

Fear and Laughing in Las Vegas

Paul Krassner

"I'm covering this for *The Nation*," I told Jerry Seinfeld.

Chris Rock interjected— "The Nation of Islam?"

We were in Las Vegas— where Mayor Oscar Goodman recently suggested that those who deface freeways with graffiti should have their thumbs cut off on TV— at the first annual Comedy Festival, a three-day laugh-quest last month, featuring some fifty shows at nine venues.

A panel about comedy featured Seinfeld, Rock, Robert Klein and Garry Shandling, moderated by CNN news anchor Anderson Cooper. Shandling asked Cooper, "What do you do one night when you're just not feeling funny?"

Seinfeld later received the first annual "The Comedian" award, given to a performer "who has most influenced and furthered the art of comedy." He said, "I'm honored, but awards are stupid— every insurance company, hotel, car dealer— they get these jack-off trophies."

Seinfeld is well known for his observational humor, so after the presentation I asked if he'd ever done a political joke. He recalled one: "Anybody who wants to be president shows evidence of a brain that's not working too well."

The festival kickoff was a two-hour taping of a TV special, *Earth to America*, a comedic approach to raising consciousness about the environmental crisis.

Executive producer Laurie David called it "a little bit of prime-time history." The show began with a film clip of her husband Larry, star of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, as a modern Paul Revere, riding into Vegas on a horse and shouting, "Global warming is coming!"

"...Coming to you from Las Vegas, the conscience of America," said emcee Tom Hanks.

Ray Romano: "I think it's very appropriate, we're trying to conserve energy in a town that uses more energy than any other town in the world."

Bill Maher: "We have a president who thinks Kyoto is that guy his father threw up on in Japan."

Wanda Sykes: "I don't wanna go home and see my aunt out on the corner, trickin' for her medicine—'Tickle your balls for an anti-inflammatory?'"

At the after-party, two bodyguards were assigned to Laurie David; none to Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. He had thanked the performers at *Earth to America* for volunteering their time (actually, they got union scale), but for the other shows, performers were highly paid. A ticket for all events cost \$1500.

The spirit of Lenny Bruce hovered over the festival. Robert Klein said that he was "good, funny, socially important— the best and highest a comedian could do."

Perhaps Bruce's most audacious onstage moment was when he became the voice of Holocaust orchestrator Adolf Eichmann: "My defense— I was a soldier. I saw the end of a conscientious day's effort. I watched through the portholes. I saw every Jew burned and turned into soap. Do you people think yourselves better because you burned your enemies at long distance with missiles without ever seeing what you had done to them?"

Hiroshima_ *auf Wiedersehen...*" Bruce was arrested for obscenity that night in 1962. The controversial portrayal by Bruce inspired Bill Maher, who lost his ABC show, *Politically Incorrect*. He said— six days after 9/11— "We have been the cowards, lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away— *that's* cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building, say what you want about it, it's not cowardly."

After the terrorist attacks, Larry King asked Maher how soon it would be all right to be funny again— "One month? Two months?"

Less than three weeks after 9/11, at a roast for Hugh Hefner, Gilbert Gottfried began, "Tonight I'm going to perform under my Muslim name, Hasn't Bin Laid," and got a big laugh. But when he closed with, "I have to catch a flight to Los Angeles, I can't get a direct flight, they said they have to stop at the Empire State Building first," the audience boomed.

Which brings us to Homeland Security... I had gone through a metal detector at the Las Vegas airport. Now, along with 4,145 others, we did it again at the Colosseum in Caesars Palace. I got wanted to preserve the safety of comedians. My weapon, a tape recorder, was temporarily confiscated. There was even a sign, warning: "Heckling will not be tolerated." Would-be hecklers were informed that they'd be removed from the concert hall if they heckled a performer, and would not be given refunds.

Jon Stewart had never performed in Las Vegas before, but he was in top form:

"That suicide-bomb married couple were gonna blow themselves up at a wedding in Jordan. I'd say-- relationship issues..."

"The Emergency Broadcast System is a test of your remote control."

"Posting the Ten Commandments is as effective as posting 'Employees Must Wash Hands.'"

"Senator Bill Frist, he's a doctor and he says that AIDS could be transmitted from sweat and tears... Not unless your penis weeps while you're fucking somebody."

"At *The Daily Show* office, we like to watch this security-camera tape we have of a man fucking a pinata."

"To the earth, we're just a mild form of eczema."

Although Stewart is used to audiences that agree with his stance on Iraq, now when he talked about George Bush's renewed push to justify the war, he couldn't help but notice that those in the front rows of this audience were not laughing and applauding like those in the less expensive seats. "You like the way things are going just fine." He began pointing at different sections of the orchestra. "You run Halliburton. You make bombs. You own Nascar..."

Lewis Black, seen weekly on *The Daily Show*, is a most incisive and outspoken stand-up comic, but when he performed at the annual Radio and Television Correspondents Dinner, he found himself sitting next to Dick Cheney, one of his favorite targets.

I asked Black how that went. "It worked out fine," he told me, "as I had destroyed my usual act, in the name of entertainment. As long as you take the gig, you should be good at it, and I feel that nothing would have been accomplished if I had pissed all over them. I didn't want to spend the next week talking to reporters about it. I stopped and talked to the vice president as I left the dais. One of his closest friends is the brother of a close friend of mine who passed away a number of years ago. I asked him to please say 'Hi' to his friend for me— I hadn't seen him in quite some time. So basically I asked the vice president to be my messenger boy, and hopefully it would keep him out of trouble for a few minutes."

Dave Chappelle's appearance at the festival was the first event to be sold out. After all, he had fled to South Africa, leaving behind his successful Chappelle's Show and a \$50-million development deal. Now there were six security guards in red jackets sitting on the floor at the foot of the stage, facing the audience.

"Holy shit," were Chappelle's first words in response to the ovation when he walked on stage. "Bottom line, if you haven't heard about me, I'm fucking insane!"

"Kanye did the bravest thing." (After Hurricane Katrina, rapper Kanye West said, "Bush doesn't care about black people.") "The bravest. I'm gonna miss him. I'm not gonna risk my career to tell white people obvious things. I saw what happened to the Dixie Chicks."

"We have to work on our vocabulary. 'Minorities'— a high class way of calling you a nigger to your face. 'Get away from my car, you minority!'"

"Vincente Fox said that Mexican immigrants do jobs that not even blacks do. He is right. 'Till I see a nigger selling oranges on the street, I can't talk."

"I'm not a crackhead, I was only living out my dream--to get to the top of show business and go back to Africa...."

Unlike Richard Pryor's confessional comedy after he accidentally set himself on fire, Chappelle did not go into any detail about what precipitated the fulfillment of his "dream." There had been a rumor that he would do a three-hour set, but he did exactly one hour.

"You can't do three hours in Las Vegas," Chris Rock remarked. "They want people to get out to the casinos and gamble." Not to mention shopping. Gilbert Gottfried's girlfriend had indulged in a heavy buying spree at the Forum Shops mall, only to learn that guests at Caesars could get big discounts at those stores. She returned all the items she purchased, got refunds, then bought them all again at the discounted prices.

After the invasion of Iraq, Jay Leno, David Letterman and Conan O'Brien helped demonize Saddam Hussein and served as cheerleaders for the war. But, as the unbrainwashing of America goes, so goes the late-night TV talk-show monologue. Leno: "Congress stepped up the pressure on President Bush to come up with an exit strategy for Iraq. Today, Bush said, 'I have an exit strategy— I'm leaving office in 2008.'" Sleazy government officials are now easy-listening joke references.

Triumph the Insult Comic Dog: "What does Karl Rove have for breakfast? Bagel with a smear."

What's shocking about Lenny Bruce these days is the fact that he was punished for his political views in the guise of violating obscenity laws. What's obscene by current standards is that his comment after channeling Eichmann would end up on a police report: "Then talking about the war he stated, 'If we would have lost the war, they would have strung Truman up by the balls.'"

Bruce was a lone voice back then, but irreverence has since become an industry.

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