

# Gay giggles and lesbian laughs

by Faith Jones (CUP)

Humour about homosexuals falls into two distinct categories: the stuff heterosexuals tell to heterosexuals, and the stuff gays and lesbians tell to each other.

Heterosexual humour about gay people relies on rigid stereotyping, because the joke always centres on homosexuality being inherently funny.

But this kind of stereotyping isn't unique. Humour that is homophobic (fearful of homosexuals) has a lot in common with other pejorative jokes, notably those about racial groups and women. They allow the teller to be in a position of power over the subject of the joke. They also contribute to a strategy of suppression that may or may not be conscious on the part of the joke-teller: they delude the oppressed community from thinking of itself as a community.

*The Sophomoric what-do-you-get-when-you-cross-a-dyke-and-a-kike jokes are more or less the norm.*

Much of mainstream humour about gays and lesbians is also racist and sexist: the sophomoric what-do-you-get-when-you-cross-a-dyke-and-a-kike jokes are more or less the norm. Lesbians are stereotyped as ball-breaking, beer-guzzling bitches and gay men as effeminate fairies. (And Blacks as stupid, women as sex objects, Jewish men as misery and Jewish women as frigid, disabled people as circus freaks, Native Indians as drunks... and so on.)

These stereotypes aren't found only in unsophisticated, locker-room humour; they prevail in popular culture as well. In Hollywood and on Broadway, gay male characters are comic relief: the fact they are gay is the only thing the audience knows about them.

Rob Baker, a writer for the gay magazine *Christopher Street*, wrote that the typical Broadway gay man is a male nurse, often Black or Latino, who is "funny" because he minces and swishes and talks in a cute little dialect.

Here, of course, the racism of the predominantly white playwrights, producers, and audiences gets inextricably wound up with their homophobia, and it's a sort of free-for-all prejudice masquerading as comedy. Ironically, Baker reports similar stereotyping off-Broadway, which is located in New York's Greenwich Village, probably one of the most renowned gay communities in the world.

Heterosexuals often defend anti-gay humour

on the grounds that gay people make similar jokes, or even that gays and lesbians often live up to their stereotypes. Baker argues that, although this may be true, it isn't a justification. Gays and lesbians may hope to find acceptance by living out what is expected of them, he says.

"Media presentation of gay stereotypes only reinforces those stereotypical patterns, making them self-fulfilling prophecies... Being a queen, a camp, a performing bear for the straight world becomes the easy way out, the path of least resistance for these gays," Baker writes.

Straight people may find it hard to understand why gay men are offended by their jokes, but not by (for instance) Transvestite Theatre, which flourished in the '60s and featured, among other things, all-male ballet troupes.

But straights often miss a crucial aspect of the gay culture they see as simply a burlesque: that it also includes a challenge. All-male ballet is anathema to the strict tradition of gender roles and feminine idealization inherent to classical ballet. Transvestite cabaret can self-consciously explore the gay male fascination with the supergoddess image. Gay reviewers may have loved *La Cage Aux Folles*, but they lambasted straight audiences for laughing at the main characters.

Similarly, lesbian comedian Robin Tyler is perfectly well-received by a lesbian audience when she does her routine about getting arrested for female impersonation (back in the days when transvestism was illegal). Why is that considered funny, but straight-world jokes about butch dykes are found to be offensive? Quite simply, because Tyler's experience (she claims it really happened) is self-affirmative.

Heterosexual's lesbian jokes posit the lesbian as "other," as outside the norm — that's the only reason straights think they're funny. Tyler's routine presents the straight world's sometimes bizarre reactions to unfeminine appearance as the humorous aspect of a fairly common lesbian experience. Toronto comedian Sheila Gostick also has a schtick about being mistaken for a gay man.

The straight world doesn't understand the context of gay and lesbian humour. *Camp*, for instance, is a centuries-old tradition, the word itself dating to England in the 16th century. It was derived from the French word *campagne*, meaning country, because strolling mime troupes entertained their country audiences with young men dressed as women.

*Camp* has been used in the gay sub-culture ever since, but it didn't come into general usage until 1968. At that point, North American culture was obsessively assimilating sub-cultural phenomena anyway: whites wore African djal-

labahs, businessmen quoted Abbie Hoffman and used Black slang; professors at protest-ridden universities wore buttons that said "it you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem." And straight people applauded female impersonators.

It didn't mean they understood: quite the opposite. The 'acceptance' of gay male camp in the late '60s is roughly analogous to movie audiences in the early '60s who cheered Jack Lemmon's performance in *Some Like It Hot*. Dressed as a woman for most of the film, Lemmon became the love object for Joe E. Brown, who wasn't disturbed when his bride-to-be turned out to be a man. Heterosexual audiences never did realize that director Billy Wilder hid an enormous number of gay culture references in seemingly innocent gags. The beauty of *Some Like It Hot* is that Wilder's camp material could work either way: the humour was enjoyed on one level by straights, and on a completely different level for gays.

Camp is an entirely male tradition, which may explain why, especially before the impact of the women's liberation movement was really felt, much camping was (and some still is) overtly anti-woman. Especially in the '60s, drag queens could count on a laugh if they called each other 'cunt.' It involved a basic contradiction: simultaneously they glorified feminine dress and gestures, and insulted female sexuality and relationships. To be proud of being gay seemed to mean being too good for the very role models they imitated.

To be entirely fair, gay men in the '60s were probably no more anti-woman than any other men — they just weren't any better.

*Of the Ten Commandments, the ninth was the one that scared her the most: Thou Shalt Not Covet Thy Neighbour's Wife.*

It is important to note that camp is changing. Now, it is just as likely to be about politics and performed by a lesbian. This is a major change: it's only in the last few years that gay male and lesbian comedy has had much in common. Camp is still very much concerned with sexuality, but it tends more towards positive attitudes these days. For example, San Francisco comedian Tom Ammiano had this message on his answering machine during the November U.S. Senate and House elections:

"Vote no on proposition 64, no on proposition 63, yes on preparation H and if you get a

proposition 69, think it over and do it safely."

Ammiano got his start in comedy when he convinced a San Francisco gay club, the Valencia Rose, to hold regular comedy nights. Ammiano was unhappy performing in straight clubs because of the rampant homophobia, as well as racism and sexism, of the average budding comedian. Ammiano, who had just run for the Board of Education, says it was easier to be an openly gay politician than an openly gay comic.

Linda Moakes, a comedian who got her start at the Valencia Rose, says Ammiano envisioned a form of comedy which was entirely different from the pejorative comedy he had witnessed at straight clubs.

"People wrote differently because they couldn't get up there and talk about what was wrong with everybody else," Moakes says.

Lesbian comedians also don't get up there and talk about what's wrong with themselves. Kate Clinton, a comedian from New York, believes that the women's movement has helped women to stop hating themselves.

"I don't do humour that puts women down and I don't do self-deprecating humour. Comedienne are allowed to succeed on how well they make fun of themselves, but I think there's a great wealth of humour without doing that," Clinton says.

It is significant that Clinton refers to herself as a "fumerist," short for "feminist humourist," and not a lesbian humourist. Lesbian feminist humour stems from the women's movement, touching on issues like reproductive rights and compulsory femininity, which are of importance to all feminists, lesbian and straight.

Heterosexual women may not always find Clinton as funny as lesbians do. She deals with lesbian sexuality explicitly, teasing and often embarrassing her audience. While lesbians may find it refreshing to hear their sexuality openly and approvingly discussed, straights may be as bored by those routines as lesbians are by *Love Boat*.

Of course, homosexual comedians don't limit their material only to lesbian and gay themes. Sometimes they deal with politics, or religion, or the royal family, and sometimes they link gay and lesbian issues to other issues. Ammiano's answering machine message is one example of this. Another is Clinton's routine about "coming out."

*Thrilled by the possibilities of 'the neutron lesbian': 'Hey Mr. Reagan! I'm a lesbian!' Kaboom!*

Coming out is the process by which lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals tell the people in their lives about their sexual orientation. When Clinton came out to her brother, he said, "Don't tell Dad. It'd kill him." Clinton was thrilled by the possibilities this opened up, entertaining visions of 'the neutron lesbian.' "Hey, Mr. Reagan! I'm a lesbian! Kaboom!"

Clinton does a fair bit of material about growing up Catholic, which all ex-Catholics, whatever their sexuality, are likely to find funny. She jokes about "Pope John-Paul-George-Ringo," whom she calls "your extreme round-headedness" and "your very narrow-mindedness." The Catholic theme lends itself to lesbian material. She claims that, of the Ten Commandments, number nine was the one that scared her the most: Thou Shalt Not Covet Thy Neighbour's Wife.

It may be that the essence of gay and lesbian humour, like the humour of other sub-cultures, is essentially rooted in joyful recognition. Having borne the brunt of humour for so long, lesbians and gays need to create new comedy that is empowering. While straight humour weakens the liberation movements, creating helpless resignation in the lesbian and gay communities, gay and lesbian humour can help the communities heal themselves.

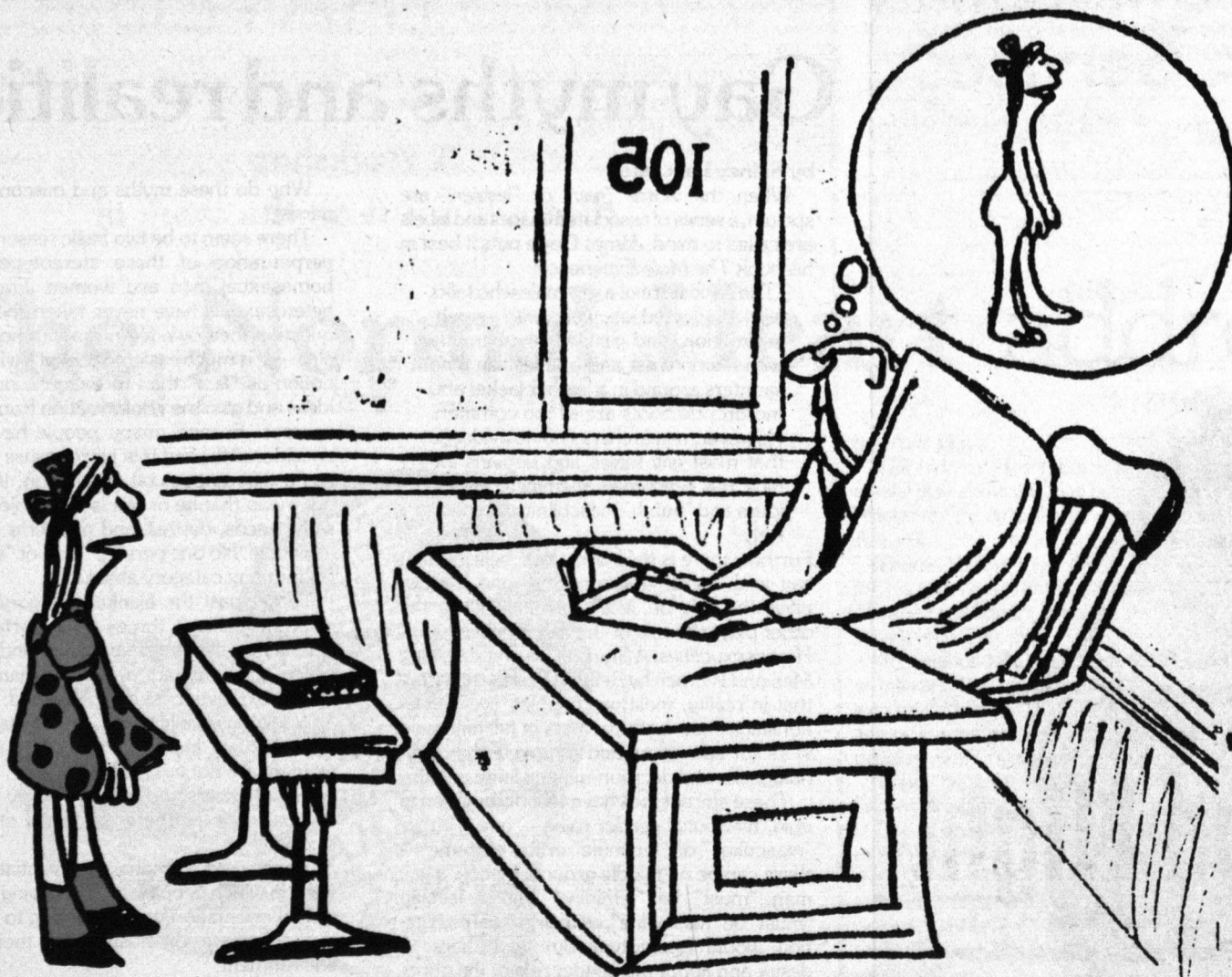
Humour is a tool for oppressed people preserving their sanity. It can also serve as an effective political tool. Just as anti-woman and anti-gay humour has helped to oppress, pro-woman and pro-gay humour can help to liberate.

In the meantime, it's funny. A Vancouver lesbian made up this joke:

Q: What are the three qualifications for being a lesbian?

A: A Swiss Army knife, cotton underwear, and a messy room.

If that's not funny to you, you don't know enough lesbians.



**MY MOTHER FEELS MUCH SAFER NOW THAT WE'VE KICKED OUT THOSE GAY TEACHERS...**