lesla Lockford writes in *Performing Femininity: Rewriting Gender Identity* that:

...some feminists would argue that actions such as altering one's body size, dancing nude for financial gain, or wearing makeup contribute to the continuance of women's social and cultural oppression by perpetuating the idea that women's value is to be measured through how much they accord to social standards for sexiness or beauty. However, I would extend and question this argument by paradoxically exploring how these very same acts may also be subversive and thereby further a feminist agenda. I argue that these traditional acts of femininity may be enacted in ways that subvert socially dominant conceptions of the feminine, further calling into question society's notions for appropriate female gender performance (Lockford 3).

I would add that the three female comics profiled here challenge gender roles and perceptions of gender specifically as comedians, thereby stimulating not only societal views of gender, but the field of stand-up comedy as a whole. Diller posed nude for *Playboy*, Diller and Rivers have used cosmetic surgery, and Diller, Rivers, and Lampanelli have certainly worn makeup as part of their performances. Therefore, the above statement

takes on a greater importance in relation to women whose actions relate to the advancement of their careers.

There are many women who deserve equally thorough research in any look at women and comedy. It is my regret that I have not been able to take the time to do so for this writing. However, any female comedian provides a link to the narrative of women and stand-up comedy, and I hope to one day soon undertake further research to explore other comic lives as well. Their names have appeared within my research of the main three women who are the focus of this thesis, and in their mention they encapsulate untold stories of women and the comic narrative in America. They have made it difficult for me to concentrate on my primary three, for I wish to also come to understand their part in the greater story of comedy, and the two most significant of all these by far are Moms Mabley and Elayne Boosler. Other comedians include Totie Fields, Jean Carroll, Whoopi Goldberg, Paula Poundstone, Janeane Garofalo, Kate Clinton, Minnie Pearl, Carol Liefer, Danitra Vance, Ellen DeGeneres, Thea Vidale, Betty White, Sandra Bernhard, and Wanda Sykes, all of whom provide insight into the greater picture of female stand-up comedians.

Moms Mabley, I have learned through the research of this thesis, is our country's first female stand-up comedian. She was born in 1894, the great-granddaughter of a slave, and ran away at a young age to perform in a minstrel show. She later performed on the Vaudeville circuit. As a black female comic, she crossed over to become popular with white audiences, appearing on such programs as the Merv Griffin Show in the late 1960s (Mabley "Merv Griffin"). I'm fascinated by the development of her persona as well, as her personal life suffered an incredible amount of hardship. When you also take into

consideration the far greater difficulty there was for African-American performers to find success more so than whites, her story is one of overcoming incredible odds; and it disturbs me that her comedy didn't achieve the same popular acclaim that Diller saw, even though Mabley had been performing for many years prior to Diller's beginnings (Bennetts "Pain" 1).

Elayne Boosler is the other female comic I would like to have taken a closer look at in terms of telling the story of women and comedy. As Richard Zoglin states in *Comedy at the Edge*, "The one woman who made it to the front ranks of the club comedians of the '70s, Elayne Boosler, was a true gender pioneer, a comic with a strong, independent, female point of view who did jokes without putting down her sex or playing into men's stereotypes. Yet she never matched the success of many of the men – like Richard Lewis, Jay Leno, and Andy Kaufman – who started out with her at the New York Improv in the early '70s" (Zoglin "Edge" 181). She too would represent a shift between the comedy of Rivers and Lampanelli that looked at how female penned and performed comedy was represented on stage.

While this thesis focuses primarily on Diller, Rivers, Lampanelli, and how their comic personae and material changed the scope of what women could discuss on the stage, it would also be interesting to take a look at not only the contributions of other female comics, but also the progression of women's humor in terms of isolating their subject matter. Through jokes, women have talked about their sexuality, holding positions of power and dominance in society, their bodies, childbirth, and a whole host of things difficult to imagine airing publicly by any female comic in the first half of the twentieth

century. While I have not been able to go into the depth I'd like to on the evolution of specific joke subject matter, here at least we may find three women who each set the stage for the next female comedian to discuss new and heretofore, taboo topics. Without Diller, we wouldn't have had Rivers, and without Rivers, there would be no Lampanelli. The way these three women's lives have intersected and each contributed to the next has been the enduring fascination with this thesis, and it has been my honor to track these changes which have brought women into the world of comedy as we know it today.

## CHAPTER 1 Phyllis Diller: There's a First Time for Everything

*"The only thing domestic about me is that I was born in this country."*

– Phyllis Diller (Diller "Goodnight")

If you were a woman living in 1950s America, being a wife and mother were high aspirations indeed, and one needed go no further. According to the PBS documentary *The Pill*:

Embedded in the propaganda of the time was the idea that the nuclear family was what made Americans superior to the communists. American propaganda showed the horrors of Communism in the lives of Russian women. They were shown dressed in gunnysacks, as they toiled in drab factories while their children were placed in cold, anonymous day care centers. In contrast to the 'evils' of Communism, an image was promoted of American women, with their feminine hairdos and delicate dresses, tending to the hearth and home as they enjoyed the fruits of capitalism, democracy, and freedom. In the 1950s, women felt tremendous societal pressure to focus their aspirations on a wedding ring. This was also the era of the 'happy homemaker.' Women who chose to work when they didn't need the paycheck were often considered selfish, putting themselves before the needs of their family (Gazit "Mrs. America").

Given this climate, how does a woman conceive of a climb to the top in the world of stand-up comedy? Stand-up comedy in the 1950s was a world which was still defining its own character and boundaries, and for those brave souls who were defining this style of performance in the United States, it was certainly a performance practice that was dominated by men. For a woman hoping to break through into this circle, what were the ways in which she could be perceived as funny? What kinds of jokes would she have to tell that would have both men and women laughing? In an era dominated by the perfect housewife and mother, an insight that became more and more clear to Phyllis Diller was to adopt the persona of the *inept* housewife: a housewife who was *not* beautiful, who was *not* perfect, and who was *not* skilled at any of the standard housewife activities, such as cooking, cleaning, or raising children. That woman became Phyllis Diller, and Phyllis Diller became her. As a result, the world was given Phyllis Diller, the first nationally and commercially successful female stand-up comic, without whom I would now be writing about women and comedy.

*“[She has] balls the size of an elephant.”*

- Penn Jillette (Diller “Goodnight”)

Ultimately one of the most fascinating things about Phyllis Diller is that, unlike any other woman in stand-up comedy, she had no female comedians to look up to, or who exerted any strong influence on her when she first began her career. In fact, she actively avoided studying too closely the work of other stand-up comedians, so great was her desire to be original. In perhaps the greatest irony of Diller, her rise to become America’s first nationally successful female stand-up comic stemmed not from any great desire to be

famous or celebrated, but simply as a means of escaping poverty for herself and her family.

Phyllis Diller (*nee*, Driver) had five children with her first husband, Sherwood Diller.

Sherwood Diller (referred to by her as Sherry) was a man who frequently found himself unemployed, and was unwilling to help or be frugal, quickly spending his way through his and Diller's finances. They found themselves evicted and homeless more than once, and Diller's journey to become the celebrated "hopeless housewife" eventually known to millions was rooted in that desire to provide for her family and in effect, look after her children properly (Diller "Lampshade").

### **Comic Structure**

*"She stood up and talked about being a wife and a mother and how it wasn't the wholesome and rewarding thing everyone had you think it was."*

- Lily Tomlin (Diller "Goodnight")

While Diller's persona evolved gradually over time, there is a clear image that comes to mind when picturing her; a look which came to define her comedy career. She stands smiling, cigarette holder in one hand, with a wacky hairdo that has most of her hair standing up on end (usually a fright wig), a loose-fitting sparkling or fringed mini-dress, gloves on both hands, and ankle boots which, combined with the dress, appear to emphasize her chicken legs. She appears as a woman who is attempting to look nice and, in doing so, fails miserably to do her figure any favors. Contrary to later female comedians, Diller intentionally made herself look unattractive. She then expressed hard-won wisdom on life as a wife and mother, with lots of self-deprecating comedy geared towards her looks and her figure, and plenty of jokes about "Fang," an invented fictional

husband, and his mother, Moby Dick, as well as other characters. In Phyllis Diller's act, she is a caricature of herself: the ugly, clumsy, incompetent housewife, trying to stumble through an existence which otherwise expects perfection from women. She is the anti-hero, with uselessness as her great comic flaw. Between jokes, you are often treated to her raucous, infectious laugh: "It's like a car where the battery is going dead," said comedian Rich Little (Diller "Goodnight").

One of the great things about Phyllis Diller's comedy is that in terms of structure, she pulled off one of the greatest joke constructions a comedian can have, *repeatedly* – and it is the "roll." The roll is the overwhelmingly used building block of Diller's sets. A roll is created when a comic makes a long-running joke by using a single set-up, which may then be followed by multiple punches (punch-lines) which all relate back to the original set-up (punches meaning the line or phrase which causes an "A" laugh – the greatest laugh) (Rosenfield "Workshop"). For example, the following bit involves a one-line set-up, followed by three one-liner punches:

"We have far too many kids. At one time in the playpen there was standing room only. It looked like a bus stop for midgets. It used to get so damp in there, we'd have a rainbow above it" (Diller "Pretty Face").

The roll is revered, for it gives a comedian more laughs per minute. Instead of a traditional set-up followed by a punch, followed by the time it takes to create another set-up and punch, you have one set-up followed by a series of punches: more bang for your buck, essentially (Rosenfield "Workshop"). Perry Diller, one of Phyllis' sons, explains in the documentary *Goodnight, We Love You: The Life and Legend of Phyllis Diller*, that

“She could clock one laugh every six seconds. That’s ten laughs per minute, and in a sixty-minute show, that’s six hundred laughs” (Diller “Goodnight”). Indeed, Diller is listed in the Guinness Book of World Records for having the most laughs per minute: twelve.

According to the *Independent*, a leading UK newspaper, it was stated in her obituary that this was “twice as many as her mentor, ‘Rapid Robert’ Hope” (also known as Bob Hope) (Vosburgh “Raucous Comic”). Several of her books follow this format (Diller has four comedy books, plus her autobiography), in which we are given a set-up followed by a cascade of punches. In many instances, the set-up is merely a title, much the way David Letterman would eventually do in his “Top 10” lists. This one is from *Phyllis Diller’s Marriage Manual*, published in 1967:

*King for a Second*. Although it never happened to us, some couples may get argued out. To reignite the fires, try the following:

1. He tells you about what his Lodge has planned for Ladies’ Night, and you say, ‘Funsy, funsy.’
2. Accuse him of squandering his paycheck on rent, insurance, and fuel oil.
3. Say, ‘Why don’t you get your check cashed on the way home? Just down the street there’s a Kool-Ade stand.’
4. When he offers to give you a kiss, say, ‘I’ve already had one.’

(Diller “Marriage” 61)

Diller states in her autobiography (co-written by Richard Buskin) *Like a Lampshade in a Whorehouse: My Life in Comedy*:

...people often told me they loved to hear me say what they would have *loved* to say about the woman next door, the husband, the mother-in-law, whoever. In fact, my acerbic one-liners also reflected what *I* might think about people but never dared to say their faces, because I didn't want to hurt them and I didn't want to fight. My favorite joke has always been the triple whammy, where one line builds on another, each revealing something new about the idiots around me even though I'm clearly just as stupid. This isn't easy to create...it's all about alliteration and ending abruptly with a hard consonant – *flick*, *Fang*, *cook* – to emphasize the mock hostility. When complaining about the mother-in-law, I'd often mumble, 'that old *bitch!*' Audiences loved it, and they also ate up a rapid-fire succession of one-liners on the same subject. I'd deliver one setup and then tag-tag-tag-tag-tag. That's economy. And my laugh would serve both as the cue and as the exclamation point (Diller "Lampshade" 182).

### **Who is Fang?**

*"Well, what would you call a man with one tooth two-inches long? I met him at a cocktail party. I thought it was a cigarette. I tried to light it. He was so drunk, he tried to smoke it."*

- Phyllis Diller on Fang (Diller "Lampshade" 99)

As for "Fang," Diller's fictional hapless husband character, it is not entirely clear even according to Diller herself whether or not Fang was based on her real-life husband at the time, Sherwood Diller, because Diller makes contradictory statements which both

support and negate the notion. Certainly, Fang and Sherwood have a lot in common, particularly their inability to hold down a job and support the family properly.

Commenting on Sherwood and his typical level of employment, Diller states:

I didn't know if he quit or if he was fired, and nobody ever told me the full reason. He certainly wouldn't tell me. All I heard was that there had been a dispute over a cup of coffee. He ended up going through another seventeen jobs within one year, and I still never discovered why. His attitude, the conviction that he knew better than anyone else, was enough to get him fired. All I knew was that he'd always wait until the money was gone and then sell the car that my parents had bought us.

Some jobs lasted a week, others lasted two. One was at a foundry, another was demonstrating toys in a schoolyard during recess, a third was as a night watchman – from which he got fired after falling asleep – a fourth was as a drill press operator...Sherry even had cards printed to say that he was in real estate, and he did pass the real-estate exam, but he never sold a thing. Then he was a taxi driver, and that actually lasted a year because, you see, it was an environment where he was in charge with nobody watching over him. He couldn't work under anyone. I remember him coming home from the drill press job and telling me that he'd been producing so much, they had to let him go. Yeah, *right* (Diller "Lampshade" 59).

In contrast, here is one of Diller's many Fang jokes:

Fang is a good loser. He lost eleven jobs in one year. I can tell he isn't frightened of work by the way he fights it. He's been under a lot of pressure lately, though – three quilts and a blanket. When he wants breakfast in bed, I call AA and they talk him out of it (Diller "Lampshade" 59).

However, Diller can be emphatic in her denial that Sherwood was the basis for Fang, and that Fang was simply an improvisation that was further developed. In fact, rather than Fang as an exaggeration of Sherwood, Sherwood appears to be the real-life exaggeration of Fang. Diller states:

...everybody has always assumed that Sherwood was Fang – every Sherry assumed that he was Fang, and he *loved* it. Oh honey, he wanted to be Fang! At last he had been endowed with the importance that he'd always wanted. However in my mind Sherry was definitely *not* Fang, and I made that very clear. Fang was just a mythical spouse, the first character that I developed, and forever my favorite. In his wake, I created numerous others, like his mother, Moby Dick, and sister, Captain Bligh (Diller "Lampshade" 104).

Fang was the eventual shortened version of "Old Fang Face," which became "Fang Face," and then "Fang." But despite Diller's protestations otherwise, Fang resembles Sherwood quite closely, and Diller admits herself that making fun of him was therapeutic: "Just as I was the antithesis of the happy and attractive fifties housewife, so Fang flipped the image of the capable husband who was king of his castle, and I soon realized he was a beloved character. No one knew I was living with an agoraphobic sex tyrant who couldn't

socialize and rarely held down a job. And not until the year of my retirement would I be aware that my stage act was actually a form of therapy. Boy, did I need it” (Diller “Lampshade” 100).

### **Comic Influences**

Diller will be the first to admit that there were other female comics working before her, and male stand-ups as well, but in looking at Diller, it’s also imperative to remember that stand-up was still in its infancy and developing all around her – something that could be mixed with music and variety acts, much like Vaudeville. Diller, in fact, was very much a part of that development:

There had been women stand-up comics before me: brassy chicks like Belle Barth and Rusty Warren, who turned the air blue with their crude jokes in after-hours hangouts, as well as the far more sophisticated and attractive Jean Carroll, who specialized in witty one-liners about her husband and her home life. Carroll actually made several appearances on the Ed Sullivan show, yet neither she nor any of the other women broke through on the scale that I did during the late fifties and early sixties – Jean didn’t travel to build a mass audience, and Barth and Warren were far too X-rated for television. So, for the first ten years, I had it all to myself.

Then again, there weren’t even many male singles. Most of them were working in pairs: Martin & Lewis, Allen & Rossi, Burns & Carlin – standups weren’t all that popular at the time, those like Benny and Hope had moved on to other things, and it was a wide-open field. I sort of snuck

in and no one realized what I was doing...the stuff was offbeat but women could relate to it, and I also gave the guys plenty to laugh at (Diller “Lampshade” 131).

If there are any comics who may be said to have any direct influence on Diller, it would be Bob Hope and Don Rickles. From Rickles (and Keith Rockwell, who also advised her in this area as part owner of The Purple Onion nightclub), Diller learned the power of mock aggression. “...I’d learn to enhance my performances in the round by actually watching the way Don Rickles paced himself to show hostility, scanning the audience and looking behind him as if to say, ‘They’re after me. Oh my God, cover for me.’ I’d think, ‘I’ve got to learn to do that,’ and when I’d succeed in learning, it would free me. Improvisation can be a wonderful thing” (Diller “Lampshade” 99).

From Hope, Diller learned more about technique:

Bob taught me a lot about comedy, explaining cause and effect as well as the motivations behind a comic persona – thanks to him, I learned where to pause and break on a line that I’d normally say all in one breath, turning an ordinary quip into something memorable. Previously, I had copied him without even realizing it, because I tried to avoid copying anyone. And what’s more, he liked to make jibes about people and I liked to be on the receiving end, so we were terrific foils, complementing each other perfectly. Not for nothing had newspaper columnists been labeling me the ‘female Bob Hope’ (Diller “Lampshade” 184).

Bob Hope was instrumental in several ways. One was his influence on stand-up comedy as a whole, historically speaking. Richard Zoglin, author of *Stand-Up Comedy on the Edge: How Stand-Up in the 1970s changed America* and frequent contributor on comedy to *Time Magazine*, states:

When you talk about stand-up comedy, I think you have to talk about the real founder of stand-up comedy in America who is Bob Hope. Bob was in Vaudeville at a time when there really weren't stand-up comedians, there were just guys doing knock-about bits, slapstick, and old-fashioned comedy team bits, but Bob started to be an MC. And he would introduce the act and he would make wisecracks about them, and I think from that developed the style that we all think of as stand-up comedy. He had a very American brashness and irreverence that I think became identified as the American kind of stand-up comedy. And he became the ambassador of America around the world: in radio, on television, and in entertaining the troops overseas (Zoglin "History").

Bob Hope would eventually bring Diller along on a USO tour of Vietnam, Thailand, and Guam in 1966, and he also had her perform in a multitude of roles in the movies and television specials alongside him. They had a long-lasting, professional and platonic relationship of profound chemistry. Diller states, "We could talk on any level, and it was reciprocal and strong. When you meet a person who is in complete simpatico with all your views and there is mutual admiration – and boy, did we have that – then it's magic" (Diller "Lampshade" 184).

Before this relationship was even struck however, Hope came along and encouraged her at a crucial moment in Diller's career, before she had achieved much renown. On the night he saw her perform, she had bombed with an audience at the Lotus Club in Washington, D.C., and Diller, seeing Hope in the audience, tried to sneak out of the club without his seeing her. He did see her however, and offered her some encouragement. In a moment when Diller questioned whether she should continue in the business or not, Hope's words of encouragement inspired her to continue performing. Years later, they would meet again when she had achieved more professional success, and that began their long road of friendship and working together in comedy (Diller "Lampshade" 141).

### **Personal Influences**

In looking at Phyllis Diller however, it is evident from her life story that the most significant influences that shaped Diller as a performer were not to be found in the comedy scene at all, but in her own life as she struggled to become the person she knew she could be. The earliest example can be found when Diller was growing up in the small farming community of Lima, in northwestern Ohio. While there was not an over-abundance of cultural activity or performance to be found (though she does recall listening to comedy on the radio as a little girl), Diller did observe something crucial, which was her father's insurance sales pitch when he traveled as a salesman on the road: "It was a concise, magnificently timed routine with a start, middle, and end, and he'd explain to me that, once you've finished your pitch, shut up. Don't say another word. Let the other person think" (Diller "Lampshade" 17). All the way up to and including her final farewell performance,

Diller wouldn't take additional curtain calls. "I do my thing and I don't come back" (Diller "Goodnight") Later on when Diller went to college, she first attended Chicago's Sherwood Conservatory of Music where she studied piano and voice. Like many comedians who have a significant relationship with music, Diller was no exception, and would later turn to her musical abilities as she began developing her first routines (Diller "Lampshade" 38).

A truly significant motivation in Diller's life however, is that Diller was extremely unhappy in her life with her first husband, Sherwood. That darkness in her life was the flip side of the coin that motivated her to pursue a life outside of the very housewife trap that she would later come to mock. With Sherwood, Diller had married a man who refused to help her as a partner, in every sense of the word: physically, financially, or emotionally. Diller recounts time after time when Sherwood refused to help, making her life a misery were it not for her children. "Once, when I was leaving for the hospital to give birth, he refused to accompany me. He was going to put me in a cab..." (Diller "Lampshade" 57). In one particularly sobering passage, Diller describes her darkest moment, when she felt she had lost all sense of herself:

I was alone in the living room, looking at my college scrapbook from the Sherwood Conservatory of Music, and suddenly I felt so overwhelmed by my situation that I threw the scrapbook into the fireplace and burned the damned thing. That was a gesture. No one knew about it, just me, and I never told anybody. It was too painful. It was a loss of hope. You know, 'Forget it.' Forget being smart, forget having any talent, forget dreaming about making something of myself (Diller "Lampshade" 71).

When the kids were a little older (she and Sherwood had six, five of whom lived past infancy), Diller found solace in making some inroads towards having a life outside her home. She began to get involved in a local church through their musical program. Even there, however, Sherwood would act in ways cruel and brutal, and Diller knew there would come a time when she'd need out:

One Sunday I had a fabulous aria and I wanted little Peter to hear his mommy sing, so Sherwood brought him to the service. It would be quite an event for a small kid to see his mother on the stage of this huge church, actually getting a little respect. However, just as I was about to sing, I watched Sherwood get up, grab hold of Peter, and leave. My heart was broken (Diller "Lampshade" 56).

As Diller moved forward steadily into the workforce (both out of financial and emotional necessity), Diller began to work as a writer for ads. She found that she was well-suited to the position, writing clever taglines and one-liners that sold well for the business: "Prices on our damaged refrigerators have been slashed. If demand is heavy, we can damage a few more.' I could outthink anybody when it came to ads and layouts. Of course, I lacked confidence because of my looks and because of the way that Sherwood treated me, but the work was slowly restoring my sense of self, and then something else came along to change my life completely" (Diller "Lampshade" 77). That something was a book called *The Magic of Believing* by Claude M. Bristol. *The Magic of Believing* was a kind of self-help, motivational book that touted self-belief to overcome adversity and achieve personal and professional success. This was the final step between Diller simply writing funny

things, and stating them aloud on the comic stage. Still, it was Sherwood who initially suggested she become a comic. And because the ad writing wasn't bringing home the money they needed to support the family, Diller took to the stage.

### **Persona Progression**

*“To create an hour of laughter – that’s like Atlas lifting the world. And enjoying it.”*

- Phyllis Diller (Diller “Goodnight”)

Like many performers of the forties and fifties, Phyllis Diller’s act began rooted in music, with funny asides between songs. Before she ever performed, she’d been encouraged by friends to go see a performer at a club called The Purple Onion in San Francisco, where Diller and family were based. Diller saw a woman perform there named Jorie Remus. “As I had watched her perform, interspersing torch songs with wry comments, it had sparked the idea that if she could do it, then perhaps I could, too” (Diller “Lampshade” 87). Sometime later, Diller would sit next to Remus’ drama coach at a jazz club in Oakland. His name was Lloyd Clark, and he had also coached the performances of Marguerite Johnson, who later changed her name to Maya Angelou. Clark set up the audition for Diller at The Purple Onion, and Diller made her professional debut there on a Monday, March 7, 1955, booked for a two-week run. Her routine was much like a cabaret performance, and it was attended by mostly friends and family. After the show, she realized one thing very quickly: that she needed more material. “...half of the audience was still there for the second show and I only had one show’s worth of material. That was a nightmare. After that I wrote a second show so fast, enabling me to deal with the overlap if I did two or three performances” (Diller “Lampshade” 93). While much of it was music-

based, she'd also introduce a bit of stand-up in between songs. One of her early signature pieces however was written by Lloyd Clark, and it was a parody of Eartha Kitt's song "Monotonous." In Diller's hands however, it became "Ridiculous" (Diller "Lampshade" 97). Diller essentially shifted her performance from a cabaret act, to a *parody* of a cabaret act.

Diller's act evolved once again when she decided to no longer perform Clark's writing, and it is in this moment that we truly begin to see the beginnings of the Phyllis Diller we have come to know and love today. "His material was all very chichi and I soon found that the public wanted something completely different, more along the lines of a truthful and honest spoofing of everyday life. You see, I was getting into my thing: the husband and the kids and the cooking and the house. That's what I needed to do – it came right out of my soul and it worked" (Diller "Lampshade" 98). From there, she invented characters: Fang and Moby Dick, as well as characters for herself which she would play: a grooming consultant, a fortune-teller, and a gangster's girlfriend ("moll") (Diller "Lampshade" 101). Her own infectious laugh also became another character in the act: but Diller has insisted that this was unintentional, first declaring it was derived from nervousness; but later in her career Diller claimed it was a reaction to her own audiences' laughter (Diller "Goodnight"). Diller quickly realized that the more she focused on a humor that only she could produce, the more genuinely funny she became. "I wanted to become *me*, totally me. The more me, the better. I instinctively knew this and I was right. My attitude, my material, and me – those were the components that distinguished me from the rest of the field right from the start" (Diller "Lampshade" 103).

Eventually, Diller moved away from other writers, and honed in on the style which gave her national acclaim and many, many appearances on *The Jack Paar Show*: the fumbling housewife. In fact, in mocking herself, she also mocked the uber-housewife, one of the later characters she created who was a woman so good at being a wife and mother, she took it to the extreme: “She not only washes the windows, she irons them. She waxes her driveway.” She even gained a fan in that perennial fixture on advice and manners, Pauline Phillips (“Dear Abby”), who began attending her shows at the Purple Onion (Diller “Lampshade” 110). Soon enough, Diller became a fixture on the “discovery club” circuit, and comedians and club owners alike gave her advice on how best to devise her routine, but Diller listened to her instincts about removing the music and just talking. This also included ridding her routine of props – the last thing to go:

When I started out I was not a stand-up. I was just another funny gal doing funny things and whatever else came to mind. I was still using props on the *Jack Paar Show*, and it was only after I’d make enough appearances and enjoy widespread recognition that I would have the guts to get rid of them. My goal was to get laughs – or ‘boffs’ – as close together as possible, and you achieve that by talking, not singing (Diller “Lampshade” 130).

By the end of 1958, Diller had honed the crazed housewife persona, and the *Jack Paar Show* appearances had laid the groundwork for her career to take off. Diller made an appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* without props, shocking the floor manager of the show. Diller had come to see them as a “crutch,” and she wanted to prove to herself and the rest of the world that she was funny without them (Diller “Lampshade” 155).

Diller shaped her hair to look crazy, and began using a blonde fright wig to this effect. She intentionally wore dresses which hid her figure, her breasts, and were unflattering. Additionally, she also commissioned boots which cut off just above her ankles, hitting the skinniest part of her legs in order to emphasize jokes she made about her chicken legs. “Colonel Sanders loves my legs. He’s bringing out a special package of chicken in my honor – it has no breasts.” Most interestingly, when Diller discusses the use of gloves, it is not for added femininity, as one might easily infer. (When Diller performed her “gangster’s moll” character, the middle finger was missing from the glove.) Instead, Diller refers to herself as the court jester, stating that jesters always wore gloves. “All clowns wear gloves. I’m a court jester. They had the ear of kings, we have the ear of presidents” (Diller “Goodnight”).

While the peak of Diller’s career was in the 1960s, she continued performing well into the 70s and onward. As Diller aged, she modified her routine to make fun of herself as an older woman: the “Madonna of the Geritol Set.” “Don’t let ‘Madonna’ bother you. The day I grab my crotch means it’s falling off” (Diller “Goodnight”). Many elements of her routine were mainstays: the dress and her attire, the wigs, the gloves, the boots, the characters (such as Fang, and a fictional sister who was her last invention), and the structure. But now, Diller could make fun of advanced age as well. She also had a lot of plastic surgery in her later years, and she didn’t hesitate to make fun of that also: “If I have one more face lift, it’ll be a Caesarian” (Diller “Goodnight”).

Diller starred in several television shows built around her, including *The Pruitts of Southampton* (which also included cast member Gypsy Rose Lee), and *The Beautiful*

*Phyllis Diller Show*. She went on to appear in films, television specials, and even a brief run as Dolly in *Hello, Dolly!* on Broadway in 1970. She also performed in one serious film called *The Adding Machine*, which though modestly successful, cemented in her mind that she was a comic performer. In a final coincidence, Diller made something of a return to the format of her earliest performances, involving music. She received a phone call from the Pittsburgh Pops, asking her if she'd do a show for them. Diller said, "Oh, I'll play a little Bach and a little Beethoven. I'd love that!" The man on the phone had wanted her for a comedy performance, and didn't know she played the piano, but clearly didn't have the heart to correct her. Thus began a ten-year stretch of classical piano performances with symphonies all over the country, incorporating some of her humor into the performances (Diller "Lampshade" 213).

### **Gender Roles**

*"The only tragedy is that Phyllis Diller was the last from an era that insisted a woman had to look funny in order to be funny. If she had started today, Phyllis could have stood there in Dior and Harry Winston and become the major star that she was. I adored her!"*

- Joan Rivers, Twitter (Duke "Smile")

Joan Rivers may be onto something. Had Phyllis Diller been born in a different era, would her comic persona have been much altered? Diller began her career in a pre-feminist era: just how radical was she? Was there radicalism simply in the fact that she held her own as a female comic? After the fifties, sixties, and even seventies came and went, Diller was still revered. If one looks at the lineup of HBO's *On Location* comedy concerts, forty-

three of them aired between the years 1975 and 1980. Only one was headlined by a woman: Phyllis Diller (Zoglin “Edge” 183).

Zoglin writes in *Comedy at the Edge* that “The women who succeeded as stand-up comics in the pre-feminist era had to do it by telling jokes and adopting attitudes that weren’t threatening to men. Phyllis Diller, with her freaky outfits, electroshocked hair, and braying laugh, made fun of her looks, her sex life, and her ineptness at housework” (Zoglin “Edge” 184). This is true. Though, I contend that for her to even pursue a career as a performer with five children and a husband at home was revolutionary given the context of the time. Her spoof of the woman who otherwise represented the feminine ideal pointed out that not every woman was born with such innate skills as child-rearing or a nurturing inclination; stereotypes that women continue to fight even today. The truth about Diller’s life was in essence a great irony considering that, in contrast to societal norms, it was she who had to join the workforce, become the family’s breadwinner, and pursue a career which women were not otherwise encouraged to have.

Diller is fascinating because her career peaked in an era when women were forced strongly by society into certain roles, a role which Diller herself willingly embraced in the first few decades of her life personally, and which she simultaneously came to flout and reject so strongly by way of her professional life. Her autobiography recounts many instances in which Diller found herself crushed by the pressure to adhere to women’s roles; sometimes unwittingly so. The earliest and most disturbing instance occurs in Diller’s life when she’s in Chicago during her college years, and was very nearly raped by the husband of a couple with whom she was boarding. After managing to fight him off and escape,

Diller called her parents for advice, and "...their response was that I should do nothing. Nothing. Otherwise I'd have to talk to his wife and cause a whole upset. Welcome to my world" (Diller "Lampshade" 6). Even when her mother was pregnant with Diller at an older age, she was initially diagnosed with a tumor, before the doctor was forced to operate and discover it was in fact a *baby*. By the time Diller is a young twenty-something and falls for Sherwood, she became pregnant, so they eloped. Diller forged the date on the marriage certificate so that the birth reflected a nine-month period *after* the official marriage. In her autobiography (published in 2005), she admits this is the first time she has ever disclosed this information publicly, for fear that her first child would grow up labeled as a bastard and that she would shame her mother. To Diller, she risked angering her mother less by disclosing a marriage that took place months before, rather than admitting she'd lost her virginity prior to marriage (Diller "Lampshade" 49). Diller entered the world at a time when there was a great gap between how supposedly great things were for women on the surface, and how things truly were far more repressive than was openly discussed, and this is the seed of what made her so funny.

According to the PBS documentary *The Pill*, "Not only did most married women walk down the aisle by age nineteen; they also tended to start families right away...and they didn't stop at just one child. From 1940 to 1960, the number of families doubled, and the number of families having a fourth child quadrupled" (Gazit "Mrs. America"). Diller fell into the latter group of women who were having four and more children, despite the already apparent problems with her first husband, Sherwood. Referring to those early years, Diller says, "All I ever wanted at that point was to be a housewife, and eventually

I'd end up with five kids, all the responsibility, and no way out. [After having another child] I immediately asked the doctor, 'How long is it before I can have another baby?' That's how I thought: you got married and had children" (Diller "Lampshade" 57).

On top of all this, there are instances throughout Diller's story when it appears likely that she was discriminated against as a female in the workplace, though Diller does not state so directly. But perhaps most poignantly, Diller's two husbands (first Sherwood Diller, then later Warde Donovan), display an overt negativity and jealousy about her soaring career, while simultaneously showing no ambition of their own. Interestingly, they both took steps to appear as though they were her manager and have some level of control over her professional life, even though neither one knew anything about managing a performer's career. For Diller, it was as though her career could not exist in their minds unless they'd had a hand in overseeing it in some capacity. Much later in life, at age sixty-eight when Diller meets the love of her life Robert Hastings, her third and final major relationship – despite the positivity and equality of this relationship, Diller describes in one passage letting him win at tennis, because "Always make your man feel like a winner" (Diller "Lampshade" 239). It seems that even for someone as successful and groundbreaking as Diller, old habits die hard.

Yet, despite a lifetime of repression by significant men in her life, Diller combated that on the stage. Her "mock hostility" served her as a comic, and as a woman breaking out of the box she'd been placed in by society. Even the book she found so inspirational, *The Magic of Believing*, appears as though it was aimed at men, not assuming that there were women interested in furthering their careers at that time: "Back your belief with a resolute

will and you become unconquerable – a master of men among men – yourself” (Claude M. Bristol) (Diller “Lampshade” 83).

Diller once gave a performance wherein she tried a different approach – looking elegant and attractive – and she bombed (Diller “Lampshade” 137). Most tellingly in regards to Diller’s de-feminization as a performer, she was asked by *Playboy* magazine to do a photo shoot for an issue that featured women of two body types: overweight or very skinny. When Diller turned out to be neither of those, the pictures were shelved and never published. “Assuming I was skinny, the *Playboy* brass reasoned it made perfect sense to follow Cass [Mama Cass] with Diller. Ugly, bony, scrawny, is what they were after, but while I certainly matched the first requirement and also had skinny limbs, the editors didn’t realize I dressed specifically to hide my large tits” (Diller “Lampshade” 226). To watch Diller in action, you’d never know that she was dealing with gender on a broader scale as she was. Her jokes are self-effacing and self-targeted: “I once had a peak-a-boo blouse. First they’d peek, then they’d boo.” Or, “When I wear a bikini, even the tide won’t come in.” In one of her television spots, there’s an entire choreographed number titled “It’s Graduation Day at Phyllis Diller’s Charm and Finishing School,” in which a dozen or so women all wearing fright wigs emerge looking like Diller herself, and seek advice in becoming the same incompetent housewife that she is. And finally, there’s her parody of “I Feel Pretty,” from *West Side Story* (Diller “Pretty Face”).

While it is easy to classify Diller as a comedian who, in terms of material, did not push the envelope as far as we may perceive other female comedians to have done, I contend that it might simply be a matter of what made it to see the light of day in her

performances, and what her audiences could accept at the time. Diller wasn't afraid to bruise the male ego, which was a valid feat in itself while simultaneously maintaining her audience: "I went into a clothes store one day and the lady said, 'Madam, you have got to try this dress on. It is so sexy, it will give your husband ideas.' I said, 'What, does a brain come with it?'" In Julia Klein's article from 1984 in *Ms.* magazine about women and comedy, she quotes comic Carol Siskind as saying that "We are talking about things that haven't been talked about – like women being horny" (Klein "Ms." 126). Clearly, Siskind never heard Diller's joke about the pharmacist:

A fellow went into a drugstore and asked to speak with a male pharmacist, and the lady there said, 'My sister and I have owned this store for thirty years, so don't be embarrassed. Just tell us your problem and we'll solve it.' He said, 'Well, it is embarrassing. I suffer from continuous sexual arousal.' She said 'Don't worry, let me talk to my sister.' So they had a conference, and she came back and said, 'The best we can do is a thousand a week and half of the store' (Diller "Lampshade" 164).

One can see how truly wicked Diller's humor can be when, funnily enough, she's not performing. For example, in the documentary *Goodnight, We Love You*, Diller has a moment when she's showing her art studio to the cameras, where she spent many hours painting and producing artwork that was sold in shows and galleries all over the country in her later years. Diller muses for a time about where her creative and artistic abilities could have come from. "I don't know...sleeping with Picasso helped" (Diller "Goodnight"). In that room, we see another facet of the world Diller might have explored further had she not

been held back by society's views of women in her earliest days. "I pigeonhole myself: as a mother, wife...and now an artist" (Diller "Goodnight"). Who knows what Diller might have achieved if the artist had come first? It's hard to say, particularly given Diller's frank admission that having a man by your side during that time made things possible for her that might not have otherwise been, including the extensive traveling for her career and subsequent frequenting of hotels and apartments all over the bigger cities. "I never realized it back then, but as useless as he was, Sherwood served a purpose in this kind of environment: he was a body and he was male. Women aren't safe running around their own at night, and so it was a good thing for me to have a man by my side" (Diller "Lampshade" 124).

### **Conclusion**

In the end however, was Diller earnestly and consciously looking to break through a new societal barrier? Or was it rather a consequence of her unexpected success? Lesa Lockford, writing in her book *Performing Femininity: Rewriting Gender Identity*, discusses those persons in history who have cast themselves in subversive roles and achieved success without overt disregard to the status quo, and in doing so, she calls to mind Diller: "History is rife with examples of the powerless adopting a 'strategic pose' in order to make those in power feel secure in their position while subversive activity was carried out behind their backs" (Lockford 41). Regardless of how pre-meditated her choices were or not, we know that Diller quite simply wanted to work as a comedian and support her family, and in the process rose to become the first truly nationally successful female comic. "I'm not the kind of person who enjoys power; not a Lucy or a Streisand

who knows it all and does it all. I just hoped that things would go the way I wanted, yet that never happens unless you get real lucky. In that regard, I never got lucky. And I was too distracted to find the will or the way to take a stand against many of the production decisions and try to turn things around. There were, you see, major problems at home” (Diller “Lampshade” 199). And in this respect, Diller did the most radical thing she could do. She went outside of the home and did whatever it took to support her family, thereby simultaneously embodying and rejecting the image of the 1950s American housewife. Diller expresses time and again that she simply wanted to make others laugh; to make them happy. And as long as she did so, *she* was happy. “Did you know that children laugh four hundred times a day, adults twenty times a day? It’s so *good* for you!” she says in her documentary on the eve of her final performance (Diller “Goodnight”).

Diller’s autobiography ends with a school hymn that she felt encapsulated her, and her contributions: “Brighten the corner where you are! Brighten the corner where you are! Someone far from harbor you may guide across the bar; Brighten the corner where you are!’ I bought that. And I sold it” (Diller “Lampshade” 266). And sell it she did, allowing for the first generation of women to come along and dream that they too could become a celebrated comedian. Thanking her audience in the last lines of her final performance, Diller said, “I hope you’re getting everything you want out of life. Good night, I love you” (Diller “Goodnight”). I’d like to believe that Diller, at the end of her life, got everything she wanted out of hers, and in turn, laid down the groundwork for more female comedians to come along and make us laugh, too; such as Joan Rivers and Lisa Lampanelli.

## CHAPTER 2 Joan Rivers: Bridging the Next (Several) Generations

*“I went to see her live one time, and the shit that came out of her mouth was so shocking and funny – she was doing something no other woman was doing. You know, I wouldn’t be doing this if it wasn’t for Joan. Much in the way that she acknowledges that Phyllis Diller paved the way for her, and before her Moms Mabley. I get it, there’s a handful of women in modern history that have done this – a handful.”*

- Kathy Griffin (Rivers “Piece of Work”)

At the height of Phyllis Diller’s career throughout the 1960s, another woman was starting out, honing her craft and playing in many of the same comedy clubs (Bon Soir, the hungry i): Joan Rivers (Diller “Lampshade”; Zoglin “Edge” 185). Rivers represents the next major shift in women and comedy in terms of style, material and subject content, and persona. Diller and Rivers (and Lampanelli as well) have a lot in common too, which I will discuss later. For now however, I’d like to look at the shift that Rivers makes in terms of female penned and performed comedy.

“The key transitional figure, the woman who bridged the gap between the self-deprecating jokesters like Diller and the liberated women comics of the feminist era, was Joan Rivers, “ writes Zoglin (Zoglin “Edge” 184). I couldn’t agree more. Both Diller and Rivers began their careers in the pre-feminist era and continued them past the second wave feminist revolution of the 1960s – 80s. So where did Diller leave off that Rivers picked up?

## Comic Structure

On the surface, Diller and Rivers don't seem all that disparate from one another: Rivers also has self-deprecating humor about herself and her looks, some mock hostility towards celebrities and other characters, and most of the material stems from her own life. She too had characters she would discuss in her early comedy: Mr. Phyllis, her hairdresser, for example (Rivers "Mr. Phyllis"). That is generally where the similarities end, however. Whereas Diller was married and mocked the life of a housewife (one in which she otherwise led, aside from her burgeoning comedy career), Rivers was a single woman in an era where an unattached woman past her early twenties was on the road to spinsterhood (Gazit "Mrs. America"). In a sense, she didn't have to worry about repercussions for her husband and child, because until 1965 she didn't have either. Joan did marry Edgar Rosenberg in 1965 however, and they had daughter Melissa in 1968 (Rivers' "Official Website"). Until then however, Rivers had been building her comedy in clubs for seven years, trying unsuccessfully to get an appearance on the *Late Night Show with Johnny Carson* (Zoglin "Edge" 184). Increasingly however, while Rivers made jokes about her life as single woman, dating, and marriage, a "feminine" point of view did not come to dominate her comedy. While Diller's comedy all stemmed from the housewife persona, Rivers entered new territory as a female comic whose comedy wasn't necessarily dominated by female subject matter. Diller may have been the crazed housewife, but Rivers did not become the quintessential single woman in search of a husband, though some of her jokes did self-deprecatingly mock that aspect of her life. Importantly however, they were not her entire set, nor was the single girl her comic persona of choice. Rivers

became known for pushing the envelope in terms of what she said, but in looking at Rivers as an early female comic, it's also important to note what she did *not* say. Rivers could have easily created her persona around the Jewish girl who hasn't married yet; but in her life as a comic, she stuck to saying what was funny without regard to her gender and began to ignore the boxes in which the industry tried to place her.

The greatest structural difference between Diller and Rivers is that while Diller would build spectacular rolls in her comedy, setting up a cascade of one-liners which delivered punch after punch after punch, Rivers was more conversational. It was as if the two of you were out to coffee, and she was simply presenting her side of the conversation. Her style is deceptive in fact, because it *is* so highly conversational, she appears not to even give you the chance to laugh. But she does give you the chance, and you do laugh. It's just not as obvious as the traditional set-up/punch format. Rivers is a master at speeding along through her material so quickly that you almost forget you are hearing a structured, pre-planned performance that has been carefully crafted. Her energy is enormous – even now as she performs at seventy-nine years old:

Oh, my daughter Melissa. I love Melissa so much, I wish she was rich though. She turned down *Playboy* magazine – can you imagine that? She turned down *Playboy* magazine. \$200,000 – they wanted her to be naked to the waist. \$200,000! Turned it down, she didn't want to do it. Calls me up! And as a mother – if any of you are mothers, you've got to say, 'Whatever you want, sweetheart. Whatever you decide, I'm 100% behind you.' 'Mom, I'm going to turn it down, what do you think?' What do I think? What do I

fucking think, you stupid cunt? You take off your pants, show your pussy and get another \$100,000 you stupid bitch! What am I? I'm fucking seventy-two years old, what do I think? I'm playing to drunks and gays, what do I think? I'm standing on the red carpet going [holding out a microphone as if to interview someone else], 'What are you wearing? Have you got a lucky charm? Who the fuck are you?' What do I think? She's divorced four years, I'm still paying for the goddamned wedding, that's what I think. And it's my own fault, she could have been Monica Lewinsky. Monica Lewinsky – she went down on the President of the United States, made \$18 million dollars, look her up on Google [Rivers is playing to a London audience here]. She has a hat factory. I thought it would be like a vacuum cleaner factory, but it's a hat factory. So she went down on the president of the United States. My daughter Melissa – does she have \$18 million dollars? No, and it's my fault. My fault, Palladium audience. Because I taught her to be good. Believe in God. Don't sleep with people you don't want to sleep with. Have respect for yourself, have respect for your body. Stupid, stupid, stupid! When she was sixteen, I should have said, 'Melissa, come in here! Get on your knees, bring a banana, momma wants to talk to you.' That's what I should have said. (Rivers "Palladium")

Within this larger conversational tone, Rivers has pushed the envelope in terms of subject matter as well. Rivers will be the first to tell you that, at her comic core, is a belief in telling the truth (Rivers "Piece of Work"). Says Tina Fey, "Her approach to jokes, which

was to be saying the thing that people are thinking but not saying was thrilling and innovative” (Rivers “Piece of Work”). It was Rivers in fact who really began to push the limits of exactly what *could* be said. Diller of course did this to some extent herself, referring to her mother-in-law as a “bitch,” and other choice words for example (Diller “Pretty Face”), but Rivers moved beyond particular word choice and usage to pushing the envelope in terms of entire subject matter. In the beginning, it wasn’t that Rivers sought out the words or subject matter she couldn’t discuss, but rather that’s where her jokes would naturally go, and she would find out in trying to use them on stage that they weren’t acceptable. “On the *Ed Sullivan Show*, I couldn’t even use the word ‘pregnant,’ can you imagine? I was eight months pregnant, I was a house, and I couldn’t say the word ‘pregnant.’ Instead I had to say, ‘pretty soon I’m going to hear the pitter-patter of little feet...’” (Pioneers of Television). It worked in her favor though – not at first, but Rivers would eventually find her audience despite her bucking of these conventions. Referring to audience response, Rivers said, “There was a gasp – but then there was a laugh” (Pioneers of Television).

Much like Rivers, Don Rickles and Lisa Lampanelli are two comedians who are self-aware enough to know that in their comedy, they will say things that have large potential to offend. In an effort to continually counteract this, both have developed catch-phrases and small reminders throughout their show to prompt the audience to recall that they are, after all, just joking. Rickles will pepper his set with, “Laugh and enjoy people,” (Rickles “Comic Relief”) and Lampanelli will praise whichever group of people she has just been making fun of, such as, “Oh, but I LOVE the gays...” (Lampanelli “Dirty Girl”).

A hallmark of Rivers' comedy, she too developed her own catch phrase which reminds the audience that she is joking, and that is, "Can we talk?" – a signal which indicates, "I'm about to say some things in jest, lest you take what I'm about to say too seriously" (Rivers "Palladium"). In later years, parallel to the increasingly litigious nature of American society, Rivers also started peppering the word "allegedly" to both signal her audience and, in blunt terms, cover her derriere. "Allegedly" even made it into the title of one of her recorded performances: *Joan Rivers: Live (Still Alive) at the London Palladium (Allegedly)* (Rivers "Palladium").

### **Comic Influences**

Rivers makes reference to one comedian's influence, and one comedian's influence only: that of Lenny Bruce. "For inspiration, she looked not to other women like Fields or Diller, but to the same comic outlaw who had influenced so many of her male contemporaries, Lenny Bruce, whom she first saw at the Village Vanguard in 1962. 'He was so beyond anything else at the time,' she says. 'He told the truth. I thought, he's saying what I'm thinking'" (Zoglin "Edge" 184). Lenny Bruce was a stand-up comedian who is revered for his willingness to discuss anything on stage: truthfully, satirically, and always with a sense of what was socially relevant. Journalist Paul Krassner said of Bruce that his use of profanity and other subject choices were grounded in morality: "He was parsing it, demystifying it...what Lenny did as a performer was break through the traditional targets of humor and talk about things that really mattered" (Sullivan "Bruce Legacy"). It is easy to see that, like Bruce, Rivers challenges the subjects she could discuss

on stage; not out of a desire to shock, but to progress society forward. Truth was the only aim.

### **Personal Influences**

What other elements have influenced Joan Rivers? I believe to great extent, her drive to be on the stage has outweighed any other professional inclination she's ever had. In the documentary *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*, Rivers discusses how she initially wanted to be a part of the theatre, and how much her stage work is incredibly important to her. So much so, that when she premieres a one-woman play in London and the show gets mixed reviews, she decides not to open the show in New York, fearing what the critics might say. "Say what you will about me as a comedian, but my acting is sacred to me. My career *is* acting. I've always been an actress, playing a comedian" (Rivers "Piece of Work"). It is this immense drive which has kept her going for so many years, and continues to drive her even now at seventy-nine years old. It's in stark contrast to Diller, who reached a point where she no longer felt she could tour as easily, and wanted to go out on a high note, determined not to become a joke herself (Diller "Goodnight"). Rivers on the other hand, when asked to which female comics she could pass along the mantle of Queen of Comedy, Rivers jokingly said, "No one! They'll have to pry it from my cold, dead hands!" (Rivers "Piece of Work"). She did list several contemporary female comedians whom she respects and felt deserved the honor of the figurative "mantle," but ultimately she stated, "I don't want to retire. I don't want to go sit in the sun" (Rivers "Piece of Work").

In looking at Rivers and her comedy, there is also the element of her core belief in comedy as a means to help one cope with the difficult things in life. It is the idea that out of tragedy comes truth, and a way to cope with the emotions that inevitably spring from such an occurrence. In many instances, Rivers has been accused of saying things she shouldn't say, and discussing subjects she should not broach. Among these is the subject of the Holocaust. Here again however, Rivers makes it clear that she raises the subject of the Holocaust not for shock value, but as a reminder that it happened and, consequently, as a healthy way to process an event such as that in the aftermath. In an interview she gave to Lee Israel of *Ms. Magazine* in October of 1984, Israel recounted a collaborative writing session in which she had been working on a humor anthology, and in this exchange with Rivers, we see recounted in simple and articulate terms, her belief in the power of comedy to heal:

LI: I wrote for a humor anthology called *Titters*. There was a meeting of the contributors – all of them women – just about the time that Betty Ford had a mastectomy. A lot of jokes were made about boobs et cetera. I finally said: ‘Can we agree that cancer’s not funny?’ And someone said, ‘No!’

JR: I’m on their side. Anything that you can laugh at becomes that much easier to bear (Israel “Ms.” 110).

Later in this same interview when Israel suggests that the audience is reacting to Rivers’ “callousness,” Rivers responds by saying, “Just the opposite. The jokes I make, I make when I feel deeply. I think I’m oversensitive. I got through my mother’s funeral by

telling jokes.” And, later still: “I got my sister through her husband’s funeral with humor” (Israel “Ms.” 111).

Not all that surprisingly, despite Israel’s interview and many other instances in the media, Rivers is still often asked to answer for her reasoning behind the jokes that she’s making. Just within the last couple of months, Rivers made another joke referencing the Holocaust, and once again was publicly asked to apologize. She refused, reminding the audience (nearly thirty years after she states so in the *Ms. Magazine* interview) that, “I’m reminding you that it happened. I’m not anti-Semitic. Go after the people who are the real anti-Semitic problems, like Mel Gibson. My late husband’s entire family died in the Holocaust” (Staff CNN “Holocaust”). Despite that Rivers has toed this brand of comedy since 1968, the documentary *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work* depicts a similar instance in which a heckler attempts to shout down Rivers during one of her stand-up gigs after she makes a joke regarding Helen Keller. The heckler shouts, “Hey, I have a deaf son! You can’t make those jokes, I have a deaf son!” Rivers, in response, states, “Don’t you tell me what comedy is! Don’t tell me what comedy is! I know what comedy is! Comedy is to help us deal with things! Where would we be after 9/11 without comedy?” (Rivers “Piece of Work”).

### **Persona Progression**

Radio Interviewer, speaking to Rivers’ plastic surgery: “*Don’t you want to be loved for the real you?*”

Joan Rivers: “*Who is the real me? I just want to be loved.*”

- Joan Rivers, speaking on a radio program (Rivers “Piece of Work”)

Of the three comedians profiled here, the shape of Rivers' persona evolution is the most difficult to define. While many of her jokes revolve around life stories and biographical anecdotes, not all of them are seemingly true (her travails as an overweight child, for instance) (Israel "Ms." 112). At the very least, we can always say that Rivers has always been unafraid to say what she felt she needed to say, whether for her comedy or not. Additionally, it's difficult to distinguish between opinions she expresses as jokes, and those she expresses which stem from personal truth. When watching a program such as *Joan and Melissa: Joan Knows Best?* (as seen on the *We* television channel), we see Rivers on a reality television program where the lines are blurred somewhat between what she is doing as part of her everyday life, and what she is doing for the camera. Likewise with her stand-up material, it is difficult to distinguish between what is truly autobiographical material, and what is artificial.

What we do know, is that Rivers began life as Joan Sandra Molinsky, the daughter of a Jewish couple, Meyer and Beatrice. She was born in Brooklyn, but the family moved to Larchmont, NY during her childhood (Israel "Ms." 110). When Rivers was eleven years old, she decided she loved to make people laugh (Israel "Ms." 112). Later in life, Rivers made a parallel move to Diller in terms of her love life and married young, seemingly because that's what she thought she was supposed to do. It lasted for six months, which according to Rivers was six months longer than was necessary (Rivers Joan.co). Rivers said, "I had the East Side apartment, the big ring. I'd done what my parents expected, and I was miserable...I wanted to perform" (Israel "Ms." 112).

The first six years of Rivers' career as a stand-up were experimental, trying, difficult, and a mixed bag of success and encouragement with bombs and other performance disasters. Rivers experimented with a number of formats, structures, and venues for her comedy. During this time, she performed with the Second City Comedy Troupe in Chicago (Pioneers of Television), which she has always credited with being instrumental in the development of her comedy. "Second City changed my life. To this day, everything I do on stage is right out of Second City" (Pioneers of Television).

Rivers experimented with having a stage name for a time during this period: "Pepper January: Comedy with Spice." She also involved singing in her act, much in the same way that Diller began her performances (Israel "Ms." 112). Despite these experiments in presentation and persona, we know that Rivers always pushed the envelope in terms of what she spoke about. Famously, she ended her original set with the line, "This business is all about casting couches. Just remember, my name is Joan Rivers, and I put out" (Rivers "Piece of Work"). In one line, we can see all that Rivers was trying to achieve, and would continue striving for all throughout her career. With the pursuit of truth at her core, she didn't hesitate to discuss the way things truly were, and turn them into comedy for her act.

A turning point in her persona came after Rivers' first marriage ended. Rivers moved back in with her parents – but the pursuit of her career often caused tension between Rivers and her parents, and after a major argument in which her mother pleaded for her to at least label herself a "writer," Rivers moved out and promptly moved in with a friend named Treva Silverman. Silverman was also interested in comedy, and later became

a writer for the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*. “Collaboratively,” writes Israel, “Silverman is known to have helped Joan find her comedic direction. ‘The brilliant, schizophrenic insanity,’ Ben Bagley recalls, ‘came from her work with Treva.’ In the next few years, Joan was helped also by Jan Wallman, a respected impresario of comedy who ran a place in Greenwich Village called Upstairs at the Duplex. Wallman encouraged Joan to take the music out of her act and go with what was true and instinctual” (Israel “Ms.” 112). It is here that we see a similar narrative to both Diller and Lampanelli: that in the stripping down of the act – removing music, props, etc., each woman locked onto the persona representation which served their comedy most successfully.

In another coincidence, Rivers – by playing in different clubs – found parts of her audience, and found that not everyone was affronted by her material. To some, it was not only less shocking, but it hit the mark. It was *funny*. Common to Diller, Rivers, and Lampanelli, is that all three women have attracted a large homosexual male following of their comedy. When Jack Lemmon heard the closing line from Rivers’ original set – “My name is Joan Rivers, and I put out” – he promptly turned and left, absolutely disgusted. Rivers saw this happen and was hurt by it, naturally (Rivers “Piece of Work”). But when Rivers began performing at the Duplex, further developing her comic persona, things changed. Israel states, “Her audience there was considerably more sophisticated than the Pips [another comedy club] crowd. It included a fair number of homosexual men. Jan Wallman laughed when I recounted the trauma caused by Joan’s closing line at Pips: [Wallman:] ‘My audience wouldn’t have been too distressed by that. Their reaction would have been, ‘So what else is new!’” (Israel “Ms.” 112).

Each year that Rivers had been doing comedy, Rivers auditioned for the *Late Night Show with Johnny Carson*. And with each audition, she was not invited onto the Carson show. But with Rivers' eighth audition, she was then invited to make an appearance – not as a stand-up comic, but as a comedy writer (what her mother wanted all along, after all!). There are varied accounts as to what brought about this alternate ending compared with previous auditions. One account suggests that it was Bill Cosby who stepped in directly and put in a good word for Rivers; other accounts suggest it was Bill Cosby's manager who pushed for her and used his reputation as Bill Cosby's manager to help persuade the talent managers. Still others point to a sympathetic talent recruiter who was working on Carson's show at the time. Regardless, Rivers finally made it onto the *Late Night Show with Johnny Carson* (Zoglin "Comedy Edge").

In Rivers' appearance on the *Late Night Show with Johnny Carson*, it has been suggested that in sitting face to face with Carson in conversation rather than performing stand-up, this could easily have been the moment that launched her career (Pioneers of Television). Given the conversational tone of her comedy which was already central to her persona, Rivers had an immediate chemistry with Carson, and by the end of the segment, he said those infamous words: "You're going to be a star." He proved prophetic. From here, Rivers' career expanded exponentially, and her motif of conversational humor, and a willingness to discuss what wasn't discussed on the stand-up stage was cemented into the Rivers comic persona. Rivers later got her own talk show in fact, something I'll discuss further in looking at gender roles within her career. This moment however, starting after her appearance on Carson's show, begins the Rivers persona we most commonly associate

with her: energetic, mocking, fast-paced, loud, and unabashed, unafraid to say whatever might truly lurk in the darker depths of her audiences' minds.

To the present day, Rivers still ruffles feathers with the jokes she makes, her jokes relating to the Holocaust a prime example. As discussed previously, in the interview she gave in 1984 to *Ms. Magazine*, Rivers defended herself and explained the nature of her comedy; in March of 2013, we see her doing the very same thing on CNN (Staff, CNN). Rivers still challenges what can be said, and what can be joked about. And, like Diller, Rivers has adapted her comedy to meet the challenges of growing older in her body. She incorporates jokes about the older population in general, but she also doesn't hesitate to include herself in the ridicule: "The only good thing is, I can get a pedicure and a mammogram at the same time. Also, vaginas drop! No one tells you this" (Rivers "Before Melissa").

Speaking off the stage, Rivers rails against a society that values youth and beauty and lacks appreciation for our elders, and has even cited comedy as something she ferociously intends to keep doing no matter how old she becomes. "As an actress, it's over when you're fifty, sixty...but as long as you make them laugh, you'll always be invited in" (Rivers "Piece of Work"). While Rivers discusses how society values youth, she then turns that notion on its head into a subtle (or perhaps not-so-subtle, as it were) piece of social criticism by mocking this very mentality on stage: "I HATE old people. Oh! If you are fucking old, get up and get out of here, right NOW! Right now! [As if one of her audience members:] 'But *you're* old, Ms. Rivers.' Well, I don't see me. If you are old, screw you.

You have to look, not me. If you are old, start now. By the time you get out, you'll have heard two-thirds of the act" (Rivers "Before Melissa").

Rivers most recent book is titled *I Hate Everyone...Starting with Me* (2012), and she has incorporated a lot of material from that book about groups of people and things that she doesn't like into her comedy set, such as: "I hate Paris Hilton," or "I hate babies with trendy names" (Rivers "Hate" 170). In the final look at Rivers' persona, she appears to be unwilling to go anywhere else but a stage, and at seventy-nine, she shows no signs of slowing down. "The minute you're not angry, not upset – what are you talking about?" (Rivers "Piece of Work").

### **Gender Roles**

Gender expectations for women in the 1960s plagued Rivers and continued to haunt her both professionally and personally throughout her career, much as it did Phyllis Diller. In fact, had Rivers not trusted her instincts concerning her first marriage and her desire to follow a career, it may be safe to wonder whether I would not be writing of her right now. Gender expectation may, in large part, have been responsible for the first seven years of Rivers' career having not had much commercial success as well. She was in her early-mid thirties during those years, and – in an interesting foreshadowing of her later career – she was already being told that she was too old by managers, agents, etc. (Israel "Ms." 112). If that wasn't discouragement enough, Rivers mentions countless agents, talent scouts, club owners, recruiters, etc. who all told Rivers that as a woman, she shouldn't be talking about the things she wanted to discuss in her shows. Rivers recounts countless examples of words she was told not to use, and entire subject matters which were

considered off-limits. Even when she was eight months pregnant, she couldn't say the word "pregnant" on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. (Rivers recounts, "All the critics could talk about was, 'I can't believe they had a pregnant woman on television!'" (Pioneers of Television)) She was told she couldn't use the word "abortion." During those first seven auditions for Late Night with Johnny Carson, the talent recruiters told her that she was "too rough," "too wild," and "talking about things women shouldn't talk about" (Pioneers of Television). Rivers said it came from her manager, even: "I remember my manager [Jack Rollins, earlier in her career] saying to me, "You shouldn't be talking about this – you're going into places you shouldn't go. Women shouldn't be talking about that," and I said, "You're wrong; this is exactly what we should be talking about" (Rivers "Piece of Work").

Can one suppose that had she been a male, she would have been considered edgy and subversive – much like Lenny Bruce – rather than simply offensive? In a description of Rivers' persona, as captured in 1984 and with the hindsight of fifteen years, Israel states:

There were, of course, other funny women of the time. Elaine May, Anne Meara, Phyllis Diller, Totie Fields – even Belle Barth, the reigning queen of schmutz – come to mind. But they were all protected in some way by the kind of comedy they were doing, by their outsize comedic personas. They were camouflaged, or at least, accompanied.

Joan alone was working without a safety net, doing what male comics had always been permitted to do and were increasingly – in the wake of Lenny Bruce – *expected* to do (Israel "Ms." 110).

One of the most telling instances in Rivers' career – and in all of show business, really, is that of Carson and Rivers' relationship. Carson had given Rivers' career a major boost and created a massive turning point when he had her on the show; not only by having her appear, but in telling her she was going to be a star. Their camaraderie was strong and obvious to anyone who watched their interaction. Jan Wallman who witnessed that first appearance in person said, "It was one of the most exciting things I've ever seen. There was an instant rapport between her and Carson. And she was hilarious" (Israel "Ms." 112). Carson then began to have her on the show numerous times. Finally, Rivers had a very successful comedian in her corner, advocating for her career. Eventually, Carson asked Rivers to be his permanent guest host on the *Tonight Show*. While it was an honor to be asked, Rivers discusses that in actuality, it meant that she provided no competition for Carson. "Very smart – it was very smart of him. Because he knew from the beginning that they would never give it to a woman." Meaning, NBC would never replace Carson with Rivers, thereby ensuring his career as host of the show for a very long time. But what's truly shocking is that eventually Rivers was offered her own talk show on the Fox network; and in accepting the position, she lost her relationship with Carson entirely. "I called him, he hung up on me. I called him again – and he never spoke to me again. If I saw him in a restaurant, he avoided me" (Pioneers of Television). To this day, Rivers has never appeared on the *Late Night* show on NBC, and she believes Carson had her blacklisted (Rivers "Piece of Work"). Would Carson have reacted so strongly had Rivers been a male? It's difficult to say, but the incident is difficult to imagine, had it been another male comic.

One of the many aspects of women in performance also concerns women's physical appearance, and the role it plays in the success (or lack thereof) of a female performer. With Diller, we saw that she exaggerated her looks to coincide with her persona, which made her look a bit wild, and certainly confused the men behind *Playboy* magazine (Diller "Lampshade" 226). Interestingly however, both Diller and Rivers are big advocates of the role plastic surgery has played in their lives. Neither are afraid to discuss it openly, and both have expressed how they cannot understand why women attempt to hide the fact that they've had work done. And, like Diller, Rivers has made several statements attesting to an insecurity about her looks. As both stars aged, they each had work done to combat the effects of aging.

Our society has reversed itself though in terms of how we view surgical alteration to one's personal appearance. In Diller's and Rivers' day, it wasn't publicly discussed, so they both consciously chose to discuss it openly in response (Diller even received an award from the American Academy of Cosmetic Surgery for her positive public statements regarding her surgeries). Diller states, "There isn't a female comic who doesn't want to be a great beauty. The four top comediennes of the seventies all went for surgery: Joan Rivers, Carol Burnett, Totie Fields, and me" (Diller "Lampshade" 232). Rivers makes the connection between youth and beauty, and discusses our society's obsession with those elements within our own culture both on and offstage: "Age – it's the one mountain you can't overcome. This is a youth-driven society" (Rivers "Piece of Work"). In both women, it seems there's a fear of professional rejection, should their looks not adhere to society's standards of beauty. But in the story of Rivers, her efforts with plastic surgery are now one

of the biggest jokes *about* her. Rivers states, “First I talked about it [plastic surgery], then I was the poster child, and then I became the jester” (Rivers “Piece of Work”). Rivers’ life span as a comedian has seen a time when she couldn’t discuss her surgery or the pressures on women to remain youthful and beautiful in appearance, and now she is ridiculed for doing just that. As an older female comic, it has, in some ways, become no easier for Rivers in navigating the roads for her career than it was at the beginning, almost fifty years ago.

In the ensuing years since that first *Late Night with Johnny Carson* appearance, Rivers has done everything: talk show appearances, show-hosting, reality television, theatre, one-woman shows, stand-up, voice-over work, you name it. In a final look at Rivers’ career as a female comic however, I wish to leave you with the following discussion of her new web series, which magnificently holds hope for Rivers’ comedy itself, as well as women in comedy.

In what is her most delightful and funny professional turn of late, Rivers has started a web series, titled *In Bed with Joan*. I could introduce it myself here, but I think no other introduction could surpass what is already perfection from a staff writer for *Heeb Magazine* (an online credible source for Jewish news, politics, and culture, which I would not be citing at this very moment were it not for my Jewish mother making me aware of its presence): “There are few things that make me smile more than hearing the phrase, ‘A new project from Joan Rivers.’ Add ‘in which she interviews Sarah Silverman from the comfort of her bed’ and I’m sold, hook, line, and Semitic sinker. So, pull on your jammy-jams and get *In Bed with Joan* – the new internet chat show from the always (up yours, Abe Foxman

– *always*) hilarious Ms. Rivers, which premiered this afternoon” (RSS “Heeb”). The insult aimed at Abe Foxman is an interesting one, particularly as it comes from a writer who is writing for a Jewish online magazine. Foxman is the National Director for the Anti-Defamation League, a national organization which works to actively combat anti-Semitism and other forms of hatred. By declaring “Up yours, Abe Foxman,” this Heeb Magazine writer is declaring that Rivers is funny, whether it’s a Holocaust joke or not. While Rivers’ humor still offends some, her comedy – and its true intentions, when understood properly – will always ring true and bring delight to audiences everywhere.

In her new show *In Bed With Joan*, after an almost fifty years of doing comedy herself, Rivers interviews other comedians trying to learn more about their personas, their careers, and their comedy. It is fitting that Rivers first question to Sarah Silverman in her first episode revolves around women and comedy:

JR: As an average working comedian, is it still harder to be a woman? Do you find it harder?

SS: Well, there’s a war on women. There’s that. And there’s the whole, ‘Are women even funny?’ Why is that even an issue anymore? Women run comedy. Have you seen comedy lately? It’s all Tina Fey and Whitney Cummings and Joan Rivers...all those hags.

And later:

JR: Have your looks – or your breasts, specifically, but have your looks helped you or hurt you in the business?

SS: Probably both (RSS “Heeb”).

In conclusion – while Diller got women onto a stage and taken seriously as a comedian, Rivers took things to the next level with what could be said – without the distancing effect of a wild persona to aid her.

### **Conclusion**

So what happens in between Joan Rivers and a female comic like Lisa Lampanelli? What happened to women and comedy? Julia Klein, writing for *Ms. Magazine* explored such a question. In the article, “The New Stand-Up Comics: Can You Be Funny Woman without Making Fun of Women?” Klein gives us an assessment of where women stand in relation to comedy in the year 1984. It is a picture of comedy twenty years after Diller, and twenty years prior to the later, more recent stage of Rivers’ career. It’s an interesting portrait: one which simultaneously indicates that things have come far, but not nearly far enough. Klein mentions the fact that one in five women who auditions for the Original Improvisation comedy club is a woman, which is five times the number who did so in Diller’s heyday. At this point in time, women are still struggling to gain the respect of their male counterparts, and still experience setbacks when fellow male comedians exhibit both subtle and obvious displays of discrimination. But just as important, the article indicates a shift in the style of comedy, and what women discuss on stage: “Not only the numbers, but the nature of women’s humor has changed. The seemingly obligatory self-derogation – attacks on their own looks and sexuality – that was a trademark of Phyllis Diller and the younger Joan Rivers is gradually giving way to a different style and sensibility” (Klein “New”).

While the article discusses a host of female comics: Rita Rudner, Adrienne Tolsch, Abby Stein, Beverly Mickins, Carol Siskind – it becomes evident that they are a new generation of women who have to cleverly navigate the audiences of both men and women, and find new and inventive ways of appealing to everyone. At this time, Rivers was already somewhat cemented in her particular brand of comedy, but for female comics just beginning their careers, finding that blend of material, persona, point of view and delivery that impresses both men and women proves tricky. Says comic Carol Siskind, “In a way, we have to be more careful. Men can be gross and get away with it. We have to be very careful not to step on the male ego. There are things you learn early on to phrase very carefully” (Klein “Ms.” 126). And so, I now come to Lisa Lampanelli – a woman who also learned to phrase things carefully, and then learned to abandon caution to the benefit of her comedy and her audiences.

*“Who wants to live carefully?”*

- Joan Rivers (Rivers “Piece of Work”)

CHAPTER 3 Lisa Lampanelli: Comedy's Loveable (Nay – *Loving*) Queen of Mean

*“Fuck ‘em if they can’t take a joke.”*

We are not positive who first said this classic and quintessential phrase in the pantheon of comedy: could it have been Aristophanes perhaps? Or was it someone more contemporary, a comedian such as Don Rickles? Research turns up several sources, the earliest indicating 1940s Air Force jargon as the culprit; but my favorite attributions include, “Bette Midler,” “Mick Jagger in the early seventies,” and the ever-helpful, “This phrase concerns the appropriate way to respond to stiff, stilted, yet still sexually attractive people” (Limeonaire).

In any event, it is the perfect embodiment of that which is Lisa Lampanelli: a woman whose comedy takes no prisoners. But to say that Lampanelli never breaks persona to reveal genuine concern for those she lambasts, is to overlook a critical part of who she is as a performer. Be it her stand-up show in a comedy club, the roast of a famous personality (whether in their presence or not), or simply as herself in a media interview, Lampanelli embodies a constant duality in her persona. Firstly, she simultaneously owns and rejects stereotype as a female comedian. Secondly, in perhaps an even more challenging feat, her jokes make fun of the black, Hispanic, Asian, GLBT, Jewish, elderly, etc. communities,

and yet these are the patrons who most avidly attend her shows. In essence, these communities are the audience who has brought her to commercial success, by way of Lampanelli's own sharp-tongued insults which send up the very worst of each community's stereotypes (Lampanelli "Live").

How has Lampanelli achieved this duality through her comedy? How does she manage to both embody and rebuff femininity in performance? And how has Lampanelli eschewed the label of "racist," building her popularity while using nearly every derogatory slur in the face of the very populations who unfairly had these ugly terms forced upon them in the first place? The answer to these questions lies in the careful, deceptively subtle, and clever manipulation of her persona as a comedian. This careful crafting ultimately creates a larger cultural joke which is at play when she performs: both in regards to the stereotypes of the communities she jokes about, and in the way she simultaneously owns and rejects stereotype herself as she plays with gender roles.

### **Comic Structure**

*"Lisa Lampanelli: she's been called a cross between Don Rickles and Archie Bunker, but in fairness to Lisa, she's got a much younger-looking penis."*

– Paul Shaffer, at the Friars' Club Chevy Chase Roast (Shaffer "Friar's Club")

Of the many styles of comedy that live on the stand-up stages of the world, Lampanelli uses insult comedy. Her brand of jape is the well-worded, well-executed zinger. The put-down comic can target any number of individuals or groups: the most common of which are celebrities, herself (which Lampanelli does *very* frequently), hecklers, groups of people defined by race, ethnicity, or cultural/religious commonality,

and “innocents” (e.g. the man who walks in late to the show, the woman who leaves to use the restroom mid-set) (Rosenfield “Workshop”). Lampanelli deftly and skillfully commands the insulting of each one. But to say that she is simply mean or to imply that her comedy somehow exhibits a lack of regard for the objects of her roasting is to miss a very integral component of her comedy. The truth of the matter is that she has a great respect for her following, and her many targets both inside and outside her audiences. To take it a step further, she poses greater social questions within her comedy at times, poking fun at contemporary social norms and asking, “Why?” – comparable to comedians Louis C.K. or Lewis Black. To claim that Louis C.K. simply derives his comedy from his middle-aged insecurities, or to think of Lewis Black as “the angry guy” is to miss a lot of the finer social nuance that comes from their comedy, as is the case with Lampanelli. For Lampanelli, the goal, *always*, is to get us to laugh at ourselves and at each other – which just may well be our first step into recognizing our shared humanity - and, thereby, getting along with each other just a little bit better.

A hallmark of Lampanelli’s set structure when she performs is that, in between the incredibly well-constructed insults, she will follow with a kind word or a subtle reminder that she is simply joking with good-natured intent. If the follow-up does not come directly on the heels of the insult punch-line, it will reveal itself before more than a couple of minutes have passed. In the apology, there might in fact be additional insult. Or, the apology might be framed in comedic exploit: but the intention remains clear that she is not to be taken too seriously. Her comedy is full of these examples, and one from her roast of

Pamela Anderson for Comedy Central is as follows – though, here, we find Andy Dick the butt of this particular joke (pun intended):

I'm not saying Andy Dick is gay, but I will say that he's been known to guess the flavor of a Popsicle just by sitting on it. But don't get me wrong; I love gay guys. If it wasn't for these fags, us fat chicks would have no friends (Lampanelli "Pam Anderson").

When adapting to the traditional comedy roast structure, for which Lampanelli herself admits is her best format (Lampanelli "Chocolate" 67), she will inevitably thank the object of her roast for letting her make fun of them, each and every time. In fact, Lampanelli will cleverly take up (minimally) half of her roast by roasting the others on the dais first, and then concentrate a few jokes for the roastee towards the end. However, Lampanelli will be the first to suggest that not only is she grateful to the recipient of her roasts, she only roasts with genuine respect for her object of ridicule. In her book *Chocolate, Please: My Adventures in Food, Fat, and Freaks*, Lampanelli says the following about roasting: "To me, poking fun or roasting means you can say whatever you want about someone because you clearly don't mean a word of it. And as a kid, I could make my mom smile even when she was having a bad day by taking little jabs at her and the rest of the family" (Lampanelli "Chocolate" 68). In the roast of Pamela Anderson, Lampanelli goes so far as to compliment Ms. Anderson even as she closes out her roast: "But all jokes aside, Pam, seriously, I'd like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to make fun of you tonight. I think the reason the world loves you so much, is that you're beautiful and famous, yet you still treat everyone you meet with kindness and respect. As a

woman not nearly as famous or as beautiful, let me say from the bottom of my heart: knock it off bitch, you're making me look like a foul-mouthed cunt" (Lampanelli "Pam Anderson").

Also very telling are Lampanelli's remarks about the roast of Daniel Carver (a Ku Klux Klansman) for the Howard Stern Show, Sirius Satellite Radio. Her lamentations that she and many other people do not actually like Carver, thereby making him a poor roast subject, puts the rest of her comedy in sharp perspective: for any comic to effectively roast, we must to some degree care positively about the roast subject, otherwise the act of roasting is ineffective. As Lampanelli herself states, "This roast was proof that the old adage 'we only roast the ones we love' is the way to conduct such an event. Since Daniel Carver – and most Klansmen, Nazis, etc. – are hated across the board, it is almost impossible to do an entertaining roast because the jokes contain none of the irony of making fun of someone who is well liked" (Lampanelli "Chocolate" 83).

### **Comic Influences**

Lampanelli's career owes itself to the influences of Howard Stern and Don Rickles – men whose comedy is similar in content, and to whom Lampanelli is often compared. Lampanelli thanks Stern in her comedy special *Dirty Girl*, and praises him for his work in advocating freedom of speech (Lampanelli "Dirty Girl"). Stylistically however, she bears closest resemblance to Rickles. Lampanelli thanks them both as the only two comedians in the acknowledgements of her book, stating "A special thanks to Howard Stern and Don Rickles, the two funniest men who ever lived. I appreciate you inspiring me every single day" (Lampanelli "Chocolate" 292).

To watch Rickles perform, we see many of the same characteristics which define Lampanelli's performances – the sending up of racial and cultural stereotypes, the crowd work in insult comedy format, and in particular, the casual reminders which pepper the set in between jokes, constantly illustrating the notion that Rickles is insulting only in good-natured jest. As seen in his performance on the television show *Comic Relief* in 1992, his insult-comedy set includes:

“Laugh and enjoy people, that’s the main thing...” and “I make fun of black people...without black people, there’d be no Olympics...” which is essentially an insulting compliment. He continues, “I laugh about people...but you are wonderful people” – and, finally, he concludes his set with the following: “Enjoy, laugh at people...laugh about life, that’s the whole damn thing. You know, we make fun...we’ve had terrible damn riots in this city, the homeless are struggling, but I must say from my heart: I love people. I think that the greatest thing we can do, is to try and laugh in our souls and say ‘Hey, we give love and kindness. Let us help the homeless, the people that were destroyed in these terrible riots. I think we all need a healing process. And this city will come back; it must” (Rickles “Comic Relief”).

### **Personal Influences and Persona Progression**

Where does Lampanelli's offstage personality end and her onstage personality begin? And more specifically, which elements from her onstage persona derive from her private life? These questions are difficult to answer, for in interviews and in her writings, I

have found many of her jokes to cross over, blurring the line between her honest self-assessment and her comedic product. In “Stand-Up Comedians and Their Alternate On-Stage Personas,” Bradford Evans discusses this spectrum between genuine self and one’s comic persona as “authentic” on one extreme end, “ironic” on the other (Evans “Persona”). I posit that Lampanelli sits somewhere in the middle: in part because we may accurately describe Lampanelli as a comic who uses her personal life to fuel her material, including her weight and appearance, her life-long social experiences with friends from all cultural backgrounds, her history of dating black men, etc. However, when she adopts the attitude of the would-be racist, or would be anti-Semite, etc., the irony of the over-generalized, baseless stereotype reveals itself through her words. Suddenly, she is a woman expressing outright derogatory statements that reflect a society that, underneath a more pristine social façade, makes similar outrageous assumptions. But when expressed with the conviction of a seasoned comic, they are clearly not her own, as she will continually remind you in performance (Lampanelli “Live”).

In terms of the progression of Lampanelli’s comic persona, her book *Chocolate, Please...* provides some clues. She recounts several instances which give us insight into her ever-evolving world-view. This includes most tellingly the moment she realized she was an insult comic; a distinct shift from the more authentic stage persona she’d projected previously. This moment became the shift into the more ironic comedian, capable of racially charged jokes on the level of a Paul Mooney or a Dave Chappelle. As Evans states, personas evolve over time and may take decades to develop, a sentiment echoed by Stephen Rosenfield, director of the American Comedy Institute (Evans “Personas”). To

summarize, Lampanelli's trajectory has essentially evolved from the presentational style of a more authentic Lampanelli to a more severely ironic Lampanelli, as seen in her early comedy specials such as *Dirty Girl* and *Take It Like a Man*, to now more recently, a return to a more authentic self (Lampanelli "Live"). To begin, let us explore the earliest known incarnation of Lisa Lampanelli.

The original authentic Lampanelli is one that I have been unable to locate in footage. From what has been documented about Lampanelli, she studied journalism at Syracuse University, and did graduate work at both Harvard and Columbia (Francesca "Interview"). She spent time working in publishing, *US* magazine specifically, and began doing amateur stand-up and open mic nights all around Connecticut, the state she calls home (Lampanelli "Chocolate" 44). At that time, her act was more directly tied to her personal life: "My future as an insult comic and roaster wasn't even a twinkle in my beginner's mind, and I did about fifteen minutes of jokes about my weight (a constant point of controversy in my life), my Italian family, and my current relationship." The beginning of Lampanelli's shift into greater irony came when Lampanelli performed a set in which a heckler yelled at the comedian who came on *after* Lampanelli, "Bring back the fat chick!" Lampanelli states that "In that instant, I made a decision: I was gonna [sic] get them before they got me. I was going to be armed and dangerous. I may be the only comedian who has been heckled when she was *offstage*, but in that moment, 'Lisa Lampanelli, insult comic' was born" (Lampanelli "Chocolate" 44). In establishing her new persona, Lampanelli even originated her own moniker. She created "Comedy's Loveable Queen of Mean" knowing she'd be interviewed for the *New York Times*' "New Jersey Arts

& Leisure” section, and it has stuck ever since. She states, “I didn’t want to be known as simply the ‘Queen of Mean’ since Leona Helmsley already had dibs on that for all the wrong reasons. And I wanted the word ‘loveable’ to appear somewhere in there to show that even though I was an insult comic, I meant no harm to people and they wished me no harm in return” (Lampanelli “Chocolate” 56).

Since that time, Lampanelli has crafted her persona more specifically, but self-deprecation has continued to perhaps be her strongest ally, both onstage and off. Her inability to take herself or others too seriously has served her comedy well. This notion of turning aggressive comedy onto oneself is described in the comic theory of Henri Bergson, in his essay “The Comic in Situations.” Bergson states, “In modern literature we meet with a good many variations on the theme of the robber robbed. The root idea is always an inversion of roles, and a situation which recoils on the head of its author” (Bergson 101). Lampanelli is a comic who turns her own insult comedy on herself, often making fun of her own appearance, weight, etc. The distinction between Lampanelli and Bergson’s example however, is that in Lampanelli’s *voluntary* self-deprecation, it is this act which also allows her audience to forgive her for everything she will say about them in return. She intentionally places herself on equal footing with those she insults, often promoting herself within larger demographical groups (e.g., white, overweight women), and therefore, we forgive her for doing the same to us the audience. In doing so, Lampanelli embodies both the white face *and* the red nose in her comedy, if we look at Eric Idle’s comic theory in his novel, *The Road to Mars* (Idle 62).

Idle paints the white face as “the straight man,” and the red nose as the more physical comic, liable to get the proverbial pie in the face. Lampanelli manages both onstage. When Lampanelli pokes fun at herself, she becomes the red nose, throwing the pie in her own face. However, in poking fun at the stereotypes of others, Lampanelli plays the white face while those she is lampooning become a sea of red faces. She allows us all as the audience a free pass to become the white face as one group while we laugh at the red noses of the world together, even as they may sit amongst us. In Lampanelli’s more recent performances, her red-nosed targets have evolved from groups of people to specific individuals that are commonly ridiculed in today’s pop culture for their controversial personalities, such as Kim Kardashian and Lindsay Lohan (Lampanelli “Live”).

But for Lampanelli, there is only one true red nose, or proper object of genuine ridicule. I have located only one reference in any of Lampanelli’s interviews or writings of a time when she genuinely insults someone with malicious intent. Those comments were reserved for Sandra Bernhard (in her book *Chocolate Please*); a woman who Lampanelli continuously refers to as “self-serious,” (evidently the heaviest insult she can lay at someone’s feet). In her book, Lampanelli has an entire section on her participation in various comedy roasts. As a reoccurring theme, she always includes what she considers to be her favorite jokes which were made at her own expense by someone else; her self-ridicule is seemingly a matter of delight in this context. She is genuine in that she loves others’ abilities to craft a great joke at her own expense. However, there is no faster way to lose her respect if one cannot take a joke of hers in return. She has this to say about Ms. Bernhard at the NY Friars’ Club Roast of Jerry Lewis: “Sandra Bernhard, self-serious

dyke, gave me the finger whenever I made a joke about her and sat with her arms folded during my entire set, proving once again that she's a cunt" (Lampanelli "Chocolate" 75). In contrast, she continuously praises those who can really take a joke, such as: "Betty White can take a joke – she took it like a man, she's awesome" (Francesca "Interview").

Contradictorily, Lampanelli exhibits genuine concern for the feelings of a roast subject as well; for example, when she recounts editing her own set mid-roast for Pamela Anderson. She describes the following instance:

At one point, after a huge diatribe of unoriginal, unfunny stretched-out vagina jokes by a comic who did a mediocre job at best, I glanced at Pam Anderson to see if she was as shaken as I would have been. She was laughing but definitely phoning it in, and her feelings were clearly hurt due to the savage attack of this second-rate comedian. [*Note here, Lampanelli has spared this comedian by not revealing his/her name, an act of consideration given the tone of her description.*] At the commercial break, as I watched, Tommy Lee stood up, went over to her, knelt in front of her, and asked her if she was okay. She laughed it off, but having noted his concern and her sensitivity, I cut out all jokes from my roast that included the words 'whore,' 'slut,' and 'vagina' (Lampanelli "Chocolate" 86).

### **Use of Stereotypes**

This shift into the more satirical, stereotype spewing and racial slurring Lampanelli which constitutes the bulk of her more famous professional work is a picture of Lampanelli coming into her own as a roaster and insult comic. One need only watch the first three

minutes of her special, *Take It Like a Man* (2005) to see precisely where she is going with her set, and the full spectrum of stereotypes that she will use to comedic effect. Language and racial jokes that would be offensive to some (or even most), now seems incongruous and absurd when coming from a woman who looks like the minivan-driving soccer mom next door (who's just finished baking brownies for the Junior League meeting that afternoon). She even wears a double strand necklace of pearls and a cardigan sweater. It is here we see one of Lampanelli's signature jokes, both in content (racial humor dependent on stereotype) and style (contemporary slang, Italian-American speech affect and use of profanity): "That's right bitches, you know me, I bang a lot of black guys...that's right son. It ain't [sic] by choice, I just haven't lost enough weight to get a white guy to fuck me." She continues onto more send ups of black, Hispanic, gay, Asian, Jewish, and other stereotypes that include some of the worst derogatory slurs contained in contemporary English language. "My black boyfriend says, 'the bigger the cushion, the sweeter the pushin' [sic]'....Bull. He just wants to have something to hide behind when the cops start shootin' [sic]...[addressing a Hispanic audience member] How you doin' [sic] Hector Poppy Cugno? Love that little spic, I always wanted to bang one of you bastards, but I had parents that were old-fashioned racist Italians, you know what they say - 'Once you go Hispanic, mom and dad start to panic...' Well, because you steal. Anyway..." (Lampanelli "Take..Man").

While admittedly it might take some mental adjustment to hear the continuous slew of racial epithets and unfair generalizations, it is this precise usage wherein Lampanelli is making fun of those who would use them in a more serious context. To use an offstage

example, a fascinating occurrence happened in Lampanelli's career when she performed in Topeka, KS, in May of 2011. The Westboro Baptist Church, known for their hatred of the GLBT community, announced they would protest Lampanelli's show. In response, Lampanelli promised to donate \$1,000 to the Gay Men's Health Crisis (a NY-based prevention, care and advocacy center for HIV/AIDS) for each protester Westboro sent (GMHC "About Us"). The day of the show, Westboro sent 48 protesters, and Lampanelli consequently donated an even \$50,000 to GMHC. Outside the theatre, Lampanelli once again uses Westboro's own hatred and embrace of stereotype as a weapon against their own representatives, this time leading the audience members in a chant: "We're here! We're queer! We take it in the rear!" (McGlynn "Lampanelli vs. Westboro").

Aside from Lampanelli's obvious use of stereotype as distortion and caricature, one can move beyond the lampoon and begin to see broader questions behind the characterization of social norms. In her writing, she expressly asks the questions outright at which her comedy pokes fun, such as, "What *is* it about black men and fat women?" (Lampanelli "Chocolate" 12). While it might seem trivial, the question does speak to a larger sociological phenomenon involving multiple aspects of our appearance and ethnic identities. What makes Lampanelli fearless in her comedy however, is that in exploring the many stereotypes that we reference in our American pop culture, she is unafraid to tackle the negative ones as much as she does the banal and the innocuous. Her reach extends across all groups of people, and she doesn't stay safe by only raising the stereotypes we are comfortable discussing. In doing so, rather than offending the particular group of people she mocks in performance, it is the people who have had the least interaction with those

particular cultures who are the quickest to take offense on their behalf. In great irony, simply stated, it is those who are furthest removed from the stereotype who find it most offensive. As Lampanelli states:

Eventually, I started to notice something...the ones who usually got angry at me for my race-based material weren't minorities at all. More often than not, they were self-righteous, liberal white people...it was these hypocrites! And the only reason they were angry was they didn't know any minorities. Hey Linda Liberal! Bang a black guy and then try not to laugh at an ashy-colored ball sack joke! Humor works when it's based in truth (Lampanelli "Chocolate" 51).

While Lampanelli is quick to stand up for her right to mock the stereotypes of every race, sex, and orientation, what contributes to her comedy's flourish is her insistence on celebrating all stereotypes – the good ones as well. In one particularly frank passage, Lampanelli has this to say in her discussion of dating black men:

Here it is: everything you've heard about black men is true...Black men have baby mama drama, they don't tip...they hustle...but there's some stuff you never hear about black men that's also true. Black men will open the car door for you, black men write poetry and love to cuddle, and they pay their child support and practically wallpaper their houses with pictures of their kids, who they miss terribly...Every stereotype is true and none of the stereotypes is true. It's all about the man (Lampanelli "Chocolate" 24).

While the use of stereotypes can more easily be seen as spoof, it can be even more difficult to swallow the use of some of the more particularly vitriolic ethnic slurs, something which Lampanelli has addressed on several occasions, including her first appearance on the Howard Stern show. “Howard asked me if I said ‘nigga’ onstage. No, I told him, I use the word ‘nigger,’ and pronounced it with a hard ‘R’ at the end. He was fascinated and I explained my philosophy on treating everyone equally at my show. I told him that if I’m gonna say ‘kike’ to Jews, I should, by rights, say the N-word to black people” (Lampanelli “Chocolate” 65). Much the same way that comedian Dave Chappelle uses the N-word frequently to lessen its power, so has Lampanelli embraced many of the slurs that I would feel uncomfortable saying, no matter how much I might support the lessening of their power through overuse and devaluation.

### **Gender Roles**

While we are on the subject of lessening the power of words through their overuse, it should be noted that Lampanelli frequently uses a word that is considered by some as derogatory to women: “cunt.” In doing so, it is Lampanelli’s direct attempt to take the hate out of the word, rendering it less powerful:

Yeah, it’s just like the restrictions that you put on yourself, or what society puts on you. I’ve always had a dirty mind, and if you really analyze – if you go through my act, and you really analyze it, I’ve never done a joke that is gross – sexually gross -- or about bodily functions. Meaning that I never do an X-rated act, or anything that’s disgusting, like guys talking about eating pussy and getting blow jobs and all this shit. It’s hopefully the words that I

challenge – because if I call you a cunt, is that bad? If I mean it with no hate behind it? It's about taking the power out of the words, and getting people to know if there's no hate behind those words, there's no reason that we should be afraid of them (Blackburn "Interview").

Interestingly, I have found that Lampanelli's use of blue comedy and "foul" language ("blue" in comedy terms, meaning "dirty"), appears to call special attention to the fact that she is a female who is making jokes this way (Rosenfield "Workshop"). While her language and set content do not on the surface appear to lend themselves to masculinity, it is clear that Lampanelli is fully aware that blue insult comedy of her ilk has traditionally been associated with male comics, and chooses to combat this directly. As a result, Lampanelli plays up both the aggressive, masculine nature of her material, while simultaneously creating gender presentation which is extremely feminine. The juxtaposition of her blue content with an extremely traditional feminine presentation is jarring, and it is clearly her every intention to do so. While she plays with cultural stereotypes through her material, she simultaneously plays with the stereotype of a female comic in performance. In Philip Auslander's essay, "'Brought to You by Fem-Rage': Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender," he states that "By claiming to possess a metaphoric penis, each woman claims her right to the comic stage and challenges the cultural values that assert that women are not supposed to be aggressive and funny, are not supposed to have access to the power that humor represents" (Auslander 330). Lampanelli's performance may use traditional attributes of the masculine – comic, aggressive, foul language and blue humor – but she will just as aggressively remind you

constantly in performance that she owns those qualities as a woman. Tina Fey discusses this very notion that women get away with a man's game in comedy in her article for *The New Yorker* titled, "Lessons from Late Night." Fey states that "Men go into comedy to break rules. Maybe we women gravitate toward comedy because it is a socially acceptable way to break rules." If Lampanelli goes too far over to the "masculine," does she preclude herself from doing comedy as a woman? And by highlighting her feminine qualities, is it simply another way to break the rules in way that audiences will accept? (Fey 107).

On the surface, Lampanelli makes very clear and distinct wardrobe choices that reflect very feminine qualities in dress and personal appearance. Her televised specials, roasts, and many performances depict a woman who resembles someone more akin to a 1950s housewife than a blue comic ranting about blacks and Hispanics. It is almost as if she were attempting to go back in time and give voice to women comics who could not have dreamed of uttering the things she does on stage, let alone be allowed the kind of career Lampanelli owns. Lampanelli's performances show a slew of such female stereotyped clothing as flowing button-down dresses with ruffles underneath, tailored button down blouses, cardigan sweater sets, pearl necklaces, necklaces with large round beads, an assortment of large rings, bracelets, sparkly belts on dresses, earrings, and often her hair is worn in a self-described "shoulder-length suburban housewife flip" (Lampanelli "Chocolate" 64).

In addition, the marketing, promotion, and production design of her stage performances and comedy specials reflect clear, intentional, extremely feminine sensibilities. But it is also here where we begin to see a conscious move towards the

acknowledgement that her material and delivery style are considered traditionally “masculine” in the world of comedy; in seeming attack of this, Lampanelli counters this notion by personifying in dress femininity to the extreme, as if to say, “See? Even the most feminine of women can still tell a good dick joke.” When she praised Betty White in an interview for being able to take a joke “like a man,” for instance, Lampanelli is making an interesting distinction between traditional gender roles and humor, and she highlights this contrast between her aggressive humor and her gender presentation as part of her comic persona (Francesca “Interview”).

In her special, the aptly named *Take It Like a Man*, we see the beginnings of pink coloring schemes, the sweater set coupled with pearls, and a cartoon crown which sits upon her head, dubbing her the Queen of Mean. If it is men who are traditionally considered the meaner sex – in comedy, if not generally stereotyped as such in life, Lampanelli is taking it back for herself and women everywhere. The cover of this special says that she can match any man, blue joke for blue joke, and be “all-woman” while doing so (Lampanelli “Take...Man”). Her next special two years later, *Dirty Girl* (2007), took things even further. The DVD features a filmed introduction of Lampanelli engaging in traditionally-held women’s activities: shopping in a market and gathering flowers, all while wearing a pink and purple floral dress, light pink shawl, and sunhat. The music suggests a campy sitcom introduction, as if to open a comic TV show about a single girl and the city. In the performance, Lampanelli wears a purple, tailored, button down dress, belt with sparkly buckle, bracelets and necklace; a shimmering and sparkly pink curtain hangs behind her, and the stage is saturated in a bright pink wash. The cover of this DVD

depicts Lampanelli in a bubble bath wearing suds, diamond ring, triple-strand pearl necklace, pearl earrings, a pink towel turban with a diamond tiara on top – and holding a giant fat cigar, looking at the camera as though she were an Italian mob boss counting his winnings after a poker game. One demonstrative moment in this performance is when she recounts that her ex-boyfriend Darryl broke up with her a year before. She offers as explanation: “Guess what he said? Freaking guy said I wasn’t feminine.” Lampanelli then moves her hands up and down her purple ruffled dress as if to say, “How is this not feminine?” And then adds, “I am feminine as *shit*, bitch,” while grabbing her crotch. The message is clear: Lampanelli can do whatever a man can in this traditionally-held men’s business of comedy, and she has. And she won’t resort to giving over to our preconceived notions of what someone should look like who does the brand of comedy that she writes and performs (Lampanelli “Dirty”). Lampanelli stated in our interview regarding her dress:

It was an accident at first, because I was at an audition for something where I had to dress kind of preppy for it, and I went right to a show that I was doing where I didn’t have time to change, and I found that it was more of a turnaround and a funny juxtaposition for people to hear bawdy humor coming out of someone who was dressed rather conservatively. So when I had enough money to have dresses made and get the right stuff, I said let’s just play it up and turn it up a notch. Especially when you’re not that well-known, it’s good to see people expect one thing and get another by your appearance. So you could go up there looking like a housewife from Jersey, or June Cleaver or whomever, and suddenly you do a turnaround and it’s a

little shocking and you get more bang for your buck on that (Blackburn “Interview).

Comedy history holds that Lampanelli is certainly one of the first female comics in a new generation to employ the level of vulgarity that she does, particularly in the insult-comedy vein. I would argue that Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers have preceded her, but Lampanelli picks up where they leave off and takes the language and brazen social humor to the next level. Lampanelli’s domination of the comedy roast is particularly something to be celebrated, for the history of women and comedy roasts is a strained one. As stated by Hallie Cantor in “The Roast: A History,” Lampanelli wouldn’t have even been on the dais as recently as the mid-1980s: “It may go without saying in any comparison of the 1960s and 2011, but early roasts were far less inclusive than those today. Women weren’t even allowed into the Friars’ Club until 1988. Phyllis Diller had to dress as a man and sneak into the club to watch Sid Caesar’s 1983 roast. A few women had been honored before 1988, but roasters made a big show of being on their best behavior” (Cantor “Roast”). It was in Dec. 2002 that Lampanelli gained her first official TV credit as a roaster of Chevy Chase in the NY Friars’ Club Roast. Although she had been taped second to last, Comedy Central moved her to the third presenting slot in the broadcast. Thus began Lampanelli’s career in the popular spotlight (Lampanelli “Chocolate” 39).

### **Where is Lampanelli’s Comedy Today?**

I had the privilege of seeing Lampanelli perform on October 12, 2012 at the Carpenter Theater in Richmond, VA. It was interesting to see her show from start to finish in person; to not simply observe her audience but to finally be a part of one. Her warm-up

act was a male comic from New Jersey, who had some similar humor, and whose set was not entirely insult comedy, but rather included elements of observational comedy as well. After a Lampanelli-style Puerto Rican joke however, he got a lot of good-natured groans from the audience. He said, “Groans – do you know who’s coming on after me? Check your ticket. If it says Taylor Swift, then get the fuck out of here” (Lampanelli “Live”).

Lampanelli’s set incorporated much of what you’d expect – the roasts of popular personalities, including the roasting of herself. But there was also a recent shift in comic persona that was reflected onstage that night: notably left out were two subjects integral to earlier incarnations of her comedy. These subjects were her weight (she has lost a significant amount of her weight due to a recent gastric bypass surgery) and her affinity for dating black men (she is now married to a white man she refers to as “Jimmy Big Balls”) (People.com). She also discussed openly her impact on comedy, too, and expressed that she felt that one of her major achievements had been to make the word “cunt” acceptable in mainstream use of language. There were other genuine moments too, such as when she made a serious plea to her audience to adopt dogs from dog shelters, giving them a good home. But to me, the most enduring moment of her show was the making fun of other female comedians, in particular for their gender-based jokes. “If you’re here to hear jokes about PMS and my husband leaving the toilet seat up, fuck that. Stay home and listen to your wife if that’s what you want.” Once again, Lampanelli asserted that she was not here to merely be a funny woman; she was here to simply be *funny* (Lampanelli “Live”).

Lampanelli is currently working on a one-woman Broadway show which will be her greatest departure from anything she’s done before. Her aim is to discuss women’s

body issues. I was fortunate to be able to ask Lampanelli about her show in our interview, and what she hopes to achieve: “I want this Broadway show to really be well-received and take off, because I think that food and overeating and body image and weight struggles – I mean 90% of women probably all over the world have a weight or body image issue - I want that to be really successful” (Blackburn “Interview”). In this most recent shift, we see a female comic – who has been relatively known for her insult comedy and fearlessness to use any words on the stage, shift into a style of comedy which is grounded in a more honest look at a subject which is personal to her, and to women the world over. I believe it says something about how far comedy has come for women. Whereas comics like Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers had to work up to careers where they had more freedom in what they could say onstage, we see Lampanelli move in a reverse direction, from a career built on outrageous language to discussing subjects which are closer to Lampanelli’s heart. Of the upcoming show, Lampanelli stated: “It’s such a big issue – it’s just an insurmountable issue. When you have someone like Oprah, who is the most powerful, knowledgeable woman in the world with all the resources in the world, and she’s still struggling, you go ‘Wow, this is a big issue.’ So you know, hopefully it will resonate with the people who need to hear it” (Blackburn “Interview”).

Because weight has long been a part of Lampanelli’s comedy, it will be interesting to see the critical reception to such a work. Weight and corresponding beauty is another element in which feminism remains challenged, and it will be interesting to see a female comic tackle that directly. As Lockford states, “Nevertheless, large women who enact their being in defiance of cultural standards still do not, in general, escape the social censure

their status attracts” (Lockford 38). Now that Lampanelli has lost the weight and will be addressing it directly in her Broadway show, it can reasonably be assumed that there are both women and men on all sides who will see her decision to have lost the weight and discuss it in her show as negative, for – despite major advances – womens’ value is still discussed in broad societal terms, and usually first and foremost by their appearances. During this year’s Academy Awards for instance, much fuss was made over the comic styling of its host, Seth MacFarlane. Many of his jokes centered on the appearances of the female actresses. While many critics came out divided as to the true nature of his humor, Victoria A. Brownworth in her editorial for *The Advocate* came to the conclusion that his material had been a pointed satire on how obsessed we are with women’s looks as part of their performance capabilities, rather than separated from their talent:

Even though the women shown during the song [“I Saw Your Boobs”] were in on the joke (their reaction shots were obviously pre-recorded), this song became the focal point of the day-after attacks on MacFarlane. Missing, we thought, the entire point of the song: that in Hollywood, women – even when playing victims of violent crime – are reduced to the sum of their parts, not the sum of their movie parts (Brownworth “MacFarlane”).

Or, in Lockford’s terms, “How some women are compelled to conform to standards of beauty at all cost surely merits discussion and activism” (Lockford 39). To see Lampanelli tackle this in Broadway-show format, coupled with her no-holds-barred comedy style, will certainly throw this discussion into a new gear, and I am excited to see what comes of it.

**Conclusion**

Finally, there was one more element which indicated a direct shift in her present performance style: in Lampanelli's performance in Richmond, she didn't apologize for herself or her jokes nearly as often, as she did in previous recorded performances. Maybe we as her audience have come to recognize and accept her jokes as lacking real hatred, and have given ourselves permission to engage in a laughter which pushes the boundaries of what's acceptable to say. Perhaps Lampanelli has finally achieved her goal of bringing us together as one community for the night, unafraid to laugh at each other and ourselves. Comedian Jim Carrey once said that "Lisa releases us from a prison of cultural guilt" (Lampanelli "Chocolate" cover). And freeing it was, indeed.

### Final Thoughts

*“They want the heroine to be pretty. To be soft. To be the one you can take home to mother. No one wants to bring the girl home to mother who brought her own pie, and puts it in your mother’s face.”*

- Joan Rivers (“Why We Laugh”)

Women are still fighting to be funny. There is a cultural legacy of women as submissive, subservient, quiet, etc. – everything that comedy is not. Diller, Rivers, and Lampanelli challenged the male-dominated world of comedy and found their way to success, despite all. If you look at what they all have in common, there are a few items: for instance, each found their comedy through mock aggression, and the influence of Don Rickles touched each of their comedic development. Each found a strong fan base in the GLBT community; and in particular, gay men.

What is interesting about women and comedy is something that ultimately cannot be summed up by looking merely at Diller, Rivers, and Lampanelli; or even a history of women in comedy at all. What I’ve discovered is that the story of women and comedy is ultimately a story about gender roles, and what society is willing or unwilling to accept both aesthetically and behaviorally in a female. These women spat in the face of what society gave them the permission to do, and carved out a space for themselves in a male-dominated realm. In fact, there are several men who have gone on record as stating they

don't believe women capable of truly being funny; for example, Adam Carolla, Christopher Hitchens, and Jerry Lewis ("Why We Laugh"). As Zoglin states in *Comedy at the Edge*:

Why were women missing in action in the 1970s? Explanations usually start with the conventional wisdom that women are less suited by nature to stand-up comedy, an aggressive, take-charge art form. Men who were just getting accustomed to the feminist movement may not have been ready for them either. [Elayne] Boosler used to claim that men simply weren't comfortable laughing and being turned on at the same time. Christopher Hitchens, in a January 2007 Vanity Fair article called "Why Women Aren't Funny," floated another theory: that only men have the cynical, down-trodden view of the world needed for comedy – an understanding "that life is quite possibly a joke to begin with," in contrast to nurturing women, who "would prefer that life be fair, and even sweet, rather than the sordid mess it actually is." Which, still, of course, wouldn't explain why so many more of those sweet, nurturing women defied the stereotype and became stand-up stars in the '80s and '90s, but were largely sitting on the sidelines in the '70s (Zoglin "Edge" 182).

In the documentary *Why We Laugh: Funny Women*, writer Robin Schiff comments on the Hitchens article, stating:

Christopher Hitchens wrote a piece maybe about five years ago about why women aren't funny, and the guy quoted, I think he's a neuroscientist, and

he said, ‘This guy did a study that proves that men are funnier than women.’ Hitchens completely misinterpreted the research, but what they found was that women were more *discerning*, and that men’s expectations and threshold were much lower. Ergo, Three Stooges, like, you just have to hit somebody in the face and they think that’s funny, whereas women have higher standards, which I thought was kind of interesting” (“Why We Laugh”).

Regardless of the neuroscience and what it may or may not say about women, men, and humor, I think what happened with Diller, Rivers, and Lampanelli, is that each found a way to first appeal to the mainstream, but in appealing to the mainstream, they changed the way women were perceived and became subversive in the process. To gain a greater population of women in comedy, society has to change how it sees women, because women are held to different standards in a lot of arenas. But how to get society to change the way it sees women? One way is to have women penetrate the field of comedy and get us all to laugh at ourselves. As Joan Rivers says, “Funny is funny is funny” (“Why We Laugh”). The three women profiled here managed to joke their way out of societal perception and into new and uncharted territory and thus, broke open what women have achieved onstage.

What these women have given to me personally is a greater respect for comedy, a greater appreciation for the obstacles they overcame, and the inspiration to have the courage to pursue what I may, despite whatever limitations might be in place for someone like me. I’m a petite female, and there are those who would not perhaps take me as

seriously as I deserve to be for embodying such a physicality. Admittedly, making people laugh has become a way of taking my power back. Producing laughter on some level is an achievement over someone else's will, and a statement of selfhood and worldview; forcing others to see things the way you do even if just for a moment. While Diller, Rivers, and Lampanelli's humor can even be self-deprecating at times, it is they who have the last laugh, to quote the old cliché. I see these three women as having boldly asserted their power through comedy, in ways far more reaching and daring than I could ever conceive of in my own life. They make me want to push myself further and not to apologize for it, or feel pressure to succumb what society believes my life should look like as a woman, at any age. When I look at Diller, I see a woman who instinctively knew something was inside of her that was worth sharing with the world, and overcame society's view that women should breed over having successful careers. Rivers spent seven years making jokes that were true to herself and true to her world view, sacrificing the security of a predictable marriage and a more conventional career in show business in order to do so. And Lampanelli's use of language throws anything that has to do with what society expects of women entirely out the window, and she continually challenges those who would have her speak differently as a female on stage (as have Diller and Rivers each in their own fashion). I had a conversation recently with Professor David Toney who, inspirationally so, talked about "the courage to be seen" and how that relates to comedy. These women had the courage to be seen; to reveal their true selves, even as those selves conflicted with expectations of their womanhood at both personal and institutional levels. They have a courage not only to be seen, but to assert their strength and power in a world which would

otherwise not have them do so. And they didn't ask for anyone's permission to do it. My discovery of the moment when Diller dresses as a man to sneak into the NY Friar's Club Roast of Sid Caesar is such a seminal moment to me, because it is precisely what these women did in microcosmic form. They found their way into comedy however they could, and then held their own in that world for the remainder of their careers and lives while remaining true to their perspectives. Their success to me comes not from national publicity or their fruitful careers, but from their ability to proclaim themselves and embrace just who they are, against all odds. And if they can do it, so can I.

*"The best advice ever given me was 'Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke.' Don't come to my show and expect me to be anything other than what I am. You came to me."*

- Whoopi Goldberg ("Why We Laugh")

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APPENDIX A

**Transcript of Phone Interview with Lisa Lampanelli**

It was my honor to interview Ms. Lisa Lampanelli over the phone on Feb. 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2013, and speak with her about her comedy in preparation for my M.F.A. Thesis. The following is a transcript of our conversation.

*Rachel Blackburn: My first question is, I know that you just performed at the Apollo - how did that go?*

Lisa Lampanelli: It was great, and if I'm going to be 100% honest, every show to me is as important as any other one, because people pay money to see you. So it's your job to literally not do it for yourself but to do it for them. I had this comedy teacher early on that instilled that in us; that it's not about you, that it's about their experience. You know honestly, I loved the Apollo, but I can't say I loved it more than the place I'm playing tonight in Albany. It's just about the audience leaving on a good note and getting away from their problems for a couple of minutes and it was great. As far as for me, the best part of the whole night was having it over and my getting to go out to dinner with a bunch of close friends and family to celebrate. So it was just another gig - in a good way.

*RB: That's great, that's really cool. So I saw you perform here, when you performed in Richmond in October, and one of my favorite things you said in your performance was, "If you're here to hear jokes about PMS and my husband leaving the toilet seat up, fuck that and go home and listen to your wife." For me that really seemed to encapsulate what I think of as you, in that you're just funny; not because you're funny for a woman, but you are just funny. Am I on the right track with that?*

LL: Yeah, yeah. I never wanted to be woman funny, I wanted to be guy funny. I'm not one of the girls who hangs around tons of girly girls, who talks and commiserates about our husbands. It's so typical, you know? I always thought that most of my jokes - really, 90% of them -- sound like they come from a guy comic, so I just wanted to be funny across the board, whatever race, creed, color, sex you are, and you can relate. Now, that being said, if there's a funny thing that happens because you're a woman, I would totally talk about it just because it's my responsibility to make people laugh - but yeah, I like being guy funny, not chick funny. Definitely.

*RB: So I'm going to read you a quote, I hope that's okay. There's this guy Philip Auslander, and he wrote this essay I really love, and it's called "Brought to you by Fem Rage: Stand Up Comedy and the Politics of Gender," it's a very cool article, and he said, "By claiming to possess a metaphoric penis (that's already funny I think), each woman*

*claims her right to the comic stage and challenges the cultural values that assert that women are not supposed to be aggressive and funny, and are not supposed to have access to the power that humor represents.” I know that particularly in your earlier work, you would present in very feminine dress...so, tell me if I’m way off base here, but are you intentionally... for lack of a better word, fucking with people’s perceptions about women and comedy by juxtaposing the feminine dress with your humor?*

LL: You mean, like when I used to wear the dresses? It was an accident at first, because I was at an audition for something where I had to dress kind of preppy for it, and I went right to a show that I was doing where I didn’t have time to change, and I found that it was more of a turnaround and a funny juxtaposition for people to hear bawdy humor coming out of someone who was dressed rather conservatively. So when I had enough money to have dresses made and get the right stuff, I said let’s just play it up and turn it up a notch. Especially when you’re not that well-known, it’s good to see people expect one thing and get another by your appearance. So you could go up there looking like a housewife from Jersey, or June Cleaver or whomever, and suddenly you do a turnaround and it’s a little shocking and you get more bang for your buck on that. But now that people know who I am, and also just the fact that I’ve lost so much weight already, I just dress like myself, have fun with it, get a kick out of it. In the beginning, it was just a funny juxtaposition – that’s another point people can make about my comedy and that would be fun to play with.

*RB: That’s cool – well, clearly it worked. For me personally speaking, I find it makes the comedy even sweeter, because it’s like “That’s right. That woman who looks like a suburban housewife; she just said that.”*

LL: Right, right. I remember once this kid came up to me at the Comedy Cellar, and he said, “Dude, you’re like my mom -- but you curse.” That’s what it comes down to, you know? You go up there, and whether it’s a black show or people who are younger than you, or a different ethnicity or whatever, they’re like, “Oh, this bitch is going to be corny,” and suddenly you’re not corny. So it’s a nice surprise for them.

*RB: Speaking to your comic persona... from what I understand about comic personas, some people have a comic persona that is closer to who they are genuinely in life, and other people have a far more ironic version, or something that’s really far removed from who they are. I was wondering, do you feel that your persona has changed over time? I know there are recent changes in your life, like the weight and Jimmy your husband, and I remember reading in your book that one of your go-to jokes was the one about, “I bang black guys, it ain’t by choice, I just can’t lose enough weight to get a white guy to fuck me.” Now that there are those shifts in your life, do you feel you’ve had to shift your persona? I know you mentioned that now that more people know you, you don’t feel you have to do some of the same things – do you feel that way generally?*

LL: You know, it comes down to basic issues of being who you are, and getting closer to who you are onstage. Like now, I'm getting much more real about stuff -- meaning, I talk about the weight loss pretty openly, and I say a few things even in stand-up that aren't necessarily funny. But I think it's important for people to know about the weight loss and the surgery, so I'm not as beholden to putting up a tough front like I used to. Now it can be more like, "Hey, this is why I got the surgery. Hey, this is why I married this guy." So I eventually get to a punchline, but I'm taking more chances to be closer to who I really am. Like, when I did the Apollo this week, I got a review in which they said, "I can't believe she didn't talk about liking black guys, or use the 'n' word." Well, that's seven years ago. You evolve as a comedian; you don't talk about the same things in your real life that you talked about seven years ago, otherwise you're stuck as a human being and as a performer. It evolves as your life evolves if you're open enough to be truthful on stage about stuff. So, I do maybe 30% insults versus 90% insults from five years ago, because I like to talk more about what's important to me and my life. So I think it's basically that you evolve, and if the audience wants to stick with you they will, and if they don't, they don't have to, they can go see somebody else, and then other people will find you that are closer to what you are and get you now.

*RB: Yeah...I don't know why people would want comedians to always do the same stuff.*

LL: Well, people like what's familiar. That's why you stay with a certain kind of guy most of your life, that's why a lot of people live in the same house for 50 years, your life looks familiar. So there's something nice about going to Don Rickles, and the fact that he's been doing -- legitimately, and I'm not exaggerating -- the exact same routine for 50 years. He has not changed a word. And I have a lot of respect for him because that's what his fans - including me - want to see. We want to see the *Hello Dummy!* record from start to finish with a song. But that's not really me because I have all these things that I want to express and talk about emotionally, and if it's not appropriate for the stand-up stage, it'll make it into the Broadway show, and if it's stand-up and funny, it'll go in there. But people like what's comfortable and familiar and unfortunately, when you change, you'll probably lose some fans, but you'll win other ones.

*RB: Right - I knew that Don Rickles and Howard Stern are big fans of yours and vice versa, right?*

LL: Oh yeah. And Stern is the exact opposite. Stern -- he has evolved so much as a human being that his show is even better now than it was 10 years ago, and it was brilliant 10 years ago. He's the exact opposite of Rickles, where he does so much changing and is so much softer as a human being now, without being *not* funny -- so yeah. I'm a huge fan of both those guys.

*RB: I'm curious: from your vantage point, do you think our culture is getting better at not being so politically correct all the time? Like, perhaps, the way audiences reacted to you initially and then how they are now: do you think things are getting better?*

LL: I have no perspective on it, because the people who come to see me – I play theatres -- so they have to pay a certain price and they know who they're coming to see. I don't have anyone coming in going, "Uh-oh, I just walked into a comedy club and who is this person trying to say this? Oh my god." So if I become less successful and I have to go back to working in clubs, I'm sure I'd have more of a perspective of people coming in and going, "I've never heard of her, but why would she say such things?" So I think I'm lucky enough that I have a built-in audience that knows what they're getting, so the whole political correctness thing doesn't affect me that much. But I've been asked to apologize for jokes, and I haven't done it. I just won't.

*RB: Good for you.*

LL: I've been doing jokes this way for 25 years so no one gets apologies. But if in real life if I've hurt someone's feelings, I'll definitely apologize. So it's just that whole thing of, thank god the political correctness doesn't affect me. But I know it's out there, and it's totally a pain in the ass.

*RB: I'm curious, is there anything that you've wanted to achieve in comedy that you feel you haven't yet? Anything you'd still like to do?*

LL: Not in comedy, because I got the HBO special. That's like a big thing for comics to actually get a one-hour special on HBO, that's a big deal. What I really want? I want this Broadway show to really be well-received and take off, because I think that food and overeating and body image and weight struggles – I mean 90% of women probably all over the world have a weight or body image issue - I want that to be really successful. But stand-up – would I like to someday play Madison Square Garden? Yeah, but it's not really that big of a deal. Right now, the focus is more stand-up and it pays great, it's great theatres I play in like the Apollo, places like that - but as far as performance – getting the Broadway show to really resonate with people would be really good.

*RB: This isn't really a question, but I have to tell you that I thought what you wrote on XOJane was great. It was so honest, and anytime someone opens up about stuff like that, I can't help but just applaud it, because you had the balls to get up there and say that and tell people about that experience.*

LL: What's good about it is I'm still being funny - and if you have a gift for comedy, you should use it. But you still make people think and know they're not the only ones going through certain stuff at the same time.

*RB: And same with your book by the way, it didn't feel like work to me...I know on some level though, asking these questions about comedy – at the end of the day, they're just jokes. We're [comedians] just trying to make people laugh. But I do think there's more to you than that...I really do think you've changed the game for comedy and women, especially. Like when I was working on the paper about you, and this guy I know said, "Well, I like her comedy, but it's weird for me to hear a woman say those things."*

LL: That's great, though, because it challenges who is supposed to talk about what. I mean, like is it okay for a woman to talk dirty? Is it okay for a white comic to talk about black people? It challenges that anyone can talk about anything, and the only requirement that really needs to be is that your heart is in the right place and is it funny. Because, we're getting paid for punchlines, not for prose, and at the end of the day, we want to entertain people. So it's good that it challenges who can talk about what.

*RB: Yeah, it's interesting because growing up as a woman, it was never a question in my mind that women couldn't curse, or say whatever they wanted.*

LL: Yeah, it's just like the restrictions that you put on yourself, or what society puts on you. I've always had a dirty mind, and if you really analyze – if you go through my act, and you really analyze it, I've never done a joke that is gross – sexually gross -- or about bodily functions. Meaning that I never do an X-rated act, or anything that's disgusting, like guys talking about eating pussy and getting blow jobs and all this shit. It's hopefully the words that I challenge – because if I call you a cunt, is that bad? If I mean it with no hate behind it? It's about taking the power out of the words, and getting people to know if there's no hate behind those words, there's no reason that we should be afraid of them.

*RB: I got to say "cunt" as part of a graduate school presentation on you this year.*

LL: Glad I could help.

*RB: How did you meet your husband Jimmy?*

LL: The comic Jim Breuer has a show at Sirius Satellite Radio and my husband was a semi-regular on it. I wanted to promote the Dirty Girl CD, and I saw him, but at the time we were both going through break-ups. Later he saw me on the Larry the Cable Guy roast and he sent me an email saying that I was a nice person and did I remember him, and that I could use a big Italian in my life. I had just taken a year and a half off from dating to be by myself for a while, to really figure out what I wanted and what kind of guy I wanted to be with, and we had a phone conversation and a date and it just took off.

*RB: When I saw you perform, you made a lot of jokes about "Jimmy Big Balls," and I know he must be cool with it, and he must be a cool person because he's cool with that, but*

*did you ever sit him down and say, "So, I'm probably going to incorporate these jokes into my stuff, and how do you feel about that?" Or how did that work?*

LL: No, I think he just knew what he was getting into, because he's been around comics so much, and he knows Breuer pretty well. He just knows we talk about our life, and if he'd been a dick about it, I probably wouldn't be dating him, because if he's going to be humorless... . If I'm going to go up there and talk about my life and flaws, then he's going to have to hear about his. I don't know if it hurts his feelings at all. I know when I've gone too far, I pull back a notch but, for the most part, it wasn't even a discussion. I was on Howard Stern one day and said my husband has huge balls, and boom: in the studio he has a new nickname. So it's really cool that he's just really chill and secure enough to handle that. Plus, secure enough to handle someone who makes a lot of money and is successful, and he's not threatened. That's very rare.

*RB: Has that been a problem before? Guys that were intimidated by your success?*

LL: I don't think so, because anyone I dated long-term already knew it. But I dated one guy and I remember him feeling like he didn't wear the pants in the family and that definitely emasculated him. I take some of the blame for that because I can be really overbearing and loud and jokey and make them feel like they're less than I am. Jimmy and I will joke a lot about it all the time and he's so secure that he can handle it. But I'm sure it's affected other relationships for the worse.

*RB: In writing this thesis I've been asking questions about women and comedy, and I wanted to ask you, do you think we're past the point where I can even be asking these questions? Do you think things are generally getting better? From your point of view?*

LL: No I think it will always be "woman comic," it will always be "black comic," it will always be "Asian comic," it will always be "gay comic." It will never just be "comic." It's just like in reality. If I said to you right now, there's a white guy parked next to me and a black guy parked on the other side, what am I, going to start describing them in different ways? Like there's a guy with blonde hair on my right and a guy with black hair on my left? It's just a reality. You're different, the different is always going to be pointed out, and it's all accepted, and it's just how the world is right now.

*RB: I know you have limited time and I don't mean to keep you, but I am probably going to keep asking you questions until you tell me you have to go. So - when I was researching you, I couldn't find a lot that talked about your transition into comedy. You worked as a journalist, right? At what point did you decide to start doing stand-up?*

LL: From about age 25 to 30, I was trying to figure out how to get started and how to do it and how to even try it once, because I thought it would be a good idea to try it. And if it didn't work out, then that's fine, but I wanted to try it at least once. I was working as a

fact-checker at Rolling Stone, and I said to this one guy, “I really want to try stand-up.” And he said, “Oh, that’s the most self-absorbed, single most conceited, opportunistic job, and it’s all about you, and it’s horrible to be a stand-up,” and I said, “Wow! That sounds perfect for me!” I’ve always wanted to be the center of attention and wanted to be fabulous so, at age 30, I was driving up to Connecticut from New York; my first nephew was born and I was driving up to see the new baby, and I heard an ad on the radio for this company Rent-a-DJ in Connecticut. I’d been wanting to try comedy but I wanted to learn how to talk behind a microphone first, and not be shy or self-conscious, so I signed up to be a DJ and do parties - that was when the karaoke craze was just hitting - and I learned a little bit about talking on a microphone. So it ended up that I read in the paper in Connecticut that a guy was giving a comedy class and I said, “You know what, I want to try it.” The last day of the class, you would go up and do an open mic at a club in Connecticut. So it was a transition, and then I got laid off from my job and ended up being able to go up more times and eventually was able to become decent at it.

*RB: I’m curious, I grew up with a dad who always said I’d be the first female pitcher for the Dodgers, and he never even hinted that there was a world out there that might try to hold me back just for being female. Do you feel like you grew up in that kind of environment?*

LL: We went to a Catholic high school, and I think it was always just assumed that we would go to college. That was just a given. And, we were allowed to study what we wanted to, but I think they were really relieved that we all picked stuff that wasn’t liberal arts; that I always wanted to be a journalist, that my brother wanted to be a journalist, that my sister wanted to be in business - so none of us wanted to study philosophy or English, because I think they would have thought that was flaky. I think my parents were just happy that we went to college and got out of there alive. They were pretty supportive when I said I wanted to go to graduate school for teaching. By the time I said I wanted to be a comic, they were like, “Whatever.” They saw that I work hard, that I’d never been homeless, that I’d never been a wreck, and I think they were just like, “Yeah, do your thing.” I think the first time I did The Tonight Show, they were like, “Okay, she’s definitely making it.” That’s a big sigh of relief for a parent. They just want to know that you’re going to be okay.

*RB: What would you say that you are the most proud of in your life? Related to your comedy or not?*

LL: Lately, that I’ve become a pretty good friend, that I’ve been a pretty good sister, a pretty good daughter. That I’m generous, but not to a fault: meaning that I don’t throw money at problems. Meaning that I’m just generous with people, but I don’t allow people to take advantage of me, or I don’t give for the wrong reasons. Also, that I like to give experiences to people, meaning that you can buy someone a nice gift, but you give them an experience and it’s even better – like establishing traditions such as: after every Christmas,

my niece and nephew, we go into the city and go to a Broadway show and have a sleepover, and they can remember this experience for the next 20 years, as opposed to, “Hey, I got this toy.” I like establishing for example this year, New Year’s Eve at my house, 24 people at a sit-down dinner, and again it’s an experience people can talk about and go, “Hey, I was part of that.” I’m also proud to fade out of the Hollywood thing – whether it was my choice or not. It probably wasn’t my choice not to be famous like Kathy Griffin, but I’m not, so now that I’m not and I probably never will be, I think it’s better for me this way. But it wasn’t my choice, I didn’t set out to go, “I won’t have a TV show.” It was my choice to be famous, but now that I have this almost-famous thing that I got going, I’m proud that I’m into it - and especially that I’m not feeling “less than.” I’m also proud that I can keep working on my faults, because I have so much stuff that I’m working on. It’s a constant struggle to be in a good mood and not depressed, and a constant struggle with the food despite the operation, a constant struggle to try and be a nicer wife...so I think just working on myself is big.

*RB: That’s really nice. All those things you just said, that’s great.*

LL: Isn’t it interesting whenever anyone asks me what I’m proudest of, it never has anything to do with my career?

*RB: Yes, it’s refreshing.*

LL: I could give a fuck less. I used to be so career-driven, but about 7 or 8 years ago, I don’t know what happened, but I just wanted to concentrate on being a good daughter, a good aunt. That’s just so much more important now.

*RB: That’s wonderful. I wanted to ask though, so you’re starting a Broadway show in New York?*

LL: Well, we’re workshopping it in March, and then we’re going to see what happens over the spring, yeah.

*RB: It’s essentially your stand-up comedy?*

LL: No, like I was saying before it has more to do with the struggle with food and weight and men. It’s still super-funny, but I can do stand-up anywhere, why would I want to go to Broadway which is far less money, to do exactly what I do on the road? I want to say something that, like I said, 90% of people, women especially, can relate to about body image and stuff. It’s more like that, which is hinging on those issues.

*RB: So this is the direction you are really going in now?*

LL: It can't help but be funny, because if you're a funny person you're going to do a funny show, but it's definitely going to be truthful about what I went through and hopefully people will relate and it'll help them with what they've been through too.

*RB: That's wonderful. I'm glad you're doing that.*

LL: Me too.

*RB: I know there's a lot of women who will be given no small amount of comfort and hope in that experience.*

LL: Yeah, it's such a big issue – it's just an insurmountable issue. When you have someone like Oprah, who is the most powerful, knowledgeable woman in the world with all the resources in the world, and she's still struggling, you go “Wow, this is a big issue.” So you know, hopefully it will resonate with the people who need to hear it.

*RB: That's really great. That's wonderful. Thank you so much for your time, Lisa. I'm glad you are doing what you are doing. Best of luck with everything, break a leg!*

LL: Thank you so much, honey.

*RB: Thank YOU so much for this.*

LL: Good luck with it. I'm glad you're doing it.

**~ End of interview ~**

VITA

Rachel Eliza Blackburn was born on Oct. 9, 1982, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a U.S. citizen. Rachel completed her Bachelor of Arts in Directing from the Conservatory of Theatre Arts at Webster University (St. Louis, MO) in 2005, and now completes her Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University (Richmond, VA), 2013. While Rachel's professional experiences began with Tulsa Opera, she continued a professional freelance career internationally after graduation from Webster, assisting on theatre and opera productions in both London, UK, and Dublin, IE from 2005-06. Rachel then returned to the U.S.A. and continued to direct, perform, and assist. From 2009-11, Rachel worked with several theatre companies in the Greater Toronto Area, eventually returning once again to the U.S.A. to begin her M.F.A. at VCU. Since that time, Rachel has served as instructor and guest lecturer in many courses offered through the VCU Theatre Dept., including History of Dramatic Literature, Theatre History, Introduction to Stage Performance, and Speech for Business and Profession. Additionally, Rachel continues to direct, perform, sound design, and most recently chaired a panel at the 2012 Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) Conference where she presented a paper titled: "Broadening Professional Perceptions: Exploring Work Abroad Importance and Structure Within the B.F.A. Theatre Program." Rachel looks forward to continuing her studies in the Ph.D. Theatre Studies program at University of Kansas this fall.