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# Book review

## Oppliger, Patrice A. and Eric Shouse (2019). *The Dark Side of Stand-Up Comedy*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Stand-up comedy is a performance genre characterised, and perhaps slightly more than some others, by affective multifunctionality, or multi-affectivity for short. By this we may refer to its capacity to elicit and draw on a range of affective states and responses from the positively valued pleasures of mirth and uncontrollable laughter to such negatively valued ones as moral indignation, repellent disgust, and visceral abjection. Having arguably emphasised the former aspects during its relatively brief period of existence, academic research on stand-up now appears mature enough for taking a serious look at the latter as equally organic aspects of all things comical.

As Patrice A. Oppliger and Eric Shouse note in the introduction to their book *The Dark Side of Stand-Up Comedy*, not only does great comedy often come from "dark places" (or so we are led to believe), we are also more than able to laugh at our follies, miseries, and tragedies – as indeed famously prescribed by Norman Cousins in the 1960s. At the same time, any discussion regarding the interrelations of tragedy and comedy in general, not to mention the potentially therapeutic effect of stand-up comedy, is bound to invite many problems, the least of which is the looming stereotype of the tragic clown or what Sheila Lintott reformulates as "the myth of the troubled comedian" in one of the quality pieces of the collection. "Comedy has issues", as concisely summarised by Berlant & Ngai (2017).

Admirably avoiding any related pitfalls, *The Dark Side of Stand-Up Comedy* reminds us that tragedy can be equally the source, target, inspiration, and frictional underside of our laughter (even though sometimes lumped unhelpfully under the general heading of "relief" in humour studies), thus immediately complicating its scope and broadening its relevance. Comprising of altogether 16 chapters by a broad array of writers from scholars to comedians, with shorter essays and commentaries thrown in for a good measure, the anthology is organised at the start around distinct forms of "darkness" associated with the art form. In specific, darkness is divided into that related to person and that related to the persona of the comic, namely the two aspects of subjectivity emblematically held in a tensional relationship by the form (cf. Lindfors 2019). Insofar as these aspects can support, overlap, misalign, and oppose each other, the analytic framework enables one to usefully juxtapose such empirical cases as that of George Carlin, who was known as joyful and "light" in personal life but caustic in his stage act; Richard Pryor, widely appreciated and loved for extracting and diluting comedy out of personal tragedy; or Robin Williams, famous for his light humour but also (posthumously) for his depressive person that ended his life. Then again, the dialectic can invite straightforwardly causal evaluations of comedians' output based on dubious biographical inference, a risk arguably brushed by Sean Springer in interpreting Steve Martin's comic persona as an upfront toward his father, "rooted in spiteful rebellion toward his parents" (p. 83).

By my reckoning, the dialectic of person and persona works better in more processual analyses of comic development, as showcased, for instance, by Kathryn Mears, Shouse, and Oppliger in their discussion of Maria Bamford, known for her transformation from someone who made fun of mental health issues in her comedy (granted, to mitigate their psychological impact) onto a mental health advocate who aims at normalising such issues through stand-up. More generally, Bamford's example inspires the writers to argue that the tragedy in stand-up has often been the "more male and more rock'n'roll" type of broken relationships, drugs, and alcohol abuse – think Richard Pryor freebasing cocaine and setting himself on fire – rather than the type that involves "crippling mental illness, decades of social isolation, and suicidal ideation" (p. 175). While this may have often been the case and is an important insight, one could also point out that many of the former subjects may not be "rock'n'roll" for the ones who experience them first- or second-hand.

The articulation or disconnect between person and persona – as analogically iconic with that between art and the artist in the stand-up context – proves equally productive when regarding "comic licence" as another apparent source of darkness. As well known, comic licence as a transactional pact allowing conventional decorum to be temporarily bracketed also enables comedians to test, if not egregiously neglect, various social and moral boundaries, potentially resulting in socially and morally charged reception. In this regard, Oppliger and Mears tackle the recent allegations of sexual misconduct made toward Bill Cosby, Al Franken, Aziz Ansari, and Louis CK, with an eye on fans and fellow comedians' reluctance to see these comedians as sexual abusers in their private lives, as well as on how comedy itself – as a multipurpose, multi-affective mode of communication – can both mask and unmask reprehensible behaviours. Reading their astute analysis, it appears all the more pressing that such distinctions as the one we are quick to place between person and persona are not only drawn and re-drawn situationally but may initially emerge in unequal terms along broader racial and gendered lines, having an easily ignored effect on how "truthfully oneself" or "representative of a group" a given comedian is allowed to be in the first place.

In her chapter, Christelle Paré relates a Canadian case of public mockery of a disabled person by comedian Mike Ward, situated at a surprisingly prominent nexus of various moral and juridical conflicts. Providing us with an admirably rounded analysis of Ward as a provocative comedian within Quebec's French-speaking comedy industry but also one committed to persons with disabilities in his private life, Paré compares Ward's case with the infamous figure of Dieudonné, a French anti-Semitic comedian who makes no distinction between his onstage persona and offstage personality, rather pushing his hostile agenda equally on both fronts. The comparison is persuasive, and I tend to agree with Paré that if it is the job of the comedian to publicly deface our "sacred cows" and collective moral pretentiousness, to do so through caricature – even of a disabled child, as harsh as that may seem – can be especially risky but also potentially illuminating and rewarding. Amongst other gripping reads are Cait Hogan's unique discussion of "rape jokes" from the perspective of a victim-comedian, as well as comedian Louis Bishop's "Picking up the dead", although not necessarily for its analytic insights but for its abject theme as a description of his day job that economically enables his comedy – which I will merely encourage the reader to go for herself.

As encapsulated in the preface to the book, "when stand-up works well it erases all traces of effort. And when it doesn't, it is painful in a very personal way" (p. 21). This is the tragedy of stand-up comedy itself, the authors seem to imply, a genre demanding of grit if there ever was one. In this regard, *The Dark Side of Stand-Up Comedy* provides an important introduction to an obviously germane aspect of the form and is very welcome in the rapidly emerging field of (stand-up) comedy studies. The collection can be characterised as mostly representing media, communication, and cultural studies, which is to say that there is less emphasis on minute (linguistic, semiotic, aesthetic, ethnographic, etc.) analyses of stand-up performances or singular routines, and more on individual performers and exemplary cases, as well as on the social and cultural impact of stand-up more contextually. While perhaps also slightly uneven as a result, the anthology is certainly versatile in terms of style and content (e.g., I had some gripes with Steven S. Kapica's piece, which felt like a lengthy apology for a master comedian, i.e., George Carlin, who did not actually need this apology). Then again, so is the darkness that haunts stand-up.

**Antti Lindfors**
University of Helsinki, Finland
antti.lindfors@helsinki.fi

## References

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