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THE NEW COMEDY

by

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Centered in New York is a group of young talent that I like to think of as the new comedians. Their world is very small in that everyone knows everybody else and when I penetrated it the word got around very fast so that I would be welcomed at interviews by something like: "You're Bob Temple? You interviewed so-and-so yesterday didn't you, and you see so-and-so at 3 and tomorrow morning you see so-and-so," etc. Their world is small in that respect. But when they are performing or writing they mirror the problems, interests and hopes of everyone who may be watching. Because in the new comedy performers take as their material their own lives, their own experiences, and they become figures of whom anyone can say: "This is a person. By seeing him I now see myself more clearly."

Joan Rivers, one of the most extraordinary of the new personalities in comedy, is a shy, almost nervously sensitive young woman who has enormous warmth and affection and a wit as wild as the West before Bill Hickock. Her comedy consists of confidences to the audience about herself, her experiences, and her observations concerning things. She has an amazing rapport with any size audience whether she's on the Johnny Carson TV show or in a small intimate night club room.

She'll tell about how when she was a girl she was fat - "I was so fat I was my own buddy at camp. I wasn't popular either and for my twelve years at school my pet name was - Joan Rivers. Except that the teachers always called me 'the new girl' because I never wanted to come back and I always acted like I'd just arrived. When I was a sophomore in high school it became stylish for all the girls in my class to get boy friends in college. So I invented a boy friend named Charlie. - He was tall, lots of blond hair, about 101 teeth. - I let him go to Yale. - I let him go to prep school too - I didn't want him to be deprived. I sent him to Choate, he got lots of Choate, and I let him sail in the summer---"

Then she may tell about the cop she knew once who had coordination problems - "like, he had trouble walking down the street and chewing gum at the same time. He was the only cop in the police force who had trainer wheels on his motorcycle. He was too soft hearted to leave tickets on cars. If he saw a car double-parked he'd write "Tsk! Tsk!" on the windshield."

And when she was in high school she didn't have any friends. So she'd go to assembly and when somebody would try to sit in the seat next to her, in order to appear not to be alone, she'd say: "Sorry, this seat's taken - I'm saving it for someone -" Only that someone never came.

There are qualities both funny and sad in Joan Rivers's humour. It is all based on real experiences, for she really was fat when she was young, and she didn't have many friends. She tells these stories of herself to an audience with an irresistible poignancy and enthusiasm, creating enormous waves of laughter interspersed with silences as sad as they are true. Her sincerity and truth she says are as important in her success as her wit and sharp insights. Like the films of Charlie Chaplin, which bring sobs amid riotous laughter, the humour of Joan Rivers is becoming a mixture of pathos and hilarious fun. And it is often said that in his films Chaplin was telling us more than anything about himself, in silence most of the time, though eloquently.

There is a group of three energetic young men called the Uncalled-for Three who are also part of the new comedy. Their comedy sometimes comes from personal experiences, but is usually plain physical panic. The three of them bang each other on the head frantically, do a hilarious "Ratman" skit and act somewhat like the Three Stooges dressed up as the Marx Brothers. Their jokes are completely irrational: "What is yellow and goes 'crick-crick'?" I don't know, what?" - "A ballpoint banana."

One of the three, Peter Lee, who has curly blond hair and baby blue eyes, plays Eve in an Adam and Eve skit, (the third character is the Serpent), but he can unexpectedly snap into a brilliant impression of a tough Italian gangster and literally scare the audience into applauding his transition from a meek fall guy to a domineering, brutal criminal type.

As Eve, Peter Lee says to a strange serpent (played by Ron Prince) who is trying to get him to eat an apple: "Look, I don't know you from Adam." Prince, who leads the group, does an imitation of Count Dracula, wearing a cape, squinting his eyes evilly and saying, with his tongue out as far as it will go after each word: "My (tongue) name (tongue) is (etc. ...) Count Dracula - the only man in the world who can seal an envelope after it's in the mailbox." Michael Mislove, the other member of the team, then comes up to him and says "What do you do for a living?" Dracula says: "I'm a mouth and throat specialist." Then Michael Mislove cuts his finger and Dracula grabs it, sucks the blood from it and says: "Hmmm, 1941. - Not a bad year."

Howard Storm, who grew up in the tough lower East Side of New York City and is now one of the most promising of the new comedians, bases a lot of his comedy on his early childhood background. He tells us how his mother was always taking a swipe at him with a dishtowel when he was bad, or often just for the heck of it. "She was always walking around with a dishtowel tucked in <sup>at</sup> her waist.



When she went to a formal wedding she wore a sequined dishtowel." - And that is the basic ingredient of Howard's humour and of so many of his fellow comedians who will be the comedy stars of tomorrow. They take an essentially true experience and make it laughable. Howard Storm says: "My mother did hit me with dishtowels, and I just have to talk about it."

Another of the new comedians who tells us a lot about himself is Dick Cavett, not long out of Yale and originally from a small town in Nebraska. One of his favorite stories is about his arrival at Yale wearing brown and white shoes and immediately getting laughed at. He follows with the punch line and we find that one shoe was brown and the other white. That turns the situation into a joke but when we laugh we still remember that he probably did wear brown and white shoes at Yale.

Cavett tells about the blind date in high school who was so ugly that, whereas some people stock clocks, she stopped sundials. "Did you ever see a close-up photograph of an artichoke? Well, that's what she looked like." She had a "black belt in dancing" (as in judo) and when he danced with her, to spare himself the horror of the sight, he turned her around backwards and carried on long conversations with the back of her head. Later in the evening he asked her, "Would you like to go to the movies?" When she replied, "Sure," he gave her some money and said, "Here, go."

Then there was the girl who attended the Ayn Rand Wrestling School and majored in Guerrilla Warfare at Bennington. She was a little late getting married to her boyfriend (who collected pictures of baseball players from caviar jars) so her friends threw puffed rice at her wedding. And her pet was a parrot that got thrown out of a pet shop for corrupting a minah.

Cavett makes cracks about all national groups: "You know how, when you eat Chinese food, a half hour later you're hungry again? Well, the other evening I tried some sauerbraten foo yung (German - Japanese) and half an hour later I was still hungry for power." And then: "They could tell I was from out of town and not Jewish when I walked into a New York delicatessen store and ordered a "chopped-up liver" sandwich. I felt really bad about not looking Jewish so I'd carry a copy of Forward with me in the subways, but they could always tell because my eyeballs rolled in the wrong direction- when I pretended to read the Hebrew."

The early home and haven of nearly all the new comedy performers is Jan Wallman's Upstairs at the Duplex, which is a small intimate night club in Greenwich Village near Sheridan Square. Jan Wallman becomes a personal friend of nearly all the performers who play her club and she'll let any one new break in there if she thinks he or she has talent, following an audition. Without Jan many of those comedians who make up the new comedy, and who will be creating important new waves in entertainment for the entire nation via TV and

movies and whatever they go into, might never have gotten off the ground. These comedians often go back to her club to do guest appearances without billing and try out new material they'll present on the Ed Sullivan or Johnny Carson Shows, at the Copacabana, or maybe in a film.

One husband and wife team, Stiller and Meara, and also a talented new comic named Bob King are frequently on the Ed Sullivan Show. Woody Allen, one of the leaders of the pack who has already "made it" in terms of a career with his film WHAT'S NEW, PUSSYCAT? his brilliant one-man shows around the country and his sallies into publicityland (like, getting his picture on the cover of ESQUIRE looking goggle-eyed at Ann-Margaret), provides official inspiration. Occasionally Fred Smoot, Joan Rivers and other new comedians are to be seen at the Basin Street East night club in New York. Or little spots on Long Island may unexpectedly feature free entertainment of high calibre when Joan Rivers drops in with Marshall Brickman or Howard Storm or Dick Cavett to break in new material and keep spark~~ed~~ed up by the reactions of an audience.

An after-hours "in" hangout of new comedians in New York is a place called the Improvisation, at 358 West 44th Street. And the famous Bitter End coffee house in Greenwich Village is where the Uncalled-for Three are most often found, where the Serendipity Singers and other singing groups originated and many of the new comedy talents perform. The center of all new comedy activity is New York, though many of the performers can be seen in Chicago and California

fairly frequently and nationally on the Johnny Carson, Mike Douglas, and Merv Griffin TV shows. Many of them have at one time or another written scripts and conceived ideas for TV's CANDID CAMERA.

The Uncalled-for Three already mentioned were originally the Uncalled-for Five. Two members of the original company left to go their separate ways, and one of those was Madeleine Kahn, a goofily funny blond bombshell type who is now featured in the revue at the Upstairs at the Downstairs Club in New York. In last spring's revue which the six performers helped write, satirical and funny songs were as usual interspersed with comedy skits. In one, "Maddy" Kahn played Miss New York in a Miss America contest and made these remarks in her speech to the judges: "This year, I have swept the width and breadth of this your -- my -- our country. I have travelled your skyways, your byways, your highways, from Maine to Vermont, from New York to New Jersey. Furthermore, I should like to say in passing as Shakespeare herself once said, and probably even better than I can; people who need people are the luckiest people in the world. How right he was!" Naturally this was intended to show the extraordinarily high intelligence of most beauty queens!

Previously in the same skit was an exchange of remarks between the announcing M. C., played by Richard Blair, and Miss Alabama, played by ~~Fannie~~ Fannie Flagg. The M. C. said: here are the four lucky finalists... first the girl who knocked herself out for you by performing the complete Macbeth in sign language while riding on her very own Palomino pony - Miss Alabama, Heather Dudepottesoire - Well,



hello sugar - Are you nervous? ALABAMA: Thank you very much - M. C.: Are there any more pretty ones at home like you? ALABAMA: Oh yes. I have three brothers. M. C.: Yours is a serious question (here Fannie Flagg, who is shaking like a leaf, winces and looks at him with daggers in her eyes). If you were maid-of-honor at your best friend's wedding, and the groom kissed you before his bride, what would you do? ALABAMA! If I were maid-of-honor at my best friend's wedding, and the groom kissed me before his bride, I - uh - would... M. C.: Thank you. We'll always remember you for that, Miss Alaska. Next, the little lady who tap-danced on toes, without taps, while singing a song she wrote and orchestrated herself, also the winner of Miss Congeniality, Miss ~~XXXXXX~~ Do-It-Yourself herself, Miss Minnesota. - Mavis Maybell Marymount.: (Etc.)

The Upstairs at the Downstairs revues and the Julius Monk Revues at the Plaza Hotel in New York are regular showcases for new comedy talent, directed and presented in a fairly sophisticated way. The downstairs room at the Upstairs at the Downstairs, which is known as the Downstairs at the Upstairs, or more correctly, Downstairs at the Upstairs at the Downstairs, is a room that promises to be a regular comedy showplace, since Joan Rivers was very successful there last March when she became the first single comedy performer to play the room, and stayed for months, drawing crowds continuously with her wacky humour.

What everyone finds, we may conclude, is that the new comedy is now a shared personal experience between audience and entertainer. The people watching - and laughing - get involved in the performers' lives and opinions, and if the new comedy is successful they do not leave without gaining something more valuable than just having had a good time. For the new comedy involves not only watching but almost being somebody else for a while - and that can be quite an enlightening experience.

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