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ridiculing women and other oppressed groups. These women use anything from the basic stand-up comedy routine to the complex one-woman show to make their points and they often use alternative forms like improvisational techniques in their shows. In order to demonstrate the problems that women face every day, these comedians often choose to work in all-woman groups or as single performers to fully explore their strength as women.

Hysterical Women, an all-woman improvisation comedy group based in Montreal, began as Underwired, a feminist section of the improvisational theatre project known as Theatre Shmeatre. But the women realized they didn't have enough time to devote to feminist comedy while involved with Theatre Shmeatre, so they broke away to form Hysterical Women.

"Feminist content was not enough. We needed to change the structure of the group and make it a collective effort of women only," says Alisa Palmer, a member of Hysterical Women.

"Women need to start taking up space in public places that have always been male-oriented. Women have traditionally been living in the private spaces and what they say has been seen as gossip or trivia. So women have to get together and use our voices in public places," says Palmer.

Hysterical Women favour improvisational theatre because it is flexible enough to help them get their message across. Palmer says the content is based on the participants and their experiences and they adapt the material to address the concerns of each audience. Improvisation is not a traditionally-structured theatre form and therefore allows women to act outside of male-imposed guidelines.

"Improv does not require a lot

turies that did not include women, so women can do the same without men and not lack anything," says Palmer.

Palmer notes that feminism shouldn't focus on men and what they do to women

"Feminism has nothing to do with men. Feminism is about women. We need to reappropriate feminism and that's what Hysterical Women is doing. Our shows are about women and for women so they shouldn't be male-defined," says Palmer.

While the Hysterical Women group has a decidedly feminist message and approach, comedian Cathy Jones makes feminism one of the many messages in her humour. Although the material in Jones' routines and in her one-woman show **Wedding in Texas** is feminist humour, Jones does not label herself a feminist.

"I guess anyone who believe in the equality of men and women would be a feminist but I don't look at myself that way, I prefer to call myself a people-ist . . . I'm concerned with the equality of all people," says Jones.

But as Jones tours eastern and central Canadian cities with her **Wedding in Texas** show, reviewers are quick to label her show feminist in content because of its pro-woman tone and its accounts of women's struggles in a male world.

Jones stresses that women often derive strength from the painful experiences they endure. As a single mother, Jones found it very exhausting to combine a frenetic career that often took her around the country with full-time motherhood. But she believes that caring for her six-year-old daughter, Mara, while working with CODCO, the Newfoundland comedy troupe, gave her the opportunity to grow and learn.

"You have to learn to handle the things that make you strong, especially the really bad things," says Jones.

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of expertise of its participants. It is very close to the performers' own voices and gives them the opportunity to express themselves and their own personality. It allows the audience to join in the creative process and breaks down the barrier between the audience and the performer," says Palmer.

Palmer says Hysterical Women has realized that women want and need affirmative feminist comedy that gets its edge from women and their experiences.

"Once we started doing performances that had only women characters and identities, we didn't notice that there were male characters missing. Men have done theatre productions for cen-

problems by having a healthy sense of humour and by working out her grief through laughter.

"I think the height comes out of the depth. The good stuff in **Wedding in Texas** comes out of some really heavy grief. A one-woman show is a good way to work out pain," says Jones.

But comedy is both educational and cathartic for many women. Hysterical Women and Cathy Jones use humour to expose a patriarchal society and have fun at the same time.

"Humour usually has something to do with power. The person poking fun has the power and the butt of the joke is usually someone powerless in our society," says Palmer.

Feminist comedy challenges a person's reaction to the power relationships in society and invites them to disagree with the way society conditions them to think that men have the power and women don't. In this way, feminist comedy allows women

make people aware of the real tragedies that take place in relationships between men and women. Jones shows the way that women are kept down by their interactions with men by illustrating those relationships in her show.

### Hysterical Women see TV workouts more dangerous than depressing. They do a skit called the "20-minute Puke Out" — aerobics alternate with bingeing and throwing up.

to turn the tables on men: by laughing at their oppressors, they put themselves in a position of personal power.

"Once we start laughing at men, we recognize that humour gives us the power. Feminist comedy is threatening to men because they are not in control of the object of the joke," says Palmer.

Comedy is threatening, she says, because it is not didactic. Comedians are not preaching. Instead, they make their points by getting their audiences at an emotional level, and therefore make an indelible impact on their audiences.

Jones agrees that people react positively when she comments on women and their concerns in a subtle way through her humour.

"I like to give people this double reaction when they really laugh and then they get this pain, these intense emotions when they realize that it's not funny," says Jones.

One of the most controversial segments of Cathy Jones' **Wedding in Texas** is an account of a domestic squabble between Rod, the abusive beer-swilling husband, and Cheryl, the trapped and angry wife. Jones convincingly plays both roles and recites the dialogue from both characters' lips. She even delivers a punch as Rod and moves quickly to receive it as Cheryl. The audience usually laughs for most of the scene where the couple hurl accusations of infidelity and deception but they become subdued when they realize that Rod and Cheryl represent many marriages.

Rod exhibits male contempt for feminists during the argument, accusing them of filling Cheryl's head with crazy ideas.

"What makes you think I'm gonna hit you, hey, Cheryl?" asks Rod, as Cheryl winces in anticipation of pain.

"I guess I'm like the rabbit who goes for the carrot and gets a shock. Pretty soon, the rabbit expects to get a shock every time," Cheryl replies in a resigned voice.

"It sounds like something one of those fucked-up bull-dyke feminist counsellors you've been hanging out with would say," retorts Rod, assuming that any woman who isn't interested in being overpowered by a man must be a lesbian.

Jones says Rod and Cheryl

While power struggles may be obvious examples of how the patriarchy oppresses women, both Hysterical Women and Cathy Jones examine the covert ways in which women are dominated. The emphasis placed on a woman's appearance in our society constitutes oppression because it pushes women into an unrealistic and superficial mold of womanhood. Women are judged by their looks and learn to rate their worth on how attractive their society considers them. These female comedians look at the way fashion and physical beauty shape the lives of many women and they encourage women to stop evaluating themselves in terms of their appearance.

Jones thinks women and men have been conditioned by their society to take appearances very seriously.

"The whole scene is always at you, sucking you in, making you think you want to be gorgeous. Men think that women have to look like Playboy bunnies but later on, they realize that it's what inside that counts," says Jones.

One of Jones' characters is Vave Gladney, the host of the talk show **Fudgeos and Feminism**. She advises her female viewers not to be so hard on themselves because of their looks ("Relax! Everybody's bum gets dimply!") and warns, "Don't watch the 20-

Minute Workout — it's depressing!"

Hysterical Women sees trends like television workout shows as more dangerous than depressing. They fear that women are being encouraged to be slim even at the cost of their health. They do a skit called the "20-Minute Puke-Out" in which aerobics are alternated with bingeing and throwing up high-calorie food. The fitness craze becomes inextricably linked to eating disorders when women become so obsessed with achieving the standards of fitness and beauty set by their society that the risk their health.

"This skit shows the paradoxes in women's images. We're saying one thing . . . that we're working out to be fit . . . while we do another . . . bingeing and throwing up to lose weight," says Alisa Palmer.

Hysterical Women say they are concerned with how women are victimized by consumerism. Male-run corporations run advertising that convinces women that they have many physical flaws and they offer them the products to erase their inadequacies.

"We have a character called Modern Molly who is addicted to stress and fast-paced life," Palmer says. "Every day the media tell her that she is inadequate and so she keeps buying all these products to make herself look good for her society. Eventually she become a living product."

These female comedians hope to show that women should not try to live up to male expectations, many of which are ridiculous. In fact, when looked at in a humorous vein, men are robbed of their power and they start to look ridiculous. When women regard men in a critical light, they may realize that they are not the people we should be aiming to please. And perhaps women should decide if a man is really worth pleasing instead of themselves. Cathy Jones laughingly wonders if keeping a man around is worth the effort.

As Vave Gladney says, "The next time some kleptomaniac woman tries to steal your man, you should look at what she's getting and say, 'Thank you very much but you can have him!'"



#### IMPROVING UNIVERSITY TEACHING: DOES IT MATTER?

A Public Lecture and Discussion

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University of Waterloo

Introductory remarks by

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