



Are Men Threatened by Funny Women?

By Emily Wilson, AlterNet

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"Comedy is so unfeminine," says comedian Judy Gold. "It's so powerful. I mean if you think about it, it's you and a microphone and a bunch of people listening to you."

Gold thinks society is still not accustomed to women having that power. "For a woman, it's like, 'That's interesting, keep it to yourself, shut up,'" she says.

Having done standup for 20 years, Gold has spent a lot of time thinking about the role of women in comedy. She shares some of her observations in a new documentary, *Making Trouble: Three Generations of Funny Jewish Women*, which she introduced at the Jewish Film Festival in San Francisco.

The six comedians featured in the film are Yiddish actress Molly Picon, Fanny Brice of the Ziegfield Follies, vaudeville star Sophie Tucker, Gilda Radner of Saturday Night Live, Joan Rivers, who went from the comedy club circuit in New York City to the red carpet for E!, and playwright Wendy Wasserstein. Gold says these comedians opened doors for her and her colleagues.

"These women were so amazing," she says. "I mean, here it is 2007 and the only real barriers I have are George Bush and the people who like him, but with Sophie Tucker and Molly Picon, look what they did during those times when there were such prescribed roles for women. When women were just supposed to have kids and maybe drink martinis because they were so miserable."

It's important to tell those women's stories, says Lauren Antler, a program manager with the Jewish Women's Archive, which produced the film. "The comedians in the movie show women it's OK to be funny, and you don't have to be a supermodel to be on stage."

A stand-up comic herself, Antler says most people don't expect women to make them laugh, and when she was growing up, boys at school thought her sense of humor just made her weird.

"People think it's an anomaly to be funny and female," she said.

Stand-up comic Beck Krefting, who is working on a dissertation about women and comedy at the University of Maryland, says it's not socially sanctioned for girls to be funny.

"It's OK for guys to crack jokes and be the class clown, but if a girl did it, she was marked the strange one," she says. "That was true in elementary school and high school and then on the stage."

And, Krefting adds, Women comics constantly have to prove they can do their job.

"I feel like I have to work a lot harder to get my audience's respect," she says. "When a guy comes up, there's this assumption that he's funny, but when a woman comes on, there's a very slight but very present skepticism, like, 'Are you sure you're funny?'"

Krefting agrees with Gold that men are uncomfortable with women having the power associated with humor. "When you're the one cracking the joke, you're in control of the conversation," she says. "Men are the ones supposed to be in control."

Rather than being in charge, society gives girls the message that they need to be quiet and well-behaved, says Andi Zeisler, a co-founder and editor at *Bitch*, a magazine about feminism and pop culture.

"A lot of people are threatened by funny women," she says. "Women are just not socialized to use comedy as power. We're socialized to play nice. It seems weird that comedy should be so subversive in these times, but it still really is."

Zeisler says we need to look at who is defining what is funny. "I always say it's like a Zen koan," she says. "If a woman makes a joke and a man doesn't laugh, is it funny? I think women are said to have a great sense of humor when they laugh at men's jokes, not when they make jokes themselves."

Sense of humor is defined differently for men and women, says Gina Barreca, a professor of English literature and feminist theory at the University of Connecticut.

"If you say to a man, 'I know a woman who has a great sense of humor and you've got to meet her,' they think she weighs 300 pounds and has an eye in the middle of her forehead," Barreca says. "If you say to a woman, 'This guy has a great sense of humor; you have to meet him,' she immediately thinks he's cute and will be a great lover and fun to be around. People think the girls who are desirable don't speak, so the syllogism is don't speak to be desirable."

Barreca, who has written several books on humor, including *They Used to Call Me Snow White ... but I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor*, says that means just speaking up can be a subversive act for women.

"Every time a woman gets up and says something besides 'Oh I love how you parallel park,' we are making strides for feminism," she says.

According to Krefting, the subversive nature of comedy makes it powerful. "You're laughing the whole time, but you're still getting it," she says. "It's not didactic or beating you over the head, but it's a way of saying what you want to say and hav[ing] people hear you and maybe even start[ing] to change their minds."

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