

A MOMENT WITH ...

Daphne Brooks, on satire in African-American culture

In November, *The Scottsboro Boys*, a musical based on the true Depression-era story of nine young black men falsely accused of rape by two white women, made its Broadway debut, using elements of the once-popular American art of minstrelsy. Daphne Brooks, a professor of English and African-American studies, teaches an undergraduate course on African-American satire and discussed with PAW the role satire plays in portraying tragic situations.

What in African-American culture contributes to satire?

There is an oral and literary tradition that uses a technique [Harvard professor] Henry Louis Gates calls “signifying.” Signifying is a sort of double vocality, where one says one thing but means another. An example is abolitionist Frederick Douglass’ 1852 landmark speech, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” The fugitive slave Douglass used the form of a pseudo-inaugural address to call attention to his disenfranchisement. In the speech, Douglass famously declares, “At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed.” He recognized the subversive political power of irony and influenced a generation of black activists to make use of the form.

Are there situations in which satire seems to cross the line?

I had an exchange with a sociologist colleague who saw *The Scottsboro Boys* and felt there were moments when the humor made her uncomfortable — particularly one scene where a character dances around an electric chair. I feel those moments of discomfort are the most powerful. Bertolt Brecht wrote about a theory of alienation within the theater. His idea was that the audience shouldn’t be seduced into the performance. *Scottsboro* is tapping into that alienation effect.

What’s the history of minstrelsy, which is parodied in *The Scottsboro Boys*?

Minstrelsy, a type of theater featuring white men in blackface performing songs, dances, and skits, was the most popular form of entertainment in the United States in the 1830s and ’40s. After the Civil War, African-Americans began performing in minstrel shows as well — black men in

blackface. Bert Williams and his partner, George Walker, revolutionized the minstrel form at the turn of the century by producing lavish blackface productions. They surprised some white audience members who expected provincial representations of black culture. At the same time, the shows inspired some black audience members who saw how the performers were subverting black stereotypes. Hopefully, Williams and Walker helped the more politically progressive audience members think about the ways in which race was a social construction.

Popular African-American stand-up comedians began to appear in the mid-20th century. What do you think about this form of humor?

You have comedians like Jackie “Moms” Mabley and Dick Gregory playing to white audiences and calling attention to Jim Crow during the civil rights movement. Then you have a groundbreaking comedian like Richard Pryor. He cultivated a brand of comedy that focused on his innermost fears, as well as on his frustrations with racial discrimination. Pryor’s comedy affirmed a radically vocal and resistant black selfhood in ways that resonated with black-power activists who were calling for black self-determination. You have Chris Rock. Much of his comedy is shaped around growing up in the era of legislated racial equality. He points out the ironies of this experience by saying, “Yes, I’m getting bused to a school with white kids who call me names *inside* of the school, instead of attacking me on my way to school.”

And then there’s Dave Chappelle, who fuses together the intimate humor of Richard Pryor with sociopolitical irreverence. He builds on the liberties born out of the civil rights movement by dabbling in seemingly taboo forms of comedy — for example, he parodied contemporary notions of color-blindness in a skit about a blind white supremacist who doesn’t realize he’s actually black.

There seems to be a sense these days that humor can transform politics. How effective do you think satire is in promoting social change?

“When done well, satire makes people think more rigorously about culture.”

Fundamentally, satire is about, as Brecht put it, trying to “awaken individuals to history.” When done well, satire makes people think more rigorously about culture. But — and this was the case long before Fox News and MSNBC — people do choose, and then stay entrenched on one side of an argument. What we need today is another Frederick Douglass to inspire the masses across both sides of the congressional aisle. After all, his form of scorching irony helped topple the institution of slavery.

— Interview conducted and condensed by Maya Rock '02

