IRREVERENCE

# You Should Smile More: Using Poetry to Disturb and Resist Notions of Feminine Cheerfulness

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## Abstract

These creative works take Ahmed's notion of the 'feminist killjoy' as a poetic provocation that pushes against the pressure to smile. In each of the creative works, a female persona is pushed to a limit: staying cheerful in the face of rejection or supportive at an uncomfortable cultural event. I use techniques including surrealism, satire, body horror, and fantasy to create artworks that surprise, disturb, and delight. Affect is key to all pieces, as I follow Stewart's (2007) lead and notice the ways in which ordinary bodies rub up against each other and against social structures. I take great joy in pulling apart hierarchical structures with a specific focus on unravelling how women and femme presenting folk are often forced into attitudes of cheerful acquiescence. The presentation draws on my ongoing research into feminist creative practice and my desire to disturb notions of failure (Halberstam 2011), query mastery (Singh 2018), and identify how humour and irreverence function as tools of feminist resistance (Day 2011; Fox 2018). I use poetic works to release the pressures of feminized social and professional expectations, and by doing so make room for other ways of reacting, responding and being to emerge.



## Keywords

Feminist killjoy, affect theory, feminist creative practice

## The Pitch

I was pitching to a roomful of people who were all smiling. The air in the room was thick. The week before I had surgery to remove a tumour from my breast, but I hadn't told anyone in the room in case it seemed unprofessional. I pitched my idea, about a play based on the friendship between artist Joy Hester and patron Sunday Reed: an intense, consuming relationship. As I started to talk about the idea, I began to leak. It manifested first in my eyes and then my nose. Salt and mucus. The stitches holding my new wound together split and breast tissue began to leak, porous, through my white shirt and, as if in sympathy, my sweat glands went into overdrive and soon the table was awash with my bodily fluids. Everyone was very polite. They kept smiling and nodding as if I was saying something very important that they hadn't heard before. About the value of female friendship and the difficulty of making art. About power and illness and death. All characters in the play I pitched, I should note, are played by breasts. Post-menopausal breasts, which are the most likely kind of breasts to get a particular kind of breast cancer. This is not the type I had as I like to be different, but in this play we see the range of full, soft, pendulous, hanging, limp, sack-like, nothing-more-than-a-fingerful breasts, and they are nothing but trouble. They are getting into it all over town, these breasts. Whether they are lopped off or simply sliced into, they have lives of their own and they will not be told where to hang or how to be or what to do any longer. These breasts are breaking into milk bars and stealing packets of Winnie Blues. They are finding telephones in office buildings and spraying shaving foam into them. The breasts are turning on sprinkler systems in fancy gardens of big houses. They are setting off fire alarms at government buildings. The company may not have the budget for this to be a promenade piece as intended. So, I have devised that the audience will sit quietly, each nursing a breast on their lap, listening as each breast tries to explain where it has been and what time they call this! Each breast just needs to be held and stroked softly until the play ends. As I left the meeting, the company manager patted my arm said that was great, you did so well! By then, the others were all just foreheads bobbing in the ocean of my fluids. I felt bad, but they were all on salary. To be honest I don't know if any of them survived. I hope someone was taking notes and that they saw potential in my work. I hold my breath. Breast. Stroking softly. I am still waiting to hear back.

## A night at the theatre

That walk I love through the apartment complex near Malthouse with the central path the little garden lights leading the way, the small hill you arrive at where you can see the Melbourne skyline. I often wonder if I would like to live in these apartments. But they are very close together and to sit out on the balcony would be to sit out in front of everyone, to be on display, and this would not be a comfortable way to enjoy the view. Although, the soft chorus that the current residents sing as I pass is beautiful and comforting. They know their roles and have accepted them. I don't think I would be so gracious.

> As ever, the box office person asks to see my proof of concession. I reach over the Perspex barricade and grab the person by their hair and shake them until their eyes roll out of their head. They are now ineffectual in their job, as they can't see anybody's proof of anything, all they can do is listen as each audience member steps forward and says hello I am here to see the show and have paid what I can afford, and the world is immediately a better place. The eyeballs have rolled somewhere on the foyer floor. They are never found. One of the rushing front of house people or a distracted patron stepped on them, thinking they were a snail lost, or a piece of food thoughtlessly dropped. They sighed and said 'Euh disgusting!' and went on their way.

I am in the front row waiting for the play to begin. I have been seated on the horns of a dilemma. I don't remember choosing this seat. It must be what the ticketing system meant by 'best available.' The horns are embedded in the theatre floor and rise up to a height that is awkward to mount. No assistance is offered. Other patrons eye me with that particular theatre disdain for any person being difficult, attracting attention, causing a ruckus. None of them were seated here so maybe there is an element of envy. *Why did she get the horns? What does it mean? I don't want the horns they look terrible but I want the option to reject the horns why didn't I get that option?* I perch on the horns, and the discomfort is the kind that builds slowly. In other words, I am not impaled. But I am, over the course of the play, slowly skewered. Like the proverbial frog in the pot of water, I don't notice how deeply embedded the horns become in the back of my legs until the play is over and I try to stand and leave.

> The play, like all plays ever written, has been about a dysfunctional family and the ways in which they try to love each other but also damage each other. It is a prize-winning play. My intention, in seeing the play, was to support the writer and the creative team and to try, once more, to understand my own dysfunctional family by seeing the story of another dysfunctional family played out in front of me. The audience wanted to like the play very much and many of them did.

At the end of the play, I remain in my seat, as to stand would risk such a huge amount of pain and blood loss I am not sure I would survive. Having been allocated this 'best seat available' I don't know how to leave. The actors smile in a strained way as they take their curtain call and each of them casts an eye at me. I make them uncomfortable, perched as I am on these horns. Stuck as I am while the rest of the audience applauds and exits.

> My night at the theatre has not worked out as I had planned.

While I am sitting there, some weeks after the play has ended, the cleaners circling me, reluctant to meet my gaze or initiate direct conversation, a job comes up at the theatre company. All I need to do is

decide if I want the job. It would be working with a lot of writers, developing new plays, running workshops, being a dramaturg. It would be engaging and busy, well-paid and prestigious. It would be something of a position of (mild) power in terms of deciding whose plays about dysfunctional families get developed and staged and whose do not. It would mean taking a break from hoping it is my play about a dysfunctional family that gets produced and being the harbinger of good or bad news for a whole lot of other writers.

> As I write this, the horns do what they do every couple of days now. They push a tiny bit further into my flesh. It has become, if not pleasant, not entirely unpleasant. This sense of being pinned. The forced stillness. The lack of choice. The musty smell of my own dried blood now the entry wounds have healed. There is not another play programmed in this theatre for some months. I wonder at what point the horns will push all the way through my legs and emerge on the other side. What the tips will feel like as they protrude from my thighs. At what point I will be ready to tear the seating bank and my own body asunder in order to leave?

I wonder about the job. Would I be able to do the job at this theatre company from this position in the theatre? Would my inability to move be a help or a hindrance? Do I want to help develop a whole lot of new plays about dysfunctional families? Would I have any power, with my new lived experience, about the seating bank, the audience allocation, the position of the horns? I write the application but cannot decide whether I should submit it or not.

> On warm nights, I can hear the chorus from the apartments nearby. I flatter myself to imagine it is a lament I hear. Their song of longing as they wonder if I will ever pass by again, find my way back to my car, still parked in the all-day street parking along the road behind the apartments. The story they will tell about the woman who went to the theatre one ordinary night and got stuck on horns she could never find a way to remove.

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## Author Biography

Emilie Collyer lives in Australia on Wurundjeri land, where she writes poetry, plays and prose. Her work mines intersections of the personal, the existential and the socio-political. She is widely published in Australia and internationally. Her poetry collection *Do you have anything less domestic?* (Vagabond Press 2022) won the inaugural Five Islands Press Prize. Emilie's plays have won and been nominated for multiple awards. In 2023 she was under commission with Red Stitch Actor's Theatre and The Street Theatre and is Melbourne Athenaeum Library writer-in-residence. Emilie has just completed her PhD at RMIT (Naarm/Melbourne) where she researched feminist creative practice. She is an Adjunct Industry Fellow at RMIT.