

Nick Marx
UW-Madison
Position Paper: “Bitches Get Things Done!”

Few issues (except perhaps the inexplicable appeal of Dane Cook) provoke as much contention among comedians and critics as gender does. And few issues are debated with less nuance. Sure, we’ve come a long way since the put-upon smugness of the Borscht Belt was replaced by the explicit sexism of boomer icons like Belushi and Chase, but even arguments enlightened by contemporary science (like Christopher Hitchens’ 2007 piece entitled “[Why Women Aren't Funny](#)”) demonstrate that there’s more fertile ground beyond mere provocation for debating the success and/or failure of female comedians. In response to Hitchens, last April’s [Vanity Fair](#) cover story by Alessandra Stanley on the rise of the Silverman/Poehler/Fey-led cadre of comediennes posits possibilities ranging from technological (rom-com matriarch Nora Ephron opines that the present boom can be attributed to “cable... There are so many hours to fill, and they ran out of men, so then there were women.”) to vaguely socio-political (*SNL* executive producer Lorne Michaels mystically claims that insofar as comedy aesthetics are concerned, “The consciousness [has] changed.”) This is to say nothing of the many conflicts female comedians face in a Hollywood hype machine that has always privileged beauty over bite.

If our training as cultural studies scholars has taught us anything, though, it’s to be suspicious of singular, straightforward explanations and embrace argumentative all-inclusiveness—both Ephron and Michaels are mostly right on parts of the equation, but where does that leave us on the rest of it? I would argue that we can begin to flesh out the complexities of contemporary female comedy by examining its performative qualities and interrogating the ways in which these qualities interact with larger trends in media convergence and popular discourse. I believe that this current generation of female comics has developed a dynamic, idiosyncratic comedy aesthetic likelier to travel across media platforms than that of previous generations of comics working solely in the stand-up or sitcom tradition (or adapting one to the other). But the performance styles of Silverman, Fey, and Poehler should be seen less as the outcome of some generational/historical shift and more as a step in the natural evolution of comedians sharing similar training.

Sketch and improvisational comedy are common to the backgrounds of Silverman (*Mr. Show*), Fey (Chicago’s *Second City*), and Poehler (New York’s *Upright Citizens Brigade*), with all three having spent time in comedy’s version of graduate school, *Saturday Night Live*. Sketch/improv comedy differs from that of film, sitcom, and even stand-up in ways that make its students grapple with myriad performance styles, sometimes simultaneously. Additionally, when performed live, sketch/improv incorporates audience interaction without stand-up’s need for domination; when mediated, sketch/improv often operates free of the strictures of conventional narrative storytelling. These comedians have worn many different hats, and that training has enabled them with a flexibility and dynamism of character that travels well from workshop to Internet short to feature film.

Of course, it’s tempting to say that they presently maintain high profiles and busy schedules thanks to their versatility, but why then do we see Fey and Silverman

ostensibly playing themselves in shows like *The Sarah Silverman Program* and *30 Rock*? And how have these comedians ascended to such positions without the self-effacement implicit in playing a character? Part of the answer lies in the sketch tradition's protocol of collaborative multitasking behind the scene/camera as well as in front of it. Fey, Poehler, and Silverman have all written for themselves and for others, as well as had others write for them. The back-and-forth of these creative deliberations are likely a good rehearsal for the kinds of management and executive negotiations a comedian must navigate before arriving at a position to solely control her own material. Indeed, training in sketch comedy does more to reconcile the respective quirks of creative laborers than it does to lay bare the ideological state apparatuses behind them, but I imagine Fey and company are operating with a healthy awareness of these issues at both micro and macro levels. It's just that one of them takes precedence over the other when the time comes to write a good bit about *Juno*, Ted Nugent, and a certain vice-presidential nominee.