"Being Cool About It": Performing Gender with Eddie Izzard

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Abstract:
Eddie Izzard in every single performance, just as Michel Foucault in his inaugural lecture, has got an obligation to begin. But, I would argue that within Izzard's discourse predominantly structured according to the conventions of stand-up comedy, he is able to also incorporate other discourses that were started before that performance and that he actually takes part in from a subversive point of view. Izzard's position within that discourse is a position of strength, as he – from a position of power as the person on stage – presents his interpretation which, according to him, is the way the world will look at things in the future anyway. There is no anger or bitterness in his analysis of the society as it is today, but he rather presents a position of sovereignty and a strong belief in the generations to come. When Foucault talks about other people's "desire to find themselves, right from the outside, on the other side of discourse, without having to stand outside it" (1971: 7), the way Eddie Izzard deals with the topic of gender in his stand-up performance as a transvestite might give pointers for what Foucault is talking about.

1 Stand-up Comedy remains an under theorised part of performance culture. But there are certain aspects supporting an analysis of this form of entertainment using Foucauldian theories of power as "audiences and performers [are placed] in an unusual[ly] interactive dependency" (Fraiberg: 316). Fraiberg at the same time states the problem that stand-up is not clearly connected to a specific disciplinary focus. It is

> too performance- or drama-oriented for the social sciences; it's not dramatic enough for drama studies; it's too popular and non-fictional for literary studies; and it's evidently too mainstream for feminist studies. (318)

Michel Foucault mentions the "dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localised in them" (1998: 96). This image of the web could also be applied to the set up of an audience at a stand-up comedian's performance, where the comedian and all of the members of the audience and their individual reactions to the show creating exactly such a "dense web". As "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts", we see why all of these powers of resistance are not necessarily localised within that web, or network.

2 In *Orders of Discourse* Michel Foucault claims that other people, just like himself "harbour a similar desire to be freed from the obligation to begin, a similar desire to find themselves, right from the outside, on the other side of discourse, without having to stand outside it" (1971: 7). This is not just a rhetorical introduction to his inaugural lecture[1] on the

[1] Foucault will return to this remark at the end of his lecture for a very intimiate and conclusive depiction of his relation with his mentor Jean Hyppolite.

various forms of analyses of discourse(s), but also as an invitation to look for – and maybe even find – ways to accomplish the seemingly impossible task to possess a voice that is heard in a specific discourse and to find oneself inside and outside of discourse at the same time.

3 In *The History of Sexuality, Vol I: The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault states that discourse "transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it." (100f.) Therefore, discourse and power are intrinsically connected.

> Power is everywhere: not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. [...] Power is not an institution, nor a structure, nor a possession. It is the name we give to a complex strategic situation in a particular society. (ibid.: 93)

4 For society as an assembly of people spending time together in a more or less ordered community it can be argued that people present in the audience of a stand-up performance bring about such a complex strategic situation showing itself, at times, in force relations. Applying the concept of "force relations", Foucault explains how the distribution of that power comes about and why certain people and discourses have the ability to exercise a certain kind of power at a given moment in time. These force relations show themselves in "'states of power', [which] are always local and unstable" (ibid.).

5 Power can be exercised in different ways, either to promote and strengthen a specific way of looking at things, or to undermine and criticise a particular perspective. For Foucault, the exercise of power is always productive. Power is not to be understood as a static situation to be overcome in a single effort, in a sort of "revolutionary fight". The struggle is not between two (or more) parties fighting for dominance on the battlefields of society. Rather, the concept of power as enacted in force fields necessarily calls for a constant negotiation within the given discourse. As he states in *The Will to Knowledge*: "Where there is power, there is resistance" (1998: 95), a resistance which occurs and has to be articulated all over the place.

6 However, in specific contexts individuals are able to determine in how far a certain discourse evolves. Force relations also empower people in specific situations to be heard better than others. Crucially. this "exercise of power", a factual sovereignty over the complex strategic situation, e.g. a specific routine performed by the stand-up comedian is never only a way of oppression in telling people what to think or what to be entertained by. Even if the audience or some of its members do not agree with the perspective of the comedian, the routine as an enactment of power can "at least" be productive in the sense of provoking a (friendly *or* hostile) reaction.

7 Foucault also addresses the topic of an individual's influence on the perception of their person. In his late writings on ethics, Foucault shows that individuals can influence the way they appear to others. As identity is not understood as a fixed essence, but rather as something that can and has to be constantly (re-)enacted, Foucault points to specific modes of representation he calls "technologies of the self". They can be seen as equivalent to Butler's concept of "expressions" in the context of the enactment of gender: "From the point of view of gender as enacted, questions have emerged over the fixity of gender identity as an interior depth that is said to be externalized in various forms of 'expression'." (148)

8 What Butler calls "expressions" and what Foucault calls "technologies of the self" are "ways in which people put forward, and police, their 'selves' in society; and the ways in which available discourses may enable or discourage various practices of the self" (Gauntlett 136). They are used as the internal and external practice of our internal ethics, of our set of standards defining how we perceive ourselves as individuals and – maybe even more importantly – of how we are perceived by others. Even though these technologies were introduced with respect to personal behaviour in a specific social field, more often than not are these technologies used for the individual's own sake. For Gauntlett, this is "not necessarily done 'for show', to give an impression to an audience" (ibid.). In this paper, however, I will look at how such expressions or technologies of the self can in fact be enacted in a specific way in front of an audience on the stand-up stage.

9 The gender performance of Eddie Izzard as a transvestite is part of the way he presents himself (on and off stage) to other people. Although it remains to be seen if Izzard intends to put his wearing of "women's clothes" to comic use, the mere act of cross-dressing is generally interpreted as and associated with comedic elements. Butler observes that

> [w]ithin feminist theory, such parodic identities have been understood to be either degrading to women, in the case of drag and cross-dressing, or an uncritical appropriation of sex-role stereotyping from within the practice of heterosexuality, especially in the case of butch/femme lesbian identities. But the relation between the 'imitation' and the 'original' is, I think, more complicated than that critique generally allows. (135)

10 So, whether or not there is necessarily any comedic quality to cross-dressing or not, the accentuation of the underlying construction of gender as such always plays an important role. Not everyone shares this idea of separation of comedy from its subversive potential. Lidlahar, in the case of Jenny Eclair, argues that "if her performance establishes the stand-up routine as the appropriate place for the destabilisation of gender hierarchies, it may serve to preclude attempts to achieve a similar destabilisation in other arenas, such as the workplace, much as the 'disordered' behaviour of the carnival served to reinforce the 'ordered' behaviour

of the rest of the year." (Conclusion) But I would argue with Butler that "those hyperbolic exhibitions of 'the natural' […] in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status." (146f.) In order for "expressions" of gender to become part of the social and the symbolic culture, they rely on constantly repeated performances to generate a recognisable identity.

11 Butler also argues for the possibility of an invention and re-invention of that identity on the same grounds. In these various (re-)iterations "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (25). She advocates the subversive element pertaining to the exercise of that power. "As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an 'act,' as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism" (146f.).

12 Everybody partakes in the Foucauldian force field of power, yet one is not necessarily (pre-)determined concerning one's acts within this field. As soon as the discourse of culture and the symbolic is understood as a constant redistribution of power-relations, there is an inherent (political) option for agency within the system. Sometimes, when certain individuals successfully act out these options for agency, "gender trouble" becomes part of the overall discourse. In this sense, the performance of Eddie Izzard, as a transvestite, but not a drag act, can be regarded as a "*de facto* political gesture [to recast the symbolic]" (Emerling 117).

13 In his work *The Art of Comedy* Paul Ryan gives a "definition" of the act of stand-up comedy:

> the comic has usually written out a script from which he or she works, with lists of jokes or anecdotes to tell. Some stand-ups don't write out their entire routine, however, they have a very good idea of topics they plan to talk about onstage. They may improvise, banter with the audience (called *riffing*), or constantly look for new perceptions and opportunities to find hilarity. Stand-ups usually work alone, but there are some well-known pairs(XVI).

As for the way in which a stand-up comedian actually performs on stage, the positions differ to quite an extent. John Harrop likens stand-up comedians to musclemen or participants of a beauty-pageant as they are only "projecting themselves […] they are not playing a character" (1992: 5). For David Marc, "the stand-up comedian addresses an audience as a naked self, eschewing the luxury of a clear-cut distinction between art and life" (11).

14 Former comedian Oliver Double on the other hand argues that there are "many aspects of stand-up which *do* involve characterization" (315), for example when stand-up comedians shift between different *stage personae* in order to bring a conversation between different protagonist to life on stage. He refers to this form of acting as "momentary characterisation" (ibid.). Not only does he thereby contradict (or at least modify) the two different positions

mentioned before on what a stand-up comedian actually does, he even makes this aspect a central feature of what he calls a "good description of acting in stand-up comedy" (321) or of that form of comedy as such: "characterizations linked with some form of commentary". He notes that in stand-up, the addition of the "commentary" (ibid.) – which could be linked to Brecht's concept of acting as an *im*perfect illusion – is absolutely necessary on the comedy stage, as the "feelings [of the comedian] must not at the bottom be those of the character, so that the audience's [feelings] may not at the bottom be those of the character either" (ibid.). As comedy, in a very broad sense, was defined by Carol C. Burnett, as "tragedy -- plus time" (Burnett), we see that the aspect of distancing always plays a role for a situation to be perceived as comical.

15 Therefore, there seems to be a double movement in comedy which consists of, on the one hand, the "momentary characterisation" the comedian and the audience need in order to present (on the side of the comedian) or become interested in (on the side of the audience) a certain character, while the distancing part – here the "commentary" – makes it possible to create or at least emphasise the comic effect this kind of entertainment strives to create. This "commentary" is another instance of what Andrew Stott in the introduction to his book on comedy calls "a division of consciousness that enables the subject to see the world with bifurcated vision" (14). He concludes that there is a constant "subversive" element in all of comedy that does not "open up a path to 'truth', [but rather that] the duality enabled in joking and comic scenario opposes any univocal interpretation of the world" (ibid.), any essentialist position, one might say.

16 Eddie Izzard can be regarded a central figure for a combined analysis of the fields of stand-up and gender, not only because he frequently cross-dresses on and off stage. It seems important to point to the fact that Izzard refers to himself as a transvestite, not a drag queen. The concept of "drag" usually refers to people who wear clothes generally attributed to the "opposite sex" in public to create a specific *stage persona*.[2] Transvestites, on the other hand, do not necessarily appear on stage in their outfit, but cross-dressing is rather a part of their private self. Izzard claims that his choice in clothing is no integral part of his performance, as he stresses that "I cross-dressed in private, but I don't call it cross-dressing any more. Now, I'm just wearing clothes" (Deevoy). Even though Izzard understates this aspect of his life in an attempt to emphasise the normality of that aspect for his life it still remains a defining factor for my analysis of his act, and a topic he cannot completely ignore on stage.

[2] Examples of prominent typical drag queens are Miss Understood, Peaches Christ, Lypsinka, Dame Edna Everage, Chi Chi LaRue, Margo Howard-Howard, Betty "Legs" Diamond, The Lady Chablis, Verka Serduchka, Miss Coco Peru, Shequida, Rikki Reeves, Betty Butterfield and Divine.

Nevertheless, the main argument here – as the title of the paper suggests – is in line with this quote from Izzard's bit called "Discrimination" from his show *Unrepeatable*: "ever since I came out as a T.V. [transvestite], if I'm relaxed about it, everyone else seems to go, 'Yes, so what's the problem?'" (1994) In this way, an individuals "coolness" about their situation influences the reaction of someone else.

17 This sort of "manipulation" might not be necessary, as Glick argues that

> Izzard is known to be a transvestite performing for a presumably liberal audience in San Francisco. That is, he is performing for an audience that is likely to be familiar with critical ideas about colonialism and thus being comfortable viewing it as a 'theft' of sorts. (295)

Big parts of his act could be understood as "preaching to the choir" of people who are already on his side. But Izzard has, especially in the recent past, become more and more prominent outside the circle of people of his "peer group" due to film roles in *Ocean's Twelve*, *Ocean's Thirteen*, and *Valkyrie*, a lead role in the FX television series *The Riches*, and his participation in a well documented series of 43 marathons around England, Ireland, and Wales for Sports Relief. The public awareness of his person makes for a more diverse audience at his (transvestite) stand-up gigs these days.

18 For Eddie Izzard, being a transvestite is a part of his life, it does not necessarily force him to go on stage. But it does not prevent him from doing so either. According to Judith Butler, a performance in drag promotes

> a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects. The loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: 'man' and 'woman' (146).

19 In his various programs Izzard sometimes refers to his clothing, but in those bits where he does not mention it specifically, it is of no further importance for his material. For example, when Izzard employs the most obvious elements of "momentary characterization", he imitates a variety of different characters with different voicing. The most obvious changes in his voices are his impersonations of James Mason and Sean Connery. These two actors are generally linked to extreme stereotypes of masculinity – and also quite easily identifiable. If anything, Izzard's clothes might be regarded as an extreme (comedic) contrast to the roles Mason and Connery are usually associated with, but this is – at least to my knowledge – never put to any comic use in the programs. He sometimes presents his material dressed "as a man" without changing his complete routine.

20 These two examples are taken from his adequately entitled program *Dress to Kill*:

> Yes, I'm a professional transvestite so I can run about in heels and not fall over, 'cause, you know, if women fall over wearing heels, that's embarrassing; but if a bloke falls over wearing heels, then you have to kill yourself! It's the end of your life, it's quite difficult.
> Also, if you're a transvestite, you get lumped into that weirdo grouping, you know? [...] I'm much more in the *executive* transvestite area. Travel the world, yes, it's much more executive. Like J. Edgar Hoover, what a fuckhead he was! They found out when he died that he was a transvestite, and they go, 'Well, that explains his weird behavior!' Yeah, fucking *weirdo* transvestite! (pointing to himself) *Executive* transvestite. It's a lot wider community, more wide than you'd think...

21 In his transvestism, Izzard does not pretend to do something that would go unnoticed by his audience. He takes part in that discourse and he does not go on stage without addressing the fact that he is a man in high heels. But we see already that he consciously works against the perception that his cross-dressing might make him "weird". He rather says that there are actually weird people within the "community" of transvestites, just as in any other group defined by one feature or affiliation. So, one could argue that he is aware of the gendered position he impersonates on stage as he acknowledges his audience's possible awareness and irritation. At the same time, he shows that other things could be far more irritating, which make transvestism irrelevant for the definition of somebody as "weird". So, one could say that in relation to his outfit he uses strategies of normalisation in order to refer to something at first perceived as strange, which is then explained (away) or rather, put in a different context to show the actual insignificance of that aspect.

22 In *Circle*, a performance recorded live in New York City, he also refers to the heavy make-up he wears on stage, describing a potential conversation with members from the audience as part of his routine:

> 'Shit he's wearing a lot of make-up.' But, you know, that's a third millennium thing, and you've just got to swing with it. There's going to be a lot more guys with make-up during this millennium. By the end of the millennium you'll probably find that you're dead and… hopefully. Otherwise you'll be on your millionth face-lift and… fucking ratchet just like 'Brazil'. Yeah, so… and a lot more guys in make-up, probably. Cause make-up's just crazy anyway, you know, cause Native Americans used to wear it, and it did all right for them until… until well, until you killed them all, I suppose. In that kind of European bastard-like way.

23 Here, he follows a similar strategy. Firstly, that wearing make-up is crazy irrespective of who wears it. Secondly, that in a specific historical and local context familiar to his American audience the painting of ones face was not at all related to being a transvestite, yet still some sort of "stigma". Thirdly, that the normalisation of men wearing make-up is only a matter of time – albeit a time period of one thousand years he refers to here – until nobody will take notice of this fact anymore.

24 Thus, by addressing this topic, Izzard does not pretend that nobody would notice his make-up. Rather, he decides to take part in the discourse of gender and stereotypes. But, by directly dismissing the significance of the aspect of wearing make-up as a man, he seems to be on the other side of that discourse already – or at least at *an*other side, to which he would like to take his audience as well, although this would arguably mean for individual members of his audience to live (and maybe even evolve) for one thousand more years.

> And I must admit, I got caught nicking stuff when I was 15, and I was nicking makeup, back in Boots in Bexhill-On-Sea. I could've bought it, I could've saved up and bought it, but I thought, if I bought it, someone might say, 'Hey, you're a boy buying makeup! You must be a transvestite!' And then I'd have to go, "Oh, Sherlock Holmes! How did you get to the bottom of that one,' […] so I didn't buy the makeup, I nicked it! And I had a loaf of brown bread, so I put it under this brown bread, and I run out of the shop and down Bexhill High Street, and they caught me! But I was 15, so they let me off with a warning, which was: 'This lipstick is not gonna work with this eye-shadow, no way! That's light blue, that's a death colour! You want a bit of foundation in this, that's very cheap foundation.' 'Oh…' 'That's a warning!' 'Oh, thank you, Chief Constable.' (1996)

25 Izzard in each performance has got an obligation to begin. But, I would argue that within Izzard's discourse predominantly structured according to the conventions of stand-up, he is able to also incorporate discourses started before that performance and that he actually takes part in from a subversive point of view, like Foucault. Looking at the power structures of what happens during his performance, and the discourse on gender-identities as something that is at times "thrown in the mix", (but visible in all other parts of the act as well) might be regarded as some sort of loophole to actually enter a discourse without necessarily "starting it". At the same time, Izzard's position within that discourse is a position of strength, as he – from a position of power as the person on stage – presents his interpretation which, as he says, is going to become the way the world is going to work in the future anyway. There does not seem to be a lot of anger or bitterness in his analysis of the society as it is today, but rather a position of sovereignty and a strong belief in the generations to come.

6 In "Jesus and Man" Izzard presents a conversation between God and Jesus in a classic father-son conversation. In this context, he presents parts of Jesus' behaviour on earth as a series of decisions not sufficiently thought through at the possible expense of the believability of the Christian faith "in the long run". After presenting some of the seemingly wrong decisions made by Jesus in a style generally referred to as "observational comedy", Izzard also pokes fun at the fact that these parts are a generally accepted part of Christian faith.[3]

[3] This could be seen as a another example for force relations and an argument could be made along the lines of Foucault's conception of power within society, which cannot be elaborated on in this article.

> ‘You have got vampirism and cannibalism right at the beginning… Oh, Gee! And you died on Easter, the biggest pagan ceremony in the history of ever! (losing it a bit) You're going to celebrate the year of your death in a different year, each year! Depending on where the moon is, for God's sake! If they don't work out that's pagan I'll just eat my hat.’ ‘Dad, don't worry. No one's going to work it out for 2000 years - until a transvestite points it out in New York!’ (2002)

In “informing” his audience of these pagan qualities in Christendom, Izzard reduces himself to his appearance as a transvestite. In doing so, he plays with the general conception of people towards transvestism as a marginal subculture not generally linked to the uncovering of religious background information.

27 Nancy Walker refers to women’s humorous writing as a “subversive protest against” the perceived lack of power (10). Regina Barecca states that “comedy is a way […] writers can reflect the absurdity of the dominant ideology while undermining the very basis of this discourse” (19). Fraiberg emphasises that this form, the comic form of subversion combines “being both within the dominant ideology, reflecting it, and yet still being able to undermine it through humorous signifying” (319).

28 Concerning Foucault’s statement about his and other people’s “desire to find themselves, right from the outside, on the other side of discourse, without having to stand outside it” (1971: 7), the way Eddie Izzard deals with the topic of gender in his subversive stand-up performance as a transvestite shows us how.

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