

Content Warning: Mention of violent homophobia and lesbophobia

Lea DeLaria: How Butch Lesbians Have Demanded Queer Visibility in Comedy

Loudly bursting through the television comedy scene in 1993, Lea DeLaria performed her marginality to force audiences to see her for who she authentically was: A biiig dyke!



Note. Photograph By Michelson, N. (2018).

Lea DeLaria paved the way for queer visibility in comedy, using radical humor as a tool for butch liberation and social justice.

Because LGBTQ people have historically been excluded from the media, many queer people

opted to hide their sexual orientations and present as straight in order to be included, recognized, and acknowledged in their fields. This was never an option for butch lesbians, as their masculine appearance did not allow them to be perceived as anything other than queer. With the combined forces of misogyny, homophobia, and patriarchal beauty standards, the butch lesbian defies everything that a woman “should be.” Thus, butch lesbians had two options: put on a heterosexual costume and succeed, or be authentically queer and face the consequences. Lea DeLaria chose the second option, learning to use her butchness to her advantage, and paving a career for herself and others.

DeLaria began her comedy career in 1982 and made history in 1993 when she performed on *The Arsenio Hall Show*, becoming the first openly queer comic to appear on American television (MOR Comedy Clips, 2018). She combined outspoken political commentary with humorous anecdotes about the lesbian experience to create her own unique brand of comedy. DeLaria faced many obstacles as her career took off. Several comedy venues ostracized her, and protesters gathered outside of her performances. In an interview with LA times, DeLaria recounts the unsettling feeling of seeing one protester holding a sign that read “Lea DeLaria is going to hell” (Karlin, 1993). Despite these challenges, her popularity grew steadily, leading to a booming career as a comedian, actress, and musician.

DeLaria’s in-your-face brand of comedy has been deemed as “radical” or even “Bitch comedy” (Gilbert, 2014), as she loudly degrades presidents (Wolfe Video, 2007) and unashamedly jokes about “eating pussy” (Team Coco, 2017). Her brash jokes no doubt cause nervousness among her straight audiences and interviewers, but nevertheless, they laugh nervously along with her. As DeLaria performs her marginality, she demands that audiences

see her for her authentically queer self.

This “radical” approach to comedy is what makes DeLaria so influential for queer visibility, as she never waters down her queerness to appeal to straight audiences. She never takes the mainstream approach that many other queer comics take, insisting that they are just like everybody else, but just happen to be queer. She embraces her queerness fully, embodying her butch identity in the way she talks, moves, and dresses. Her comedy was a safe haven for other queer people who had perhaps never heard someone speak so openly about their gay experiences.

This radical approach to comedy is as much a tool for social justice as it is for laughter. By taking up space as a butch lesbian comedian at a time when homophobic jokes and attitudes ran rampant (Thecomedyclubchannel, 2011), DeLaria put her queer foot in the door, allowing more LGBTQ comedians to funnel in behind her. DeLaria says that she started comedy to bring the gay and straight communities together and be a role model for other marginalized people (Karlin, 1993). In her interview with StyleLikeU, DeLaria recalls being called a dyke on the street, being queer bashed during gay pride, and she says that she probably would have “put a gun in her mouth” if she hadn’t found stand-up comedy (StyleLikeU, 2015). This historically widespread violence and hatred towards butch lesbians is exactly why we need outspoken lesbian role models in comedy.

Critics of DeLaria may claim that taking such a radical approach to comedy alienates straight audiences, whereas taking a gentler approach could make more progress for LGBT exposure in the media. I agree that mainstream queer comedy appeals more to straight people than radical comedy – just look at Ellen DeGeneres’s success. However, I think

there is so much value in comedy that is unapologetically queer, not concerned about pandering to straight folks. In her interview with Curve, Lea DeLaria claps back at those who criticized her sexual jokes about Hillary Clinton, saying, “People want to make us palatable to the mainstream, so that we’re supposed to behave in a certain way (Curve Staff, 1996). See, we have to pretend to be straight. We have to act like them in order for us to become accepted by them. I don’t go for that.” I see Lea DeLaria’s “radical” comedy as a form of empowerment. To stand in front of an audience, proudly calling yourself a dyke is a form of liberation; it is taking back your power from a world that constantly degrades and ignores you.

Butch lesbians in particular have a target on their backs in society and are one of the most underrepresented LGBTQ identities in the media (Buckley, 2023). This is why butch visibility is so crucial. The comedy industry is steadily improving in its diversity and inclusion, but much more work must be done to include butch lesbians in the media.

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