Comedy: Funny Business: Stand Up Comedy and Its Social, Political, and Cultural Importance
Faculty: Bruce Levitt, Professor of Performing & Media Arts
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Schedule: Monday - Friday, 9-12 and 1:30-3:30, except Wednesday afternoon.
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Back in 2013, I got a call from Bill Maher.

He was being hit with a lawsuit by Donald Trump and thought it would be "comedy gold" for my column. The host of HBO's "Real Time With Bill Maher" had joked that Trump was the love child of a human woman and an orangutan — what else could explain the tangerine hair? Maher offered to give $5 million to charity if he could see the birth certificate of Trump, who had offered $5 million to charity for records to verify the birthplace of President Barack Obama.

Trump failed to see the parody and thought the joke was mean. The flamboyant mogul told his lawyer to answer Maher with a letter: "Attached, hereto, is a copy of Mr. Trump's birth certificate, demonstrating that he is the son of Fred Trump, not an orangutan." Then Trump sued Maher for $5 million, before dropping the suit eight weeks later. (The Trump representative who threatened to refile the suit was none other than Michael Cohen.)

"He's not even a real person," an exasperated Maher told Conan O'Brien about Trump at the time. "He's just like a pop reference from the '80s." It was like beefing with J.R. Ewing from "Dallas," he said.

I told Maher that it wasn't worth writing about Trump and his silly lawsuits and risible presidential aspirations.

"Forget it," I said. "Trump doesn't matter."

Oh, well. Nobody gets it right all the time.

At 68, the comedian is still a thicket of thorns in Trump's side. He led the pack in 2015, taking the threat of Trump seriously. He led again in 2020, warning that Trump would not accept the results if he lost. And he predicts the same this time if Trump loses again — two grooms showing up at the altar on Jan. 20 (which happens to be Maher's birthday).

"It'll be disputed and it'll be ugly," he said over a recent dinner at Craig's, a Hollywood show business canteen.

Maher has fun comparing the heavily made-up Trump to a drag queen. After Trump's team asked for a mistrial in the New York hush-money case, Maher japed that the former president's drag name was "Miss Trial."

But the comedian is about more than one-liners these days. He has become our own prickly, patriotic Will Rogers, drawing acclaim — and fire — for his yeasty interviews and his lacerating editorials at the end of "Real Time," taking on the right, the left, the media, romance, college campus protests, cancel culture, victim culture and technology gone awry.

His new book, “What This Comedian Said Will Shock You,” is the “crème de la crème,” as he says, of a decade’s worth of his editorials intended to “break through the bubbles.”

“If he sees hypocrisy, disingenuousness, cruelty or intellectual dishonesty, he calls it out,” said Richard Plepler, who worked with Maher as head of HBO and now heads Eden Productions at Apple TV. “We’re living in an environment where nobody seems willing to listen to anything but their own tribe, and Bill has this really preternatural ability to open up people’s ears so they maybe, God willing, learn something.”

Maher evokes the twin archetypes of the wisecracking kid who sat behind you in school and the grumpy uncle who sits next to you at Thanksgiving. He’s a rebel with a cause: He actually cares about the things he complains about, so there’s heart behind the cynicism.

Jerry Seinfeld called the consistently high level of Maher’s editorials “shocking.” “Your brain is worthy of all the attention it gets,” he teased Maher on “Club Random,” Maher’s podcast.

His range may be explained by something Maher, a Cornell history major, writes in his book: “I watch the History Channel like most guys watch Pornhub.”
He is not universally beloved. Some people find him smug; some think he has been red-pilled. His show has been nominated for an Emmy 21 times without a win.

Image

Two well-known Emmy losers at the 2004 awards show.Credit...Dan MacMedan/WireImage, via Getty Images

“I am the love that dare not speak its name,” he said, laughing. “It’s almost ridiculous; I should have won 20!” Growing serious, he said that it no longer stings as much: “What I really have learned now is that, it is good being old when you’re smart in a way you weren’t when you were young. The dumbest thing you can do in life, I think, is to have almost everything and then obsess on what you don’t have.”

But even without a fistful of gold statuettes, he is undergoing what Katie Couric, a guest on “Club Random,” called a “Bill-aissance.”

He seems to make more news than all of the other night-owl comedians combined, no doubt because he breaks free of comedy’s congealed partisan worldview. Unlike most other political commentators, he does not pander to the left or the right.

“Let’s be honest,” he said. “The only thing that the two parties really have in common is that they’re both hoping their candidates die.”

Sometimes Fox (which he says he rarely watches) loves him and MSNBC is mad at him, and sometimes it’s the reverse. In a world awash in disinformation, Maher gives blunt,

practical opinions, not filtered through ideology or likability, on everything from "Barbie" to Bibi to babies — and why he never had them.

"Why can't everybody live in my world, in the middle, where we're not nuts?" he wondered, ordering a shot of tequila to go with his margherita pizza. The dedicated health freak, opponent of treating obesity as body positivity, and Ozempic skeptic has a small bottle with a dropper, dripping into his sparkling water a product called Jing, a bubbly water enhancer with no aspartame, gluten or carbs.

Maher is constantly asked why he makes fun of the left more than he used to.

"Yes, I do, because they're goofier and more obnoxious than they used to be," he told his guests, Frank Bruni and Douglas Murray, on his show recently. "They also just became weirder."

"I'm a comedian," he told me. "I'm going to go where the ridiculous is."

About the fans he has lost for not toeing the blue line, he writes in his book, "I do not miss them."

He thinks that the right is more dangerous and he espouses "the Blue Liquid Doctrine": "If it's Trump against Biden, I will vote for Biden's head in a jar of blue liquid." But that's not good enough for his liberal friends in Hollywood, who pester him to shut up about President Biden's age and gait. (Maher kids that Biden should lean into it and say, "I walk like a toddler with a full diaper, but I believe in democracy.")

He believes it's not the job of the liberal commentariat to shore up, and cover up, the weaknesses of the Democratic candidate.

He credits Biden with a fierce, Dracula-worthy will to hang onto the Oval: "He has crossed oceans of time to be where he is, and he's not going to give it up now."

The Trump-dictator-we're-doomed narrative bores him. "When people come up to me and say, 'What are we going to do?' I'm like, 'It doesn't look to me like the world is just falling apart. Maybe it will tomorrow,'" he told me. "Look, I lost my nervous system under Trump once. I'm not doing it again. When he blows up the world, wake me. I can't put my nervous system on the line every day for every stupid tweet and every bonehead thing he does."

While he's a jade, he admits to "a soft spot for this crazy, mixed-up country of ours."

He thinks we should stop acting as if we're heading to a civil war and start talking to each other. He loves his stand-up gigs in red states.

"We have to see each other not as mortal enemies," he writes, "but merely as roommates from hell." (He has been in that "bad-roommate situation," putting white tape through the middle of the apartment.)

At dinner, we talked about the eruption of antisemitism.

“It’s hard to get your head around the thought of people yelling ‘Death to America’ on American soil,” he said.

He is disgusted with progressive students who, as he writes, cheer on Hamas to preside over a country with few constraints against sexual harassment, spousal rape, domestic violence, homophobia and child marriage.

He calls elite universities “the mouth of the river” from which nonsense flows, producing “American-hating hysterics devoid of knowledge. If they had any knowledge about the Middle East or what apartheid really means or genocide, would they be on the side of Hamas, really?”

In ancient courts, the jester could speak the truth to the king with impunity, like Shakespeare’s fools. But, given safe spaces and trigger warnings, being a jester isn’t what it used to be.

“He survived his first cancellation,” said Tina Brown, the media duchess, “and now has become a warrior for the rest of us, absolutely refusing to be careful.”

I got to know Maher after his first cancellation, in 2002 — the literal one of his ABC show, “Politically Incorrect.”

Proving that a 90 percent approval rating is a dangerous tonic, the Bush-Cheney White House decided after Sept. 11 that it would brook no criticism. Ari Fleischer, the White House press secretary, haughtily dressed down Maher when he agreed with a guest that, while they were fiends, the 9/11 hijackers were not cowards.

Maher, and all Americans, Fleischer said, needed “to watch what they say.” ABC dropped Maher’s show.

I wrote a column pointing out that, especially when our country is a target, “we should not suppress the very thing that makes our foul enemies crazed with twisted envy — our heady and headache-inducing clash of ideas. We should dread a climate where the jobs of columnists and comedians are endangered by dissent.”

My idol is Jonathan Swift, so I think that satirists — the other “Swifties” — should be given a long leash. Sometimes they’ll miss the mark, sometimes they’ll be offensive. But we need our jesters to hold up a mirror to our society, now more than ever.

Maher was moved when his producers recently gave him a box that looked like an engagement ring box, with a ring on a chain symbolizing his attachment to his fans.

“This is the relationship of my life,” Maher told me about his loyal audience. “Not that I really wanted kids to begin with, but I would have ignored them anyway if they were tugging on my pants because I had to rewrite this editorial.

“I think that’s a chip in your head that you’re born with: You either like babies or you like fur,” said Maher, a PETA board member. “I just love fur. I can watch humans suffering in a movie, but I cannot watch animals suffering in a movie. I can’t even watch ‘King Kong’ or ‘Godzilla’ or ‘Planet of the Apes’ or ‘Seabiscuit.’”

He was brought up in New Jersey by a nurse and a radio broadcaster (and later editor). “I still have some tapes of him doing the top-of-the-hour news,” he said of his dad. “I have one the day Mickey Mantle retired.”

Maher recalled that he went to school “scared all the time” of the bullies.

“I wasn’t the most picked on,” he said. “I might have been the second most, which puts you in a very precarious position. It’s like the mother dog has a litter of nine and she has eight nipples; the eighth guy’s going to be very insecure. I was the eighth nipple.

“It just put a knot in your stomach all the time. Kids are feral. You have to teach them to be decent.”

He didn’t have much of a social life at Cornell, either. “At the time I was there, I would say it was probably four or five to one, men to women,” he said. “You take a guy who has no game and put him in those odds. Of course you’re going to be lonely the whole time. I was really slow to learn how to just even talk to a girl.”

He was raised Roman Catholic before he was shocked by some news. “I was 13 when it came up at Christmas that my mother’s family side was Jewish,” he said.

“It never even entered my mind to ask why my mother never went to church with us,” he said. “It’s very strange when I look back on it, but back then, it was, ‘Don’t talk about politics or religion.’ Now it’s all we talk about. We’re always at each other’s throats because these are things you’re never going to really agree on.”

He is thinking of giving up stand-up after his next HBO special. “It’s like playing the cello,” he told me. “You got to always be working at it.”

On “Club Random,” where he gets stoned and sips tequila and invites guests to partake of pot or their drinks of choice as well (Seinfeld had coffee; Couric had a paloma), Maher can get downright sentimental, and confessional. He spoke to Martin Short about waking up in the middle of the night with morbid thoughts, by which he meant death. He fretted to Seinfeld that “men have been ruined by the phone and pornography. It’s rapey. It’s domineering. And this is what young men see.” The old days of Playboy, he said plaintively, have been replaced by “horrible things, choking and spanking.”

He has a stake, with John McEnroe, in Woody Harrelson’s Hollywood pot dispensary, the Woods, and recently hung out there with Paul McCartney. “I got to say, he was great,” Maher said.

He sleeps until he wakes up naturally, at about 11 a.m. or noon; then he fasts most of the day because, he said, eating slows you down. “Three meals is just something somebody made up,” he said. “God didn’t put it on a tablet.” He takes his two rescue dogs, Chico, who has one eye and is about 15 years old, and Chula, 10, and shoots baskets and gets high and writes; about 3 p.m., he has a shake with protein powder, yogurt, pumpkin seed butter and chlorophyll, with avocado and tomato “because I was told Hispanic men have very low rates of prostate cancer” — and a light meal at night.

As we left Craig’s, with Maher heading to his gray, all-electric Mercedes, I asked him if he ever felt as though he were beating his head against the wall. He does. But, he said dryly, he’s willing to tie himself to the mast and “keep sailing onward.”

“I don’t want to hate half the country,” he said. “I *don’t* hate half the country. And I don’t want America to get a divorce.”

More from Maureen Dowd

Comedy Techniques

TECHINQUES

We will look at various techniques that can assist in the creation of solo performances. Each technique listed below can be applied to each mode of solo performance. Although they can be explored in isolation, the techniques listed below are not mutually exclusive. They can be used in any number of ways to act with each other in any number of combinations. Since the list below is by no means exhaustive, we may want to define others as the semester progresses:

Environment: The organization of the physical space for solo performance is essential to focusing the audience's attention and in assisting with the creation of character, story telling, or performer presence. The **Environment** can create a context for the piece by providing the solo performer with objects to assist the performance or obstacles to create conflict within the performance. The environment can compliment or contrast the content of the piece to create atmosphere, surprise, emotional identification, humor, tension, and dramatic action. The use of the **Environment** can reveal character. The environment can also reject any emotion or illusion, including that of character.

Exteriorization: Expressing an internal process through observable behavior.* **Exteriorization** can include the use of props, costume or set pieces.

Imitation: This technique has a variety of levels including transformation and mimicry. Simply put, this technique involves observing another person and incorporating that observation into the solo piece. This can be as simple as singing a song in the "style of," satirizing another individual or some personal trait of another person, or, as accurately as possible, re-creating another living human being within the piece.

Personal Habit: some solo work, particularly which which falls into the mode of Performance Art, is often personal and autobiographical. Performers can frequently make use of personal quirks, ticks, or habits to aid in the creation of the piece. **Personal Habits** can, among other things, be used to draw the audience to the performer, to push the audience away from the performer, or, through the use of exaggeration, to create humor, pathos, or to build dramatic moments.

Primary Activity: A Primary Activity functions much like the environment in that it can provide a frame or a context for the performance. It can underscore or contrast the content of the piece, or do both alternately. Usually, however, the Primary Activity is referred to in the piece and becomes part of its method—in other words, it is somehow tied to the theme of the piece and may be used quite self consciously.

Secondary Activity: This is an activity carried out by the solo performer without necessarily referencing it in the text of the performance. It can be used as an Secondary

activity can be used to contrast, and thereby shed light on, the primary direction of a piece.*

Second Voice: While **Second Voice** can incorporate **Imitation** it can be independent of it. Adding another voice or other voices to the solo performance often occurs in storytelling. It can lead to the creation of "dialogue" and can contribute humor, dramatic tension, variety, and/or surprise to the solo piece.

Media: The use of **Media** in solo performance is a well used technique. Media includes slides, video, tape, microphone, or CD. Video may be live or recorded. The content of slides, video, tape and CD varies widely in solo performance.

Extension: is the continuing of a single, not-so-vivid impulse to an extreme.*
For example, a solo performer, using cooking as a **Primary Activity,** drops an egg on the floor and becomes upset. The performer begins to purposely drop other food objects, perhaps beginning with another egg, then two, then ten, until the stage is covered with dropped or thrown food.

Opposite: Playing **Opposite** is finding a way to contrast the exterior life of the performer with that of the interior moment. The contrast created usually creates a moment of revelation for the audience

Against: Playing Against is an attempt to hide the interior moment from the audience. The effort usually heightens the audience's investment in the interior moment**.**

Silence: This technique can be used to heighten the tension, undercut the rhythm of the piece, frustrate the audience, precede an explosion of activity, or allow the immediate past moment to dwell in the mind of the audience. **Silence,** when earned, and used precisely, can be an effective technique.

Audience Interaction: All solo performance involves an interaction with the audience. This can range from simple direct address to moving among the audience, to bringing members of the audience into the piece to interact with the artist.

*These terms and parts of the definitions are taken from David Feldshuh's Directing I Class

The Journey From 'Colored' To 'Minorities' To 'People Of Color'

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By
Kee Malesky

Can race and ethnicity be represented by the colors found in a crayon box?
lilivanili/Flickr

Language is and always will be an essential element in the struggle for understanding among peoples. Changes in the words and phrases we use to describe each other reflect whatever progress we make on the path toward a world where everyone feels respected and included.

A Google Ngram search comparing the frequency of the use of "colored people," "minorities" and "people of color" delivers interesting results. The use of the phrase "colored people" peaked in books published in 1970. For "minorities," the top-ranked year was 1997. Since then, the term has steadily declined but continues to significantly outstrip the use of "people of color," which reached its apex in 2003 (although it is important to note that 2008 is the latest year for which results are available).

Let's consider the evolution of that ubiquitous phrase, "people of color." It's not new.

A little research into early sources turns up "An Act to Prohibit the Importation of Slaves into any Port or Place Within the Jurisdiction of the United States" (signed in 1807), which applied to "any negro, mulatto, or person of colour" — indicating that the term was well-enough established to be used in the text of legislation.

People who fit this broad category could no longer legally be brought into the country for the purpose of involuntary servitude. But the precise definition of "person of color" has varied among the states and over time.

As the *Baltimore Afro-American* newspaper noted in November 1912:

"The statutes of Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee and Texas assert that 'a person of color' is one who is descended from a Negro to the third generation, inclusive, though one ancestor in each generation may have been white. According to the law of Alabama one is 'a person of color' who has had any Negro blood in his ancestry for five generations. ... In Arkansas 'persons of color' include all who have a visible and distinct admixture of African blood. ... Thus it would seem that a Negro in one state is not always a Negro in another."

The Oxford English Dictionary's earliest reference for "person of color" is from the French *gens* (or *hommes*) *de couleur*, in the late 18th century. A 1797 survey of the population of what is now Haiti described three classes of people, including "The class

which, by a strange abuse of language, is called people of colour, originates from an intermixture of the whites and the blacks."
"Person" or "people" as a term for human beings, that's pretty much uncontroversial. But color — which can be used as a noun, an adjective or a verb (transitive and intransitive) — is a word packed with history, prejudice and confusion when it's used to describe someone's complexion as an indication of race or ethnicity.

The adjective form — "colored" — we hardly need the OED to confirm, but it says the term is now:

"Usually considered offensive … Coloured was adopted in the United States by emancipated slaves as a term of racial pride after the end of the American Civil War. It was rapidly replaced from the late 1960s as a self-designation by black and later by African-American, although it is retained in the name of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. In Britain it was the accepted term for black, Asian, or mixed-race people until the 1960s."
In a 1988 *New York Times* column about the phrase, the late great language maven William Safire pointed out that Martin Luther King Jr. referred to "citizens of color" in his speech at the 1963 March on Washington. Safire also quoted an NAACP spokesman:
" 'Times change and terms change. Racial designations go through phases; at one time Negro was accepted, at an earlier time colored and so on. This organization has been in existence for 80 years and the initials NAACP are part of the American vocabulary, firmly embedded in the national consciousness, and we feel it would not be to our benefit to change our name.' "

Safire continued in that 1988 essay:

"Colored people (which in South Africa means 'people of racially mixed ancestry') has in the United States a connotation different from people of color. … Colored is often taken as a slur, even when not so intended, and so this term — first used with this meaning in 1611 by the historian John Speed as 'coloured countenances' — is better replaced by its synonym as noun and adjective, black. People of color, on the other hand, is a phrase encompassing all nonwhites. … When used by whites, people of color usually carries a friendly and respectful connotation, but should not be used as a synonym for black; it refers to all racial groups that are not white."
When I was a kid, the "flesh" crayon in a box of Crayolas was pink, even though no one actually has pink skin (except maybe after a day on the beach without sunscreen, when I could go all the way to orange-red). The company renamed it "peach" in 1962, and now promotes a "Multicultural" box of crayons in eight "skin hues" — Apricot, Black, Burnt Sienna, Mahogany, Peach, Sepia, Tan, White.
The first thing I learned in color theory as an art student was that, when you're talking about light, white means all colors and black is the absence of color, but if you're referring to paint, then white is no color and black contains all colors.

Contemporary artist Carrie Mae Weems produced a series of photographic portraits of African-American children and called it *Colored People*. A *New York Times* review of an

exhibit of her work described how she "tinted the prints with monochromatic dyes: yellow, blue, magenta. The results were beautiful ... but the colors carried complex messages. They are reminders that the range of skin colors covered by 'black' is vast."
"Person of color" is a useful term, because defining someone by a negative — nonwhite or other than white — seems silly. But some white folks object to the phrase, too, because, hey, we do have color.

One definition of white, from the Random House Unabridged Dictionary, is "marked by slight pigmentation of the skin." And the term seems to be replacing "minorities," which makes sense, since minorities can be a demographic inaccuracy. In U.S. history, "person of color" has often been used to refer only to people of African heritage. Today, it usually covers all/any peoples of African, Latino/Hispanic, Native American, Asian or Pacific Island descent, and its intent is to be inclusive.

I think professor Salvador Vidal-Ortiz summed it up well in the *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity and Society*:
"People of color explicitly suggests a social relationship among racial and ethnic minority groups. ... [It is] is a term most often used outside of traditional academic circles, often infused by activist frameworks, but it is slowly replacing terms such as racial and ethnic minorities. ... In the United States in particular, there is a trajectory to the term — from more derogatory terms such as negroes, to colored, to people of color. ... People of color is, however it is viewed, a political term, but it is also a term that allows for a more complex set of identity for the individual — a relational one that is in constant flux."

Hitchens: WHY WOMEN AREN'T FUNNY

Be your gender what it may, you will certainly have heard the following from a female friend who is enumerating the charms of a new (male) squeeze: "He's really quite cute, and he's kind to my friends, and he knows all kinds of stuff, and he's so *funny* . . . " (If you yourself are a guy, and you know the man in question, you will often have said to yourself, "Funny? He wouldn't know a joke if it came served on a bed of lettuce with *sauce béarnaise.*") However, there is something that you absolutely never hear from a male friend who is hymning his latest (female) love interest: "She's a real honey, has a life of her own . . . [interlude for attributes that are none of your business] . . . and, man, does she ever make 'em laugh."

Now, why *is* this? Why is it the case?, I mean. Why are women, who have the whole male world at their mercy, not funny? Please do not pretend not to know what I am talking about.

All right—try it the other way (as the bishop said to the barmaid). Why are men, taken on average and as a whole, funnier than women? Well, for one thing, they had damn well better be. The chief task in life that a man has to perform is that of impressing the opposite sex, and Mother Nature (as we laughingly call her) is not so kind to men. In fact, she equips many fellows with very little armament for the struggle. An average man has just one, outside chance: he had better be able to make the lady laugh. Making them laugh has been one of the crucial preoccupations of my life. If you can stimulate her to laughter—I am talking about that real, out-loud, head-back, mouth-open-to-expose-the-full-horseshoe-of-lovely-teeth, involuntary, full, and deep-throated mirth; the kind that is accompanied by a shocked surprise and a slight (no, make that a *loud*) peal of delight—well, then, you have at least

caused her to loosen up and to change her expression. I shall not elaborate further.

Women have no corresponding need to appeal to men in this way. They already appeal to men, if you catch my drift. Indeed, we now have all the joy of a scientific study, which illuminates the difference. At the Stanford University School of Medicine (a place, as it happens, where I once underwent an absolutely hilarious procedure with a sigmoidoscope), the grim-faced researchers showed 10 men and 10 women a sample of 70 black-and-white cartoons and got them to rate the gags on a "funniness scale." To annex for a moment the fall-about language of the report as it was summarized in *Biotech Week:*

The researchers found that men and women share much of the same humor-response system; both use to a similar degree the part of the brain responsible for semantic knowledge and juxtaposition and the part involved in language processing. But they also found that some brain regions were activated more in women. These included the left prefrontal cortex, suggesting a greater emphasis on language and executive processing in women, and the nucleus accumbens . . . which is part of the mesolimbic reward center.

This has all the charm and address of the learned Professor Scully's attempt to define a smile, as cited by Richard Usborne in his treatise on P. G. Wodehouse: "the drawing back and slight lifting of the corners of the mouth, which partially uncover the teeth; the curving of the naso-labial furrows . . . " But have no fear—it gets worse:

"Women appeared to have less expectation of a reward, which in this case was the punch line of the cartoon," said the report's author, Dr. Allan Reiss. "So when they got to the joke's punch line, they were more pleased about it." The report also found that "women were quicker at identifying material they considered unfunny."

Slower to get it, more pleased when they do, and swift to locate the unfunny—for this we need the Stanford University School of Medicine?

And remember, this is women when confronted with humor. Is it any wonder that they are backward in generating it?

This is not to say that women are humorless, or cannot make great wits and comedians. And if they did not operate on the humor wavelength, there would be scant point in half killing oneself in the attempt to make them writhe and scream (uproariously). Wit, after all, is the unfailing symptom of intelligence. Men will laugh at almost anything, often precisely because it is—or they are—extremely stupid. Women aren't like that. And the wits and comics among them are formidable beyond compare: Dorothy Parker, Nora Ephron, Fran Lebowitz, Ellen DeGeneres. (Though ask yourself, was Dorothy Parker ever really funny?) Greatly daring—or so I thought—I resolved to call up Ms. Lebowitz and Ms. Ephron to try out my theories. Fran responded: "The cultural values are male; for a woman to say a man is funny is the equivalent of a man saying that a woman is pretty. Also, humor is largely aggressive and pre-emptive, and what's more male than that?" Ms. Ephron did not disagree. She did, however, in what I thought was a slightly feline way, accuse me of plagiarizing a rant by Jerry Lewis that said much the same thing. (I have only once seen Lewis in action, in *The King of Comedy,* where it was really Sandra Bernhard who was funny.)

In any case, my argument doesn't say that there are no decent women comedians. There are more terrible female comedians than there are terrible male comedians, but there are some impressive ladies out there. Most of them, though, when you come to review the situation, are hefty or dykey or Jewish, or some combo of the three. When Roseanne stands up and tells biker jokes and invites people who don't dig her shtick to suck her dick—know what I am saying? And the Sapphic faction may have its own reasons for wanting what I want—the sweet surrender of female laughter. While Jewish humor, boiling as it is with angst and self-deprecation, is almost masculine by definition.

Substitute the term "self-defecation" (which I actually heard being used inadvertently once) and almost all men will laugh right away, if only to

pass the time. Probe a little deeper, though, and you will see what Nietzsche meant when he described a witticism as an epitaph on the death of a feeling. Male humor prefers the laugh to be at someone's expense, and understands that life is quite possibly a joke to begin with—and often a joke in extremely poor taste. Humor is part of the armor-plate with which to resist what is already farcical enough. (Perhaps not by coincidence, battered as they are by motherfucking nature, men tend to refer to life itself as a bitch.) Whereas women, bless their tender hearts, would prefer that life be fair, and even sweet, rather than the sordid mess it actually is. Jokes about calamitous visits to the doctor or the shrink or the bathroom, or the venting of sexual frustration on furry domestic animals, are a male province. It must have been a man who originated the phrase "funny like a heart attack." In all the millions of cartoons that feature a patient listening glum-faced to a physician ("There's no cure. There isn't even a race for a cure"), do you remember even one where the patient is a woman? I thought as much.

Precisely because humor is a sign of intelligence (and many women believe, or were taught by their mothers, that they become threatening to men if they appear too bright), it could be that in some way men do not *want* women to be funny. They want them as an audience, not as rivals. And there is a huge, brimming reservoir of male unease, which it would be too easy for women to exploit. (Men can tell jokes about what happened to John Wayne Bobbitt, but they don't want women doing so.) Men have prostate glands, hysterically enough, and these have a tendency to give out, along with their hearts and, it has to be said, their dicks. This is funny only in male company. For some reason, women do not find their own physical decay and absurdity to be so riotously amusing, which is why we admire Lucille Ball and Helen Fielding, who do see the funny side of it. But this is so rare as to be like Dr. Johnson's comparison of a woman preaching to a dog walking on its hind legs: the surprise is that it is done at all.

The plain fact is that the physical structure of the human being is a joke in itself: a flat, crude, unanswerable disproof of any nonsense about

"intelligent design." The reproductive and eliminating functions (the closeness of which is the origin of all obscenity) were obviously wired together in hell by some subcommittee that was giggling cruelly as it went about its work. ("Think they'd wear this? Well, they're gonna *have* to.") The resulting confusion is the source of perhaps 50 percent of all humor. Filth. That's what the customers want, as we occasional stand-up performers all know. Filth, and plenty of it. Filth in lavish, heaping quantities. And there's another principle that helps exclude the fair sex. "Men obviously like gross stuff," says Fran Lebowitz. "Why? Because it's *childish."* Keep your eye on that last word. Women's appetite for talk about that fine product known as Depend is limited. So is their relish for gags about premature ejaculation. ("Premature for *whom?"* as a friend of mine indignantly demands to know.) But "child" is the key word. For women, reproduction is, if not the only thing, certainly the main thing. Apart from giving them a very different attitude to filth and embarrassment, it also imbues them with the kind of seriousness and solemnity at which men can only goggle. This womanly seriousness was well caught by Rudyard Kipling in his poem "The Female of the Species." After cleverly noticing that with the male "mirth obscene diverts his anger"—which is true of most work on that great masculine equivalent to childbirth, which is warfare—Kipling insists:

But the Woman that God gave him,
every fibre of her frame
Proves her launched for one sole issue,
armed and engined for the same,
And to serve that single issue,
lest the generations fail,
The female of the species must be
deadlier than the male.

The word “issue” there, which we so pathetically misuse, is restored to its proper meaning of childbirth. As Kipling continues:

She who faces Death by torture for
each life beneath her breast
May not deal in doubt or pity—must
not swerve for fact or *jest.*

Men are overawed, not to say terrified, by the ability of women to produce babies. (Asked by a lady intellectual to summarize the differences between the sexes, another bishop responded, “Madam, I cannot conceive.”) It gives women an unchallengeable authority. And one of the earliest origins of humor that we know about is its role in the mockery of authority. Irony itself has been called “the glory of slaves.” So you could argue that when men get together to be funny and do not expect women to be there, or in on the joke, they are really playing truant and implicitly conceding who is really the boss.

The ancient annual festivities of Saturnalia, where the slaves would play master, were a temporary release from bossdom. A whole tranche of subversive male humor likewise depends on the notion that women are not really the boss, but are mere objects and victims. Kipling saw through this:

So it comes that Man, the coward,
when he gathers to confer
With his fellow-braves in council,
dare not leave a place for her.

In other words, for women the question of funniness is essentially a secondary one. They are innately aware of a higher calling that is no laughing matter. Whereas with a man you may freely say of him that he is lousy in the sack, or a bad driver, or an inefficient worker, and still wound him less deeply than you would if you accused him of being deficient in the humor department.

If I am correct about this, which I am, then the explanation for the superior funniness of men is much the same as for the inferior funniness of women. Men have to pretend, to themselves as well as to women, that they are not the servants and supplicants. Women, cunning minxes that they are, have to affect not to be the potentates. This is the unspoken compromise. H. L. Mencken described as "the greatest single discovery ever made by man" the realization "that babies have human fathers, and are not put into their mother's bodies by the gods." You may well wonder what people were thinking before that realization hit, but we do know of a society in Melanesia where the connection was not made until quite recently. I suppose that the reasoning went: everybody does that thing the entire time, there being little else to do, but not every woman becomes pregnant. Anyway, after a certain stage women came to the conclusion that men were actually *necessary,* and the old form of matriarchy came to a close. (Mencken speculates that this is why the first kings ascended the throne clutching their batons or scepters as if holding on for grim death.) People in this precarious position do not enjoy being laughed at, and it would not have taken women long to work out that female humor would be the most upsetting of all.

Childbearing and rearing are the double root of all this, as Kipling guessed. As every father knows, the placenta is made up of brain cells, which migrate southward during pregnancy and take the sense of humor along with them. And when the bundle is finally delivered, the funny side is not always immediately back in view. Is there anything so utterly lacking in humor as a mother discussing her new child? She is unboreable on the subject. Even the mothers of other fledglings have to drive their fingernails into their palms and wiggle their toes, just to prevent themselves from fainting dead away at the sheer tedium of it. And as the little ones burgeon and thrive, do you find that their mothers enjoy jests at their expense? I thought not.

Humor, if we are to be serious about it, arises from the ineluctable fact that we are all born into a losing struggle. Those who risk agony and death to bring children into this fiasco simply can't afford to be too frivolous. (And there just aren't that many episiotomy jokes, even in the male repertoire.) I am certain that this is also partly why, in all cultures, it is females who are the rank-and-file mainstay of religion, which in turn is the official enemy of all humor. One tiny snuffle that turns into a wheeze, one little cut that goes septic, one pathetically small coffin, and the woman's universe is left in ashes and ruin. Try being funny about that, if you like. Oscar Wilde was the only person ever to make a decent joke about the death of an infant, and that infant was fictional, and Wilde was (although twice a father) a queer. And because fear is the mother of superstition, and because they are partly ruled in any case by the moon and the tides, women also fall more heavily for dreams, for supposedly significant dates like birthdays and anniversaries, for romantic love, crystals and stones, lockets and relics, and other things that men know are fit mainly for mockery and limericks. Good grief! Is there anything less funny than hearing a woman relate a dream she's just had? ("And then Quentin was there somehow. And so were you, in a strange sort of way. And it was all so peaceful." *Peaceful?*)

For men, it is a tragedy that the two things they prize the most—women and humor—should be so antithetical. But without tragedy there could be no comedy. My beloved said to me, when I told her I was going to have to address this melancholy topic, that I should cheer up because "women get funnier as they get older." Observation suggests to me that this might indeed be true, but, excuse me, isn't that rather a long time to have to wait?

Who Says Women Aren't Funny?

The idea that women aren't funny—and which male said that?—seems pretty laughable these days. TV has unleashed a new generation of comediennes, who act, perform stand-up, write, and direct—dishing out the jokes with a side of sexy. Annie Leibovitz photographs a dozen of the wittiest dames in showbiz, from *30 Rock'*s Tina Fey to Sarah Silverman, to *S.N.L.'*s current stars, while the author learns why the setup has changed.

BY ALESSANDRA STANLEY

There are people who lament that no women now are as funny as Carole Lombard or Barbara Stanwyck in the screwball comedies of Lubitsch, Sturges, and Hawks. They are missing the point: today's comediennes are on television, where they are often responsible for their own material. Tina Fey, for instance. The former head writer of *Saturday Night Live,* who wrote the film *Mean Girls* before creating the sitcom *30 Rock,* is one of the leading voices in a new generation of comediennes—women who not only play comic roles but also perform stand-up and write and direct comedy.

Lombard and Stanwyck were great comic actresses on-screen, but they had about as much to do with the joke writing as Jennifer Aniston or Courtney Cox did on *Friends.* Off-camera Lucille Ball was about as funny as lead. *30 Rock* is often compared to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show,* but James L. Brooks created and wrote that classic sitcom with Allan Burns; Moore and the rest of the cast were talented actors, not comedians. There were always exceptions, *sui generis* performers such as Mae West and Gracie Allen and Carol Burnett. The difference now is that funny is closer to the norm for women.

"There is no question that there are a million more funny women than there used to be," says Nora Ephron, the writer and film director. "But everything has more women. There are more women in a whole bunch of places, and this is one of them." Ephron knows exactly why female

comedians are currently much more successful than they used to be. “Here’s the answer to any question: cable,” she says. “There are so many hours to fill, and they ran out of men, so then there were women.”

The humor of women has been a sensitive topic ever since the first one cracked a joke. (In Genesis, Sarah, pregnant long past her childbearing years, says her son is named Isaac, Hebrew for “laughter,” because it’s funny she would have a child at her age.) Throughout time, prominent, deeply serious men have argued that women have no sense of humor. Shakespeare didn’t agree, and the 19th-century English novelist George Meredith suggested that without the tempering wit of women there could be no real comedy at all. His examples were the Middle East and Germany. (“The German literary laugh, like the timed awakenings of their Barbarossa in the hollows of the Untersberg, is infrequent, and rather monstrous,” Meredith wrote, “never a laugh of men and women in concert.”)

But the suffragette movement must have taken a toll on the male ego: by the late 19th century the humorlessness of women was a staple of club toasts and magazines such as *Punch.* Jerry Lewis picked it up again in earnest in 2000, telling an audience at a comedy festival, “I don’t like any female comedians.” When Martin Short, also onstage, said that he surely must have liked Lucille Ball, Lewis flatly replied, “No.” (Lewis later softened his assessment on *Larry King Live* but not by much.)

And the question was recently reopened in this magazine: the polymorphously polemic Christopher Hitchens argued that, in general, women are not funny, and certainly not as funny as men. “For some reason,” he wrote, “women do not find their own physical decay and absurdity to be so riotously amusing, which is why we admire Lucille Ball and Helen Fielding, who do see the funny side of it. But this is so rare as to be like Dr. Johnson’s comparison of a woman preaching to a dog walking on its hind legs: the surprise is that it is done at all” (“Why

Dissecting the nature of women's humor, or supposed lack thereof, is a joyless and increasingly moot subject, but it boils down to the point Virginia Woolf argued in her essay about Shakespeare's sister in *A Room of One's Own,* and it's analogous to the case Larry Summers made so clumsily with regard to women in the sciences that it cost him his job as president of Harvard: namely, that society has different expectations for women. Summers sealed his fate by also suggesting that women's innate aptitude for science and math might be weaker. The nature-versus-nurture argument also extends to humor. It's a shame that Margaret Mead never made it to that tribe in Papua New Guinea where women tell the jokes, and men pretend to find them funny.

Certainly, the rewards of wit are not nearly as ample for women as for men, and sometimes funny women are actually penalized. Not everything has changed since 1885, when educator Kate Sanborn tried to refute the conventional male wisdom in her book *The Wit of Women.* Sanborn pointed out that women have good reason to keep their one-liners to themselves. "No man likes to have his story capped by a better and fresher from a lady's lips," she wrote. "What woman does not risk being called sarcastic and hateful if she throws the merry dart or engages in a little sharp-shooting. No, no, it's dangerous—if not fatal."

Or as Joan Rivers puts it, "Men find funny women threatening. They ask me, 'Are you going to be funny in bed?'"

It used to be that women were not funny. Then they couldn't be funny if they were pretty. Now a female comedian has to be pretty—even sexy—to get a laugh.

At least, that's one way to view the trajectory from Phyllis Diller and Carol Burnett to Tina Fey. Some say it's the natural evolution of the women's movement; others argue it's a devolution. But the funniest women on television are youthful, good-looking, and even, in a few cases, close to beautiful—the kind of women who in past decades might have been the butt of a stand-up comic's jokes.

And it doesn't help to point out that Lucille Ball began her Hollywood career as a model and starlet or that Elaine May was—and still is—fetching. Onstage and even on-camera, funny women in the old days didn't try to look their best; they tried to look comical. Lucille Ball would wear almost anything—Carmen Miranda dresses, muumuus, and crazy hats—to transform herself into the childish and braying Lucy Ricardo. When Phyllis Diller stripped off her false lashes and cotton-candy wigs, she actually looked attractive. Nowadays, Fey cultivates a "sexy librarian" look on *30 Rock,* with foxy glasses and décolletage that slyly defies the show's premise that her character, Liz Lemon, is a homely nebbish.

In her stand-up act and on her show on Comedy Central, *The Sarah Silverman Program,* Sarah Silverman is as crude and cruelly insensitive as any male comedian, but with a sexy, coquettish undertone—a Valley Village version of Brenda Patimkin, the Jewish-American Princess in *Goodbye, Columbus.* In one scene, Sarah calls her sister "gay," then apologizes to her two gay neighbors. "I don't mean gay like homosexual," she says sweetly. "I mean gay like retarded."

Even Lisa Lampanelli, a husky comedy-club veteran whose Donna Rickles act is an all-offenses-made smutfest, crammed with jokes about gays, blacks, and "fisting," does stand-up on Comedy Central in a low-cut, blue satin cocktail dress, with Jimmy Choo shoes and her hair long, honey blond, and tousled. Lampanelli says her *Sex and the City* look is part of her act, but she may also want to look hot.

How this evolution happened is not entirely clear. The backlash school of feminism would argue that it's the tyranny of a looks-obsessed culture that promotes sex appeal over talent, be it in comedy, pop music, or even sports. Joan Rivers blames the entertainment industry and the men who still control it. "Oh, please," she says. "Nowadays, you can't even get on open mike with less than a C cup."

On the other hand, the comedy business offers more opportunity and cachet for women than ever before. It could be that after decades of

insecurity—and self-derision—women finally feel they can look good and still be taken seriously as comics.

"Maybe pretty women were always funny but only now decided to go into comedy," argues Patricia Marx, a humorist who in the 1970s became one of the first woman writers on *The Harvard Lampoon.* "Maybe pretty women weren't funny before because they had no reason to be funny," she says. "There was no point to it—people already liked you."

It has become a supply-and-demand issue: the supply of good-looking female comedians is growing, and the industry demands that they keep growing prettier. Chelsea Handler, the host of *Chelsea Lately,* a talk show on E!, has long legs, short skirts, low-cut shirts, and puffy blond hair—her look is Beverly Hills bimbo, with a Borscht Belt mouth.

"With television, it's just expected that every person be better-looking," Fey explains. "In the 90s, it seemed like every person on a sitcom—think of the cast of *Friends*—was just really foxy. I know our show and *The Office* have normal people. If anything, it's shifted back." Fey says she doesn't really see herself as a looker. "If I am one of them, it's just under the wire." But she concedes that it was gratifying to be told by a stylist during a group photo shoot for this issue, "Oh, you don't look like comedians."

Amy Poehler, who's been on *S.N.L.* since 2001, says much the same thing. "For funny ladies, we're attractive. But when you open us up to real, professional attractive people—I do not want to run with those horses." And yet, they increasingly do.

Obviously, though, pretty comics still have to be willing at times to put their looks aside. Cleaned up, Amy Sedaris is a bubbly champagne blonde with a seditious edge, like Kyra Sedgwick; in *Strangers with Candy,* her Comedy Central series, Sedaris squinted, slumped, and drooped her mouth downward so deeply she looked like Martha Raye with fetal alcohol syndrome.

Cheryl Hines, who plays Larry David's now estranged wife on *Curb Your Enthusiasm,* remembers being hazed in her early days studying comedy at the Groundlings, in Los Angeles. "I was supposed to be a cave woman or something," she told *The New York Times.* "And I was in the middle of my improv, and my teacher shouted out: 'We know you're cute. C'mon! What else do you have?'" The heckling teacher was Mindy Sterling, who later played Frau Farbissina in the *Austin Powers* movies.

It's hard to remember or fathom, but there was a time when Phyllis Diller had to dress in drag to attend a Friars Club roast. There has been an epochal change even from 20 years ago, when female stand-up comics mostly complained about the female condition—cellulite and cellophane—and Joan Rivers and Roseanne Barr perfectly represented the two poles of acceptable female humor: feline self-derision or macho-feminist ferocity. (The fact that both those pioneers are now almost as well known for drastic cosmetic surgery as for comedy is either a cautionary tale or a very sad punch line.)

Comedy has changed on sitcoms, in clubs, and on *Saturday Night Live.* The repertoire of women isn't limited to self-loathing or man-hating anymore; the humor is more eclectic, serene, and organic. "The consciousness changed" is how Lorne Michaels explains the difference. Michaels should know. He began his career as a writer for Diller, among others, and got his break as a producer thanks to Lily Tomlin, jobs which eventually led him to *Saturday Night Live.* There, starting in 1975, he presided over decades of male-dominated sketch comedy (brightened by the likes of Gilda Radner) until he named Fey the head writer in 1999 and in 2000 made her "Weekend Update" co-anchor opposite Jimmy Fallon. (In 2004 two women anchored the mock news desk when Amy Poehler replaced Fallon.) Suddenly, *S.N.L.* sketches were written by women, for women; the biggest stars were Poehler and Maya Rudolph; and the oh-God-I-hate-myself-so-much routines seemed passé. The satire shifted outward, with parodies of everything from "Mom Jeans" to Hillary Clinton and Condoleezza Rice. When Rachel Dratch, another

strong cast member, introduced her whining Debbie Downer character, in 2004, Michaels says, “It was almost old-school.”

As comedy has opened up, women who once might not have dared write comedy, or writers who hadn’t considered performing, have been emboldened to become writers and get onstage, “sort of the way singer-songwriter happened in the 1960s,” Michaels says. Now the patriarch of *S.N.L.* is holding auditions for the next generation of female stars. “Two or three are really funny. And they are totally confident and don’t feel any need to do ugly-girl comedy. They do skits like ‘Angelina Jolie on an airplane.’”

“It’s not that these girls are better than the girls who preceded them,” says Fran Lebowitz. “They’re luckier. They came along at a time when the boys allowed them to do this. In comedy, timing is everything.”

There are still limits to how high a female comedian can climb—the crass ceiling. Late-night talk shows, from *The Tonight Show* to *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,* all have male hosts and huge writing staffs that, when gathered onstage at awards shows, are startlingly white and male, like the Whiffenpoofs of 1961 or Vladimir Putin’s Kremlin. On the other hand, cable has whittled away at the primacy of the biggest shows. *The Tonight Show,* now in its 53rd year, is a little like the American presidency—still sought after but sadly diminished in power and influence.

The same can be said for movies: they cost more and more, studios make fewer and fewer, and, thanks to the Internet and other technological advances, the era of seeing them in theaters may end any day now. At the moment, though, big-budget comedies are still a reach for most women. Comedians such as Steve Carell, Will Ferrell, and Sacha Baron Cohen are major movie stars in a way that their female counterparts are not. Looks, for them, aren’t important: pudgy Jack Black and Seth Rogen are tapped as romantic leads opposite Kate Winslet and Katherine Heigl.

Poehler argues that, despite the changes in television and comedy clubs, Hollywood has made it harder than ever for comediennes to play leads in romantic film comedies. “I guess I’m not able to play the girlfriend of guys my own age anymore,” she says. “I play the bitchy older sister. And who doesn’t love the bitchy older sister who gets it in the end?” Poehler speaks wistfully of the days—20 years ago—when “Lily Tomlin and Bette Midler could open a movie, Teri Garr and Diane Keaton were movie stars and they looked like they lived in your building; you felt you could kind of know them.” Today’s movie comedies—think of Ellen Pompeo playing sweet and bland in *Old School,* or Rachel McAdams in *Wedding Crashers*—often shortchange women’s roles. “Female parts are underwritten as it is,” says Poehler. “You don’t need to be that funny, so you might as well be good-looking.”

It’s oddly cultural but not really much of a mystery: ticket sales are driven by young men (18–24), whereas television, especially network television, is more of a woman’s world. (Female viewers outnumber men by approximately 30 percent during prime time.) So it is something of a milestone that Tina Fey and Amy Poehler have teamed up to make *Baby Mama,* a comedy about a single career woman (Fey) who wants a child and hires a working-class surrogate (Poehler), who moves in; they then clash like *The Odd Couple.* In a market that favors boy-girl romantic comedies such as *27 Dresses,* a female buddy picture is bold. There have not been many successful ones since Bette Midler and Shelley Long starred in *Outrageous Fortune* in 1987. (*Thelma & Louise* had its funny moments, but that final pratfall was deadly.)

Fey says she is aware of the risks. “Women drive what’s on television, and husbands and boyfriends decide on movies,” she said. “I’m doing it backwards: I have a TV show for men and a movie coming out for women.”

The dynamic of female comedy duos does seem to have changed a little since the days of ironclad Mary/Rhoda rule—a pretty heroine and a plainer, funnier best friend. (The 1997 comedy *Romy and Michele’s*

High School Reunion was more of a cult favorite than a box-office hit, but the movie made a joke about the pretty girl/ugly friend principle: the characters played by Mira Sorvino and Lisa Kudrow fall out after a heated dispute over who is the Mary figure in their friendship.) That is apparently not the pattern in *Baby Mama.* "Amy and Tina have transcended that," says Lorne Michaels (who's one of the film's producers). "Neither is pinned down to that archetype—either one could play either role."

Nor is it present on *30 Rock.* In the pilot, Rachel Dratch was cast as Jenna, the star of the sketch-comedy show written by her best friend, Liz Lemon. (Dratch and Fey are friends in real life as well.) But at NBC's instigation, for whatever reason, Dratch was dropped and replaced by the more glamorous Jane Krakowski—perhaps unfairly but also wisely, as it turns out: Krakowski is hilarious as the slutty, self-deluded Jenna and a perfect comic foil to Fey's Liz. In an episode in Season One in which Liz admits to Jenna that she sometimes wishes she could be an on-air star, Jenna is bewildered. "You couldn't be serious about acting for a living," Jenna says. "You have brown hair."

There is obviously a difference between witty writers (Mme. de Staël, Nora Ephron, Fran Lebowitz) and stand-up comics. Stand-up comedy was always harder for women, because it is aggressive—comedians have to dominate their audiences and "kill," by common metaphor. Male listeners might make allowances for sparkling repartee—which is, after all, instinctive and responsive and manslaughter at the very worst. But a premeditated joke or routine can be murderous in the first degree.

Women either had to compete—head-on, in the aggressive style of Paula Poundstone or Lisa Lampanelli—or subvert the form and make themselves offbeat and likable, the way that Whoopi Goldberg and Ellen DeGeneres do. As Elaine May used to say regarding improv, "When in doubt, seduce." By and large, however, stand-up comedy is tougher and meaner, and the women who do it play by men's rules.

Sitcoms are a collaborative art that can showcase a single talent, and always have. Television didn't produce only Lucille Ball and Carol Burnett; there are scores of others, from Ann Sothern and Eve Arden to Bea Arthur and Julia Louis-Dreyfus. Sketch comedy opened doors to women who were comedians more than actresses. But behind the curtain the writers' room has remained a male-dominated clubhouse. "The girl in the room," the lone woman writer on a white, male staff, is a long-standing and long-suffering tradition in comedy. It can seem benign and kind of fun—Rose Marie as one of the fellas on *The Dick Van Dyke Show,* or, in real life, Merrill Markoe when she was the head writer of *Late Night with David Letterman.* But especially in the no-holds-barred era of drugs and *Lampoon* humor, those writing rooms turned toxic, as Laraine Newman and other *S.N.L.* women have attested. Catherine O'Hara was hired away from *SCTV* in 1981, but quit before she had a chance to perform—appalled by a particularly dark and demented diatribe by *S.N.L.* writer Michael O'Donoghue.

- Sometimes political correctness can overshoot. In 1999 a young female writing assistant tried unsuccessfully to sue the producers of *Friends,* claiming that the male writers were sexist and disrespectful, which was a little like suing Pepsi because its carbonated soft drinks are so bubbly.
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- But the nastiness of male comedy writers is still an operative conceit. The writers of the HBO series *The Comeback* worked in a plotline that seemed inspired by the *Friends* lawsuit: Lisa Kudrow's character, fading sitcom star Valerie Cherish, walks into the writers' room on her new show to find one of them simulating a sex act on another, who is pretending to be Valerie. (But when Shayne, the young African-American actress on the show, threatens to quit because of the writers' disgusting jokes, Valerie talks her out of it.)
- This is also a theme on *30 Rock:* Liz is constantly having to tone down and tame her team of socially crippled, uninhibitedly sexist male writers, which she does with the kind of good-humored

forbearance Mary Richards maintained with Ted Baxter. In real life, Fey says she expects her writing staff—two women (plus Fey) and seven men—to be more tempered and sane. “Brilliant comedy writers sometimes have loud and dangerous personalities, and I wish them great success—somewhere else.”

- Comedy writers, and comedy clichés, don’t always go quietly. Fey says that there are people who continue to insist that women are not funny. “You still hear it,” she says. “It’s just a lot easier to ignore.”
- **Alessandra Stanley** is the television critic for *The New York Times.*
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Why Women Still Don't Get It

Christopher Hitchens's "Why Women Aren't Funny" engendered plenty of outrage. He's read the angry letters, seen the Funny Girls cover, and unearthed a romantic subtext in Alessandra Stanley's counter-argument. To this unrepentant male, it all proves one thing: he was right all along.

BY CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

As I read Alessandra Stanley's essay in the April issue of *Vanity Fair* ("Who Says Women Aren't Funny?"), the decades fell away from me, and I was back a quarter-century ago in the Washington, D.C., of the early Reagan years. In those days of my journalistic boyhood, there were three brilliant and witty young female reporters who drew all eyes to their prose and indeed to themselves. The flame-haired Maureen Dowd, the lithe and lissome brunette Jane Mayer (then at *The Wall Street Journal*), and the quasi-legally blonde Alessandra Stanley were the ones. They were a team, even though they were rivals, and would hang out together and occasionally invite some males along. I remember having lunch with all three of them at the now defunct Joe and Mo's on Connecticut Avenue: it was a transgressive snack that felt somehow like breaking bread with the witches of Eastwick.

I could scarcely avoid asking myself if perhaps I stirred anything at all in these divine breasts. With Maureen and Jane it seemed improbable, but every now and then I caught myself wondering if the tempestuous Alessandra felt even a slight *tendresse.* Perhaps a hint in that demure glance, a suggestion in that tinkling laugh … Ah, even now it takes the droop out of my whiskers to reminisce about it. But I feared to speak, and duly danced at her wedding to another, while wearing the mask and banking down the smoldering fires within. Then she moved away, and ever upward on a parabola of achievement, and I was left to grow gray and reflective.

And now, what a pulse is beating under my leathery old hide! Oh joy! She did care all along. Perhaps—oh heaven—she still does! "Look first upon this picture, and on this … " Here are quotations from my original essay ("Why Women Aren't Funny," January 2007), followed by the relevant excerpts from hers:

"Maybe pretty women were always funny but only now decided to go into comedy," argues Patricia Marx … "Maybe pretty women weren't funny before because they had no reason to be funny," she says. "There was no point to it—people already liked you." [A.S.]

[Nora] Ephron … accuse[d] me of plagiarizing a rant by Jerry Lewis that said much the same thing. (I have only once seen Lewis in action, in The King of Comedy, *where it was really Sandra Bernhard who was funny.)* [C.H.]

By the late 19th century the humorlessness of women was a staple of club toasts and magazines such as *Punch.* Jerry Lewis picked it up again in earnest in 2000, telling an audience at a comedy festival, "I don't like any female comedians."… And the question was recently reopened in this magazine: the polymorphously polemic Christopher Hitchens argued that, in general, women are not funny. [A.S.]

In any case, my argument doesn't say that there are no decent women comedians. There are more terrible female comedians than there are terrible male comedians, but there are some impressive ladies out there. Most of them, though, when you come to review the situation, are hefty or dykey or Jewish, or some combo of the three. When Roseanne stands up and tells biker jokes and invites people who don't dig her shtick to suck her dick—know what I am saying? [C.H.]

By and large, however, stand-up comedy is tougher and meaner, and the women who do it play by men's rules. [A.S.]

You may well wonder what people were thinking before that realization [about the necessity for male insemination] hit, but we do know of a society in Melanesia where the connection was not made until quite recently. I suppose that the reasoning went: everybody does that thing the entire time, there being little else to do, but not every woman becomes pregnant. [C.H.]

It's a shame that Margaret Mead never made it to that tribe in Papua New Guinea where women tell the jokes, and men pretend to find them funny. [A.S.]

Precisely because humor is a sign of intelligence (and many women believe, or were taught by their mothers, that they become threatening to men if they appear too bright), it could be that in some way men do not want women to be funny. They want them as an audience, not as rivals. And there is a huge, brimming reservoir of male unease, which it would be too easy for women to exploit. [C.H.]

Certainly, the rewards of wit are not nearly as ample for women as for men, and sometimes funny women are actually penalized. Not everything has changed since 1885, when educator Kate Sanborn tried to refute the conventional male wisdom in her book *The Wit of Women.* Sanborn pointed out that women have good reason to keep their one-liners to themselves. "No man likes to have his story capped by a better and fresher from a lady's lips," she wrote. "What woman does not risk being called sarcastic and hateful if she throws the merry dart or engages in a little sharp-shooting. No, no, it's dangerous—if not fatal." [A.S.]

For women, reproduction is, if not the only thing, certainly the main thing. Apart from giving them a very different attitude to filth and embarrassment, it also imbues them with the kind of seriousness and solemnity at which men can only goggle. [C.H.]

The humor of women has been a sensitive topic ever since the first one cracked a joke. (In Genesis, Sarah, pregnant long past her childbearing years, says her son is named Isaac, Hebrew for "laughter" …) [A.S.]

I rest my case. By the way, Jewish humor seems to me to have been improving since the time of the mythical (but obviously fall-about and general thigh-slapper) Sarah, whose son was to be offered for sacrifice by her somewhat unsmiling husband. And what if I had claimed in those days of legend that Jews weren't funny? There would have been an angry and resentful silence for a few millennia, followed by a chorus of triumphant accusations. "Milton Berle? Mort Sahl? Lenny Bruce? Woody Allen? How much funnier can you get? What, you have a problem with hilarious Semites?" At the close of my original article, I quoted my wife—whose tribal provenance is none of your business—as saying that "women get funnier as they get older." My own personal riposte to this was: "Excuse me, isn't that rather a long time to have to wait?" But Sarah, or Mrs. Abraham, as I prefer to think of her, was pushing 90 when she finally got off the snappy line that knocked 'em dead in old Hebron and that still appeals so much to Alessandra.

So, to return to the breathless, tremulous point with which I began: Can Alessandra be serious? Or is all of this a coded message to show me that, yes, I was right to hope, and right to dare to hope? I mean to say, I write a little feuilleton that's published in *Vanity Fair* in the snows of last January, which argues that there are lots of sexy and aggressive chicks on the comedy circuit but stipulates that they are in a male game run by male rules, and which further cites Nora Ephron and Fran Lebowitz and praises Sandra Bernhard. And then the snows of this new January are just melting, and my seasonal affective disorder is just kicking in, when the molten, tawny Alessandra comes up with a piece that—never mind the careful way that she pads so lovingly in the deep tracks of my points above—also follows the fragrant and maddening spoor of the Jews and dykes and sex bombs, from Nora to Fran to Sandra and even into pastures and postures new. What am I saying: I rest my case? I can know no rest! I dash the beads of perspiration from my brow. I accept. I

surrender. Oh Alessandra, oh angel, if you wanted a giggle or even a cackle, you only had to call me. Let's agree that sexy and beautiful women are now trying even harder to please, and that a crafty *Vanity Fair* has furnished you with the photographs to prove it? Did I never tell you that this was my Plan A, and was my deepest-laid scheme all along? I forgive you for being so slow to see my little joke because—ah well, just because.

Female Comedians Have Never Been Raunchier — And Why We Need That Now

By Lea Palmieri @littleleap
Powered by Reelgood

“Let’s get started. Girls, do you remember the first time you found out about blow jobs?” is the way comedian Nikki Glaser starts her latest Netflix special, *Bangin’*, and for the next hour, rarely moves away from the topic of sex. It’s a popular topic lately, particularly with female comedians, and one that’s forced me to face my own prudish tendencies that I didn’t even know I had.

While Glaser’s not alone, she is the one that focuses on and dares to address the most details about what would previously be considered awfully TMI details. But what I’ve learned from her special, and others, is that I don’t have the balls, or the ovaries, in this case, to make these same statements publicly, but I sure am glad she does. In fact, when I searched for “stand-up” on Netflix, only five out of the nearly 50 titles that came up were female comedy specials. These women *have* to stand out and make it count, and no matter how many times I may clutch my pearls, they aren’t using sex in a way that’s cheap or just for shocks. It’s part of a cohesive, hour-long special; it’s their truths and even us prudes are aware that these women aren’t alone.

Jenny Slate’s *Stage Fright* also has moments where she explores some rather frisky topics, from porn to just plain being horny, to that time she masturbated to (or with?) the moon. The later is the kind of joke that is mostly comedic and a little bit confusing, but overruling the sheer weirdness of it all is the fact that Slate dared even make that joke. By splicing these stand-up bits with interviews with her family members, especially that absolutely adorable grandmother of hers, and ah, that moment where she’s twirling in that gorgeous pink dress, makes the hour-long comedy special a full examination of femininity and what it means to be a woman in 2019. Yes, some of it is going to be awkward and that should be expected. She addresses her divorce and the #MeToo movement and how those events in her life complicate dating and being intimate with a new dude. Any average lady is likely to talk about sex or sex-adjacent themes when out with a pal at dinner or coffee. But those are the conversations we have in a hushed tone, and not before looking around to survey who’s nearby and could overhear something very unintended for their ears.

But there are a number of female comedians (ugh, I hate using that term, but I promise it’s with a necessary and significant purpose in this case) that are allowing average women to have these conversations a little louder, a little more frequently, and with a lot less shame. With shows such as *Pen15* and *Fleabag* addressing female sexuality in various forms (form humping a pillow to humping a priest), and fellow comedians like Amy Schumer (who has bravely led this charge for some time now) and Whitney Cummings, unafraid to dedicate large parts of their 2019 Netflix specials to the topic, it’s becoming the norm.

Yet, I couldn’t help but wonder how these talented women could be so unapologetic about discussing what is ultimately human nature, while I’m over here watching and feeling more and more like a Charlotte York by the second. My impulse was still to be intrigued, as my blushing

became nearly permanent, though was I watching more out of curiosity or comedy? Do I need 10 more women to write raunchy hour-long comedy specials before my cheeks become less flushed? 20? Maybe! I do know that watching nearly an hour of sex talk makes me uncomfortable, even if only mildly. But it's also in a way that feels important, a way that makes me consider *why* I feel uncomfortable and confront it head-on (as I continue to do here), instead of just turning off these specials and saying in my grandma voice, this is too much for me! There still is a part of me that likes to see a comedian cover a variety of topics during their special, but if they've intercepted a sex football and they're running clear down the field, who am I to tackle them?

And it's not just me, a 30-something millennial woman, affected by these specials. I'm glad that younger women can tune into this and learn something. Maybe if I had these when I was in college I'd be more of a Carrie these days. Hell, a male peer admitted Glaser's special was "informative" for him. That's gotta have her feeling pretty accomplished. If young people are going to watch *The Daily Show* for the latest news on politics, they should also watch comedy specials for the latest news on sex. Because why not? It has to be a more honest venue than porn.

Plus, I'd be surprised if these specials weren't delivering some real results. Nicole Byer's set as part of the *Comedians of the World* special, released at the beginning of this year, has a moment where she puts an unsuspecting couple on the spot and straight screams in the man's face, instructing him to give his female partner oral sex. I'd be shocked if he didn't obey that as soon as they got home (maybe sooner?). Whitney Cummings didn't just talk about sex of today in her latest Netflix special, *Can I Touch It?*, she explored the sex we'll be having in the future, going so far as to create her very own sex robot doll. It was a bold and unique move, and one that could've come off incredibly creepy if a male had dared do it.

Glaser, in particular, gets away with a lot of revelations due to her on-stage presence. She's endlessly confident in her delivery, even when she's talking about her own insecurities. She's self-deprecating and relatable and yet brave and impressive at the same time, and again, so effortlessly unapologetic the whole time that you'd look like a fool to call her a slut. She makes talking so openly about everything from details of her own vagina, masturbation, porn searches, and being so confident in liking sex seem like a whole lot of fun. Plus, she has the audience in stitches the whole time because she's so unrelenting. She doesn't really move on to another topic! It's also not just raunchy for the sake of being raunchy, her jokes are sharp and funny no matter how hard you're blushing. Ultimately, it's a feminist take on fucking, and the one we

The Revolutionary Rebrand of Asian American Comedy

Stand-up from Asian Americans was once designed to be palatable to white audiences at the expense of those in the community. That's changed — and the jokes are funny as hell.

Ever since she was a little kid, comedian Youngmi Mayer knew she was funny. As the “quintessential class clown,” she remembers not being able to sit still but always being able to make people laugh.

As an adult, Mayer began to wonder whether she could turn her sense of humor into something bigger. “I just did not think that I had the right to tell anybody that I had dreams of pursuing something like comedy or writing, ” Mayer, 39, says. “Because I thought that that was reserved for people who were just way better than me.”

Mayer — who was born and raised in South Korea and later moved to Saipan, one of the Northern Mariana Islands — had long thought comedy was a luxurious and indulgent pursuit, a feeling she largely attributed to both being Asian and being a woman. She described not feeling worthy of that type of fulfillment and happiness — that is, until, at 33, she told her therapist that she wanted to pursue comedy. The very next day, Mayer signed up for an open mic at a dingy bar in New York City’s East Village.

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As she worked on her craft, that feeling of inadequacy crept back up. But Mayer kept reminding herself that regardless of which field we choose, imposter syndrome is a reality for many of us. So she leaned into the emotion — and found that the audience laughed with her, not at her.

Today, she speaks through the lens of her identity: as a woman, as a Korean, as a biracial person, as someone who immigrated to America when she was 20 and realized that life wasn’t all like ”Saved By The Bell,” and as the author of her upcoming memoir, “I’m Laughing Because I’m Crying.”

Mayer’s approach to comedy is a refreshing, triumphant example of how comedy made by and about Asian people has evolved. In 2005, the year she moved to America, comedy was a space barren of the Asian diaspora, aside from a few famed comedians like Russell Peters, Margaret Cho and Ken Jeong.

s also a time when stand-up from Asian Americans was designed to be palatable to white audiences at the expense of those in the community. Sometimes, this

was more obvious, like when it manifested in reductive mockery of our accents, our -isms and our identities.
At the end of the day, it didn't matter whether you, as an audience member, were Asian or not. You were going to laugh with everyone else at every crude accent, every comment about brown girls' hairy arms, and every joke about ever-disappointed parents and about not getting into Harvard — all of which came from both people who looked like us and people who didn't.
(White people were really on one.)
Asian people in the West were typecast as "forever foreigners" and members of a model minority, because America's white gaze didn't have tolerance for nuance. Raj Belani, 38, a comedian who also works in T.V. production, believes that that era of comedy was a matter of circumstance and not individual willpower, which ultimately led Asian comedians to where they are today. "We're better than [those stereotypes]," he says. "But at the time, I think they needed to do what a double-edged sword."

The white gaze in comedy was first disrupted by Black comedians such as Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy in the 70s and 80s. "Black people and culture did this first. Audiences essentially were given permission to laugh," says comedian Kareem Rahma, 39. "And I think that's what's happening now, with the rest of us."
Rahma was born in Cairo, Egypt and moved to America when he was 6. Though he doesn't identify as Asian himself, his Arab upbringing means that he resonates with facets of the Asian experience as a brown person himself. You might have seen him asking for strangers' out-of-pocket takes on the New York City subway, or asking taxi cab drivers to take him to their favorite spots while they keep the meter running. More recently, he hosted one of six shows put on by Asian Comedy Fest, a NYC-based festival amplifying diverse comedians who are of Asian and Pacific Islander heritage.
Asian Comedy Fest's existence is the product of the change that's come since the Somebody-Gonna-Get-A-Hurt-Real-Bad era. Spaces for Asian comedians to connect with audiences with similar backgrounds (and those who just *get it)* began cropping up, while social media democratized comedy and began connecting the right audiences to the right comedians. Harmful tropes around perceived Asianness ceased becoming the punchlines to jokes. Rather, the Asian experience, whatever that looks like to comedians, has become something to punch up, to pepper into more nuanced material, more incisive jokes and reclaimed stereotypes — and something that puts online and offline audiences in stitches.

Mayer, who also performed at this year's festival, has subverted many tropes and stereotypes around the model minority myth by finding humor in it. "Asian American creatives and comedians are forced into this very rigid box of saying exactly what people want us to say," she says. "In that rigidity, there's so much freedom because I can be like, 'Oh, you thought I was going to say this? I'm not.' I think for me, it's one of the places where I find a lot of joy because it's just so ridiculous."

Finding hilarity in these tropes is something that has bonded Asian diasporic cultures, across languages, customs, and circumstance: Mayer, for instance, finds that delivering some of her jokes in Korean both enhances the storytelling and delights a spectrum of audiences. But these comedians aren't just making fun of white people; they're redefining who's the "other," which is revolutionary on its own.

To be clear, there are still many comedians today who rely on those tired tropes — about small penises, about being nerds, about not liking math. On one hand, comedian Alex Kim, one-half of the Boba Gays duo, thinks relying on these stereotypes in sets makes for uninventive hack jokes, and they stick out to him even more as someone who came to the U.S. for college after living in Abu Dhabi for most of his childhood and adolescence. "Unless you're making an actual commentary on it, or you're actually trying to expand the joke, you're just regurgitating an old joke," Kim, 29, says.

On the other hand, he can see how this stereotype-heavy comedy is rooted in insecurity, and how those comedians may feel that they need to address their Asianness on stage. (Though maybe it's the Virgo empath in him.)

Kim himself feels a similar pressure around being a gay man. "I always have to address it somehow, you know? I have to come out every set just because, in order to get the jokes I need to tell," he says. "It's something I haven't even done with my parents."

The sensation Kim describes conjures the gravitas of a single person being vulnerable to an audience of fleeting strangers who dole their laughter, recognition, and validation to a select few. But like Mayer, Kim tries to subvert and reclaim all of those misconceptions.

"Even though I'm given the parameters of a performance, the fact that I'm able to take full control of it has enabled me to be more comfortable in coming out to people and being casual about it," he says.

Belani, too, is trying to subvert those same tropes. The comedian spent the first half of his career performing in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, which has a tiny Asian

population. “In Lancaster, the kind of comedy that I would kind of tend to focus on was more dumbed down comedy for the general audience — so nothing super specific about my culture or growing up Indian,” he says.
But in these settings, the shock factor of the punchline is where his most revolutionary work occurs. “One thing I try to do is to spread progressiveness with my comedy, but in a way that sounds ‘backwards’ up top.” Belani explains. “And then when they hear the punchline, people are like, ‘Whoa, where did that come from?’”
His set at the comedy festival did exactly that, throwing his audience for a loop while still delighting them, and finding nuance and normalcy in topics such as queerness and divorce that have traditionally been swept under the rug in many Asian households.

Nonetheless, there’s a common thread in my conversations with Mayer, Belani, Rahma and Kim. Sharing their lived experiences with their audiences and calling them their own is actually where a lot of genuine connection happens. “I am living an Asian queer life. Yet the more specific I get, the more universal I connect with people,” Kim says.
And inversely, as more and more comedians do the same, Asian American comics may feel less pressure to focus so intensely on their identities on stage. “It doesn’t have to be specifically in those stories about that identity. The fact that I’m talking — that a gay Korean is talking — and just the fact that I’m saying it, already makes it” about identity, Kim says.

It’s when lived experiences become broad generalizations that we fill gaps with disingenuous tropes and lose sight of each other’s humanity. “Our brains are made to find patterns, and that’s how we understand the world,” Mayer says. “And then once you get that, that’s the reality in your head. It’s when we subvert those ideas that a lot of beautiful art and creativity lies, but it’s also what a lot of people hate and are afraid of.”
Comedians — then and now — have always been expert observers, and comedy as an art form has its roots in responses to political and social events. We saw it in the way that Hari Kondabolu developed the incredible documentary ”The Problem with Apu” (and how ”The Simpsons” took the bait). We’re seeing it in the way so many comedians of Asian descent have used their shows to fund humanitarian efforts in Gaza.
Comedy has always been a vehicle for social change and activism, and those who perform it are acutely aware of their place in the world.

“I want people to feel seen, but at the same time, I want to feel seen,” Mayer says of her comedy. “And that alone is so rewarding.”

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS ISN'T KILLING COMEDY IT'S MAKING IT BETTER

Diversity Among Comedians and Audiences Makes Room for More Laughs

BY REBECCA KREFTING | SEPTEMBER 19, 2016

Comedians have always had one simple guiding rule: be funny. That is, some critics say, until now.

Recent conversations dominating the comedy world in the past few years have a lot to do with a changing status quo. We've heard it in the arguments about whether the internet is

really a democratizing force that rewards the best output (content is king!). We've seen it in the back-and-forth over the female comics alleging incidents of sexual harassment and assault.

Finally, and perhaps most visibly, we've witnessed it in the debate about whether there's a place for political correctness in comedy—that profession that profits from poking fun at others, playing with taboo, and pushing the proverbial envelope. From Dennis Miller to Jim Norton to Daniel Lawrence Whitney (a.k.a. Larry the Cable Guy), spates of comics are bemoaning the infringement on their freedom of speech wrought by overly-sensitive listeners. Even Jerry Seinfeld, famous for his harmless observational patter, took to the *Late Night with Seth Meyers* to voice his objections to what he sees as: "A creepy PC thing out there that really bothers me." As an example, he refers to a joke in which he dons a stereotypical gay male affect. It hasn't been going over too well, he says, but explains that it's only because audiences are too afraid to laugh for fear of seeming bigoted.

While some among the anti-PC ranks are comics of color, like Chris Rock and Russell Peters, and a few are women, like Lisa Lampanelli, queen of shock comedy, those most vocal about this are, by and large, straight white male comics. A male sense of humor has long stood in as *humor genera*. But with the advent of Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Reddit, Instagram, and other social media, fans have myriad avenues for challenging this presumption of a shared comic sensibility willing to take potshots at the disenfranchised, and for finding alternatives that better fit their tastes.

Of course, these conversations are not new or even symptomatic of social media. From the Culture Wars of decades past to more modern debates about multiculturalism and diversity, there have always been those lamenting shifts in our shared identity. Though the critics may cloak it in the language of having the right to say whatever they want, what they're really trying to safeguard is an old idea of who "we" (as a group, a university, a nation, an industry) are. In the case of comedy, the debates about political incorrectness hit on core questions about who gets to join and stay in the club: What do we think is funny? What isn't? Who can get away with certain jokes? Who can't? You can see why the deliberation gets so heated.

The internet has also added an extra layer of public scrutiny to these complex questions. Smartphone videos and social media virality have allowed material once confined to intimate comedy clubs to easily make its way to critical audiences across the world wide web. We've already seen this phenomenon in full force: Criticism for *Daily Show* replacement Trevor Noah's handful of tasteless anti-Semitic and sexist tweets. A social media storm over Daniel Tosh's joke about a female audience member being gang-raped. Offense taken at Tracy Morgan's anti-gay rant. Outrage over Michael Richard's racist outburst at a heckler. The trend even prompted *New Yorker* writer Ian Crouch to ask "Is social media ruining comedy?" His answer, for the record, was a definitive "no." Social media has, however, undeniably changed the power dynamic between performer and audiences. Spectators, emboldened by these new platforms, are unafraid to unleash

cavalcades of criticism aimed at comics who they perceive as expressing homophobic, racist, anti-Semitic, or misogynistic worldviews.

… it's a false presumption that being more mindful when it comes to producing humor that punches down will somehow create comedy that's less funny. If anything, it makes it smarter.

What's notable about these new, louder voices is that they aren't stifling free speech (that bludgeon so often used by incorrectness defenders). They're creating more. Comics such as Jim Norton may criticize the internet outrage gang for spending too much time railing about matters that are inconsequential, namely jokes told by comics. Upon closer examination, however, a lot of these "petty" conversations speak to issues of great significance in our society like how we portray and treat historically disenfranchised groups.

Does some of the outrage go too far? Yes. Will fear of backlash lead to some performers self-censoring their material? Perhaps. (Though you'll note that most of these complainers aren't exactly being silenced.) But it's a false presumption that being more mindful when it comes to producing humor that punches down will somehow create comedy that's less funny. If anything, it makes it smarter.

Here, too, change is afoot in the industry. The "the internet changes everything!" trope is a tired one, but it is impossible to ignore that this connectedness changes the way people produce, circulate, and consume humor. Comics are taking their talents to YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and podcasts. Retweets, likes, and shares can lead to a big breakthrough or, at the very least, help fill seats at a show. Although a late-night TV spot or a network stand-up special certainly helps a career, they're no longer the only determinants of who becomes successful. Creators and consumers now have more power than ever to shape what becomes popular comedic content.

Through this confluence of a culture of sharing and a culture that's more open to hearing from diverse comics (and that's more diverse itself), we're seeing a flourishing of all sorts of humor that had a hard time finding opportunities to break through. There's Hari Kondabolu, who recently dropped a critically-acclaimed digital album joking about waiting for 2042, the predicted year when whites will be the minority in America. There's Phoebe Robinson and Jessica Williams, who cohost 2 Dope Queens, a widely successful podcast that features the rhetorical artistry of the pair chatting it up between stand-up sets by guest comics (who usually aren't one of the #sooomanywhiteguys they often complain about). And of course there's Tig Notaro, who in 2012 walked on stage and launched into her now legendary viral set—"Hello. Good evening. Hello. I have cancer. How are you?"—and proceeded to fill in the details of a rough year that included the surprise death of her mother, a break-up with her girlfriend, a *C. diff* infection, and a diagnosis of Stage 2 cancer in both breasts.

I could go on.

Now, it seems, we're entering an era where societal shifts in *what* we consider funny and *who* gets to be funny are making more space for all sorts of new voices. These are comics that are tackling the taboo—making provocative observations on race, sex, death, money, politics. But they're doing it from the perspective of those who were usually the punchlines, not the comedians on stage.

At their noblest essence, comedians have always been cultural soothsayers. They levy critiques that let them be voices for the voiceless, prophets of public ills, conduits of catharsis. Despite all the challenges to the status quo in comedy, none of this core has gone away. The changes we're seeing aren't killing comedy. They're just letting more people in on the jokes.

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https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/05/13/liberals-should-worry-conservative-comedy-00031907

Conservative Comics