

Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* on Netflix: The disorienting, unfunny impact of identity politics on comedy

By Ed Hightower
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The world needs comedy, good comedy—the kind that shows no consideration for “respectable,” officially approved boundaries—and lots of it. An increasingly brutal and palpable absurdity surrounds so many facts of contemporary life.

In the United States, a fascistic billionaire casino mogul can posture as a populist, while the official opposition party mobilizes the CIA and repressive agencies of the state ostensibly to protect the sanctity of “American Democracy” from “Russian meddling.” The situation cries out for mockery and ridicule!

Good comedy pops up here and there, but demand vastly exceeds supply.

Enter Hannah Gadsby, who wrote for and acted on the Australian sitcom *Please Like Me* (2014-2016), acted on the sitcom *The Librarians* (2009-2010) for two episodes and has had an otherwise unremarkable career, making the rounds of stand-up comedy in Australia and appearing on public television news spoofs. Her Netflix special, *Nanette*, has become a huge success.

Great claims, unsupported by the reality of the hour-long program, have been made for it. The *New York Times*, for example, in a July 24 article, “The Comedy-Destroying, Soul-Affirming Art of Hannah Gadsby,” claims that *Nanette* is “an international sensation, the most-talked-about, written-about, shared-about comedy act in years, exquisitely timed to the #MeToo era.” Big claims. What goes on?

We learn from Gadsby's monologue that she grew up struggling to find acceptance as a lesbian in what she describes as Tasmania's “Bible belt” and suffered a number of personal difficulties, perhaps tragedies. In one of the few humorous bits in *Nanette*, Gadsby describes feeling like an outsider even among homosexuals, alienated even by the brightness of the rainbow flag. “Where do the quiet gays go?” she wonders aloud.

Unfortunately, *Nanette* fails to develop this material in any relatable, artistically serious way. Instead, Gadsby ends up dragging the viewer through a swamp of self-pity and bitterness that lacks restraint, context and much comedic value. Gadsby uses her *Netflix* special largely as a forum to launch an attack on men, working class men in particular, who, in her view, have a natural inclination toward rape and violence.

The following is a representative sample of *Nanette*:

“All my life I was told I was a man-hater; I don't hate men. Fellas, you don't have a monopoly on the human condition, you arrogant fucks. But the story is as you have told it. Power belongs to you. I am not a man-hater, but I am afraid of men. If I am the only woman in a room full of men, I am afraid, and if you think that's unusual, then you're not speaking to the women in your life. I don't hate men, but I wonder how they would feel if they'd lived my life, because it was a man who sexually abused me when I was a child. It was a man who beat the shit out of me when I was 17. And it was two men who raped me when I was barely in my twenties. Tell me why was that okay? Why was that okay to pick me off the pack like that?”

Accepting Gadsby's sufferings at face value and assuming that her account of them is accurate, why has she been encouraged, why does she feel encouraged, to erupt in this vindictive manner? Does her misery or anyone else's entitle her or them to inflict misery on others, much less contribute to the general cause of political reaction? There are social and artistic conditions in which such painful experiences, in fact, would encourage *compassion* and *social criticism*. Through no fault of her own, Gadsby has clearly not been exposed to such progressive, humane influences.

The ambiance of a self-help group or a therapy session prevails for most of *Nanette*, which precludes any genuinely comedic treatment of its subject matter. Self-pity and self-absorption make a poor basis for sharp comedy, which demands, above all, acute observation and sensitivity to others and to the way the world works. The central conceit of the special is that Gadsby, who has previously performed “self-deprecating” jokes, is giving up what she considers to be humiliating material and stand-up comedy as a whole.

Social backwardness in Tasmania, its ugly consequences, Gadsby's own personal dilemmas, none of this lies outside comedy's jurisdiction. A comedian of a different type (or era) would win the audience to her view through humor, throwing pies in deserving faces. Charlie Chaplin lampooned Hitler and Mussolini. George Carlin, Bill Hicks and David Cross ridiculed the wealthy and powerful.

But Gadsby, who (she explains) studied art history, views

everything through the highly subjective and impressionistic lens of contemporary gender politics, with its attack on “cisgender straight white males.” A considerable portion of *Nanette* concerns a jumbling together of Gadsby’s hostility toward working class men and much of the history of Western art.

“High art my ass [referring to nude portraits generally],” she declares, before explaining that “the history of Western art is just the history of men painting women like they’re flesh vases for their dick flowers.”

Gadsby lays into Pablo Picasso, whom she ignorantly calls *Picasshole*, observing, “It doesn’t get any better with modern art: I hate Picasso. [Sarcastically] Thank God for Cubism. I hate Picasso and you can’t make me like him. Picasso fucked an under-aged girl, and that’s it for me. Any of those perspectives [in the Cubist approach to the subject matter] a woman’s? No, well I’m not fucking interested. You just put a kaleidoscope filter on your cock, you’re still just painting flesh vases for your dick flowers.”

Such backward denunciations of “degenerate” and “obscene” art are the province in the modern age of the extreme right. They encourage censorship and repression. According to *Nanette*’s logic, given Picasso’s vile, oppressive character, his history of sex with minors and the emptiness or charlatantry of his work, why shouldn’t his paintings be burned in a public square?

Before the curtain drops, Gadsby has likened all males to Donald Trump, Picasso, Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, Woody Allen and Roman Polanski, all villains in her eyes. In the closing sequence depicting Gadsby’s coffee table, three fictitious books sit next to her cup of tea, *#MeToo* by Picasso’s former lover, *Picasshole* by Gadsby herself, and one entitled *Castration*.

The liberal press has greeted Gadsby’s performance with varying degrees of rapture. While the reviews come complete with cautious admissions that *Nanette* really isn’t stand-up comedy, the critics trip over one another in their efforts to extol Gadsby’s performance. A lawyerly, apologetic literature has arisen to protect *Nanette*’s reactionary kernel: a highly weaponized form of identity politics.

The *New York Times*, the epicenter of the entire *#MeToo* project, lauded Gadsby’s on stage melt-down and even compiled a short list of the top five essays to read about the transformative *Nanette*. One of these was authored by Jason Zinoman (also writing for the *Times*), a review of a live performance of *Nanette* at the SoHo Playhouse.

Zinoman praises Gadsby as she “calls out Louis C.K., Harvey Weinstein and Bill Clinton, not to mention Pablo Picasso, in an ingenious indictment of the sexism and sentimentality of our narratives about genius.”

Andrew Kahn of *Slate* believes that Gadsby has changed more than just stand-up: “*Nanette* challenges an idea of comedy, humor as truth-telling, that passed as common sense until pretty recently.” (Or, as Kahn writes in another piece, “The truth is not always funny.”) But this is merely the affluent petty bourgeoisie unhappy with Trump in power, the Democrats out of power and more generally concerned that not everything is going its way. It doesn’t reflect any greater seriousness about the way the world is, it’s simply a new and deepened, somewhat sour, *self-seriousness* .

Emily Nusbaum of the *New Yorker* called *Nanette* “a masterful critique of stand-up comedy” and a “strikingly relevant presentation and a challenging one for audiences in the age of #MeToo ... It’s also hilarious and it might make you cry.”

Countless other publications have bent over backwards to legitimize the lamentable *Nanette*. What accounts for this widespread approval?

Gadsby’s performance does not come out of the blue. Behind *Nanette* lie decades in which subjectivism and self-involvement, along with indifference or hostility toward the fate of masses of people, were encouraged by various ideological and cultural trends. The crude attack on Picasso would have been unthinkable 40 years ago. Picasso and modern art are certainly not above reproach, but this is a *right-wing* critique. It goes hand in hand with the assault on democratic rights and due process undertaken by the #MeToo movement.

The principal problem here is not Gadsby, whatever her personal difficulties and obsessions. She is as much a victim as a propagator of this process. Her performance and its narrative of abuse at the hands of men have become the vehicle through which definite social interests pursue their aims. *Nanette* affords privileged layers a “legitimate” opportunity (because Gadsby was abused, after all) to vent hostility toward the “unwashed,” savage masses. And this same apparently painful life story justifies shouting down and intimidating those who would speak up, call things by their real names and maybe even ridicule them.

The *Times* and other elements of the establishment are making use of Gadsby’s show to try and enforce official upper-middle-class public opinion within the entertainment industry and beyond.

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