

# HANNAH GADSBY: CELEBRITY STAND-UP, TRAUMA, AND THE META-THEATRICALS OF PERSONA CONSTRUCTION

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## ABSTRACT

*This essay examines the work of stand-up performer Hannah Gadsby in relation to persona, extending the conventional reach of persona studies to the realm of live performance and comedy. The author analyses Hannah Gadsby's risky decision to kill off her widely adored comic persona in her 2017 show *Nanette*, replacing it with a persona that shot her to global celebrity and changed the power dynamics with her audiences. The essay investigates Gadsby's contention that stand-up is bad for her mental health and is predicated on an abusive relationship with audiences. It considers her strategies of comic unmaking and remaking in the contexts of women working in a sexist industry within misogynist societies. It also interrogates Gadsby's dramaturgies of foregrounding persona creation and the performative dialogic of 'face' or 'mask.' Gadsby's postmodern deconstruction of her own comic artistry and her exposure of the limits of stand-up as a form are examined through a new concept of meta-persona.*

## KEY WORDS

Mask; Live Performance; Audience; Meta-persona; Gay Politics; Mental Health

## COMIC PERSONA

In her now infamous show, *Nanette*, first performed in 2017, Hannah Gadsby staged the spectacular live execution of her much loved comic persona. She announced that she was quitting stand-up because it had been catastrophic for her mental health and was a form that encouraged a mutually abusive relationship between performer and audience. The ricochets from what has proved a brilliant and controversial act are still sounding, and Gadsby's story provides an intriguing focal point for developing a new dialogue between persona studies and the disciplines of acting studies and comedy studies. Persona studies has grown from media studies, film, and sociology and their intersections with star studies (see Marshall 2016; Marshall et al 2020). A central concept in acting and comedy studies, 'persona' is deployed more explicitly in the teaching and articulation of comic theory and practice, especially stand-up. Acting studies incorporates live performance and is centrally concerned with the performer's agency and working processes, the theories and practices of different performance approaches, as well as the creation of offstage and onstage personas. Comedy studies articulates and theorises the practices of comic performance and is a relatively recent academic discipline.

Whatever the medium – stage, screen, audio or social media – persona construction is understood to be for the purposes of a public performance and is strategically staged. The vocabularies of comic acting with their emphasis on role, mask, character, embodiment, self, and subjectivity are all key to the emergent discourses of persona studies, and Gadsby's show offers an intriguing case study in the meta-theatrics of persona creation, with its inherent conceptualisations of deconstruction and reinvention.

Popular comedy is now accepted as an academic subject and as a constituent part of the disciplines of theatre and performance studies. Joanne Gilbert's *Performing Marginality* (2004) has highlighted the more recent legitimisation of women in comedy both in the industry and in the academy. Gadsby's show, *Nanette*, captured the zeitgeist for personal stories and reflected the fact that the relationship between offstage self, personality, and stage persona is increasingly the focus of many comedians and of scholarship in comedy and humour studies. Many contemporary comedians foreground the complex negotiations between comic performer and role, and meta-theatrically expose and perform those paradoxes and precarities for audiences' gratification (Double 2017, pp. 1-29; Lee 2010 and 2012). Indeed, popular performance, as Louise Peacock has emphasised, rests on "the blurring of the distinction between the everyday personality of the performer and the persona of the role performed" (2017, p. 123). To this end, practising comedians have made notable analyses of their own constructions of stage personas in their articles and books, their performances and also in their doctoral theses on stand-up (Fox 2018a). The 'genius' of comedy lies in the crafting of a stage persona whether constructed through words, appearance, and gesture or through costume, body, and mime as was manifest in Marcel Marceau's Bip the Clown and Charlie Chaplin's little tramp. Stand-up, now a multi-million-dollar global phenomenon, with some comics attaining a rockstar status on festival and touring circuits, has fetishised the stage persona. Gadsby's show foregrounds the making and unmaking of persona as spectacle. Most unusually, the global celebrity that Gadsby has enjoyed through performing *Nanette* was realised through a high-risk strategy of constructing a show that was intent on the assassination of the very persona she had painstakingly constructed over many years. The irony is that she feared she might end her career; instead she inadvertently engineered an internationally staged lift-off into the entertainment stratosphere.

Stand-up relies entirely on the presence of a live audience. The creation of a distinct stage persona is the vital component in all stand-up routines, a process, often shrouded in mystery, that trainee comedians are encouraged to discover and refine through a myriad of comedy schools, how-to books, comedy doctors, and professional experts (Frances-White & Shandur 2015). Predictably, there are as many approaches to self-fashioning as there are comedians, and the creation, maintenance or adaptation of a stage persona is a constant negotiation for all comic performers. Lenny Bruce's enraged, free-associative, and foul-mouthed persona in the 1960s was a result of Mort Sahl's influence and of his determination to fight for freedom of speech through an act that inverted logical thinking to expose absurd social constructs (Bruce 2016). For Tony Allen (2002), the crafting of an effective stage persona is defined by the discovery and development of a particular attitude towards the material that might be exaggerated for the purposes of forging a distinct stage presence. Wanda Sykes has very successfully crafted a kick-ass, know-it-all, no-nonsense persona that refuses to be brow-beaten and has no toleration of prejudice or stupidity. Eddie Izzard, who was a street artist before becoming a stand-up and attended stand-up workshops early in his career in London, acknowledges that the real-life fluidity of his gender and transvestism indivisibly inform both his stage and offstage personas (2017, pp. 254, 288).

In stand-up comedy it is now the fashion and audience expectation for the gap between the performer's branded public self and their stage persona to be as narrow as possible and for offstage and onstage selves to be intricately blurred into one. As stand-up Robin Ince has noted: "Everyone wants to know the face behind the mask when it comes to comedians – far more so than of authors, architects or mountaineers" (2019, p. 138). The stand-up is nearly always in the conundrum of trying to second-guess how she can most play herself. Politically this can make life complicated for female stand-ups who want to champion their feminism or advocate women's rights because stand-up has traditionally been male-dominated, sexist, and intolerant of women critiquing masculinity, campaigning for women's causes or expressing rage or protest or points of view which are deemed unacceptable or inappropriate for a woman to hold (Long 2011, Christie 2015). In the case of Hannah Gadsby, the protocol of narrowing the gap between self and persona appeared to be reversed: the project in *Nanette* focused on how Gadsby could, at all costs, avoid playing her accrued, accumulated persona. Having become trapped into what she felt was a deceit, she was intent on exposing the intolerable burden of her mask.

In *Performing Marginality* (2004) Gilbert repeats the well-documented observation that many female stand-ups have traditionally performed a self-denigrating stage persona in order to ensure a position of lower power status in relation to their audiences because it is harder to be accepted in a still overwhelmingly macho professional environment. Joan Rivers (1933-2014) was perhaps the most famous example of the flamboyantly self-loathing persona, who was always clear that she was speaking to the women in the audience in an attempt to force them to confront their delusions about themselves and the men in their lives: "I never look at the men in the audience, I never deal with them. It's the wives who get it, the stay-at-home moms and the middle-aged women whose husbands leave them anyway" (qtd in Nussbaum 2015). Rivers explained her act in terms of her origins: "I'm from a little town called Larchmont where if you're not married, and you're a girl, and you're 21, you're better off dead" (qtd in Nussbaum 2015). Arguments still rage about whether Rivers was a pioneer of women's comedy or a reinforcer of prejudice and stereotype, or both. But female stand-ups today still attest to the sexism in male stand-up audiences and in the entertainment industry itself. Sarah Pascoe (2016), Jo Brand (2010), Bridget Christie (2015), and Josie Long (2011) have voiced the problem loudly although Brand is also of a generation that has witnessed the greater numbers of women who are now given stage time. Christie overtly confronts the difficulty of espousing feminism in a comedy routine; Long says she is challenged most weeks by men claiming that women are not funny or cannot be likeable and funny; and Pascoe and Brand have softened their self-attacking material by way of example to women in their audiences.

Female audiences are, in fact, a growing market in stand-up. Hannah Gadsby's audiences are overwhelmingly female with a high percentage who self-identify as gay. Many female stand-ups have become political and artistic saboteurs by subverting conventional assumptions about women on stage. One tactic is the grotesque exaggeration of stage persona to challenge misogyny and other social prejudices in order to explode audience expectations. Zoe Coombs Marr's persona of 'Dave', for example, a sexist, brainless, and offensive straight white male, operated, in the words of *Guardian* critic James Norman, as "a mirror on the Australian male psyche" (2014). In a similar strategy, Sarah Silverman adopts a politically extreme, satirical, and deadpan persona to address taboo topics about race and sex that would shock her American audiences if they were not refracted through jokes and offered as entertainment. Both Coombs Marr's and Silverman's stage personas are reflexive constructs that pathologise masculinity and right-wing politics and are deployed to enact trenchant social critiques of dominant cultures. In the terminology of actor Michael Redgrave, Marr's and Silverman's personas emphasise 'mask' rather than 'face', and although complexly interconnected, mask operates as a device for self-

concealment more than self-revelation (1958, p. 27). ‘Mask’ for Redgrave refers to voice, appearance, technique, and mannerism; ‘face’ is the actor’s “essence of emotional experience and the residuum of a life’s philosophy” and without the “perfect discipline” of mask, the face, which signifies the unique qualities of that actor’s personality and being, would not be visible (1958, p. 27). Projections of the self and of stage roles are multiple and complex, argues Redgrave, and the central paradox of performing is that “in a sense it is true that the hardest thing of all is to be yourself on stage” (p. 27). Redgrave argues that the ‘self’ or ‘selves’ can, paradoxically, only be filtered through the fluctuating variables of a series of different masks that function like Russian matryoshka dolls or Chinese boxes. Intriguingly, Redgrave also asserts that the indistinguishability of mask and face is a significant feature of a performer’s skillset; indeed, it is a mark of their greatness.

In the higher reaches of the actor’s art, the unmistakable stamp of an actor’s personality or genius is always to be detected through whatever mask he has created for himself. Is it mask or face? I had better say at once that in my opinion the two cannot be separated. (Redgrave 1958, p. 27)

In stand-up the idea of performed authenticity is mostly articulated by comedians talking about the quest to develop their own voice (Izzard 2017, pp. 252-253; Frances-White & Shandur 2015, p. 208; Notaro 2018, pp. 10-11). Finding your voice is understood to be the same thing as finessing a persona that is intimately aligned with a comic’s offstage personality and sense of self. In the words of Tom Wrigglesworth,

I’m trying to rely on my stage persona to be just me. But that’s always a lie. It is an act, isn’t it? ... Me on stage is as close to me offstage as is currently possible. (Qtd in Frances-White & Shandur 2015, p. 203)

Current trends in stand-up comedy both interrogate and problematise the relationship between self and persona in relation to the market demand for the confessional, the desire for authenticity, self-expression, and real-life. As Oliver Double has contended,

The new school of comedy is personal comedy. Your act is about you: your gut issues, your body, your marriage, your divorce, your drug habit ... the idea that the comedian’s act should reflect his or her real personality is commonplace. (2014, pp. 6, 115)

The comedy industry is haunted by a superstition that it takes seven years for a comedian to learn how individual beliefs and values can be configured into an effective stage persona, seven years to forge a compelling political identity, and seven years to ‘find a voice’ that is the mark of a unique and successful persona (Apatow 2015, pp. xiv-xv). The masculinity of the stand-up world is still assumed by many comics and producers and the worst of the misogyny has been both documented and enacted by figures such as Richard Pryor (2018) and Christopher Hitchens in his controversial essay ‘Why Women Aren’t Funny’ (2007). Google is often besieged by users asking the same question millions of times over: “why aren’t female comics funny?” (Hazarika 2017). Fortunately, none of this has deterred the growing legion of 21<sup>st</sup>-century female stand-ups. Still, it took Hannah Gadsby rather longer than seven years to feel that she had lighted on a persona that was a more honest version of herself, and it was her performance of repeated self-assassination in *Nanette* and a changing zeitgeist for women in the entertainment industry, that enabled her to discover her voice. Before *Nanette*, Gadsby had located her identity in coming out as lesbian through a self-abnegating persona, recounting stories from her childhood and adult life in a genteel and light-hearted style. During *Nanette*, Gadsby ritually murdered her old persona and assumed a new high-status role that radically altered her relationship to the audience. As she said in a subsequent interview with Leigh Sales

on ABC television: "I feel like with *Nanette* I found my voice and I may as well use it" (Sales 2019). To use Redgrave's terminology, Gadsby's performance in *Nanette* was more 'face' than 'mask' but the face was shocking because Gadsby had always concealed it; the new face had to do with shocking personal revelations.

### HANNAH GADSBY'S DRAMATURGIES OF PERSONA

It is difficult to describe both the phenomenon that Hannah Gadsby has become since *Nanette* and the engine of political rage that has been powered by the #metoo campaign in Australia and many other countries (Svect et al 2019). In *Nanette*'s premiere year, 2017, Gadsby won the Barry Award at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival, the Helpmann Award, and the awards for the Best Comedy Show at the Edinburgh and Montreal Comedy Festivals. She was a sensation on Off-Broadway and on tour in America and in the UK. But it was the Netflix production of *Nanette*, filmed in the Sydney Opera House in 2018, that won her a Peabody Award, two Emmy nominations, and launched her global career. Gadsby reflected on the fairy-tale irony of it all in her subsequent TED talk:

Not long after I worked out why I was good at stand-up I decided to quit comedy. Quitting launched my comedy career. Really launched it. After quitting comedy, I became the most talked about comedian on the planet because I'm apparently even worse at making retirement plans than I am at speaking my own mind. (Gadsby 2019)

One of the many things I find remarkable about *Nanette* is that I can think of no other example of a stand-up who has taken the potentially career-ending strategy of detonating a persona in a sustained and repeated performance in front of a live audience. In 2012 Tig Notaro caused a sensation in America when she revealed on stage, and within days of her diagnosis, that she had cancer, and that the additional burdens of her mother's death and her relationship break-up were almost unendurable. The first line of her act became legendary: "Hello. Good evening. Hello. I have cancer, how are you?" (Notaro 2016, p. 139). But Notaro insisted on pursuing what she understood as "the job of the comedian" and kept her audiences laughing by persistently "delivering a lighter joke" in order to spare them from what she called "the dark hole" (Notaro 2016, p. 140). Notaro did not change her persona in terms of her style of delivery or form; instead she became known as a cancer survivor and celebrated for breaking a taboo about making her condition and medical treatment the subject of her act. Gadsby, on the other hand, methodically extinguished her old persona through breaking conventions related to content *and* form. She threw her audiences headfirst down Notaro's black hole by refusing to spare them the harrowing details of traumatic events, prejudice, and social stigma in her life. She refused them the redemption of the usual protocols of stand-up joke dramaturgy.

Gadsby debuted *Nanette* at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival in front of her home crowd and most devoted fan-base, many of whom would have known that she had launched her career through the heats for apprentice comedians (called Raw Comedy) in the same Festival in 2006. Her persona as a writer and actor had been constructed through her popularity as a stand-up and repeated appearances on festival circuits; through television, notably co-writing and co-starring in the ABC television show *Adam Hills Tonight* from 2011 until 2013; and through acting in Josh Thomas' multiple award-winning sitcom *Please Like Me*, which did much to normalise gay characters on Australian television between 2013 and 2016. She had also carved a niche for herself as an alternative art historian through her Comedy Art Tours and Art Lectures for the National Gallery of Victoria, debunking the patriarchal and neo-colonial discourses underlying mainstream fine art appreciation in Australia (as well as her own

undergraduate degree in Art History and Curatorship from the University of Tasmania and the Australian National University).

Gadsby's stand-up persona had been fashioned by stories of her childhood in Smithton, a small town in Tasmania of less than 4,000 people, reliant on beef and dairy farming and located near the turbulent weather systems of the Bass Straits. Today, Tasmania is packaged as a breath-taking eco-paradise of untouched flora and fauna. But Gadsby's upbringing and her personal tales reflect the neglect of Tasmania by its mainland neighbour and the poverty, insularity, and religious oppression of its population until relatively recently. Historically notorious for its harsh conditions for convicts, Tasmania was, for a long time, perceived as a penal backwater and a feral isle which has made it ripe for gothic arts festivals (Dark Mofo) and dark tourism. Gadsby's personal tales were about her sense of alienation, shame, her learned homophobia, and self-disgust at her lesbianism. Her LGBTQ advocacy and her rise in Australia need to be understood in the contexts of her birth in 1978 and the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Tasmania as late as 1997. Tasmania's homophobia was particular: it was the last imperial British outpost to exercise the death penalty for sodomy in 1867 and in the following century had the highest rates of imprisonment for private consenting male sex anywhere in the world (Alexander 2016). Lesbian sexuality went legally unrecognised and was a complete taboo, a legacy which had a profound effect on Gadsby. Her struggle to accept her own sexuality and to be accepted also needs to be framed by the protracted battle for same-sex marriage in Australia, which was legalised only in 2017, the year of *Nanette's* premiere. Lastly, her stand-up has to be set against the epidemic of gender-based violence which continues to infect Australian life and which was declared a 'national crisis' by the Federal Government in 2015 (Piper & Stevenson 2019).

Gadsby makes light of the homophobia and violence at the beginning of *Nanette* but the menacing undertones and the puns about incest are unnerving.

I had to leave [Tasmania] as soon as I found out I was a little bit lesbian. And you do find out, don't you? [pause] I got a letter. [big laugh] "Dear Sir-Madam" [laughter, clapping]. It wasn't a great letter to receive in mid 90s Tasmania. Because the wisdom of the day was that you chose to be gay. I say wisdom – even though homosexuality is clearly not a choice. Wisdom is always relative and in a place like Tasmania everything is *very* relative [big laugh]. The wisdom was that if you chose to be gay you should get yourself a one-way ticket to the mainland and don't come back. Gays, why don't you just pack up your aids into the suitcase there and fuck off to mardi gras. (Gadsby 2018a)<sup>i</sup>

Before *Nanette*, Gadsby's contract with her audiences was that she could be relied on to supply an evening of genteel comic observation that drew upon her feelings of being a social misfit but relayed her supposed dysfunctionality in a whimsical and non-confrontational way. I discovered Gadsby as an immigrant in Australia and rapidly became a fan. Her performances were somewhere between a lecture and sophisticated and meticulously worked storytelling exercises that enjoyed the meta-frames of joke-telling and relished in the craft of stand-up. Her persona was cheerful, feel-good, and kooky. There were no shocks and no dark confessions. Gadsby appealed to all generations and whilst she always had a strong feminist and lesbian fan base, she was also a comedienne people took their grandmothers and great aunts to enjoy. Her persona spoke, to some degree, to Gilbert's construct of the 'reporter' persona, which she asserts is a recognisable invention of a number of contemporary American female stand-ups:

The reporter persona is clearly opinionated but because she offers sociocultural – and occasionally political – critique through an observational lens, she does not appear threatening. The reporter directs her dissatisfaction at general targets (that is, society)

through commentary peppered with questions like “Did you ever notice?” This persona also muses, often telling humorous anecdotes as a way to voice mild irritation, frustration, or incredulity. Because the reporter evokes a sense of community (“We’re all in this together”), this posture is extremely popular with a variety of audiences. (Gilbert 2004, p. 124)

Gadsby’s persona did not deliver political tirades but was gently politicised. She was comforting, affable and reassuring, and her looks, bodily appearance, and mannish, though not male, attire fitted Gilbert’s construct of the reporter persona as “relatively androgynous.” Gadsby’s observations of her background played on the idiosyncratic and surreal aspects of day-to-day living as a non-normative woman, who, as she would often say, “looks like a man – but only very briefly” (2018a). Gadsby’s persona arguably also overlapped with Gilbert’s category of the ‘whiner’ comic, a self-deprecatory persona of low self-esteem with an abject relationship to her own body (Gilbert 2004, pp. 214-224). Gilbert proposes that the postures of the reporter and the whiner belong to a “rhetoric of victimage” and are often deployed by female comics to explore “the potentially subversive use of self-deprecation (the power of powerlessness), and the rhetorical construction of victims and butts of jokes” (p. 138). Gilbert describes both the reporter and the whiner as “safe” choices for comedians because they do not strenuously challenge audiences. Safety is culturally relative, however, and Gadsby felt it was neither safe nor possible to pursue a stand-up career as a lesbian in an only recently decriminalised Tasmania when she started doing gigs. Standing on a stage in mainland Australia and declaring her lesbianism was as radical a challenge to her sense of self as Gadsby could imagine, but once established, Gadsby’s genteel persona and conciliatory show content imposed a self-censorship that ultimately reinforced traumas experienced as a child and young adult (Wright 2017b). The very vehicle by which she made a living, Gadsby’s persona also became the trigger for a worsening state of mind and functioned as a form of ghastly self-entombment. It was a paradox that she found increasingly intolerable: “I was in a dark place for the two years before I wrote *Nanette*. My mental state was deteriorating and yet I was a success” (CBS 2019).

For Gilbert the politics of performing marginality directly addresses the paradox of using self-objectification as a means of obtaining power (2004, p. 140). Gilbert’s defence of the humour of self-deprecation is: first, that it is often cultural critique; second, that “comics who use self-deprecatory material do not necessarily believe themselves to be the personas they project onstage”; and third, that jokes come with a carnivalesque discourse which undermines their serious analytical deconstruction (2004, p. 140). Before *Nanette*, Gadsby deployed a low-status, self-mocking persona that was political in being ‘out’ and an advocate of gay rights. But Gadsby also celebrated her lesbianism negatively, conveying that she experienced her sexual identity as abnormal, outlandish, and incongruous. She made herself the butt of the joke and her persona was constructed to accommodate and communicate self-abasement. Gilbert’s categories provide some interesting provocation, but they are themselves problematic in their playing of well-worn female stereotypes, including the bitch, the bawd, and the kid – types which Gilbert claims are fundamental to female comic performance. Female comics use type to debunk type, argues Gilbert, some using self-scapegoating “to substitute self for society” (2004, p. 162) and performing marginality to invert gender hierarchies. But Gilbert proposes a limited sexual range for female comics – highly sexualised femininity or androgyny. Gadsby, like many female comics, does not identify with either descriptor. In *Nanette* she reveals she is unsure how to identify herself and specifically sends up the social obsession with categorising and defining women by sexual orientation. Declaring her frustration with condemnation from all communities, including straight, lesbian, and transgender, for her supposed failure to identify herself with sufficient nuance, she posits a different solution:

I don't identify as transgender. I'm clearly gender-not-normal. I don't even think lesbian is the right gender for me. I may as well come out now. I identify as TIRED [*laughter*]. Just tired. [*applause*] There is too much hysteria around gender from you gender-normals. You're the weirdos. And hysterical. You're a bit weird. A bit uptight. Seriously, gender-normals, calm down. Get a grip. (Gadsby 2018a)

Gadsby's strategy is not to perform her gender marginality but to suggest that its performance is impossible because it will always be misread, misunderstood or co-opted for another cause. She is not interested in a persona that emphasises compartmentalised, over-simplified difference. One of her projects in *Nanette* was to focus on shared perspectives: "Did you know human men and human women have more in common than they don't? We always just focus on the difference between men and women" (Gadsby 2018a). The jettisoning of the old persona and the declaration she was retiring from stand-up provided the theatrical freedom that Gadsby needed "to say what I really thought because it meant I wasn't worrying about a career, I wasn't worrying about my persona" (Wright 2017a). Her persona had got in the way of an honest relationship with herself and her audiences.

The problem with Gilbert's stereotypical stage personas is that they are not suited to the increasing number of stand-ups who regard a high degree of autobiographical honesty and directness as crucial in the creation of their comic persona and the enactment of their personal politics. Gadsby had arrived at a point where her persona obstructed an ethical openness with her audiences and prevented her continuing comic innovation. Gadsby's objective with *Nanette* was to elevate her subject position and to find a way of communicating the traumatic narratives of her life that she had always edited out of her material. In Redgrave's terms, the mask was not just completely obscuring the face, it had also become a corrosive agent. Ten minutes into *Nanette*, Gadsby moved into attack and without warning:

I do think I need to quit comedy though. It's probably not the forum to make such an announcement – in the middle of a comedy show. I have been questioning this whole comedy thing. I don't feel very comfortable in it anymore. I have built a career out of self-deprecating humour and I don't want to do that anymore. Do you understand what self-deprecation means for someone who already exists on the margins? It's not humility, it's humiliation. I put myself down in order to speak, in order to seek permission to speak and I simply will not do that to myself anymore or anyone who identifies with me. And if that means my comedy career is over then so be it. [*catcalls, applause, whistles*] (Gadsby 2018a)

The catcalls, applause, and whistles that greet this declaration are recorded in the Netflix performance but are made by an audience who are, by this time, well versed in the background to *Nanette* and are aware that they are participating in a celebrated phenomenon and witnessing the performative trope of an ending that in fact went on to become the launch of a new persona and a ground-breaking show. With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to overlook that *Nanette* was not received as a rhetorical gesture when it launched in Australia. In the early stages of the run, audiences at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival emerged shocked and stunned by Gadsby's traumatic personal revelations, and many felt personally castigated by her rebuttal of stand-up and her expression of disappointment in its audiences' low ethical standards and unreflective pleasure. In the early Melbourne runs, Gadsby was running the risk of her professional career; audiences in those runs, before the show became a global hit, did not cheer or catcall or whistle. They sat in tormented silence, wondering when the real show would start and Gadsby would retract her announcement that it was all over. They were already in mourning for Gadsby's passing from the stage – and I was one of them. We did not question that

Gadsby meant what she said. She had taken too great a professional risk not to be serious and in the first few weeks jokes were largely denied. “It’s my responsibility to make you laugh”, Gadsby stated, “but I’m not in the mood.” This is a line that receives a tremendous laugh by the time of the Netflix filming of the show but which was delivered as an admonishment in early iterations. In the weeks following the premiere, fans communicated with Gadsby in person and on social media, imploring her to recalibrate her material and be kinder. They had known nothing of her experiences of hate crime, violent assault and rape, nor of her rage about the masochistic limitations of the stand-up form, and felt that she was being overly harsh on them and blaming them for their ignorance. Gadsby listened carefully and fine-tuned *Nanette* into a masterclass of stand-up brilliance, explaining to audiences at every turn what dramaturgical strategy and comic trickery she was employing to control their emotions and shock them into reflecting on their expectations and assumptions.

### REINVENTION AND THE META-PERSONA

In the prolonged run of *Nanette*, Gadsby became celebrated for shuffling off her behemoth persona by explicating the horrors it concealed, while at the same time exposing her fans’ complicity in the forging of it. Gadsby follows through on a pact she has made with herself to exterminate the self-abasing persona that not only deepened her psychological damage but was also abusive to her fans. Self-deprecation as a strategy, argues Gadsby in *Nanette*, is a form of self-harm and a self-denial of the right to freedom of expression. The persona that emerges in its place during the course of the show is one that allows Gadsby liberty to vent her personal outrage at the perpetrators of violence towards her, to express the sadness that she did not report the crimes, and to admit the profound trauma that those events have caused her. But an equally powerful feature of this new persona is Gadsby’s insistence on her authoritative standing as a professional technician of comedy and her superior excellence as a comic virtuoso. The wounded, traumatised, and angry voice she finds in *Nanette* is never emotionally overcome although the rawness of the hurt is both audible and visible in her delivery. Crucially, the turbulent emotion of the voice is always contained by reminders that she is an expert at the business of comedy, that she is in charge of the dynamics in the room, and can dictate and fine-tune the intensification, maintenance, and release of emotional tension in her audiences. Her greater emotional openness about her past and present is matched with a self-reflexive meta-persona that narrates and analyses the strategic operations of her act and insists on the consummate professionalism of her control of comic craft. Stand-up is far from innocuous entertainment, Gadsby argues, but at the same time spectators should not be under the illusion that they leave *Nanette* having been morally improved. Gadsby emphasises that she has a political agenda and that this does not make her a better person:

Laughter’s the best medicine, they say. I don’t. I reckon penicillin might give it the nudge [laughter]. There is truth to it. Laughter is good for the human. When you laugh you release tension. When you hold tension in your human body it’s not healthy psychologically or physically. It’s even better to laugh with other people – more than when you laugh alone – mainly because when you laugh alone that’s mental illness and that’s a different kind of tension. And that kind of laughter doesn’t help. Trust me. Tension isolates and laughter connects us. Good result! I’m basically Mother Teresa. But just like Mother Teresa my methods are not exactly charitable [uneasy laughter]. (Gadsby 2018a)

Gadsby’s personal openness and her new comic meta-persona in *Nanette* were directly aimed at reworking her relationship to her audiences. She is not interested in the feelgood heroics attached to much stand-up. As she states in *Nanette*: “I’m sorry to inform you but nobody here is leaving this room a better person” (Gadsby 2018a). It was a tactic that Gadsby knew might

prove too much for her fan base but was pursued because she decided to place her own wellbeing and a personal code of ethics above the conventions of stand-up. In her TED talk Gadsby reveals the nature of her calculated risk:

I fully expected that by breaking the contract of comedy and telling my story in all its truth and pain that that would push me further into the margins of both life and art. I was willing to pay that price in order to tell my truth. But that is not what happened, the world did not push me away, it pulled me in deeper. Through an act of disconnection, I found connection. (Gadsby 2019)

Gadsby's insistence on exposing the limitations of stand-up as a form and her adoption of the persona of expert comic interrogator inverted her performer status from low to high. Her analysis of the comedian's obligation to yield to the dramaturgy of the punchline at the expense of real events and at potentially great personal cost laid bare a taboo at the heart of stand-up – that, in some instances, the performance of marginality is a kind of self-harm and that both performers and audiences can and should do better in terms of their respect for one another. It is possible, Gadsby showed, to deny laughter for significant sections of a show and to resist Tig Notaro's conviction that the comic must, above all else, keep the mood light. It is possible to ignite a persona that a performer has co-created with their fan base and ask those same fans to watch it burn. And it is possible to insist that the audience stare into 'the dark hole' of the performer's trauma and acknowledge it appropriately – that is, without laughter. The problem with the joke structure, Gadsby asserts in *Nanette*, is that it is composed of a set-up and a punchline: "It is essentially a question with a surprise answer. In this context the joke is a question that I have artificially inseminated" (Gadsby 2018a). The impelling force of the punchline, according to Gadsby, requires the real story to be altered, truncated, or simply distorted, and stand-up dramaturgy at best suppresses but more generally completely erases pain and trauma. The now famous example that Gadsby gives is of her teenage encounter with a man at a bus stop who berated her for ogling his girlfriend, became verbally violent, and accused her of being "a fucking faggot". Gadsby has narrated this story in previous shows and ended with the heroic choice to walk away: "I do understand that I have a responsibility to lead people out of ignorance at every opportunity but I left him there people [applause] Safety first! [laughter]" (Gadsby 2018a). Towards the end of *Nanette* she returns to this narrative and reveals that the actual events of the story do not make for effective comedy. Having realised that she is in fact a "lady faggot", the man came back to the bus stop to "beat the shit out of me and nobody stopped him". Gadsby reflects on the fact that she neither reported the crime nor took herself to accident and emergency.

You know why I didn't? Because I thought it was all I was worth. And that is what happens when you soak a child in shame and give permission to another to hate. And that was not homophobia pure and simple. It was gendered. If I'd been feminine that would not have happened. I am incorrectly female. Incorrect. And that is a punishable offence. And this tension – it's yours. I'm not helping you anymore. You need to learn what this feels like because this tension is what not-normals carry inside of them ALL OF THE TIME. Because it is dangerous to be different. (Gadsby 2018a)

In order to be able to tell her story "properly", Gadsby argues, she has to privilege content and truth over punchline dramaturgy which sacrifices both to the generation of laughter. Stand-up form and comedy structures more generally circumnavigate realist endings and consequently prescribe certain kinds of stage personas. Stand-up mitigates against the telling of real stories because real endings, more often than not, do not align with what I shall call the laughter principle. With the reinvention of her persona in *Nanette*, Gadsby assumes high status. She rules

by dividing her audience into normals and not-normals, assuming that most will be in the underdog category of 'normal' and that the not-normals will, in any case, appreciate her standpoint. The reversal of perspectives is carnivalesque and her adoption of the dominant position made both through an angry confessional mode and through appeals to rationality and good sense. She does not make apologies for her difference. Throughout Gadsby speaks to explicate her experiences as someone living daily with negative reactions to her difference. She has particular opprobrium for straight white males and what she sees as their pathological behavioural patterns and obsession with domination but she is mainly on a mission to create emotional discomfort in all audience members who do not empathise with her marginal position or those who want to co-opt her for their own causes. She does pre-empt the morally bankrupt attack that she has endured for the entirety of her comic career:

All my life I've been told I'm a man-hater. I don't hate men. I don't even believe that women are better than men. I believe that women are just as corruptible by power as men – because you know what, men? You don't have a monopoly on the human condition, you arrogant fucks! But the story is as you have told it, that power belongs to you and if you can't handle criticism, take a joke or deal with your own tension without violence you have to ask if you're up to the job of being in charge. (Gadsby 2018a)

While Gadsby is on stage the so-called normals are very clearly not in charge, indeed they are placed firmly at the bottom of the food chain in real-life and in comic performance where, by implication, they belong. The criticism of not being able to 'take a joke' picks up on the verbal assaults Gadsby has long suffered both personally and professionally and which she presents as a form of gender violence perpetrated by many in the entertainment industry and argues is manifest in regular consumers of stand-up. It is not new to equate joke-telling with aggression and assault and the in-vocabulary of stand-up has its homicidal edge in regard to audiences with the successful domination of spectators referred to as 'killing it'. Gadsby's reinvented persona in *Nanette* emphasises her lethal technical prowess as contract comedy killer but she also highlights why it was necessary for her to develop the postmodern comic analyst and meta-persona. She has come to the end of the experiments that innovate and interest her and stand-up personas are targeted too much on others' pleasure and too little on emotionally challenging material. The energy is all directed in giving relief and catharsis to others and none to the performer, argues Gadsby. The comfort zone of self-denigration, traditionally the expected locus for women comics, had become a torture zone for Gadsby. She offered herself as the butt and buffoon of her own routines and the psycho-dynamics of her persona mirrored Gadsby's constant experience of real-life diminution. Her old persona simply facilitated a socially normative reflex to treat her as the monstrous oddity and it inclined Gadsby to think less and less well of her audiences.

I make you laugh and you release tension and you think "thanks for that!". But I *made* you tense – this is an abusive relationship [*laughter*]. Do you know why I'm such a funny fucker? It's because I've been learning the art of tension defusion since I was a child. Back then it wasn't a job or a hobby, it was a survival tactic. I didn't have to invent the tension. I was the tension. I'm tired of tension. Tension is making me sick. [*Mood change in audience and apprehensive silence*]. (Gadsby 2018a)

Such moments allow Gadsby to use the audience silence to make further points about why it is crucial that she jettisons her old persona and why it is imperative that she no longer conceals dark secrets about herself if she is to have credibility as a stand-up. At the same time, Gadsby's relentless narration about the perversity of the stand-up form permits her to lay much of the

blame on the conventional performer-audience contract in stand-up which, she argues, militates against the narration of a series of events as they actually occurred.

## PERSONA, TRAUMA, AND CREATIVE DESTRUCTION

The main butt of Gadsby's humour is stand-up itself and this is the genius of *Nanette*. One way of viewing the show is as a performance of dramatised wrestling with a form that has suppressed and strangled the performer who beats it into submission. If, as Tig Notaro has written, "we've finally come to a time when the dark, tragic truth is not something women are expected to keep to themselves anymore" (Notaro 2018, p. 13), then Hannah Gadsby and *Nanette* have epitomised that time. In her TED talk Gadsby speaks of the popular belief that "the way out of trauma is through a cohesive narrative" and of her realisation that

I'd been telling my stories for laughs. I'd been trimming away the darkness, holding away the pain and holding on to my trauma for the comfort of the audience. I was connecting other people through laughs yet I remained profoundly disconnected. I had an idea to tell my truth – all of it. Not to share laughs but the literal, visceral pain of my trauma. (Gadsby 2019)

Gadsby has spoken of *Nanette* as a project through which she intended to "break comedy" in order to be able to "rebuild it and reform it so that it could better hold everything I needed it to share" (Gadsby 2018b). Her metaphor of the holding space directly references the safe space that therapists aim to create. But her meta-persona is also the wrecker and the wrecker of chaos and has a relation to the Shakespearean clown and the court jester. Gadsby's is a creative destruction that has staged a kind of comic suicide but risen again with a different mask and the purpose of self-healing. Her persona insists on an individual's right to speak and be heard, on individual worth and dignity, on courage, resilience, and a refusal to succumb to the conventions of form. Her persona is more than a survivor; it is also a formidable warrior of the everyday and indistinguishable from Gadsby's offstage presentation of herself. She understands her reinvented persona as humanising and validating the not-normals:

I am not a victim. I tell you this because my story has value. My story has value. I need you to know what I know – that to be rendered powerless does not destroy your humanity. Your resilience is your humanity. The only people who lost their humanity are those who believe they have the right to render another human being powerless. ... I did not want to make them [*the audience*] laugh. I wanted to take their breath away, to shock them so they could listen to my story and hold my pain as individuals and not as a mindless laughing mob. I took everything I knew about comedy – all the tricks, the tools, the know-how and with it I *broke* comedy. (Gadsby 2018b)

In her latest show, *Douglas*, which premiered in 2019, Gadsby builds on the reinvention of her persona and refuses a trauma narrative – "I'm fresh out of trauma. There is life after trauma and there is joy."<sup>ii</sup> Once again, she constructs a meta-persona, interrogating the form and content of comedy, questioning its relation to trauma and audiences' predilection for consuming trauma and forecasting exactly when her audience will laugh and why her jokes will trigger laughter despite the audience's best instincts. Hannah Gadsby's work as a performer demonstrates, quite uniquely, the way that persona can be used not just as a complex device for interrogating the relationship between onstage and offstage roles and identities but also the way it can be reinvented and deployed to protect the comedian's mental health, to innovate form in order to challenge stigma, and to change the paradigm of audience expectations.

## END NOTES

<sup>i</sup> All citations of *Nanette* are the author's transcriptions from Netflix.

<sup>ii</sup> The author's transcript from Hannah Gadsby, *Douglas*, New Theatre, Oxford, 24 October 2019.

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