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Bitches, politics, and power

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Mixed Bill's Comedy and Power Conference

Sheffield, UK, 9.-10. November 2018

Mixed Bill's comedy and Power Conference
Lisa Moore

Sheffield Hallam up 9-10-November 2018

Bitches, Politics, and Power.

I am focusing on Luisa Omielan's authentic comic voice in her exploration of the politics of gender, class, power and death. In this paper I draw attention to Omielan's comic expression of these major issues and themes, and I am questioning the source of her emerging sense of anger in revealing where the power really resides.

I'd like to offer a little context first in terms emphasising the journey of the female stand up thus far. When I first began my research in the area of women and comedy around 2010, I found myself asking some very searching questions about the gender gap in comedy, and particularly with relation to stand-up comedy.

In 2012 I chaired a panel at Giddy Goat comedy conference, the panel discussion title was;

Woman_in comedy, is the playing field level yet?

Discussions led to some rather depressing findings. Not least was the realisation that the playing field was actually far from level.

The panel consisted of esteemed female industry professionals, ranging from stand ups to producers' researchers, commissioners and writers -debates added hearty testimony to the fact that women were not getting anywhere near an even-handed deal in terms of representation.

Female stand-ups were, at that time, generally regarded as tokenistic additions to any line up, promoters were being called out for merely paying lip service to the idea of a woman on the bill -it wasn't uncommon to hear stories of the need to get a woman on the bill- twitter went wild when a male booker's asserted that there was no need for another woman on his line up since he' *already had one*'

Publications at the time were nowhere near as plentiful as they are now

Koehl's *We Killed: The Rise of Women in Comedy* in 2013 went some way toward attempting to redress the balance it featured scores of first-person interviews, clips from contemporary reviews, excerpts from stories from a huge list of female comics, their male contemporaries -the book illustrated a long battle fought by women to break into the comic arena-Feminist theory, in particular was useful in determining political and personal restraints for women in comedy but there was little to really underpin and grapple with what was not happening in terms of stand up in the up where women were concerned.

Much alluded to in the book was the 2007 vanity fair article. From the late Christopher Hitchens who wrote extensively about his views of why women aren't Funny". it proved a monstrously damaging article because his notions of biological determining factors made way ridiculous concepts that began to get bound up in hair brained beliefs that women might just not be funny –It might seem good place to quote his article here- but I'm not even going to - not giving any weight.

in 2014 Katy brand Offered 9 things you need to know about being a female comedian in the telegraph. -two particular points made for interesting reading for my own research/point 3 and I quote.

You will encounter sexist attitudes towards women in comedy.

This is unfortunately still true. When I first started in live comedy, my approach was to simply deny it and ignore it, and it's still a useful tactic, although obviously if everybody is denying and ignoring it in public, you do start to feel that you are going crazy because you know it's out there. In fact, not just 'out there', but right here, standing next to you, telling you to your face that women just 'naturally aren't as funny as men because of evolution', or something.

Point 7 added more weight to the argument and again I quote:

You will usually be the only woman on the bill

There will be more women on the bill at your first gigs, where everyone is trying out new stuff at open mic nights, but as you progress up the you will find that you are usually the only vagina on the bill. There are a lot of truly wonderful male comedians out there, and you will have a great time with them and form fantastic friendships, but if you want to catch up with other female comedians, you will mostly have to wait for rare nights that feature more than one woman, or parties, or organise specific women in comedy drinks in order to do so. If you leave it to the usual circuit gigs, you could literally go years without seeing one.

Conversely, an interview with Sarah milican in the new scots man in 2009, had argued that gender divide in stand up wasn't a very real thing

"I've never believed that' she argued

If you're funny you get on and if you're not, you don't,"

There are a million reasons why I might not do well at a gig. But none of them are because I'm a woman. Suffice to say opinions were divided and it was proving to be very sensitive territory.

My own early research had begun to focus on a consideration of the idea that the female comedic voice was maybe a somewhat muted one, I suggested that patriarchal restraint was possibly affecting any authentic voice ,and that any developing voice might, as a consequence, result possibly in the stifling of that voice, I went on to add that any suppression was responsible for something of a kind of arrested development where women in stand up were concerned- I was treading in murky and controversial waters because my assertions were pulsing towards ideas around the potential for women's comedy to become categorized as

a genre –and yet it was clearly more of a question of gatekeeping they simply weren't developing cos they weren't getting in.

I, like many others, came to the miserable realisation that Female stand-ups had to a lot work harder to establish and maintain their position in comedy - it seemed more and more obvious that our dominant culture asserted, through patriarchy, that the qualities inherent within Stand-up, such as assertion, authority, and forcefulness were essentially masculine ones.

Suffice to say a decade later offers a very different view of women on the comedy scene

an article by Sarah Bradbury in the times talks of generation of female comedians dominating 2017 where there are more female stand-ups at the Edinburgh Fringe than ever before, but she bemoans that it is about pushing forwards in a male-heavy industry.

Despite articles indicating more positive statistics, the comedy scene is still not without its imbalances and embedded complexities, but there is no denying that the times are indeed a changing, and particularly in terms of the material being produced, and the manner in which it is being delivered.

A new wave has arrived at last -a wave where female comics who are now stampeding through the mire and making way for a new and rousing terrain.

Luisa Omielans' work serves as a solid trail blazing example of that rousing terrain. Hers is a voice that illustrates boldly how the voice of the female stand up is now, not only a dominant one, and one on a more level playing field, but one that is fast becoming a new kind of

player, on perhaps a different field altogether, where, to continue with the football analogy, the game itself is perhaps becoming a rather more beautiful one - certainly a more meaningful one and, in essence, one that calls for activism.

Omielan's early work what would Beyoncé do appeals to all the single ladies' shows are a mixture of honest anxieties and kick-ass sing along to tunes. A comedy equivalent of the girls having a heart-to-heart in the the ladies bonding over emotional insecurities and bedroom confidences before getting back out there and getting on with it.

Clip 1 <https://youtu.be/D7KtzaR4B8Y>

As the clip demonstrates Omielan brings in an evangelical empowering energy to her shows, the likes of which stand-up hasn't really seen before. She also brings with her at this point, a new audience to the genre, and it wasn't long before she was propelled from her tiny pub rooms at the Edinburgh Fringe, to venues such as the Clapham Grand- larger venues meant that she could ramp up the party spirit but without losing the intimacy that her candour and frankness seems to create. but steadily, the reality behind this brash front is revealed. That of heartbreak, of being dumped, tough family torments, brought on by mental health issues, problems because of finding herself living back with her mum in her 30s. these incidents pack a firm emotional punch, but while Omielan is refreshingly truthful about the effects of the melt down, the message is that she shouldn't reel from it because Beyoncé certainly wouldn't. The objectives seem to be about both galvanising her audience, as well as telling them that it's ok to not be ok.

Omielan's second show Am I right ladies offered more bursts of full of swagger: a proud independent woman owning her sexuality a woman with a clear sense of herself, a young female who is having no truck with society's pointless conventions, whether it's about body

image, patriarchal hypocrisy or no strings sex with men who are not washing their parts adequately enough.

Clip2 am I right lady's thigh gap <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2MskQOinwE>

Suffice to say this show is heavy on empowering -it is notable that the thigh gap clip went viral – omielan was now not only joyfully firing up her audiences but inciting them toward a back lash regarding body image. In so much as, in terms of having problems yes, she'll admit to having, but her curves is defiantly not one of them, on the contrary states she, body fat is the trophy of a life well lived – it is evidence of dinner with friends.

Omielan's latest show politics for bitches is a far cry from her previous shows-it's also a show that BBC have commissioned as series of the back of.

https://www.comedy.co.uk/online/politics_for_bitches/videos/

There is no sing a long, no joyous celebrations. New clip \There are the usual songs playing on stage at the start, there is the usual casual Luisa popping on stage unannounced entering pre-show all casual and smiley – a clip board sits on stage and the mood is decidedly different -unmistakably foreboding

We are advised by her early on that we're going to get something different, but nothing could prepare us for just how different, not even when her gigantic Burmese mountain dog gallops on to centre stage with her and resides there for the duration of the show.

Omielan is clear from the off that she wants to try to get the audience engaged, she begins by explaining the big issue for the unengaged where optics are concerned, there is a delightful analogy for Brexit, a deliberately long winded one for health service funding, there's loads about trump and toxic masculinity, and it's all delivered rather cleverly in smart teacher style -complete with shocking stats on government spending, all etched on a white board- there are plenty of laughs too ..but then comes the big one, the one that sets her apart from anyone else right now, and that is when she tells the heart rending true story of the lack care of her own mother under the NHS just 12 months previously -a lack of care that led to the late cancer diagnosis resulting in the slow and painful death of her mother just weeks after the diagnosis. There are even laughs again here too when she reveals how the seeking out illegal cannabis oil almost resulted in her own arrest- suffice to say though, this very last part of the show is dark and not at all funny- there is slight relief from the donkey of a dog now getting bored on stage, a much needed release when Bernie the dog jumps up and down in an attempt to get her attention, but the atmosphere is an intense one, the audience is shaken, some of them visibly tearful, because Luísa's mother is dead, and it could have been avoided had politics played a better part.

It is in this sense that omielan is breaking new ground and it is here that we see and hear the source of her emerging sense of anger – when omielan ends her show advising her audience to *do something about it*.

it becomes abundantly clear that Omielan is intent on revealing *where* the power resides, and she makes no bones about clarifying that the power lies precisely within *them*.

Bruce Dessau *The "Tyranny of Edinburgh" – Craft of Comedy Conference Report 2015*

Koehl, yale , *We Killed: The Rise of Women in Comedy*, 2013 picador

Brand Katy *9 things you need to know about being a female* www.telegraph.co.uk 2014

Hitchens Christopher *Why Women Aren't Funny* Jan 2007 vanity fair

Sarah Millican's stand-up is in the worst possible taste *The new scotsman* 2009

Omielan, Luisa, *what would Beyoncé do*

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=what+would+beyonce+do+luisa+omielan&view=detail&mid=EDC8D3276608769D9107EDC8D3276608769D9107&FORM=VIRE&PC=APPL>

Omielan, Luisa, *am I right ladies*

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=am+i+right+ladies+luisa&view=detail&mid=25D0FA2918D97001C89D25D0FA2918D97001C89D&FORM=VRRTPAP&PC=APPL>

Omielan Luisa, *politics for Bitches* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p06nh7s3>

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