

Let me talk about what we called New Vaudeville. It lives on and I'm delighted to continue to be a part of it but it has blended with other styles and won't stay still long enough for my, or anyone's, single definition. It had its genesis on the sidewalks of America in the late 60s and 70s. Like many of the phenomena that broke out at that time, it had its counterpart in Europe but the American version had its own flavor.

Really ... in the beginning there was street performing (sounds sort of biblical, doesn't it?). What I mean is that it was no one person or group's idea ... the street performing explosion that took place in America in the late sixties into and through the seventies, eighties, nineties and whatever the collective name for the early millennial decade is (the aughts?) just happened. It happened stronger in some towns: Boston, New York, Seattle, San Francisco, Chicago, Berkeley, New Orleans, Key West, ... but that thing that happened seems to have been simultaneous and, at first, unrelated to each other. Avner the Eccentric went out to do street performing in Atlanta without knowing that I and others were doing it in New York. The Karamazovs were college students in Santa Cruz and took their act onto the sidewalks of that town while the Bread and Puppet Theater troupe were doing the same in New England.

Michael Mielnik was a very young man when he gathered some of the better street acts and presented them in a combined indoor show and took them on tour. No doubt others combined their individual street acts to make teams, circuses, and such. When I got to San Francisco in 1975 I looked for a way of getting myself off of the windy streets to do more of the bubble tricks that wanted to play a larger role in my show.

Me as MC doing bubbles and political satire with puppets plus several street acts ... a juggler, a comedy team (one group later became well known as Duck's Breath Mystery Theater) a singer, a magician, ... different combinations for each show. I called it San Francisco Cabaret.

When I asked the juggling duo called the Flying Karamazov Brothers if they would join one of my shows (circa 1975-76) they told me about a guy in the Northwest called Reverend Chumleigh (Michael Mielnik) who was doing the same thing but instead of calling it "cabaret" he was calling it "vaudeville". I loved that! Yes! Vaudeville! I began to read everything that I could find on the subject and I began to preach the vaudeville gospel to all of the street performers who I met and I didn't hesitate to preach it to my audiences as well ... vaudeville. I called it entertainment for a post-television generation.

The original Vaudeville in America came about when Tony Pastor in the 1890s in New York gathered acts that were playing the bawdy Honky Tonk circuit. Those shows had been for all male audiences and featured sexy dancers and "dirty" jokes as well as Irish tenors and knockdown comedy, jugglers, other demonstrations of skill and other novelties. Pastor insisted that, in his theater, all performers remove all "blue" material from their presentations. Then he was able to invite women and children to the shows. That style of entertainment took off and others gave it the French title "vaudeville" but it was Pastor's conscious exclusion of sexy and rude material that made it work for the emerging audiences of America.

Interviews with performers suggest that in many vaudeville houses audiences were would readily let a performer know if his/her work was appreciated. Less refined than the theater crowd, they would boo and hiss or they would cheer loudly to indicate their preferences. If you tried a new joke this way and that way and another way, it wouldn't take long for you to know whether that was ever going to get a laugh. Each audience helped the performers to shape the presentations into a form that the next similar audience was likely to appreciate.

Today's television audiences are useless to an entertainer looking for feedback, they are often literally directed to applaud and even then their reactions might be "sweetened" with laugh tracks and applause enhancement. Where can a modern performer find out what the people wanted?

Live theater is one place but a beginning performer will have trouble finding a theater that is willing to produce his/her experimental work. Comedy clubs allow some access on unpaid "open mic" nights and there are people honing their stagecraft in those clubs right now.

But on the streets the "audience" needn't even be demonstrative to make their feelings known. They didn't come to see you anyway; they don't owe you anything. If they aren't entertained they can simply walk on by. To survive, good street performers learn to entertain. They need to create and then maintain an ambiance that kept the attention of passersby. This is especially true of non-musical, and more theatrical acts whose presentation is less interesting unless the audience stays around for the beginning, middle, and end (the "end", of course, is typically the only time that any money comes into the hat).

In the nineteen sixties and seventies the street performers who performed in heavily trafficked tourist locales on weekends could find a weekday audience on college campuses and on the downtown sidewalks of some college towns. Like the audiences of the 1890s, those audiences had their own preferences. They were not as easily offended by "sexy" references but "sexist" material was uniformly hissed by the women and men who had had what was then being called feminist "consciousness raising". The college towns were alive with that subject and the feminists were powerfully relentless. If they heard a sexist comment they would hiss ... every time.

If they were willing to hiss when their father and uncles made wisecracks around the dinner table, if they were willing to risk retribution from their college professor in his classroom, they wouldn't hesitate to hiss at a sexist joke told by a street performer on the quad.

Some street performers had their own consciousness raising along the way but even those who didn't needed to address the fact that their favorite crack about women drivers got as many hisses as laughs. It was easier to take out the damn problem-joke than it was to keep it in and hit that same bump in the road each time. The audience helped the performer to know what it was that they wanted ... or didn't want. They didn't want sexist or racist humor.

Some performers talked to other performers and non-performers about this and reasoned out what was going on but it was and is the audience that is the real teacher in this matter. There were and still are disagreements about the relationship of "sexy" to "sexist" but the conscious effort to even consider the question was brand new.

Non-sexist, non-racist humor simply did not exist before that time. Before that we never had the 70s under our belt. The old joke books are filled with jokes that were useless ... jokes based on sexist or racist assumptions that were now being questioned and the old knee-slappers are now, at best, groaners and often produce an even less desirable response.

That change in performer consciousness often took place among the street performers first because they were most exposed to and audience that had the least investment in trying to have fun – they paid nothing and they could always at least simply walk away.

Maybe I shouldn't make too much of this – there were/are plenty of street performers who played against this and used any criticism from the audience as fodder for their bad guy or wiseass characters. Some thought the anti-sexist sensibilities to be prudish or too reminiscent of the censorship that they were happy to leave behind when they left the clubs to be their own boss on the streets. But still, there were some who found this similar path through the school of the streets and campuses.

When I met the Flying Karamazov Brothers and saw their act, when they saw the act of Avner the Eccentric, when Avner saw Reverend Chumleigh and Magical Mystical Michael, ... we knew that we were connected. Some of it was political, but not all. Some was a revival of old vaudeville skills or even actual routines refreshed, rewritten, and revived, but some were brand new and would not have worked in old vaude. When we all saw Polaris the Wizard (later called Alfredo

Fettuccini of Laughing Moon Theater) we all immediately knew that he was one of ours. I believe that it was related to the fact that each of these performers made you laugh for long periods of time without once bringing up a sexist or racist assumption. Comedy was so tied to those old racial and sexual stereotypes that to do that at that time it was necessary for you to have consciously removed or rewritten the jokes that carried those assumptions. Maybe you took it out only to sharpen the pace of the act (by avoiding the hisses) or maybe you took it out because you cared about the issue ... but the end result was non-sexist, non-racist humor.

That conscious exclusion of sexism, like Tony Pastor's conscious exclusion of sexy material in an earlier age helped to shape a new kind of entity ... a new kind of vaudeville.