

According to Elinor Fuchs, the main characteristic of postmodern theatre and, consequently, the main reason for the decline of the dramatic text as the most important element of classical theatre is the death of character. While the traditional Hegelian view of drama depends heavily on a unified fictional subject, Fuchs argues that both modern and postmodern theatre destabilise and subvert this subject to the degree that we can no longer see it as a coherent whole. Yet, her theory, like Hans-Thies Lehmann's, has one notable methodological weakness: she almost entirely ignores comedy. Her study omits in its analysis a substantial portion of the repertoire not only of the mainstream but also of fringe and experimental theatres.

This paper attempts to rectify this omission and hopes to determine whether character also disappears from postdramatic comedy and not just from serious postdramatic theatre. The analysis focuses on three forms of postmodern comedy that deviate from the traditional narrative format and seem to support Fuchs's reading: on sketch, stand-up and improvisational comedy. Using examples from sketch comedy *Beyond the Fringe*, George Carlin's stand-up acts and The Second City improv, the main body of the argument tests the cogency of the basic tenets of Fuchs's theory. The second part of the paper offers a counterargument and a possible supplement to her hypothesis.

Keywords: postdramatic theatre, Elinor Fuchs, sketch comedy, stand-up comedy, improvisational comedy

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The Death of Character in Postdramatic Comedy

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In the summer of 2008, *The Drama Review (TDR)*, one of the most prestigious scholarly journals in its field, published a comprehensive assessment of the recent English translation of Hans-Thies Lehmann's book *Postdramatic Theatre*. The fact that it was entrusted to an academic heavyweight, Yale University professor Elinor Fuchs, who is herself quoted several times in Lehmann's book, is probably the best indication of the importance that *TDR's* editors placed on the publication. Yet, Fuchs did not approach her task with the respect one might have expected, given the reputation of Lehmann's study. Her review systematically dismantles Lehmann's argument, methodology, and style. It goes as far as to suggest that *Postdramatic Theatre* "has the peculiar fate of being both prophetic and behind the times" (Fuchs 178). She finds Lehmann both too circumspect and not decisive enough. "What is the 'postdramatic' post?" she asks and continues with another question: "Might we then expect a return to the text after all?" (Ibid. 181).

Considering the extent of Fuchs's disapproval, it is somewhat ironic that Lehmann and Fuchs actually share the same methodological starting point. They both base their analyses of contemporary theatre on rejecting the traditional Aristotelian definition, which favours text over all other elements of a performance. However, while Lehmann claims that the most important feature of postdramatic theatre is a "renunciation" of the plot (27), Fuchs, in her book *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism*, sees the disappearance of character as more significant. According to Fuchs, neither modern nor postmodern theatre depends on self-reflective subjectivity. Instead, they both actively attempt to destabilise and subvert this subject to the degree that the audience can no longer see it as a "continuous self" (Fuchs, *Death of Character* 9).

Lehmann and Fuchs have one other methodological feature in common: their theories rely almost exclusively on what could provisionally be called serious productions and ignore nearly all forms of theatre whose main objective is to make their audiences

laugh. This disregard does not necessarily mean that either Lehmann's or Fuchs's hypotheses are fundamentally flawed. However, it implies that they are incomplete and should be tested on further examples. Since productions aiming for laughter are just as present and popular today as they were in the past, any thorough examination of contemporary theatre should at least attempt to account for comedy.

Moreover, this is precisely what I have tried to determine in this paper. Using Fuchs rather than Lehmann as the foundation of my terminological and methodological framework – simply because her argument is epistemologically more decisive than his – I attempt to describe how comedy has responded to the changes in theatrical practice and dramatic writing since the decline of modernism. The main question I ask myself on the following pages is whether character also disappears from postdramatic comedy and not just from serious postdramatic theatre. I focus on three forms of postmodern comedy that deviate from the traditional narrative format and seem to support Fuchs's reading: on the sketch, stand-up and improvisational comedy. Since the postmodern theatre is characterised by "the vanishing boundaries between high and popular culture" (Fuchs, *Death of Character* 2), most of my examples come from the popular part of the spectrum rather than from what criticism usually considers high literature. The main body of the argument tests the cogency of basic tenets of Fuchs's theory using examples from sketch comedy *Beyond the Fringe*, George Carlin's stand-up acts, and The Second City improvisations. The second part of the paper, on the other hand, offers a counterargument and concludes with a possible supplement to Fuchs's hypotheses.

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The most conspicuous postdramatic mutation of comedy is probably sketch comedy. The main reason for this is that sketch comedy is no longer fixated on "individual subjectivity," which, according to Fuchs, has been the principal goal of drama since the time of German idealism (*Death of Character* 27). Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (Ibid. 27) first introduced the notion of dramatic character as "the only artistic vehicle that could give material form to absolute spiritual subjectivity" but it reached its peak in realism, where it was understood primarily in terms of its psychological depth and complexity. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, modernist playwrights such as August Strindberg and Maurice Maeterlinck started to move away from it until "in twentieth-century non-realist theater, Thought began to assume a newly dominant dramaturgical position, shadowed by the slighted Aristotelian category of Spectacle" (Ibid. 31).

A paradigmatic example of how this new genre operates is the legendary 1960 sketch comedy *Beyond the Fringe*, created jointly by the Cambridge University Footlights

Dramatic Club and The Oxford Revue. While both student groups regularly staged their productions for the general public and were satirical in their outlook from their inception, *Beyond the Fringe* nevertheless represented a qualitative leap from the usual sophomoric humour and tongue-in-cheek lampooning to the thoroughly “anti-establishment” bent and anarchic structure (Stringer 57). Alan Bennett, Peter Cook, Jonathan Miller and Dudley Moore’s loosely connected and non-linear comic sketches may have been a logical extension of their earlier student revues, but, as a whole, they far exceeded the sum of their parts and became a historical turning point in the post-war British “satire boom” (Carpenter 1).

With its radical abandonment of narrative continuity and integrated fictional identities, *Beyond the Fringe* appears to offer a new, postmodern alternative to traditional comedy. In the published version of the sketches, the speakers are referred to by their performers’ names – Peter, Jon, Alan and Dudley – rather than by the name of the character they play. This practice is used even when they temporarily adopt another identity, for instance, when Jon becomes Vicar Dick or when Peter mimics British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan (Bennett et al. 23, 53–55). If the recordings of the actual production of *Beyond the Fringe* can be trusted, this kind of approach results in the dismantling of the mere idea of a unified self. The four performers move from one stereotype to another in a seamless manner, sometimes splitting the lines belonging to a single voice and at other times switching from one persona to another in a matter of seconds.

The impression of the perfect fluidity of characterisation is further reinforced by a total lack of any character development. Because the structure of *Beyond the Fringe* is so episodic, with each sketch fully independent of the others, no single enacted figure has the chance of being fleshed out. Peter’s Mr Charles Spedding of Hoxton “*com[es] up through a trap door;*” delivers a speech in which he reminisces about the declaration of World War II, and then exits in the same way, never to be seen again, no matter how much the audience may care about what happens to him next (Bennett et al. 72–73). Conversely, another Charles, Charles P. Moody, does not even appear on the stage, though he is at least mentioned several times (Ibid. 80).

The only bond between the fragments in *Beyond the Fringe* was among the four performers themselves, but they were dressed so similarly that they occasionally appeared interchangeable. Perhaps Dudley, who also sang, was slightly distinct from the other three, yet even he did not really change through the play. All this is, of course, a significant departure from traditional comic characters, who may be flawed but are always consistent in their foibles, and who may not grow but at least fluctuate in their dramatic status.

The second type of postdramatic comic theatre that deserves closer scrutiny is stand-up comedy, with its most unique feature an innate “theatrical self-reflexivity” (Fuchs, *Death of Character* 47). Fuchs describes it as a mode of “self-observing consciousness [which] operates at the level of the characters’ canny awareness of their own role-playing” (Ibid. 47). The main example that she uses to illustrate this notion is David Cole’s 1979 “chamber epic” *The Moments of the Wandering Jew* (Fuchs, *Death of Character* 48). As is the case in so many other postmodern “mysterium[s]” (Ibid. 49), in Cole’s play, the symbolic and abstracted everyman figure only exists as an actor in his own play. This means that the protagonist of *The Moments of the Wandering Jew* is no longer only decentred but also stripped of all his psychological attributes and fully theatricalised.

In stand-up comedy, stand-up comedians can be seen as the contemporary equivalents of such medieval allegorical characters. They are a de facto postmodern Everyman or Mankind: their goal is to become so universal that every audience member will be able to relate to them. Meanwhile, the ubiquitous presence of a microphone foregrounds the theatrical nature of their act. It reminds both the comedians and the audience that what they are witnessing, despite the ostensible intimacy and authenticity of the confessional format, is ultimately still a performance and not life itself.

The suggestion that stand-up comedy is a subgenre of postdramatic theatre is further reinforced if we remember that, according to Philip Auslander, stand-up comedy “is not a narrative form; there is no ‘situation’ to surround and contain the actions of the comic” (118–19). Instead, Auslander continues, “[S]tand-up comedy is monologic – the comedian stands alone, unmediated by other characters; there is no George for every Gracie, no Ricky for every Lucy” (119). If Lehmann is correct when he observes in his analysis of common postdramatic strategies that “a monologue as a speech that has the audience as its addressee intensifies communication” (128), then stand-up comedy amplifies communication to the point where all the limits between the medium and the message have been erased. In this case, life and fiction are inseparable, which also means that the traditional category of character has become obsolete.

The most postdramatic of all stand-up comedies is probably George Carlin’s infamous routine “The Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television”. Unlike several of the other tracks on the album *Class Clown* on which this routine was first recorded, “The Seven Words” lacks a clear autobiographical dimension. While the views presented are still presumably the speaker’s, any details about his own personality or experiences are absent. In fact, the structure of Carlin’s routine is much closer to a high-school public-speaking assignment than to a typical stand-up anecdote.

Here is the beginning of Carlin's text, as delivered on 27 May 1972, in Santa Monica, California: "I love words. I thank you for hearing my words. I want to tell you something about words that I think is important. I love that I say they're my work, they're my play, they're my passion. Words are all we have, really. We have thoughts, but thoughts are fluid..." ("Seven Words"). There is obviously no attempt to be funny in the first six sentences. Instead, Carlin articulates a sensible and insightful position to which few spectators or listeners could object. The first moment of comic deflation follows the pause after the word "fluid", but the first of the seven transgressive words is not heard until almost a minute and a half into the seven-minute spiel.

The overall effect of Carlin's routine is very much in line with Fuchs's description of what happens with character in postmodern theatre: the subject retreats behind the pure objectivity of words and sacrifices its individuality through the process of deconstruction of language as the established limit of our thought (compare Fuchs, *Death of Character* 170–1). The very end of Carlin's monologue, in particular, with its analysis of "two-way" or "double-meaning words" – "You can prick your finger but don't finger your prick" ("Seven Words") – in a curious way, reminds us of the verbal gymnastics typical of French poststructuralists. In Carlin's stand-up comedy, just like in Jacques Derrida's philosophy, "metaphysical presence" is "undermin[ed] [by] theatrical presence" (Fuchs, *Death of Character* 11) until it reduces the character to a speaker in front of a brick wall.

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The last postdramatic comic genre that I will address in this paper is improvisational comedy. Here, too, Fuchs's study provides a convenient theoretical explanation of the genre's contribution to the dissolution of character. "Inspired by Artaud's rejection of the 'masterpiece' and by Grotowski's training," she writes, "many theaters came to regard the author's script as an element of political oppression in the theatrical process, demanding submission to external authority" (Fuchs, *Death of Character* 70). The alternative to such oppression was what Fuchs calls the "[e]x tempore speech" (Ibid. 70), that is, the unrehearsed lines which express the performers' subjectivity rather than the absent writer's.

Such a dialogue is particularly important in improvisational comedy proper, especially as developed by two leading Chicago companies: the Compass Players and its successor, The Second City. Under Paul Sills's guidance, both companies successfully put his mother Viola Spolin's Theatre Games theories into practice (see Spolin). The Second City style of improv, as this variation is often called, differs most prominently from its famous predecessor, *commedia dell'arte*, in that the final segment of The Second City's

typical performance abandons any script or prepared material and instead relies on its plotting and characterisation entirely on the audience's suggestions.

As their former artistic director Del Close notes, the Second City audiences often attend their productions precisely because they want to observe the results of their own interaction with the performers (see Patinkin and Klein 55). When one of The Second City's early shows "closed with an opera improvised on an audience suggestion of Grimm Brothers' fairy tale" (Ibid. 36), the spectators who gave the performers the seemingly impossible challenge experienced a two-fold pleasure: they enjoyed both the performers' quickness of mind and ingenuity and the creative potential of their own idea.

However, the unpredictability of the audiences' interventions has an unusual consequence. It causes the fundamental instability of Second City characters. Though the company normally decides in advance how each fictional figure will behave and rehearses various directions in which an actor could take the character during the actual improvisation, a live audience can derail even the best of plans. Nia Vardalos, for example, was called "thunder thighs" during the improv set in a Toronto performance (Thomas 158). Her response to a comment about the size of her legs was certainly not a part of her rehearsed character. She took the microphone, walked into the audience, made the heckler stand up, and said, "Let's take a look at your body" (Ibid. 159). Everything that she did after that moment was a departure from her original character, and no matter what she said afterwards, her lines were perceived as more assertive and edgier.

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Fuchs argues in her study that the "interest in the psychological depth and substantiality of character" declined "toward the end of the nineteenth century" and suggests that this has led to a gradual move away from "character-generated" dramaturgies (*Death of Character* 49). The result of this change is that postmodern theatre no longer focuses on questions of identity and is instead far more interested in an "exploration and playing out of difference" (Ibid. 14). My analysis so far confirms Fuchs's views: sketch comedy dismantles the notion of a unified self, stand-up blurs the border between the real and the fictional, while improv destabilises subjectivity itself. In short, everything seems to indicate that character is dying out in postdramatic comedy, too.

There is only one dissenting voice from this view: that of the comedians themselves. They still appear to approach their comedies through the lens of character. Cook's miner, for instance, appears in a single sketch in *Beyond the Fringe* (Bennett et al. 97–98) and

should, as such, be a perfect example of a dislocated postmodern figure. Yet, he ended up evolving into one of the most original and well-defined comic characters of post-war British comedy, the wonderfully dull and pompous E. L. Wisty (see Cook xiv–xv). Similarly, Carlin’s second most popular stand-up routine, “Al Sleet, Your Hippy-Dippy Weatherman,” revolves around the carefully crafted character of a well-natured but spaced-out hippie, Al Sleet. Carlin’s repertoire includes a whole range of other assumed identities and is rarely, if ever, fully depersonalised. Furthermore, the same is true of The Second City’s performance poetics. More than sixty years after the company was first established, their advertisement for the current production of *Noisy Maroon* still promises a “long-form, character-driven improv”. It even assures its spectators that “all improvisers will be one character (inspired by audience suggestion) for the duration of the show”.

No matter how hard they try to distance themselves from the past, postmodern comedians are clearly still resorting to fictional and psychologically motivated characters in their performances. Why is this the case? How is it that comedy cannot follow serious theatre and reject tradition? Does this mean comedy can never be truly postdramatic?

The first potential answer to these questions is that comedy as a genre tends to be cautious, not so much in terms of its selection of suitable targets as in its choice of dramaturgical and theatrical strategies that it employs to achieve its effect. Because comedy depends for its success on a very tangible audience response – laughter – it wants to ensure a maximum level of understanding. It is, therefore, far more reluctant to experiment with its means of expression than other forms of theatre where interpretative uncertainty and ambiguity are often seen as values. In this sense, hanging onto tradition is the lesser – and the safer – of the two evils: rather than a taste for nostalgia, it indicates a healthy degree of performative pragmatism.

But there exists one other hypothetical explanation. It is also possible to argue that the comic character has survived any attempt to abolish it because it is precisely its unstable identity, inadequate authenticity, or ambiguous individuality – that is, the main objectives of its deconstruction – which make it comic. In this view, characters are considered comic when they fail to become autonomous and unified subjects. Or, to take this statement even further, any bid to challenge character as an independent dramatic entity inevitably makes it comic. Let me demonstrate how this works in practice, using examples from the same three subgenres of comedy that I discussed earlier in this paper.

The curious choral sketch “Bread Alone” from *Beyond the Fringe* should have been a perfect case of the loss of individual identity in postmodern comedy. Though the names of two of the four bar guests in the sketch are specified – Squiffy and Buffy

(Bennett et al. 100) – these are such generic public-school nicknames that they do not really help the audience distinguish between the very similar members of the group. This impression is further confirmed by the fact that much of the scene is delivered with a variety of incomprehensible hums and ahems and other human noises rather than with words, which is exactly what Fuchs admires in Antonin Artaud’s *Theatre of Cruelty*.

Yet, instead of responding to this visceral experience of the “unlimited, stripped-bare, sacred Self” with awe (Fuchs, *Death of Character* 70), the audience reacts to the four performers’ mumbling with roars of laughter. From the spectators’ point of view, the vague identity of the guests whose only distinguishing feature is their choice of drink – Peter orders “large whiskey,” Jon “double brandy,” Dudley “glass of vino tinty,” and Alan “rosé” (Bennett et al. 99) – can be explained simply as a logical materialisation of their spiritual vacuity. Four people are on the stage, but they share one thoroughly predictable and one-sided character. And since they have been stripped of all noticeable differences, the only legitimate way to respond to their blank identities is with giggling.

In Carlin’s case, his attempt to depersonalise the speaker of “Seven Words” and make him factual rather than fictional has an unforeseen corollary. Though the main target of Carlin’s ridicule are the absent (and possibly hypocritical) censors, a speaker so preoccupied with the seven words that he cannot move on to the next topic himself ceases to appear real. In his persistent fascination with swearing, he is almost as funny as the moralistic television producers who have decided to ignore the vernacular of the world surrounding them. Carlin’s anger at society may not quite reach the point where it could be considered what traditional scholarship of comedy calls “monomania” or “obsession” (Nelson 14; Frye 168–69), but it does make him, too, worthy of the audience’s glee.

The relationship between theatrical deconstruction and the survival of comic character is probably even easier to see in *The Second City* productions, where the rehearsal process is gradual and often well recorded. We can occasionally retrace all the steps in the genesis of an iconic character there. For example, Martin Short’s nerd Ed Grimley started when he took over a role in the sketch “Sexist” in their revue entitled *The Wizard of Ossington*. Because Short could hardly be more different than John Candy, who originally performed the role of a chauvinist “moron” (McCrohan 242), he had to address the challenge with the help of an entirely different set of improvisations and rehearsal discoveries. Grimley’s idiotic grinning, for instance, was imported from an unrelated scene. “‘I was doing the piece with Robin Duke and Peter Aykroyd,’ Short recalls, ‘I remember one time I looked at Robin, and she was downstage. I kind of bared my teeth by accident. The audience laughed. My tendency

when they laugh is to freeze and figure out what I've done later. So that teeth-baring became part of the character" (Ibid. 242). In other words, an actor's mistake turned into an essential character feature.

Grimley's exaggeratedly pointy hairdo was also just an extension of the actor's own mannerism. Short originally gelled his hair to make Grimley look more fashionable. However, once one of his scene partners pointed out the ridiculousness of the shape, the hair became a reflection of the character's silly personality. The source of inspiration was neither psychological nor intended to convey the essence of a fictional figure. Instead, a character emerged out of serendipitous moments which resulted from a process privileging play and not mimesis. The dorky Ed Grimley did not evolve into a well-rounded comic figure *despite* all the attempts to make him less realistic, but *because* of them.

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Like sketch or stand-up comedy, improvisational comedy demonstrates that a postdramatic approach does very little to affect the dominant position of character in comic dramaturgy. At the same time, all three forms of postdramatic comedy repeatedly underline parallels between postmodernism as a historical period and comedy as a genre. Does this mean that, at least in theory, all postmodern characters could be seen as comic? This may sound like a sweeping and superficial generalisation but let us not forget that critics have regularly described postmodernism in terms of its "parodic relationship with modernism" (Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody* 28) and speak of "the governing role of irony in postmodernism" (Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism* 4). Metatheatre, especially, cannot avoid gravitating towards laughter, no matter how serious the subject of the plays (compare Abel 59–60).

Of course, the practice of postmodern theatre does not quite support this suggestion. First, there are many coherent characters in some of the best-known postmodern plays, which are decidedly unfunny. Second, not all parodies are comic, and at least one form of irony has been present in tragedy at least since Sophocles. And finally, the propensity for comedy in postmodern drama does not necessarily make every single character funny.

A more nuanced explanation of the curious affinity between comedy and postmodernism, which also accounts for the persistence of comic character in postdramatic theatre, might be that there is no concerted effort to abolish character in postmodernism after all. The great majority of all attempts to eliminate or replace it occurred in modernism, and postmodernism, simply highlights their failure, especially in its comedies. Because it does this through appropriation – and

subsequent subversion – of the methods for a modernist deconstruction of individual subjectivity, these methods have now often become associated with postmodernism rather than with modernism where they originated. Yet, they primarily exist in postmodern theatre as a comic device, working to make a character amusing rather than superfluous. Their primary value is in ensuring that comic characters can also exhibit ontological and not only moral vices. In this sense, postmodern comedy is clear proof that character has survived the transition to the postdramatic theatre and is there to stay. Even if character only remains present in comedies, this still means that the reports of its death have been greatly exaggerated.

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