

No offense, but ...

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The thin line that separates tasteful comedy from what's not is in a state of flux

By Vanessa E. Jones, Globe Staff | January 29, 2008

During a recent performance in Westport, Conn., Dorchester comedian Deb Farrar-Parkman riffed on why she liked visiting her sister, who had suffered a stroke, in a rehabilitation facility. "They have some fine male patients," Farrar-Parkman says, recalling the joke. "I've been asked out on two dates. A homeless guy and a guy in a wheelchair." She continues, "I can't wait to go out with the guy in the wheelchair, because the one thing I know about him is he's got his own transportation."

The joke usually generates laughter because of the socially acknowledged pain of dating a guy who doesn't own a car. But when Farrar-Parkman got to the punch line, she noticed that some people in the audience seemed uncomfortable. The reason became apparent after Farrar-Parkman's set ended. About five people using wheelchairs made their way out.

If Farrar-Parkman had seen them, she probably would not have included the joke in her set.

"They were out to have a wonderful evening," says Farrar-Parkman, who stated her age as "over 45 and under 55." "You don't want to point somebody out or single somebody out. You always want there to be a level of comfort."

The issue of cultural sensitivity has become an increasingly complicated one in the world of comedy. Comic Michael Richards generated controversy in late 2006 for silencing black hecklers with a racial epithet. The owner of Laugh Factory, the comedy club where the Richards incident occurred, swiftly banned use of the slur in comedy routines. The Comedy Central shows "Mind of Mencia" and "The Sarah Silverman Program" have faced criticism for incorporating blackface and ethnic or racial slurs into skits.

Comedians such as Silverman, Dave Chappelle, Chris Rock, and Carlos Mencia, have long mined issues of race, gender, and sexuality for laughs. Animated shows such as "South Park," "Family Guy," "The Boondocks," and "The Simpsons" poke fun at subjects ranging from abortion to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

"[George] Carlin does the joke that a comedian's job is to determine where the line is and cross it," says local comedian Myq Kaplan, 29.

Stepping over that line sometimes means moving into offensive territory. "The Simpsons" has long irritated some people of South Asian descent because of its thickly accented character Apu. Mencia peppers his comedy with racial slurs. In an interview in a Salem, Ore., newspaper, a Mencia fan who attended his show there said, "Carlos is a racist son-of-a-[expletive], and I love him. . . . He doesn't bite his tongue. I know some people get offended by the things he says, but I don't know why. He's only being a real person."

Some people fear that when comics don't delineate boundaries, it gives the public the impression that it can freely utter offensive comments. Rock addressed the subject during his sold-out New Year's Eve show at Madison Square Garden. Fat girls make fun of skinny ones, he joked, but skinny ones can't do the same to fat ones. Yes, the poor can excoriate the rich, but the rich are not allowed to ridicule the poor.

Rock stopped performing an older routine about how he "loved black people" but hated the racial slur for blacks because he thought his white audience enjoyed too much a joke that referred to blacks in a pejorative way. Chappelle, who built a career creating edgy comedy about race, abandoned a \$50 million TV deal with Comedy Central, where his successful "Chappelle's Show" aired. In subsequent interviews Chappelle intimated that he dropped the show because of his discomfort with how his jokes were received. He believed his jokes made some whites feel they could indulge in racist words and thought. Mencia's "Mind of Mencia" ultimately replaced Chappelle in the Comedy Central lineup.

Delicate balance

A joke and its effectiveness depend on the comedian, local jokesters say. A good comic walks the fine line of presenting a message about race, gender, sexuality, and other sensitive matters to an audience without seeming preachy.

"Words and stereotypes can be used positively, and there are many comedians black, white, and otherwise that I respect a great deal who use the N-word constructively," says Kaplan, using as an example a joke that David Cross does about former US Senator Trent Lott. "If that intent is clear and the audience understands that intent, then that is positive. You have a responsibility to communicate clearly and make sure that happens."

After Joe Wong began doing comedy in 2002, he discovered that he had to include humor about his Chinese origins in his jokes. If he didn't, he felt the audience didn't react as positively to his jokes.

"If the crowd is mainly white people or black, and very few Asians, and you have an Asian on stage, you have to address it somehow because people think you're not opening up," says Wong, a 37-year-old Arlington resident. "It's always good to start by addressing your physical presence on stage." Once Wong does that, he gets bigger laughs when he moves on to the universal subjects of driving, babies, and marriage.

Shows such as "South Park" successfully tackle race by incorporating the offensive word. Farrar-Parkman praises last year's controversial episode "With Apologies to Jesse Jackson" in which Stan's father gets into trouble for using the pejorative term for blacks while appearing on "Wheel of Fortune." The word is repeated 43 times, uncensored. At the end of the episode, Stan tells Token, the black student at his school, "I've been trying to say that I understand how you feel, but I'll never understand. I'll never really get how it feels for a black person to have somebody use the N-word."

The episode encapsulated American perceptions about race, says Farrar-Parkman. "That's the whole thing. White people don't get it, and they never will. It was just magic. It was my favorite 'South Park' episode of all time, just the way they dealt with the issue."

Crossing the line

Some comedians struggle to keep their comedy from slipping into offensiveness. Wong has debated using two jokes that straddle the line of acceptability. One has to do with a Mandarin word for "that," which sounds similar to the slur for blacks. Another joke concerns Chinese immigrants' penchant to use their middle fingers to point.

"Those are materials that are potentially funny," Wong says, "but I don't know how to present it."

Local comedians believe New Hampshire native Silverman either straddles or crosses the line. The "Face Wars" episode of her Comedy Central series generated controversy because the comic donned blackface. Jenn Ruelas, who recently ended a run as a comedian to study child psychology, doesn't get the allure of Silverman's "shock" comedy, she says. However, Kaplan says Silverman is successful because "she doesn't seem to be the type of person who believes one race is better than another, and that's important."

Ruelas doesn't object to the equally in-your-face comedy of Mencia. "Personally, I think it's brilliant," says Ruelas, 30, a Salem resident. "Instead of just saying flat out, 'There's stupid Americans out there; there are stupid people of all races out there. We're going to make it so big and so stupid that they still won't get the point that we're making fun of them.' That's what people like Dave Chappelle and Carlos Mencia are doing."

When Ruelas started out she didn't include jokes about her Mexican heritage. But when she began adding a handful of those jokes, it was always important for her to explore her ethnicity in a non-stereotypical manner. For instance, her husband, a former comic named Dave Greenberg, is Jewish. One of Ruelas's jokes concerns naming their child Jesus Greenberg.

"I was able to make fun of my race without belittling my race," Ruelas says. "I didn't want to come off as self-hating. I owe enough to my family not to fall into that category of comics. I always had a lot of limitations on what I would do, how far I would push it." ■