

Tragicomic Presentations of Self: Starring Phil Silvers as *Bilko: The Incomplete Comic Human*

Abstract

When a performer becomes over-associated with a particular, celebrated comic character can this lead to problems, not merely in terms of type-casting, but in creating confusions for the actor's own perception of self? In instances where a comic creation is perceived to be an extension of the performer's actual 'self', what dissonances in self construct may arise between the comic actor's created persona and his/her own presentation of self? This article considers the nature of tensions created through the permeation of persona and person which can beset comedians who become closely identified with their particular mediated role. Can, indeed, over-association with their successful 'signature' comic role be seen to prove psychologically destabilising for certain performers whose own fragile, sense of identity becomes further compromised by presentation of their own most familiar and definitive, comic creations? Drawing specifically upon the career and comedy of Phil Silvers (aka 'Sergeant 'Bilko'), this article attempts to evaluate the forms of crises of identity that can arise between presentations of public and private selves for those performers who become, in effect, 'public comic property'.

Key words

Phil Silvers; Sergeant Bilko; Persona; Presentation of self; Comic Characterisation

It is, perhaps, significant in the light of notions of 'presentation of self' that the sociologist Erving Goffman chose to adopt the terminology of performance to analyse everyday social interactions, describing humans as 'sign vehicles' (1959: 1) in our operation of essential communicative activities. In conceptualising notions of expressing personal identity, Goffman further described ways that people present

themselves in interpersonal actions and reactions as representing behavioural processes in which 'the expressiveness of the individual (and therefore his [*sic*] capacity to give impressions)' (1959: 2) are implicit. Alongside his use of performative terms to describe what he defined as the 'dramaturgic elements of the human condition' (1959: 237), Goffman also uncovered the universal tendency for individuals to adopt multiple personae according to the situations and contexts within which they find themselves. People can, and do, enact myriad social roles and can, seemingly interchangeably, at will, assume apparently oppositional external behavioural characteristics – e.g. mother/child; driver/pedestrian; or consumer/vendor – as and whenever the appropriate circumstances and roles dictate. Presentation of self is then essentially dependent on the mode adopted in each discrete interactive event in which a person plays their different socio-cultural 'part'. In their ability to adopt different personae, as John Hewitt notes, 'the person has a multiple rather than a single reality...he is one individual and yet many persons' (1984: 107). As John Joseph further characterises these multiple presentations, there exists 'The Self', that is, 'who I feel myself to be affectively'; 'The Person', or 'the identity I project to others in socially defined roles'; and 'The Persona or (mask)' which is 'the self one projects in everyday interactions' (2004: 117).

Similarly, as Jean Paul Sartre observed, simple 'being' implies the adoption of performed personae according to the expectations of the given behaviours acted in societally understood roles. Sartre noted, 'consider this waiter in the café...he is playing...But what is he playing?... he is playing at *being* a waiter in a café' (1957: 59, *italics in original*). Goffman suggested that, for actual actors (i.e. those performers who portray dramatic roles) – or, the 'fabricators' of 'contrived performance' (1959: 70) – that further complexities of manufactured presentation of self are required in order for them to be able to represent their fictional characters whilst retaining the impression of authenticity. Performance, then, in the sense of theatrical acting, requires an extra layer of mimesis, a performative impersonation of 'being' that, in essence, registers to the audience as a recognisably accurate presentation of someone else's presentation of his or her self.

For performers, moreover, the question of presentation of (other) selves is often not as clear cut a matter as simply adopting one extra layer of presentation of (someone else's) self. As the founder of the 'Method' acting school, Lee Strasberg suggests,

There are... psychologically, two kinds of actors. Some actors can always go on stage and be themselves, and by being themselves they can be the character...the opposite kind of actor...have to feel that there is a mask (Hethmon, 1966: 282).

Duality of building character for performance from within, drawing on Stanislavskian traditions of accessing 'conscious means to the subconscious' (Moore, 1974: 12) affords the actor a creatively intertextual function in the formation of 'a character [as] a new human being, born of the elements of the actor himself united with those of the character conceived by the playwright' (1974: 17). It also requires building a character from without, i.e. through observation, and adoption of, how others present themselves. This duality becomes even more complicated when actors perform comic roles as yet another extra layer of impersonation needs to be taken into account.. As Andrew Stott notes, all 'comic humans are incomplete' (2005: 61) and so, in portraying a comic human, there is a *missing* element of someone else's presentation of self that needs to be added and presented (or, more accurately, perhaps, removed) by the actor who undertakes a comic characterisation. This aspect of presentation of self involves the performer recognisably playing a facet of behaviour that is absent in the comic character's presentation of him or herself in the fictional world. The comic character's critical lack of self-awareness – what Simon Callow describes as the 'gap between the way the character sees himself and the way the audience sees him' (1991: 36) – requires the portrayal of a non-self-aware presentation of self. The performer must play out a perceptual dissonance that registers for the audience, in their presentation of a comically manipulated display of how a real person is expected to act. The presentation of comic self is different to the ordinary, non-comic modes that Goffman explains. In short, in comedy acting, the performer has to balance and present subtly different levels of behavioural self-awareness and non-self-awareness within their practice of revealing character. In one sense:

We might say that comic identity appears to be found in a sense of division or incompleteness. This can manifest itself as a conflict...between appearance and reality or between self-image and public perception. It might also be the

case that a character is not fully attuned to the world nor entirely possessed of a sense of themselves or their surroundings (Stott, 2005: 60)

Arguably, performing the extra layer of lack of self-awareness that is required in comic characters' presentations of self may be one of the reasons why comedy is often cited by actors as harder to play. As the American actress Elaine Stritch noted:

Comedies are a lot harder and more stressful to play than serious parts. As Neil Simon says "Dying is easy, comedy is hard." (In Luckhurst and Veltman, 2001: 141).

When, moreover, a performer achieves fame for portraying a particular comic character the blurring of manifestations of persona and person can, perhaps, easily become still more confused in the audience's perception. Their conceptualisation of the identity of the originator of the characterisation and the character's presented identity can become blurred. As A. A. Thomson notes, the well-loved sitcom figure, for example, has:

No separate existence outside [the TV screen]... Their admirers have, so to speak, been able to assist in the creation of the 'characters' themselves... They are in a special sense the property of both actor and audience (1966: 64-65).

As Brett Mills further notes in *Television Sitcom*,

It is obvious comedy characters and the actors who perform them are not the same, they do often rely on a conflation of the two for their potency and pleasure (2005: 73).

In effect, it is not always easy to separate where the comic performer's presentation of their own self begins and where the characterisations that they have become famous for ends. In *Television Mythologies*, for example, Caz Bazalgette muses on this tension with regard to the comedy actress Su Pollard (who played Peggy the Chalet Maid in *Hi-de-Hi* (BBC: 1980-88)). In Pollard's appearance, as herself, on the children's television programme, *Disney Time* (BBC: 1971- 83), Bazalgette notes,

On *Disney Time*, of course, Pollard appears not as Peggy but as 'herself'. What does this mean? Predominantly, it is a 'making strange' of the Peggy character without abandoning it altogether (In Masterman, 1984: 32).

In this way, as Brett Mills also notes, 'the display of performance in comic acting means there is always a tension between the coherence of the character which is being acted and the person who is acting it' (2005: 83).

So, what is the nature of the possible tensions in presentations of self for comic performers who develop strong associations with their famous created characters? Certainly, for some well-known comic actors, over-association with a comic part means that type-casting often follows, as a presumption pertains that the public does not wish to see – or refuses to take 'seriously' – those performers executing any other type of role. Moreover, when a performer becomes well known for portraying a set of characteristics that are perceived to be closely akin to aspects of that actor's own personality, particular problems of self-construct can arise for the performer too. The British comedian Tony Hancock is, perhaps, a particularly notorious, case in point. The writers of his programmes, Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, wrote for the fictional Hancock persona, i.e. an insecure performer with a heightened sense of his own entitlement. The writers drew on the performer's own anxieties and based elements of their characterisations on what those who knew and worked with him described as Hancock's own, very real, similar 'demons' and 'comic's neurosis' (Whitfield, 2000: 134-5 and 215). In so doing, as Jerry Palmer observes, the Galton and Simpson co-created 'Hancock's persona...[as] the central feature in the comedy...and it is a persona with more psychological depth than was previously normal' (1987: 171). Hancock's mediated persona was very clearly depicted as that of 'an unemployed actor with delusions of grandeur' (Stott, 2005: 59); while Stephen Wagg further describes Hancock (the character) as 'the model of a dyspeptic, status-anxious, petit-bourgeois suburbanite stomping grumpily about the lower reaches of middle-England' (in Stott, 1998: 59). Tony Hancock's own attempts to distance himself from the created Hancock persona and its definitive trappings of dyspeptic anxiousness, lack of self-awareness and necessity for comic failure became problematic for the actor's own, fragile psyche. Tony Hancock's rejection of the essential 'Hancock-ness' of his subsequent comic presentations, coupled with his increasing, well documented loss of actual self, led, to some extent, undoubtedly, to his tragic, premature and personal demise.

Fragility of perception of self has also been remarked upon in the case of comedy actor Peter Sellers . “‘Behind our masks”, he once said, “we clowns lead very sad lives...I’m a sort of plastic mock-up. The real Peter Sellers is somewhere at home doing the washing up because he can’t get any help”” (Quinlan, 1992: 251). The director John Boulting said of Sellers, ‘I have a horrible feeling that very likely he was incapable of living except in terms of a creation, a role’ (in Evans, 1981: 167). Sellers himself noted:

When a role is finished... I experience a sudden loss of identity. It’s a funny thing, but when I’m doing a role, I kind of feel it’s the role doing the role, if you know what I mean. When someone says “You were great as so-and-so” I feel they should be telling so-and-so and not me (Evans, 1981: 168).

Even more seemingly untroubled comic performers can display self-identity problems. The comedian Ronnie Corbett noted how his colleague and sometimes comedy partner Ronnie Barker (Fletch in *Porridge* (BBC: 1973-77) and Arkwright in *Open All Hours* (BBC: 1973-85)) was unable to appear as ‘himself’ in the opening and closing ‘news’ segments of their sketch comedy show *Two Ronnies* (BBC: 1971 –1986). Corbett states:

In the end I made a suggestion – that he should play himself as a character...I suggested that Ronnie play a fictional version of himself...so he developed a more chummy, more outgoing, more avuncular version of himself (Corbett and Nobbs: 2006: 190).

A loss of sense of self can beset performers in general. As the psychologist Oliver James notes, a ‘weak sense of self’ and the fundamental psychological ‘need to develop the right character to attract...interest’ might suggest that some performers only feel real when they are pretending to be someone else (2008, n.p.). Moreover, for comedy actors in particular, the creation of a comic role might prove even more destabilising to their self-identification. In building and presenting their comic character the performer has to remain reflectively aware of playing a level of non-self-awareness whilst also being constantly vigilant to the audience’s laughter response – ‘the comic actor must be attuned to the audience’s laughter response in a way that the ‘serious’ actor need not be’ (Wilkie, 2016: 17). This is the case ‘even in recorded

performance formats, where the *imagined* audience's response must still be taken into account' (2016: 6).

Adding in yet another element of construct of identity, that of the complex, grey area of where the actor and their most famous characterisation intersect, raises potentially deeper problems. Where a role becomes interchangeably allied to the public perception held of the actual performer (say, John Cleese and the grumpy hotelier Basil Fawlty (*Fawlty Towers*: BBC, 1975, 1979); Garry Shandling and the narcissistic talk show host Larry Sanders, (*The Larry Sanders Show*, HBO: 1992-1998); or Jerry Lewis in his early, zany clownish incarnations), a destabilising factor is introduced when any mismatch between the performer's presentation of self and the character's presentation of self becomes exposed. The performer's presentations of actual self can become confusingly bound up with those of the fictionalised personae of both 'public property' actor and the famous character (who looks and sounds a lot like the public property actor to the public). In this way, the performer of the famous character risks the public adoption of a strange hybrid persona which is an uneasy amalgamation of their celebrated mask, their (falsified) public face and presentation of their real, actual self. It is small wonder that some performers who originate a celebrated comic role experience some loss of self and a fragility of psyche in attempting successfully to marry and resolve their public and private person and personae.

Phil Silvers/Ernie Bilko

In wishing to consider the question of how a comedian's fictional persona and their actual person (i.e. his or her 'real' self) can clash, a clear case for over-alliance between actor and role might appear to be evident in the case of American comedian and comic actor Phil Silvers (1911-1985). The man who became the performer Phil Silvers (who, in turn, became the character Ernie Bilko) was born Phillip Silversmith in 1911 to a poor Russian Jewish immigrant family in Brooklyn. He was the youngest of eight children and was raised by his older sister, Lilian. The young Silversmith was a nickel-and-dime street hustler and, like his later comic

creation, was not lacking in street smartness and chutzpah from the outset. Silversmith's early fascination with Vaudeville led to him pursuing his own stage career, seeing him develop from boy soprano to becoming a 'feed', then to graduating as a fully-fledged Vaudeville Comedian. Through the pursuit of the comic's (then) established route to fame - the Catskills' comedy circuit, followed by a stint at Minsky's Burlesque - Silvers was promoted from playing supporting comic roles to becoming 'top banana'. Comic acting playing supporting roles in Broadway musical comedies followed. All this eventually led to something of a career cul-de-sac in which Silvers found himself in Hollywood films of the 1940's, playing thankless comedy sidekick roles - usually the hero's bespectacled best friend who never got the girl - and who was, as Silvers ruefully noted, usually called 'Blinky'.

PHOTO

Silvers in his incarnation as a 1940's supporting character in Hollywood

Photo © Collection of I. Wilkie

It was, however, in the emerging popular medium of 1950's U.S. television sitcom that Silvers was to find real and enduring fame and success. The signature-role that Silvers developed became, undoubtedly, the catalyst for the most personally affective influences of his life and career. His best-known comic creation, Sergeant Ernie Bilko, appeared in the massively successful sitcom that was variously titled *You'll Never Get Rich*, *The Phil Silvers Show* and *Bilko* (CBS: 1955-59). As Mark Lewisohn notes, *Bilko* was 'destined to...become, unarguably, one of the all-time great sitcoms. Many consider it *the best*' (2003: 623, *Italics in original*).

Conceived and written in its earliest incarnations by Nat Hiken (himself described by Jim Burrows, the director of *Cheers* (NBC: 1982-93) and *Friends* (NBC: 1994 -2004)) as 'a founding father of the situation comedy' (Everitt, 2001: xiii), the show quickly became hugely successful. *The Phil Silvers Show* ran for 142 episodes between 1955 and 1959, was internationally syndicated and, ironically, eventually became a victim

of its own success, with the CBS network finding it cheaper to syndicate the numerous reruns of the show rather than to make any new programmes after 1959.

In creating the sitcom, Hiken influenced a sitcom formula that is traceable in the U.S., through sitcoms such as *Barney Miller* (ABC: 1974-82); *Taxi* (ABC/NBC: 1978-83); and *Frasier* (NBC: 1993 to 2004). In the UK, the sitcoms of Jimmy Perry and David Croft and Ben Elton can be seen to follow the *Bilko* format where a central manipulator is surrounded by a put-upon ensemble which comprises a gallery of comedic feeds, patsies and co-conspirators who attempt to best authority and to improve their lot through, often, nefarious means.

Between them, Silvers and producer/writer Nat Hiken created the comic character of Sergeant Ernie Bilko. The Bilko character drew on ancient comic models of the conniving chiseller figure. In his book, *The Idler and the Dandy*, Chris Ritchie defines the categories of chisellers as they appeared in classical comedy. These were 'the professional flatterers...the professional joker...the soldier's satellite...the agreeable parasite...the social handyman or fixer' (2006: 26). All are phenomena evident in the characterisation of, and are central to, the comedy of *Bilko*. In drawing on this classical comic type and by appropriating many of Silvers' own characteristics, Hiken created the character of 'the essential Bilko... born from the combination of first-rate scriptwriters working with an inspired star whose fictional character was perfectly tailored to his real-life personality' (Thomas and Irvine, 1985: foreword).

As the sitcom's creator, Nat Hiken, freely attested, Ernie Bilko's defining characteristics were heavily based on Silvers' own personality traits – i.e. the fast-talking, wisecracking, roving-eyed, warm-hearted, addicted gambler Ernie Bilko was played by the fast-talking, wisecracking, roving-eyed, warm hearted, addicted gambler Phil Silvers. Silvers, as an actor, brought considerable performative skills to the role:

Sergeant Bilko was the ultimate Silvers rogue, a character that allowed him to use every technique he had mastered in his twenty-five years of comedy

experience: the machine gun spiels; the quicksilver turns from one character to another, from one idea to the next; the wonderfully agile takes; and, perhaps his greatest comic weapon of all, his brilliant, dimpled smile, dazzling with insincerity. And now there was one more addition to his repertoire: his ability to bark and growl a series of commands that brings a platoon to attention without the benefit of a single word of English (Everitt, 2001:106)

Seldom have comic persona and person become so intertwined. As Mark Lewisohn notes in the *Radio Times Guide to TV Comedy* 'never has a comic actor been so completely identifiable with his TV persona as Silvers was with Bilko' (2003: 623). This fusion of person/persona was evident as early as 1956 when 'after the first season Silvers asked for rise in salary – Hiken approached [Red] Buttons who said "He is Bilko and Bilko is Silvers. There can be no-one else"' (Freeman and Rubinstein, 2000: 78).

When the series ended in 1959 there was an attempt to follow-up with a short lived sitcom starring Silvers as the leader of an ensemble set in a garage but, essentially, for Silvers, his Bilko image was now set in stone. Post the hit sitcom, as a performer, Silvers' marketable identity for public consumption became indelibly fixed with his playing of Ernie Bilko and from 1960 until his death in 1985, Silvers was symbiotically linked with his most famous comic creation. Subsequent roles in films such as *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1963), *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum*, (1966), *Carry On - Follow That Camel* (1967), *Buona Sera, Mrs Campbell* (1968); and on television in *The Love Boat* (ABC: 1977- 1986) and *Happy Days* (ABC: 1974-84), were all thinly-veiled variations on the essentially Bilko chiseller character - fast-talking, opportunistic, connivers all.

Post-Bilko, moreover, Phil Silvers the individual would become a blurred creation who existed somewhere in the uneasy fusion of the fictional Ernie Bilko, Silvers' own personality, Silvers the performer and Silvers the comic performer. The Silvers/Bilko fusion continued to exist as the conditional phenomenon that was the amalgamation of Hiken's earlier comic character writing and Silvers' on-going interpretative and improvisational comic performative skills. The hybrid construct could, moreover, only thrive in the arena of an audience's expectation and approval. However, while Ernie

Bilko was a mono-maniacal con man with little inner life (albeit with a redeeming conscience), the real human who inhabited and performed him was, inevitably, a much more complex and fragile individual. As his co-performer in the sitcom, Mickey Freeman, recalled, Phil Silvers (already, it must be remembered a successful comedian and well-established comic performer by the early 1950's) was nonetheless experiencing some crisis of identity during the run of *Bilko*:

As the star of the show, would do the warm-up each Friday. This was a chore he detested. As *Bilko* he could hide behind the character he was playing but going out as Phil Silvers left him too exposed. Several times he would be in the bathroom throwing up just before he was due out on the set (Freeman and Rubinstein, 2000: 12).

Despite the fact that 'although the comedian's on stage persona may be every bit as assumed as that the character played by the actor' (Carr and Greeves, 2006: 113) the public's expectation of Silvers/*Bilko* never appreciated (or desired) such a subtlety of distinction and Silvers' post-*Bilko* confusion of identity would continue to become even more apparent over the years. In his unusually frank and confessional autobiography, co-written with Robert Saffron in 1973, Silvers chose to end the book with the avowal 'so long, *Bilko*' (1973: 276). However, less than a year later, on the BBC chat show *Parkinson*, Silvers admitted 'I'm *Bilko* in everything I do'. In the autobiography, Silvers reflected on the performer's lot as follows:

Performers, actors, can't be very objective about themselves. They know their limits onstage, their vocal and emotional ranges. They can take criticism of their performances but not of themselves. If they looked too deeply into their own illusions, they might destroy the confidence they need to build illusions onstage. I've never known a performer who was rock-hard secure inside (Silvers and Saffron: 1973: 144).

Intriguingly, although he was an untrained actor, and was a comedian who traded on his own, well-established, manufactured, comic persona, Silvers was actually what Strasberg (as above) termed a 'mask' actor (Hethmon, 1966: 282), that is, a performer who looked to create character from within. Whilst Silvers claimed that his comic performance was 'instinctive' (Parkinson, BBC: 1974), by adopting an inner, Stanislavskian, route to building character, Silvers nevertheless remained fully conscious of the psychological 'method' approach to acting. It is documented that he

apparently barked at fellow performers who were relying on cheap comic effects to 'keep it real' (Everitt, 2000: 111) and he suggested to one colleague who had trouble performing a scene to ask himself 'what would Stan say?' (Hiken, 2008: n.p.).

As a reflective practitioner, Silvers was also aware that there was a neurotic impetus behind his own urge to perform. Without an audience, he felt that his essential being was somehow compromised and he was reduced as a person, stating, 'I know, when I am in front of an audience, doing my best, nothing can stop me. I *exist* onstage' (Silvers and Saffron, 1973: 276, *italics in original*). In a very real and immediate sense, Silvers was also fully cognisant of how destructive and personally affective the process of internalised expression of presentation of person, persona and self-identity could become for the performer of comedy. The very act of comic performance itself requires the validation of audience laughter. When getting the laugh becomes the supreme motivating factor, and self-defining goal of the comedian, this can cause an enormous pressure for the practitioner. As Carr and Greeves note:

The character trait that unites all successful performers is a kind of masochistic compulsion to make people laugh. It's pure, naked need; a need for love, for popularity, to be noticed, to show off...do they love me? Yes they must do – they're laughing. Obviously it's a double-edged sword; the medium's greatest attraction is also its cruellest disappointment, because when they don't laugh, it must follow that they don't love me. Actually, maybe they hate me (2006: 114).

On the BBC chat show *Parkinson* in 1974 Silvers was asked by the interviewer why comedians tend to be neurotic. Silvers averred that 'the doubt of it is what makes you neurotic...What insurance do you have they'll laugh tonight? That's why comedians are half nuts. That little doubt'.

For comic performers the gaining of validation of self through the response of audience laughter means a magnification of the phenomenon of the basic desire for approval. For comic performers, this intensified need to receive approbation through audience laughter may require complex demands or sacrifices to be made by the actor to gain the reward. In Goffman's terms, the re-presentations and manipulations

of behavioural authenticity that are required in comic acting may affect the performer's own sense of self-construct. The comic performer is, after all, the extreme example of the presenter of a 'contrived character...[whose] successful staging... involves the use of *real* techniques – the same techniques by which everyday persons sustain their real social situations' (Goffman, 1959: 254-255, *italics in original*). The contrivances required to ensure successful presentation of other's comic selves, coupled with the importance of gaining extrinsic validation through spectator laughter, can become dangerously disestablishing. This problematic self-perception and self-definition is also an excessive example of John Hewitt's expression of the human tendency to give others what we think they expect of us. He states:

People are conscious of the expectations others hold towards them, and their 'Me's' are formulated by regarding their own actual or contemplated acts from the vantage points of others' expectations (1984: 111).

For some comic performers, their very sense of comic identity and concomitant self-esteem can become troublingly entwined. The burden of other people's expectations of them as interpreted through the direct approval of the audience is considerable. For those comic performers who have a famous and successful persona associated with them, the expectation that their alter ego brings means that the originator can, unfortunately, seldom be as funny, popular or as well-loved as their own fictional creation. A loss of self can ensue for performers in this category and those actors' psyches can become damaged in the discovery that, as Harry Stack Sullivan notes, 'each of us has an ideal self, which we approve, and other selves which we may not find so attractive' (in Hall, 1981: 60). For the 'fabricator' of a 'contrived performance' (Goffman, 1959: 70), such self-doubt – even a complete loss of self - can become an acute form of "self-distantiation", namely that process by which a person comes to feel estranged from himself' (1959: 81). As Goffman further notes, 'to the degree that the individual maintains a show before others that he himself does not believe, he can come to experience a special kind of alienation from self and a special kind of wariness of others' (1959: 236). Elsewhere, Goffman continues this theme:

For a famous person to 'get away' where he can 'be himself' may mean his finding a community in which there is no biography of him: here his conduct,

reflecting merely on his social identity, can have a chance of being of interest to no one (1963: 88).

This 'getting away' may have taken the form of alcohol for Tony Hancock or the increasingly negative and bleakly existential diarising for Kenneth Williams. For Phil Silvers, this self-distantiation took the form of addictive gambling and, like Spike Milligan, extended stays within a mental health sanatorium. For Silvers, moreover, even the simple act of 'getting away' to a 'community where there is no biography' proved difficult. Within the confines of Las Encinas institution, where he was undergoing treatment for a nervous breakdown, Silvers' persona and persona continued to become confused. In a somewhat tragi-comic coda near the end of Silvers' autobiography, he relates that, while walking in the grounds of the asylum, 'I said good morning every day to an elderly gentleman...quite senile, he had to be helped on his walks by an orderly. After a few weeks he suddenly spoke to me. "Sergeant Bilko, are you on duty here?" (Silvers and Saffron, 1973: 252-3).

In the end, for humans, presentations of private and public selves are crucial to self-concept. As Markus and Kunda argue, measuring the 'malleability' of the self-concept requires:

Placing the individual within a particular context reveals how the self-concept, although resisting challenge and disconfirmation, varies with the prevailing social situation and how it depends on the social context for its particular manifestation and expression (1986: 865).

For comic performers, especially those who have achieved a level of fame that renders them as 'public comic property', the complex, grey area of where the actor and their most famous characterisation intersects suggests a particular, albeit, ethically considerate area for further study. Research of the 'self distantiation' (Goffman: 1959: 235) process that may be experienced by performers who have a famous comic alter-ego could yield insights into the ways in which fragile and vulnerable performer psyches can be forced into troubled waters. This study could take the form of an evaluation of the crises of identity that can arise between presentations of public and private selves for those performers who have become

‘public comic property’ and who risk exposure of the layer of actual self during the process that Goffman describes as:

‘when... the members of an audience...learn.... The aggressive pleasure they can obtain by discovering someone’s dark, entrusted, inside, or strategic secrets’ (1959: 235).

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