didaskalia
gazeta teatralna

From the issue: **Didaskalia 180**
Release date: kwiecień 2024
DOI: 10.34762/705d-6x66
Source URL:
https://didaskalia.pl/en/article/quitting-comedy-analyzing-autistic-aesthetics-hannah-gadsbys-stand-performances

/ IMPRO I STAND-UP

Quitting Comedy: Analyzing the Autistic Aesthetics in Hannah Gadsby's Stand-up Performances

Sinchan Chatterjee | Indian Institute of Technology Bombay

Artykuł powstał jako odpowiedź na call for papers *Kalekowanie sztuk performatywnych* pod redakcją Katarzyny Ojrzyńskiej i Moniki Kwaśniewskiej. Do tej pory w tym cyklu ukazały się teksty w numerach 178 i 179. Wybrane artykuły są redagowane w języku prostym przez Jakuba Studzińskiego w ramach współpracy z Małopolskim Instytutem Kultury. / The article was written as a response to the call for papers *Cripping Performing Arts*, edited by Katarzyna Ojrzyńska and Monika Kwaśniewska. So far, texts in this series have appeared in issues 178 and 179. Selected articles will be edited in plain language by Jakub Studzinski in cooperation with the Malopolska Institute of Culture.

Abstract

This paper explores the (de-)constructive and critical role that autism can play in transforming the art of stand-up comedy. Analysing various aspects of audio-visual performance in Hannah Gadsby's sets, *Nanette* and *Douglas*, this paper will attempt to identify a new autistic aesthetics in Gadsby's performance and examine its differential relation to conventional neurotypical modalities of performing comedy. This paper will also examine how Gadsby revolutionizes and crips comedy to create space for the 'negative' affects (anger, tension), traditionally excluded from the domain of stand-up, in order to extract the therapeutic efficacy of 'connection' through story-telling.

Keywords: autism; crip; intersectionality; killjoy; performativity

Introduction

As an autistic lesbian woman, doubly-ostracized for the intersection of their[1] neurological otherness and sexual difference, the Australian artist Hannah Gadsby (born 1978) uses comedy as an analytical tool with which to destabilize the patriarchal and ableist assumptions embedded in the medium of stand-up comedy. Gadsby began their career as a comedian after winning the Raw Comedy competition in 2006. In 2018, their show *Nanette* won a Peabody Award as well as the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing for a Variety Special. They were also awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Tasmania in 2021.

Through their ingenious performances and their hypnotizing persuasiveness, Gadsby critically questions the foundational roots of humor itself, and how stand-up comedy as a genre has historically been steeped in exclusionary practices and mockery of weaker sections of society. As Shawn C. Bingham and Sara E. Green note, the superiority theory of humor, which can in fact be traced to as far back as Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes, held that laughter is generated from ‘the supposed superiority’ of some people laughing at the inferiority of others (2016, p. 287). Hobbes, for instance, wrote that ‘the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminence in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others’ (1840, p. 13). Historically speaking, the voices of women, homosexuals, disabled individuals, and other marginalized identities have always been the butt of jokes; their desires have been squashed, the stories of their oppression silenced. For instance, stand-up comedians such as Louis

C.K., Bill Cosby, Jimmy Carr, and Frankie Boyle have relied heavily on misogyny and ableism, reinforcing patriarchal stereotypes about women and ableist assumptions about disabled people. Female comedians themselves have had to participate in this process by making self-deprecating jokes in order to claim legitimacy as comedians.

In contrast, Gadsby's work marks a radical departure and a perspectival shift from such a mode of performance. Famously announcing that they would 'quit comedy' (Gadsby, 2018) in the middle of a set, the Australian artist engages in the project of abandoning the traditional brand of stand-up. They 'crip' existing generic demands to create space for a new, more inclusive aesthetic of storytelling – through comedy – using innovative rhetorical methods and theatrical experiments which expand the possibilities of stand-up. Such performances by disabled artists, as Mabel Giraldo justifiably argues, can create 'a renewed aesthetic legitimacy through manifestos that reject traditional artistic canons and create "original" performative practices' (2019, p. 238). In this paper, I will analyze two of Gadsby's sets, *Nanette* (2018) and *Douglas* (2020), in order to examine how an autistic aesthetic emerges from the interplay of various elements of their audio-visual performance – scripting, lighting and sound, props, stage design, audience-engagement, delivery, among others.

Towards an Autistic Aesthetics of Stand-up Comedy

Filmed live at the Sydney Opera House, *Nanette* is a show that revolves around the themes of homosexuality, marginalization, identity-based discrimination, xenophobia, gendered violence, and the toxic socio-cultural manifestations of patriarchy. Describing how homosexuality was a criminal

offence in Tasmania, Gadsby speaks of the inhuman ostracization that gays and lesbians had to face in Australia. Next, commenting on the ostentatious, flaunty lifestyle and exuberant parades of the vibrant homosexual community in the Mardi Gras event, they go on to ask, 'Where are the quiet gays supposed to go?' As a 'quiet soul,' they note that their favorite sound is that of a teacup finding its place on a saucer. As a result, they felt quite out of place in the community, occupying a liminal space as an introverted, asocial (and autistic, as they later reveal) lesbian. Part of Gadsby's ingenuity and charm as a comedian perhaps stems from the fact that they are absolutely unafraid to be controversial, which allows them to unflinchingly capture social truths. For example, Gadsby criticizes the Pride flag itself, calling it a 'bit busy,' especially with 'six very shouty, assertive colors, stacked on top of each other, [giving] no rest for the eye' (2018). Although Gadsby does not explicitly come out as autistic in *Douglas*, the set contains important hints and indicators of their (sympathy for) neurodivergence, like their preference for quietness, and also when they criticize the Pride flag for not being too inclusive for autistic people, who might find the loud colors overwhelming on a sensory level.

Intersectionality[2] constitutes an important backdrop to Gadsby's comedy. Gadsby's act seems to be commensurate with Butler's idea of gender performativity (Butler, 1990, p. 25), as is evinced through exclamations like 'I am incorrectly female,' and 'I don't think I'm very good at gay,' and 'I don't lesbian enough' (2018), which suggest that Gadsby is aware that gender and sexuality are categories that are largely constructed through repeated practice. Being a 'gender not-normal' autistic lesbian woman living on two spectrums at once (the gender/ sexuality spectrum as well as the autism spectrum), they have experienced a dual marginalization. Robert McRuer in his groundbreaking volume titled *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of*

Queerness and Disability, examines the fraught territory of the 'intersectional' by investigating the overlap of queerness and disability. Destabilizing the discourses of able-bodied heteronormativity, the text reclaims the word 'crip' to suggest the immense theoretical, practical, and socio-cultural possibilities that can emerge when we read history through the lens of disability studies. The scholars Louise Hickman and David Serlin also point out how a crip methodology essentially seeks to debunk cultural stereotypes about disabilities by foregrounding 'subjective experiences drawn from the lifeworlds' (2018, p. 133) of disabled individuals. This paper will study how Gadsby's intersectional identity, and especially their autism, shapes their comedy and allows them to crip the existing generic norms of stand-up. Historically speaking, the word 'crip' was used as a derogatory term in North America to address disabled ('crippled') people. However, disability scholars such as McRuer chose to reclaim the word and underscored the resistive and subversive potential it carries; the word 'crip' can be used both in the noun as well as the verb form – to 'crip' something is to apply a disability justice lens to it in order to destabilize ableist assumptions and practices.

Indeed, Gadsby crips comedy through their act in a number of ways. This is signaled unambiguously and explicitly in the middle of their set, when Gadsby declares with a wry smile, 'I do think I have to quit comedy' (2018). Very self-reflexively acknowledging that 'I know it's probably not the forum to make such an announcement,' they underscore the necessity of questioning, pausing, and reassessing. Looking back on the brand of comedy they have been involved in over the years, they realize: 'I built a career out of self-deprecating humor, and… I don't want to do that anymore,' because when it 'comes from somebody who already exists in the margins,' self-deprecation is 'not humility, it is humiliation,' as the comedian has to 'put

[themself] down to […] seek permission to speak' (Gadsby, 2018). The voices and narratives have systemically been silenced and usurped by the patriarchal-heteronormative-ableist majority. In the context of comedy, Sharon Lockyer in the essay 'From Comedy Targets to Comedy-Makers: Disability and Comedy in Live Performance,' traces how historically disabled people have been the object of jokes which drew on ableist hegemonic conceptions and assumptions. In this context, the scholar observes how performances by disabled comedians (such as Gadsby) can generate the effect of a 'reverse disability discourse,' which is a semantic tool that 'employs disabling language and stereotypes to produce [an] anti-disablist resistance' (2015, p. 1406). As an autistic person, Gadsby's consciously political stance of refusing to 'seek permission' to speak empowers them by transforming them from being a target to a creator of comedy. The decision to 'refuse' also suggests a radical shift in power, where Gadsby speaks from the margins and challenges the traditional norms and conventions of comedy.

Gadsby's comedy shatters the popular ableist assumption that autistic individuals lack self-awareness, which is a stereotype reinforced by clinical studies by scholars such as Charlotte F. Huggins and Gemma Donnan (2021). In contrast to biomedical generalizations, Gadsby's material defiantly bears unmistakable proof of a deep and constant sense of self-reflexivity and self-awareness as an artist. For instance, lauding their own joke, Gadsby once observes, 'That's a good joke, isn't it? Classic. It's bulletproof too. Very clever, because it's funny, because it's true' (2018). Another striking feature of Gadsby's performance which indicates self-reflexivity is their use of meta-jokes: punning on the words 'meta' and 'call-back' (which in the context of comedy refers to the reiteration of an earlier joke), they say, 'I've never met a joke that I haven't wanted to call back' (2020). The deft deployment of

meta-jokes also shatters the myth that autistic individuals are 'mind-blind' and unable to gauge the mental states of others, which is a popular assumption promoted by the Theory of Mind model[4]. In fact, it is Gadsby's unblinking self-criticism and their unfaltering self-reflexivity as an autistic comedian which defines their brand of comedy. The comedian also engages in the act of speaking about comedy at various instances, talking about their own brand of humor and how it differs from the conventional modes of doing comedy, analyzing their own jokes from the point of view of the audience, foreshadowing the audience's reactions, even setting their expectations from the whole show, as I will discuss later. Another method of their performance which exposes the hollowness of the 'mindblindness' theory popularized by biomedical models is how Gadsby, unlike conventional performers, not only acts as a comedian, but also plays the role of a critic, an instructor, and an analyst for the audience. Using the very medium of comedy, they break down the art form into its basic elements to scrutinize the way that comedy works. 'Let me explain to you what a joke is,' they start. Stripping it back to its 'bare essential components,' they note how a joke needs two components – a setup and a punch line. Additionally, the setup relies on the building up of tension (which the comedian supplies) and its resolution.

When Gadsby declares 'it is time… I stopped… comedy' (2018), they do not mean that they are going to quit performing professionally as a comedian. In fact, they go on to comment how they are not qualified for or interested in getting any other job. So, what they essentially imply when they talk about quitting comedy is to abandon the conventional mode of comedy which relies on misogyny, suppression of women, lying, insensitivity, and self-deprecation of the already marginalized identities. In contrast to such a form of humor, Gadsby upholds the necessity of storytelling instead – a kind of storytelling that emphasizes sensitivity, empathy, respect, and connection.

In comedy, it is the convention to end on a laugh, with a punch line. However, Gadsby purposefully refuses to do this. They argue that the conventional structure of the joke, with its insistence on a punch line, leaves 'no room for the best part of the story, which is the ending.' Gadsby explains how stories, unlike jokes, need a beginning, middle, and an end[5]; however, the last part is always omitted from a joke. Thus, the joke version freezes a false story of the past (without the ending) in time, and over time, we learn to accept that fabricated history as true. Such a truncated version of history often leads us to internalize shame and self-hatred, since the comedy is often built around self-deprecation. Moreover, since the punch line also relies on surprise, it compulsorily needs trauma. However, Gadsby complains that as an autistic person, marginalized and oppressed for their deviant sexuality as well as their neuroqueerness, they have held the trauma and the tension within them for far too long. Now, they assert that 'I need to tell my story properly.' Here, they highlight the usefulness of the quality of sensitivity, which 'has helped me navigate a very difficult path in life.' As an autistic comedian, Gadsby embraces their hyper-sensitivity, which they claim 'has been a boon to them' (2018). In the Gadsbian scheme of storytelling through comedy, sensitivity becomes important as it allows the storyteller to delve into the nuances, textures, and layers of the narrative, while offering an account of the teller's embodied, experiential reality. It is the narrator's sensitivity which shapes her language, allowing her to articulate sensations through metaphors and similes, thus enabling the audience to connect with the story. Gadsby also draws a link between comedy and sensitivity. They note how they are often accused of being too sensitive to misogynist and homophobic jokes; they assert, 'when somebody tells me to stop being so sensitive, I feel a little bit like a nose being lectured by a fart' (2018).

Recounting their stories of sexual abuse and helplessness, in the end, they

leave the audience with the story of their trauma, without a setup, without any promise of a punch line, simply noting, 'this tension is yours, I am not helping you anymore' (2018). The account of trauma and abuse recounted by Gadsby is an experience shared by numerous autistic individuals across the world. Authors such as Julia Bascom, Charlotte Amelia Poe, Reese Piper, and Laura Kate Dale note their traumatic experiences of being bullied and abused by peers, elders, and people in positions of power. Hence, the story that Gadsby narrates is not theirs alone – it is a story of thousands of autistic and homosexual people spread out across the globe. Gadsby ends with a glimpse of their vision of a better world, which upholds the value of a multiplicity of perspectives, and treats diversity as strength and sees difference as a teacher. The focus on the necessity of embracing divergent modes of feeling, sensing, existing, and expressing also forms the foundational core of the neurodiversity movement. Gadsby ends their performance by acknowledging that 'this is theater, fellas. I have given you an hour, a taste. I have lived a life.' This tension is a weight that 'not-normals carry within them all the time' (2018). What Gadsby implies here is that people who live divergent or queer existences (in terms of gender, sexuality, or neurology) have to perennially carry within them their stories of trauma, abuse, and anxiety. The fear of being ostracized, marginalized, dehumanized, and pathologized governs the lives of divergent individuals. By upholding narratives about 'not-normals' from the neurological and sexual margins, Gadsby is effectively critiquing the idea of the 'norm' itself – which is an arbitrary, idealistic standard that imposes restrictions on and sets a uniform set of unrealistic expectations from all human beings.

However, Gadsby does not wish for pity, and they refuse to see themself as the victim. The sole purpose behind their set, they assert, is to make people feel connected through stories. They lament that growing up, they had no

one else around them whose story they could resonate with in order to deal with their loneliness: ‘What I would have done to have heard a story like mine. To feel less alone. To feel connected!’ (2018). Gadsby’s performance also serves another purpose – that of building a sense of community and connection for the neurodivergent people in their audience through shared stories. Stories bear evidence of resilience, and Gadsby contends that ‘Your resilience is your humanity. To yield and not break, that is incredible strength’ (2018). To add to the theatricality of the performance, almost with tears in their eyes, Gadsby loudly and angrily proclaims in a quivering voice: ‘There is no way anyone would dare test their strength out on me, because you all know, there is nothing stronger than a broken woman who has rebuilt herself’ (2018). This episode also serves as a commentary on the role of the comedian as an artist responding not only to their private history but also to a zeitgeist, speaking to the socio-political conflicts in a given milieu.

The tone here is one that vehemently expresses anger, and it allows Gadsby to properly voice on stage the affective state that can justifiably capture their response to the emotional and psychological torment. Thus, Gadsby is able to crip comedy by incorporating the negative affects of anger and displeasure, which are traditionally far from the realm of comedy, into their act. Gadsby reiterates that they need to quit comedy because it is only with anger that they can properly tell the story of their physical and sexual abuse and trauma. Nonetheless, as an artist, they also admit that they do not possess the right to spread anger, which is ‘a toxic, infectious tension.’ Finally, they claim that ‘laughter is not our medicine. Stories hold our cure. Laughter is just the honey that sweetens the bitter medicine’ (2018). Gadsby’s use of the metaphor of medicine is also telling here – it sheds light on their preoccupation with the ideas of disease and disorder, which autism is also often perceived as. Gadsby ends with a plea to the audience, asking

them to take care of this story, because it is not Gadsby's story alone; it is our stories that connect us. That is the central focus of their storytelling-though-comedy: building connection with fellow human beings through sensitivity, resilience, and empathy. As Gadsby concludes, 'Tension isolates us, and laughter connects us' (2018). Ironically, however, Gadsby uses tension itself to connect the audience with their narrative, effectively using the platform of stand-up comedy to tell a story which builds a bridge across genders, sexualities, and abilities.

As Sarah Balkin cogently observes, 'quitting was always a conceit' in Gadsby's show – it was 'part of the performance' (2020, p. 82). In fact, Gadsby's decision to quit the age-old pattern of doing comedy forces the audience to question the traditional conceptions of aesthetic production as well as appreciation. Tobin Siebers argues how the idea of 'disability aesthetics' can usher in a massive expansion in the notion of aesthetics by introducing numerous alternative criteria, values, and modes of aesthetic representation which have radically altered the standards of the 'healthy' and 'beautiful' body and mind (2006, p. 64). Similarly, Gadsby's performance stretches the categories of the comic and the aesthetic by introducing a new brand of comedy that portrays deviance as legitimate, and complicates and subverts existing discourses on normalcy and normativity. The autistic aesthetic that is developed by Gadsby in their comedy may therefore be defined as a radical mode of storytelling which, founded on inclusivity, uses sensitivity, empathy, and humor to narrate subjective experiences of marginalization and oppression in a way that exposes the arbitrary ableist and neurotypical roots of conventional stand-up comedy.

Cripping Comedy through Comedy

The new brand of comedy that *Nanette* proposes is ultimately executed and put to test in Gadsby's stand-up set titled *Douglas*. Here, they begin by noting, 'Had I known just how wildly popular trauma was going to be in the context of comedy, I might have budgeted my shit a bit better' (Gadsby, 2020). At the very start, they curiously go on to do something previously unheard of in any stand-up performance: over the first fifteen minutes of the show, they lay out the expectations of the audience. They meet the audience's expectations by 'adjusting' and 'setting' them, admitting that they are very good as a comedian because they cheat. Generally speaking, the conventional comedian delivers jokes and has no way of preempting the audience's reaction. However, by manipulating the responses of the audience, Gadsby crips the conventional relationship between the comedian and the audience by bridging the gap in between and destroying the power-hierarchy. The audience knows exactly what to expect from the show, and even exactly how to react to it. Gadsby curtails the audience's freedom to choose their own reaction to their jokes.

Commenting on this method of laying out expectations for the show, Gadsby reflects, 'I have Hansel and Greteled the fuck out of it'. They state that this is a romantic comedy, because it is a show that 'rewards people who persevere,' and patiently wait to see what is on 'the other side of the spectrum' (a clever pun on the word 'spectrum') (2020). Thus, every move from the beginning of the act to the very end is already scripted before the show really begins. In the context of comedy or theatre or stage performances, even though all acts are scripted beforehand and the actors merely play out the script, Gadsby's performance is different in the sense that the audience too is let in on what the script contains. Thus, by scripting

the whole performance and including the block-by-block exposition of their script within the performance itself, Gadsby achieves an effect that perhaps no other comedian has attempted to explore before.

In this context, it must be noted that scripting (of speech, dialogues, or conversations, or social interactions) is intrinsically an autistic trait. Autistic individuals, in order to deal with the anxiety of interacting with strangers, mentally prepare a blueprint of exactly what they are going to say at what point in the conversation to keep it going and to appear less socially awkward. The sense of structure provided by the script serves to alleviate the anxiety of autistics by eliminating the space and scope of any unexpected event occurring. Scripting is essentially a strategy of masking, which refers to the act, conscious or otherwise, of hiding aspects of one's autistic identity (such as stimming, or bodily movements or echolalia or hypersensitivity to sensory information) so as to not be seen as different from the normative individual. In the words of various autistic individuals, as Felicity Sedgewick records, masking feels like 'putting on a character' (2021, p. 25), or 'hon[ing] something of a persona' (2021, p. 26), or 'cultivat[ing] an image,' or 'taking the role of the actor' (2021, p. 26). It involves copying other people's speech patterns and even their body language, gestures, and movements. Gadsby engages in a kind of scripting of the entire set, including the responses of the audience. When the audience mistakenly respond in a way that they had not prescribed, such as being offended at the 'bait' jokes, Gadsby stomps their feet on stage in order to express their irritation and repeatedly warns the audience not to 'take the bait' (2020).

Thus, before the show even begins, Gadsby offers a 'detailed, blow-by-blow description of exactly how the show is going to unfold' – they would start off with some observational comedy, then narrate a story about an incident in

the dog park, which will carry a gentle 'needling of the patriarchy' (2020); after that they would recount another story about a misdiagnosis and misogyny; then they would engage in what they call 'hate baiting,' where they would leave bait for their haters and make no effort to be funny; then, they would move on to the joke section. Finally, they would declare that they have autism, and try to make it sound like a 'big reveal' with the use of staging and lighting tricks. Then they note that they would end the show by dropping the mic, except that they would not really drop it with a thud because they have autism and find loud noises distressing. Instead, they would place the mic gently on the ground. That move would perhaps 'take away from the theatrics of the moment, but let's not be ableist about this' (2020), they insist. Here, Gadsby explicitly links 'theatrics' to ableism, exposing how the loudness and brightness of the theatrical setting in a stand-up show can be oppressive to the performer as well. Especially for an autistic person like Gadsby, the trope of mic-dropping – usually used to express the culmination of a show or the successful landing of a brilliant joke – is oppressive and exclusionary.

At a later point in the show, when the lights are turned back on after a moment of complete darkness on stage, we see Gadsby sitting on the stool. They announce quite nonchalantly, 'I have autism,' and then shrug, as the audience erupts into a loud peal of laughter, as Gadsby had predicted at the start. Her nonchalant tone also indicates the impulse to normalize neurodivergence as a legitimate and alternative mode of existence, and emphasizes her refusal to romanticize or exoticize autism. Speaking about autism and the harmful stereotypes surrounding the disability, Gadsby comments that the popular understanding is that autism only affects young boys who like maths a lot. This is a clear, sarcastic allusion to the movie *Rain Man* (1988), which propagated the myth that autistics are generally 'idiot-

savants' who possess special gifts. Offering an insight into the insider's perspective of everyday experiential reality of an autistic, Gadsby notes that being autistic feels a lot like being 'the only sober person in a room full of drunks, or the other way around,' when everybody else is 'operating on a wavelength [which] you can't quite key into' (2020). As a result, the autistic individual, just like the sober person, often feels left out, experiencing a profound sense of isolation and loneliness. Gadsby here succeeds in translating the experience of neurodivergence to a neurotypical audience, using the analogy of being drunk. However, the limitation of this analogy is that although the sober person chooses not to drink of their own accord, autism is never a choice; it is how the person is neurologically wired. Gadsby adds that receiving the formal diagnosis felt like they were being 'handed the keys to the city of me' (2020), and many confusing things began to magically make sense, like why they struggled with filling forms, or always found it difficult to connect with people. Gadsby's use of the metaphor of the key and the (previously locked) city to refer to themself is also commensurate with the autistic person's feeling of being trapped inside themselves, as authors like Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay, Ido Kedar, Laura James, and Temple Grandin record. In general, Gadsby's performance is replete with metaphors and similes, 'concrete, sense-based words,' which as Olga Bogdashina notes, is typical of many autistic narratives (2004, p. 110).

However, just as in *Nanette*, even in this set, Gadsby does not position themself as a victim. They are 'not here to collect your pity,' they assert. In fact, the whole set becomes a mode of reclaiming their disability, by proclaiming that 'there is beauty in the way that I think' (2020). It is through their performance that they offer insight into the intricate workings of the thought processes of their autistic mind. The last shot, as Gadsby had already predicted and scripted at the outset of the show, is them gently

landing the microphone on the floor, signaling the end of the performance. This moment encapsulates a shift in the generic paradigm of stand-up comedy: like a battle-cry for inclusivity, empathy, and kindness, Gadsby's gesture silently questions the ridiculous absurdity of loud mic-drops, which are a popular trope in stand-up comedy, but which can come as a sensory shock for most autistic individuals in the audience. Gadsby replaces the culminating act of any conventional comedy show with a gentler, less violent, and more inclusive gesture, that of calmly laying the mic on the ground, effectively queering and cripping the genre of stand-up comedy itself.

Gadsby's stage design and use of props is also quite unique and 'divergent' from the norm of traditional performances. When *Douglas* begins, for instance, we spot a dog-like structure on the stage, which the comedian later reveals is a dog made entirely out of crayons. This prop provides a background to the title of the show, which is named after their dog Douglas. Gadsby immediately goes on to point to the dog and say, 'I don't need that!' (2020). The verb 'need' is quite significant in this context. It suggests that even though the comedian did not actually require the crayon model of the dog, they made the effort to create it, carry it all the way, and put it on stage and keep it there throughout the show. Clearly, even though they did not need it, they wanted it to be there. By serving no apparent purpose, this prop serves a deeper purpose: it helps Gadsby to crip the set and the stage in many ways. By making room for something that is not absolutely necessary on stage (whereas most props in most performances are placed to serve a clear purpose), Gadsby crips the space of the stage, questioning what can and cannot be put up there on display before the audience. A prop that they do not even need is turned into the title of the whole show, transforming it into the centerpiece, the silent backdrop of the whole set. As

a symbol, the crayon statue thus becomes loaded with a deeper metaphorical meaning: it becomes a symbol of autistic resistance against the capitalist ethos of utilitarianism, productivity, and necessity. It also serves as a commentary on how even though many disabled and non-normative entities do not serve a capitalistic purpose in society, their stories are equally legitimate, and their divergent modes of existence are equally necessary. At the same time, however, by simply being absurdist and comic, the prop also helps to sell Gadsby's show (on a global OTT platform like Netflix), which still largely operates within the capitalist framework.

Another prop that they use in *Douglas* is that of the projector and the screen, in order to give the audience a 'lecture' (which many viewers accused *Nanette* of being) on the misogyny embedded in the sketches of women painted by men across ages. The format of the presentation/lecture also crips the genre of stand-up by pushing the boundaries of the generic demands and expectations. In their feminist analysis of these paintings, Gadsby positions themself as a lecturer/teacher who. Gadsby exposes the misogynist discourses which have been prevalent in society since the ancient times, and how these formulations have shaped the cultural representation of women of those times as helpless, weak, confused, powerless, and having no agency, story, or function of their own. Using their formal training in art history, Gadsby also revisits the story of Van Gogh in order to vehemently attack the rampant romanticization of mental illness. Destroying the misconception that an artist must suffer in order to create beautiful art, they note that Van Gogh's failure to sell his paintings was owing to his mental illness which made it difficult for him to network with people, and not because he was 'born ahead of his time' (2020), which is biologically an impossible feat to accomplish. This argument is clearly informed by the lens of disability studies, which seeks to destroy the mythicization and

romanticization of disability, and to portray disabled individuals as human beings with their own sets of struggles, embodied lives, desires, thoughts, and needs. As an avowedly feminist project, Gadsby's comedy shatters the romantic myth that artists are tormented geniuses who must exist in isolation, and upholds the necessity of relationality, networking, care, and 'connection' for human survival.

In order to enact this kind of connection on stage, Gadsby redefines their relationship with the audience in numerous ways, and studying these modalities can also provide us important insight into the subtle shifts in the dynamics of power between the comedian and the audience. Generally speaking, in any comedy show, the comedian holding the microphone in the spotlight is the one in power – s/he speaks, the audience listens, and it is a one-dimensional relationship with a unidirectional flow of information. However, most comedians like to hide this fact in order to earn the trust of the audience, using self-deprecating humor or making jokes that would be relatable for the masses. However, as already noted in another context earlier in this article, Gadsby openly admits that the relationship between them and their audience is 'an abusive relationship' (2018). They explain that every joke needs the build-up of tension (which is later released) in order to work and state that a comedian is the one supplying the tension to the audience, making them uncomfortable and uneasy. Furthermore, it is also the comedian who provides the punch line which breaks the tension and makes the audience laugh. Thus, the emotional state of the audience is always strictly under the control of the comedian, as Gadsby admits. Moreover, by preempting the reactions of the audience, Gadsby is not only scripting and dictating how the audience should react to their jokes. They are also situating themself in the shoes of the audience and listening to the jokes of the comedian from the perspective of the spectator. Through the

invention of these strategies, Gadsby complicates the one-dimensional relationship between the comedian and the audience. The shift in power-dynamics between comedian and audience becomes an integral element in Gadsby's aesthetics; it not only crips conventional roles in a stand-up comedy setting, but also organically demonstrates the crucial impact that comedy can have in fostering connection, inclusion, and empathy.

Balkin identifies Gadsby's tone as often being 'ambiguously comic' – the delivery of the lines, she observes, has a 'characteristically Australian vocal tic of making statements as though they are questions' (2020, p. 77). This tone makes Gadsby funny to non-Austrialian audience while also sounding conversational and keeping the audience engaged in their narrative. In comedy, timing is of paramount significance for a joke to work well, be understood and appreciated by the audience. Gadsby is deeply aware of this and pauses between two jokes to ensure that the meaning of each joke has sunk in and the punch-line has landed well. Moreover, Gadsby also manipulates audience response by cutting off their applause at multiple points during the show in order to exercise total control over the response of the viewers. All of these tricks and manipulations allows 'Gadsby's unjoking show' to express a 'comic vision,' as Balkin argues (2020, p. 82). Thus, their set bears testament to the creation of an alternate brand of comedy which values difference and diversity, and marks a radical shift away from the norm. All the modalities of expression and methods of performance – including delivery, silences, modulations of speech and intonation, gestures and movements, and the use of props – serve to reveal the formulation of a new aesthetic of storytelling-through-comedy. This aesthetic that crips every part of the show – the format, tone, stage-design, props, comedian-audience relationship, and even the mic-drop – is essentially autistic because it questions the norm of neurotypicality at every step and highlights the beauty

of divergence, experimentation, fascination, curiosity, imagination, sensitivity, empathy, and self-reflexivity.

The comedian notes that in *Nanette*, they deliberately chose to 'turn the laugh tap off' (2020), completely aware that it was not technically going to be comedy as the audience knew it. By consciously turning the 'laugh tap off,' Gadsby posits herself as a 'crip killjoy,' to use the concept developed by Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer, and elaborated by Maria Tsakiri, which borrows from Sara Ahmed's idea of the 'feminist killjoy' (2010, p. 2). Just as Ahmed's feminist killjoy engages in an act of political activism by refusing to conform to the oppressive expectations to be and spread happiness, crip killjoys also refuse to fake happiness to appease the abled majority at the cost of their own discomfort. Johnson and McRuer also note that when crip killjoys become 'wilful,' they are able to make the decision 'to be unstable, incapable, unwilling, disabled' (2014, p. 137). However, when Gadsby admits that they chose to call the show a comedy in order to trick the audience into listening, they confess that this act of deception is 'technically a joke' (2020). However, this ultimate retreat into a 'joke' finally betrays the comedian's anxiety about her new brand of comedy and exposes her fear of not being funny, thereby begging the question: can Gadsby really be considered a killjoy?

Conclusion

Stand-up comedy has historically been an ableist and patriarchal space dominated by straight white men who had the license to vilify women and other subjugated groups. Numerous stand-up comedy sets rely on the engagement of the audience in acts that are called 'crowd-work.' Although disguised as light-hearted fun and harmless humor, these jokes made at the

expense of the private lives of members in the audience can often be quite caustic and invasive, leaving the chosen target uncomfortably exposed to the whole crowd. Further, stand-up culture's careless disregard for the emotions of its audience is also displayed in the obsession with 'not taking offense,' which is an excuse that many comedians use to express the most vicious, aggressive and hurtful of statements. Gadsby does not rely on any of these techniques. The only people they deliberately choose to attack are the straight white men in the audience, as they acknowledge. Their comedy is aimed at those in power, not the weaker and marginalized sections of society (they 'punch up,' not down). Thus, Gadsby's comedy seeks to upset the status quo by bringing in new dimensions of unsettling thoughts about patriarchy, misogyny, trauma, and violence, issues which are hardly considered the subject of stand-up comedy.

Employing a radically new mode of performing comedy through storytelling, Gadsby succeeds in creating room for the 'negative' affects[6] (Ngai, 2005, p. 32) such as tension, revulsion, and anger, which are conventionally excluded from the domain of comedy and which are undeniably part of the experience of marginalized (neuro)divergent individuals. By acknowledging these feelings and making space for addressing them within their set, they revolutionize the generic paradigms and expectations. As Giraldo writes, 'the laying bare of suffering turns into a sort of social, cultural, and/or political "redemption," achieved through the denunciation of traditional aesthetic models and dominant ideals' (2019, p. 238). It is this 'laying bare' of structure, content, emotion, and affect, which enables Gadsby to accept their vulnerability and celebrate their resilience. The new autistic aesthetics of comedy – which is founded on connection, storytelling, honesty, vulnerability, sensitivity, resilience, self-reflexivity, the acceptance of diversity, and the celebration of a multiplicity of perspectives – is

empowering not only for the performer, but also the audience. Such an aesthetic fosters the spirit of cultural inter-dependence, of empathy, and connection through the shared space of stories. All of these ingenious strategies devised by Gadsby enable them to crip the medium of comedy itself by pushing generic borders and expanding the scope of what is possible in comedy, in terms of content, structure, form, and theme. They are therefore able to effectively introduce a paradigmatic shift in the medium of stand-up itself.

To conclude, Gadsby is arguably the proponent of a new brand of comedy that critiques and eschews the traditional modalities of stand-up, which are founded on otherisation, marginalization, and discrimination of all forms of identity that are different from the norm. A number of other disabled comedians such as Maysoon Zayid (who has cerebral palsy), Ophira Calof (influenced heavily by Gadsby, as she acknowledges), Terry Galloway, and Nina G., among others also engage in the project of reclaiming the medium of stand-up comedy by vociferously asserting their difference as disabled comedians. Instead of 'punching down' and making jokes at the expense of their own selves or other oppressed individuals, which they recognize is a form of bullying, these comedians 'punch up' and mock those who are in power. Such a new aesthetic of comedy exposes the norm itself to be an arbitrary (ableist and patriarchal) ideal, a social construct which is not founded on any solid logical ground. It seeks to effect a reconfiguration and an organic transformation, slowly but surely, of the very mechanisms through which the institution of stand-up comedy operates. These performances therefore set up the stage, metaphorically speaking, for a new kind of stand-up which strikes at the roots of ableism and patriarchy, and offers the hope of liberation and empowerment to women, disabled individuals, non-binary folks, and all who experience discrimination and

exclusion for digressing from the norm.

Wzór cytowania / How to cite:

Chatterjee, Sinchan, *Quitting Comedy: Analyzing the Autistic Aesthetics in Hannah Gadbsy's Stand-up Performances*, "Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna" 2024, no. 180, DOI: 10.34762/705d-6x66.

Author

Sinchan Chatterjee

Sinchan Chatterjee (sinchan.iitb@gmail.com) – Teaching Assistant in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences in IIT Bombay, India. As a Fulbright-Nehru Doctoral Research Fellowship affiliated with UC Berkeley and a UGC-NET qualified Junior Research Fellow, Chatterjee is currently studying autistic autobiographies for his doctoral dissertation. In his research, he critically investigates various aspects of autistic experiential reality, such as stimming, masking, scripting, among others, as recorded in narratives of neurodivergence, using the theoretical frameworks of phenomenology, crip theory, queer theory, and critical disability studies. Chatterjee completed his MA and BA in English literature from Jadavpur University and St. Xavier's College Kolkata respectively. As a poet, rapper, photographer, and stand-up comedy artist, Sinchan believes in preserving as many stories and in as many ways as possible. ORCID: 0009-0008-6038-8859.

Footnotes

1. Hannah Gadsby uses the pronouns 'they/them.'
2. The idea of 'intersectionality' was coined by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 in order to describe the interconnected nature of oppression faced by different groups based on the overlapping of race, gender, class, and other categories.
3. 'Locker-room talk' refers to the chauvinistic conversations that take place typically in all-male locker rooms, where men boast about their sexual conquests, etc.
4. Theory of Mind refers to the ability of understanding other people's mental states. Autistics were believed (by scholars such as Uta Frith) to be lacking the ability to infer other people's emotions, feelings, beliefs, and intentions, but this has been proven to be a misconception by many recent researchers.
5. This goes back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, where he delineated the structure of the plot which is divided into a beginning, middle, and end.
6. Sianne Ngai talks about the importance of acknowledging negative affects such as envy,

anxiety, paranoia, and irritation, with particular focus on the issues of gender and race.

Bibliography

Bibliography

Ahmed, Sara, 'Feminist Killjoys (and Other Willful Subjects),' *The Scholar And Feminist Online*, 2010, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 1-8, http://sfonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/ahmed.01.html [accessed: 14.11.2023].

Balkin, Sarah, 'The Killjoy Comedian: Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette*,' *Theatre Research International*, 2020, vol. 45, no. 1, pp. 72-85, http://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883319000592 [accessed: 16.11.2023].

Bhabha, Homi, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,' *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis*, MIT Press, 1984 vol. 28, pp. 125-133, http://www.jstor.org/stable/778467 [accessed: 14.09.2023].

Bingham, Shawn C.; Green, Sara E., 'Aesthetic as Analysis: Synthesizing Theories of Humor and Disability through Stand-up Comedy,' *Humanity and Society*, 2016 vol. 40, no. 3, pp. 278-305, https://doi.org/10.1177/0160597615621594 [accessed: 16.09.2023].

Bogdashina, Olga, *Communication Issues in Autism and Asperger Syndrome: Do We Speak the Same Language?*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London 2004.

Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York 1990.

Calof, Ophira, 'Ophira Calof on Unravelling Ableism from Comedy,' *Akimbo*, 23.04.2021, https://akimbo.ca/akimblog/ophira-calof-on-unravelling-ableism-from-comedy/ [accessed: 16.09.2023].

Gadsby, Hannah, 'Nanette,' *Netflix* 2018, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80233611?source=35 [accessed: 11.09.2023].

Gadsby, Hannah, 'Douglas,' *Netflix* 2020, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81054700?source=35 [accessed: 12.09.2023].

Giraldo, Mabel, 'Breaking Myths about Autism through Performance-based Practices: An Exploratory Analysis of the *Imagining Autism* Approach,' *Italian Journal of Special Education for Inclusion*, 2019 vol. VII, no. 2, pp. 237-257, https://doi.org/10.7346/sipes-02-2019-19 [accessed: 17.09.2023].

Hickman, Louise; Serlin, David, 'Towards a crip methodology for critical disability studies,' [in:] *Looking towards the Future*, vol. 2, *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Disability Studies*, ed. Katie Ellis, et al, pp. 131-141, Routledge, New York 2018.

Hobbes, Thomas, ‘Human Nature,’ [in:] *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, vol. IV, ed. Sir William Molesworth, John Bohn, London 1840.

Lockyer, Sharon, ‘From Comedy Targets to Comedy-Makers: Disability and Comedy in Live Performance,’ *Disability & Society*, 2015 vol. 30, no. 9, pp. 1397-1412, https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2015.1106402 [accessed: 12.11.2023].

McRuer, Robert, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, NYU Press, New York 2006.

Ngai, Sianne, *Ugly Feelings*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2005.

Sedgewick, Felicity; Ellis, Helen; Hull, Laura, *Autism and Masking: How and Why People Do it, and the Impact it Can Have*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London 2021.

Siebers, Tobin, ‘Disability aesthetics,’ *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 2006 vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 63-73, http://www.jcrt.org/archives/07.2/siebers.pdf [accessed: 15.11.2023].

Tsakiri, Maria, ‘NoBody’s Perfect: Charm, Willfulness, and Resistance,’ *Review of Disability Studies: an International Journal*, 2018 vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 1-13, https://rdsjournal.org/index.php/journal/article/view/823 [accessed: 18.11.2023].

Source URL:
https://didaskalia.pl/article/quitting-comedy-analyzing-autistic-aesthetics-hannah-gadsbys-stand-performances