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Beryl Reid Says... Good Evening: Performing queer identity on British television

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Abstract

Beryl Reid Says... Good Evening (1968) was a comedy revue series broadcast on BBC television in the late 1960s that showcased the talents of a renowned British character comedy performer. Beryl Reid's career spanned music hall, variety theatre, dramatic acting, radio comedy, film and television. She was a celebrity figure from the 1950s to her death in the 1990s but never became a 'star' as such. Reid's work is addressed as a form of queer performance, both in roles that reference lesbian sexuality and roles that depict eccentric femininities. This television series was one of the few attempts to showcase her talents, and it is discussed here as an example of how character comedy queers heteronormativity through its camp attention to the everyday.

Keywords

comedy

queer

femininity

heterosexuality

television

performance

camp

Beryl Reid (1919–1996) was a British actor, whose career in character comedy stretched from music hall to film and television. She also had a number of high-profile roles in television drama, including as Connie in the BBC adaptations of John le Carré's *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1979) and in *Smiley's People* (1982), for which she won a BAFTA. This article examines Reid's performance of queer identities, primarily through her articulation of camp. Beryl Reid identified as heterosexual but a number of her film and television roles referenced lesbian sexuality. In this regard, she is probably best remembered for her performance as June Buckridge in *The Killing of Sister George* (Aldrich, 1968), a grim rendering of a transgenerational relationship that was groundbreaking in its explicit representation of lesbian desire. Following a brief survey of Reid's career, this article focuses on her 1968 series *Beryl Reid Says... Good Evening* (1968), where she performs musical numbers and character sketches that satirize heteronormativity. Reid's primary work was in character comedy, a tradition in which performers create a character distinct from their own public persona that becomes a self-contained 'act':

It is a formula which permits considerable flexibility... it can allow the performer to show off a skill or to involve us closely in the fate of a character we come to care about. In fact it can walk on the edge of drama while ensuring that we do not lose sight of the comedian-as-author. This framework makes it possible for a performer to wield unusual power. It emphasizes woman as controller; she does not 'play herself' but creates a multiplicity of selves before the audience – selves which more conventional theatre practices might deny her. (Gray 1994:162)

This tradition thus lends itself to queer dynamics that cut through or expose social norms, and Beryl Reid takes full advantage of this. In her character comedy work Reid troubles binary understandings of gender and sexuality, deploying costume, regional accents and physical theatre to undercut the naturalization of straight, white, middle-class identity.

Camp contexts

The heritage of music hall, variety and theatrical revue, which informed Reid's work in film and television, is aligned with definitions of camp (see, e.g., Cleto 1999; Isherwood 1999; Sontag 1999; Robertson 1996). Fabio Cleto proposes camp as 'the site of an improvised and stylised performance, a proper-groundless, mobile building without deep and enduring foundations', thus following the critical tradition of relating camp to theatricality and transience (1999: 9). This statement also registers that camp offers an unstable platform for political positions or polemical argument; it is not designed to unequivocally carry politics or polemics, rooted as it is in the practice of satire, parody and irony. Camp is more a means of puncturing the logic of political agendas, by sending up seriousness and debunking weighty polemic through 'discursive resistance, [and] semiotic excess' (Cleto 1999: 3). Pamela Robertson argues that there is also a tradition of feminist camp performance that 'runs alongside – but is not identical to – gay camp, [and which] represents oppositional modes of performance and reception' (1996: 9). Robertson describes feminist camp as: '... a female form of aestheticism, related to female masquerade and rooted in burlesque, that articulates and subverts the "image- and culture-making processes" to which women have traditionally been given access' (1996: 9). This is a tradition that may be traced, faintly, working against the binaries of gender and representation. Feminist camp, in this account, represents an alternative to the dynamic of the male gaze, which positions women as object rather than

subject, as static facades rather than active protagonists. It also offers a way of understanding the history of successful female character comedy performers who take active roles onstage and screen, a history that includes stars of music hall, such as Marie Lloyd, and early cinema, such as Marie Dressler (Banks and Swift 1987: 2–9; Martin and Seagrave 1986: 47–55).

These performers trouble the boundaries of heteronormativity and its hegemonic rendering of heterosexuality that attempts ‘to assert one “proper” heterosexuality and deny or pathologize the multiple other forms of heterosexuality that exist’ (Griffin 2009: 6). Women who perform character comedy may thus be understood as challenging ‘proper’ heterosexuality through a deployment of grotesque, camp and eccentric performance styles.

Eccentric performances

This genealogy of camp performance informs my reading of Reid’s work. When Beryl Reid died in 1996 the *New York Times* ran her obituary under the headline ‘Beryl Reid, actress, 76, dies: Gave life to varied eccentrics’ (Gussow 1996). Her work was indeed ‘varied’ and also emerged from the British tradition of variety theatre: ‘The offspring of the Victorian music hall, variety was one of the most important forms of entertainment in the first half of the twentieth century’ (Double 2012: 1). Major theatres in London and the provinces were established in the mid-nineteenth century to support the demand for music hall, providing a performance circuit that spanned the United Kingdom. In the early twentieth century music hall became variety, a more family-oriented programme of entertainments running twice nightly with a shorter programme featuring fewer acts, whereas music hall shows had lasted for three or four hours. Variety was faster and more *varied* than music hall. Oliver Double notes critical distinctions made between the two forms: “‘Music Hall’ was seen as authentic, vital and democratic, whereas “‘Variety’ was refined, efficient and soullessly respectable’, but

he argues that they are simply ‘earlier and later terms for a continuous tradition’, much like burlesque and vaudeville in the United States (2012: 38).

Beryl Reid began her career in 1930s variety, touring provincial theatres as a soubrette impressionist doing character comedy ‘bits’. She travelled throughout the United Kingdom, working with famous music hall and variety performers, including Max Miller, Nellie Wallace and George Formby (Junior), the latter giving her a first uncredited film role in *Spare a Copper* (Carstairs, 1940) (Reid 1984: 9–22). By 1937, at 18, she had a regular show on BBC radio Manchester, *A Quarter of an Hour With Beryl Reid*, and she continued to work in theatre and radio during World War II (Reid 1984). Throughout her variety career, and her subsequent character comedy work in radio, film and television, Reid certainly ‘gave life to varied eccentrics’; not only regarding the range of roles and characters she perfected but also their queer tendencies.

Fabio Cleto, considering the etymology of ‘queer’, excavates its alignment with eccentricity in the *Oxford English Dictionary* – ‘Strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric, in appearance or character’ – and its relation to camp: ‘The estranging, alienating effect of eccentricity, anticonventionality, or perversion of doxastic prescription links *queer* with its “troubling inauthenticity” – witness the occurrences of *queer money*, “counterfeit money”, at least since 1740 (cf. OED Supplement, 1982, 972)’ (1999: 12–13, original emphasis). Beryl Reid’s background in variety performance places her within a similar history, as eccentric, camp and queer. In the introduction to an edited collection of essays on performativity and performance Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick pursue the etymology of performativity through Austin and Derrida, noting that the critical examination of performance acts has been linked to theatricality and camp: ‘the performative has thus been from its inception already infected with queerness’ (1995: 5).

Variety theatre gave full rein to Reid's avowedly eccentric approach to life and schooled her in the queer identities performed by music hall entertainers (Reid 1984: 1). Miller, Wallace and Formby all generated comedy personae that deviated from binary understandings of gender. Max Miller's stage character was a garrulous 'cheeky chappie', a 'front-cloth' comic dressed in clownish, brightly coloured suits, who employed gossip, direct address to the audience (Hudd and Hindin 1997:120–21). George Formby performed comedy and musical numbers as a bashful Lancastrian with a routine full of gentle innuendo underscored by his fey masculinity. Nellie Wallace, however, made queerness her particular forte, gaining a billing as 'The Essence of Eccentricity'. Alec Guinness saw her onstage at the London Coliseum in 1921 when he was 7 years old:

I don't believe I laughed at Miss Wallace on her first appearance. Truth to tell, I was a little scared, she looked so witch-like with her parrot-beak nose and shiny black hair screwed tightly into a little hard bun. She wore a loud tweed jacket and skirt, an Alpine hat with an enormous, bent pheasant's feather, and dark woollen stockings which ended in neat, absurd, twinkling button boots. Her voice was hoarse and scratchy, her walk swift and aggressive; she appeared to be always bent forward from the waist, as if looking for someone to punch. She was very small. Having reached centre stage she plunged into a stream of patter, not one word of which did I understand, but I am sure it was full of outrageous innuendoes. The audience fell about laughing but no laughter came from me. I was in love with her. (cited in Banks and Swift 1987: 89)

Wallace, from this account, as in other descriptions of her stage work and in the remnants of her film appearances, challenges her audience with a queer turn. Her hair, clothing, voice and

posture are decisively *wrong*, contradicting traditional associations of heterofemininity with softness in appearance and comportment.

Guinness' description of Wallace's act makes evident the link between eccentricity and queer performance. The troubling queerness of the eccentric female variety performer offers a subversive commentary on normative gender and sexual roles by destabilizing the semiotic certainties of binary models. Gender and sexuality are closely attended to in these comedy routines depicting onstage caricatures that often contradict or undercut heteronormativity. This places performers like Nellie Wallace in the feminist camp, to borrow Pamela Robertson's terms, because she confronts and deploys visual stereotypes in her character comedy work. Morwenna Banks and Amanda Swift cite Nellie Wallace as an exemplar of British character comedy:

Although she began her career in music hall, she had none of the inviting sexuality of music hall singers such as Marie Lloyd or Vesta Victoria. She was a thoroughbred clown who started as a clog dancer, was hopeless as a serious actor but excelled in music hall and pantomime. She cultivated an outrageous and outraged stage character – a scrawny hen of a woman who never got her man but never ceased to be infuriated by rejection. (1987: 89)

Performers such as Nellie Wallace, Beatrice Lillie and Beryl Reid followed the character comedy tradition from music hall and variety, refusing heteronormative femininity (Medhurst 2007: 179–80). Their onstage personae were not pretty, quiet or modest; from her early career Reid asserted that she 'didn't try to make up to look pretty; I made up badly, on purpose' (1984: 14). While such comedy may foster stereotypical and pejorative roles for women, such

as Wallace's angry spinster, they also offer a queer commentary on normative heterofemininity.

A queer career

During her career Beryl Reid developed a number of comedy character roles that she employed in variety, revue, pantomime, and her radio and television work, such as gawky, breathless schoolgirl Monica and the beatnik Birmingham dance hall queen Marlene, who sported a range of outrageous earrings. These personae carried her through to prime-time radio on *Educating Archie* (1950-1958), a hit show on the BBC's Light Programme (the predecessor of BBC Radio 2) in the 1950s. By the 1950s Reid had found her forte in intimate revue in the West End. While variety consisted of an assortment of separate acts, revue was a directed programme of performers who worked with each other in sketches, musical numbers or short plays based around a topical theme. Alongside her theatre roles Reid worked on television variety and sketch shows, such as *The Benny Hill Show* (1955–1968) and *The Ted Ray Show* (1955–1959). Television and radio work also led to guest appearances on panel shows and chat shows, such as *Call My Bluff* (1965–1988) and *Tea with Noele Gordon* (1956). After her small part in George Formby's *Spare a Copper* Reid continued her character comedy work in film too, including *The Dock Brief* (Hill, 1962), *Star!* (Wise, 1968) and *Inspector Clouseau* (Yorkin, 1968). She camps it up in *The Belles of St Trinians* (Lauder, 1954) as Miss Wilson, a butch maths and chemistry teacher who wears a monocle and tweed plus-fours, plays golf and helps the girls to produce quantities of gin in the school lab.

Reid's most famous film role, however, was a dramatic part in *The Killing of Sister George* (Aldrich, 1968). The film recounts the death of 'Sister George', a long-standing character in a

radio soap opera, and the impact this has on June Buckridge, the actor who plays her. In 1965 Reid toured the United Kingdom in a stage version of *The Killing of Sister George*, with Eileen Atkins as June's girlfriend Baby:

The tour was a disaster. We were path-finders. In the British theatre nobody before had spoken about Lesbianism, and this really destroyed the people we were playing to: in Bath we were deafened by the old chaps in their bathchairs being wheeled out by their nannies, their urine bottles rattling as they went, saying 'Disgusting, disgusting'. ... Hull was the biggest disaster of all. The people of Hull would barely serve us in the shops, they were so horrified. (Reid 1984: 129–30)

The touring company were indeed pathfinders; this was before the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, which decriminalized male homosexuality in Britain. Lesbian sexuality was literally unmentionable and while the play did not foreground its lesbian storyline audiences were in no doubt as to the implications of June/George and Baby's relationship. Yet the show went on to great success in London and New York; Reid won a Tony when the play went to Broadway in 1966. Aldrich's film was more explicit about the lesbian aspect, taking some pains to provide an authentic backdrop to the main characters' relationship. A central club sequence in the film was shot in the Gateways Club in Soho, employing club regulars as extras. The Gateways was a lesbian nightclub (1945–1985); it is fondly remembered in LGBT histories and generates camp nostalgia in retro club nights (see, e.g., *Another Nickel in the Machine* 2008; *Duckie Goes to the Gateways* 2013). Following campaigns around lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans sexualities in the liberation movements that emerged in the 1960s, *The Killing of Sister George* has come to represent a campy moment in lesbian

history. Most notably, it is a rare text from this era that offers a protagonist who is unapologetically queer, an ‘unrepentant butch’ (Anderson 2009).

Judith Halberstam notes the excessive semiotic weight that the butch woman on-screen carries, an excess that, as in Aldrich’s film, ‘exceeds the limits of the stereotype and disrupts the dominant systems of representation that depend on negative queer images’ (1998: 180). In contrast to the alleged distinction between performer and character in Reid’s character comedy work, this dramatic role continually blurs the boundaries of identity and performance:

The association made in this film between acting and being queer is common enough, as is the connection between homosexuality and the unreal, but the power of *The Killing of Sister George* lies in the way it insists on the absolute confusion between theater [*sic*] and life. Sister George is both an acting role and a real role, just as George’s butch persona is both a role and an identity. In the course of the film, George accosts a clutch of nuns in a taxicab, visits a prostitute, and goes to a dyke bar costume party with her lover as Laurel and Hardy: everything and nothing is an act. (Halberstam 1998: 197)

Reid’s performance of these fluid border crossings is informed by her work in variety and character comedy. The performativity of identity, of gender and sexuality, is thus made evident in the complex genealogies of Reid’s work in theatre, radio, television and film.

Beryl Reid’s queer trajectory is also apparent in her career, which does not trace a linear trajectory to stardom. Instead her work represents success on a smaller scale; she continued to

work for most of her life and forged a memorable path in character comedy work as well as straight dramatic roles. In her BFI biography Tise Vahimagi notes, ‘both cinema and television remained stubbornly oblivious of Reid’s capabilities’. Despite her success in *Sister George*, as the middle-aged man-eater Kath in both stage and film versions of Joe Orton’s *Entertaining Mr Sloane* (Hickox, 1970) and as Mrs Malaprop in a BBC production of Sheridan’s *The Rivals* (1971), Reid remained marginal, eccentric and, most importantly, visible. She won critical acclaim for these roles but they did not lead to larger projects. Beryl Reid is an example of a performer who did not fit, who did not become a star but rather a *personality*, a celebrity regular on panel shows such as *Blankety Blank* (1979–2002) in the 1980s. While Reid’s film, theatre and television work, in *The Killing of Sister George*, *Entertaining Mr Sloane* and *The Rivals*, may challenge the image of the ‘proper’ woman as heterosexual, sexually continent and verbally contained, her comedy is also queerly resistant in its depiction of a surreal landscape that satirizes heteronormativity per se. She is a direct descendent of variety turns like Nellie Wallace, character comedy that subverts hegemonic femininity by parodying the derogatory discourses assigned to women who do not conform to ‘proper’ gendered behaviour.

Old and new revue: *Beryl Reid Says... Good Evening*

This queer aesthetic is given full rein on her 1968 television show, *Beryl Reid Says... Good Evening*, a six-episode series broadcast on BBC1 in the early evening from March to April 1968. Each programme followed a similar format, opening with a standard voice-over announcement: ‘Ladies and gentlemen, Miss Beryl Reid’. The show is modelled on intimate theatrical revue, a form developed in the late nineteenth century:

Unlike variety, a revue was a show with a title, an actual production rather than just a collection of acts. It was written and directed, and cast members would appear in more than one item. There would be song and dance numbers performed by a chorus, sketches, and usually some sort of finale. (Double 2012: 47)

The intimate West End revue style that Reid's shows replicated for television was on a smaller scale than full theatrical revue, but had a similar structure; there were only two regular cast members in addition to Reid, and a further one or two more performers were given additional minor roles in sketches or comedy 'bits'. The show was largely written by Alan Melville, who had just presented two television series based on a stage revue, *Before the Fringe* (1967) and *More Before the Fringe* (1967). These two series showcased an older generation of comedy performers whose style anticipated Cambridge Footlights' *Beyond the Fringe*, a student revue that toured the United Kingdom in 1960 and heralded a new era of satirical comedy. Reid appeared in four episodes of *Before the Fringe* and recalls taking a traditional revue to London in 1961 following a provincial tour – the standard theatrical route. By 1961 theatrical revue was already regarded as old-fashioned: 'I suppose we looked dated, because we were well-dressed, and the notices were, in some cases, vitriolic' (1984: 119). *Beryl Reid Says... Good Evening* looks back to that older tradition of revue theatre, a style that was already outdated, marginal and unfashionable in 1968, a campily 'démodé' format on the newest, shiniest medium in 1960s Britain (Sontag 1999:60).

Reid's co-stars were Jake Thackray and Hugh Paddick, respectively symbolic of the new and old order in BBC light entertainment. Jake Thackray was a young satirical singer-songwriter who performed a song in each episode and was also occasionally given a role within a sketch. Reid had seen him on a television show produced in Leeds and asked for him as her musical

act (1984: 143). This form of musical satire, while part of the tradition of variety, was also evident in more youth-oriented programmes such as *That Was The Week That Was* (1962–1963), a show that opened with a topical musical number by Millicent Martin and featured satirical ‘calypso’ from Lance Percival. Reid’s other regular co-star was Hugh Paddick. Paddick was Reid’s contemporary; he also appeared on *Before the Fringe* and is probably best remembered now for the radio comedy series *Round the Horne* (1965–1969). Paddick played a number of comedy characters in *Round the Horne*, but his double act with Kenneth Williams as Julian and Sandy is infamous for its representation of gay identity on 1960s national radio. Julian (Paddick) and Sandy (Williams) were an outrageously camp couple who deployed the Soho gay slang, *polari*, to comic effect, in conversations with Kenneth Horne who played their straight man. This unapologetically risqué representation of queer identity and language was a first for BBC radio, and introduced *polari*, with its references to ‘bona’, ‘naff’ and ‘cottages’, to a wider audience, while also offering a lifeline to gay listeners across the nation (Baker 2002: 4–5). The background of Beryl Reid’s two co-stars, in addition to her own heritage on stage and screen, gives some sense of the rich texture of popular television entertainment in the late 1960s. The legacy of variety theatre, radio comedy and both old and newer revue styles offered an array of aesthetics that fed into the television show and fuelled the camp ‘semiotic excess’ apparent in Reid’s musical numbers and sketches.

Queer moments

To demonstrate this, I will examine one episode in detail. In the final show of the series, broadcast on 8 April 1968, the comedy begins immediately. Beryl Reid does indeed say ‘Good evening’ but is interrupted by Hugh Paddick wandering across the shot in front of her

and going to sit on a sofa in the background. Commenting quietly on how rude this is, Reid launches into a song about a ‘romance’ that goes badly wrong, with Paddick acting out the lyrics behind her:

I never knew that our romance had ended

Until he poisoned my food

...

He didn’t even try to scold me

He just disfigured my face

...

Life used to be so placid –

Darling please put down that acid –

And say that we’re sweethearts again.

Finally she knocks him out with a mallet; she then revives him and they chastely kiss as the song ends. The violence of the lyric is not allayed by Paddick’s comic mugging. This opening number narrates a heterosexual romance in terms of domestic violence, specifically violence against women. It is an uncomfortable introduction. In his examination of the usage of ‘queer’ (rather than gay or lesbian), Michael Warner asserts, ‘The insistence on “queer” – a term initially generated in the context of terror – has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simply intolerance, as the site of violence’ (1993: xxvi). Reid’s opening number thus makes a queer intervention by indicating the underlying association between heterosexuality and violence. The discourse of romance is exploded here, exposing discourses of power within the heterosexual dynamic.

This musical number is followed by a sketch in which Reid and Paddick play a couple who facilitate a burglar. The setting is a domestic living room, with Reid on the sofa watching television and knitting. Hugh Paddick enters with a piece of cake on a plate, and observes calmly that there is a burglar in the kitchen. Dialogue is delivered in a deadpan, distracted manner as Reid knits with one eye on the television and Paddick eats his cake; it is never made clear what their relationship is: are they a married couple, siblings or friends? The punchline to the sketch comes when the lady of the house arrives home and thanks them for babysitting; they do not mention the burglar, who has taken most of her valuables. This odd playlet echoes the style of Harold Pinter's early 'comedies of menace' and the broader traditions of absurdist drama. Pinter contributed material for two episodes of *Beryl Reid Says... Good Evening* but the author of this sketch is listed as P. H. Robinson. The effect is to destabilize the domestic arena (this is not their home) and normative oppositions between law-abiding and criminal subjects (they are content to be burgled). The sketch confounds expectations about the characters' responses and relationships. While the burglar is not seen in the sketch, his activities are considerably less disconcerting than the noncommittal manner of Reid and Paddick's characters, who deliver their lines in a fey, sing-song style. The sketch destabilizes its domestic setting, playing on the uncertainty of Reid's and Paddick's identities. Huddled on a sofa, they mimic the postures of the viewing audience, rarely looking at each other and mesmerized by the light from the television set. The suburban home is satirized here, its comforts literally and figuratively plundered, as Reid and Paddick parody television viewers so preoccupied with what they are watching that they accept a burglar without question.

Domestic camp

This sketch is followed by a song from Jake Thackray, and then another surreal playlet, titled ‘One Blast and Have Done’. The drama is once again set in the domestic arena, a kitchen with Joan Sims as housewife Freda. Reid plays Ivy, a neighbour who calls by asking to borrow a flute, in much the same manner as one might ask for a cup of sugar, asserting, ‘We’ve nothing in the house except percussion’. This bizarre request sets off a surreal conversation between the two Northern housewives, where musical instruments and songs become objects of exchange or offence. Freda manages to find ‘one of Mum’s old bassoons’ in a cupboard, which Ivy gratefully accepts, along with a cup of tea. Ivy then launches into a complaint about her neighbour, Mrs Bargold, who ‘started up’ when Ivy had gone into the garden for a quiet half hour:

You’ve never heard anything like it, *right through* the trellis work. ...

Mrs Bargold, I said, I don’t mind you singing, but not through my trellis, if you *don’t* mind. ... ‘Rock of Ages’, full blast. ...

I told her I didn’t have my trellis work put up for her to sing ‘Rock of Ages’ through.

The constant singing of ‘Rock of Ages’ through Ivy’s trellis is causing a nasty form of mould to develop, which Ivy struggles to remove. Freda reports that another neighbour is suffering from a similar problem caused by ‘someone singing “Shenandoah” through her letterbox’. The conversation is finally interrupted by a blast from a trombone offstage.

Ivy: [suddenly coy] ‘What was that..?’

Freda: [raises her eyebrows] ‘I expect he couldn’t wait – he’s blown the nearest thing!

[Ivy makes a rapid exit]

Freda: [to camera] ‘Nothing in the house except *percussion* – pah!’

In this sequence the women’s conversation defamiliarizes both orchestral instruments and the domestic arena by placing unfamiliar objects in a familiar setting. The dialogue also reverses the gendering of such instruments: a flute is usually played by female members of the orchestra while the bassoon is a male instrument. These surreal juxtapositions are compounded by a clash of cultural capital. Freda and Ivy are working-class, Northern English housewives, not characters one would associate with orchestral music. Their dialogue makes the everyday strange, weighted with unspecified innuendo, so that words such as ‘trellis’, ‘mould’ and ‘blow’ are overloaded with meaning. This comic territory was later mined by Alan Bennett, one of the original *Beyond the Fringe* players, in his *Talking Heads* series (1988/1998).

The evasive logic of the sketch makes it impossible to place. Why is this funny? Such surreal humour would be at home in absurdist theatre; the style and content is comparable to Beckett. The sketch was written by N. F. Simpson, an award-winning playwright whose work is categorized as Theatre of the Absurd and often compared with Eugene Ionesco’s surrealist style (Coveney 2011). His first play, *A Resounding Tinkle*, was staged in a 1958 Cambridge student production, directed by John Bird, with Eleanor Bron and Peter Cook taking the lead roles as a suburban couple who take delivery of an elephant. Simpson’s work is cited as an influence on the Footlights generation and the Monty Python team (Barfe 2011). In ‘One Blast and Have Done’ absurdism is deployed to queer domestic realism, via the camp

performances of Reid and Sims. Viewers may be reassured by the fruity implication of a sexual relationship between Ivy and her errant flautist; the sexual innuendo of ‘blowing’ and ‘starting without you’ is literalized by the sudden honk of the trumpet. This closing moment appears to offer some correspondence with reality, but fails to explain the offence of ‘singing through the trellis’. The sketch as a whole is an assault on concrete language; here the signifier is wrested from its signified, and a queer realm is created through Reid and Sims’ impeccable comic timing. This sketch demonstrates the diverse genealogies of Reid’s work: it references absurdist European theatre and the new comedy of the 1960s, as well as older traditions of music hall and variety, in its oblique take on the everyday. *Beryl Reid Says... Good Evening* evades finite categorization; it is neither old fashioned nor entirely new, but a complex amalgamation of theatrical histories and television futures.

The musical number that follows ‘One Blast...’ offers the viewer a more concrete reference to vaudeville history, as Reid performs ‘Burlington Bertie from Bow’ dressed as an ageing roué. The song, and Reid’s performance of it, references Ella Shields’ famous music hall act that itself parodied Vesta Tilley’s ‘Burlington Bertie – The Boy With the Hyde Park Drawl’. Shields and Tilley spent much of their careers cross-dressing as men onstage for comic effect; Tilley’s song personified ‘an upper-class layabout’, while the more famous Ella Shields version (written for her by her then husband) features an ‘apparently dashing young swell [who] turns out to be a fake, an impoverished, broken-down rake’ (Maitland 1986: 114–15). Once again, Reid calls upon the heritage of music hall, variety and revue in a manner that underlines the mutability and performativity of gender and class identities.

The final sketch features Reid as a rather scatty elderly woman who is called to a meeting for failing to pay her taxes. ‘The Battleaxe’ was written by Arthur Macrae, an established comedy writer who worked closely with Reid in television and theatre (1984 119). When the

tax inspector (Hugh Paddick) produces a handsome young bailiff (Jake Thackray) and says he will stay in her house day and night until she pays up, the older woman is delighted with this proposal. Reid's character gazes adoringly up at the (much taller) Thackray and gleefully takes him off to her home. Once again the standard dynamics of gender and sexuality are lampooned. Where the old are often regarded as unsexed, and women are expected to wait for men to act, this older woman demonstrates both 'improper' desire for a younger man and the ability to act upon it. The sketch pivots on commonly held assumptions regarding the proper sexual conduct of an elderly woman; her desire may be the punchline of the joke but it is desire nonetheless. The show subsequently closes, as every week, with Reid thanking her co-stars and singing Cole Porter's 'Every Time We Say Goodbye'. None of this offers a radical departure from existing modes of comic performance. Reid's work does not challenge or shock but it does undermine normative models of gender and sexual behaviours. Its queer power is evident in the borderline, unspecified perspective the show delivers in songs and sketches, most notably through a comic disregard for the perceived boundaries of age, sexuality, gender and class.

Back to the future

Contemporary reviews of the show were not glowing, although they tended to note the quality of Reid's work. Henry Raynor in *The Times* remarked of an earlier episode:

It is a pity that the climax of Beryl Reid's *Good Evening* last night was the familiar, less than brilliantly witty sketch about the Spanish Maid who ruined the dinner to

which the boss was invited. Miss Reid's series has not yet managed to do her justice.
(1968: 11)

Certainly Reid's show was not recommissioned; it remains a historical curiosity, with a single episode preserved in the BFI's Mediatheque. *Beryl Reid Says ... Good Evening* is written through with a camp, queer world-view, drawing on a diverse range of theatrical and satirical styles to undercut the hegemony of heteronormativity, including character comedians in music hall and variety theatre, the deconstructive tendencies of absurdist drama and the satirical surrealism of 1960s student revues. Of these, the character comedy tradition is the strongest, most effective and most fully queer. While Theatre of the Absurd and the generation of comedians that emerged from Oxbridge in the 1950s and 1960s have acquired cultural capital on stage and screen, character comedy remains a popular form.

In the work of writer-performers that emerged in the 1980s, such as Victoria Wood, Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders, character comedy became imbued with a political awareness informed by 1970s feminist and gay liberation movements:

... the comic possibilities of 'ordinary' characters are drawn in such a way that they exceed 'ordinariness' and reveal the tensions and contradictions of women's experience beyond the hackneyed repertoire of female impersonation. Most importantly, Wood, French and Saunders and others use comic licence not as a means of controlling exteriorised 'others', but as providing access to a territory in which gender, identity, sexuality, language and social experience in everyday life can be creatively explored. (Littlewood and Pickering 1998: 309)

I would argue that this tendency is visible far earlier, notably in the work of Nellie Wallace and Beryl Reid, and in the work of other female and male character comedians who address ‘gender, identity, sexuality, language and social experience’ almost inadvertently through their performances. This tradition continues in the work of contemporary impressionists and character comedians, such as Catherine Tate, Julia Davies and Morgana Robinson. They create characters that challenge preconceptions about the limits of age, class, sexuality and gender, following the model established by Reid and others, and, perhaps as a result, are often seen as disturbing or ‘dark’, producing comedy that is hard to categorize or ‘unfunny’. Catherine Tate’s ‘Nan’ is an angry old woman who rejects her grandson’s middle-class attitudes (*The Catherine Tate Show*, 2004–2009); Julia Davies’ nightmarish ‘Jill Tyrrell’ takes feminine narcissism to new extremes (*Nighty Night*, 2004–2005) and Morgana Robinson, as the socially inept ‘Gilbert’ or a young Boris Johnson, parodies the misguided exuberance of teenage boys (*The Morgana Show*, 2010). Like their predecessors, these performers attend to and deconstruct the ‘ordinary’, exposing the tensions and distortions of the everyday.

Such queer moments in popular culture continue to be necessary, if only as an antidote to a post-feminist era where gender is ever more rigorously policed (Negra 2009:188). Rosalind Gill has already argued that contemporary femininity is now not about who you are or what you think but how you appear: ‘... it is now defined in advertising and elsewhere in the media as the possession of a young, able-bodied, heterosexual, “sexy” body’ (2007: 91). At a cultural moment where femininity is ever more tightly controlled, defined (it appears) with only young middle-class white women in mind, the momentary interventions of character comedy seem almost revolutionary, attending as they do to the bizarre discourses that

surround gender. Contemporary stars like Tate, Davies and Robinson are following a tradition of stage, screen and radio female comedy performers who render heteronormative behaviours ridiculously fictive, just as they are felt in lived experience. Perhaps this is what makes such performances funny, that they reveal an unacknowledged truth. Like her contemporary successors, Reid's queer aesthetic exposes the lack of coherence in heteronormative performances, thus challenging compulsory heterosexuality and the gender binary it endorses. Her work, and theirs, is queer in its attention to the *peculiarity* of heterosexuality and the gender impersonations it requires.

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