



Why Jesters are no Fools

by Bronwyn Lovell

The jester has been around since ancient times. In the Middle Ages jesters used to amuse the aristocracy with their quick-witted, cutting humour. They had a privileged position that allowed them to insult and openly criticise the elite and their extravagant lifestyle (something that would surely have landed any other social commentator in a dungeon). Not only was this behaviour accepted; it was expected as part of their role, and it was respected, too.

Jesters were able to get away with saying things no one else could. They existed outside the otherwise stifling restraints of manners and class. They may have been the lowliest member of the court but they enjoyed a lot of freedom and had plenty of influence. So, too, do many modern-day comedians.

Many comedians – to varying degrees of subtly – draw attention to the failures of society. Audiences are open to listening because, while no one likes to be lectured, everyone loves to laugh. And in the context of jest, touchy topics that are ordinarily off limits become fair game.

This is dangerous territory, but the best comedians are those that are not afraid to test us – that make us laugh at ourselves and see the myriad ways in which we're ridiculous, that push the boundaries and make us squirm in that odd place between pleasure and pain. Comedy should make us feel uncomfortable. We know from stage and screen that comedy and tragedy traverse either side of a very thin line. And the best comedies are laden with tragedy. 'Muriel's Wedding' comes to mind. That movie is so powerful because it makes you laugh at something and then makes you feel sick with guilt afterwards that you had. That comedy continues to haunt me in ways that a horror film never could. In the words of Shakespeare, "in jest, there is truth".

I will never forget seeing English comedian Jen Brister at the 2011 Melbourne Comedy Festival in her show 'British(ish)'. In it, she had crafted such a clever stand-up routine around the topic of porn – in particular, lesbian porn that does not cater to homosexual women at all, but instead appeals to and perpetuates the often absurd and unrealistic fantasies of straight men. I remember laughing loudly while nodding furiously at the same time, thinking

how the constant objectification of women creates such a sick and warped society. Everything this smart, talented woman said in the name of comedy was funny, but not a single word of it was flippant. In this way, the talent of the jester lies in the fact that they are "wise enough to play the fool", to quote Shakespeare again.

Another comedian I admire is Louis CK. His appeal comes from the fact that he doesn't just make fun of others, he ridicules himself with a confronting kind of honesty that exposes the worst of his own character and society. He is not afraid to divulge aspects of his personality and thinking that are ugly and make him seem pathetic and despicable. Plenty of people find Louis CK's comedy distasteful, and there are certainly times when I am one of them, but I still believe his comedy is courageous, because he does not shy away from potentially unsettling or offending his audience.

In his HBO special 'Oh my God', Louis CK calls heterosexual dating an act of bravery. He explains that the male courage is risking possible rejection to ask a woman out, while the female courage, he says, is accepting such an invitation. It is akin, he says, to a Zebra agreeing to get into a car with a lion. He exclaims, "How do women still go out with guys, when you consider that there is no greater threat to women than men? We're the number one threat to women! Globally and historically, we're the number one cause of injury and mayhem to women... Try to imagine that you could only date a half-bear, half-lion. 'Oh, I hope this one's nice.'" This astounding "joke" is at once hilarious and utterly terrifying. I couldn't stop laughing, even though I knew the issue at the heart of this routine was no laughing matter. Thinking about it has kept me up at night.

In this way, comedy has the unique ability to put me in conflict with myself. It weighs body against mind and individual against society.

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