

Misogyny Central?

by Erin Finnegan



I have not seen *The Man Show* and have no desire to, but its sudden appearance on Comedy Central is not surprising. It is part of a long tradition of male humor in this country. As a film student, a fan of Comedy Central, and a feminist, I feel I should say something on this topic. In order to examine sexism on Comedy Central, I think it is necessary to examine a few of their other original programs, such as *The Daily Show*, *The Upright Citizens Brigade*, *Win Ben Stein's Money*, and even the infamous *South Park*. From these and a few other outside examples, we can learn how an atrocity like *The Man Show* managed to evolve (or mutate, as the case may be).

Comedy Central knows its demographic and caters to it well; that is to say, they aim for a viewing audience of primarily white males between the ages of 14 and 30. This has been poked fun at on *The Daily Show* once or twice, where they have directly mentioned their fans' demographic, but it is also painfully obvious from their style of humor. *The Daily Show*, although a more or less straightforward news program, manages to give us a constant stream of butt jokes and *Dumb and Dumber*- or *Beavis and Butthead*-style stupidity. One cannot blame Comedy Central for that. Toilet humor sells, as seen by said examples. Looking at the cast of the show itself, most of the reporters are white guys, with one or two women thrown into the mix. Liz Winstead, the show's creator, was particularly funny, but quit after the former host, Craig Kilborn, made a sexual joke about her in a national magazine. Craig has gone on to host his own show on CBS. Although I think Kilborn is funny, the incident disturbs me a great deal. I also find the lack of media coverage on the incident rather surprising.

Another Comedy Central original show I enjoy is *The Upright Citizens Brigade*. It is an incredibly bizarre sketch comedy show starring three men and one woman, all white. Colby, as

she is called on the show, plays almost all the female roles in all of the sketches herself, as well as many male parts. She has tremendous talent, but being practically the "token" girl on a bizarre, obscure cable TV show, I doubt she has a huge movie career to look forward to.

Win Ben Stein's Money is particularly offensive in its treatment of women. The show is a Jeopardy spoof wherein three contestants play against Ben Stein, the co-host, to win money. Anything left over at the end of the season is paid to Ben, thus "Win Ben Stein's Money." The disturbing part is that on the majority of the shows (at least those in the first season, which I have seen; later seasons may vary) the contestants are two men and one woman. In an almost formulaic way, if the woman is attractive, Ben makes a comment about it during the player's introductions, and then later at the end of the first round when the lowest scoring player (inevitably the pretty girl) is eliminated. For example, Ben usually comments "It's always the pretty ones," as they dismiss the low-scoring girl. It is irritating how little money some of these female contestants win by the end of the first round. I have seen many shows in which they do not even answer one question correctly. Very few women have ever made it to the final round, where the highest scoring contestant goes one on one with Ben Stein. Those that have are usually not the pretty girls, and I would dare to speculate that this is no coincidence. However, like Jeopardy, the contestants do go through a rigorous screening process, so it is difficult to comprehend how such strange casting decisions come about.

Next we have Comedy Central's pride and joy, *South Park*. It stars four little white boys. The women on the show take a back seat to male antics. Of the few female characters, Wendy is a love interest and stereotypical Lisa Simpson-esque overachiever, the female Mayor takes bribes and is highly corrupt (for comic purposes, and it is funny; I should note at this point that one cannot possibly look to *South Park* for morality, obviously) and perhaps sadly, the woman with the biggest role is Cartman's mother. Mrs. Cartman, as we are told by the boys, has been on the cover of *Crack Whore* magazine, and as we learned by the end of the first season, has slept with nearly everyone in town and is a hermaphrodite. One could go on to say that this trivializes women, but there would be no point in doing so, as *South Park* trivializes

every aspect of society, and makes fun of everything, from religion (the "Jesus and Pals" call-in show) to assisted suicide (Stan's Grandpa says "Why won't you kill me, Billy?") and is even self-reflective of offensive cartoons filled with fart jokes, as the characters on the show are obsessed with *Terrance and Philip*. My only point in bringing it up at all was to point out how there are fewer female characters as opposed to male characters. One could probably see the best example of the popularity of the male characters by looking at T-Shirt sales alone. It is far easier to obtain a T-Shirt featuring Chef than one featuring Wendy, for example.

This brings us closer and closer to the advent of *The Man Show*. Note how the station's primary creations thus far mainly star white males, and cater to a similar audience with toilet humor. Now we must bring in an outside example. Think of Al Bundy on *Married with Children* and Archie Bunker on *All in the Family*. These characters were white male family men, slow to warm up to changes in society, and almost threatened by a growing focus on the concerns of women and minorities. Their plight is made fun of with a sort of sympathy. The shows are tales of somewhat old-fashioned dads, who, in Al Bundy's case, are becoming more and more pathetic in their plight for traditional values in a rapidly changing society. This is one thing, but how these shows are celebrated in America is an entirely different issue. *All in the Family* is a highly valued classic sit com, still shown on some cable stations to this day. *Married with Children* displays a purposefully lower-class kind of humor, but has recently become the longest running sit com of all time. (For a more current example of this type of central male figure, watch Fox's new animated series *The Family Guy*, or even early episodes of *The Simpsons*, keeping in mind that in later episodes Homer grows less intelligent and more absurd.)

And now enter *The Man Show*. It caters purely to a male audience who is used to the poor-endangered-white-guy-against-a-new-America brand of humor. It makes perfect sense to me. I have seen many of my guy friends, and especially my dad, take on a humorous "Just bring me a steak and do my laundry!" type of attitude. They joke around because they feel threatened by feminists and vegetarians and even affirmative action. I once said to my dad that that kind of comic routine is over-done. It is even carried out, on a more serious level, by

Rush Limbaugh and Newt Gingrich. I told him it would be a lot funnier if he was an extreme left-winger, because nobody does that except in parodies. A few minutes later the conversation turned to a recent trip to New York city. My dad asked me if the subways were safe, and I replied,

"Well, you know, there are a few shady characters, but it's OK for the most part." And he quickly shot back:

"Now Erin, those people might just have alternate lifestyles!"

I laughed for a long time. It is one of the funniest things my dad has ever said.

Fortunately, a recent column in *Entertainment Weekly* criticized a rash of new misogynistic shows like *The Man Show*. There are three of them, apparently, on different networks, one of which stars Frank Zappa's sons. *Entertainment Weekly* accused the humor of such shows as being degrading to men, and also pointed out that the shows are not even funny, because the hosts are more intelligent than the material they are presenting. This is another important aspect of *The Man Show* that I had not yet considered, that it is just as harmful to men as to women.

I originally wrote this in response to an email campaign that proposed a protest against *The Man Show*. This is a futile gesture, as it is exactly what Comedy Central's producers expect you to do. It is supposed to be humorous through its blatant offensiveness. It is an entire show based on the Al Bundy mentality. My only objection is that if they're going to have a "Man Show" then there should also be a "Woman Show." Extremist feminist humor could prove to be very funny. Although really it doesn't take that much to be offensive to the male sensibility—all one needs to do is make a tampon joke or two and one will have cleared the room. But why spend the money to produce such a show when a suitable one is already in existence? Six or seven years ago ABC produced a show called *She-TV* which featured an all-girl cast of comedians doing sketch comedy. I thought it was great, but it was cancelled after a few weeks. I bet obtaining re-runs of these shows would be incredibly inexpensive. It could air right after *The Man Show* just for a good contrast. ☑

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