

On Comedy and Contemporary Rhythms

By Jim Meskimen

I was thinking a little about humor and creating laughter and so forth, and had some new thoughts about it that might possibly be of interest.

So much of good comedy has to do with expectancy, and then an artful switching out of what is expected with that which is not. “Misdirection” is another word of it that you hear a lot in professional circles.

Laughter is the rejection of the unexpected thing that comes AFTER an initial acceptance, then a recognition that—Hey, wait a MINUTE... it doesn't fit.

I'm in the position of having dabbled in a lot of various forms of comedy, from live stand up, comedy movies, sitcom TV shows, funny Internet voiceovers, to improv and improvised commercials, so I am very sensitive to the way humor is used, and how long the shelf life is of certain types of comedy.

We can all see how certain comedic styles are immortal; Chaplin is a classic example because we can actually decipher, with some help, the Roman numerals MCMXXIV on the credits and recognize that the humor made by Chaplin in 1924 is still quite hilarious in 2010. That's a pretty long shelf life; almost as long as a Twinkie. (See what I did there? I waited four paragraphs for the Twinkie reference. Patience!)

So, selfishly, I get interested in seeing how timeless I can make my comedic efforts, so that A) I can continue to make people laugh, regardless of passage of time, and B) I don't look like a out-of-date bonehead after a few months or years.

I realized just a little while ago that just as expectancy has a lot to do with comedy, (what we call comedic timing) so, too, do patterns of comedy have a certain predictability, which works to the performers favor or disfavor.

As an example, when I was a boy, the great comedian Bob Hope was still alive and on television with comedy specials every month or so, but was also definitely beyond his prime. I imagine he had the same stable of writers, and the same tried and true viewpoints and rhythms were as ingrained in them as they were in his aging fan base.

To me, none of it was funny.

To me, the very transparent, “One line set-up-gag-dead pan to camera” was robotic and totally predictable. The robotic part was not the flaw; see the career of the very funny Steven Wright. The predictable part was the nail in the coffin.

That same predictability had been a strength for Hope in decades prior, a specific structure and rhythm he and other vaudeville comics had lovingly honed (for their own

survival and protection) as a way of instilling confidence in their audience that a professional had the floor; all the crowd had to do was tolerate the sensation of momentary misdirection or lapsed expectations, and all would be jolly.

For me, in 1970, that “Predictable” part of Hope’s stand up was the part that I found so unappetizing. I felt like I was being forced to act scandalized by something totally de rigueur; like it must feel to open the door to a surprise party that you already knew all about, over and over again all evening long.

When one uses the specific rhythms of one’s time and society, it can cut both ways, just as Bob Hope’s hoary pattern was both a source of satisfaction to older viewers and the object of complete rejection by a kid like me.

If one composes humorous offerings for others and establishes a pattern that is satisfying, once the pattern is set, it becomes easier and easier for the “Transaction” of comedy to take place. Witness any episode of “Friends”, where the laughs, so expertly crafted over seasons, roll with the regularity of the tides. It becomes easier for an audience to accept and digest even less than brilliant jokes if there has been a solid establishment of the rate, the quality, and the predictability of the sequence itself, regardless of specific content.

Conversely, if you mess about and fail to deliver, and struggle to establish a pattern when no actual benefit is being delivered to an audience, that failed pattern, repeated, will tend to brand one as “Unfunny” and soon afterward, ignored. That’s what I hear “Bombing” is. Of course, I wouldn’t know...

In trying to come to grips with today’s sense of humor, I find, as a lot of guys my age do, that there is a sort of antipathy towards a lot of it. And there could be many ways of justifying that antipathy.

Performers my age look at comedy today and go, “Whoa. That is GROSS that is IMPOLITE, that is... just DISGUSTING. No WAY am I going to embrace THAT sort of humor. If THAT is the way young people are going to get their laughs, FINE– they can do it without me.”

Even the great Arte Johnson of Laugh-In fame, whom I had the good fortune of directing in the year before he passed on, told me about modern comedy shows that “There’s nothing for me there.”

So, one could give up and feel that there was no entry into this new discussion, in this new way of speaking to one another about life’s adventures and peculiarities.

But that is missing the point. The newer generation is always going to be able to score by knocking down the shibboleths of prior generations. Those sacred cows and established conventions provide the raw materials of a lot of comedy, and would be foolish to ignore. And indeed, it is part of the duty of the next generation to point at the foibles and rotten

spots in the stone idols of their forefathers, so as to clear away the less worthy for the good of all. (I don't know if a stone idol can be said to have a foible, but you follow.)

So, the young develop their own acceptable rhythms of relating funny things to one another, and it perforce becomes a kind of coded shorthand, just as certain beats in the music of the day tells aficionados what to feel. And just as old music styles no longer excite the imagination but become iconic or static styles, so do the methods of communicating humor, irony, and other comedic forms.

So, what ABOUT this new style of comedy?

To me, the “contemporary” YouTube/FunnyOrDie comedic style has a sort of “Random” quality. The old Bob Hope, set-up/gag/deadpan form is completely absent, and in its place is something that looks like an artistic free-for-all, a pastiche of very random viewpoints and delivery styles, mirroring in some way the disorderly nature of our whole society.

It's as if the thing we latch onto, as a common element to which everyone can relate is CHAOS.

Chaos and randomness has become the style most in tune with the zeitgeist, (which is a German word meaning “spirit of the times” that is still cool, for some reason. Maybe that is just me being totally out of touch. Anyway, now you can calibrate your reaction to my remarks by how cool you feel/don't feel using the word “Zeitgeist” is.)

However, in case you feel, as I do, that there is quite enough chaos in the world, thank you very much, and that perhaps you like to laugh at things in a traditional way, I draw your attention to the fact that Sid Ceasar is still funny, the Marx Brothers are (most of the time) still funny, that Chaplin is still funny, that P.G. Wodehouse and Mark Twain and even Shakespeare (once you break out your Shakespeare Concordance and clear up all those crazy old timey words) is still funny, and show every sign of staying funny for the next century at least.

So even guys like me can, still, on occasion, be very funny, even if we aren't as random as some of our- WHOA! What was that? AhhAAAHHHH! Okay- this is gonna sound insane but a GOPHER just bit me on the ankle and I think he was RABID, because there was a lot of foam on his