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IF LAUGHS COULD KILL

Eddie Izzard and the Queer Art of Comedy

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Not drag – drag means costume. What I do is just wearing a dress.

(Eddie Izzard, interview with *Vanity Fair*, 2010)

Lofty laughter. Such was the queer pursuit of Russian writer, Nikolai Gogol, whose impressionistic caricatures of everyday life captured the vulgarity in beautiful visions of the 19th century. The same might be said of British stand-up comedian, Eddie Izzard, whose surrealistic depictions of both the banal and the elevated aspects of our human condition seem to proclaim: “Onward! onward! away with the wrinkle that furrows the brow and the stern gloom of the face! At once and suddenly let us plunge into life with all its noiseless clatter and little bells ...” (Gogol 1997, p. 135). And this amidst the clink and clunk of high heels as Izzard struts across a stage.

Izzard has made a career of performing in “heavy eye shadow, glittery shirts and sometimes skirts and fishnet stockings” while “delivering riffs about culture, history, and language – routines that are literally loopy as they swoop and circle back on themselves” (James 2008). Indeed, his comedy thrives on free association such that any performance could feature him flying through lines from Old Testament parables or Greek mythology to pet behaviorism, evolution, dinosaur clerics, Church politics, militarism, grammatical oddities, commercial advertising, osteopathy, bullying, bees, Wikipedia, baseball, the U.S. American national anthem, and so on seemingly *ad infinitum*. Or perhaps *ad absurdum*, given that Izzard performs a comic logic that laughs at the prescribed standards used to shape common perspectives on reality. Co-founder of the revered comedy troupe Monty Python and self-proclaimed “writer, actor, and tall person,” John Cleese, famously dubbed Izzard “the lost Python.” This is an apt judgment. Izzard admits Monty

Python's influence, and exercises it by inventing dialogues within outlandish one-man sketches (i.e., a conversation between God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost that turns into an imagined episode of Scooby-Doo) and producing wild malapropisms (i.e., "Why the big pause?" as the man in the pub said to the bear," which sets up a joke based on an historical time lapse between Earth's creation and human arrival). In other instances, he practices historical revisionism. "We had pagans [in Britain]," Izzard recounts in one joke. "They were into sex, death, and religion in an interesting, nighttime telly type of way. And we had the druids. Long white robes, long white beards, early transvestites, didn't get their shaving together." The perpetuation of gender confusion is important here, namely because Izzard relates it to a well-known and obscure architectural monument in the mystical area of Salisbury, England – Stonehenge – at the same time as he maps it onto popular folklore. "No one knows what the fuck a henge is," he proclaims. "Before Stonehenge there was Woodhenge and Strawhenge. But a big bad wolf came and blew them down, and three little piggies were relocated to the projects." Izzard's own transvestitism embodies this ostensibly methodized madness insofar as his surreal blend of the sublime and the ridiculous folds into a Pythonesque aesthetic "of cross-dressing, parody and camp" (Aronstein 2009, p. 116). Yet, for Izzard, this is not simply part of the gag.

In interviews Izzard identifies as a "card-carrying transvestite." On the one hand, this affirms his membership in a legitimate social group. On the other, it mocks "official" membership itself, calling out the potential harm of classifications. The notion of "mistaken identity," after all, is central to persistent remonstrations against alternative sexualities and marginalized identities more broadly. In fact, as recently as 2013, Izzard had to proclaim again – namely to American audiences – that he is *still* a transvestite, because in some of his appearances in film and on stage he seemed to be in "boy mode." This is no doubt why Izzard's stand-up comedy has also been a vehicle of civic education, an angle I accentuate throughout this chapter in order to contend that he has combined a comic history of ideas with a sort of gender politics that demonstrates how certain normative viewpoints influence broader sociopolitical orientations. Over and again, Izzard's absurd logic strings audiences along with anachronistic references that he combines with common sense to provide deep readings of the surface effects of, say, evolutionary time or dressing in drag. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his Emmy Award winning performance *Dress to Kill* (*DTK*), which was filmed at the Orpheum Theatre in San Francisco in November 1998 and distributed on video in June 1999.¹

This chapter engages *DTK* as exemplary of Izzard's queer art of comedy, which interrupts common sense through ridiculous bits about the absurdity in conventional thought, speech, and action. Specifically, I argue that Izzard exemplifies stand-up comedy as a means of embellishing the proximity of so-called "queerness" to the norm in order to re-dress heteronormative images of civic identity and, in a 21st-century argot, neoliberal discourses. Or, better, Izzard

articulates some of the ways in which oddities and curiosities can predominate the center stage, sometimes most tellingly in the latent judgments that circulate in and adorn those dominant cultural orders that seem to determine certain claims to public selfhood. Many stand-up comedians are celebrated for their comic irruptions and incongruous jokes, not to mention their seeming surrealism. Izzard, however, exhibits stand-up as a mode of “queer rhetoric” that “asks society to confront ... the place of identity issues in politics” (Foss 2007, p. 77). To do so, he situates himself as characteristic of a strange fixation on stubborn interpretations of civic identity. Surrealism, in this sense, is a comic *poros*: a “passage” or “place” for approaching logical impasses and the rhetorical impact of contradictions in malleable constructions of reality. Izzard negotiates these aporia in a male-dominated, if not masculine, genre.² His stand-up performances are therefore important for their interruptions of the tyranny of gender, which characterizes and codifies normative views of human conduct that Izzard uses to portray the failure of normativity (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Halberstam 2000; Munoz 2009). Beyond gender per se, Izzard reassembles and disarticulates popular discourses by tracing the ways in which certain rhetorical vestiges reify social injustice through the cruel exercise of power. The comic reconfigurations in *DTK* are thus *trans*- in the literal sense, moving across contexts, through images and ideas that “clothe” reality, and over the “lofty origins” of truisms in order “to laugh at the solemnities of the origin itself” (Foucault 1984, p. 79). That Izzard is himself a transvestite, or one who traverses (*trans*-) categorizations of dress (*vestire*), only makes the extent to which he “kills” commonplaces through comedy that much more pronounced – especially since he does so by exploiting the comic stage as a relatively “safe” space to embellish just how bizarre the familiar seems when compared to the strange.

To demonstrate the rhetorical artistry in Izzard’s queer comedy, this chapter examines how *DTK* troubles prescribed social standards and the folly in conventional wisdom. I begin with a brief discussion of its historical context at the turn of the 21st century wherein concerns for material security, cultural voluntarism, and political polarization seemed rampant in the U.S. (Fischer 2010). In addition, a so-called “crisis of masculinity” typified Western culture such that the end of the century signaled an odd publicity of chauvinism in so-called “lad culture.” The rise of “deep-seated religious and moral divisions” further crystallized the culture wars, eventually growing contiguous with both figuratively and literally violent interactions between warring ideologies and public claims to civic identity (Layman 2001, p. 3). *DTK* provides a counter-narrative to these developments along two interanimating thematics: gender confusion and queer militancy, which together orient Izzard’s performance of how personal character emerges through its decidedly public consequences. These thematics are important to U.S. American social politics because, even though he is a British comic, Izzard broaches topics that transcend geographic boundaries and touch on more widespread problematics of human suffering. These topics also appear time-tested given that, while *DTK* is 15 years old, they remain relevant and even

find their way in to Izzard's more recent shows, such as *Force Majeure* (2013). And considering that he harps on many touchstones of contemporary Eurocentrism, Izzard persistently serves as a sort of outsider looking in on many of the images and ideas that permeate American public life. Here again queerness is as much a way of seeing public culture as it is a personal or collective marker of civic identity.

Izzard's comedy, I argue, ultimately upends the values inherent to these inhabitations, declaiming nonsense as a means of overthrowing "good/common" sense to make sense anew.³ In making my case, I attend in particular to his wide-ranging use of *metalepsis*, or the expression of outrageous causal relationships aimed at "changing sense." I also highlight his digressions, or ludicrous (yet "logical") departures from linear reason, to show how Izzard revises sociopolitical realities through rhetorical resources not readily available off the comic stage. Considering certain tropes as the stock-in-trade of Izzard's comedy enables me to evaluate how he "kills it" by toeing the line of taking perspectives on persons, images, ideas, and historical events too far. Important in this orientation is just how much the "clothing of rhetoric" itself plays in to Izzard's comic politics (Chaney 1996, pp.157, 163) insofar as his fustian witticisms and fantastical chronicles animate the vulgarity of the "natural" and the ordinary. It also allows me to approach the risibility in his performance as a sartorial sort of recourse for sociopolitical change (Brouwer 2010). As such, I close with a rumination on how Izzard transforms a personal aesthetic into "real" world politics, which he has increasingly folded into an interest in officialdom with his gestures toward shifting "from high heels to high office" (Dougary 2013).

One of the Lads

The video of *DTK* opens with an odd documentary of people riding the iconic tram in San Francisco. Through voice-over and views of Alcatraz spliced into footage of the Golden Gate Bridge and hilly city streets, Izzard talks blithely of Bay Area iconography only to peg the passengers as convicts on their way to prison. The tram operator is introduced as a prison guard, passengers are perpetrators of "hellish crimes" (i.e., stealing hubcaps), and tourists are forensic photographers – all of whom comprise a picture of the "criminal element." The comic clash in this prologue plays on conventional images of Alcatraz as a particularly touristic place while San Francisco is depicted as a rather dull dwelling for its residents, who live so close to the architectural remnants of incarceration, now a tourist trap. A contrast is thus established between a "paradise" and a "penitentiary," with the implication that people are imprisoned by both the accouterments and the ordinary ideas of their civil society. For some, this milieu is hospitable, even enticing. But looks can be deceiving. In the span of a few minutes Izzard crafts a nonsensical narrative about a reality that is otherwise readily recognizable. Then viewers are told: "Tonight's show is brought to you by the prisoners of Alcatraz."

It is telling that Izzard's prelude proclaims sponsorship not simply from "prisoners" – that is, from his actual audience – but also from misrepresentations. Consider that *DTK* was recorded and released at a time when identity cultures were carved out of calls for diversity and concomitant claims to uniformity. While no time period is homogeneous, one story of the 1990s emphasized an emergent "lad culture," or a reaction to male homosociality and the perceived rise of feminist sympathies that fostered chauvinistic appeals to heteronormativity and consumerist attitudes for dividing socioeconomic and sociopolitical groups along lines of shared beliefs and interests. Following Izzard, to buy in to conventional wisdom is to be "one of the lads," which is to say, one of the *guys*. Policing gender boundaries with traditional ascriptions of societal roles means valorizing certain appearances as true and good cultural signifiers. Such signifiers then collapse into the mainstream, with all of its prevailing opinions and popular tastes. (How jarring, then, are the decidedly humanistic words of a "prison guard," whom Izzard calls Freddie Dingo, declaring that people are people despite appearances.) British broadsheet, *Loaded*, and American magazine, *GQ*, are often identified as signposts for mainstream revivals of hardline masculinity in the 1990s. The consequences of the resurgence are central to Izzard's performance.

One consequence was a cultural reinstitution of binary logics in the widespread use of gender-specific language. Izzard frequently says that he does not wear women's clothes; he wears *clothes*. He does not wear *women's* makeup but rather makeup. Nevertheless, "a strange, manic kind of gender nostalgia" subtended popular appeals to manliness versus gayness (Harrison 2010, p. 70; see also Hatty 2000). Within them were commercialized identities that could be found in film portrayals (i.e., *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* [1998]), music (i.e., gangsta rap and glam metal), and attire (i.e., "blue collar" working class). Beyond them were attempts to evaluate divergent gender identifications as psychogenic afflictions (that is, cognitive or emotional disorders rather than physiological predispositions) or, at the extreme, as matters of military offense (recall "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"), and thereby a reassertion of the mainstream in the quasi-acceptance of marginalized identity groups as illegitimate yet niche markets. Figures like Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern, not to mention then President Bill Clinton, typify a masculinity that "wavered erratically between vulnerable child, loutish adolescent and grown cynic, mediating some of the contradictory demands placed on men at a time of changing gender roles while giving relief from the obligations of political correctness" (Harrison 2010, p. 69). The license to heterosexist lewdness was largely a response to the instability of the very tenets of lad culture, especially considering that traditional masculinity was often featured alongside male cosmetics, fashion, and grooming tips (Hodkinson 2011, pp. 236–237). The contradictions are evident in films like *Fight Club* (King 2009), in ad campaigns for male grooming, and in widespread appeals to "metrosexuality." In sum, traditionalism in the mainstream led some cultural stakeholders to shore up conventional wisdom with *lads* as the "foot soldiers" of masculinity. But as Izzard is quick to point out, they were also the fools.

The fervor and folly in demands for gender conformism were also played out in religious cum cultural institutions (Hunter 1991, p. 184). To begin with, there was in the 1990s a palpable reinstantiation of orthodoxy and progressivism (Thomson 2010, p. 2). This is most notable in Conservative pundit and social commentator Patrick Buchanan's infamous declaration of a "religious war" in the U.S. at the 1992 Republican National Convention. This war collapsed into what Kenneth J. Meier calls "morality politics," or attempts to influence both policy and public opinion in order to institutionalize social values. Buchanan, in this regard, was not too dissimilar from Stern and Limbaugh in that he was a jack-the-lad type raising hell in seeming *disregard* for any position that went against his own view of convention. On top of this climate was the increased capitalization of religious commitments to cultural values as principles to be peddled through commercial media (Miller 2005). Commercialization thus begat the mass politicization of religion, or the mass consecration of cultural politics, allowing voluntarism to become a vulgar philosophy for cordoning certain civic identities. From gender politics to political creeds, the 1990s had been defined in a culture war idiolect as a time for "speaking in the name of core values and national traditions" (Harrison 2010, p. 18).

Hijacking Jack the Lad

In steps Eddie Izzard. Throughout the 1990s, Izzard utilized stand-up to reimagine the ways in which "pseudo-bodies" become conscripted into bodies politic through a comedy of errors in judgment.⁴ This means, primarily, that he has long put his own body forth as a self-styled byproduct of absurd, never mind abusive, rhetorics of gender normativity, which are ironically drawn from "the kind of pretend-neutral, old-fashioned, nostrils-flared appraisal that women get and men almost never do" (Williams 2010). In demonstrating the ways particular bodies are "attired," he gave voice to embodied forms of judgment by laughing at and laughing off stereotypes while lashing out against the common sense in cultural knowledge structures. So, for instance, a half-hour in to *Unrepeatable* (1994), Izzard recounts an experience in the streets of Leicester Square wherein a laddish cabal of "dickhead men" harassed him, shouting: "Bloke in a dress! Bloke in a dress!" Such idiotic protestations were, for Izzard, actually code for declaring "I'm a wanker!" and utterly antithetical to what should be a contemporary enjoyment of "clothing rights." Given this brief example, it is easy to see why some might say that Izzard combines the intensely ironic insensitivity of Don Rickles with the frenzied energy and frenetic reasoning of Robin Williams, and then again with the deadpan and paraproscopic style of Steven Wright. The apparent ease of his humor almost makes "it seem as if the transvestitism was no big deal" (Williams 2010), especially since Izzard's own abrasive speech betrays a more fundamental will to acceptance. This deeper motive makes sense given his interest in grander narratives, not just one-offs and one-liners; and his irony is far more built on *catachresis*, or the misuse and misapplication of images and ideas,

than on a sort of propriety that would not allow so many turns on a logic that pretends to deny (or affirm) what is really affirmed (or denied).⁵ A few primers therefore stand out here.

First, Izzard approaches stand-up as a comic modality of dressing up, undressing, and/or redressing discourse. He is eloquent, to be sure, and his rhetorical prowess reveals a real facility with language. But if elocution is at base about “the clothing of ideas in language,” Izzard also makes it about how those ideas impact the clothiers and the wearers alike. Second, then, Izzard engages language as a means by which individuals and collectivities are fashioned into or out of shape, and also altered through exchange. Third, and perhaps most importantly, Izzard’s queer comedy is a rhetorical form for interrupting misunderstandings, hence his circular and circuitous practice of mocking personal traits as tokens of collective identity claims that are fitted to broader ways of seeing (Richards 1936, p. 3). Still, whereas bits like the one from *Unrepeatable* were once momentary and episodic in Izzard’s performances, in *DTK* they constitute a framework for clueing audiences in to the trials and tribulations of “trans-” identifications. They are also part and parcel of a much more surrealistic engagement with sociopolitical realities that often clarifies the absurdity in meanings through the very types of confusion that seem to foster misunderstanding or intolerance in the first place. Izzard’s performance in *DTK* brings attention to his identity as a transvestite while shedding new light on particular issues and the cultural logics they evoke, and this while crafting new ways of seeing the impacts of everyday interactions as attractive alternatives to conventional wisdom.

Before delving into *DTK*, though, it is worthwhile to lay out the stakes in appreciating stand-up as a *poros* for showing how we clothe cultural categories, both rhetorically and materially, and thus how we approach popular judgments that circulate in and adorn dominant cultural orders. There is an ancient lineage to the metaphor of rhetoric as “clothing,” or in Kenneth Burke’s words as “equipment for living” (Burke 1967, p. 293–305). Cicero, in *De Oratore*, writes that “just as clothes were first invented to protect us against cold and afterwards began to be used for the sake of adornment and dignity as well, so the metaphorical employment of words was begun because of poverty, but was brought into common use for the sake of entertainment” (III.38.155). By “entertainment” Cicero probably means something akin to activity or exhibition of various points of view. Along with this he brings in his sense of rhetoric as an art for teaching, delighting, and persuading in accordance with a culture’s civic virtues. And his metaphor makes rhetoric much more than figures of speech or thought; it is something to “try on.” Just as we can clothe, denude, and redress our discourses, so can we give voice to bodily forms and the vestments and vestiges that describe them.

It is not too much to say that clothing is foundational to rhetoric, nor is it a stretch to suggest that rhetoric, well before Cicero, contributed to the formation of civic identities – specifically as they relate to the sorts of public appearances that make or break sociopolitical bonds, encourage or discourage, how people know

themselves in relation to others, and allow some ways of seeing to remain in or out of view. As Robert Hariman (1986) contends:

[C]lothes create meaning by concealment, for they cover the body to disclose its intention, and in covering identify the individual in respect to the social body. They reveal, only by suggestion, yet when they are removed, the ‘interior’ or ‘hidden’ meaning disappears, and a person’s identity can be reconstructed only by reference to the ‘external’ society.

(p. 50).

With such a vantage on the “clothing of rhetoric” (Chaney 1996, p. 157), Izzard’s transvestitism might seem a convenient gimmick. But, as mentioned above, it is a lifestyle, not a tactic for inspiring “subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect” of dressing in drag (Butler 1990, p. 146). As Izzard has repeatedly said, he knew he was a transvestite when he was four years old and, after coming out at 23, worked hard “to walk around in heels and nails and not give a monkey’s blok about it” (Garrison 2013). In other words, he struggled to stand in for abstract stereotypes and to withstand the sometimes-brutal reactions they might incite when materialized. Furthermore, Izzard’s clothing as at once a verbal rhetoric and a visual display stands out for its codification of gender and given full view when flown in the face of normativity (Brummett 2008, p. 47). *DTK* is therefore as much about transforming “foreign” sexualities as it is about refiguring the “image-clothing” of dominant discourses (Barthes 1990, p. 3). The laddish context of *DTK* has been widely recognized for its over-emphasis on public displays of normative bodies. The political culture, too, has been noted for its dualistic organization of bodies politic. Certainly, Izzard’s own “gender bending” performance disrupted the “phantasmatic constructions” of power and privilege that are so predicated upon looks and the collective will to police appearances.⁶ Yet, insofar as he advances his stand-up as itself a queer art of making the familiar strange, he converted the “transvestite imagery” into a sociopolitical critique of powerful discursive formations and their supporting institutions, which seem to separate “the *naked* (real) truth” from “*clothing* (decoration)” (Ijsseling 1976, p. 126; Tanke 2009). Even today, popular references to queers (let alone transvestites, in particular) tend to crop up when criminal acts are committed against them – or, conversely, when they are accused of committing illicit and/or scandalous offenses, like public indecency. Izzard utilizes stand-up as a transversal mode of performance for “becoming criminal” such that to unthinkingly be “one of the lads” is to be a wrong ‘em boyo (Reynolds 2002). Or, in Burke’s terms, it is to be stupid (1959, p. 41).

A Comedy of Nonconformity

Gender nonconformity has seen various historical stages of either exaggerated masculinity or overdone femininity. In fact, gender exaggeration both draws

attention to the problems of variance and makes normative claims to (fe)maleness seem ridiculous. A “jack the lad” is generally a braggadocio – a figure defined by hyperbolic displays of self-aggrandizement. He is also a rogue thinker and actor, refusing to conform to societal proscriptions for behavior. Izzard, in many ways, fits this bill. However, instead of affecting a politics of self-display that refuses responsibility, Izzard acts with all the confidence of a man who throws off convention in order to inflate its consequences. *DTK* is so outstanding because it “dramatizes the problematization of the boundary between fiction and reality” (Malina 2002, p. 2). Izzard’s comedy of nonconformity amplifies the absurdity in sticking points between these two stances, namely through surreal juxtapositions that purposefully “preserve certain forms of the real in order to devalorize its content” (Chenieux-Gendron 1990, p. 92). More specifically, it reformulates how audiences make sense of rhetorical constructions of public identity in society and politics. This begins with Izzard’s provisional self-presentation.⁷

From the first, Izzard reevaluates and revises common conceptions of transvestitism. The show opens with portraits of Izzard in the style of Andy Warhol appearing on large television screens beside the stage. Izzard walks out of the shadows sporting a Jean-Paul Gaultier dress (that had been shortened into a jacket), glistening black pants, red lipstick, eyeliner accompanied by blue eye shadow, and cropped blonde hair. Amidst applause, Izzard bows then hops around before announcing, “in heels as well,” teeing up the numerous turns to gender that he will make throughout the show. “I am a *professional* transvestite,” he declares, “so I can run about in heels and not fall over,” which is significant because “if women fall over wearing heels, that’s embarrassing. But if a bloke falls over wearing heels then you have to kill yourself.” Straightforward as it seems, this simple assertion orients the entire gig. First, it legitimates transvestitism in suggesting that a transvestite only makes a fool of himself when he misuses accessories, not when he fashions himself as a woman in the first place. Second, and by extension, Izzard mocks public tolerance of his appearance in proclaiming that it is fit for a man to wear women’s clothing but only until he does so in an unfitting manner. Finally, he exaggerates the sociality of gender norms by overstating the punishment for shame, not to mention the common sense that states of disgrace are self-inflicted. These threads are so significant because they typify the sort of “irruptive extensions” that Izzard affects in his reapplication of categorical judgments.⁸

Consider his immediate passage to a lesson on gender and sexuality. “If you’re a transvestite,” says Izzard, “you’re actually a male tomboy. That’s where the sexuality lies.” This is a catachretic construction: the notion of a “male tomboy” borrows from connotations of girls dressing up and behaving as boys in order to craft a contrastive image of a boy who is girlish versus a girl who is boyish. The masculine qualifier juxtaposes two seemingly incongruous concepts. Nevertheless, when Izzard links his own apparent girlishness to heterosexuality, it makes sense. And he goes on: “It’s not drag queen. No, gay men have got that covered.” Here, after acknowledging that people can mistake transvestites for drag queens, he highlights the fact that transvestitism tends to be a way of life rather than a

theatrical performance of flamboyance for comic effect. Then he ups the ante: "It's male *lesbian*. That's really where it is, okay?" In moving from the image of a tomboy to the image of a lesbian, Izzard stretches his association from gendered predispositions to sexual attractions. "It's true," he pronounces as the audience laughs, "because most transvestites fancy girls ... fancy women, so that's where it is. So running, jumping, climbing trees, putting on makeup when you're up there."

This reorganization of gender classifications by way of conventional characteristics establishes Izzard's fantastical take on a general impropriety that tends to animate judgments about alternative sexualities. Much of his comedy – and, to be sure, much of its rhetorical force – comes from digressions. As Heinrich F. Plett (2001) states, *digressio* allows for disruptions of narrative flow "in favor of exuberant subplots, authorial comments, and so on" (pp. 225–226). Cicero, Plett notes, went so far as to argue that digressions are often more important than the central topic (p. 257). This is likely because digressions are also rhetorical tactics of amplification. That is, in disconnecting from a topic to explore a thematic relation, a rhetor can emphasize a particular point through the elaboration and aggregation of referents, thereby garnering understanding and even goodwill. So, too, can clothing function like a "visible garment" for disclosing particular dispositions, even as it can serve "as both clarification and obfuscation, speech and silence, publicity and secrecy" (Burke 1969, p. 120). For Izzard, digression has the comic effect of displacing meanings through a sort of *amplificatio ad absurdum*, and it explicitly sustains his interest in upsetting common notions by transforming their usual vesture. Consider, in the first instance, that Izzard uses catachresis as a figure of abuse in order to disabuse his audience of the "proper" way to envision transvestitism. He sets right the very idea that gender bending, for whatever reason, is wrong. Izzard then pushes this toward the absurd when he converts impropriety into a comic congeries of well-ordered setups and punchlines – or, in this case, when he strays into a tale about how, as a kid, he kept his makeup in a squirrel hole.

According to Izzard, a male squirrel enabled his transvestitism, storing his stash of cosmetics beside a stockpile of nuts. "And sometimes," he relayed, "I'd get up that tree and that squirrel would be *covered* in makeup!" Here, Izzard pretends to be a squirrel applying lipstick while holding a pocket mirror. When a juvenile Izzard catches him, the squirrel acts as if he was just eating a nut, and then taunts: "What? Fuck off." Izzard goes further still. From his childhood interaction he moves to the nature of squirrel behavior (i.e., they always eat nuts with two hands, chew their food frantically, and pause at odd moments to observe their surroundings). He then applies anthropomorphic qualities to squirrels, acting as though, when they pause, they are actually wondering, "Did I leave the gas on? No! No, I'm a fucking squirrel!" Sometimes, however, they tire of an all-nut diet and pine "for a grapefruit." Such a digression is significant to Izzard's general comic art insofar as it epitomizes his capacity to craft vividly absurd images of whatever topic he is engaging. Additionally, it actualizes the extent to which surrealism is tied to his revisions of sociopolitical realities, and to which clothing becomes a site for sexual demystification. Surrealism is a type of art that "undercuts the

representation of the world” (Chenieux-Gendron, 1990, p. 88). Moreover, in such outlandish comic tales, it expands both verbal and visual rhetorics of clothing by “making fashion an important site for ... cultural and individual expression” (Lusty 2007, p. 99). As a comic art in Izzard’s stand-up, it reinforces the artfulness in his regroupings. It also allows Izzard to bring transvestitism out of the trees, so to speak, and into public culture with a defiant expletive that affirms the potential civic virtue in nonconformity. To be squirrely here is to be appropriately fidgety in identity categories. This is not comedy as the conventional deviation from a norm via the surreal; it is a transformation of the norm itself.

Take as another example Izzard’s establishment of a transvestite typology. Following Burke, a change of identity can be signaled by a change of name (1967, p. 27). Izzard’s sense of the morphology in transvestitism is introduced early when he defines himself as a “professional” transvestite. This implies, on the one hand, a certain combination of skill, dexterity, and competency that comes with practice and experience while also signifying a measure of distinction, refinement, and sophistication. Izzard elaborates on these qualities when he situates himself outside of the common placement of transvestites in a “weirdo grouping,” which he delineates with a story about a man in the Bronx who lived in a cage and emerged only to shoot geese. When the man was caught and arrested, it was discovered that he collected women’s shoes. But if he was actually a transvestite, Izzard suggests, he was “a fucking *weirdo* transvestite.” Then, with an eloquent gesture of pride and a nod to cosmopolitanism, he proclaims: “I’m much more in the *executive* transvestite area.” Izzard locates complexity in seemingly straightforward classifications and even reveals the contradictions that actual bodies introduce to abstractions. This is evident later when he describes himself as an “action transvestite” who, like a squirrel, is fond of running, jumping, and climbing trees.

But Izzard’s “action” orientation also comes from military aspirations he had as a kid, making the “running, jumping, climbing trees” bit a play on gender stereotypes. Izzard develops this by turning to militarism as a masculine predilection, and war as something for which he could have been well equipped. Still, it is the reason he gives for not enlisting that is most significant for his irruption of gender categories: military uniform codes. “I didn’t join ... because there’s not much makeup in the army, is there? They only have that nighttime look and that’s a bit slapdash.” Here Izzard mimics a sloppy application of war paint, which makes soldiers “look a mess.” Tellingly, he implies an artfulness to transvestitism that clashes with an identifiable combat aesthetic. This is in part a self-referential joke; Izzard has mentioned in numerous interviews that much of his self-consciousness as an out transvestite stemmed from his lack of fashion sense. But it is an appeal to public judgment as well when he brings up the politics of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” The policy was implemented in 1993 as a means for the U.S. military to discipline and even discharge (never mind disgrace) openly gay service members. Izzard mocks its logic. “If you’re a bloke wearing a lot of makeup ... I don’t think they *need* to ask, really.” Izzard and others like him are obviously identified vis-à-vis the visual rhetorics that seem to signify alternative sexualities. Then again, the audience

knows Izzard is straight. Furthermore, as he argues, the real fiction lies in policies for keeping up appearances. “No, you can’t join,” says Izzard in a hyper-masculine voice as he pretends to be either a policymaker or an army recruiter. “Wrong shade of lipstick for the army, I’m afraid.” The implication here is that, in policy and practice, camouflage is paramount.

Izzard’s turn to gender in the armed forces is also significant because, at the time, the European Court of Human Rights was in the process of shoring up non-discrimination laws for gay and transgender individuals in the British military. The U.S. would not do so until 2011. Through the use of *prosopopoeia* – or the rhetorical device of speaking and/or acting as if you are another person – Izzard renders ridiculous the public judgment of U.S. citizens, showing forth the prejudiced and collective will of a country to keep queer identities “outside the charmed circle” of “positive images” for gayness writ large (Sender 2003, p. 355). In addition, he demonstrates the potential damage done by forgetting that looks can be deceiving. “And you’re missing a *huge* opportunity here,” Izzard laments, “because we all know that one of the main elements of attack is the element of *surprise*.” Then he asks the rhetorical question: what could be more surprising than the Airborne Wing of the First Battalion Transvestite Brigade? Just imagine a throng of transvestites “parachuting into dangerous areas,” each “with *fantastic* makeup.” Then imagine the stupor that might befall opposing forces. Izzard impersonates their reaction, standing in awe and uttering, “fucking hell, look at these guys.” The made-up men are ludicrous, until it is realized that “they’ve got guns!” The onlookers pay for their chauvinism. And the U.S. suffers from its own prejudice when it holds fast to an olden notion of masculine national identity.⁹ Here, Izzard reimagines warfare as a flight of fancy, which brings me to a final way he troubles gender conformity.

Izzard turns his attention to the 1963 film, *The Great Escape*. The film features American actor Steve McQueen and details the exploits of Allied prisoners attempting to flee a Nazi prisoner of war camp in Silesia by disguising themselves as Germans in plainclothes then fleeing the country. Unsurprisingly, Izzard is quick to point out his personal affinities given that most of the prisoners are British (“link up there”) and it is an action film (and Izzard is an “action transvestite, link up there”). He opens his bit by proclaiming that the British play bad guys in American movies “because of the Revolutionary War.” For those unconvinced, consider that the French get to play “esoteric characters” that are fawned over for their erotic exoticism. The reason: America has an historical debt to General Marquis de Lafayette. Izzard digresses here to reinforce his earlier points about American exceptionalism by insulting the audience members for not knowing their own history. “You don’t know who he is, do you?” Izzard taunts before mimicking their cultural privilege. “The Spanish-American War? The French-Banana War?” Then Izzard corrects: “The Revolutionary War. Hung out with Washington. Street named after him in New York. Forget it.” Importantly, Izzard instructs his audience in an unmentioned aspect of U.S. public culture by making fun of the strangeness that comprises common senses of American exceptionalism. General

Lafayette was a prominent figure during the American Revolution; Izzard uses him as a cudgel for mocking a U.S. audience that seems to have relegated him to the margins, perhaps because he was a foreigner.

From here Izzard recounts the plot of the film, detailing the British efforts to build elaborate tunnels, craft true-to-life costumes of German officers, and forge identifying documents. "On the day of the escape," he says, McQueen has met up with the other escapees who have "trilby hats on, overcoats, briefcases, canoe, bit of a rabbit. [...] And Steve's just there in *jeans* and a *t-shirt* ... disguised as an American man." That is, the British are forced to change their identities, while McQueen plays a white American male dressed up as himself. Not only does this epitomize a sense that Americanism has no need to hide itself, even in the direst of circumstances, but it also reinforces the relative invisibility of normative identities (see Nakayama & Krizek 1995). Evidence of this is contained in the film's outcome, wherein the British escapees are held up at a train station where they are fumbling the German language and getting hassled by the Gestapo while McQueen strikes out on his own and gets to the border of Switzerland by way of a motorbike. "This is from Poland," Izzard remarks. "And if you don't know the geography, it goes Poland, Czechoslovakia, Holland, Venezuela, Africa, Beirut ... the *Hanging Gardens of Babylon*, and then Switzerland." If the absurdity of Izzard's geographic layout does not do enough to expose the absurdity in *The Great Escape* as a "true story," the climax does. McQueen is the only one who "lives to tell the tale. Meanwhile, the British are all round up and shot in the head." For Izzard, this is the individualistic articulation of Manifest Destiny to a T, made even more so by the fact that he, a transvestite Brit, identifies more with the "damn cool" American than his own brethren. What is more, the damn Yankee actually upends revolutionary depictions of American men as enfeebled dandies by juxtaposing the manliness of individualist, prideful pursuits with the inefficacy and effeminacy of dressing up.¹⁰

I indicated above that much of Izzard's comedy relies on *metalepsis*, or the rhetorical force of changes in perception or perspective. Digressions, catachretic compositions, and *prosopoeic* arrangements all fill out Izzard's peculiar associations. More to the point, metaleptic rhetoric refers "to something by means of another thing that is remotely related to it, either through a farfetched causal relationship, or through an implied intermediate substitution of terms" (Metalepsis n.d.). The rhetorical and transformative effect, as illustrated above, is a comic expression that enables audiences "to experience new ways of being" (Malina 2002, p. 9). Put simply, Izzard's comedy opens up a space for his audience to see the consequences of gender identifications by making them ridiculous, and yet reasonable. So when he inflates the (martial) fallout from gender typecasts and their categorical failings, when he distorts the gendered nature of national identity, or when he travesties portrayals of hyper-masculine American exceptionalism, he actually amplifies the real-world merit of "queer" mockeries. This happens when he disrupts stereotypical narratives as much as when he interrupts the sociopolitical construction of subjects. Moreover, it happens when Izzard reveals the difference between fiction

and reality as a “*mimetic relation*” *in actu* (Malina 2002, p. 9). In the end, Izzard demonstrates the transhistorical consequence of historiographical gender classifications by utilizing queer comedy as a rhetorical style of performance that bends the rules for coming to collective judgments about cultural conditions. And his comic absurdity perpetuates a politics of redressing ways of seeing when it educates his audience not on what is new but on what is taken for granted (Butler 1997, p. 50).

Conclusion: Comedic Radicalism

Transvestitism, for Izzard, is a way of life. But it is also a resource for a comic rhetoric of trans-vesture insofar as it provides a way to redress the historical shortcoming in gender (and other forms of) politics. Izzard is an everyday student of history. In addition to his advocacy for reconsiderations of transgender categorizations are career-long engagements with classical antiquity, historiographies of the Christian Church, and surrealistic myths of origins – all of which rely on his clever use of *allæosis*, or the exchange of conventional images and ideas with alternatives in order to amplify the paradoxes embedded in the norm.

It is little surprise, then, that Izzard refers to himself as a radical liberal, especially since the word “radical” carries connotations of both “going to the root or origin” and departing from the norm, or from orthodoxy. Izzard’s radicalism crops up in his comedy when he wraps his political leanings in outlandish interpretations of sociopolitical problematics and their peculiar pedigrees. His surreal sense of humor leads him to advance a progressive politics that makes the commonplace appear nonsensical. By playing out the consequences of certain ways of thinking, speaking, and acting, Izzard enacts an *amplificatio ad absurdum* that exaggerates alterations of sense. In *DTK*, he stretches the sensibilities and perspectives of his audience so that when they snap back they might not return to the same place they started, whether in terms of their own self-image of civic identity or their situation of “others” in public culture.

For my part, Izzard seems most interested in how images and ideas impact the particular treatment of people in certain bodies politic. Hence why the form and function of clothing is endemic to the rhetorical artistry of his use of gender confusion as a more complex appeal than straightforward explanation, and as a means making nonsense a route to transformations in collective judgments. Nevertheless, and despite Izzard’s worldwide popularity, transvestitism today “remains something to be discouraged and/or hidden” (Suthrell 2004, p. 174). Even though there is much to be said for what has been called “America’s transgender moment,” there is still a powerful feeling that this moment (and other similar moments) of increased visibility of marginal identities “tap into pre-existing panics about gender or sexuality, not necessarily spawning new ones” (Griggs 2015). In *DTK*, however, gender deviance and sexual nonconformity is presented as at once a comedic and a public good, and the fantastical moments that Izzard creates set up a sort of re-envisioning whereby the audience is moved by an insinuation

that seems to emanate from the stage: it's not me (Izzard), it's you. Pushing back against incorrect and even unstated assumptions about transvestite lifestyles, as well as presumably common beliefs that it is only "appropriate" at certain times and in specific spaces (i.e., drag performances or gay burlesques – or on a stand-up comedy stage!), Izzard performs the very stereotypes that constitute artifactual constructions of femininity and masculinity, and that therefore get inscribed on particular bodies. Furthermore, in advocating a sort of masculine femininity,¹¹ Izzard posits stereotypical judgments about personal appearance – not to mention sexual preference – as so many perversions of cultural impulses and shared prejudices rather than aberrances of either will or instinct. This is why his comic turn to the ridiculous affects a "change of surroundings" in a "change of clothes" (Burke 1967, p. 27). Or, following Berlant (2008, p. 242), it is why *DTK* grapples with the import of sociopolitical membership by dressing up misconceptions in order to "kill" normative assumptions.

It is therefore appropriate that Izzard closes with a peroration on puberty and the psychosociality of bodily change, which in itself mocks his rationale for remaining in the closet throughout school (as he did not want to be killed with sticks by ignorant classmates). It is also fitting that he finishes by relaying a rather mundane tale of how he lost his virginity only to reaffirm his sexuality and leave the audience, as he says, with an "Oh" feeling. In this way, Izzard embodies dissonance, and the queer possibility that comes with it, especially given that "[n]othing in man – not even his body – is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men" (Foucault 1984, p. 87). Or, as he has asserted for years now, Izzard does not wear women's dresses; he wears his own dresses that he buys, even if they were meant for a woman. Izzard makes this wobbly logic that there is necessarily something wrong with a "bloke in a dress" most discernible when he cycles the extra-ordinary back into the everyday.

Of course, as I have implied throughout this chapter, Izzard's stand-up is also about civic education and the sociopolitical potential of change through exchange. The long and winding yarns about his gender nonconformity add complexity to otherwise simple-minded explanations for deviation writ large. Histories are contradictory. Individuals are always multiple people. Yet conventional wisdom crystallizes ways of seeing the world even as it organizes what can or should even be seen. In *DTK*, comedy serves as a metaleptic *poros* for revealing through ridiculousness that ways of seeing are also ways of *not* seeing. Importantly, Izzard's Pythonesque skits craft new images and ideas out of olden principles. Just as he inhabits "women's" clothing, so too does Izzard display the inhabitation of other perspectives. Once again he does this literally when he invents dialogues and makes absent bodies present through "prosthetic embodiment" (Berlant 2008, p. 107), and figuratively when these presentations provide rhetorical shifts in position. This has civic virtue when one considers that such inhabitations imply that struggles for a common good have a direct relation to personal welfare. In addition, it suggests that Izzard's own rhetorical posture relies on the triumph of wit in the body of a wise fool. His wisdom seems undeniable

when he comes back on stage for an encore that he ends up delivering mostly in French, highlighting his own status as a *travesti exécutif* while reminding his audience that *DTK* is nothing if it is not about the importance of shared vocabularies for understanding shared realities. Significantly, because of his English set-ups and his performative imitations, one need not speak French to understand the *farce française* in his finale.

Even with all of this, the question remains as to whether or not *DTK* actualizes change. One could argue that Izzard simply preaches to the proverbial choir when, as he admits, his audiences are primarily comprised of educated, socially conscious, center-right/center-left liberals (Robb 2013). Moreover, one could argue that stand-up comedians in general take advantage of a certain comic license to perform without “real world” consequences. But a few points stand out for consideration.

First, Izzard is by now widely recognized in both the publicity of his comedy and his roles in a handful of popular films. At the time of *DTK*, which remains his most decorated performance, he was praised for turning his own recognizability into recognition for transvestitism in public culture. Interestingly, communication scholar and rhetorical theorist Edward Schiappa discovered that *DTK* in particular has actually proven to decrease audience prejudice toward transvestites and other minority groups (Schiappa 2008, p. 111). The proof of its endurance is in the popularity of successive recordings of his stand-up as well as in his broad acclaim and worldwide attention beyond the stage. In the summer of 2009, for instance, Izzard ran 43 marathons in 51 days (charting a 1,105-mile course from London, through Liverpool, Belfast, Edinburgh, Leeds, and back again) to raise £200,000 for Sport Relief, a charitable affiliate of Comic Relief that donates money and services to impoverished people around the globe. In 2013, he received the seventh annual Cultural Humanism Award from the Humanist Community at Harvard University, which is co-sponsored by the American Humanist Association and the Harvard Community of Humanists, Atheists, and Agnostics. Izzard has also long been a Labour activist and has even expressed interest in converting his comedic activism into a 2020 run for mayor of London (which seems appropriate given the idiomatic indications of visual acuity in the calendar year). And as I write, he is carrying out a world tour, *Force Majeure*, from which he took a “break” in June 2014 to fly from the U.S. to Normandy in order to perform a trilingual show on the anniversary of D-Day in commemoration of those who fought for democracy. I mention all of these things not because it is necessary to prove how audience reception surpasses performance situations, but rather to acknowledge that part of Izzard’s rhetorical force stems from his ethos as a comedian. In other words, it is his queer disposition and surrealistic temperament that dispose audiences to grant the good sense in his comic nonsense.

Second, as a stand-up comedian, Izzard is uniquely situated to act out potentially tragic consequences of misguided perspectives. While demonstrating rhetoric itself as a queer art of comedy, which of necessity places so much importance in the play of appearances, he also cautions audiences against losing sight of the

depths that are brought to the surface in rhetorical play. In his circuitous and circular commentaries on transvestitism, Izzard models a logic for approaching even the severest bigotry with a humane sense of humor – a logic, that is, which relocates deeply “offensive” circumstances and discourses to the comic space of stupidity. Traditional oratory in the category of the serious is not nearly as attuned to the lofty nonsense that often emerges in such a queer “art of surfaces” (Deleuze 1990, p. 9). Moreover, Izzard’s comedy is unrepentantly oriented toward cultural histories as resources for explaining why we are certain ways, and so he diminishes his own need to persuade per se in order to play up his collection of available means of persuasion that are travestied as *topoi* for habits of thinking, speaking, and acting. In this way, Izzard simultaneously commends and maligns his audiences’ capacity to reason. He also manipulates reason itself through a metaleptic process that recalls a catchphrase of *Monty Python*’s John Cleese, which speaks directly to Izzard’s promotion of sociopolitical change: “And now for something completely different.”

DTK therefore offers a comedic politics of establishing difference in the visibility of tacit images and ideas about public life. As a sort of meta-parody of a popular skit from *Monty Python*’s *Flying Circus*, Izzard revises gender confusion and common practices of relegating alternative sexualities and gender deviants to the margins from a civic education in “How Not to Be Seen” to an absurd yet auspicious tutorial on “How (Not) to See.” One need not be an Izzard initiate, or even a fan of *Monty Python*, to appreciate the gesture to collective stakes in personal ways of seeing in this reference. Consider that one of Izzard’s main incentives to comedy was his own experience coming out as a transvestite (i.e., of being seen). Consider, too, his general sense that the Golden Rule is the only necessary civic tenet, which bespeaks a wider concern for what stereotypes and blind faiths can do for or against public relationships. Arguably, the comic stage is a “safer” space than a more seriously construed bully pulpit to tease out some of the tensions that lead to violent public interactions. It is less dangerous for Izzard because, with him, the *outré* is expected. In fact, it is the unconventional that ultimately enables him to make the “strange” familiar. *DTK* is therefore an exemplar for laughing at how we dress ourselves and others in order to redress public ills – or not.

Notes

- 1 *Dress to Kill* won two Primetime Emmy Awards for writing and performance. It also stands as the fifth of nine video recordings (spanning from 1993 to 2013). The title seems to be a send up of Brian De Palma’s 1980 erotic thriller of the same name, which is replete with lascivious sex and bloodlust perpetuated by a cross-dressing killer. Additionally, the title retools an affirmative idiom for dressing up in order to be noticed: “if looks could kill.”
- 2 See Gilbert 2004; Horowitz 1997; Kohen 2012; and Stebbins 1990.
- 3 Note that this is a decidedly Deleuzian logic of nonsense. See Deleuze 1990.
- 4 I borrow this term from Berlant (2008). Butler (2004), too, discusses such interpellations in terms of “cultural conscriptions.”

- 5 Note, too, that Izzard's use of *catathesis* shares affinities with a comic deployment of what Kenneth Burke calls "casuistic stretching," or the conscious introduction of new principles of judgment that mystifies in order to clarify social standards. Indeed, Izzard advances absurdly comic demonstrations as a means of moving from strict categorical groupings to categories of association. See Burke 1959, pp. 229–231.
- 6 I borrow the phrase "phantasmatic constructions" from Judith Butler (1990; 2004). See also Halberstam 1998 and Devor 1989.
- 7 See Halperin 2012.
- 8 According to Derrida (1982), an "irruptive extension" of a sign, or of any representation, is not simply a substitution of one idea for another but rather a disruption of the very notion that a particular representation or idea is necessarily proper, or that the meaning it conveys is ineludibly correct. Derrida ties such an extension to the concept of *catathesis*, mentioned earlier as the comic misuse of social knowledge (p. 255).
- 9 Elsewhere, I have evaluated this predisposition in terms of representations of abject soldier bodies (Gilbert 2014).
- 10 A digression early in the bit only exaggerates Izzard's point. Before recounting the film, he tells a story about doing a gig in Memphis, Tennessee, and meeting a stereotypical hillbilly who asked him to "talk British" for his kids. Izzard mimicked the man, pretending to round up the children – "Jimmy Sue, Bobby Will, Fishy Bob" – then reminding them all that he speaks English. Obviously the accent is of interest, but the kids would still rather watch a man emasculate a donkey than gawk at a foppish Brit.
- 11 Note that Halberstam defines androgyny as the "movement back and forth between femininity and masculinity" (1998, p. 294).

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