

COMEDY IS HARD

BY CARMINE CAPOBIANCO

Actually, comedy could be hard. One of the hard parts of comedy is knowing your audience.

And having energy.

When I was in high school and college, I loved *National Lampoon* magazine. They knew their audience. They knew me. They were totally irreverent and showed me boobies. (I even ended up doing a few movies with one of their “boobie girls.”) They would never get away with a lot of their stuff today on college campuses. College kids are so PC. You won’t find Bluto from *Animal House* on any campus, and you also won’t find many stand-up comedians there either. They refuse to go.

Growing up, I collected vinyl albums of stand-up greats like Cosby, the Smothers Brothers, Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, and Woody Allen. I watched the pros on Ed Sullivan, including Stiller and Meara, Shelley Berman, Milton Berle, Alan King, and many more. I was enthralled by *The Honeymooners*, *Andy Griffith*, and *Dick Van Dyke*, and, of course, I loved Lucy. Quite often, we would go to the drive-in and watch the “new” crop of funny people, such as the solo Jerry Lewis, Peter Sellers, and pretty much

the whole cast of *It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* doing their own thing. At home, though, is where I cut my teeth on the real funny men: Abbott and Costello, the Three Stooges, Laurel and Hardy, and the occasional Marx Brothers movie. I must also point out that I was a huge horror fan.

I want to take a second to talk about *Abbott and Costello Meet*



Carmine Capobianco (with Debi Thibault, lounging) filming the incomparable *Psychos in Love*.
(All photos by Kathy Milani / ©PsychosInLove.com.
Courtesy of Gorman Bechard)

Frankenstein. What made this an almost perfect comedy was the fact that the monsters played it straight. Bud and Lou played themselves, but Frankenstein's monster (Frankenstein himself never appeared), the Wolfman, and Dracula were the horror icons we grew to love. The scene where Lou sits on Frankenstein's monster's lap was, to me, as a kid, frightening and funny at the same time. It brought my two favorite genres together, and as an 11-year-old, I considered it my go-to movie anytime it was televised (no VCRs yet). The problem I have with the movie now is—like the movies after it where Abbott and Costello meet the Mummy, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and the Invisible Man—there weren't any classic routines. Now I have the Blu-ray and my son and I will watch it every once in a while. Afterward, we go to YouTube and watch some version of their *Who's on First?* routine. Now, we watch and

laugh at the Mel Brooks/Gene Wilder masterpiece *Young Frankenstein*. But that's a whole other 4,000-word essay. I think it's time to show my son *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

In the early '70s, I was in Waldenbooks, pulled Richard Anobile's *Why a Duck? Visual and Verbal Gems from the Marx Brothers Movies* off a shelf and started to thumb through it. The book consisted of frame-by-frame blow-ups of scenes from several Marx Brothers movies, complete with the actual dialogue from the films. It was on sale and I bought it.

The book changed my views on comedy. I still loved everyone I mentioned before, but I became obsessed with these guys—especially the unreleased gem *Animal Crackers* with Anobile's *Hooray for Captain Spaulding: Verbal & Visual Gems from "Animal Crackers."* Then, in 1974, *Animal Crackers* was finally rereleased in theaters after remaining unseen for decades. It immediately became my favorite film of all time (and still is to this day). Seeing it performed live at the Goodspeed Opera House in East Haddam, Conn., was a huge thrill, and meeting the entire cast was a fun event. I spoke to the actor who became famous for playing Groucho for years, Frank Ferrante, and questioned him on a missing scene. His mouth dropped and he asked me how I noticed that. My mouth dropped when he told me that they edited out some of the scenes and musical numbers because they felt today's audiences would not sit for that length of time. I would have sat longer and then watched it again.

In 1975, another life-changing





Cast co-operation is always appreciated.

movie was released: *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. This and *Animal Crackers*, especially, taught me so much about comedy. A year later, during my senior year in high school, I was allowed to do several solo performances in the school variety show in front of the curtain as scenery was being changed behind it. When I heard the live audience laugh and saw that on several nights, I received standing ovations, I fell in love with making people laugh. I knew that it was quite possible that I could become a funnyman.

Before the band that I was in changed from a party band to a wedding band (which I couldn't stand and quit), I was allowed to work the crowd. The laughter I heard made me happy. I had written a beautiful ballad and introduced it as such and began to play the lovely opening piano part. The young couples stood up and began to slow dance in front of us, and I began to sing. The words were about a man who just didn't like his girlfriend anymore, and the song was full of insults. It was titled "I Hate You." We always got a similar reaction.

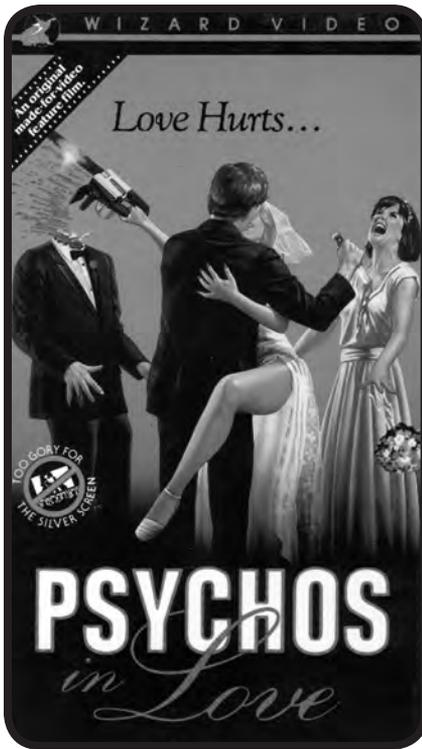
Most couples continued to dance, but those who listened to the words stopped and laughed through the song. When it was over, those who stopped dancing reacted with loud applause and whistles, while others were confused about what was happening.

This song reinforced what the Marxes and Pythons were showing me: You don't need to put

on a red nose to reinforce that you are doing comedy. The realness of the situations, coupled with lines spoken seriously that add to the absurdity, will get you a laugh every time.

Good comedy has targets. It may shock a race, a nationality, or even a gender. It may make the villain look like a buffoon, or it may simply be self-deprecating. It may point out what is obvious to us, or, in its blatancy, a punch line may fool us by *not* surprising us. There's the running joke that may or may not be funny the first time, but the more we hear it, the harder we laugh. With some comedians or movie dialogue, it is the storytelling that resonates in our memories, and we laugh at the ridiculousness of situations through which we lived. Let's not also forget about a good double entendre and bad puns.

As I get older, I find that comedians who resort to jokes about sex and their body parts are not funny. Excessive cursing no longer makes me laugh out loud (Sorry, Richard and George), and political comedians who use insults to further their agendas



bore me or tick me off (too easy for 50 percent of their audiences). I don't like comedians who are just mean—I mean *really* mean. Comedy is supposed to make you smile or laugh and not shake your head and say, "Those poor bastards." Yes, yes, I know that there are targets in a lot of comedy, but there's no need to bring a Luger to a butter knife fight.

This brings me to how I got to be known as a funny guy around the world (not by everybody around the world, but a few people in a lot of countries). (I still blush when certain fans refer to me as a "comedic genius," but that's worth blushing for.)

The first feature film I appeared in was a little ditty known as *Disconnected*. Although not a huge commercial success, I am amazed at

how many people have actually seen it. I played Detective Joe Tremaglio (a name I used in every subsequent movie I made with director Gorman Bechard—except *Galactic Gigolo*, in which we spelled the name backwards and I was "Eoj Oilgamert").

I wasn't really an actor, so Gorman let me just play myself and ad-lib most everything. It worked, and viewers liked the character who was, at times, the comic relief, but by playing it straight in absurd situations.

We tried our hand at drama by cowriting a piece of crap called *And Then?* which never saw the light of day except on a local cable station. The director of the station took a chance and aired this even though it had adult language and nudity. Through some video-based black hole, I was awarded an award for best supporting actor.

We now realized that it was drama that was hard and began cowriting *Psychos in Love*, a horror film/romantic comedy that takes place in a universe where murderers never get caught. The murders were serious, many of the characters were serious, and the romance was real. The script was funny, and whenever Gorman sent me scenes to rewrite, I pushed them over the edges of the proverbial envelope. Sometimes, but not always, Gorman would bring it back just to the edge.

Casting was done perfectly, and during the shoot, there were plenty of questions. Every person, save one, understood what we were going for, and filming was not only easy (even though there were a few days over 24 hours), it was pure joy. Scenes were changed, shortened, lengthened, and

at one point, we wrote a scene on set. And there was ad-libbing. This was mostly by me since I can't remember lines exactly. However, the best part was the laughing. Everybody laughed, and most everyone fell in love with each other and became life-long friends.

The movie was sold to what is now Full Moon, and we were offered a 35mm four-movie deal. Gorman and I tried to recreate the magic of *Psychos in Love* with a script that had an even sillier premise: *Galactic Gigolo*. This story was that a broccoli from a planet inhabited by walking, talking vegetables wins a trip to a small town on Earth known as the horniest place in the galaxy. So, the horror/romantic comedy becomes a sci-fi/kind of romantic comedy, which we attempted to film like a cartoon. We used brightly colored gels to alter the lighting, but when we sent the film to post-production at Full Moon, they corrected (and destroyed) the colors. Their editing was not what it should have been, the music was

goofy, and it didn't look like we were having fun making it. Some of the performances were way over the top, and sometimes, they screamed, "Hey! I'm being funny over here!" The most embarrassing part of the movie was the climax. The editors had no idea about comedy, and there was no rhythm or pacing. I truly believe if we had control of post-production, the movie would have been a lot more entertaining. Why? Because we understood what we were trying to do, and we knew what worked before.

So, I now know that to some people, comedy is hard.

Nothing (or nobody) can be funnier than a seasoned stand-up comedian. Why? Because he or she recites the material over and over again, and a bright comedian will listen to what gets the laughs and what doesn't. If it is something he thinks is funny and barely anyone chuckles, he may try to reword it, rework it, and reorganize it before his next show and then listen to the audience's reaction again. He



"Look over there!" "Where?" Debi as Kate, Carmine as Joe, Frank Stewart as Herman.
(Caption recycled from *Movie Outlaw: The Prequel*, by Mike Watt. Cuz it's FUNNY!)

continues to tweak it until he gets what he wants from his audience. If no matter what he does the joke falls flat, he drops it. It's history.

The Marx Brothers took on the road many of the potential "skits" they had written for their movies. They would perform these before live audiences. They listened to what worked best and then preserved it exactly, locking it in for the film. They rarely ad-libbed.

According to Charlotte Chandler in her book *Hello, I Must Be Going: Groucho and His Friends*, in her interview with Robert Pirosh (a contributor to the dialogue in *A Night at the Opera* and *A Day at the Races*), Groucho "was a perfectionist in his work. On this road tour, on the *Night at the Opera* road tour, we'd have a scene down pat, and he would know, everyone would know where the laugh comes and about how long it's going to last, how long a pause to take. He'd try every possible thing, and sometimes, by switching one word around or by using another word, he would get a laugh."

Pirosh goes into a bit more detail. "I remember one line. Harpo was playing a harp, and Groucho kept heckling him. S. A. Schearer was a well-known name then. They were pawnbrokers and they advertised a lot. So, one of his lines while he's heckling Harpo was, 'There's a man outside. He's from S. A. Schearer. He's here to get the harp.' It got a laugh. Then, the next time he came in, it would be different. 'S. A. Schearer is here for the harp.' And the next time, it would be, 'S. A. Schearer sent a man here for the harp.' You know, he'd keep trying everything, and one of them

would get a bigger laugh than the others. Nobody knows why, but he'd stick to that."

I know why and now you know why.

We filmed *Psychos in Love* on 16mm short ends, which are partial rolls of unexposed film stock left over from another shoot and sold to a film dealer, who would resell it back to us. It was a cheaper way to go since full rolls of 16mm film were quite expensive. Plus, we had to develop the film and get a work print for viewing and editing. Then, the negative was edited, and the final film was printed from that. Today, everything is digital, and the cost of film, which can run into tens of thousands of dollars on a low-budget film, is wiped out of the final cost.

We needed to save money whenever we could. We rarely filmed a scene more than once, and there were no "outtakes" for a blooper reel. The solution was to rehearse each scene over and over until we felt we got it right. The main rule on this film was that once the film is running, you better damn well have everything perfect. But this was a comedy, and the over-rehearsing was like taking the sketches on the road. At first, I worried that rehearsing so much would make everything stale, but it had the opposite effect for a lot of us. We rehearsed, and Gorman—a pretty funny guy his own damn self—would make a suggestion for the dialogue or the action. We listened to the room and waited for the laughs or the silence. We tried it again and I tried something else. Again, we listened to the room. By the time the camera started rolling those short ends, we

had a pretty tight scene. And a damn funny one.

For most of us, the perfect example was the scene where Joe is behind the bar and Kate comes running in excitedly to tell Joe something. She is constantly interrupted by the Chinese man in the Karate uniform, who orders a beer by just saying the word "one." Right after he does that, though, either Kate or I ask a question. Lum Chang Pang, who played that part, was from Brooklyn and had a heavy accent. When he answered one of the questions that wasn't meant for him with "Cuz I'm thuh-stee" and a totally deadpan face, I would always burst out laughing, causing the room to break. Gorman claims he couldn't get through the scene because my shoes sounded like suction cups on the wet bar mats behind the counter.

We rehearsed over and over again because the scene was all about timing, and we hoped that the literal tears of laughter would subside because we were getting used to Lum's straight-faced delivery. We were filming in a real strip club, so we couldn't start any production until the bar closed. The time was going fast. At about 4:30 in the morning, Gorman called that we were going to film this scene. We all kind of stiffened and reluctantly agreed. When you watch the movie, you will notice that my character is having a tough time holding it together. When Gorman said "cut," there was a huge round of applause and lots of laughter and hugs. We had shot my second-favorite scene in the movie. To me, it is still the funniest because I was there and we found the funniest way to do

the scene.

By the way, my favorite scene in the movie is the very last. I am a firm believer in the audience always leaving the theater feeling the final scene. The last scene in our movie is funny and sweet and sums up the beautiful relationship the two serial killers had during the course of the movie.

Before I had my son, seventeen years after my third daughter, I really wanted to introduce my three lovely ladies to the "old-time comedians." I owned a few video stores and thought I would try a little experiment after I wore a Marx Brothers tie one day and a teenager asked me which presidents were on my tie. I told him they were the Marx Brothers, and after a long, frustrating conversation, the only way he remotely knew them was through the Vlasic Pickles stork. I then got excited when he asked me if I had any old movies, so I took him to the "Classics" section. He told me he hated black and white and by "old," he meant from the '80s. Something is wrong here, and I will be ding-dang damned if my daughters even remotely turn out like this nimrod.

I grabbed a VHS tape (DVDs weren't around yet) of *Abbott and Costello Meet Jerry Seinfeld* and brought it home, pulling a "gather 'round, girls." They reluctantly lined up on the couch, I quickly explained who Bud and Lou were, and we watched. Before the *Who's on First?* routine came on, I thought I should explain it and have a little fun with my little girls. I did this with my son years later.

"OK, listen. There are three bases, right? On first base is a guy named Who. That's his name. Second

base had a guy named What, and third base had a guy named I Don't Know." They looked a little confused, so I explained it again. Then, I quizzed them. "Tell me the name of the guy on first base."

"Who!" they squealed.

"The guy on first base," I teased.

"Who!" they started to laugh. And they understood and learned another facet of comedy.

The magic of the boys worked, and my girls were soon laughing out loud. These were their best routines, and they probably were going to be hard to follow.

A few days later, I called the girls from the store and read them the list of Abbott and Costello movies I could bring home. For some odd reason, they chose *Abbott and Costello Meet the Invisible Man*. I would have chosen *Buck Privates* or *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*, but I was still trying to get my foot in the door. They loved

it.

They weren't too fond of the Stooges or Laurel and Hardy but totally fell in love with Harpo Marx. That was completely understandable. Harpo was a mischievous imp and very childlike. They loved the scene in *Duck Soup* that ends with Harpo splashing his feet around in Edgar Kennedy's vat of lemonade.

It dawned on me what children love. They love to see other kids, like Harpo, getting one over on the adults (see *Home Alone*). They also love to be in on a joke, like in *Who's on First?* And they love to be teased by an adult deliberately playing dumb.

Teenagers are a tough call. In my video store, I offered them free rentals to expose to them some of these old comedians. Many took me up on the offer, especially at the encouragement of their parents. Many ended up being "too cool for school" and came back shaking their



Debi Thibault and corpse in repose.

heads. Sometimes, if they returned the movie without their parents around, they said they thought it was funny or said it was stupid. I couldn't tell if they were being truthful or not. Then, they rented *Ace Ventura* and left.

I'm not sure who our exact target audience was for *Psychos in Love*, but if I were to guess, it would be a guy in his twenties who loved slasher films and boobs. But then we had the romance, so maybe a few women too. But then we had references and/or a homage or two to classic comedians (Groucho's "She's either dead or my watch has stopped" or the Abbott and Costello-inspired wedding scene), and we satirized the persona of Michael Myers with a screaming exotic dancer who would not die. So, maybe our target audience was someone older. I'm all over the board with my guesses.

My youngest daughter sent me a text when she was in her late teens that simply said, "You're a genius." When I asked her why, she texted back that she just watched the movie and loved it. During the pandemic, my oldest daughter, who is 32, texted me that her husband wanted to watch the movie again that particular night. My middle daughter, an amazing actress, doesn't like the movie. In a few years, I'll show it to my son.

When the Internet, especially Facebook, became prevalent, we found out that there were fans of all ages all over the world. Some of these fans remembered the dialogue better than we did. *Psychos in Love* was loved by this wonderful cross section around the globe. Meeting these fans at conventions always means so much to me.

So, seriously, really, is comedy

hard? It's hard if you don't understand it. It's hard if you don't know why or to whom you're trying to be funny. It's hard if you don't take it seriously. It's hard if you don't know how to react. It's hard if you don't know how to get that twinkle in your eye. It's hard if you don't know when to pull back. It's hard if you're not familiar with how to manipulate the language. It's hard if you are always PC. It's hard if you are afraid of being ridiculous. It's hard if you are afraid to "be on" and let your weird little mind always turn.

Comedy is exhausting. The only thing you have to be careful of is ending up being predictable. There are two kinds of predictable. One type of predictable is when your audience knows what your punchline will be in some way, shape, or form. This is the worst. The second type of predictable is when your audience knows that you *will* make a funny comment in the next moment. That one's not so bad.

I get a lot of eye-rolling from my kids, but my brother will laugh hysterically at the stupid stuff I say. I will immodestly state that I am a good storyteller. So, I have that.

At home, with my girlfriend, I will deliberately say things that are ridiculous. I took her to a couple of screenings, and people have asked her if I am that funny at home. She sighs and says, "Yes." I guess it gets to be too much. But I love hitting my goal at home. That's when I go over the top and she says, without malice, "You're an idiot."

My goal with all of you reading this is a smile or a laugh. That is when I feel like I am king of the world. Thank you for that.

Seriously.