

Vogue arts

Pretty FUNNY

Heard the one about the feminist stand-up?
She's the biggest thing in comedy.
Christa D'Souza meets Bridget Christie

Bridget Christie is not against rape jokes *per se*. Her argument is that if someone is going to make a joke, it better be damn good. She cites one by her fellow comedian Sarah Silverman as the perfect example. "Shall I tell it to you? OK. Here goes. 'Who is going to complain about rape jokes? Rape victims? They barely even report rape.' Now, see, that is such a brilliant, clever joke. It's just not good enough to say '...and then I buried her'. That's not a joke, that's a statement. I mean, there's no thought that's gone into that..."

Bridget Christie, winner of the Edinburgh Festival's prestigious Foster's Comedy Award (previously Perrier), is sitting outside her local artisanal bakery on Stoke Newington Green. Next door, she points out, is >

CHRISTIE: "I'M JUST
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the Unitarian Church in which Mary Wollstonecraft, eighteenth-century author and mother of Mary Shelley, used to hang out. Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is one of Christie's favourite books. If you have ever heard her Radio 4 show, *Bridget Christie Minds the Gap*, you may have caught the story of the trip she made to Waterstone's to buy it. How the chap behind the till had no idea what she was talking about and directed her instead to the "Hitler and Cookery section"; and how when she did finally find the women's section, there was the unhelpful chap just leaving it – having emitted a giant fart. "I mean it *stank*," she says, giving my hand a little squeeze for emphasis. "That was a real epiphany for me. The least populated area of a bookshop and therefore the logical place for him to fart in? What a metaphor for the way people think about feminist literature!"

Comedy and feminism: two words that don't necessarily go together. And yet, judging by the amount of feminist-slanted stand-up at the Edinburgh Fringe festival last summer, perhaps they do. Until recently there were only a handful of comics riffing on matters misogynistic, such as Jenny Eclair and Jo Brand. But this year, according to Nica Burns, the West End producer who runs the Foster's Awards, women comedy performers made up a quarter of all stand-up acts, from Sara Pascoe to Bryony Kimmings to Claudia O'Doherty to Adrienne Truscott (whose outrageous one-woman show *Asking for It* involved her being on stage nude from the waist down and mimicking Travis Bickle from *Taxi Driver*). This was the year, as *The Independent* put it, "the Fringe found feminism."

"We've just come out of a dark period," says Christie, in her warm, deliberate West Country accent. "The late Nineties – the last 20 years actually – have not been a good time for feminists at all. Now suddenly people are talking about it. It's in the papers all the time thanks to these amazing women like Caitlin Moran and Lauren Bates [founder of The Everyday Sexism Project]. But there have always been these amazing women throughout history. There are waves when it's fashionable and these dearths when it's not fashionable at all. Meanwhile things are the same. I mean, Mary Wollstonecraft was saying the same things in 1792 that we're saying now. We're not fixing things here..."

Born in Gloucester, the youngest of nine, Christie would probably describe her background as liberal working class. Her dad worked in a factory; her late mother, despite having no help whatsoever, worked in a care home and campaigned for workers' rights. By fibbing magnificently on her CV ("Well, I wasn't applying to medical school, was I?"), Christie got a place at drama school and, on graduating, a job temping at the *Daily Mail*. Her job came to involve interviewing celebrities cold at parties, a toe-curling experience which, in 2009, she turned into the stand-up show *My Daily Mail Hell*. One of her finest moments, she says, was when the comedian Gene Wilder tried to strangle her. "I think I might have said something along the lines of, 'Ooh, you're not very funny in real life, are you?'"

A slight, heavily fringed figure dressed in jeans, novelty socks from Sainsbury's and a

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little felt cape (from she has absolutely no idea where), Christie, 41, has an aura about her that is both cosy and razor-sharp. Think Olivia Coleman mixed with Louise Mensch mixed with Pam Ayres – although Pam Ayres, to a lot of us, was never very funny and Christie, who describes herself as "to Simone de Beauvoir what *Horrible Histories* are to Simon Schama" most definitely is. Something about the way she stamps her foot and tells a pigeon to go away, or unwraps the chocolate that came with her coffee and studies it in horrified bafflement, or the way she reminisces about her honeymoon in the Shetland Isles (she is married to the stand-up comic Stewart Lee, co-writer of *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, with whom she has two children, aged two and six). "Did it rain? Did it rain? There was no bloody *light*." It is telling, too, that her all-time comedy heroes are Laurel and Hardy, who make her "cry with happiness and joy", and that in her earlier, more experimental days (she has been on the stand-up circuit for 10 years now), her schtick involved dressing up as Charles II, a donkey and a giant furry... ant.

In her latest award-winning show, *A Bic for Her*, Christie skilfully riffs on all that "innocuous" misogyny in the ether: his 'n

hers yoghurts, sportscasters claiming women don't have the mental aptitude to race cars, and, of course, that infamous Bic advertising campaign marketed to women with its "pastel shades and easy-to-hold handles". "I expect that's why the Brontës were so shit at writing," she deadpans, "their pens were so uncomfortable and drab." There are also some thoughtful musings on why women have their labia surgically altered ("They're *meant* to look like that") and why Beyoncé is a bigger role model than the Pakistani schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai, all delivered in that persuasive yet peculiarly non-soapboxy way of hers. You're not doubled over? You sort of need to be there to get it, as so many already have. The unpopular 11am slot she picked at Edinburgh was packed solid for every show. Steve Coogan went twice (once with his daughter) and the Milibands had to stand. Meanwhile, tickets for her show at the Soho Theatre sold out so quickly it has had to extend its run.

So what does the future hold for Christie? She's just been commissioned to write her memoirs, and to do a second series of *Mind the Gap* for Radio 4. She is also working on her next show for Edinburgh which, yes, will pivot on the absurdity of everyday misogyny but, she insists, not at the expense of the issues that literally make her cry such as acid burnings, domestic abuse and female genital mutilation. "These things," she says, "they're all connected, and it's important people make these connections."

Domestically speaking – and you have to eke this out of her because she hates talking about her private life – she and her husband keep it very real. They've never had a nanny, splitting the childcare between them, and hire a babysitter only when they are both working at night: "not because anyone was holding a gun to my head, but because that's how we decided to do it." Money-wise, it would be nice to have a garden for the children, and "something for retirement" and maybe one of those Wallace & Gromit bikes with the side-cars – she was a bit of a biker chick in her youth. But what she'd rather talk about is the number of girls in hospital suffering from the after-effects of genital mutilation. "But I'm just a comedian," she says, "I have to remember that. I'm not a politician, I need to remember my place. There's nothing more awkward and unfunny than seeing a comedian emote."

Feminist stand-up. There couldn't be an ickier balancing act. Christie though, manages to pull it off. ■

"A Bic for Her" is at the Soho Theatre until December 7 (Sohotheatre.com)