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# STAGE PERSONA, STAND-UP COMEDY AND MENTAL HEALTH: 'PUTTING YOURSELF OUT THERE'

MATT HARGRAVE

## ABSTRACT

*This article addresses the subject of stand-up and mental health through the prism of comic persona, generating new, non-diagnostic discourses around mental illness. The article focuses on British and Australian comedians whose material addresses conditions such as bipolar disorder (John Scott), depression and anxiety (Seymour Mace; Lauren Pattison; Felicity Ward), or feigns the staging of mental collapse (Stewart Lee). Based on the analysis of live events and one-on-one interviews, the essay considers the role that persona plays in mediating the relationship between the comedian and their material, arguing that shaping persona is key to developing practices framed within a poetics of vulnerability.*

## KEY WORDS

Vulnerability; Role; Comedy; Mental Health; Stigma; Performance

## INTRODUCING PERSONA, STAND-UP, AND MENTAL HEALTH

One of the first tasks of the stand-up comedian on their stage entrance is to amplify their voice, usually by means of a microphone. At the same time, they must attempt something more complex but no less vital: to amplify their subjectivity by means of persona. My use of persona references Erving Goffman's definition: the "implicit or explicit claim" that a social being makes "to be a person of a particular kind" (1959, p. 24); in this case a distilled, or exaggerated, essence of themselves, embodied on stage, which becomes the vehicle for their comedy. Several authors (Brodie; Double; Frances-White & Shandur; Ince; Quirk) have stressed the importance of persona in comedy, between them providing the basis for a critical framework. First, the comic's persona must be highly subjective and quickly signal their unique perspective on the world. This becomes particularly apparent in club nights featuring four or five comedians. In a short time, the stand-up must convince the audience of *who they are*, a process which is mirrored in Chris Rock's joke: "When you meet somebody for the first time, you're not meeting them, you're meeting their representative" (Rock 1999).<sup>i</sup> Secondly, subjectivity must be maintained consistently: most comics will not move from surreal flights of fancy to political gags, or from physical clowning to confessional depth, unless they address this tonal shift as an integral part of their act. As Robin Ince explains, "An audience need to know what they believe they are dealing with – the universe they occupy must be defined" (2018a, p. 126). For Ince, the authenticity of who he is on-stage would be undermined if he could not meet people 'as himself off-stage after the performance (2018b).<sup>ii</sup> Thirdly, the persona of many stand-ups will convey not just a specific point of view but a socially marginal one. As folklorist Ian Brodie points out, "marginalisation is a subjective framework created by the performer in collusion with the

audience“ (2014, p. 104). One of the ways a marginalised framework might be created is when a comedian openly declares mental distress, which is itself the playing out of a stigmatised social identity.

The symbiotic relationship between comedy and mental health is an open secret that, until recently, few have considered more than common fact. The ‘tears of a clown’ and/or suicidal comedian are cultural clichés and can be summarised in the Groucho Marx joke: A man goes to an analyst and says he has lost the will to live. The doctor says, “Why not go to the circus to see Grock, the world’s funniest clown. I’m sure you will be much happier”. The man says, “I am Grock” (qtd in Kanfer 2001 p. 432). It is a cultural trope that the desire to perform stand-up comedy is itself evidence of a mental health problem. Judd Apatow’s book of conversations with fellow comedians, for example, is called *Sick in the Head* (2015). “When someone is laughing”, Apatow explains, “I know they don’t dislike me ... I ... need ... constant approval” (qtd in Maron & McDonald 2017, p. 237).<sup>iii</sup> The point is reinforced by the late Robin Williams:

How desperately insecure we are that made us do this for a living ... you get to do stuff, where if you did it in the street people go: ‘That man! He talked about his penis! To me openly!’ And you do it in a club, suddenly there’s this license to thrill ... You’re this weird insecure guy who does this looking, like Lenny Bruce said, looking for love. Do you love me? Temporarily? Kind of? I don’t care if you love me, I gotta say this shit. Is that an artist or is that a sociopath? Or a psychopath? ... Well I’m not going to label him! (Maron 2010)

Williams’ positioning of himself as outsider is part of what Brodie means by “the vernacular theory of comedy” which views the comedian as a social type differentiated as “marginalized ... rooted in loneliness and the need for approval ... seeing the world from a different perspective” (2014, p. 104). The sense that there is something ‘wrong’ with comedians has led to medical studies that seek to uncover apparent psychotic traits: psychological profiling via online tests indicate that “perception aberration” (paranormal or magical thinking); “cognitive disorganisation”; “anhedonia” (inability to feel pleasurable emotions); and impulsive risk taking are all disproportionately found to be traits of stand-ups (Ando et al. 2014).<sup>iv</sup>

In this essay, I address the under-researched issue of comedy and mental health through the prism of comic persona. I do not diagnose comedians, rather I seek to analyse the vivid contribution that stand-ups make to understanding vulnerable states of mind. I focus on British and Australian comedians whose material addresses conditions such as bipolar disorder (John Scott), depression and anxiety (Seymour Mace; Lauren Pattison; Felicity Ward), or feigns the staging of mental collapse (Stewart Lee). Based on analysis of live events and one-on-one interviews, I consider the role that persona plays in mediating the relationship between comedian and material or between comedian and audience. I suggest that there are at least five ways that persona operates in this context: as a protective device which allows the performer to share vulnerabilities (Scott); as an interruption of an established identity which allows the voicing of revelations (Pattison); as a theatrical conceit which troubles the notion of fixed identity (Lee); as an emotional distancing effect (Ward); and as a way of articulating a sense of belonging (Mace). I am not suggesting that such persona transactions are purely technical devices that can be picked off the shelf by the next aspiring comedian: they are deeply embedded in each individual and work in specific ways. Nor do I intend to be patronising or reductive about a complex performance dynamic. I argue that by describing and analysing the *affect* of persona, it is possible to understand the importance and subtlety of self-presentation as *one component* in conveying complex subject matter. The analysis of stand-up and persona, I assert, can make an original and important contribution to the fields of persona studies and to the emerging field of performance and mental health. Such analysis dismantles reductive

binaries (well/sick; sane/insane; happy/suffering) and leads to more productive ways of thinking: not to administer or medicate, but to illuminate the subjective experience of stigmatised states of being. 'Mental health', in so far as it means anything, is the capacity to develop - and cope with having - a self. 'Mental health' is embedded in the craft of stand-up since the form places high demands on the individual practitioner's ability to negotiate this self aesthetically and publicly.

My essay is underpinned by the philosophical work of Erinn Gilson, who argues that vulnerability is an increasingly urgent issue in the neoliberal era, in which the prevailing mode of selfhood is 'entrepreneurial subjectivity' that promotes competitive self-seeking as the only rational choice. Gilson's *Ethics of Vulnerability* (2014) explores the implications of three assertions: first, that the normative equivalence of vulnerability with weakness devalues vulnerability as something socially 'bad'; second, that vulnerability can be viewed as an ethical resource that helps manifest virtues of empathy and compassion; and third, that vulnerability is often wrongly reduced to a state of perpetual risk, as opposed to an ambiguous, multifaceted, and productive experience, full of human potential. I argue that stand-up, as an artistic and social platform, provides a unique place to observe vulnerability at work and offers a critique of the entrepreneurial self. Like Gilson, I question why vulnerability is overwhelmingly equated with socially undesirable indicators such as weakness and risk. I argue that vulnerability is an aesthetic and social resource to be explored and celebrated. I take this theme forward here, echoing comedian Phil Jupitus:

I've always had this belief that you have to have something wrong with you to want to do stand-up, because it is putting yourself (particularly as a performer) in possibly the most vulnerable position you can be in, aside from people who fuck each other in Amsterdam for money ... I think it's really baring and putting yourself out there. (qtd in Double 2013, p. 129)

The craft of stand-up involves a dual decision: not only the choice to put your 'self' out there but also which 'self' to send as representative.

### **PERSONA AS SHIELD: JOHN SCOTT'S CREATIVE RECOVERY**

The first category of comic persona is that of protective shield: a mode of address which allows the comic to choose those parts of him- or herself that they will allow public scrutiny. It permits the voicing of vulnerabilities that would otherwise be too painful to share. Scottish comedian John Scott has, in his own words, had "nineteen years' experience as a comedian and twenty-four years' experience as a mental health service user". Furthermore, he says: "I don't think comedians statistically experience mental health issues any more than the general public at large. It's just that you hear them talk about it" (Scott 2019). Scott points out in his 2017 show *Delusions* that the relationship between his psychiatric self and his comic self has always privately, if rarely publicly, intertwined:

The unusual thing about me I suppose is it was actually becoming a comedian that got the right diagnosis. When I started out in comedy I was without treatment. A doctor took sympathy on me and also doubted my diagnosis so we had a wee experiment with going meds free. So after six weeks I went back to see the doctor. How are you doing meds free? she asked. AWESOME I said, I'VE BECOME A COMEDIAN. She went, Oh no ... I was worried about something like this happening ... At one point I visited the local GP because my condition was acting up, and he didn't believe I was a comedian. He actually thought I was being delusional again. You might be thinking the same. (Scott 2017)

*Delusions* was the first time Scott had ‘come out’ as having a history of acute mental health difficulties. Utilising a punchline-rich political satire, the show presents his own struggle with bipolar disorder in conjunction with, and possibly as a manifestation of, the current world-political order. Scott deploys the constant interruptive dissonance between his own narrative journey through the mental health system and wider geo-political chaos. The show is a narrative of how he was misdiagnosed with schizophrenia as a young man and the difficult process of having this diagnosis overturned to bipolar disorder, for which he now, by his own admission, receives successful treatment. The show *Delusions* is both memoir and educative tool. Scott’s message is one of creative recovery:

There’s been a lot said about anxiety and depression but this show looks at the more acute end of mental health and is about the period in my life when I was misdiagnosed with schizophrenia. Don’t worry I got better ... but I wouldn’t want to catch it again. (Scott 2017)

Scott’s on-stage persona is not far from his everyday self: affable, good humoured, sharing of enthusiasms. The lines above, early in the show, demonstrate how far he is at pains to put the audience at ease, to acknowledge the potential for discomfort and to gently put it to rest. As he said in interview:

I’ve never exposed myself like this as a comedian. I felt very vulnerable doing this, now I feel empowered by it. Vulnerability in stand-up comedy is really when you’re talking about very personal material. It’s not just whether they are going to laugh at this, it’s how they are going to take me as a person because of this ... It’s probably the most out of my comfort zone space I’ve ever been as a comedian ... Rather than saying ‘I’m weak, I’m vulnerable’ I’m using the defence of laughter as a barricade, as a shield, but that is my job as a stand-up. (Scott 2019)

Perhaps the most affecting moments in his routine, and some of the funniest, are when Scott tells how others around him were implicated in the diagnostic journey from schizophrenia to bipolar. After an involved description of the events leading to the over-turning of his first diagnosis, his then girlfriend is consistently referenced as a supportive other: “I should also mention I no longer have that girlfriend in these stories any more ... Now she’s my wife” (Scott 2017). As Scott explained:

My wife is pivotal [in the show]: helping me get the treatment. When I first spoke of this and I talked about her - it hit me - I became very emotional how hard it had been for both of us. So I checked myself and tried to write in a way that wouldn’t make me emotional. I was very conscious. I could have made it more sentimental but I wanted to keep it to just for laugh. I don’t want people getting weepy. (Scott 2019)

This is an important principle of what I refer to as a poetics of vulnerability: that vulnerability avows structural support. I argue that Scott’s work, like others discussed here, extends Gilson’s idea of vulnerability as a productive human state: it is an aesthetic - and comedic - resource, which has not thus far been properly understood. *Delusions* upsets the notion of the self as autonomous entity: Scott’s journey is an implicit critique of the ideology of what Gilson terms ‘entrepreneurial subjectivity’, the now prevalent mode of citizenship which promotes competitive self-seeking. What comes across clearly in his material is the care and attention of a range of psychiatrists and a loving partner who supported Scott to attain his current equilibrium. *Delusions* then, despite being a solo performance, to borrow from Shannon Jackson, “foregrounds performance as a series of supporting relations” (2011, p. 42). This is

echoed in two iterations of the performance I have seen where Scott openly refers to written material on the stage floor. He makes no secret that this work is 'supported' by written material and occasionally allows us to see the written mechanism that comics often keep hidden.

Scott's psychiatric condition, bipolar disorder, is, one might argue, *already personified*. Psychoanalyst Darian Leader states that bipolar disorder often involves the "creation of a new persona, as if one were someone else" (2013, p. 15), which he associates with the role of "the night club entertainer who has to keep his audience focused on himself at all times" (2013, p. 25). Is it "any accident", Leader asks, "that manic depression is so common in the world of comedians?" (2013, p. 25). For Leader, the 'signature motifs' of bipolar, during high periods, correlate with stand-up: the flight of ideas; the sense of a special connectedness between things; compulsions and increased appetites; a tendency to create categorical distinctions between good and bad; and the need for an audience. Such correlations have been questioned by comedian Sarah Pascoe:

It is tempting to say "YES, that is what comedians are like, we are not normal, we are so special and creative, QUICKLY put us in the attic and get remarried!" But we're not that interesting. Very little of what we do is inspired. We work hard on sculpting our routines. Through nightly practice. What remains in a set and what gets cut is mostly decided by the audience, whose reactions are essential within the creative process. Are they psychotic too? (Pascoe 2014)

These comments reflect what psychoanalyst Adam Phillips views as the problem of both *undervaluing* so-called mental illness – disciplining it through normative rules – and *over-valuing* it – idealising or romanticising those who have 'it' and convey some essential truth (Phillips 2012, p. 197). I do not want to reinforce a binary opposition between 'the nightly grafter' and the 'gifted psychotic'. I simply suggest that there is a *formal synergy* between the art of stand-up and the clinical label of bipolar, as it is defined by Leader. Both 'forms' share a hyper-connectivity; a propensity for word-play and punning; and the need to keep the language flowing: "Manic discourse freezes the listener; speaking keeps the other person there ... The listener will often feel manipulated or controlled" (Leader 2013, p. 25). Stand-up is manic speech formalised: the underlying rule that makes stand-up work is that what appears to be dialogue is always one with a silent interlocutor. As comedian Dylan Moran observes: "It's like you're having a conversation with the other person, but you're having to work it out for both of you" (Maron 2012). Any disturbance in this formal contract, heckling for example, is an exception that proves the rule: it is disruption that must be suppressed to make way for continued monologue.

### **PERSONA INTERRUPTED: LAUREN PATTISON'S "SHIT TONNE OF LAYERS"**

The second category of persona in relationship to comedy and mental health I refer to as 'interruptive' because it splits and refocuses an established persona in order to voice another more layered truth. Perhaps the most shocking example - and at the time of writing, most influential in the comedy industry - is the Australian comedian Hannah Gadsby's 2017 work *Nanette*, which broke with her habitual persona and has become a touchstone for a re-examination not just of mental health but of the formal conventions of stand-up. These, Gadsby argues, perpetuate harmful tropes of self-degradation and gender violence and make audience and performer complicit in the diminishment of personal suffering through self-deprecation. Mary Luckhurst's detailed essay on Gadsby in this issue can be read both in its own right and as a kind of parallax to this analysis. A comedienne at an earlier point in her career is Newcastle-born Lauren Pattison, who has enjoyed rapid success over the last two years, with shows *Lady*

*Muck* and *Peachy*. Pattison's comic persona plays with her identity as a young woman, recently graduated, who finds herself in a world which jars with her working-class roots. She references her appearance as 'cute' like a baby or a kitten; is self-deprecating about her ability to find suitable relationships; and much of her comedy derives from her class position as the underdog in most relationship and social situations. This persona works itself through the two shows: the first is a break-up narrative, the second a redemption tale of new love and new adventures, touring comedy in Australia. Pattison's child-adult status is consistently deployed through references to her mum, and the sense that Lauren is vulnerable and in need of being looked after. Pattison willingly delves into the underlying anxieties which underpin her success. Two thirds into *Peachy*, Pattison moves seamlessly into the following monologue, which occurs after her new boyfriend has bought her a gift, which demonstrates how much he has listened to her, not something she is used to:

I find it quite hard to get people to listen. If I want to get people to listen to me I have to charge you £10, put on some sequins and scream into a microphone [*big laugh*] that's how I do it [*as laughter fades*] ... 'Comedy Lauren', everyone *cares* what Comedy Lauren's got to say. 'Normal Lauren': nobody gives a fuck. No one gives a shit. I can put a joke on Facebook and it'll get few hundred likes 'cause I'm fucking hilarious. I can ask for someone to go for a coffee with me and no one will reply. No one gives a shit about the real me. Everyone just cares about that version of me: the on-stage me, the comedy one, that's who people want to know, and I can't be that person all the time. I'm not that person all the time. So this was the first time that someone cared about me, Normal Lauren, who puts on a shit tonne of layers, just to make someone laugh. That's who someone cared about.  
(Pattison 2018)

When I saw this show live, the immediate impact of these words was incredibly powerful. It was as if someone was literally taking off the mask she had maintained up to this point and trying on another.

Pattison's reference to the "shit tonne of layers" is a call back to an earlier routine where she literally dresses herself in an absurd number of clothing layers, awaiting her boyfriend's arrival. Yet, it also echoes the psychological layering happening in the moment: that what we see on stage is a layered, constructed persona. Perhaps the correlation between the sartorial and the psychological is accidental but Pattison's work is so carefully written and constructed that this seems unlikely. In its way, it is a direct challenge to the audience, as if she is saying: I'm not *just* a clown, I'm not *just* what you can see, I'm a whole other person besides this. This on-stage revelation echoes John Limon's central thesis that stand-up's true subject is always abjection: abjection as an abasement and a prostration before the audience; but also abjection as a way to describe "something mirroring your life, some skin that cannot be sloughed off, some role ... that has become your only character" (2000, p. 4). Perhaps in this case not the *only* character, but a character that has suddenly given Pattison a degree of fame and hard-won recognition that would be difficult to give up. It is as if Pattison, like Batman's enemy, Bane, has found a true purpose through a mask. As Bane in *The Dark Knight Rises* says of his position: "No one cared who I was till I put on the mask" (Nolan & Nolan, p.3) Bane's survival, and perhaps that of some comedians, is dependent on the putting on of a persona.

Pattison's work also underlines Alain Ehrenberg's thesis that "depression ... serves as a canvas upon which to sketch out the changes in modern subjectivity, the displacement of the hard task of being healthy" (2016, p. 232). Ehrenberg asserts that depression is an endemic contemporary phenomenon, one which reflects the weariness of the postmodern subject, who must undertake the daily labour of self-definition. I argue that stand-up is a particular kind of

self-definitional labour, one that reflects - via persona - what it means to live in a world of perpetual, self-monitoring choices. Pattison, in *Peachy*, has achieved the success she desired and been given new choices: international travel, awards, independence. Yet this choice, this sovereignty of the individual, as Ehrenberg terms it, leads to insecurity and the inability to act. Depression is the opposite of the desired social norm: future-orientated, goal-driven, autonomous, proactive, and invulnerable. Pattison, in her portrait of the artist as a young depressive, offers, like several other comics analysed here, a counter-discourse, one that gives voice to depressive subjectivity. This subjectivity is, as Nietzsche once asserted, a complaint: "There is one small dose of revenge in every complaint", he said, which "can give life spice and make it endurable" (qtd in Ehrenberg 2016, p. xiii). There is an anger in Pattison's words at this point in the show, a reproach, not just to the world at large but to the audience. It is this act of anger that seeks to make the most direct connection. Yet it also hints at the fleeting nature of this connection. It is a statement of rage at one human being's incapacity to connect beyond the level of the joke.

### **PERSONA AS THEATRICAL CONCEIT: STEWART LEE AND THE GHOSTS OF DEAD COMEDIANS**

Stewart Lee, who has increasingly had to reinvent his marginalisation because of his commercial success, is an example of the use of persona as theatrical conceit which troubles the notion of a fixed or authentic identity. Deploying a faux-arrogant persona, aggrandising mania coupled with despair, Lee has defined his creative process in part thus:

Like a lot of stand-ups I try to write in the rhythm and cadences of someone who has cornered you in a bar or a train carriage, continues drinking steadily and determinedly over a two hour period, grows increasingly agitated and unhappy whilst holding forth on a series of subjects he really knows little about; and in so doing, inadvertently reveals some great truth and/or the real things that are driving him to despair. (Lee 2013)

Lee is underlining an important issue: that comic persona is constructed, intimate and vernacular, and often implies deep-rooted distress. If 'agitation', 'despair', and 'unhappiness', not to mention alcohol and other self-cures, are often part of the dramaturgy of stand-up *per se*, might this not make stand-up a form *a priori* equipped to explore mental distress? Some readers may find the inclusion of Lee in this discussion surprising. I am, for the most part, analysing the work of stand-ups who declare a clinically specific mental health issue. Lee does not. But some of his routines have led certain audience members and critics to believe that he has:

I was in Dublin and I did a long bit about thinking I'm being haunted by the ghosts of comedians who have killed themselves. It goes on for ages and people buy into it. I've had people in the front row going, "Can you see them? Are they around you?" Anyway, a woman in the front row got her camera out and took a photo. So I went, "Why would you do that? Why would you take a photo of someone remembering people they know who have taken their own lives?" Then she crept out .... she's a journalist ... and she's tweeted: "I've just seen Stewart Lee have a mental breakdown on stage thinking that ghosts are attacking him." She bought into it to the point where she thought she'd got a scoop that I'd gone nuts. (Lee 2013)

The routine which, which eventually appeared in *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle* (BBC 2016), reminds me of Frankie Howard's joke: "The most important thing in show business is you've *got* to be authentic. And if you can fake that, you've got it made" (qtd in Ince 2014). Lee's authentic conceit is precisely that: fake. He presents the trope of the wounded clown recovering from



childhood trauma (a bullying incident where other boys urinate on him); berates his audience for laughing in all the wrong places (saying “Audiences like you as good as murdered Robin Williams”); and then pretends to hear voices and see the bodies of dead comedians on stage in a painful pseudo-collapse. Part of my research process has involved practising stand-up as a creative intervention with people who identify as mental health service users, which has involved watching recordings of some of the comedians discussed here with members of Recoco Recovery College, Newcastle -Upon-Tyne. Responses to Lee’s recorded work were mixed. One person asked: “How does he get an audience for that?” (Seminar 2019b). Another praised the way Lee was able to weave different elements together over the course of the half hour so that if you missed one bit, you would miss the whole point. Another found it offensive and walked out, stating: “That is totally disgusting. I’ve heard voices. You can’t take the piss out of that” (ibid). Another stated “I laugh at my voices like he does. You’ve got to laugh about it” (ibid). Furthermore, we discussed the possibility that Lee was doing the equivalent of blacking up: ‘madding up’. If so, who had the authority to claim ownership of madness? To exercise its limits?

Stand-up troubles the relationship between public statement and truth: in the field of medicalised mental health, which has become ever more obsessed with the ‘objective’ truth of diagnosis, stand-up can convey the limits of such objectivity. Lee’s deployment of persona dismantles any simple, unambiguous model combining stand-up and mental health. I argue that the utility of stand-up - in deconstructing stigma for example - is not limited to the ‘honest’ or ‘authentic’ confession of mental health labels. The complex interplay of public utterance, joke, truth, persona, and audience-performer relationship creates a space in which all fixed labels, especially those of psychological instability (which cause some people to be described sane and others mad) seem to disappear for the life of the performance. It is by understanding how each comic manages the relationship between truth, persona, and so-called illness that stand-up might offer new ways of thinking about the lived experience of mental health. In Lee’s case, the line between art and psychosis is intentionally blurred when he discusses the distance between himself and his stage persona:

I remember being on stage in Liverpool, and a terrible thing had happened in Liverpool that week and I was thinking how awful it would be to accidentally mention that and I found myself up above myself looking down on myself and I was saying all these things and I was trying to stop me from doing it and I realised that it wasn’t happening, that I wasn’t saying those things and I became this other personality and I lost time. I don’t know what I was doing in that time, I had a kind of panic that this other voice had got the better of me. But now I use that. I sort of let it ... let it do things, and I think I can normally get it back before it’s ruined everything. It might be from having been in the double act, with Rich Herring, where that was sort of my function, was to, um, bait him into going too far and then I would get the thing back on track. But now I do that to myself. (Hagen 2019)

This is an example of where a sort of fugue or panic state has inspired a later creative choice. It is interesting to note that Lee evokes the earlier double act as a potential *reason* for this voice hearing, as if he is channelling his one-time stage partner, even as a solo act. If the seeing of dead people on stage is fictional, drawing as much on Victorian medium shows as stand-up (Luckhurst 2014), even more ambiguous is the mental mechanics of a live stand-up working out, in the moment, what he can or should get away with. It is possible that this aesthetic choice was born of a previous necessity: an overcoming of an earlier on-stage trauma in which he genuinely lost control. Lee often seeks to ‘lose the room’ in his longer sets; there is a built-in dynamic of failure in his work where he is consciously trying to make it *appear* as if the act has

lost its way. Lee claims that this is because he wants his act to be liked (or respected) *in spite of* his on-stage persona, not because it is charming the audience (Lee 2010).

### PERSONA AS DISTANCING EFFECT: FELICITY WARD'S EXUBERANT DEPRESSION

Australian-born comic Felicity Ward represents a fourth potential category for understanding persona: as an emotional distancing device. Ward describes her on-stage persona as:

Quite joyful. I do find it very pleasurable being on stage. I also think that that's very un-British. It's not a very common persona over here [in the UK] to be exuberant on stage. It also depends on confidence. If I'm confident I can get away with being really cheeky or really dark and because the audience feel safe, they know that they're going to come out of it ... I'm not a sit-back-on-my-heels, cynical, you'll-come-to-me, kind of comic. I'm very open-hearted. (Ward 2019)

This 'open-heartedness' has led one reviewer to refer to Ward's comedy as "highly strung and needy" (Logan 2015). Logan's review of Ward's 2015 Edinburgh festival show *What If There is No Toilet?* - a narrative of anxiety, depression and irritable bowel syndrome; and of recovery from recurrent on-stage panic attacks brought on by the fear that Ward would be unable to find a toilet if needed - claims that Ward has "brought her nervous negative energy under control" and "learned how to use it *for good*" (Logan 2015, my italics). Logan underlines an important issue: the extent to which vulnerability is equated with socially undesirable characteristics such as 'neediness', an over-burdensome way of being in the world which is *not* 'good'. Logan's brief critique of Ward's persona suggests that the success of *What If There is No Toilet?* is due, in part, to Ward having 'tamed' her anxiety. The show, with its narrative thread of recovery, has outed the panic attacks that were once hidden: it has made them material as well as persona. Or put another way, the show has made Ward's anxiety more bearable to Logan because 'it' has been explained. Thus, Logan is ambiguously both celebrating Ward's vulnerability *and* setting the 'proper' parameters of how it should be deployed. There is a potential gender bias in such criticism. As Ward says:

I think something that has been tricky for British reviewers to swallow with me is I'm not a damaged genius. So sometimes when I do a joke that doesn't quite get the reaction I want, I say, guys you can clap louder than that, that was *very* funny. That's ... faux-arrogance. But other comedians who *attack* the audience as part of their schtick: they are lorded as being unique. There's definitely sexism that comes into play. Rose Matafeo [New Zealand comic] and I talk about how women are perceived, how anxiety is perceived. 'Oh, she's very anxious on stage, she's got an anxious persona, an anxious personality'. And Rose says, they're writing it like it's a bad thing! We have anxiety: of course we're anxious! Many comics come across as depressed, often men are depressed as part of their persona. Or Russell Kane: he's very hyper; and he's been hugely successful. When he was first exploding [onto the scene] it was this refreshing, energetic, hyper-active young man. With women, it's like: 'Oh, she's a bit anxious'. (Ward 2019)

In addition to the way that certain readings of female artists reveal gender bias, I argue that the analysis of Ward's persona can lead to more generative readings of vulnerability as a vital aesthetic resource which extends the range of what is possible in stand-up comedy. At one point in *What If There is No Toilet?* Ward tells the story of a panic attack she experiences on her birthday. Because she is so distraught, her boyfriend makes the decision to physically restrain her. This is one instance, perhaps, where one's sympathy for Ward threatens to overwhelm her comedy. However, this moment of extreme vulnerability is undercut in two ways. First, Ward deploys a vivid metaphor to describe her physical state:

I started flailing around ... I looked like one of those blow up men out the front of used car dealerships. I'm like N...No! [*begins to physicalise the image arms and body waving as she is speaking but smiling at the same time*] These prices are crazy! Everything must go! Nothing to do with diarrhoea, just quality Toyota Camries. [*big laugh from audience*] (Ward 2016)

This moment jolts the spectator away from the emotional content and toward a more distanced perspective. The comedy arises from the absurd juxtaposition of the lived reality with the metaphorical extension; one that feels oddly apt. A balloon man, after all, has nothing inside him. He is a hollow skin filled with air, he is nothing but the 'behaviour' of his image, which is weightless, chaotic movement. The comedy enriches the metaphor by enacting and physically demonstrating it. It also points to a rather obvious fact about comedy: that it always pushes toward weightlessness. As Kant put it, laughter creates a "sudden evaporation of expectation to nothing", a disappearance of something into the void of laughter (qtd in Critchley 2002, p. 5). In her personification of anxiety as a blow-up man, Ward attains a kind of weightlessness that, however briefly, allows her and her audience to transcend the memory of a trauma, to turn it into material. Far from the unbearable vulnerability of being, for Ward this is the bearable lightness of being Ward. The balloon image works so well, both as poetry and comedy, because it represents a complete *lack* of subjectivity in a *highly* subjective moment.<sup>v</sup>

Secondly, Ward undercuts the vulnerability of the moment by stating, matter-of-factly: "After a while I think I just tuckered myself out!" This is followed by a nod and a wink to the audience:

It's very tiring being mentally ill, let me tell you. [*Changes persona into a workout instructor with a faux upper-class English accent*] And that's why I'm in such great shape [*poses, legs stretched in profile, as the instructor, as if for camera*]. (Ward 2016)

This impish knowingness is a major part of Ward's persona, Brechtian in its estrangement of material and mood: the exuberant depressive, able to share harrowing personal detail with the breezy flamboyance of a Butlin's redcoat. This is not to suggest that Ward's smile is somehow fake, the rictus grin of the bored entertainer. Far from it, Ward's originality lies in her ability to match high level performance energy with searing distress, without ever appearing shamed or in need of sympathy. Ward *enjoys* performing. In her own words, "performance is an act of service" (Ward 2019). It is such moments of *Verfremdungseffekt* that forcefully remind us of performance's contribution to a poetics of vulnerability: that in heightened states of mood and attention, performance can disrupt the binary that falsely separates the normative good - socially positive behaviour - from so-called mental illness (bad). For the time of her performance, Ward suspends the judgement that requires some people to be labelled mad and others sane.

## PERSONA AS BELONGING: SEYMOUR MACE'S REVELS IN DEPRESSION

The fifth and final category is that of persona as a way of belonging in the world, of creating and maintaining a useful social role. Seymour Mace is a Newcastle-based comedian who enjoys a cult following due to his long-standing work as a headliner on the club circuit and his award-winning Edinburgh fringe shows, such as *Niche as Fuck* (2015); *Shit Title* (2016); and *Seymour Mace is My Name: Climb up My Nose and Sit in my Brain* (2019). Difficult to categorise, Mace's work regularly includes material about depression: "I've been spending a lot of time by myself. I've been doing that thing where you don't wash your hair... Depression." As Mace stated in interview:

It's easy to see how ridiculous the world is. We wear clothes, build houses, but we're just animals like all the other animals. Everything is ridiculous. It's easy to view that negatively. The world is crazy. I see depression as a switch. Because my switch is switched to negative, I only see the negatives. (Mace 2019a)

Mace rarely allows the audience to settle into a cosy relationship with him or the material. There is something edgy about his work: he is not asking you to build a relationship with him. He is not asking for permission. He uses his voice and body boldly: this is me. Take or leave it but *I will make you laugh*. Often his observations are delivered in a conversational drawl, frequented by pauses, doubtful err's and ah's. The comedy is heightened by the way polished material is scuffed and broken up by the slowness of delivery. The literal transcription of the above joke would be:

So err, right, I've err I've been spending a lot of time by myself... been doing that thing where you don't wash your hair... Depression.

Perhaps of all the comics whose persona I analyse here Mace is the one who presents the least concern for what the audience thinks of him. This is not the 'faux arrogance' that Ward and Lee utilise to great effect. With Mace, unlike Ward and Lee, one is rarely conscious of another self, peeking through the façade. Mace's on-stage self is closer to a kind of ontological ground zero: a purified deprecated self, which acts as a foundation from which all else follows. His uniqueness lies in the juxtaposition of a depressed, despairing, often angry perspective on the world – its injustice, its need for conformity – with flights of childlike fancy and a love of home-made theatrical props. This conjunction has led to his work being described as "dark whimsy", which Mace has further dubbed "Grimsy" (see Goldsmith 2016).

A normative reading (or performing) of vulnerability would single out Mace as 'the vulnerable one' because he is speaking of suffering, different in essence from the autonomous, invulnerable spectators. Such a reading would be wholly in keeping with normative assumptions that seek to close down a nuanced engagement with vulnerability. Stand-up circumvents this paradigm in several ways. The most obvious way this happens is that comedians have the microphone, and thus take control of the room. As Mace puts it:

There's a definite separation between the persona on stage and the persona off stage. A lot of people don't get that, they expect you to be that person they just saw on stage. For many people, their worst nightmare is doing what I do, getting on stage in front of people but for me it's the opposite way round: the stage is the *one* place where I feel comfortable where I can be 100% myself. I can be a complete arsehole and it's perfectly alright for people to laugh at me. If I did this kind of thing out on the street I would be sectioned. It would be *inappropriate* to form a crowd and laugh at me. For me on stage is only place where I feel sane. I feel at one. When I get off stage that's the insane place. I have to wear blinkers, I have to fit in with society, become a happy little robot ... I'd happily be on stage all the time. (Seminar 2019a)

Echoing both Robin Williams' and Lauren Pattison's comments, what is remarkable is how much of this off-stage conversation – recorded in a public seminar – found its way into Mace's 2019 show *Climb Up My Nose*, almost verbatim. These words elicited much laughter in an Edinburgh fringe preview, suggesting that the line between the on-stage and off-stage persona is not quite as clear-cut as Mace suggests. I do not know whether the off-stage conversation was a 'bit' before the seminar, or whether Mace logged it in his mind and decided to use it for the show at a later stage. I do not think that this matters; my point is not to 'test' the origin or authenticity of a thought. The point is the fluidity between life lived and life as material. For Mace, and perhaps

for many comics, there is no distinct line. It is as though Mace is continually inhabiting a *potential* stage, where personal revelation operates as material and vice versa. In his full-length fringe shows – and in his monthly panel show *Seymour Makes it up As He Goes Along* – Mace turns on the house-lights and often eschews use of a microphone. The gap between on- and off-stage is therefore traversed and the informality heightened. In his 2019 show Mace follows the above monologue with a literal illustration of the gap between his on- and off-stage self. Standing off-stage, he stands head down, to the music of Tom Waits, the sombre piano underscoring the slow lyrics: “Lonely, Lonely, Lonely I, Lonely place”. Leaping on stage, the music cuts to *Uptown Funk* by Mark Ronson and Bruno Mars: “Come on, dance, jump on it / If you sexy then flaunt it / If you freaky then own it”. The demonstration becomes funnier the more the juxtaposition is repeated and the swifter the changes between each persona. With depressive panache, in the performance I viewed, Mace made a point of berating his own performance for its lack of finesse and pointing out all the ways it should be improved. This generated more laughter.

Any sense of ‘recovery’ in Mace’s case is not visible or voiced. He exists on-stage in a comic present, any recovery always offset to some future point, some moment where his apartness from the world may end. Indeed, as his most recent Fringe show attests, he had to abandon his working title, *Seymour Beats Depression*, because he could not beat it (Mace 2019b). Mace’s depression becomes material, alongside other material. This is counter to a normative societal pressure for disability or mental illness to carry a weight of meaning: a warning for others; or a cathartic message to take forward about overcoming tragedy; or an exemplar of the contemporary watchword – resilience. Mace’s depression, in other words, is not redemptive. During one scratch pub gig in 2017, Mace created a montage of personal humiliation (a ritual shaming by his ‘parents’, drawn from members of the audience; and indecision as to the practical means of a potential suicide, performed to the soundtrack of Pharrell Williams’s *Happy*, which offered few obvious punchlines). Such comedy depends on an unusual complicity. Mace invited several spectators to join him on stage, to play members of his family. We were given a script. While we briefly rehearsed the lines, Mace stripped down to his underwear. There followed what might be described as a ritual shaming, with each family member taking turns to inform Mace what an inadequate human being he was and that he was not really a member of the family. The majority of the audience met this event with hysterical laughter – although one did leave in tears. Mace’s humour, I argue, slips the knot of Hannah Gadsby’s *Nanette* moment because the self-deprecation is so extreme, so foundational to him as a person: it becomes a commentary on deprecation itself and the lengths an audience will go to support a performer. Mace himself is resistant to the idea that his depression is a muse that fuels his comedy, but for me, a delighted spectator, I am not sure. It is as though I am witnessing someone seeking to understand who they are in the world, only able to find themselves, momentarily, through performance. Mace takes something that he finds chronically debilitating in real life and turns it into something beautiful on stage. During *Shit Title* (2016) he states: “I suffer from depression. Well no, I don’t suffer from it. I revel in it!” So (mostly) does the audience.

## CONCLUSION

This essay has demonstrated five ways in which persona can be understood in relation to stand-up and mental health and has focused on the *surface* presentation of self (persona) rather than the *depth* of underlying desires (psyche). This focus mirrors both the form of the joke, which deliberately shatters distinctions between surface and depth, and the form of modern psychiatry, which turns surface symptoms into diagnostic labels and thus eschews subjective depth (see Leader 2011, pp. 31-33). Subjectivity, as Darian Leader has argued, is currently

missing from clinical responses to mental illness. This is proven by the fact that in a single year (2008) only 0.17 per cent of published medical papers about schizophrenia referenced patients' direct experience (Geekie & Read 2009, p. 25). To treat distress as a problem of pharmacology – a set of symptoms, an object to be treated, a pill to be swallowed – denies the essential human stories that create a person and enable them to connect with others. Stand-up provides a direct channel to these stories and gives permission for other stories to be heard.

In this essay I am suggesting new theoretical perspectives in the emerging field of performance and mental health. I am offering the field a poetics of vulnerability. Such a poetics suggests that that vulnerability is a comedic resource to be used and celebrated: that vulnerability invites spectators' complicity; that it re-avows concepts of support and care; and that it places both fixed identity and fixed judgement in doubt. Stand-up is an art form well suited to 'therapeutic subjectivity' – the projection of an inner self that needs to be witnessed and understood by others. This operates in resistance to 'entrepreneurial subjectivity' that promotes competitive self-seeking as the only rational choice and which makes the individual consumer solely responsible for his or her own health.

A poetics of vulnerability also supports the concept that performance and mental health is a gendered subject: performance mirrors the cultural tendency for male artists' distress to be "reframed as [being] indicative of essentially male attributes of creativity, uniqueness" (Bell 2011, p. 203) whereas the "hysterical body has become emblematic of all the traditionally negative characteristics considered to be feminine: duplicity, theatricality, suggestibility, instability, weakness, passivity and excessive emotionality" (Bankey 2001, p. 40). The comic form does however render this category ambiguous. The artists discussed here engage in an art form that utilises *all* the negative 'feminine' characteristics, identified by Bankey, as *constitutive of its craft*: duplicity (Scott's misdirection and double meaning); theatricality (Ward's exaggerated personification); suggestibility (Lee's outrageous maintenance of false truth in the service of the joke); weakness (Pattison's revelation of vulnerability as a mode of self-deprecation); passivity (Ward's faux-arrogance of not 'caring' what an audience thinks); and excessive emotionality (Mace's 'manic' rants).

A poetics of vulnerability has room for both acceptance and critique of official diagnostic labels. Ward reports that she is diagnosed with generalised anxiety disorder and emerging depression; Scott, at the point of writing, is content with his fought-for diagnosis of bipolar; and Mace expresses the relief that accompanied his diagnosis of depression (Goldsmith 2016). At no point, aside from Lee's routine which acts as a meta-commentary on stand-up and depression, is there an indication of the problem of labelling *per se*. Does this indicate that the *absence* of diagnostic categories has become unthinkable? Rather it suggests that by wearing the label – by absorbing it into the persona as it were – the diagnosis itself has become a kind of shield from a vulnerability that would otherwise be too painful to share. One of the issues that Scott faced when publicising his show was the sudden fact of having the words bipolar and schizophrenia next to his name. Scott had to adjust to the reality that his public persona was now inflected with new labels and over time he became comfortable with them (Seminar 2019a). This is a considerable contribution to a growing culture of de-stigmatising and 'un-shaming' of psychiatric labels.

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## END NOTES

<sup>i</sup> It is no accident that the joke teller often begins the set with a reference to their own physical attributes. The laugh comes from the recognition that *they see what you see*; that they are somehow standing outside themselves *seeing themselves as you do*: that is why “I know what you’re thinking...” is a common set up line.

<sup>ii</sup> This also demonstrates Ince’s care for his fan base, many of whom will see him repeatedly, year after year (Ince 2018b). For Stewart Lee, the same applies in a slightly different way: “One of the reasons I always man the book stall afterwards is I find it very funny to do all that edgy stuff for two hours and then be all, ‘Hello, how are you? Would you like this signed, too?’” (Self 2016).

<sup>iii</sup> The portrait that Apatow paints of himself as the artist as a young geek is instructive as a model or ‘ideal type’: he is “an angry kid” for whom the world does “not make sense”; and so turns to comedians to “fill the void” (2015, pp. xii-xiii).

<sup>iv</sup> For detailed examinations of comedy and mental health by practicing comedians see Robin Ince’s documentary *Tears of a Clown*, BBC Radio 4 and Susan Calman’s *Cheer Up Love: Adventures in Depression with the Crab of Hate*.

<sup>v</sup> It also tangentially acts as a comment on a cultural narrative in which female performers are emptied of subjectivity (see Gregory 2018, pp. 1-2).

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