Adrienne Truscott’s Asking For It: A One-Lady Rape About Comedy
Starring her Pussy and Little Else!
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By Chantal Bourgault du Coudray

In 1980, riding the crest of second wave feminism, Dale Spender observed that ‘rape’ is a remarkably neutral word, as ‘evidenced by its usage in polite conversation and by the fact that it can also be used metaphorically without distaste, as for example in the “rape of the countryside”.’¹ Spender argued that such usage is ‘predicated on the “reality” – constructed by males – that they possess greater sexual urges’ and that women ‘are responsible for this terrible act which they themselves do not perform.’² The enduring deployment of rape as a comedic device has long supplied further evidence of this pattern, and thirty-five years on, although Spender’s argument has become tidily captured by the phrase ‘rape culture’, naming the problem has done little to diminish it. Indeed, as the bereaved Tom Meagher has argued, every time a rape joke goes uncontested, those who remain silent become complicit in the ‘social normalisation of violence’ that led to the death of his wife.³ Rape is no laughing matter.

Enter Adrienne Truscott. Her persona is Dolly Parton-esque – blonde, buxom, denim-jacketed – and she performs the kind of femininity that, according to the logic of rape culture, leads to rape. For one thing, she seems to have lost her skirt and wears nothing below the waist, apart from a pair of 6-inch heels. When she first appears, she gets some isolated laughs by telling a ‘standard’ rape joke about a dumb blonde in a bar, and then performs a giggly and enthusiastic striptease, removing a series of denim jackets. She clutches a drink while flirting with her new audience. She’s a novice comedian, she tells us naïvely; some people thought it might not be possible to joke about rape but she thought she’d give it a go.

It soon becomes clear that she is not so naïve, and not so new to the comedy scene. Statistically speaking, she tells us, there is a rapist in this room. And behind her are pictures of male comics who have joked about rape. She tells us she’s a huge fan of their work, and genuinely connects with audience members who feel the same way; they’re great, right? Really funny guys. Then she explains her dismay at the way they rallied around the comedian Daniel Tosh who, after getting heckled by a female audience member for joking about rape, allegedly replied "[w]ouldn’t it be

funny if that girl got raped by like, five guys right now?"4 In the media scrap that ensued, Tosh’s fellow comics came to his defence, claiming that no subject should be taboo for comedians. Truscott says she agrees ... but that because Tosh is a professional comedian, he should also be able to say something funny.

Throughout her show, Truscott shows Tosh how it is done, by deploying time-honoured strategies of the professional comedian to render rape – or perhaps more accurately, myths about rape – funny. In particular, she plays with role reversal, recognising film-maker Leah Green’s point that ‘[b]y turning the tables we can look at harassment with fresh eyes.’5 Trying to get a male audience member to engage in audience participation, she says ‘he looks unsure but his eyes are saying yes, so we’ll assume consent’. And, in a more extended development of the same strategy, she tells a story about conducting research for her show by raping a dude: drugging him, then investing in Viagra (because he was ‘all floppy’), and then calling her girlfriends to share in the adventure. Throughout this sequence, she frankly details the logistical and physical challenges of raping, and also explains how unresponsive and non-participatory her victim was, and her consequent struggle to make the situation fun. In the face of such a raw account, the audience is unsure how to respond, and the laughter is nervous and muted – which is precisely the point. Comfortable with the audience’s discomfort, Truscott spins this sequence out, allowing time for the message to sink in: the reality of rape is not actually funny.

At her most sophisticated, she also manages to shine a light on the illogic of myths about rape. She canvasses the idea that rape is ‘natural’ by extemporising on the sex life of ducks, regaling us with lurid details about cork-screw penises and anti-corkscrew vaginas (a sequence that is implicitly shadowed by the work of scholars like Randy – seriously? – Thornhill and Craig T. Palmer in their 2000 book A Natural History of Rape.) But then she drifts into a whimsical speculation about female gerbils, who will sometimes eat some of their babies, thus providing a ‘natural’ justification for human mothers who might kill the babies resulting from ‘legitimate rape’ that American conservative politicians would otherwise force them to keep.6 And then she shakes herself – oh wait, no. You’re not a gerbil, Adrienne. You’re a duck.

At one point, a man leaves the room. Truscott draws our attention to his departure, pointing out that whenever someone walks out of her show, there is always a ripple of tension, because everyone is thinking the same thing ... is that the rapist? By drawing attention to the ubiquity of rape, she combats ‘monster myths’ that position rapists as demonic semi-human beasts lurking at the margins of civilised society. Instead, her show insistently reminds us that rape is normalised and that rapists are everyday people who walk among us. We should give them rape

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4 ‘So a Girl Walks into a Comedy Club…’, Cookies For Breakfast, http://breakfastcookie.tumblr.com/post/26879625651/so-a-girl-walks-into-a-comedy-club
5 Leah Green, ‘Only by turning the tables on sexual aggression can we see how bad it is,’ The Guardian, April 7 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/07/turning-tables-sexual-aggression-everyday-sexism
6 Rep. Todd Akin infamously used the term ‘legitimate rape’ in an interview of August 19, 2012, seemingly implying that some rapes are ‘illegitimate’ (or falsely identified as rape).
whistles, she suggests—so that they can blow them if they think they might be about to rape someone.

Is rape funny? No. But is it funny to expose and laugh at the myths that make it seem natural, inevitable, or acceptable? Yes indeed. Truscott’s show is deceptively sophisticated, incrementally exposing her audience to a feminist politics that exposes and critiques the logic of ‘rape culture’. Although some of the ideas she explores are reworked from feminist material that already circulates on the internet, the persona she has created enables her to present these ideas in a way that preaches to the unconverted. By the end of her show, the kind of ‘comedy’ with which she opened has been ‘raped’, and the problematic politics of such ‘humour’ has been laid as bare as Truscott’s ‘pussy’. Those who laughed unashamedly at her opening joke have been given plenty to think about on their way home.