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ECHOS OF VAUDEVILLE: HOW MODERN MUSICAL COMEDIANS
CHALLENGE THE PATRIARCHAL PARADIGM

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ABSTRACT

This work explores how artists like Diana Oh, Grace McClean, Abby Feldman, and Catherine Cohen are pushing the boundaries of musical comedy, creating performances that are personal, interactive, and deeply connected to their audiences. These performers draw on techniques from vaudeville and stand-up comedy but subvert traditional forms to create inclusive and empowering spaces. Through their work, they are not only reshaping the landscape of musical comedy but also sparking conversations about social justice and the power of performance art.

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ECHOS OF VAUDEVILLE: HOW MODERN MUSICAL COMEDIANS CHALLENGE THE PATRIARCHAL PARADIGM

From the showgirl to vaudeville, from the variety show to cabaret, musical comedy has worked as an entertaining crowd pleaser in the landscape of American theater. The blend of music and comedy yields various showcase styles—but how do performance artists utilize these elements today?

When one thinks of musical comedy, the most common thing to come to mind is Broadway. Large scale theaters, rows of dancers, and stories that stand the test of time. If we shifted to a smaller scale, one might think of Broadway's predecessors, vaudeville, cabaret, and the variety show. Vaudeville in particular subverted musical comedy in a feminine perspective, allowing female performers to break the mold of showgirl and experiment with savagery and mischief. Has this legacy of subversion continued for solo female performers? To answer one might look at female performers in stand-up comedy. Contemporary comedians like Hannah Gadsby and Tig Notaro are of a generation of new comedy—one that includes feminine and queer voices. However these artists and others have still failed to break stand-up tradition which lies deeply in the masculine, and even deeper in self-deprecation. So what performance art exists in the margins of musical comedy? And what can it do?

I would argue that artists who draw on techniques of stand-up, vaudeville, and musical theater—but push against these forms boundaries—create performance art that is reflective of diverse identities and experiences, is connected with the audience in a participatory way, and champions stories in relation to queer and gender marginalization. Artists like Diana Oh, Grace McLean, Abby Feldman, and Catherine Cohen employ comedy and music not only for

entertainment, but as tools for personal expression, social commentary, and fostering spaces of vulnerability and inclusivity.

Diana Oh, on their website is a self proclaimed, “multi-disciplinary maker, musician, actor, writer, sonic ritualistic, and open channel to the art that feels good to their body” (Oh). Oh’s work combines music and comedy along with intent to build relationships with their audience. Their work is sometimes concert, sometimes dance party, and mostly musical. Oh experiments sonically in research, rehearsal, and in performance. To build this work they use a list of their “core truths” (Oh). This list includes, “I want to create art with vulnerability. I want to see people, I want people to see me. I want to make people laugh. I want to dream big about love. About connection.”(Oh). While these are only a few in Oh’s list of core truths, they allow for a deeper understanding of how their work is designed. Oh wants to see their audience, and to be seen by them. In their work, Oh curates opportunities for audience engagement, connection, and reflection. Oh has had audience members complete coloring pages which were added to scenery onstage as well as hosted their guests with a BYOB (bring your own blanket) sleepover style viewing option. Along with tactile engagement, music and comedy also enable Oh to connect with their audience, and share vulnerability.

In addition to developing connection and community, Oh also describes their work as, “a big warm FUCK YOU to an industry that’s adopted a debilitating treatment of women” (Pabon-Colon). Oh is reminding us that this need for connection did not come out of nowhere. Alongside traditions of musical comedy stands a history of patriarchal ideals. Oh wants to create art to combat marginalization, and as a queer performance artist, intends to empower their community. Oh says, “MY CALLING IS TO QUEER THE PROCESS AND TO QUEER THE WORLD” (Oh). Oh is not only sharing themselves within their work, but demanding to be seen and

to be heard. They are exploring new modes of art-making and art-sharing as a mode of queer expression.

Oh's work is similar to other performance artists today that use music and comedy. These performers are also in relationship to historical performance and use their work to navigate current issues of gender and queer marginalization. The elements of their practices tend to include comedy that is in relationship to self, but not self depreciating, music that is written and performed by the author, and curated audience relationship. In sharing music and vulnerable comedy, these artists return to direct address throughout their performance. This technique builds the relationships between artist, audience, and performance.

In Chisoula Lionis's article, *Humor and the Commodification of Suffering*, the art of humor and it's responsibility is explored. Lionis argues that, "The emphasis on precarity and conflict in contemporary art has meant that artists from sites of crisis are frequently framed as local informants expected to perform cultural capital by narrating experiences of marginality and political conflict" (Lionis). I would argue that Oh and other musical comedians today share their work in the way that Lionis describes her "local informants" (Lionis). They are certainly finding new modes of narration through music and comedy, and are speaking of a shared marginality. However, where Lionis is arguing the artist's responsibility to share work, these artists are creating not because they feel expected to, but because they feel called to. These performers grew up in a country that pushed them to the edges, and now down the stairs to be the butt of their joke. They are demanding a new practice of performance - that doesn't stand for bigotry or hatred of the feminine.

Another performer that falls in this "local informant" category is Grace McClean, a New York based vocalist and performer. McClean spans genres, working with opera and experimental

pop. McClean's work also heavily relies on her relationship to her audience. She mixes sound live on stage while holding stand-up like conversation with her audience. She often performs at the Glade Stage on Little Island, where admission is free. The audience settles on blankets spread about the small grassy lawn. As the space fills, the audience shares a closeness of shoulder brushes as more guests squeeze onto the grass. When McClean begins she builds on this energy, inviting her audience to embrace the closeness and lean-in. One summer evening she even included us on a FaceTime call to collectively sing happy birthday to her father. The laughter, music, and small sense of community is a gift to both audience and performance. McClean's performances rely on this symbiotic audience relationship, with the performance feeding the audience and the audience feeding performance. McClean doesn't shy away from vulnerability with her audiences either. Her crowd favorite songs include her middle and high school journal entries as lyrics. This honesty resonates with her audience as they recall their own youthful crushes and awkward sex dreams. McClean's concerts are warm and inviting, and she tends to have us all singing along by the end of the night. The pandemic proved to McClean just how vital her audience is to performance. In an interview with Deb Miller, where McClean discussed her virtual concerts, McClean shares, "What's so essential and amazing about live performance is the audience—normally I'm talking to them, looking people in the eye, there's a palpable exchange of energy."(McClean). McClean is a performer who is aware of the power of relationship to audience and how to strengthen this connection. McClean's joyful energy, aided by music, comedy, and collective audience brings about this unique performance art.

Abby Feldman self describes as "a comedy pop-star"(Feldman). In an interview with Sam Rosenberg about her show *Call me by my Hebrew Name*, Feldman discusses her musical comedy and its goal of community building through Jewish humor. In this performance Feldman

experiments with pop music and rapping coupled with humor that releases tension around discussions of her Jewish Identity. Feldman also considers this show to be a spiritual endeavor, having developed from the idea of a Friday night Shabbat with friends. Feldman talks about the intentions of the piece stating, “[t]he whole concept is, like, cleanse the past week and set an intention of joy for the coming week” (Feldman). This intention stemmed from Feldman’s desire for community and Shabbat in LA having come from New York. Feldman uses tools like music and comedy to foster connection with her audience. Additionally her songs embrace personal insecurities and flaws: “Cellulite Summer” celebrates fleshy imperfections , and “Soft to Get” suggests an alternative to the popular “hard to get” mentality. These comedic songs allow not only Feldman to embrace her “flaws”, but her audience as well. At the end of her interview, Feldman reflects on her current inspirations, including Rachel Bloom and Barbara Streisand (Rosenberg). This is a reminder that her performances pull from lineages of Jewish female comedians and performers. A connection to these histories uncovers techniques that performers like Feldman can use to connect to current communities and lineages that came before. Feldman also draws a clear line between humor and self deprecation, that her jokes are not self-deprecating and are never self-hating Jewish comedy. Though not formally stated like Feldman, Oh and McClean do not include self-deprecating jokes in their performances either. This sets them apart as artists who are breaking traditional stand-up forms and using comedy in performance art as a tool for something larger than laughter. This comedy is for communities who uplift each other, and who do not allow for self-deprecation.

Comedian, actress, and singer Catherine Cohen grapples with larger issues while addressing and confessing the simple and mundane. In her musical comedy special *The Twist? ...She’s Gorgeous* Cohen invites us to join her on her therapy experience and medication

journey, and questions whether or not she should freeze her eggs. All of these small, relatable, everyday experiences guide us to more complex meditations like - what is the point of being alive? Cohen says, “I like any kind of performance that feels like a little secret that you’re watching, and that’s what I’m always trying to do.”(Cohen). This revealing of innermost dialogue can be freeing for both performer and audience. This strategy, similar to Feldman, enables connection with an audience who are being let in on a secret. In cultural gender norms, these secrets are ones that the patriarchy asks us to keep. Freezing your eggs is something “not meant” to be discussed - to do so onstage is a clear push against patriarchal boundaries and a clear calling in to the many women that have similar experiences. While this special is now widely available to be viewed through a screen, the intention still reaches its intended audience and invites them to continue the conversation.

What is so important and valuable about these makers is their awareness of the history of joining music and comedy. Not just to uplift and unite, but to share themselves with pride in order to engage their audience as a community. This is connected to what vaudeville did for women of the American stage in the 1920’s. Women who, “used the stage to exploit and experiment with changing notions of manliness and femininity, savagery and civilization.”(Casy, 88). Women of that time used vaudeville to demonstrate ways that women could be nasty, funny, cruel. This work paved the way for new performers who were able to abandon ways in which female performers were expected to behave. Similarly, this group of artists are daring to experiment, especially musically, with ideas that might not look or sound perfect, but that allow for expression of vulnerability. The women of vaudeville were pushing against the upheld American chorus girl who was sensationalized and parodied rather than respected - although she was held to high standards of typical feminine poise and meek nature. “American vaudeville

offered a space in which normative heterofemininity was both upheld and subverted.”(White 1). Performers at this time moved in and out of the ideal female performer. Vaudeville offered a new type of performance that was by women, for women, much like these performance artists today. Performers like Oh, McLean, Feldman, and Cohen invite all forms of the feminine and queer to be in community— to laugh, to cry, to cuddle up on the floor in blankets together.

The way that these artists work at the margins of comedy, music, and performance art calls their audience in. There is a self awareness which allows women, femmes, and queer people to understand patriarchy in a way that a cis-het man might not fully grasp. That self-awareness allows for these ways of making and playing with elements of well-known genres. These artists are making space at the edges of traditional performance art genres and may be cultivating an all-together new genre of performance.

The history of American theater has long been enriched by traditional musical comedy forms, from cabaret and vaudeville to Broadway. While musical comedy has grown and evolved over time it has left the feminine and queer perspective to the sidelines. Today, contemporary performance artists are utilizing music and comedy to push through these boundaries, creating altogether new forms of expression that resonate with their marginalized audiences. The artists in this research have played a significant role in reshaping the possibilities of musical comedy. Drawing on the forms of vaudeville, stand-up comedy, and traditional musical theater these artists are fostering inclusivity, and relating to their communities. These artists utilize the history of vaudeville performers, who in a similar way, experimented with defying patriarchal norms. Oh, McClean, Feldman and Cohen are creating performances that are personal, and at times interactive. By appealing to their audiences with personal stories, these performers are building connections that go beyond the limitations of the stage. Using techniques that engage their

audience, along with experimenting with musical comedy's traditional forms, these artists are able to invite their viewers to join them in a performance that builds relationships. In their work, these artists are not only redefining how the forms of musical comedy can be used, but they are also challenging the typical conventions of theatrical performance. This subverting of traditional forms is in some ways creating a new genre that is empowering, inclusive, and reflective of the experiences of the queer and femme community. As these artists continue to break the boundaries in traditional musical comedy today, they are also shaping a future that expands the margins of this form into a genre that is reflective of diverse perspectives.

This genre that continues to expand, not only captures the essence of personal identity but also serves as a compelling argument for issues of social justice. It is in these performance spaces that the true potential of music comedy is realized— it becomes a dynamic tool for expressing the experience of marginalized communities. While the work of these artists is an exploration of historical practices, the performances also reimagine ways to prioritize visibility and the suppressed perspectives within patriarchy. In doing so, these artists are contributing to the landscape of performance art, and inspiring continued experimentation with historical musical comedy. Through this innovative blending and blurring of genres, these artists offer a vision of what the future of musical comedy might hold.

AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANA OH

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

K: I'm researching a lot of artists who are trying to curate and build relationships with their audience. I know a lot of your work is concerts, dance parties. It seems like you let the lines between audience and performance blur a lot and that audience is important to you. How do you curate your relationship to an audience when you're building a piece?

Diana Oh: How do I curate the audience? When I'm building a piece? Wow. I didn't even realize it was that calculated of a thing. It is that genuine I suppose, the invitation. I think it comes down to *what is the art for, for me personally*, right? And as these femme queer weird, freaky slutty bodies, right? What is going to make me feel open-throated and big and loud and safe? I'm probably not going to want a bunch of frat bros salaciously being like, you know, *bleeeughhh*. I'm gonna want Kindred there; I'm gonna want softness. I'm gonna want other people who want to feel seen, who crave a certain level of eye contact, who will want my dating profile. Here's what I'm looking for: if you're down, come on, you know? If you're not, probably you don't want to.

K: Can I ask you what that invitation looks like? Is that setup at the top of the piece? Is that in how you advertise the piece?

Diana Oh: I think it begins with the description of the piece. There's a lot of intention that goes into how to describe it on the page, on the website, the language of it. I do belabor over, *What is the fun way? What is the exciting way?* I do meditation and centering and listening to intuition and soul and heart and source and body. And what is the thing that opens me up to—oh my god, that's something that lights me up—the sparkly, fun, glitter, heart centered practice. The

heart-centered practice of language making, invitation making and that is for artists. The invitation making is the program. If you so choose to make a program. And for me, when I did *H8 Letter* [*My H8 Letter to the Gr8 American Theatre*] at Smith, I wanted to make a coloring book for the program. At Ancram Opera House, it was a party invitation with a sleepover. And then the producers were amazing. And they [were] like, *So we'll send the yellow school bus from the city*. And I was like, *Oh, y'all are down*.

K: Where does your relationship with music and comedy function in your work?

Diana Oh: I think by accident. I'm a big fan of just doing things by accident. That's also my own defense mechanism, right? I don't want to go so hard to be like, I'm a comedian. I'm gonna pursue this and go on tour—I don't think I have it in me to pursue it like that. By sitting here, like, is it?

K: I think it's already living in your work, I'm just wondering if you've noticed the function of comedy in your work?

Diana Oh: I would never describe it as, “I do comedic work”. I mean, it's important to be off the cuff. It's important to say what you want. It's important for me to be off-script. It's important that I give myself the freedom to be present with what's in the room. Be present with what's in the room and be an open nerve. I get off on that. That makes me happy. And so things are scripted, in a way that works for me. I love going by a set list of songs. So I know what the spine is because I know what the spells are. I know what spells to cast in ritual form. I feel very confident in holding that kind of space. And I guess humor. I mean, *well what makes friendship work? It's always humor, right?* It's because we know how to make our friends laugh, and make them feel good. I love it.

K: As queer artist, beyond the content, where do you locate queerness in your work?

Diana Oh: *In my vag?* Definitely it starts there. Then my voice when laying music, there's something that feels genderless about my music, once there's a full band there with the range, I do have a three and a half octave range. And also, because I am Korean American, there's something spiritual that happens too, it feels genderless. I go to a different place when the full effect of a full band is there, a certain kind of channeling just happens. That feels very queer to me, queer feels limitless right? Queer feels like a large appetite. Yes, there's a large appetite for life, expression, and innovation.

K: Another thing that I'm looking at with this project is artists who are sort of borrowing from or are leaning into a historical knowledge of performance and types of performance. Artists who are borrowing from vaudeville techniques, or variety show techniques, things of the past that are now coming into the future. Do you feel that that is in your work at all? Do you borrow from historical context in performance?

Diana Oh: I don't realize that I am. When you say vaudeville I definitely am like *what's that?* Because I don't nerd out on it. I'm definitely a big believer in, especially as a queer person, our nightlife, our social life, our fashion, the glitter—it's all there. And definitely as a Korean American born of immigrants, queer, femme, fluid, power switch, kinky friend advisor—like that is all in there.

K: It sounds like what you're talking about is that the generational history of the theatrical practices is imbued in your work?

Diana Oh: Yeah, the social Beingness. And the historical beingness, the ethereal beingness, the spiritual beingness, the ancestral beingness. It's all there, it's not really a textbook study. For me, the practice, It's very impulse driven. If I'm going out for a night, and I'm seeing the way that a

party will unfold, I'm looking at the nuances and how they chose to begin a party, from the way that it opened into what they chose to be the climatic zone and how they chose to end it out. I'm observing that and drinking that. And then studying that, to me that is my research.

K: I have one more question. You had at one point on your website a list of your core truths. And I'm wondering if you can use a piece as an example, something you've made already and how the core truths showed up as you were building your work. Before you perform, where do they live in the trajectory of creating your work?

Diana Oh: Well, I guess every piece begins with a core truth, for me. A core truth for me is something I'm going to prioritize, in my work and in my space. And therefore a lot of my work is going to come from very personal writings like journal entries, lived experience, something I am thinking about and going through. There's a certain piece in particular that I'm working on this year, which is my love letter to introverts. It's called a rare bird and it's my love letter to introverts and also it is about my discovery and my coming out of being a tantric person.

K: Thank you for meeting with me. This is really wonderful.

Diana Oh: Thank you, and send me the recording so I can keep it in my mirror box.

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