

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* improves, 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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Po mnenju Elinor Fuchs je glavna značilnost postmodernega gledališča in potemtakem osnovni razlog za zaton dramskega besedila kot najpomembnejše prvine klasičnega gledališča smrt dramskega značaja. Medtem ko tradicionalni hegeljanski pogled na dramo temelji na enotnem fiktivnem subjektu, piše Fuchs, pa tako moderno kot postmoderno gledališče tak subjekt destabilizirata in sprevračata do te mere, da ga ne moremo več obravnavati kot celoto. A podobno kot Lehmannova ima tudi njena teorija vsaj eno opazno metodološko pomanjkljivost: skoraj popolnoma prezre komedijo. Fuchs se v svoji razčlembi izogne precejšnjemu deležu repertoarja institucionalnih pa tudi alternativnih in eksperimentalnih gledališč.

Pričujoča razprava poskuša odpraviti to pomanjkljivost in ugotoviti, ali značaj izgine tudi iz postdramske komedije in ne le iz postdramske resne dramatike. Pri tem se osredotoča na tri podzvrsti postmoderne komedije, ki odstopajo od tradicionalnega pripovednega vzorca in na prvi pogled potrjujejo interpretacije Elinor Fuchs: na skeč komedijo, standup komedijo in improvizacijsko komedijo. Prvi del prispevka se posveča analizi nekaj značilnih prizorov iz skeč komedije *Onkraj obrobja* (*Beyond the Fringe*), standup rutin Georgea Carlina in improgledališča Drugo mesto (*The Second City*). Drugi del ponuja protiargument ter možno dopolnilo k njenim hipotezam.

Ključne besede: postdramsko gledališče, Elinor Fuchs, skeč komedija, standup komedija, improvizacijska komedija

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1

Poleti leta 2008 je *The Drama Review (TDR)*, ena izmed najuglednejših strokovnih revij na svojem področju, objavila izčrpno oceno nedavnega angleškega prevoda Lehmannove knjige *Postdramsko gledališče*. O tem, kakšen pomen so uredniki TDR pripisali tej objavi, najzgovornejša priča dejstvo, da so recenzijo zaupali akademski težkokategornici, profesorici z Univerze Yale Elinor Fuchs, ki je tudi sama citirana v Lehmannovi knjigi. A Fuchs se svoje naloge ni lotila tako spoštljivo, kot bi lahko pričakovali glede na sloves Lehmannove študije. Njena recenzija sistematično skritizira Lehmannovo razlago, metodologijo ter slog in med drugim celo zatrdi, da je *Postdramskemu gledališču* »usojeno, da je hkrati preroška in zastarela« knjiga (Fuchs 178). Po njenem mnenju je Lehmann tako preveč previden kot tudi premalo odločen. »Postdramsko je post čemu?« se vpraša in nadaljuje s še enim vprašanjem: »Lahko torej navsezadnje pričakujemo vrnitev k besedilu?« (prav tam 181).

Glede na to, kako kritična je Elinor Fuchs, je kar malce ironično, da Lehmann in Fuchs pravzaprav izhajata iz istega metodološkega izhodišča. Oba svoje analize sodobnega gledališča utemljujeta z zavračanjem tradicionalne aristotelovske definicije, ki besedilo postavlja nad vse preostale prvine gledališke uprizoritve. A medtem ko Lehmann trdi, da je najpomembnejša značilnost postdramskega gledališča »odpoved« zapletu (27), Fuchs v svoji knjigi *Smrt značaja: pogledi na gledališče po modernizmu* to vlogo podeli razkroju značaja. Ne moderno ne postmoderno gledališče, dokazuje ameriška kritičarka, se ne zanaša več na avtorefleksivno subjektivnost. Prav nasprotno: tako moderno kot postmoderno gledališče subjekt namenoma poskušata spraviti iz ravnovesja in ga razrahljati do tiste mere, ko ga občinstvo ne bo več moglo dojeti kot »stalen jaz« (Fuchs, *Death of Character* 9).

Lehmann in Fuchs pa imata še eno metodološko stično točko. Njuni teoriji se sklicujeta skoraj izključno na resne predstave in se bolj ali manj izogneta uprizoritvam, katerih glavni namen je, da občinstvo nasmejijo. Takšna izbirčnost sicer ne pomeni, da so njune domneve načeloma zgrešene, a vsekakor opozori na njihovo nepopolnost ter posredno zahteva dodatno preverjanje. Glede na to, da so dandanes zabavne predstave prav tako pogoste in priljubljene kot v preteklosti, nas ta zahteva ne bi smela prav

hudo presenetiti: vsak temeljit pregled sodobnega gledališča bi moral vključevati tudi komedijo.

In prav to je osrednja tema mojega referata. S pomočjo Elinor Fuchs kot terminološke in metodološke vodnice – v glavnem zato, ker je njen argument epistemološko bolj razviden kot Lehmannov – bom poskusil opisati, kako se je komedija odzvala na spremembe v gledališki praksi in dramski pisavi po zatonu modernizma. Poglavitno vprašanje, s katerim se bom spopadel, je, ali značaj izgine tudi iz postdramske komedije in ne le iz postdramske resne dramatike. Pri tem se bom osredotočil na tri podzvrsti postmoderne komedije, ki odstopajo od tradicionalnega pripovednega vzorca in na prvi pogled potrjujejo interpretacije Elinor Fuchs: na skeč komedijo, standup komedijo in improvizacijsko komedijo. Ker v postmodernem gledališču »meje med visoko in popularno kulturo počasi izginjajo« (Fuchs, *Death of Character* 2), večina mojih primerov izvira iz popularnega repertoarja in ne iz visoke literature. Prvi del razprave preverja utemeljenost njenih teoretičnih predpostavk s pomočjo primerov iz skeč komedije *Onkraj obrobja* (*Beyond the Fringe*), standup rutin Georgea Carlina in improgledališča Drugo mesto (*The Second City*). Drugi del ponuja protiargument ter možno dopolnilo k njenim hipotezam.

2

Najočitnejša postmoderna mutacija komedije je verjetno skeč komedija. Glavni razlog za to je, da skeč komedije »individualna subjektivnost,« po mnenju Elinor Fuchs osrednji cilj dramatike vse od nemškega idealizma (*Death of Character* 27), ne zanima več. Idejo, da je dramski značaj »edino umetniško sredstvo, ki lahko podeli materialno obliko absolutni duhovni subjektivnosti« (prav tam 27), je prvi omenil Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, toda svoj vrhunec je pričakala v realizmu, kjer sta pisatelje najbolj zanimali psihološka globina in kompleksnost značaja. Ob koncu devetnajstega stoletja so se modernistični dramatiki, kakršna sta bila na primer August Strindberg in Maurice Maeterlinck, začeli odmikati od iskanja »individualne subjektivnosti« kot dramskega ideala, dokler ni »v nerealističnem gledališču dvajsetega stoletja misel polagoma prevzela najpomembnejši dramaturški položaj, tesno za njo pa tudi doslej prezrta aristotelovska kategorija spektakla« (prav tam 31).

Kako deluje ta nova literarna zvrst, lahko najnazorneje vidimo v legendarni skeč komediji iz leta 1960 *Onkraj obrobja*, ki sta jo skupaj postavila dramski klub Odrske luči z Univerze v Cambridgeu (Cambridge University Footlights Dramatic Club) in Oxfordska revija (*The Oxford Revue*). Čeprav sta obe študentski skupini že pred tem redno uprizarjali satirične uprizoritve za široko občinstvo, pa je predstava *Onkraj obrobja* vendarle pomenila kakovostni preskok od običajnega nezrelega humora in

neresnega posmehovanja do povsem protiinstitucionalnega pristopa in anarhične zgradbe (Stringer 57). Ohlapno povezani in nelinearni komični skeči Alana Bennetta, Petra Cooka, Jonathana Millerja in Dudleyja Moora so nemara res logični podaljšek njihovih prejšnjih študentskih odrskih revij, vendar kot celota opazno presegajo vsoto svojih sestavnih delov in so postali prava zgodovinska prelomnica v povojnem britanskem »satiričnem bumu« (Carpenter 1).

Z radikalno opustitvijo pripovedne kontinuitete in v zaplet vpisanih izmišljenih identitet *Onkraj obrobja* očitno ponuja postmoderno protiutež tradicionalni komediji. V knjižni objavi skečev so govorci poimenovani z imeni nastopajočih – Peter, Jon, Alan in Dudley – ne pa z imeni oseb, ki jih igrajo. Tako je urejeno celotno besedilo, tudi ko igralci začasno prevzamejo drugo vlogo, na primer ko Jon postane vikar Dick ali ko Peter oponaša britanskega ministrskega predsednika Harolda MacMillana (Bennett idr. 23 in 53–55). Če lahko zaupamo televizijskim posnetkom uprizoritve *Onkraj obrobja*, tak pristop pelje v razstavljanje same ideje enotnega jaza. Štirje nastopajoči od enega stereotipa k drugemu prehajajo brez opaznega presledka, pri čemer si včasih porazdelijo replike ene same osebe in spet drugič z ene na drugo preklapljajo vsakih nekaj sekund.

Vtis popolne poljubnosti karakterizacije dodatno potrjuje odsotnost kakršnega koli razvoja značajev. Ker je zgradba *Onkraj obrobja* vseskozi epizodna in posamezni skeči neodvisni od vseh ostalih, ni prave priložnosti, da bi bil kateri koli lik do konca izdelan. Petrov gospod Charles Spedding iz Hoxtona na primer na oder »vstopi skozi pogrezalno loputo«, izvede govor, v katerem se spominja začetka druge svetovne vojne, ter z odra izgine na isti način in se nanj ne vrne več, čeprav marsikoga med gledalci verjetno zanima njegova usoda (Bennett idr. 72–73). Neki drug Charles, Charles P. Moody, se, prav nasprotno, na odru sploh ne pojavi, ga pa zato drugi govorci kar nekajkrat omenijo (prav tam 80).

Edina vez med fragmenti v *Onkraj obrobja* so bili štirje igralci sami, toda tudi ti so bili oblečeni tako podobno, da so se zdeli bolj ali manj izmenljivi. Dudley, ki je v predstavi pel in ne le govoril, je verjetno nekoliko izstopal, vendar se med predstavo samo ni prav nič spremenil. Vse to je seveda bistveno drugače kot pri tradicionalnih komičnih značajih, ki sicer imajo hibe, a so v njih vselej dosledni. Tudi če se morda res ne razvijejo, v svojem dramskem statusu vendarle vsaj nihajo.

3

Druga zvrst postdramske komedije, ki si jo velja podrobneje ogledati, je standup komedija; njena najprepoznavnejša poteza je »gledališka avtorefleksivnost« (Fuchs,

Death of Character 47). Elinor Fuchs jo opisuje kot vrsto »samoopazujoče zavesti, ki se izraža kot odkrito priznanje značajev, da v predstavi zgolj igrajo vlogo« (prav tam 47). Glavni primer, s katerim pojasnjuje to misel, je »komorni ep« Davida Cola *Trenutki večnega Žida* (*The Moments of the Wandering Jew*) iz leta 1979 (Fuchs, *Death of Character* 48). Tako kot v mnogih drugih postmodernih »misterijih« v Colovi igri simbolični in abstraktni slehernik obstaja samo kot oseba v svoji lastni igri (Fuchs, *Death of Character* 49). To pomeni, da protagonist *Trenutkov večnega Žida* ni le razsrediščen, temveč popolnoma psihološko razgaljen in zreduciran na golo gledališkost.

Komik v standup komediji je sodobni vrstnik srednjeveških alegoričnih junakov. Dejansko bi ga lahko imeli za postmodernega Slehernika: njegov cilj je postati tako splošen, da se bo z njim lahko poistovetil vsak gledalec. A ker ga na odru vselej spremlja mikrofonski nastop, njegovi nastopi vseeno ostajajo gledališki dogodek. Mikrofonski nastop kot komika spominja na to, da kljub navidezni intimnosti in pristnosti izpovednega formata pri standup komediji vendarle spremljata predstavo ne pa življenja samega.

Da gre pri standup komediji za podzvrst postdramskega gledališča, dodatno potrjuje Auslanderjeva ugotovitev, po kateri standup komedija »ni narativni žanr; v njej ni ‚situacije,‘ ki bi vključevala in omejevala komikove akcije« (118-19). »[S]tandup komedijo,« nadaljuje Philip Auslander, bi lahko opredelili bolj »kot monološko – komik [je na odru] sam in mu ne pomaga nihče; vsaka Gracie nima svojega Georgea in ni Rickyja za vsako Lucy« (119). Če ima Lehmann prav, ko v svoji analizi osnovnih postdramskih strategij opozori, da »monolog kot nagovor, v katerem je naslovnik občinstvo, krepi sporazumevanje« (128), potem standup komedija sporazumevanje stopnjuje do tiste mere, ko razmejitve med občilom in sporočilom dokončno izgine. V tem primeru sta resničnost in fikcija neločljivi, kar hkrati pomeni, da tradicionalna kategorija značaja postane povsem nepotrebna.

Najizrazitejše postdramska od vseh standup komedij je verjetno znamenita rutina Georgea Carlina »Sedem besed, ki jih ne smeš nikoli reči na televiziji« (»The Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television«). V nasprotju z večino drugih posnetkov na albumu *Razredni pavliha* (*Class Clown*), na katerem je bil Carlinov nastop prvič posnet, »Sedmim besedam« manjka očitna avtobiografska razsežnost. Medtem ko so pogledi, ki jih njegova točka zagovarja, skoraj gotovo avtorjevi, pa v njih ni niti enega samega podatka o govorčevi osebnosti ali življenjskih izkušnjah. Pravzaprav je dramaturški lok Carlinovega nastopa veliko bliže srednješolskemu govornemu nastopu kot pa značilni standup anekdoti.

Oglejmo si, denimo, začetek Carlinovega besedila, kot ga je podal 27. maja 1972 v Santa Monici: »Ljubim besede. Hvala, ker poslušate moje besede. Nekaj zelo pomembnega vam hočem povedati o besedah. Ponosen sem, da so besede moja zaposlitev, moja igra, moja strast. Besede so navsezadnje vse, kar imamo. Seveda imamo misli, ampak misli se spreminjajo ...« (»Seven Words«). Kot lahko vidimo, v prvih šestih stavkih ni ne duha ne sluha o kakršni koli šali. Carlin preprosto izraža smiselno in pronicljivo mnenje, s katerim se ni težko strinjati. Prva priložnost za komični učinek se pojavi šele po premoru, ki sledi besedi »spreminjajo,« medtem ko prvo izmed sedmih prepovedanih besed slišimo šele minuto in pol po začetku sedemminutnega nastopa.

Učinek Carlinove točke kot celote je zelo blizu tega, kar se po mnenju Elinor Fuchs v postmoderni dramatikii pripeti značaju: subjekt svoje mesto prepusti popolni objektivnosti besed in svojo individualnost žrtvuje na oltarju dekonstrukcije jezika kot prislovične meje našega sveta (primerjaj Fuchs, *Death of Character* 170-1). Še zlasti sam konec Carlinovega monologa, v katerem analizira »dvostranske« ali »dvopomenske besede« – »Lahko se tiče dotika, ne smeš pa se dotikati tiča« (»Seven Words«) – na svoj način spominja na besedno telovadbo, kakršno navadno povezujemo s francoskimi poststrukturalisti. Tako kot v Derridajevi filozofiji tudi v Carlinovi standup komediji »gledališka prisotnost« spodkopava »metafizično prisotnost« (Fuchs, *Death of Character* 11), dokler se značaj ne zreducira na govorca, stoječega pred steno.

4

Zadnji izmed postdramskih žanrov, ki jih bom tukaj omenil, je improvizacijska komedija. Tudi pri njej je prispevek k razkroju dramskega značaja še najlažje razumeti s pomočjo teoretične razlage, ki jo v svoji študiji ponuja Elinor Fuchs. »Pod vplivom Artaudovega zavračanja ‚mojstrovini‘ in pod vplivom poetike Grotowskega,« piše Fuchs, »je vrsta gledališč avtorjevo besedilo, ki pač zahteva podrejanje zunanji avtoriteti, začela obravnavati kot orodje političnega zatiranja v gledališkem procesu« (Fuchs, *Death of Character* 70). Alternativa takemu zatiranju je po njenem mnenju »ekstemporirani govor« (prav tam 70), se pravi, improvizirane replike, ki izražajo subjektivnost nastopajočega izvajalca, ne pa odsotnega avtorja.

Improviziran dialog je seveda še posebej pomemben v improvizacijski komediji sami, še zlasti v takšni, kot sta jo razvili vodilni čikaški gledališči: Kompas (Compass Players) in njegov naslednik Drugo mesto. Pod vodstvom Paula Sillsa sta oba ansambla uspešno uresničila teoretične ideje njegove matere Viole Spolin (prim. Spolin). Improgledališče v slogu Drugega mesta se od svoje slovite predhodnice *commedie dell'arte* najočitneje razlikuje po tem, da njegovi igralci v drugi polovici tipične

predstave opustijo kakršno koli zapisano predlogo ali vnaprej pripravljen dialog in se pri dogajanju ter karakterizaciji zanašajo izključno na predloge občinstva.

Kot je opazil njihov bivši umetniški vodja Del Close, gledalci predstave Drugega mesta pogosto obiskujejo prav zato, ker hočejo opazovati, kako se bodo igralci odzivali na nasvete gledalcev (glej Patinkin in Klein 55). Ko se je, recimo, ena od začetnih predstav Drugega mesta »po želji občinstva končala z improvizirano opero na temo Grimmove pravljice« (prav tam 36), so gledalci, ki so igralcem zadali ta navidezno nemogoči izziv, lahko uživali na dveh ravneh: tako v bistroumnosti in iznajdljivosti izvajalcev kot tudi v ustvarjalnem potencialu lastne ideje.

Načelna nepredvidljivost posredovanj gledališkega občinstva pa ima še eno nepričakovanoposledico. Povzročatemeljno nestabilnostkomičnihlikovvuprizoritvah Drugega mesta. Čeprav se režiser in igralci navadno že vnaprej odločijo, kako se bo določena namišljena oseba obnašala, in se med vajami pripravijo na najrazličnejše improvizacijske scenarije, lahko uprizarjanje v živo iztira tudi najnatančnejše zarisane načrte. Med improviziranim delom predstave Drugega mesta v Torontu, na primer, je eden izmed gledalcev Nio Vardalos na glas podražil, češ da ima »gromska stegna« (Thomas 158). Igralkin odziv na opazko o premeru njenih nog vsekakor ni bil del vnaprej pripravljenega značaja. Pograbila je mikrofona, se sprehodila v dvorano, nevljudnega gledalca dvignila s stola in mu rekla: »Pa si oglejmo tvojo postavo« (prav tam 159). Od tega trenutka je bilo vse, kar je Nia Vardalos naredila na odru, odmik od njenega izvirnega značaja in ne glede na to, kaj je dejansko rekla, je občinstvo njene besede dojelo kot odločnejše in ostreje.

5

Elinor Fuchs v svoji študiji piše, da se je »zanimanje za psihološko globino in trdnost značaja ... proti koncu devetnajstega stoletja« zmanjšalo, in sklene, da je to pripeljalo do postopnega odmika od »na značaju temelječih« dramaturgij (*Death of Character* 49). Posledica te spremembe je, da se postmoderno gledališče ne osredotoča več na vprašanje identitete, ampak ga veliko bolj zanimata »raziskovanje in odigravanje razlik« (prav tam 14). Moja analiza zaenkrat podpira njeno mnenje: skeč komedija razstavlja pojem enotnega jaza, standup komedija briše mejo med resničnim in fiktivnim, medtem ko improgledališče destabilizira subjektivnost samo. Skratka, vse kaže na to, da značaj izumira tudi v postmoderni komediji.

Samo eno mnenje se ne strinja s takšno interpretacijo: mnenje komikov samih. Komiki se svojega dela še zmeraj lotevajo skozi prizmo značaja. Cookovega rudarja na primer srečamo v enem samem skeču v *Onkraj obrobja* (Bennett idr. 97-98), kar pomeni, da

bi moral biti idealen primerek nedokončanega postmodernega lika, a ga je njegov izvajalec kasneje razvil v enega izmed najizvirnejših in najbolj dodelanih komičnih likov v povojni britanski komediji, v neskončno otopelega in domišljavega E. L. Wistyja (glej Cook xiv-xv). Podobno velja za Georgea Carlina. Njegov drugi najpriljubljenejši monolog, »Al Sleet, vaš hipijevski vremenar«, se vrti okrog natančno zastavljenega značaja dobrodušnega, toda zmedenega hipija Ala Sleeta. Nasploh Carlinov komični repertoar sestavlja cela vrsta prevzetih identitet in le redko so njegovi monologi popolnoma razosebljeni. Položaj ni kaj dosti drugačen niti v gledališki poetiki Drugega mesta. Več kot šestdeset let po ustanovitvi te skupine njen oglas za predstavo *Glazen pok (Noisy Maroon)* še zmeraj obljublja »celovečerno, na značaju temelječo improvizacijo« in občinstvu celo zagotavlja, da »bo vsak improvizator upodabljal en sam značaj (ki ga bodo predlagali gledalci) skozi celotno predstavo«.

Ne glede na to, kako trdo si prizadevajo, da bi se oddaljili od preteklosti, se postmoderni komiki v svojem pristopu k igri očitno še zmeraj zatekajo k namišljenim in psihološko motiviranim značajem. Zakaj? Kako to, da se komedija, v nasprotju z resno dramatiko, tradiciji ne zmore dokončno odpovedati? Ali to pomeni, da komedija ne more nikoli biti docela postdramska?

Prvi možni odgovor na ta vprašanja je, da je komedija kot literarna zvrst načeloma previdna, in sicer manj pri iskanju primernih tarč posmeha kot predvsem pri izbiri dramaturških in gledaliških prijemov, s katerimi se teh tarč loteva. Ker je uspeh komedije odvisen od zelo konkretnega odziva občinstva – smeha – si gotovo prizadeva, da bi ji lahko sledilo kar največ gledalcev. Zato je komedija veliko bolj zadržana pri eksperimentiranju z izraznimi sredstvi kot mnoge druge dramske zvrsti, ki se ne bojijo interpretativne negotovosti in dvoumnosti. Oklepanje tradicije je s tega zornega kota manjše zlo in varnejša rešitev: prej kot na nostalgijo kaže na zdravo mero uprizoritvenega pragmatizma.

Toda to ni edina možna razlaga. Prav tako je mogoče trditi, da je komični značaj vse poskuse ukinitve preživel preprosto zato, ker so prav temeljni cilji njegove dekonstrukcije – nestabilna identiteta, nezadostna pristnost in vprašljiva individualnost – tisti, ki ga delajo komičnega. S tega stališča je značaj komičen, kadar mu ne uspe postati avtonomen in enoten subjekt. Oziroma če to misel izpeljem še korak naprej: vsak poskus, da bi značaj kot neodvisno dramsko danost odpravili, ga slejkoprej naredi komičnega. Naj pokažem, kako ta postopek poteka v praksi, s pomočjo prizorov iz istih treh podzvrsti komedije kot poprej.

Nenavadni zborovski skeč »Samo od kruha« iz *Onkraj obrobja* bi moral biti po vseh pravilih idealen primer razkroja posameznikove identitete v postmoderni komediji. Dva izmed štirih barskih gostov v skeču sta resda izrecno poimenovana – Squiffy in Buffy (Bennett idr. 100) – toda njuna nadimka sta tako stereotipno osnovnošolska,

da prav nič ne pomagata pri razlikovanju med zelo podobnimi si člani skupine. Poleg tega se gostje v glavnem sporazumevajo z momljanjem in odkašljevanjem ter drugimi nerazpoznavnimi zvoki, ne pa z besedami, se pravi, na način, ki ga Elinor Fuchs občuduje pri Artaudovem gledališču krutosti.

A namesto da bi se občinstvo na takšno nagonsko izražanje »neomejenega, razgaljenega, svetega Jaza« odzvalo s strahospoštovanjem (Fuchs, *Death of Character* 70), na stokanje štirih igralcev odgovori z izbruhi krohota. S stališča gledalcev si je namreč nerazločno identiteto gostov, katerih edina razpoznavna lastnost je izbira pijače – Peter naroči »[v]elik viski,« Jon »[d]vojni konjak,« Dudley »[k]ozarec temnega vina« in Alan »[r]oze« (Bennett idr. 99) – še najlažje razložiti kot pričakovano utelešenje njihove duhovne praznosti. Na odru so štiri osebe, pa si delijo en sam predvidljiv in enostranski značaj. In ker med njimi ni opaznih razlik, se na njihove brezizrazne identitete lahko mirno odzovemo s hahljanjem.

Carlinov poskus, da bi govorca »Sedmih besed« razosebil in ga osmisлил, ima prav tako nepredvideno posledico. Čeprav so glavna tarča njegovega posmeha odsotni (in verjetno licemerski) cenzorji, se nam govorec, ki ga tako skrbi za usodo teh sedmih besed, da kar ne more preiti na naslednjo temo, tudi sam polagoma preneha dozdevati resničen. S svojim vztrajnim vračanjem k preklinjanju je skoraj tako smešen kot moralistični televizijski uredniki, ki so se odločili, da jih dejanski pogovorni jezik pač ne zanima. Carlinova jeza na družbo sicer ne doseže tiste mere, ki bi jo lahko z besedami tradicionalne vede o komediji opisali kot »monomanijo« ali »obsedenost« (Nelson 14; Frye 168-69), ga pa vsekakor potencialno izpostavlja posmehu.

Odnos med gledališko dekonstrukcijo in preživetjem komičnega junaka je nemara še lažje ponazoriti s primerom iz repertoarja Drugega mesta, saj gre pri njihovih vajah za zelo pregleden in pogosto natančno arhiviran postopek, ki kdaj pa kdaj celo omogoči rekonstrukcijo celotnega nastanka dobro znanega lika. Shortov pičlar Ed Grimley, recimo, se je začel oblikovati, ko je igralec prevzel vlogo v skeču »Seksist« v odrski reviji *Čarovnik z ossingtonske*. Ker si Martin Short in John Candy, ki je bil v vlogo šovinističnega »kretena« zaseden pred tem (McCrohan 242), nista prav nič podobna, se je moral Short z izzivom spoprijeti s pomočjo popolnoma drugačnih improvizacij in vaj. Grimleyjevo bedasto režanje je, na primer, v vlogo prenesel iz neke druge igre. »Igral sem v prizoru z Robin Duke in Petrom Aykroydom,« pravi Short, »Spomnim se, da sem se nekoč ozrl proti Robin in opazil, da je na rampi. Bolj ali malo po naključju sem ji pokazal zobe. Gledalci so se zasmejali. Ko se mi gledalci zasmejijo, navadno otrpnem in šele kasneje ugotovim, kaj sem pravzaprav sploh naredil. In tako je moje režanje postalo del lika« (prav tam 242). Z drugimi besedami, igralčeva napaka je postala bistvena poteza novega značaja.

Grimleyjeva pretirano koničasta frizura je prav tako le podaljšek igralčeve zasebne afektacije. Short si ji lase na začetku naželiral zato, da bi Grimleyja naredil bolj modnega, toda potem ko je eden izmed njegovih soigralcev omenil, kako trapasto je videti navzgor prifrknjeni koder, je Shortova frizura v hipu postala del osebnosti lika. Niti prva niti druga značilnost nista bili psihološko motivirani in nista imeli kakšne posebno globoke povezave z bistvom dramskega lika. Prav nasprotno, značaj se je izoblikoval na podlagi naključnih odkritij in pa zato, ker je bila Shortu igra pomembnejša kot posnemanje resničnosti. S tem ko je telebana Grimleyja poskusil narediti manj realističnega, je Short torej pospešil, ne pa preprečil, razvoj tridimenzionalnega komičnega lika.

6

Tako kot skeč komedija in standup komedija tudi improvizacijska komedija očitno potrjuje, da postdramski pristop h gledališču ne vpliva na ključni položaj značaja v komiški dramaturgiji. Hkrati vse tri oblike postdramske komedije nenehoma opozarjajo na vzporednice med postmodernizmom kot zgodovinskim obdobjem in komedijo kot literarno zvrstjo. Mar to torej, vsaj teoretično gledano, pomeni, da so vsi postmoderni značaji načeloma komični? Čeprav se tak zaključek skoraj gotovo zdi pretirano posplošen in površen, ne smemo pozabiti, da literarni teoretiki kot temeljno lastnost postmodernizma pogosto omenjajo prav njegov »parodični odnos do modernizma« (Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody* 28) in med drugim govorijo o »vodilni vlogi ironije v postmodernizmu« (Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism* 4). Igre v igri, denimo, se zlepa ne uspejo izogniti smehu, in to ne glede na to, s kako resnimi temami se ukvarjajo (primerjaj Abel 59-60).

Podrobnejši pregled postmoderne gledališča seveda hitro ovrže to hipotezo. Najprej zato, ker je v nekaterih izmed najbolj znanih postmodernih dramskih besedil kup doslednih, toda popolnoma nesmešnih značajev. Poleg tega ni vsaka parodija zabavna pa tudi ironijo lahko zasledimo tudi v tragediji že vse od Sofokleja. In končno, nagnjenost postmoderne dramatike h komediji ne pomeni nujno, da je čisto vsak značaj komičen.

Druga, precej manj preprosta, pa nemara prepričljivejša razlaga presenetljivih vzporednic med komedijo in postmodernizmom ter posredno tudi razlaga razlogov za vztrajno navzočnost komičnega značaja v postdramskem gledališču, temelji na predpostavki, da postmodernizma ukinitve dramskega značaja pravzaprav sploh ne zanima. Velika večina poskusov, da bi značaj odpravili, se je zgodila v modernizmu; postmodernizem nasprotno le opozarja na njihov neuspeh, še posebej v svojih komedijah. Ker to počne tako, da si pri modernizmu izposoja – in kasneje tudi

spodkopava – postopke za razgraditev individualne subjektivnosti, te postopke kritiki pogosto povezujejo s postmodernizmom in pozabljajo, da pravzaprav pripadajo modernizmu. Pa vendar v postmoderni dramatiki podobni prijemi v glavnem delujejo kot komični mehanizmi in značaj smešijo, ne pa ukinjajo. In kar je še pomembnejše: pri komičnih značajih dovoljujejo tudi ontološke in ne le moralne slabosti. S tega stališča postmoderna komedija torej jasno dokazuje, da je značaj preživel prehod v postdramsko gledališče in da bo tam tudi ostal. In celo če se je značaju uspelo ohraniti le v komediji, to še zmeraj pomeni, da poročila o njegovi smrti močno pretiravajo.

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