

## Lily Tomlin's *Appearing Nitely*: Performing Difference Before Difference Was Cool

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**A**PPEARING NITELY WAS A PERFORMATIVE PHENOMENON IN THE LATE 1970s. Lily Tomlin's one-woman show defied easy categorization. It wasn't stand-up, it wasn't a play, it wasn't performance art. Produced by Tomlin and written and directed by Jane Wagner, Tomlin's longtime partner and collaborator, it was a collection of monologues, the enactment of characters, the performance of difference. Tomlin appeared on stage alone, with no props, no set, in simple black slacks and a gray blouse. Using her body, her face, and her voice, she enacted 15 characters, sometimes two or three on the stage at the same time. Some of these characters had been seen before in her live and television performances, but most were new here.

The show is narrated by both Lily Tomlin as Lily Tomlin, offering wry observations on the absurdities of the culture, and by Tess, a bag lady who also offers wry observations on the absurdities of the culture but from her own perspective. The other characters include Crystal the Terrible Tumbleweed, a quadriplegic making a trek across country in her chair with the goal of hang gliding off Big Sur. There is Sister Boogie Woman, a 77-year-old Southern inspirational singer, and Rick, the only male character, whom we meet in a bar where he is trying to pick up women. Glenna stars in an epic saga chronicling some of the cultural shifts of the 1960s. Lud and Marie are a middle-aged couple who drive their teenaged daughter crazy with their banalities. All three are on the stage at once, and it is a particularly dazzling spectatorial experience to watch them interact through the person of Lily Tomlin.

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This show was an enormous success in its run on Broadway in 1977 and in Los Angeles in 1978 largely because Tomlin is such a gifted performer. Her characterizations are closely observed, thoughtfully drawn, and carefully developed. Her performance is hugely seductive in its polished, professional seamlessness. Reviews for the show were universally rave. She ended up winning a Tony for the show. It was released as a sound recording shortly after the run, and in 1979, HBO aired a version of the show that included excerpts of it with some additional footage that made it a video about the whole "theatrical experience." In 1992, Tomlin and Wagner released the video. By all showbiz standards, the show was a hit.

What is particularly important about this show, though, is that it appealed to mainstream audiences, or dominant ideologies, at the same time that it offered liberatory subject positions to women spectators. What I discuss in this article is how this show was able to use its access to mainstream press and audiences to do cultural work that was hugely important for feminist ideologies, and for women spectators in particular, in the 1970s. Lily Tomlin offered women liberating subject positions by the way she inhabited the stage. She took charge of making meaning, and the meaning she made was, among other things, a critique of patriarchy, capitalism, conventionality, naïve politics, and selling out. In her enactment of that critique, she also offered women spectators a new place to occupy, a place to identify—or better, multiple places to occupy and identify.

It is in the particular way she enacts that critique that she offers multiple subject positions. By enacting so many characters, many on stage at the same time, and by performing them all with a sense of integrity and an understanding of their motivations, Tomlin offers us as spectators multiple positions from which to identify. This strategy is particularly important because it moves us away from the construction of a unified or even essentialized version of self, and toward a fragmented and multiple sense of self.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the importance of this performative strategy did not become articulated in feminist theorizing of representation until the late 1980s and 1990s. That is, *Appearing Nitely* anticipates later developments in feminist theorizing about women's subjectivity by at least ten years. In this show, Tomlin enacts feminist conceptions of multiple subjectivity that are fragmented and contradictory rather than a valorization of a singular strong woman whom audiences are supposed to identify with to show a woman's subjectivity. In some

sense, Tomlin is ahead of her time with the show because it is assuming what much of second-wave feminism was trying to establish at the time: that women are people too. This show takes that one step further and enacts the differences between women, rather than focusing on the differences between men and women. In the focus on differences between women, Tomlin gets to the differences within women as well—that is, she enacts the contradictions within her characters, and by implication, within all of us and thus offers multiple possibilities for spectators themselves.<sup>2</sup> “Multiple possibilities” applies in at least three ways: each individual spectator is offered a range of subject positions and can move between them as fluidly as she performs them (so that we can see our own contradictions); the range of characterizations means that a wide variety of types of spectators identify in different ways (allowing her to speak to a very diverse audience); and perhaps most importantly, the enactment of difference points to the social importance of differences between women (the political work not articulated as widely in 1977 as it became in the 1980s and 1990s).

She does this while she satisfies the professional and ideological demands of much of the mass media establishment. The mainstream press loved Lily Tomlin. There were articles in most major magazines and newspapers reviewing the show and profiling her as a personality. When this show opened in 1977, she was at the height of her career commercially. She was a household name because of her work on *Laugh-In* from 1969–1973. She had recently appeared in her most successful films to date, *Nashville* and *The Late Show*. She had been doing concerts and recordings and television specials as well. At this point in her career, she had one Oscar nomination, one Grammy, and three Emmys. She was respected by critics and popular with audiences.

The power of her performance comes in part from her ability to provide a critique of the culture from within that media establishment—in this case, from a Broadway stage. By occupying the space of respected performer, she can speak to spectators who may not otherwise be as open to the radical critique she offers. She articulates perhaps vaguely held sentiments of spectators, putting words to amorphous feelings. She does this by walking a thin line, appealing to an incredible variety of spectators at the same time. As she notes herself in a *Los Angeles Times* article titled, “Lily: Laughing on the Outside”:

Everything I've done has attracted a slightly different audience. In a club like the Fairmont's Venetian Room in San Francisco, I have one

table of people who have come as part of some bus tour sitting right next to another table of really radical feminists. The mix can get really exciting. (Kilday 11)

Tomlin knows how to work that mix. Her ability to play to a diverse crowd allows her to speak to some part of almost any spectator. For my purposes here, I would like to discuss the ways in which she can speak and enact feminism on Broadway and get away with it. Her critique is accessible in part because of her skill as a performer. That skill and professional polish, along with the humanity she brings to her characters, noted so often in reviews of her work, make her challenge to gender relations and other oppressive forces palatable to a diverse yet mostly mainstream audience. It allows her to command the attention of the most disparate group of spectators. Along with the numerous mentions of her humanity and compassion for her characters, another common theme in articles about her at the time is her approachability, her "smile that is gracious, yet sly."<sup>3</sup> Without exception in these articles, Tomlin is portrayed as an open if complex personality. The overarching theme in mainstream reviews of her work is its compassion, sensitivity, and insight. She is seen as a cultural oxymoron: a feminist with a sense of humor—and more than that, a sense of empathy.

Much of the press about the show and her as a personality mention her feminist politics. She is described by Jack Kroll as a "feminist activist," by *Time* as "devoted to the feminist cause as any performer in the country" ("Lily . . . Ernestine . . ."), and by Leticia Kent in the *New York Times* as a "strong feminist"—certainly respectful enough characterizations but clearly written from a distance from feminism. Even with this tone—which allows this kind of press to appeal to several constituencies and is part of the appeal to multiple ideological positions that Tomlin pulls off—there are several places in these articles that allow Tomlin to articulate a conscious feminist intention in her work. For instance, in the *New York Times* interview with Kent, she says, "I feel I'm being politically active when I perform" (D17). Or in discussing with Vito Russo a script she was sent for a supposedly feminist part, her response was,

Well, I just sent it back with a note and I said, "Thank you for thinking of me for this, but I cannot participate in it because of my own personal views. It simply isn't radical enough from a feminist viewpoint." (26)

The point here is that Tomlin makes her feminist politics part of her public persona, available to those who are looking. For spectators who do want to look, those who can see, those who *want* to see a more liberated vision of women's subjectivity, Lily Tomlin offers it in *Appearing Nitely*.<sup>4</sup>

The very way Tomlin occupies the stage challenges "woman."<sup>5</sup> "Woman" is the sign that appears everywhere in popular culture to represent women, actual adult female human beings. "Woman," though, is a misrepresentation in that it tends to be a universalized image of feminine essence constructed for the male gaze. Tomlin steps out of the normative ways that women are represented on the stage by taking the stage alone as a speaking subject. She does not fetishize her body, nor does she let her clothing, hair, or make-up allow a male gaze to construct her. There is no mistaking the fact that Tomlin is the author(ity) of this performance.

This challenge to "woman" begins with the way she uses her body, face, and voice on stage to make meaning. For every character she enacts, including the Lily Tomlin self, she moves freely and agilely all over the stage. With no self-consciousness about looking "good" or attractive, she bends, squats, flails, stomps, runs, and falls to the floor. She speaks to us as Lily Tomlin from a fully prone position. She moves her face as easily and into as many positions as her body. It is part of the arsenal to create the meaning she wants to create, again without regard for looking attractive in any conventional sense. Similarly, her voice varies from a modulated tone as "Lily" to a kind of hurried, loud, anxious tone as Tess, to a frenzied, guttural screech as Sister Boogie Woman, and an adolescent scream as Agnus. Each character has her own movements, facial expressions, and intonation. None of them is addressed to a male gaze or is meant to satisfy the cultural requirements for proper womanhood. All of these moves transgress the rules for feminine deportment, and thus transgress "woman." According to Sandra Lee Bartkey, to be a feminine body is to be a constricted body. She writes,

Woman's space is not a field in which her bodily intentionality can be freely realized but an enclosure in which she feels herself positioned and by which she is confined. The 'loose woman' violates these norms: her looseness is manifest not only in her morals, but in her manner of speech and quite literally in the free and easy way she moves. (66)

Lily Tomlin is clearly a “loose woman.” Bartkey goes on:

But women’s movement is subjected to a still finer discipline. Feminine faces, as well as bodies, are trained to the expression of deference. Under male scrutiny, women will avert their eyes or cast them downward; the female gaze is trained to abandon its claim to the sovereign status of seer. The ‘nice’ girl learns to avoid the bold and unfettered staring of the ‘loose woman’ who looks at whatever and whomever she pleases. (67)

With her physicality on stage, Tomlin breaks those cardinal rules of femininity. She takes up space, she moves in space, she sees, she looks back, she is loud: she breaks out of the bounds of womanhood.

Along with her physical transgressions, what she says on stage is decidedly unladylike. As “Lily,” in her own voice, she makes amazing feminist observations like, “I once saw a man in a bar go up to a group of four women and say, ‘hey, what are you doing here all alone?’” This is a political assertion that is in direct violation of the codes of “woman.” And it is a feminist one at that. Not all of her assertions are directly feminist, but as assertions at all, they are feminist acts. For instance, looking at the audience, she says, “The 1950s was the most sexually frustrated decade ever. Ten years of foreplay. And the 1960s was like coitus interruptus. The only thing we didn’t pull out of was Vietnam.” Or from the floor on her back, “It’s funny to think that one day bean bag chairs will be antiques.” Part of the definition of “woman” is that she does not speak. She has no voice of her own. Lily Tomlin has a voice, both as “Lily” and as many other characters. Again, not all of these characters “speak feminism” in a direct sense—although many do—but all of them speak their minds.

Tess is the glue that holds the monologues together, even more than “Lily” does. She does not comment on the activities on the stage so much as recur in between them. She is a “crazy” bag lady who stomps around with big steps, waving her arms above her head, spewing her insights loudly and uninvited. She is the voice of the oppressed, the unheard. Tess is on the streets selling potholders she made. She says:

Made ‘em when I was inside, to keep me from goin’ bats.  
I didn’t like it in there, but boy I don’t like it out here.  
Tryin’ to get myself back in. They said I was well. But  
what do they know? They’re still in there.  
Reason I got I in there. Somebody told ‘em I thought  
I was God. They don’t like people thinkin’ they’re God  
‘cause they think they’re God.

She continues talking about seeing flying saucers: "When I told the authorities they said, 'You got evidence you seen this saucer?' I said, 'You got evidence I didn't?'" The "they" for Tess is indiscriminate. It is the institutions of dominant culture, as defined in opposition to her. Tess continually interrogates normative reality, and offers a logical alternative.

The Glenna and Jane saga chronicles two young women's coming to a feminist consciousness by tracing their personal growth through what was happening in the culture from the early 1960s to the 1970s. Glenna is the narrator and Jane is her always-unseen and silent friend to whom she is talking most of the time. This piece is a complex combination of satirical commentary on some of the dominant cultural moments of the time through the eyes of the growing counterculture, an insider's backwards glance at the development of that counterculture, and ultimately an affectionate poke at the naïveté involved in trying to be "political" and at the same time not lose anything. This piece speaks most directly to those who lived it and to those who were living it then.

It starts with Glenna's hysteria over the Beatles and her observations while getting stoned. Again, the physical performance is key to the meaning made here. Glenna dances around, laughs with complete abandon, grabs her head, and makes very wise observations on the state of the nation while she is stoned. For instance, as she watches the landing on the moon, she says in a stoned kind of voice, "The astronauts got to the moon and what do they do? They collect rocks, they lope around like they are stoned. They hit a golf ball and they plant a flag. Right now there is a flag and a golf ball on the moon. I mean, is this happening, or is it the hash?" She goes on, "All that technology to get to the moon and what do we do? We play golf. Oh insight. That's what we should have done when we went to Vietnam. We should have played golf. I hope I can remember this tomorrow." It moves on through Glenna going to college and meeting this "cool dude named Oz." She says in a voice resembling Angela Davis's speaking voice (as if she has adopted a "black" style), "He's a white guy I met in my Black Studies class." After a lengthy (and funny) recitation on their relationship, it ends in disillusionment when it turns out that Oz is "a male chauvinist pig." Telling her therapist about the fight leading up to the break-up, she says, "I said to Oz, 'you be me and I'll be you.' And he said 'no way man. I could never be a woman.'" Glenna

is devastated and says finally, "This whole society is like slow dancing. The men get to lead and the women get stepped on."

Glenna's disillusion mirrors the politics of the time. She continues with her therapist:

Marches. There's still a lot to protest about but you can't get a march together these days to save your life. And dope. I remember a time when there was almost a spiritual bond between two people who smoked dope. Now you go to parties, you see these Wall Street broker-types saying 'hey let's have a hit off of that.' It just takes all the fun out of it. And the Beatles split up. Can you imagine?

Continuing to mirror the culture, Glenna seems to be pulled out of her despair by personal fulfillment. She meets a new man. One of the key moves the piece makes to foreground the contradictions inherent in the political activism of that time is when Glenna calls Jane to tell her she is getting married. She says, "I know it's only a piece of paper. I'm the one who taught you that." She goes on, "He's a lawyer. He's working to change the system from within." This signals Glenna's choice to be a mainstream liberal. And she continues on that path. She relives giving birth during the natural childbirth movement: "There is nothing natural about natural childbirth. It is as close to a freak accident as anything I can think of. Why I picked a time like this to go off drugs." The piece ends in present time (the late 1970s) as Glenna as harried mother talks to her friend Jane on the phone, making plans to "go to the Unitarian for the fundraiser," and then "Lord & Taylor. There's a big sale." It ends finally with her speaking to her maid. "Rosita, I am going out. Yo voy ahora. I've left the grocery list on the counter. Remember, no lettuce and no grapes. Adios." Glenna has surrendered to the middle-class, complete with a Mexican maid to whom she speaks bad Spanish. That last line wraps up who Glenna, and by extension, so many liberal white women became in the 1970s: liberals blind to their own race and class privilege, seduced into their lives of safety and comfort despite what they once believed. It does reflect what came to be the commonly held sentiment of the 1970s as the "me-decade": self-focus at the expense of real political action.

This piece is on one level an obvious homage to the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s and the political ideologies and activism of the time. But it is even more profoundly a loving critique of the

limitations of those ideologies and politics. It can be read as an acknowledgment of the irrelevance of liberal politics, or the power of dominant culture to swallow us all up, or the price of self-satisfying illusions. The reading is fairly open, but one cannot escape the fact that whatever level of critique is happening here, it is done from an insider's perspective—from one whose identity was formed in and by those times, by those politics, with a real commitment to second-wave feminist consciousness in particular, and Left politics more generally.

This is an especially good example of Tomlin's positioning of her own distance from any one ideological place. This strategy of nonallegiance is not about the liberal attempt to appeal to "everybody," that nonexistent mass audience. Tomlin occupies subject positions, but it is the plural that is the point. Even as she makes clear her own political commitment to the Left, her larger performative strategy eschews any unified ideological or subjective space. It is all up for grabs, everything is vulnerable to satire. This is more than the comic's ability to make fun of everything; it is the foregrounding of the contingency of everything. There is no one answer, there is no utopia, and there is no salvation. As she emphasizes the fact that all political and social arrangements are relational and constructed, she points to the multiplicity and fragmentation of identity as well. There is no one place to be, no one place to identify.

This performative strategy is in itself a progressive political move. Even when the content of the piece is not particularly political, the fluid movement from one identity to the next, performed with the same body, points to the multiplicity of identity. Kate Davy describes this strategy succinctly: "Manipulating the identification through an articulation of many different and rapidly changing points of view creates a continuously shifting subject field. Spectators are invited to repeatedly (re)engage with shifting positions, intermittently activating certain kinds of subjectivity" (158).

The kind of subjectivity Tomlin enacts is one that recognizes its own fragmentation and contingency. Perhaps the most stark example of the "rapidly shifting points of view" is the piece about Lud and Marie. The persona "Lily" introduces them as her parents, but she "changed their names to protect them." Lud and Marie are a middle-aged married couple having a conversation on the stage, mostly about a cake. Tomlin glides between them with breathtakingly fluid movement. This is a pleasure to watch. It gets even more interesting, though,

when their adolescent daughter Agnus enters the scene. She has no patience with the insipid level of conversation. She slams doors and screams sporadically throughout the piece, "Please stop talking about that cake!" The "subject field" then shifts between three perspectives and keeps us moving between them. There is no one place to rest or identify. Finally, the piece brings in one more character, Mr. Munroe, the insurance agent who comes to visit the household. Tomlin performs all four characters in the same space, engaged in the same moment.

Sister Boogie Woman is another character who is less political in content, but her presence is very political. She is a 77-year-old Southern evangelical (not in the Christian sense) inspirational speaker. She ends the show in a frenzy of energy. Tomlin's body during this performance never stops moving, swaying, and dancing. Her voice is loud, deep, and throaty. She performs this monologue in a trance, or hypnotic yet intense state. She is addressing her audience, imploring them to "get boogie." "Boogie's not a meanin', boogie is a feelin'. Do you feel it?" She defines it in different ways. For example:

Boogie is fire in your life. Boogie is settin' your  
sights on the highest mountain and never looking  
down before your next step. And make it a dance  
step. You got two feet don'tcha?!

She goes on, "Some people afraid if they get boogie they make a fool of themselves. But I say, 'so what?' If you don't, someone else will."

Sister Boogie Woman's message is (without using anything like these trite phrases) to claim your life, feel joy, set yourself free. The performance itself is sensual and physical without becoming material for the male gaze. Her body is not performed to be desired; it is moving for its own pleasure. And that is Sister Boogie Woman's point. Enjoy your body for its own sake.

Crystal the Terrible Tumbleweed is another noteworthy character for some similar reasons. She is a quadriplegic who is going across the country in her chair. Her goal is to get to Big Sur to hang glide. Tomlin performs her sitting down with arms resting on invisible armrests. She explains that there is a tube called "the joystick" that Crystal blows into to power her chair, and an antenna for Crystal's CB radio. The only thing that Tomlin moves is her face. Certainly, this character escapes the male gaze, but she is also about using your body

for your own pleasure. One thing Crystal is about, besides the excitement she has for her journey and the upcoming hang gliding, is taking up space in a world that does not make space for you. Her tone is not, “I just happen to be disabled,” in a liberal humanist move to be inclusive or tolerant. It is more like, “I am disabled—‘a cripple’—and this is what it means for me.” The character Crystal is politicized—completely, and she communicates her political consciousness with a wicked sense of humor.

For instance, she talks about her adventures as a woman living in a wheelchair. She gives several examples of how “all walkies mean well.” But, “thank god kids never mean well.” She says, “At a carnival outside Decatur, a kid climbed on my lap and asked, ‘Are you a ride?’” Crystal smiles real big to show her amusement at the absurdities of the walking world.

Tomlin plays Crystal’s understanding of the absurdities with no sense of victimization, and at the same time, with no happy resolution. Crystal does not assuage able-bodied guilt, but she does not engender it either. Talking about her first hang gliding experience, she says, “Unfortunately, my catheter got tangled in the crosswires.” She does not leave the catheter as a comedic aside. It returns, along with her leg bag. “Goddamned leg bag. It’s like some kind of other government or something.” In the most direct attempt at educating a walking public, Crystal tells us:

Each morning 12 million of us slam our dead old  
bony asses into a wheelchair and sit. When I say  
sit, I mean sit. Might as well. Once you get to where  
you need to go you can’t get through the door anyway.  
Too narrow. I had a friend, got caught in a revolving door.  
We had to buy the building.

Buses, stairways, tabletops, checkout counters, payphones.  
Let’s just take a minute on restaurant doors. Too narrow.  
Sure you can be carried in through the window every time  
you want a hamburger. Such acts invariably horrify the other  
diners. Leaves the cuffs of your dungarees grazed with mustard.

As Crystal addresses us, she periodically speaks out of the side of her mouth in the imagined voice of spectators, what they are probably thinking. As Crystal introduces herself, she comments as the aside, “Oh my god, how tragic. I cannot look. I just can’t look.” And later when

she has said something that may challenge us, she says,

“Boo, hiss. Cripple gal talking hostile. Get me Easter Seals. I want my dime back. Say can’t we do something to get her paralyzed from the neck up?” No you can’t. Hand me my wings. I’m going hang gliding.

Crystal is not the happy handicapped, making us feel good about the fact that we can watch and listen to someone in a chair. She certainly is not asking for tolerance or acceptance. She is creating a life in a world that does not want her to create a life. Crystal is the embodiment of real difference in a culture that makes no room for real difference.

Each in her own way, all of Tomlin’s characters are women who create lives in a culture that does not want them to be who they are. Although she does perform one male character (which foregrounds gender even more dramatically), Tomlin enacts the differences between women and the contradictions that comprise all of us. This offers spectators not different options for ways to be a woman, as though a smorgasbord of identity, but a way out of the essentialized “woman” so common in mainstream representations of women. It offers a 1970s audience in particular one of the first such examples of this kind of representation. Tomlin was among the first women to take the stage in such a bold and accessible way. She enacted some of the feminist insights of the time by giving voice to much of what second-wave feminism was making clear. She did that with her direct observations, foregrounding the fact that women do exist without being defined by a man, but even more dramatically she performed that fact. By appearing on that stage, alone, militating against the male gaze, as the author(ity) of the discourse (she created this show with her partner, Jane Wagner), Tomlin is the embodiment of the woman defining herself without any particular man, or masculinity more generally.

*Appearing Nitely* also anticipated developing theoretical developments in feminist thought, especially in her performances of multiplicity. Tomlin enacts many of the meaningful differences in our culture, marking their social significance. Feminism was talking about differences between women at this time, but the theoretical emphasis on the importance of those differences was just barely beginning in any widespread way. Those theoretical moves have been the product of the poststructuralist theoretical explosion of the 1980s and 1990s.

Perhaps most significantly, Tomlin made this meaning in a mainstream venue: on Broadway. It was so popular that it also spawned a sound recording and a video that was re-released in the 1990s. Clearly, large numbers of people have had access to this show. In *Appearing Nitely*, Lily Tomlin pulls off a rare feat in popular culture: she speaks to and about the women it so often ignores.

#### NOTES

1. This way of reading (or of conceptualizing) the self anticipates feminist theoretical moves of the late 1980s and 1990s. See Case (126–46) and Reinelt (48–57) for a discussion of the issue of women performing multiplicity on stage. For a more general discussion of multiple subjectivity and feminist postmodernism, see Belsey; de Lauretis (1987); and Weedon.
2. This idea of the differences between women and within women is explained most fully by de Lauretis (1987).
3. Kilday (1975) Calendar Section: 2. For other examples of articles and reviews that express this basic appreciative and admiring, and the same time, rather awe-struck tone, see Cohn (38+); Kilday (1976 11+); Mackay (53); Buckley (9+); and Robinson (63).
4. This concept of women who *can see* other women on the stage is articulated by Frye (152–74).
5. For a more complete discussion of the differences between “woman” and women, see de Lauretis (1984).

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