

Divine Comedy at the Cineplex

We all love movies that make us laugh, even in the worst of times—and from *Annie Hall* to *Blazing Saddles* to *The Big Lebowski*, there's good theology behind that.

By Craig Detweiler | posted 02/27/06

"The secret source of humor is not joy but sorrow."—Mark Twain

My wife was recently diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma. What an unexpected punch-in-the-gut (or actually, the lymph nodes). At times like this, your throat tightens, your stomach contracts, you feel numb.

On the other hand, it should give me some great material. After all, I writes jokes for a living.

Perhaps laughter serves as the most logical response to a reality that we simply can't grasp, a reality that overpowers us. Comedy is the best medicine, helping us cope with life's hardest lessons.

Laughing at the human condition

Ten classic comedies were screened at the recent [City of the Angels Film Festival](#). A broad coalition including Fuller Seminary, InterVarsity, and Catholics in Media offer this annual event as a gift to the city, a celebration of theology and film.

The festival has been distinguished by its timely themes, from 2001's "Touches of Evil" following the events of 9/11, to 2004's "Reel Myths," which highlighted the re-enchantment of fantasy films. So what does the festival's most recent theme, "Divine Comedy: Spirited Laughter," suggest about our circumstances?

Festival producer Michael Smith noted, "Comedy at its best stares the human condition straight in the face but comes out smiling and sometimes laughing, at the most gravely serious situations."

Fittingly, the festival opened with a double feature of the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup* and Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*. I was struck by the Jewish origins of so many classic comedies. The earthy, boisterous Hebrew storytelling tradition offers a sharp contrast to our often disembodied, Greek-influenced Christian faith.

Hearty laughter arose from the broad satire of Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* to the Coen Brothers' neo-noir, *The Big Lebowski*. These films reveal the savage, anarchic spirits lurking beneath our veneer of respectability. Yet, with the exception of Woody Allen's God-haunted work, most Jewish screen comedy avoids overt theological commentary. Has a century of suffering rendered notions of God irrelevant? Or should the laughter provided by these comedians be accepted as a gift in the face of profound angst?

Finding hope amidst hopelessness

The wisdom literature of the Bible also teeters on the edge of depression. It provides an alternative take on the promises of Scripture, offering a heavy dose of reality.

Some read Ecclesiastes as a descent into despair. But Woody Allen's desperate comedy can help us uncover the hope found in Ecclesiastes. When Allen quips, "To you I'm an atheist; to God, I'm the loyal opposition," he stakes out the same territory as the weary Qohelet. Just as Woody finds satisfaction in the quirky charms of Annie Hall, so Qohelet challenges his readers to enjoy their meals, to embrace their mates, to hug their families. Wisdom lit encourages us to embrace life's everyday pleasures.

The Book of Job can be read as a comedy of overstatement, where everything that can possibly go wrong, does. The false comfort of Job's friends seems quaint compared to the help offered by Nurse Ratchet in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Given ample reasons to curse God and die, McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) soldiers on, rallying his fellow crazies for a game of basketball. Meanwhile, Guido (Roberto Benigni) finds hope amidst the Holocaust in the fable, *Life Is Beautiful*.

Both films celebrate humanity's ability to press on amidst the most soul-draining situations. They are comedies of defiance, of people willing to mock the powers that be. Their heroes tend toward madness, revealing the thin lines that separate comedy and tragedy, wisdom and foolishness. McMurphy and Guido head toward sacrificial deaths, undaunted by Job-like suffering. Comedy suggests our ability to transcend grim circumstances, even as it reveals our shortcomings, our fallenness.

Comedy's theological possibilities

The City of the Angels Fest teases out film's theological possibilities during post-screening panelists' conversations. Seasoned Hollywood writer Ron Austin, discussing Buster Keaton's *The General* (1927), noted how American film comedy arose from the void created by World War I. While the war severed Europeans' comedic traditions (resulting in Dada art), Americans refined their comedic instincts from slapstick to screwball comedy.

Austin lamented the loss of physical comedy, a training forged onstage, before live theatre audiences. "Physical comedy," says Austin, "begins with the recognition that we're not in control of the world. It acknowledges the perpetual embarrassment of the body, but affirms the physicalness of the Incarnation—the goodness of our being in the face of an absurd world where animals bite, buildings fall, and cars wreck."

He went on to trace the roots of comedy back to Plato: "We laugh because of the gap between the real and the ideal, between ourselves and God, especially when we take ourselves too seriously."

Perhaps the most overt biblical allusions arose in Preston Sturges' screwball comedy, *The Lady Eve* (1941). The film begins in the Garden, with an animated sequence featuring a serpent and an apple. Henry Fonda plays a rich beer magnate—named "Hopsie," no less!—who literally falls for a con artist played with comic aplomb by Barbara Stanwyck. The film skewers the pretensions of the upper class, but it places blame on both sides of the perpetual battle of the sexes.

In the post-screening discussion, Pepperdine University Provost Daryl Tippens noted the theme of falling and its connection to the medieval notion of *felix culpa*—the fortunate, or in the film's case, "happy" fall. Monica Ganas of Azusa Pacific University added, "Everyone has reasons to repent; the flattening of social class demonstrates we're all in the same boat before God. Comic relief comes because we know we're in trouble. Once

we realize we (and the characters) are off the hook, that is grace."

Humor's time and cultural constraints

Mark Twain said, "Humor must not professedly teach, and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever."

Humor doesn't always travel or age well, and American films that dominated the festival slate, revealing comedy's cultural constraints, underscored that fact. While the Marx Brothers' commentary on the madness of war still applies, the sexism and racism found in *Duck Soup* invoked wincing amidst the guffaws. *Blazing Saddles'* riff on racism in the Old West played as outrageous in 1974, but seemed passé thirty years later.

Satire's sting can be bound by its era. It can cross into cruelty or obscurity, depending upon the subject critiqued. Ron Austin suggested, "The great comedians make us laugh with compassion, not ridicule. They laugh at their own pretensions—the gap between who we pretend to be and who we are."

Comedy is a weapon that must be wielded with precision and care. It works better as a mirror than a spotlight. As festival director Scott Young put it, "Funny flicks open up space for spirited laughter to do its radical makeovers on unsuspecting human species."

Absurdist ethos captures the day

The largest festival crowds gathered for the two most recent films—1998's *The Big Lebowski* and *Rushmore*—whose absurdist ethos captures the chaotic spirit of our age. Fans who discovered these films on DVD were eager to laugh with an audience. The communal nature of the moviegoing experience enhances comedies.

The *aha!* moment of *Rushmore* begins in a mandatory chapel. While most of the students at his private boys school sleeps through a sermon, Max Fischer finds a mentor (and eventually a rival). *Rushmore* descends into the pettiest of fights for the affectations of a woman.

Annie Hall, *The Lady Eve*, and *Rushmore* all chronicle the folly of searching for the ideal woman. Only after failing in their foolish quest for perfection do the men realize that the best woman was right in front of them. As in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, a beatific vision fuels their descent (ascent!?) through personal infernos and purgatorios. Again, comedy can reveal our blindness, launching us toward a journey that can only be satisfied in the paradiso.

The Big Lebowski's rabid cult following continues to grow, despite (or because of) the Dude's apparent disinterest. The Dude (Jeff Bridges) keeps the hallucinatory spirit of the Sixties alive. Yet, the Coen Brothers' send-up of slackers, performance artists, and bowlers named Jesus came closest to suggesting the salvific aspects of comedy. The film offers a basic creed ("The Dude abides") and comfort ("It's good knowin' he's out there. The Dude. Takin' 'er easy for all us sinners"). He plays the fool, but reveals a method to his madness. Fueled by a steady diet of White Russians, The Dude and his posse take down nihilists, pederasts, and pornographers. Is the foolishness of the Dude a nod to Shakespeare's "wise fool"?

Seeking proper foolishness

Is it good to be a fool? Proverbs doesn't recommend it. Yet, Paul writes that "God chose

the foolish things to confound the wise" (1 Cor. 1:27). So, what is the kind of foolishness that God encourages?

The great Japanese author, Shusaku Endo, portrayed Jesus as a *Wonderful Fool*. Georges Roault painted Christ as a clown. Dostoevsky respectfully declared him *The Idiot*. "Jesus told silly stories, about camels passing through needles and people crawling back into their mother's womb—to be born again.

Comedy at its best reminds us how upside down Jesus' kingdom can be. Like today's Jewish comedians, Jesus turned the conventional wisdom on its head. The Coen Brothers mock self-satisfied German nihilists. Jesus exposes a brood of vipers whose lifeless religion leaves them as whitewashed tombs. Christ was equal parts social satirist and religious reformer.

Perhaps the most famous agnostic in America, Woody Allen, captured Jesus' take on our postmodern condition best in *Hannah and Her Sisters*. He wrote that, "If Jesus came back, and saw what's going on in his name, he'd never stop throwing up."

Come to think of it, does Woody Allen in 2006, the Woody Allen who made *Match Point*, still count as an agnostic, or would nihilist be a better description? That's a question for another day. He made *Hannah and Her Sisters* a long time ago, but we can watch it today. And that spirit of righteous inquiry, of raging against the status quo, speaking truth to power, is at the core of the more revelatory and enduring comedy.

So, why am I a comedy writer? Humor is how I process the world. Laughter serves as the ultimate coping mechanism, a filter for all kinds of pain. Yet it is also a profound act of faith. I mock things in order to make the world a better place.

As my wife heads into another round of chemotherapy, I expect to find humor even amidst this dark situation. For what can be a more defiant, life-affirming gesture in the face of death, than to laugh as Jesus laughed on resurrection day. Easter weekend started as a tragedy, but it ends with uproarious, spirited laughter.

I am grateful to the City of the Angels Film Festival for offering me a dose of divine comedy during a particularly trying time in my life. May God continue to offer us the merciful gift of laughter amidst confusing times.

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