



November 7, 2008

Can We Laugh? Yes, We Can

By DAVE ITZKOFF

MORE than an hour into a contentious discussion on Wednesday night at the [92nd Street Y](#), where panelists like the “Daily Show” co-creator Lizz Winstead, the sitcom star Roseanne Barr and the Fox News commentator Monica Crowley had been debating the outcome of Tuesday’s election and how an Obama administration might address the economy and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a few restless audience members began adding their voices to the fray.

“This was marketed as part of the New York Comedy Festival,” one dissatisfied attendee declared.

“Obama jokes!” a second person shouted.

In fairness to the first protester, the discussion, titled “We Have a Winner,” was indeed offered as one of the leadoff events of the fifth annual New York Comedy Festival, which runs through Sunday.

If the debate offered relatively few laughs, it also illustrated the tricky and uncertain place at which the festival — not to mention comedy itself — has arrived.

On the one hand, the festival’s organizers hoped that by scheduling the event immediately after the presidential election they could capitalize on an energized audience eager to see current events played for laughs.

“There’s a very uplifting mood about this,” said Caroline Hirsch, the founder of the comedy club Carolines on Broadway, which produces the festival. “This is such a special, special election, and you can’t wait to see what they’re going to say about it.”

In that spirit, this year’s festival features not only comedians known for topical humor (writers from “The Daily Show With [Jon Stewart](#)” and “Late Night With [Conan O’Brien](#)”) but also performers who have recently discovered their political voices (like [Sarah Silverman](#), the star of the pro-Obama viral video “The Great Schlep”) and comics (like [Tracy Morgan](#)) already known for their unabashed observations on race.

But the shifting political landscape is also a perilous one to make fun of, and many questions remain unsettled, even for those who are paid to do the mockery. What’s funny, and what’s fair game, about a President [Barack Obama](#)? Is it too soon to start

ridiculing his achievement? Can blacks make fun of him? Can whites?

No two comedians seemed to have the same answers to any of these questions. But as Ms. Winstead suggested at that panel discussion, Mr. Obama and his allies will find themselves comedic targets eventually. “Of course they’ll blow it,” she said. “They’re politicians.”

Here’s what four other participants in coming festival events had to say about the state of comedy and politics.

J. R. Havlan

Writer, ‘The Daily Show With Jon Stewart’

Q. Are the results of Tuesday’s election a mixed blessing for the “Daily Show” writing staff?

A. It’s probably no secret where our politics lie; we are in show business, after all. We’re not unhappy with the results of last night [Tuesday]. We haven’t sat around thinking, “What are we going to do, comedically, if Obama wins?” There’s going to be plenty going on around him. Plus, [Ted Stevens](#) may have won in Alaska. Proposition 8 passed in California. We don’t need a semiconscious president to put on a decent show.

Q. And how do you do that?

A. We look for stuff, but we don’t create it. Something has to happen for us to make fun of. Unlike the actual news, what we say is based in fact. It’s going to be fun watching Fox News rapidly lose their balance. We may have a thing or 200 to say about that. We did a bit on the show about “So many people are happy about what happened, but we’re forgetting about old racists, who thought they would be able to die without seeing this day.” That bit comes from a genuine place.

Q. Have comedy writers figured out a way to make fun of Barack Obama yet?

A. Well, his name is Barack Obama. It’s kind of inherently comical. We can work around a personality, but we don’t really know so much yet what his quirks are going to be. He’s good at speaking, so he’s less likely to say something stupid. But he’ll have plenty of people around him to take care of that. I mean, it’s going to be a Democratic administration with a Democratically controlled Congress. If anything, we might have to start doing two shows a day.

J. R. Havlan will be among the participants in “Writers Speak! A Potentially Regrettable Evening With the Writers of ‘The Daily Show’ ” at the [Paley Center for Media](#) on Friday night at 8.

Mike Sweeney

Head writer, 'Late Night With

Conan O'Brien'

Q. In the immediate aftermath of the election, how do you make fun of a unifying moment like that?

A. In the short term, you certainly can do jokes in the great American tradition of kicking losers when they're down. There's this company that called us up and said: "You know what? We have 5,000 McCain dolls. We don't want them. Do you?" They're being delivered here, and we're trying to think of creative ways to destroy them. Like maybe a Viking funeral on the Hudson River.

Q. And in the longer term?

A. It really does become a day-to-day thing where you're hoping someone blunders and messes up. You have to wait for all the dust to settle and look for patterns and things to joke about. Part of the story is commenting on all the different channels, how they covered it. Like, CNN had holograms on election night. We're like, "We're supposed to have hologram technology here?" They had a hologram of Will.i.am. Ah, good use of the technology. I need to see him with a shimmering blue outline. That's what was missing from my life.

Q. Will white comedians have to be more careful joking about a black president?

A. Oh, my God, I never even thought about that. Oh, no. No, I don't think so. We do a thing where Conan will talk about — like when Obama was nominated — this is historic, and kind of start pontificating. And then we cut to our bass player, Mike Merritt, who's African-American, and we hear his voice, like, "Ugh, God, listen to this guy." It's really just a way to comment on what a honky Conan is.

Mike Sweeney will be among the participants in "Deconstructing Conan," a panel discussion with the writers of "Late Night With Conan O'Brien," at the Paley Center for Media on Saturday at 3 p.m.

[Joel McHale](#)

Host, 'The Soup'

Q. As someone who thrives on celebrity gossip in your comedy, is the end of the political season a boon for your work?

A. In a way that's sad, but yes, it will all go back. It's been hard times for things like E!

Entertainment and “The Insider” and “Access Hollywood,” because [Lindsay Lohan](#) is not out there stumping for Barack. That’s hard on everyone, because not as many people have been paying attention to celebrity news right now. Thank God. We’re not usually allowed to make fun of all that stuff. That’s left for the real experts like Jon Stewart and [Keith Olbermann](#).

Q. Will we see more loosening of the boundaries between what’s real news and what isn’t?

A. I think it’s all in the packaging. We’re not covering where [John McCain](#) or Barack Obama is eating, or whether they’re going grocery shopping. But all channels want to be entertaining, so that means great graphics, coverage of nonstories over and over again. CNN has their breaking-news ticker going at all times. Which technically, I guess, is correct, that it is breaking news, that Coke is introducing Diet Coke With Lemon. Sure, it’s not an avalanche or hurricane, but it’s breaking.

Q. So when Mr. Obama makes his inevitable postelection visit to [Oprah Winfrey](#), it’s not a given that you’ll cover it on “The Soup”?

A. We try to cover the coverage. We don’t want to break stories, we don’t want to be part of the horrible gossip. We just want to make fun of it. If Obama went on “Oprah,” and it also happened to be one of her “Favorite Things” episodes, I think we would have some sort of crazy harmonic-convergence heart attack. But we’d much rather show Jean Bice from QVC, talking about her dead boyfriends and her BeDazzled headbands. That is much more interesting to us.

Joel McHale performs at Town Hall on Saturday night at 7:30.

Tracy Morgan

Actor and comedian, ‘30 Rock’

Q. Will all black comedians be expected to joke about President Obama now?

A. Oh, man. If you don’t have Obama material, then you’re out of the loop. I mean, the world’s about to change. Race is out there now, and it’s going to be confronted. Everybody wants to sweep it under the rug, put it back and close the door. But we can’t now. The president is black, so obviously we’re going to make fun of every situation you could ever imagine about a black president. But they had to let Obama win. You finally got O. J. Give us Obama.

Q. Can white comedians safely make fun of him, too?

A. I don’t know. White comedians have got to roll the dice, Baby. And if you get into a fight, then you get into a fight, because you know how black people are going to feel

about Obama. If you go down that road, you better be funny.

Q. If an Obama presidency is unsuccessful, will black comedians feel a greater need to stick up for him?

A. Dude, do you think we really care about stuff like that? The black community, we're just trying to get something to eat tonight, man. More brothers are worrying about where their next meal is coming from. They ain't worrying about the Dow Jones. I don't know any dude named Dow Jones.

Q. You predicted an Obama victory during a guest appearance on "[Saturday Night Live](#)." Do you think you've got a future in political punditry?

A. Who, me? Nah, that's not my thing, man. Politics was never talked about in my house, growing up as a kid. The last time I voted was for Dave Dinkins, man. Long time ago, Bro'.

Q. Did you vote this year?

A. Yeah, I got into a fight with three other black dudes 'cause they saw me vote for McCain. Nah, I'm just joking. They'd run me out of my community. A black Republican? Shoot. That ain't happenin', Captain.

Tracy Morgan performs at the [Apollo Theater](#) on Saturday night at 8.

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