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Toward Unmediated Performance: Jane Wagner and Lily Tomlin's *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*

By Jennifer Schmidt

Abstract

Working across media, in television, film, and live performance, Lily Tomlin and Jane Wagner have spent the majority of their careers operating within the confines of popular culture and mainstream entertainment. As politically-engaged artists, their work for television and film frequently comments on the unique place they occupy in pop culture, projecting a certain discomfort with the commercialism of their medium even as they work within it. Their consciousness about the role of media and technology in modern life transfers to the work they developed for the stage, in particular, their lauded one-woman show, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*. In *Search for Signs*, Wagner (as writer) and Tomlin (as performer) employ shifting modes of addressing the audience to bring attention to the layers of mediation present in life and art. By examining the evolving audience/performer relationship, this paper explores how Wagner and Tomlin weave into the framework of their one-woman show an argument for the importance of live, unmediated performance to both a feminist and humanist worldview.

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The television special *Lily: Sold Out!*, which aired in 1981, presents a fictionalized account of Lily Tomlin turning her one-woman show *The Seven Ages of Woman* (an exaggerated version of feminist performance art) into a Las Vegas spectacle. Early in the special, Tomlin gets a call from her agent about the possibility of working in Vegas:

Who called? Caesar's Palace? I'd have to do *Seven Ages of Woman*, Arthur. It's what I believe in right now. If I did something else right now it would just be for the money. And I don't think I could live with myself if I did something just for the money. How much? Is that per week? (quoted in Reed 136)

The next shot shows her racing through the desert on her way to Vegas. The special thus sets up a (false) dichotomy between Tomlin's theater work, which purports to be "highbrow" and politically engaged, and her work for mass audiences, which is purely about the money. But it takes equal hits at both sides of the highbrow/lowbrow divide. Her theater piece, *The Seven Ages of Woman*, is an overly serious work, poking fun at the essentialist feminist attitudes that were prevalent at the time. The Las Vegas stage show, on the other hand, is a shallow wash of flashing lights, sequins, and cheap tricks. By setting up these exaggerated extremes, Tomlin points the way to a middle ground, and by making fun of how easily a fictionalized version of herself "sells out," she also displays her own ability to walk the divide in real life.

Tomlin and her partner, Jane Wagner, mostly worked within the confines of popular culture, mass audiences, and mainstream media.

Especially in their television specials, the work they produced for mass audiences frequently commented on the unlikely position they occupied, projecting a certain discomfort with the commercialism of their medium even as they worked within it. Often, Tomlin would make fun of her own contradictory position as a TV star known for her political consciousness and feminism. Early in her career, she famously turned down a \$500,000 offer from AT&T to play her telephone operator character, Ernestine, in a commercial; later, of course, she satirized this kind of refusal to “sell out” in *Lily: Sold Out!*

In Jennifer Reed’s book, *The Queer Cultural Work of Lily Tomlin and Jane Wagner*, she argues that Tomlin’s self-consciousness and self-parody form an essential part of her “cultural work”:

She knows she is just making a television show and that she at the same time wants to, and does, make a social comment in her work. She makes fun of her own perceived pretension, and neither disavows nor exaggerates it. She is creating new terms. She makes fun of her own position as a celebrity, and at the same time does not deny what she also cares deeply about: art and politics. (132)

One way that Tomlin displays her commitment to art and politics is through her dedication to live performance, which she pursued alongside her work in film and television. To the current day, she continues to tour and perform *An Evening of Classic Lily Tomlin*, a one-woman show composed of material and characters from her long career. Although Tomlin/Wagner satirize the divide between high and low culture in their television specials, the stage ultimately proved to be the most successful outlet for their creative ambitions together. Unsurprisingly, the role of media and technology in life and performance, art, and politics, remained a core thematic concern in their work for the stage, especially in their

lauded one-woman show, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, which had its Broadway premiere in 1985.

Just as in their television specials, *Search for Signs* explores the various compromises, interferences, connections, and missed connections in a culture governed by commercial mass media. Throughout the course of the play, Tomlin portrays fifteen different characters, and each monologue (or dialogue as with Lud and Marie¹) alters the relationship to the audience. Much existing criticism of *Search for Signs* identifies the complexity and diversity of its multi-character form as a core component of its feminism as well as its humanism, because through its web of predominantly female characters, the play ultimately stresses the value of human life and bonds. In *Utopia in Performance*, Jill Dolan finds hope within Tomlin's chameleonic transformations that bring "friends and lovers, strangers and those most different from ourselves" into an "interconnected, humane, and loving theatrical universe" (71). Crucially, this form of humanism, as Dolan defines it, "doesn't devolve into the transcendental sign of 'man'" or "become omniscient and omnipotent," but remains "contextual, situational, and specific" (21-22). Jennifer Reed builds on this idea of a "reanimated humanism" in her reading of *Search for Signs*, emphasizing that the work provides a multiplicity of perspectives and an openness of identity without taking away from the integrity of the discrete characters: "That is, the characters are written to provide multiple points of identification, and they are performed with the meticulous specificity that gives each one subjectivity" (102). Tomlin and Wagner thus escape the "totalizing signifier" of earlier humanist ideas of the universal,

¹ The married couple Lud and Marie are recurring characters in Tomlin's work. In her earlier one-woman show, *Appearing Nitely*, she explained that the pair was based on her parents, but she had "changed their names to protect them." The text of their scenes is written in dialogue with Tomlin making vocal changes to delineate the characters. Segments from *Appearing Nitely* were recorded live and released on the album, *Lily Tomlin: On Stage*, Arista Records, 1977, streaming audio, accessed August 1, 2017, https://archive.org/details/lily_tomlin_1099

while letting their individual subjects represent an interconnected humanity (Dolan 22).

While Dolan discusses how Tomlin's shifting identities have an alienating effect on her audience—noting that her use of Brechtian estrangement breeds “both critical attentiveness and affection for her characters” (69)—she does not examine the performer/audience relationship as it changes between different modes of address within the play itself. Considering Tomlin/Wagner's work from this perspective sheds light on their innovative use of the monologue form. Most of the monologues employ some form of mediation between the character and the audience; rather than addressing the audience directly, the characters often speak to an implied interlocutor, either through the invisible presence of another character or through the use of a device like a telephone call or television commercial. At other times, Tomlin or her characters do speak to the spectators and by contrast, the direct engagement with the audience becomes the means for the play's transformative conclusion. Constructing a complex dramaturgical framework for their one-woman show, Wagner (as writer) and Tomlin (as performer) use this shifting relationship to the audience to bring attention to the layers of mediation present in life and art, and ultimately, to argue for the importance of live, unmediated performance to both a feminist and (reanimated) humanist worldview.

The second act of *Search for Signs* features a long segment focusing on the character Lyn and her two friends, Edie, a radical feminist and lesbian, and Marge, a partaker in the sexual revolution. As the lengthiest and most complicated segment of the play, the Lyn story helps to illustrate the dramaturgical function of the various modes of address. Providing an insider's critique of second-wave feminism, the story follows Lyn and friends as they move from the optimism of the 1970 Women's Strike

through their tired celebration of Geraldine Ferraro's vice-presidential nomination in 1984. In performance, Tomlin plays all three friends, dexterously switching between Lyn, Edie, and Marge when they are conversing with each other, changing her voice and posture to indicate the shifts. Wagner further complicates the narrative style by writing the segment as a flashback, and thus the monologue not only oscillates between different voices but also between time periods. The piece is framed around Lyn finding and reading the diary she kept in the 70s, and it includes several distinct kinds of writing: a type of narration when Lyn reads aloud from her journal, dialogues between the three friends in which Tomlin embodies all the parts, and implied-interlocutor monologues that present Lyn's conversations with unrepresented characters like her therapist, boss, or children.

Though she is aided by the clarity of Wagner's writing and the support of sound and lighting design that differentiate the various settings, the quick shifts in character and address require Tomlin to maintain razor-sharp precision of body and voice. On the page, the stage directions clearly differentiate between scene and character, with descriptive headings such as "From Lyn's Journal," "Two Phone Calls," "In the Dome Home" or "A Few Months Later, At The Office" (Wagner 185, 186, 188). In performance, however, the delineations between these settings become less clear. With Wagner's framing of the story as a flashback, the quick jumps in setting and perspective mimic the blurred lines of memory. Frank Rich notes the fluidity of these transitions in his *New York Times* review of the original production: "Miss Tomlin shifts among the female personae so fast—with alterations of voice, posture and facial muscles—that Lynn's [sic] tale almost takes on the hallucinatory flow of consciousness as it spills about the black stage." Although the brief scenes blend together, the quick pace also requires a speed and precision

from Tomlin that leaves little room for a direct engagement of the audience. The recording of Tomlin's performance from the 1991 film version of *Search for Signs* demonstrates the extreme physicality of the Lyn story. Tomlin practically dances through the segment, and rarely do her carefully choreographed movements allow her to speak the lines directly to the audience. In a few of the most emotionally intense moments, such as the news of Marge's suicide, Tomlin even turns her back on them.

Tomlin thus manipulates her performance style to match the mixture of serious and comic elements in Wagner's writing, constructing a fourth wall in passages of heavy emotion and breaking it down to deliver the jokes. With the same sharp intention used to indicate character changes, Tomlin occasionally turns to deliver a line to the audience—usually a punch line. In one such moment, Tomlin breaks up a piece of text from Lyn's journal with an aside that lets her land the joke. Describing her worries that Bob, her husband, "has gotten too much in touch with his feminine side," Lyn quips, "Last night, I'm pretty sure, he faked an orgasm" (178). With the last sentence, Tomlin swivels her gaze and delivers the line with a comedian's accomplished deadpan. The intentionality behind Tomlin's shifting relationship to the audience marks her diverse experiences as a performer; she offers the rapport of stand-up comedian, the intimacy of a film actress, and, ultimately, the invitation into the fictive world of the play developed by prior solo performers, such as Ruth Draper (who was an inspiration for Tomlin).

The Lyn story takes up most of the second half of the play, making it a kind of solo-play-within-a-solo-play, but the layering of different modes of address extends throughout *Search for Signs*. The narrative framework of *Search for Signs* centers on Trudy, the bag-lady narrator, who further complicates this mediated audience/performer relationship. The variety of

characters, stories, and scenes that make-up the loosely constructed plot appear via Trudy's ability to "look in on" the lives of her fellow human beings—her ability to see others countering the fact that she is the type of person typically invisible to society. A self-identified crazy person who communicates with aliens, Trudy explains that electro-shock treatments gave her a "hookup with humanity as whole" (21), and as she tunes into the lives of the other characters in the drama for the benefit of her extraterrestrial friends, the audience watches along with her. This framework, Dolan notes, "offers the audience a view of life from the margins" (69). Moreover, because Tomlin plays all the characters, Trudy's act of looking becomes an act of embodiment, collapsing the distance between her grotesque body and the graceful body of the performer.

The difficulty of distinguishing between Tomlin as performer and Trudy as narrator becomes apparent when the first character witnessed through Trudy's "hook-up" is Tomlin herself: "I see glitches—Now I see this dark-haired actress on a Broadway stage. I know her. I see her all the time outside the Plymouth Theater, Forty-fifth Street" (23). In the monologue that follows, Tomlin addresses her audience, thanking them for coming to the theater and listing a few general worries (a common segment in her live performances). Yet, following the logic of how the scene is framed, the monologue is also set at a metatheatrical remove: the audience witnesses Tomlin's presence in the theater through Trudy, who is viewing the actress from outside the theater and sharing it with friends from outer space. Thus, the scene manages to be both present and apart, direct and distanced, requiring a kind of double vision from the audience—an awareness that the moment experienced in the theater might also be witnessed from the vantage point of the cosmos.

As the overarching framework for the play, this kind of double-vision applies to each character and scene that follows; the audience

witnesses the scene through Tomlin's immediate and embodied performance but also through Trudy's mediated and out-of-body "channel-switching." Trudy's mode of address itself includes a kind of double-vision, since she's constantly both talking to herself and directly to the audience, existing onstage and on the street outside the theater. Wagner writes Trudy's dialogue as narration, and she acts as storyteller throughout the play, introducing each monologue as it comes and describing her interactions with the aliens for the benefit of the audience. Yet, a tension exists between Trudy as homeless woman, the kind of figure most people intentionally ignore or overlook, and Trudy as narrator, who is demanding the audience's attention. The opening lines of the play engage this politics of "looking," as Trudy draws attention to the grotesqueness of her body—her "raspy voice," rotting teeth, and eyes that "twirl around like fruit flies" (13)—yet demands the audience's notice nevertheless. "Look at me, / you mammalian-brained LUNKHEADS," Trudy exclaims, calling on the spectators to grant her the power of their gaze (13). Just as Tomlin makes Trudy intentionally hard to look at, she delivers Trudy's monologues as the kind of slightly mumbled rant that city-dwellers normally tune out. Thus, rather than acting as charismatic conduit to the audience, like the Stage Manager in *Our Town*, Trudy makes a rather combative narrator, putting the onus on the audience to look and listen carefully. She might be talking to herself, but she fully expects that we listen.

Like Trudy's electro-shock-induced visions, the other stories in the play highlight the role technology and media play in human lives, as either a tool for greater connection or further distancing. As mentioned above, many of the characters speak their monologues through a layer of mediation. Mrs. Beasley appears in a television advertisement, which the suburban couple, Lud and Marie, watch in disgust from their living room.

Lud and Marie's teenage granddaughter, Agnus, first appears when desperately making phone calls on a House of Pancakes payphone after being kicked out of her house. She calls into a radio psychologist for help, but receives none. "What? A commercial? I can't believe you're brushing me off. To sell some product that probably killed some poor *lab rat*" (65). The attempts at communication in these monologues (through either TV, telephone, or radio) fail completely, but Agnus's next attempt brings her into more direct contact with an audience. The first act of *Search for Signs* closes with Agnus's presentation of her one-woman performance art piece. Speaking to her live audience rather than into a telephone, or through a split-personality conversation with her grandparents, the full force of Agnus's angst is focused onto the audience, and her goal for the performance is, in fact, connection. "This will be a night of sharing for the sharing-impaired" (84), she states, and precedes to present a diatribe against apathy that ends with her holding a hand over a flame and feeling the burn. Wagner parodies performance art through Agnus's one-woman show, but within it she also states a main thesis of *Search for Signs*: a call to move past the interference and jadedness of modern existence in favor of visceral and live experience. The first and second acts of the play both present this move from a more heavily mediated form of communication to direct, physical connection in a live theater, and thus Wagner/Tomlin use the evolving modes of address in the monologues to echo the thematic development of the play.

In addition to the scenes that use phone calls or TV as mediation between audience and performer, many of the scenes call for an implied-interlocutor. The first scene to employ an unseen interlocutor features Chrissy, who sweats it out to an 80s aerobics routine while opening up to her friend, Eileen, about her problems, which are rather severe. Her seminar leader, she explains, labeled her a "classic 'false hope' case" (37),

and leads her to realize that her expectations for life have simply been too high. Tomlin's energetic bouncing to the music provides a stark contrast to Chrissy's darkly humorous lines and suicidal thoughts—she speculates that “the worst part of dying is the part where your whole life passes before you” (43). Chrissy's ramblings do not allow much room for input from her friend, and the monologue might have easily done without Eileen, if not for the fact that the audience and Trudy are merely eavesdropping and thus need the conceit of the unseen listener. Eileen's presence also serves to distance the audience from the heaviness of Chrissy's despair. Both the implied interlocutor and the physicality of the exercise class mitigate the impact of Chrissy's confessions—giving the audience a certain detachment from which to consider her condition as a victim of her own false hope. Chrissy's monologue occurs early in the play, and the ironic distance from which the suicidal aerobicizer is first introduced will be broken down by the resolution of her storyline through another character, Kate.

We first eavesdrop on Kate when she is complaining to a friend at a beauty parlor about how “having *everything* can sometimes make you stop wanting *anything*” (Wagner 58). An upper-class woman whose boredom has turned into callousness, Kate lets taste and fashion dictate her choices, despite the fact that it brings her little pleasure. A bad haircut, for instance, causes her to lament that she is “sick of being the victim of trends I reflect but don't even understand” (Wagner 58). The satire of Kate's monologue works on two levels, critiquing the rich woman's exaggerated complaints while sympathizing with her subjection to a rigid system of standards for appearance and behavior. Her privilege and adherence to the mainstream differentiates her from the other misfit characters that make up the play; perhaps because of this, however, she serves an ultimately vital role in tying together the loose pieces of plot. In her first monologue, Kate mentions that she will soon be an audience

member of *Search for Signs*: “I’ve got to go to the theater tonight, this actress/comedy thing. They say it’s uplifting, but still I dread it” (Wagner 57). This metatheatrical comment provides another transformation in the audience/performer relationship, resituating the character on stage as a potential fellow audience member. Despite the impossibility of Kate attending a performance of *Search for Signs*—because Kate is Lily Tomlin—the suggestion that she might be in the house rather than on the stage heightens the sense of interconnectedness between the world of *Search for Signs* and our own. It collapses the frame of the fictional world, letting it collide with the reality of the current moment in the theater.

Later, in the penultimate monologue of the play, Kate describes two events that increase the intersections within the fictional world as well, bringing many of the characters into one degree of separation. First, she finds Chrissy’s suicide note on an LA sidewalk and the resulting responsibility she feels for another person’s life and legacy opens her up to further connection: “Lonnie, this experience has had such an effect on me. Made me aware of just how closed off I’ve been to people’s suffering, even my own” (Wagner 210). In her new state of mind, she runs into three more of the play’s characters, Trudy, Tina, and Brandy, and stops to observe them. She explains, “This evening, after the concert, I saw these two prostitutes on the corner...talking with this street crazy, this bag lady. And I actually stopped to watch them. Even though it had begun to rain” (Wagner 210). Her attention is rewarded when a young man asks them how to get to Carnegie Hall and Trudy responds “Practice!” With Trudy’s enactment of the old joke, the unlikely grouping catches “each other’s eyes” and laughs together “in the pouring rain” (Wagner 210).

This moment comes closest to a resolution for the fictional world of the play, bringing together many of the far-flung characters. (The Carnegie Hall concert features Edie’s son Ivan playing the violin, who is actually

Paul's biological son from when Marge collected his sperm during a one-night stand. Trudy and her alien friends also attend). The moment shared between Trudy and Kate on the street outside Carnegie Hall also unites the most economically diverse characters in the play, and Kate's description of the encounter might induce some of the "uplifting" feelings, which the play self-consciously promises to deliver at the end. In his review of the original production, Frank Rich wrote in *The New York Times* that at this point "the tone turns abruptly sentimental," while admitting it was hard to "resist" its charm. It may be sentimental, but the magic within this moment of connection is also unexceptional—it simply requires Kate to notice her fellow human beings on the street. Earlier in the play, Trudy informs us that she frequently haunts the area around the concert hall in order to shout "Practice!" when the opportunity arises. Thus Kate, with her newly-opened mind, witnesses an ordinary occurrence, and it is her capacity to be a good audience member rather than the event itself that is extraordinary. By "*actually stopping to watch*" Kate finally answers Trudy's demand in the opening monologue that someone passing by "LOOK" at her.

The final gestures of the play unite the misfit characters into one story, but their interconnectedness does not promise any happy endings. The neatness or sentimentality of this conclusion weakens with the recollection that the unresolved aspects of the play include two characters committing suicide and many more of them no better off than where they started. The hope arises instead from the possibility suggested by Kate's monologue—that they might manage to realize and acknowledge their shared existence. The ultimate uplift of the play occurs when it circles back to the shared space within the theater. After the violin concert, Trudy brings the aliens back to "Shubert Alley" to catch more of *Search for Signs*. Her extra-terrestrial companions hope to have a "goose bump experience"

(Wagner 212) before leaving earth, and they finally experience it, not through Tomlin's performance or Wagner's script, but by looking at the audience: "I forgot to tell 'em to watch the play; they'd been watching the *audience!*" (212). Trudy laughs and explains that "to see a group of strangers sitting together in the dark, laughing and crying about the same things...that just knocked 'em out" (Wagner 212). In *Utopia in Performance*, Dolan discusses the importance of this move:

Tomlin and Wagner's humble gesture makes the audience magic, makes the audience the origin of the utopian performative, who can gesture toward a better world by showing up to watch, to listen, to be together, to be moved, to watch each other respond to a performance that creates history from our various experiences. (74)

The gesture to the audience also closes the gap between audience and performer one last time. The "you" that appeared several times in Trudy's opening monologue—fifteen times on the first page of text to be exact—has turned into a "we" in the last lines of the play:

I like to think of them out there
in the dark, watching us.
Sometimes we'll do something and they'll laugh.
Sometimes we'll do something and they'll cry.
And maybe one day we'll do something so magnificent,
everyone in the universe will get
goose bumps. (213)

This last image places Trudy, Tomlin, the audience, and all the other characters on a single plane of existence through the universalizing force of the *theatrum mundi* metaphor. But in this case, not only is the world a stage, but we are all both players *and* audience; and our abilities to watch and listen prove as important as our desire to act.

By breaking down the hierarchy between storyteller and audience, Tomlin/Wagner's humble conclusion of *Search for Signs* demonstrates the multi-character one-woman show's potential as a feminist form. Marilyn French's essay on the play, included as an afterword in the print edition, celebrates the "feminist attitudes" that permeate the piece: "*The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* is the first work I know of that simply takes it as a given that a mass audience will accept feminist attitudes, that proceeds on the assumption these attitudes are shared and that therefore does not lecture, hector, or even underline" (French 222). In keeping with these attitudes, French identifies the dangers of distancing ourselves as one main feminist point in the play: "Nor does Wagner's script deal out blame for the social problems it addresses. Instead it focuses on our anxiety and on our dangerous tendency to harden ourselves" (220). Through its intricately constructed narrative that removes layers of mediation as it goes, Wagner and Tomlin weave this argument into the framework of the play. Of course, the movement toward unmediated performance is an impossible goal, (because no performance can be truly unmediated), and the movement is facilitated by the use of distancing devices. But, by relying on a system of shifting modes of address, they develop the solo form into a dynamic framework that transforms the relationship to the audience. In the process, they present the undeniable claim that in all our various searches, humanity should continue to seek the community found within live storytelling.

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