

Tragedy is easy...

ANALYSIS / How seriously should we take homophobic comedy?

Scott Dagostino / Xtra / Friday, May 02, 2008

There's an old joke: What do you call a homosexual gentleman who's just left the room? A faggot.

Making fun of gay people has always been a comedy staple: 1930s movies mocked sissies, Lenny Bruce explained how Rock Hudson *couldn't* be a fag and Eddie Murphy declared he was afraid of gay men.

In February however, comedian Ellen DeGeneres took an on-air moment to discuss 15-year-old Larry King, a California high-school student who was murdered by another boy he'd asked to be his valentine.

"I would like you to start paying attention to how often being gay is a punchline of a monologue," she said. "It starts with laughing at someone, then it's verbal abuse, then it's physical abuse and then it's this kid Brandon killing a kid like Larry."

Ellen's speech may have had an impact. Many of her fellow talk-show hosts came under criticism for homophobic humour in the weeks following her plea. Jay Leno asked actor Ryan Phillippe to give the camera his "gayest look." David Letterman called transgendered pregnant man Thomas Beattie an "androgynous freak show." Jimmy Kimmel (fresh from fucking Ben Affleck) minced around awkwardly with Richard Simmons, and Conan O'Brien giggled nervously when Canadian comic Harland Williams explained how a British man told him, "'I'd like to smoke a fag.' And I said, 'Yeah, I'd like to boil a couple of lesbians myself!'"

That last gag, with its faint death-threat odour, raised more than a few eyebrows (Williams declines to discuss it) but some gay Canadian comics have defended him.

"I did think the joke was a little old-fashioned and lame," says New York-based Robert Keller, but "I personally don't think that Harland Williams was motivated by hatred, nor do I think his joke will result in hatred or violence."

MuchMusic's Trevor Boris says, "I'm not a fan of anything boiled — hot dogs, lesbians, whatever."

Bitch Salad's Richard Ryder says simply, "I thought that was funny."

Boris says he has no problem with any joke, provided it's funny, but the problem begins "when the joke is made so often that this kind of language leaks into people's lexicon. We start forgetting that some may get hurt (emotionally or physically) by it."

Steven Solomon, School Social Worker with Toronto's Triangle Program, agrees. Comedians, he says, might look at their own jokes objectively but fail to see how they can add to cumulative stereotypes. Solomon holds diversity workshops for elementary and high-school students and finds that even kids in Grade 1 "giggle when I use the word 'gay'...it's something to be made fun of. That's pervasive."

Solomon says he isn't trying to be the thought police, "but I want the kids to think about the impact of these kinds of putdowns on other people." That's especially true for late-night TV comedians: "I think there's an additional layer of responsibility for public figures who have audiences of millions.... Do they do a monologue and then do a debrief on its homophobic impact? No, of course they don't."

Ryder disagrees that the line leading from mockery to violence is so direct.

"Who's to say what inspires people to do anything?" he says. "Hell, Jodie Foster inspired someone to shoot at Ronald Reagan." Keller says, "Humor is a supremely subjective art form — one gay's funny is another gay's line-crosser." Adding to the uncertainty is the huge gay following for comics like Sarah Silverman and Lisa Lampanelli, who seem to dance on a line between mocking racism and perpetuating it. Do we all need a thicker or thinner skin?

Comedian and Proud FM DJ Deb Pearce sees this play out every Tuesday. Her open mic night at Alibi attracts a wide array of gay and straight performers, including amateur comics who sometimes offend the room.

"I don't believe as a host of the night that it's my job to censor people nor do I believe that art should be censored," she says, adding that her crowd is usually quick to handle it. "If someone says something racist, homophobic, etcetera the audience is very intelligent and they share their feelings."

Avenue Q creator Jeff Whitty shared his feelings about Jay Leno's moronic comments with Mygayestlook.com, a site with hundreds of people giving Leno the finger, a response funnier than what provoked it.

Ryder asks, "Wouldn't the gayest look for a guy involve a cock in the mouth? I mean, that's how I roll!"

Solomon admits that homophobia won't be eliminated overnight but challenging people on the anti-gay jokes they tell is "an easy intervention."

Ryder says, "I'd rather be offended in a comedy club where it's just some idiot on a mic than at a political rally or in a church where it's a supposed cornerstone of society." Ultimately, he says, "These are just jokes. The best way to hurt a comic who tells them is not to laugh."