

# the writer's block

by Ira Nayman

In one of my Humanities classes last term we discussed ethnic and racial humour. I took the position that jokes based on race, religion or sex were offensive and unacceptable. Such humour is always used by members of one group to exclude members of the group the joke is about.

Minority members rarely identify themselves with the characteristics described in jokes about them. I've known a lot of Jewish women who described others as Jewish American Princesses (JAPS), for instance, but none who would apply the term to themselves. Not one. Furthermore, I've heard a lot of Jewish men refer to women as JAPS (inasmuch as the joke puts down women); but, tellingly, many of those same men will defend women against JAP jokes when

they are told by non-Jews.

Racial, religious and sexual jokes are expressions of anger directed towards groups perceived by the teller to be inferior. How else to explain the fact that the same jokes are often told about different groups, that today's native Canadian jokes are tomorrow's Ukrainian, Polish, Mennonite, Hindu or name your own least favourite race/religion/other minority joke? This kind of humour divides people rather than bringing them closer together through understanding.

At this point in my argument, somebody impatiently said, "Come on! Sometimes a joke is just a joke!" Well, I beg to differ. All humour, like all art, is a product of the beliefs of the time and place in which it was created. Even critical art defines itself against the prevailing set of beliefs.

One of the most difficult things

I've ever had to do was convince somebody that most commercial television drama contains information about predominant social values, especially after I've railed against the medium's mindlessness. Nevertheless, even the most vacuous "entertainment" contains a wealth of information about (usually middle class) society's ideals and values.

If you find this hard to believe, consider the following pages from three very similar, yet radically different scripts. If you've ever watched television, you should be familiar with the first:

**SCENE ONE:** MOTHER is stirring batter in a bowl for a cake in the family's open kitchen. FATHER is sitting on a couch in the den, reading the *Toronto Star*. SON comes down the stairs into the den.

SON: Dad, can I borrow the station wagon tonight?

FATHER: Big date, son?

SON: Well . . .

MOTHER: Have you done your algebra homework, dear?

SON: Didn't have any, ma — my teacher had the flu . . .

MOTHER: Son . . .

SON: (protesting) Aww, ma — I did my algebra homework last month!

FATHER: (reasonably) Now, son, you know that you need algebra if you want to become an accountant . . .

SON: Sure, but do I have to be an accountant tonight?

MOTHER: You don't want to fall behind, do you?

SON: I could live with that . . .

FATHER: I think you better forget about going out tonight.

SON: But, dad . . .!

FATHER: I don't want to hear it, young man. Go straight up those stairs to your room and don't come down until you've done your homework.

SON: Oh, alright . . . (walks up the stairs)

FATHER: That's my boy.

Pretty straightforward stuff, right? Nothing we haven't seen a

million times before (and it wasn't especially funny the first time, either). And, yet, watch what happens when the same scene is placed in a different social setting . . .

**SCENE TWO:** MOM is warming up some macaroni and cheese in the kitchen. DAD is sitting on the couch in the den, watching wrestling on television. SON walks up the stairs into the den.

SON: I'm going out. Gimme the keys to the truck.

DAD: Goin' ta get laid, eh?

SON: What's it to you? (MOM sticks her head out of the kitchen)

MOM: Have you done your remedial math problems, son?

SON: Hey — teacher's in hospital with three cracked ribs, alright?

MOM: Son . . .

SON: Gimme a break! I did my math homework last year!

DAD: (angry) Come on, son, you know that you need math to become a garage mechanic.

SON: So, who wants to become a garage mechanic?

MOM: You don't really want to fall behind, do you?

SON: Like, I really care, ma?

DAD: You're not going anywhere tonight, kid . . .

SON: Oh, yeah?

DAD: Don't give me any lip, either. Go straight down those stairs to your room and don't come up until you've done your damn homework!

SON: Up yours! (walks out the front door)

MOM: That's your boy . . .

If you've been reading closely, you should be able to detect a few subtle differences between these scenes. (If you can't, you've watched too damn much television; for heaven's sake, read a book!) Just to ensure the point is made, let's take that first scene in the opposite direction:

**SCENE THREE:** the COOK is in the kitchen preparing lobster thermidor. MATER and PATER are sitting on a couch in the West Wing library, reading *Better Homes and Gardens* and the

*Financial Times*, respectively. SON walks in.

SON: Pater, may I use the Ferrari this evening? With James gone, I hate to drive the Rolls myself.

PATER: Young PC's meeting tonight, is there?

SON: Well . . .

MATER: Have you finished your advanced calculus homework, dear?

SON: Mater, mater, mater — are you unaware that my tutor was offered a more lucrative position with IBM?

MATER: Son . . .

SON: Oh, honestly! I've been doing advanced calculus since I was four years old!

PATER: (cold) Now, son. You know you need advanced calculus to get into Harvard Business School.

SON: Yes, Pater, but I do not need to get into Harvard Business School to get a job with you.

MATER: Still, you do not want to fall behind, do you?

SON: I am prepared to make that sacrifice . . .

PATER: You had best delay going out for the moment, son.

SON: Honestly, Pater . . .!

PATER: No, son. Go straight to your room in the east wing and try to do a little homework before going out.

SON: Yes, sir. (exits)

PATER: Who's boy was that?

If you're still not convinced, ask yourself the following questions the next time you watch your favourite entertainment programme: what kind of home do the characters live in? How is it furnished? How do they dress? How do they spend their time? What are the aspirations of the main characters? How do they relate to each other? Could these (or other) details be different? How? And, perhaps most important, why aren't they?

A medium which consistently shows only one way of life reinforces a particular value system while marginalizing those who will not, or cannot live within it. Unfortunately, this and other consequences will have to be explored in a future column.

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## artscalendar

compiled by Kristy Gordon

*Waiting for Godot*, an existential play examining human nature written by Samuel Beckett, will be presented by the theatre department's fourth year acting ensemble. Director Ron Singer has taken an untraditional approach by casting four women in the lead roles. The play previews on Jan 29 and runs Jan 30-Feb 3 in the Atkinson Theatre. Phone 736-5157 for tickets and more info.

Samuel Zacks Art Gallery (109A Stong) features **A Solo Exhibition of Art Works** until Feb 2. The gallery is open weekdays from noon to 5pm. Admission is free.

The AGYU (N145 Ross) presents *Diagnosis* with works by Marc De Guerre, Mark Lewis, Kiki Smith and Jana Sterbak. The display runs until Feb 18 and focuses on the relationship between

rience. The AGYU is open Tues-Fri 10-4:30pm, Wed 10-8pm and Sun 12-5pm.

*A Design Area Exhibition* in the IDA Gallery (Fine Arts Building, first floor) will include works from all design courses. The gallery is open weekdays from 10-5pm.

On Jan 19 at noon, the music department presents a *Student Chamber Music Concert* including a woodwind quartet, brass choir, trio with trumpet, clarinet and piano, and voice and piano. All are welcome to attend this free concert in DACARY Hall, McLaughlin College.

Don't miss *A Concert of North and South Indian Music* featuring Aruna Narayan. A teacher in Toronto, Narayan has recorded for the BBC, and has lectured and given recitals across North America. The Jan 24 concert will start at 12:30pm in DACARY Hall.

On Jan 26 at noon, in DACARY Hall, the **York Dance Ensemble** and the

music department present a programme of Music and Dance featuring York music alumni.

Oh yah, also the **Cabaret at York** is looking for you.

Cabaret is a variety show that includes music, dance, theatre, readings, visual arts and film. The next Cabaret performance is Feb 9. Auditions for the show are on Jan 26 at 6pm in the Atkinson Studio. Come in with a prepared piece. The Cabaret is also holding a **logo contest** for a t-shirt design. Send submissions to the 3rd floor Theatre Callboard in Fine Arts Phase III. The big winner receives a free T-shirt and a lifetime subscription to *Cabaret*. The deadline for entries is Jan 26 6pm.

If you want 16,000 pairs of eyes reading about your event, please bring your listing to the EXCAL office and drop it into the big manilla envelope on the arts board.