Article: *Comedy Studies*

'Women Like Us?'

Dr Gilli Bush-Bailey
Reader in Women's Theatre History
Department of Drama & Theatre
Royal Holloway, University of London

Abstract:

This article works to excavate the historical depth of representations of working women in comedy, arguing that the construction of women in comedy has deep historical roots which are reflected in cultural understandings and expectations of women in popular performance today. Catherine Tate's outraged (and outrageous) 'Nan' (2004), Mabel Constanduros' 'Emily', a forerunner to her long-running and forthright radio character 'Grandma Buggins' (1925-48) and Fanny Kelly's lovelorn, and lachrymose household servant, 'Sally Simkin' (1832), are just three examples among the numerous characters created by female comedy writers and performers over nearly two hundred years. Delighting their audiences with a potent mix of sentimentality undercut by their deliciously shocking observations about life, these characters work to demonstrate a deeply embedded set of constructs that make up the stereotypical representation of the metropolitan working woman. Deploying a deliberately eclectic mix of approaches from the cultural turn in performance theory and feminist revision I use the methodologies of theatre historiography to make connections between the latest women on the comedy sketch scene and their predecessors, arguing for renewed understandings in our critical appreciation of writing and performing 'funny' women.

The shock of the (not so) new

On Monday 20th February, 2012, the BBC broadcast the first of a new six part series by female comedy duo, *Watson and Oliver*. Lorna Watson and Ingrid Oliver have been regulars on the Edinburgh fringe and comedy circuits but are newcomers to BBC television and early reviews are generally sceptical about press claims that they are poised to take up the baton from British television favourites *French and Saunders* or from the more recent and current small-screen favourite Miranda Hart. *The Guardian* review for 29th February, 2012, 'Watson & Oliver: let's give them a chance' shrugs off the *French and Saunders* comparison, acknowledging instead the new comic duos' debt to the enduring popularity of male comic duo, *Morecombe and Wise*, but there are also traces in this latest sketch work of Victoria

Wood, a comic 'national treasure' who is, it seems, already erased from the list of recent comic comparisons by television reviewers. By the time this article goes to press Watson and Oliver's first televised series will be over. Perhaps they will already have sunk without trace - or will their 'really nice' school girls be as familiar to us as Catherine Tate's 'Lauren', or their hapless museum volunteer 'Susan' garner as many YouTube hits as Julie Walter's 'Mrs Overall' or Tate's 'Nan'? Tom Sutcliffe for *The Independent* (Tuesday, 6th March, 2012) complains that while watching *Watson and Oliver* 'I just find myself thinking how old-fashioned the format is' but it is precisely because they have unashamedly mined such a deep seam of comic sketch work that Lorna Watson and Ingrid Oliver might well gain a place alongside the many remembered (and forgotten) women whose comic work has established women as creators and critics of female representations in British culture. It is by asserting first that there is a real and valuable repertoire of women's comic work, in creation, performance and reception that I want to move to a specific exploration of the depiction of three metropolitan women – 'types' created in characters that were performed at quite different historical moments and yet who all share characteristics that we recognise today. This is not merely to prove the deep historical roots of women in comedy, although the inequality of representation in the histories of comedy and in the current stand-up scene still needs to be recognised, but, more importantly, to look at how women's comedy work has contributed to the construction, disruption and containment of women in and through the laughter of women like us.

I deliberately invoke the contentious and somewhat slippery notion of 'us' in the title of this paper to draw attention to its binary opposite, the implied 'them'. Women as subjects of comedy, makers of comedy and comedy audiences are agent in contemporary female representation that informs constructs of 'our' female identity, whether to reinforce or disturb the hegemonic 'we' that we all recognise, even if and when we work to oppose it. As Andy Medhurst argues so convincingly when discussing his own subject position in *A National Joke: Popular comedy and English Cultural Identities* (Routledge, 2007):

> far too much writing about comedy sets itself the stern, intrusive, pseudo-objective task of studying what Other People laugh at and why Other People laugh. This has the damaging consequence of letting the critic's own sense of humour off the hook, and that lack of self-reflexivity both prevents a full exploration of comedy's political complexities and contradictions and risks turning the analysis of funny things into a sermon about what it is correct and incorrect to find funny. (Medhurst, 8)

This article then seeks to avoid the distantiating 'them' implied in a critical approach to other people's work in the past or present, but instead to stand close to work made by and about 'us'. As a female academic and theatre historian my comic taste is revealed through the criticism of sketches I have selected for consideration. As a female member of an audience I have experienced the affective phenomenon that is the shared laughter of recognition, generated on at least two occasions within a wholly female audience and, as a performer (although not of stand-up), I have also experienced the visceral pleasure and sheer energy created by generating that laughter – no wonder televised comedy continues the tradition of performing for live audiences. So what is it that we see of ourselves, for ourselves and about each other in the characters I have chosen to discuss? And what might we make of the contradictions and complexities of the politics we find at work there?

The shock of the old

> There is such a premium on claiming originality, innovation and marked changes that theatre historians are ill-disposed to acknowledge derivation, consistency, or comparability. Exactly those qualities are often negatively inflected. Consequently, originality is privileged over borrowing, and uniqueness over likeness (Davis, 2012, 13).

Tracy Davis' introduction to an anthology of nineteenth-century plays usefully opens up the seams of women's comic work that I want to explore. Rather than claim originality for the comic sketches that I consider, I want to establish and argue for their recognition in the cultural economy of comedy through their comparability. Davis' argument for the importance of understanding the repertoire, that is 'the day-to-day competencies of performers and audiences to make and understand theatre, drawing upon their familiarity with aesthetic conventions, contemporary politics, and cultural preoccupations' (ibid) can be extended and applied to the making and understanding of comic sketches. I will be interested to see if the satirical bite of Watson and Oliver's playboy bunnies 'Candy and April' can be sustained beyond the girls 'gagging' as they bicker about whose turn it is to service the ancient Hugh Hefner, depicted through an off stage voice and a portrait of a repellently 'gurning' old man, but I am more intrigued to see how they develop further the many kinds of working women they represent in their thirty minute sketch shows. Alongside the office receptionists with absurdly long designer nails and the competitive secretaries fighting it out over paperclips,

Watson and Oliver also mine the comedy to be found in the past. Set in the care-free days of the post-war seaside resort, a vintage film clip of 1950s buses and families playing on the beach dissolves to reveal the embittered and morally suspicious landlady of the sea-front boarding house. With hair rollers visible beneath her tight headscarf and her floral housecoat covered by a cable knit cardigan, the landlady is first discovered in the ubiquitous green-painted kitchen belonging to her friend, Ruby, who is similarly dressed and sits at her kitchen table with tea towels draped over the typically 1950's airing rack in the background. While the landlady spills her tale of a deserting husband, in between puffs on a cigarette, Ruby reacts by drawing ever more absurd responses on her forehead with the eyebrow pencil. The very physical, almost slapstick comedy of this first sketch gives way to a more conventional monologue in the second episode. Cigarette still in hand, the landlady delivers a tirade of moral rectitude to an unseen honeymooning couple, insisting on documentary evidence of their marriage – and a letter of confirmation from their MP – asserting that there will no 'unlawful conjugals' in her house.

These sketches owe much to the comic patterns of dialogue established by Victoria Wood, but shift their focus to women in the south of England rather than Wood's more usual geographical ground of the midlands and the north. The 1950s setting also follows in the wake of the current trend for romanticised recreations of post-war England in televised drama. Miranda Hart, for example, is called upon to deploy the comic persona she created in her BBC situation comedy *Miranda* (BBC 2009) as part of the depiction of 1950s Poplar in London's East End in *Call the Midwife* (BBC, 2012). Here, Miranda Hart provides a post-war predecessor to the physically awkward woman in search of love she established in *Miranda*. 'Chummy', or Camilla Cholomondely-Browne, is a lovelorn 'posh' debutante who pursues an agonisingly awkward romance that eventually leads to happiness in the final episode when she marries the local bobby.

Connections between Miranda Hart and Joyce Grenfell, not least in the many characters she created in British films of the 1950s, are obvious and work to draw attention to the metatheatrical and intertheatrical references of the current repertoire which is, of course, also part of a much longer repertoire of comic representation of working women. Grenfell's on-screen trials as the gawky police-woman or hapless school mistress in the *St Trinians* film series can easily read across to the contemporary agonies experienced by Miranda Hart as she too negotiates a series of romantic and social challenges in *Miranda*. Grenfell also wrote and performed her own material in a series of character monologues and it is not surprising to

find that both Victoria Wood and Miranda Hart cite Grenfell at the top of their list of comedy heroes and influences.

A question of class

I have thus far avoided the direct use of 'class' in thinking about the comic representations of working women, but in the three sketches I now want to discuss, Catherine Tate's 'Nan' (2004), Mabel Constanduros' 'Emily' (1927) and Fanny Kelly's 'Sally Simkin' (1832) it is hard to avoid discussing the intended depiction of working-class women, even though one might choose to discard the vexed label of 'cockney' for the three characters created and performed some hundred and eighty years apart. Readers of Patrick Joyce et. al. in *Class* (Oxford University Press, 1995) will have heeded the warnings about modern understandings of class being 'mistakenly[…] imaged back upon the past, so distorting it', but Joyce also acknowledges the 'enormous influences' of the views and discourses of class, arguing that '[o]nce they are themselves revealed to be in fact part of a long history of class discourse, and not an objective report on the past, it may at last be possible to move beyond them to new understandings' (Joyce, 15-16). Andy Medhurst's exploration of comedy and comic traditions in *A National Joke* (cited above) also deals with questions of class, usefully extending them to include discourses of gender and sexuality. In his chapter on the hugely successful television series *The Royle Family*, Medhurst notes that '[c]lass is a recurring social and cultural theme throughout the history of English (and British) situation comedy' (Medhurst, 145) but he also speaks of *The Royle Family* as 'getting behind sociological generalities[….] confidently work[ing] with such levels of detail because it is committed to depth, not breadth' (Medhurst, 146-47). With twenty episodes in which to explore this depth, this (and many other situation comedies) can enjoy the luxury of specificity and nuance that such time allows – but where does this leave the sketch, or even the series of sketches? What of the 'tight social focus, what might be called a demographic of deep narrowness' (147) that Medhurst credits to *The Royle Family* but which I suggest can also be seen as powerfully at work in the sketches of Nan, Emily and Sally Simkins?

Nan, Emily and Sally Simkin

In moving on to examine the sketches I will resist the notion of a linear, teleological development in women's comic work, ascending from Sally Simkins, through Emily to Nan,

or descending in a reverse historical order, doing history backwards, but will rather present my discussion of the three sketches via the notion of a palimpsest. That is, to consider these sketches as overlaying each other with their historical difference and dissonance revealed through equally permeable layers of consistency and comparability. I hope in this way to mark their differences but also to acknowledge their relatedness, not least in the central use of the female character voicing a perspective that is focussed on female experience and is, at times, surprising in its candour. Nan's use of language, her damning condemnation of those around her might be seen as being as inappropriate as Emily's candid prognosis for the inevitable demise of the ailing young mother she seeks to cheer up by a visit to the sickbed. Such expected 'unexpectedness' in women's comedy work seeps through a palimpsestic model in ways that are richer in their testimony to consistency than a conventionally linear progression suggests. The accusation of repetition or fixedness that has often been attached to women's work might then be replaced by a consideration through incremental strategies, 'a different composition' (Bennett, 73) as argued by Susan Bennett in her essay 'Decomposing History,' that works toward a more inclusive history of women's work. Kelly's 'Sally Simkin', speaking from the more historically distant culture of the mid-nineteenth century, has as much to say about her experience of the absence of men as Constanduros' 'Emily' and in all three sketches, comic mileage is created by men being seen as a disappointment, even when they are present. The more striking effect of palimpsestic layers is the haunting dimension of longing for 'something better' that underpins all three sketches, a 'likeness' that defies historical specificity in its ghosting presence. Before extending my discussion further, I will, for the sake of clarity, outline as briefly as possible the content and the context of the characters as they were created and performed.

Emily makes her appearance in a monologue sketch written and performed by Mabel Constanduros in 1927. Written in 'cockney' dialect and entitled 'Cheering up Maria',[1] she is identified as being 'a hearty, red-faced, cheerful creature' (638) who on entering the room of her unseen and unheard interlocutor, is unable to restrain her horror at the state of the bed-bound invalid: 'Oh, Maria, you *do* look bad, and no mistake! What *'ave* you been doin' ter get yerself down ser low? [….] I only seen one person 'oo looked as bad as you, and that was me brother's wife's aunt be marriage, and she was gorn in twenty-four howers!' (638). The almost gleeful recounting of conversations within the tight social and family network,

[1] The full text of Constanduros' 'Cheering up Maria' can be found in Maggie B. Gale and Gilli Bush-Bailey, eds., *Plays and Performance Texts by Women 1880-1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012) 638-40.

established through a series of observations about weddings being soon followed by funerals, quickly turns to further dismay as she turns her attention to Maria's baby. Admiration for Maria's 'beautiful boy' irresistibly gives way to tales of dying babies, and her incredulity at the rapid decline of her brother's child at the same age who 'simply pined away. Nothink did it no good' (638), not even the pork chop, or 'noosepaper packet o' s'rimps', although 'a drop o' beer out o' my brother's glass dinner time' did cheer the baby up, but to no avail: 'wisted right away to a shadder, it did' (639). It is with genuine surprise that she conveys the news that the doctor suggested the baby was starved: 'it wasn't even as if they'd give it nothink but milk, like some people' (639). Momentarily distracted by the tale of her sister's fatal 'hinward canker', she then returns to Maria's baby who she is now sure has ''oopin'-corf ' and announces 'eight monce is a very critercal age, so I'm told' (639), before switching to a discussion of Maria's husband who is serving overseas in China:[2]

> 'E'll be alright. Why should the Chinese bash 'im about? 'E never done them no 'arm, I lay. Never 'ad the sperit to lay a finger on you, did 'e, let alone a Chinese? Though when you come to think about it 'e's just the sort that comes to 'arm. Them good steady ones always gits taken, don't they? (639-40)

Finishing up with a tale about her ''Enry' who only joined the army for the rum ration: 'I was frightened to death 'e wouldn't enlist' (640) and evidently less than pleased that he had returned home 'as I knoo 'e would, with a wound in 'is 'and, so's 'e can't do no more work, and a appetite like a 'ostridge' (640), Maria's Job's comforter leaves with the cheery sense that she is always one to 'ave a good laugh, and see the funny side' (640).

Constanduros' sketch reveals the fear of cancer and infant mortality beneath a thin veneer of comedy on the everyday realities of feeding a family, work-shy husbands and even domestic violence. At a time when women were facing uncertain economic futures in the aftermath of the first world war, with ongoing foreign conflicts and lack of employment adding further uncertainty to the turmoil of the inter-war years, the sense that 'it's always the good ones that goes' (640), echoes the wave of female disappointment that is evident in the sketch focussing on Kelly's character 'Sally Simkins', created and performed nearly a hundred years earlier. Sally is a maid-of-all-work, a typical occupation for many women for whom economic survival depended upon a place as a domestic worker in service to a family or household. Fanny Kelly was herself among the less than usual working women of her

[2] In January 1927, troops were sent to defend British interests in Shanghai and other mainland ports at the outbreak of the civil war in China.

times as she was unmarried and, for many years, enjoyed economic independence through her work as a popular actress on the London stage.[3] She uses 'Sally' as a recurring character in her one woman show, *Dramatic Recollections*, which is effectively a series of stand-up monologues and comic sketches. Sally is presented as always hungry, always melancholy and, as the sketches reveal, always painfully conscious of the absence of her sailor beau, John Jones about whom, as Kelly confides, 'there was some sad mystery of a shark' (142).[4] In the first sketch, Kelly introduces Sally by way of a short duologue, in which she, Kelly, plays both herself, as the helpless auditor, and Sally. The scene is set on the eve of departure from London to a 'Country Engagement' (143). Sally is comforting herself with a large piece of plum pudding, 'about the size of a band box' (143) and her complaint is not about the pain of parting from loved ones, but the pain of having no one to part from:

> Lawk Miss! – I can't help hardly half crying – at going away somewhere – and bidding good bye to nobody – Ah! When I kept company, the quitting was something like – but Jones is at Sea where the sharks are and with a roving heart – Heigho – I a'n't happy. (143-4)

She goes on to complain that the unmarried Kelly cannot possibly understand as ' you don't keep company – You've no Jones away [….] Nobody but they as kept company knows what it is to part' (144). As Kelly remonstrates with her, Sally continues to be bemoan her lot still further, having only a lock of hair kept in her precious nutmeg grater to remind her of her love:

> He sent it me when he thought he was dying of a Fever and as he knows I like Dark hair, he cut it with his own hand off the Boatswain's head – whose hair was darker than his own – Lawk Miss! Its enough to perish one on this lonesome night to be going away from Nobody (144).

Kelly refers to Sally Simkin as 'my plague' and the comedy of this sketch depends as much upon her reactions to her impossible maid as on Sally's outpourings about the restrictions of her single state. Catherine Tate's 'Nan' also relies on a long-suffering auditor to take the full brunt of her invective. [5]

---

[3] For more on Kelly's life and work see Gilli Bush-Bailey, *Performing Herself: Autobiography & Fanny Kelly's Dramatic Recollections* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011). Page references to Kelly's 'Sally Simkins' refer to this publication which includes a fully annotated edition of Kelly's 1832 one woman show, *Dramatic Recollections*.

[4] It is never entirely clear if Sally fears Jones' emotional parting from her, or if indeed Jones has already been parted from himself in the jaws of the frequently mentioned shark.

[5] There are numerous online sources for material on Catherine Tate with over fifty clips on YouTube dedicated to 'Nan'. First appearing in *The Catherine Tate Show* (BBC, 2004-09) she is one of Tate's most popular

Tate's 'Nan' is an overt disruption to the notion of the sweet old 'cockney' granny. There is the comic delight of the shocking in Nan's unrestrained swearing and her politically incorrect criticism, usually involving an offensive assessment of everyone and everything around her. Tate increases the comic effect by providing a foil, a 'stooge' for Nan, in the form of her well-meaning grandson, Jamie, whose regular visits prompt the now familiar outbursts. It all starts well with Nan's catchphrases including a sense of surprised welcome at the arrival of her grandson: ''ere 'e is! You come up and see me? Come up and see me ain't ya? I noticed that!' or, 'is that you darlin'? Oh you're a good boy'. Each sketch then follows one of several routes that all end in the now expected explosion of invective as Nan moves with effortless duplicity to accept, question and, ultimately condemn whatever Jamie has attempted to bring for her: 'what a load of old *shit*!'

The inevitable failure of attempts to convey in textual terms alone how and why a sketch is funny works to demonstrate the essential and vital act of performance for which such work is intended but there is, I hope, sufficient in the extracts above to see something of the content and the value in pursuing the notion of 'consistency' and 'comparability' in the working of these women and their comic creations. The physical appearance of each character fits comfortably familiar, or typical models. Nan's wayward, thinning hair frames her fixed expressions and overworked jaw, her slippers and wrinkled stockings immediately speak of the lone older woman confined to the limits of the room in which we most usually see her. Emily's ' hearty red-face' also conveys something of the 'jolly' London type, contradicted and yet reinforced by her forecasts of doom on all about her. And Kelly introduces Sally Simkin as 'ugly to a merit – yet she hung gaudy ribbands and cluster'd cheap lace contentedly around those perverse inane plain features with as much daily care as if she was ornamenting Beauty itself' (142). We laugh at 'them' because we are 'us', not them. This is most clear to us perhaps in the case of the contemporary Nan. Complaints from only a small section of viewers to the BBC about Nan's excessive use of swearing suggest a younger demographic as the target audience for *The Catherine Tate* show. Andy Medhurst rightly interrogates the broadcaster's and critics' assumptions about audiences in the previously mentioned chapter on *The Royle Family* when he quotes *Time Out* commenting on the 'Beeb's gamble' in screening the show on BBC1: 'will the wider viewing public get the joke? (qtd. Medhurst, 157). As Medhurst translates it, the real question is 'will the thickies

---

characters, appearing in *Comic Relief* (2007) and the Christmas special *Nan's Christmas Carol* (BBC, 2009) among many other television 'guest' appearances.

get it?' (ibid). Medhurst resists the conclusion that the success of the *The Royle Family* 'is nothing more than a freak show of underclass inadequacies' (ibid.) providing a self-satisfied audience with a glimpse of the 'uneventful lives' represented on screen and wonders if 'they' can really fail to see the 'tenderness, affection and raw emotion' that runs through and across the relationships between the characters. I am aware that I am not doing full justice to Medhurst's much longer and more complex argument but I am working to capture something of the critical perspective he offers, and extending that still further beyond the construction, performance and reception of class and type. The hegemonic work of recognising the apparent futility of Jim Royle's life, lived almost entirely in his chair in front of the television, leads to laughter of relief that 'we' are not living such a life. In Bakhtinian terms, comic creations like Jim Royle might be seen as our contemporary fools for the day – or in the case of Nan for the three minute duration of each sketch – but, as we know, such carnivalesque overturning is posited on the sure return to the status quo. We are not expected to admire or emulate the unemployed Jim Royle, spending his day watching the telly – quite the reverse. The work of comedy to expose and overturn can also be seen to establish and reinforce dominant cultural values and expectations.

This is the less than comfortable position to which the palimpsestic understanding of women's comic work inevitably brings me. As much as I want to celebrate and make visible the 'likeness' and comparability of characters like Nan, Emily and Sally, I also have to admit to their being worked up on the basis of female types that we recognise – and are encouraged to reject. These are not models of female behaviour 'we' would seek to emulate. By creating women who say the 'unsayable' – even if it is 'how it is' – we both release the steam, the tension of what women see and do, and what they 'can' say and yet we also reinforce the constructs that have contained, and continue to contain us. We relish the disruption of expected behaviour and response; but does our laughter also support and even buy into the not-so-subtle controls of gender construction? Does Sally Simkin reinforce the historical powerlessness of spinsterhood and speak still to the pity we feel for today's singleton – however 'out there' she may be? Just as Emily exposes the reality of the many women working as sole breadwinners to support their families, she also reminds us of the fear of fatal illness for the single parent. Nan too reveals the horror of a lonely, limiting and bitter old age. At the other end of the all important age-scale for women, does Watson and Oliver's parody of playboy bunnies really work to expose the degradation of women in the fantasy world of Hefner's Playboy mansion or do they simultaneously valorise contemporary images of female sexuality, reinforcing the age-old subservience to body image?

The history of comedy, the comedy of forgotten histories

The history of women's comic repertoire is then not without its problems; but the problems are not about originality or uniqueness. The characters examined and their creators are not identified above because of the extraordinary triumph of their work, although they have had commercial success. Their place in my representation of the repertoire is, as noted in Tracy Davis' words above, because of the 'day-to-day competencies of performers' (Davis,13), to some extent the ordinary and everyday success of women's comic work. The likeness and comparability to which I have drawn attention could just as well be applied to a host of remembered and forgotten female comic performers from Music Hall performer Jenny Hill to early television's Beryl Reid. It is not, then, only the task of demanding attention for and recognition of the forgotten performer, but also of thinking more widely about the cultural act of forgetting that revisionist histories have sought to overturn. As Susan Bennett argues, revisionist history has less than convincing long-term benefits. If it is to be anything more than 'the act of correction, improvement and updating', it must work instead toward a new model of historical composition that accounts for and includes the 'extensive' creative work of women (Bennett, 73). The appreciation of the repertoire does not depend upon an in-depth and detailed understanding of, in this case, the comic work of every generation of women who have contributed to it, but rather upon an acknowledgement that such a repertoire exists. We must recognise that there is a very real body of work to which the newest, or latest, most outlandish or even the most conventional connects - the pleasure in likeness adding to the laughter of recognition.

I am of course not really saying anything new. No one has, I think, brought together the work of Tate, Constanduros and Kelly before, but the forgetting of likeness and comparability in the work of women in comedy extends beyond the writers and performers to the body of work written about them. The history of women in comedy has been written about in the last thirty years: it is with pleasure that I find significant sections on Joyce Grenfell and Victoria Wood in Frances Gray's *Women and Laughter* (Macmillan, 1994) both of whom are also referenced along with Mabel Constanduros and Beryl Reid in Morwena Banks and Amanda Swift's *The Jokes on Us* (Pandora, 1987). But it is with some dismay that I find no new work of academic enquiry by women on women in comedy published since the turn of the twenty-first century. Medhurst cites both these books in his bibliography but, as he makes clear, his identity as a white male academic is central to his response to the comic

material he explores. When the late Christopher Hitchens' largely derided article 'Why women aren't funny' was published in *Vanity Fair* in 2007, it generated a number of heated responses – not least from me, a white, middle-class former actress turned academic, teaching a course on women and comedy in the context of an undergraduate university degree. Web-based resources proved more accessible to my students, as they found out-of-print publications almost impossible to track down. The internet now leads one to a wide range of performances and writing workshops for women and comedy. The London-based *Funny Women* has recently announced its preparations for the tenth anniversary of the 'Funny Women Awards' (we are women – we are funny www.funnywomen.com) but I wonder if the notion of connectedness of comparability and likeness will be acknowledged or commended in the seemingly relentless drive for originality, the search for uniqueness in the selection of the winner? Will the next 'new' act rise as if entirely new made? Will Watson and Oliver be expected to change direction in the relentless pursuit of the new or, will they join me in turning to their critics to chorus with Nan: 'What a fuckin' liberty'.

Bibliography:

Banks, Morwenna and Amanda Swift, *The Jokes on Us* (London: Pandora, 1987)

Bennett, Susan, 'Decomposing History' in W.B.Worthern with Peter Holland *Theorizing Practice: Redefining Theatre History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) pp.71-87.

Bush-Bailey, Gilli, *Performing Herself: AutoBiography and Fanny Kelly's Dramatic Recollections* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011)

Davis, Tracy, C. ed., *The Broadview Anthology of Nineteenth-Century British Performance* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2012)

Gale, Maggie B. and Gilli Bush-Bailey eds., *Plays and Performance Texts by Women 1880-1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

Gray, Frances, *Women and Laughter* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994)

Medhurst, Andy, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007)

GBB revised April 30th 2012 – words 5,345 (incl. Abstract and Bibliography)