

## America's tongue in cheek is MIA

I have no statistics or hard data to support my thesis, but I'm going to lay it on you, anyway... America has lost its sense of humor and especially its ability to produce that deft version that appeals to the thinking man's (or woman's) preference...a little tongue in cheek-iness.

Brother do I long for the days when Art Buchwald was writing his columns on politics and Andy Rooney was treating us to another round of "Did you ever wonder that, etc., etc.?" on Sixty Minutes. The ladies were right up there, too, with humorists like Erma Bombeck who really knew how to turn a phrase. 'Intellectual humor' or satire was what some people called it, but I just called it hilarious in an understated way that made you stop for a second and THINK. No boffo laughs. Chortles, chuckles or head-shaking were the result, and that was plenty for me.

A few years back, in 2018, we lost Charles Krauthammer, another literary giant, who was, in my opinion, on par with Mark Twain and Will Rogers. We should also not forget the ultimate late night show host, Jack Paar. Notice that none of these people resorted to 'blue words' or scatological commentary to make us laugh. They appealed to our better angels and better upbringing and didn't need to grovel in the mud and wallow in shock talk and four-letter expletives to tap into our funny bones. Their routines and written words reminded us that we had a beautiful language and that we should use it to stimulate our minds instead of resorting to knuckle-dragging comedy riffs that required us to pretend that we were all vulgarians at heart AND that the only real laughs were those that came from jokes made about our bodies and drugs or that ridiculed people different from ourselves.

I know this sounds priggish and old-fashioned, but I was always taught that people who peppered their speech with gutter-talk just didn't know the correct words to use to describe their feelings or opinions. Comedians of the forties and fifties (the period I can best relate to) did, sometimes, make their mark and their careers with folksy or ethnic humor like 'Moms' Mabley, but much of it was self-effacing and not targeted at another ethnic or racial group. There were exceptions, of course, like the ultimate 'bad boy' Lenny Bruce and Jack E. Leonard (born Leonard Lebitsky) and Don Rickles who exemplified the 'insult' comics that didn't ask you to suspend reality, but instead, gave it to you right in the labonza.

Mort Sahl, who is still around at 92, was one of those so-called 'cerebral' comedians whose routines seemed off-the-cuff and relaxed and never ever violated the audience's trust that they were going to be treated to a dollop of mouth-watering mind dessert. Apart from Rickles and Fat Jack Leonard who used anger or sarcasm, the tongue-in-cheek comedic practitioners were specialists in satire that was delivered like a singing telegram from Western Union.

Times changed when the 'free love/anti-war generation' wanted a one-way ticket away from their parents' comedy. They wanted something *real* man - something earthy - that was, above all, rebellious. Enter Richard Pryor and George Carlin followed by Eddie Murphy, Dave Chappelle, Chris Rock and so on. It seemed that none of them could put together a simple sentence without assaulting our ears with expletive upon expletive, often in rapid succession. Definitely not mainstream America's cup of tea.

Granted, there are a few comics today who only use an occasional 'F-word' to underscore their point or to connect with a younger audience like Dennis Miller or Lewis Black, but they are the exception not the rule. Anger has taken over comedy among female comedians. You need only listen to a few minutes of Janeane Garafalo, Sarah Silverman, Wanda Sykes or Kathy Griffin to realize that fact. When did we become comedy bottom-feeders anyway? I suspect that television and entertainment historians will probably tell us that everything changed when HBO and cable came on the scene. The floodgates were opened and comedians (and everyone else) could say just about anything they wanted to...and they did.

Yes, I'm sorry we ended up on this path because by following it we've tumbled down the rabbit hole of bad taste and we can't see daylight above us. Brer Fox has won over Brer Rabbit, and if Uncle Remus could talk today he'd probably say, "Jes because you can anything you want, don't mean you should."

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