

W.I.W. S.I.E. crackers



WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU HOLD A MIRROR UP TO SEVEN COMEDIANS? *PT* SAT DOWN WITH SOME WELL-KNOWN WITS TO EXPLORE THE DROLL—AND THE WEIGHTY—ELEMENTS OF THEIR CRAFT.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL EDWARDS

“Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog,” said E.B. White. “Few people are interested and the frog dies.” Sure enough, humor, that most ineffable of human art forms, has long eluded the efforts of psychologists to describe it. So we turned to the real experts—comedians, actors, and satirists. Our round table consisted of **Todd Hanson**, editor-in-chief of *The Onion*; **Bob Mankoff**, cartoon editor of *The New Yorker*; *The Daily Show*'s **Kristen Schaal**;

MADtv's **Arden Myrin**; **Sam Lipsyte**, author of *Home Land*; comedian **Eugene Mirman** (who, along with Schaal, appears on *Flight of the Conchords*); and comedian **Heather Lawless**. Since they're the ones on the front lines making people laugh, we knew they'd be able to shed light on when jokes go too far, whether men like funny women, and that great existential stumper, the knock knock joke. —Jay Dixit

We want to keep this informal...

Mankoff: Can we keep it totally formal?

Mirman: We should probably use Robert's Rules of Order.

Hanson: I don't believe any scholarly conversation can reasonably be held if it's not in Latin. I mean it's for *Psychology Today*, let's try to keep it classy.

Mirman: Alright, the psychology of humor! We're about to talk about power, struggle, our childhoods—with comedy, or what I like to call “the power of the tease.”

Let's start with something that's not funny at all but quite sad: the death of George Carlin. How did he influence you?

Mirman: Never heard of him. (*Laughter*) He influenced the canon of standup and shaped what it became and what was acceptable. He took it from vaudeville, Bob Hopey jokey jokes and made it personal and important and an art.

Mankoff: Like *New Yorker* cartoons, Carlin's whole point was to use humor to communicate something besides making the person laugh. The things we've laughed at hardest in our lives are not the jokes at all. He was a thinking comedian.

Hanson: Carlin was part of a giant shift in the culture. He was 30 when he started dropping acid and turning into the Hippy Dippy Weatherman. Before that, he was a

straight comic. There isn't really a counterculture now. But on the other hand, in the mainstream, there is nothing that's considered out of bounds.

Myrin: We have such a crazy censor on *MADtv* that it's very arbitrary what you can or can't say. So the writers write entire sketches with made-up names for penis and vagina, like “gooch hole” and “twazzer.” But the censors still won't let them use them because of the context, so they get in battles.

What is it about vulgarity that's funny?

Hanson: George Carlin says there's no such thing as shock humor. Shock is just another word for surprise, and all humor is based on surprise, or having the person off-guard.

Schaal: I think it's a matter of taste: Maybe you love Andrew Dice Clay, or maybe you don't.

Hanson: I do love Andrew Dice Clay, but only because I hate women.

Mankoff: I think what you're getting to is what psychologists call script opposition. So if there's a doctor saying, “You'll be awake during the entire operation; the anesthesiologist is on vacation.” The script opposition is that we expect the doctor to be solicitous. The weird thing is it's a surprise you expect. When they do experiments, they find the more predictable jokes are the ones that are funny.

Lipsyte: I once heard someone describe it as a rubber band being stretched.

Myrin: I like seeing what you can get away with with a smile. The sweeter, more pleasant you can be—and then say something horrifying.

Hanson: You don't have to be a primatologist to figure out there's a connection between the startle reaction and making people laugh. For me, the funniest things are always the most horrifying, and then figuring out a way to process that in your mind so you can laugh.

Schaal: And also playing it real and sincerely and not at all winking.

Mankoff: It all occurs in the context of play. When we're playing, we enjoy things that are normally offensive and repulsive to us.

“I don't need that immediate gratification of the laugh. I'm just detached from whether people think I'm funny or whether they think I suck.”
—Kristen Schaal



“When you think rationally, it's A or not A, it's this or it's that. But in comedy, it's always both things. Think of a cartoon with a guy on the phone saying, ‘Thursday's out. How about never? Is never good for you?’ It's both rude and polite. The syntax is polite, the message is rude.”
—Bob Mankoff

Say I can have a cartoon where it's a gallop and there's steps—and then there's a ramp for the handicapped. It's play. You can have a guy getting executed with a guillotine and the guy has the two baskets and he's saying, “Paper or plastic?” That actual scene wouldn't be funny.

Mirman: I think it actually would be funny.

We're talking about humor coming from surprise, but isn't it also the recognition of the familiar?

Schaal: But you start with recognition.

Lawless: There's a degree of precariousness.

Mankoff: There's a degree of unexpectedness and conjoining two things that people haven't expected. If I do a cartoon and say to you, “OK, here's heaven. Make something up about it—conjoin it with an airport.” You'll start to come up with jokes. What are the parallels? You go into heaven, maybe there's security. Maybe it's a nightclub—there's a guy out front, guarding the ropes. Maybe it's the U.S. and there are illegal angels crawling over. If I say it's like a highway, maybe there's an EasyPass. Conjoining these two things is what you're

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supposed to do as a comic.

Lawless: It also depends on who your audience is. You don't set yourself up to be completely misunderstood. If you do a show in New York City downtown, you know you'll have to be listening to the darker corners of your imagination. If you're doing the road or a college, you don't want to make yourself so vulnerable that they're not going to get on board with your premise.

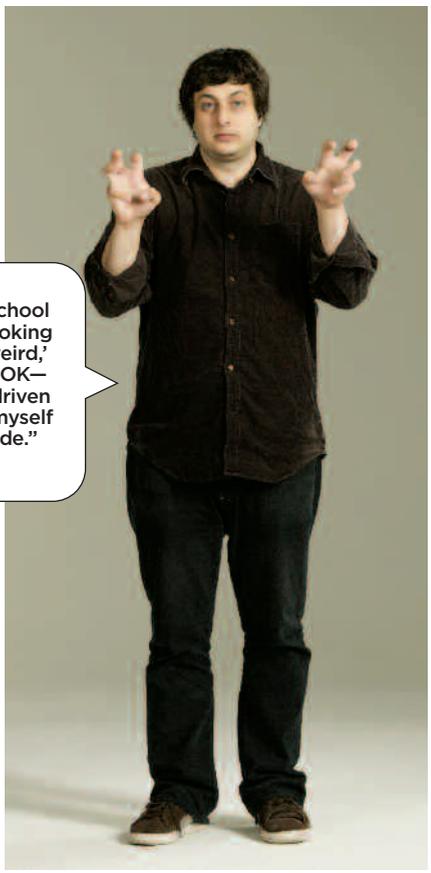
Mirman: People have to trust you.

Lawless: You have to start with something that gets their ears open.

Let's talk about when humor crosses the line.

Hanson: When the towers came down, there was a joke that was well constructed, funny, and sad. But it was too cavalier and we didn't feel like being cavalier at the time. It was “America Stronger than Ever, Say Quadragon Officials.” It's funny, but it was inappropriate because that fifth of the building that was missing had dead people in it. We decided it was not right for the time. It's not the subject matter, it's not the language. It had to do with the target of the joke.

“I was the most hated child in my school system for 10 years. Then I started joking around. It went from, ‘He's super weird,’ to ‘Oh, he's funny.’ And then it was OK—except for the fact that I was then driven to become a comedian and prove myself to the people I knew in eighth grade.”
—Eugene Mirman



would seem inappropriate.

Is there anyone you can't make laugh?

Hanson: The less is wrong in your life, the less you need humor. There's this great Mark Twain quote where he said there's no humor in heaven. I thought that was very sad and funny and a good dig at all the humorless Presbyterians he was raised by.

Mankoff: Humor's for things that go wrong. If you have a good vacation and the luggage gets there on time, there are no jokes in that.

Schaal: Only stupid people don't have senses of humor.

Mankoff: People who are funny have something uneven, some grit, some damage. Anyone who does things just for fun is going to laugh and if you do a lot of things just because you enjoy them, not to achieve something, not for some greater purpose, I think you'll have a sense of humor.

What about when people are offended by a joke?

Mankoff: There was a cartoon in *The New Yorker* of two surgeons cutting open a baby on the operating table and the caption says, “There's gotta be an easier way to get can-



"It's wild when someone knows you do standup. They'll say something that is really out of character for them, and they're doing some weird thing, and I feel really awkward. I can't laugh because it's not funny and then immediately, we don't have a friendship."

—Heather Lawless

one of the many things that didn't happen to you, it's OK. So finally we just ran an op-ed called, "That's Not Funny, My Brother Died That Way." But the thing the guy is taking offense at is the scene in *Police Academy* where he goes flying off the edge of his

motorcycle and his head goes up the horse's rectum. And he's like, "I don't know how they could make a joke about that, because that's exactly the way my brother died."

Mankoff: But that's such a slippery slope. You have anybody being held up in a cartoon—then you say, "Well, some people get held up and get killed!" So there's almost nothing you can do.

Lipsyte: Mark Maron got tackled on stage. He did a suicide joke, and some guy's brother had just attempted suicide and jumped up and tackled him.

Mirman: You can make a joke that does hit too close to some people, it's true. I mean, some books make people cry! It's

"I've always liked a little whiff of death around humor. That's what always ties us together, the mortality aspect of it. I think that's the core of some of the best humor—our fragility."

—Sam Lipsyte

upsetting, it's life.

How did you become funny?

Mirman: I was the most hated child in my school system for 10 years. And sort of vaguely started joking around. Somewhere, it went from, "He's super weird," to "Oh, he's funny." And then it was OK—except for the fact that I was then driven to become a comedian and prove myself to the people I knew in eighth grade.

Hanson: It's a weird combination of a deeply ingrained sense of self-hatred and a grandiose self-absorbed narcissism.

Myrin: Being an oddball when you were little. I looked like a boy until I was 12. Literally, people would say to me, "What a

nice young man!"

Do you think there are different motivators for women than men?

Mankoff: Guys want women who laugh at their jokes and women want guys who are funny.

Schaal: Yeah, but I don't think guys want women who are funnier than them.

Hanson: I don't like women who are sexier than me. I'm threatened by it. But really, I love women who are funnier than me.

Myrin: I think some guys like it at first, but then get competitive about it.

Do you use sex in your act? Either trying to be sexy or making fun of the expectation that you be sexy?

Myrin: There's a braveness, a certain fearlessness. You can't be worried about how you look—you just have to leap off. It bothers me in movies when the funny character is just a super hot girl who does a pratfall or something. It's a bummer because there are so many super funny girls and it would make the movie so much funnier.

Schaal: We had something on *The Daily Show* called "News I'd Like To F***," because it's so obvious networks prefer hot women. Not like they're going to change.



dy from a baby." I had this psychotherapist calling to complain. And I'm saying, "It's a fantasy! Like a children's fairy tale or Grimm's." Let's understand that the baby getting killed is not real. "We use anesthetic ink," I say. "There is no baby here." He was a psychotherapist who treated abused children. And he somehow thought this related to that! That this joke related to abused children!

What do you think it was about the joke that he didn't get?

Hanson: That it's funny because it's wrong.

Mankoff: And that it's not real! It has nothing to do with babies! It's also his narcissism. Abused children are the most important topic in the world to this guy. Anything that bears on that, he is the monitor. He's the watchdog against this cartoon being the trigger for someone taking some kid on an operating table.

Hanson: At *The Onion* we get so many emails that start: "Normally I'm a fan, but the blah blah blah you did recently went too far when you took on the subject of..." And then it's, "Insert anything that has to do with their specific life." If it's whatever happened to you, then it's wrong, but if it's

Hanson: I once wrote a headline for *The Onion* that didn't get picked. I was hanging out in the lobby at 30 Rock waiting to do a part on Conan, talking to all the PAs there who all look like models. It was, "Intern Just Happens To Be Beautiful 22-Year-Old Woman." Like through sheer coincidence, she just happened to be the most qualified one for the job.

Tell me one of your favorite bits or jokes in your own genre.

Mankoff: A wonderful cartoon called "January 3 at Rockefeller Center." It shows that entire huge tree upside down in a tiny little basket. No matter what, Christmas is going to be over.

Myrin: I love Molly Shannon. I love that her characters start out kind of still, and that they're all at some point going to explode, but you don't know where or how.

Mirman: Andy Kindler was talking about a TV show and said, "Not only is that not my cup of tea, it makes me hate tea."

Hanson: We haven't talked about anti-humor. Somebody once at *The Onion* did an anti-joke where they said, "Phrase?! More like slightly different phrase!" Things like that get me—that deconstruction.



"I like to play freaky characters, so for me, it's learning not to fight it. If they want me to look pretty, I'm like, 'OK, I'll put on a party dress, but then I'll beat them at their own game and do improv—I'll just be a freak in my cocktail dress.'"

—Arden Myrin

Lipsyte: In terms of anti-jokes: A playwright, a friend of mine, Will Eno, had a joke in one of his plays, *Thom Pain*. A horse walks into a bar. Bartender says, "Why the long face?" Horse says, "I have AIDS."

Mankoff: I like jokes with very long narratives. But there's one short joke I like where

"I always use the word horrifying when I talk about humor. You don't have to be a primatologist to figure out there's a connection between the startle reaction and making people laugh. For me, the funniest things are always going to the most horrifying."

—Todd Hanson

a guy says, "Pretentious? *Moi?*"

How have your personalities influenced your humor?

Mirman: Whatever you grew up with is what you become. If you were treated a certain way as a kid, you eventually see yourself that way.

Mankoff: Going back many years, the guys at *The New Yorker* didn't go to Harvard, and it wasn't a training ground for *The Simpsons*. Now I deal with a lot of kids who were president of the *Harvard Lampoon*, 800 on their SATs. I don't see that type of damage. Why would they feel inferior? There doesn't seem to be that hurt. But they are very clever.

What's their humor like?

Mankoff: I see a lot of incongruity, slapping

things together. They're clever but there's nothing to say because they haven't experienced anything. It could just be that they're young. They see the forms, the tropes, they look at the Lego set and extend and twist it and make something really nice.

Hanson: I think jokes have to say something or there is no point. There has to be a sort of underdog element.

Anyone else? How has your personality influenced your humor?

Myrin: I just think I'm super retarded. I got married and my friend's toast was,



"Don't take this the wrong way, but you're the most retarded person I've ever met." It was such a compliment! I just think I'm a super goofy girl. I don't have a lot of other skills, so I'm grateful I can pay my rent doing this.

Lipsyte: Today my 3-year-old son was trying to tell me jokes, or what he considers jokes, but they weren't funny, I hate to say. My wife and I laughed. "Ha ha, that's a great joke!" Well, if he was saying 2 and 2 is 5, we wouldn't say, "Oh, you're great at math!" We would say, "No, it's 4." But we discussed the importance of encouraging, and he'll get there. "Knock knock." "Who's there?" "Orange." "Orange who?" "Building."

Schaal: Is that his joke? I like that joke.

Mankoff: Experiments on kids show that up until age 3, incongruity is perfectly fine. It doesn't have to make sense, it just has to be unexpected.

Lipsyte: I think of humor as an activity with my friends. We're not going bowling, we're just going to sit around and laugh. They're not professionals but they can produce laughter in other people.

Hanson: I'm going to have to disagree. I say leave humor to the professionals. **PT**