

Satire, Schmatire

by NAT HENTOFF

FOR THE PAST three years, it has appeared as if a radical change in comedy were taking place in night clubs and on recordings. The one-line, stand-up comic, with Borscht belt training and a file of comfortably predictable caricatures of his wife and children, was fading fast. According to the myth, the bold new wave consisted of stinging social satirists who were plunging hungrily into dissections of the delusions and evasions of us all. The hierarchy consisted of Mort Sahl, Elaine May and Mike Nichols, Shelley Berman, Lenny Bruce and, the latest, Bob Newhart.

In fact, however, comic Orson Bean is accurate in his plaint that "there is more talk about social commentary in current comedy than there is actual social commentary itself." In the same vein, writer-cartoonist Jules Feiffer asked rhetorically in the *Chicago Sun-Times* a few weeks ago: "Does it really make a difference that twenty years ago the laugh came when the comic said 'Brooklyn' or 'La Brea Tar Pits,' and today it comes when he says 'University of Chicago' or 'Kierkegaard?' Our society, even with all of its obvious freedom, is so rigidly structured today that it's easy for an artist to feel daring and nonconformist and still stand for nothing."

Satire without a moral center of gravity has nearly always been characteristic of the few "topical" comedians who have existed in American show business. "Don't tell me about Will Rogers," says Feiffer. "When I can view him on a glorified reprise of his career talking on a radio broadcast with President Hoover about the horrors of the depression and then comforting his audience with the news that Mr. Hoover was doing his best, I can only say that while I am a patsy for many fables, his is one that floats airily by without touching."

"Fred Allen," Mort Sahl adds, "would do topical jokes, but they were without a consistent point of view and were often without taste. Bob Hope also works in some political material, but his is the Lindy's attitude. It's like you're aware of Polaris and you're also aware Eddie married Liz, but that's all. You're aware of being aware but have no viewpoint on Polaris in the context of our foreign relations, defense policy, and the like."

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Unfortunately, Mr. Sahl is not too far outside Hope's category. Some observers have termed Sahl a "nihilist," but there is small indication he has worked that hard toward formulating any particular point of view, including the thesis that no point of view is logically possible. Sahl is an occasionally successful skeet shooter at the more obvious absurdities of our political and social lives, but he rarely cuts below the surface of appearances. It is significant, for example, that Sahl has become considerably less effective now that the Republicans are out and he no longer has available the so easily puncturable target of Eisenhower. It requires a much more subtle sense of the absurd and of the amoral to wing the more sophisticated confidence men of the New Frontier. It requires, in fact, a radical dissatisfaction with the structure of society and a knowledge of its inner power ploys to fully comprehend the many openings for swift and sometimes savage humor that increasingly exists among us.

MR. SAHL, however, still goes for the easy, brittle laughs. ("I don't mind contributing to the tractors for Castro, but I want to know whom I'm getting in return.") Sahl, moreover, has an unwittingly funny, inflated view of himself, according to the *New York World-Telegram*, as "the only person in the country who can say what he wants. When people hear me, maybe they'll get the courage to break some rules, too." But what rules has the dauntless Mr. Sahl broken? Interestingly, three of "America's Ten Most Influential Young Men," as chosen recently by the Boys' Club of New York, are Van Cliburn, disc jockey Dick Clark—and Mr. Sahl. It's the kind of award young Richard Nixon was winning not too long ago.

To his credit, Sahl does occasionally make a pungently irreverent—if fragmented—point. During a stay at Basin Street East in New York, he commented on a bill that had been recently signed by Governor Rockefeller (who should be a much larger and more satisfying object of topical wit than Eisenhower). The bill denied a driver's license to anyone who had taken the Fifth Amendment. Sahl pointed out cheerfully that now anyone riding in a chauffeured car would be suspect.

Compared to Shelley Berman, Sahl is at least moderately viable and even a bit courageous. Berman,

for one thing, is an actor rather than a comedian and he performs polished monologues, as Ruth Draper did. Except for occasionally poignant—and safe—remiscences of Jewish family life, Berman goes no deeper than satires of airplane travel, a roundup of embarrassing moments, and an interminable set of variations on telephone conversations. (Both Berman and Nichols and May use the same bit of a harried man who has lost his last dime in calling information and has to plead his way through several plateaus of telephone company bureaucracy to win redemption—a searing moral tract of our time. And Berman introduces *his* version of this pilgrim's progress by calling it *Franz Kafka on the Telephone*. As Feiffer indicates, the laugh that greets the reference to "Kafka" is an echo of the one that "Brooklyn" automatically produced two decades ago.)

Bob Newhart, however, makes Berman look like a veritable Eugene Debs. Newhart, a former accountant, satirizes—but always within a wide margin of safety—public relations techniques, retiring employees, disgruntled submarine crews, driving school recruits, and similar festering wounds of our culture. Newhart plays it so cool that, according to Ralph Gleason of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, when Newhart and his troupe worked a series of California concerts, singer Barbara Dane was "asked not to sing *The Last Mile* in Sacramento because it was a song against capital punishment and the State capital, of all places, might have been sensitive to it. There was also, at the beginning of the tour, pressure for her not to use a Negro bass player in her accompanying group."

There is more bite and at least some element of outrage in the occasional political and social satire of The Premise company in New York and the Second City troupe in Chicago. Billed as improvisatory theatre, these companies perform a fair number of set routines but occasionally do work out their quick moral fables on the spot to be refined in the course of succeeding nights. I cannot comment on the Second City from enough direct experience, but the Premise's approach is about as diffuse as Mort Sahl's, although the players frequently have deeper and more trenchant insights than he. Their depiction of a bored soldier, the man who will have the ultimate responsibility of pressing *the* button—on orders—is simultaneously hilarious and terrifying. When the soldier closes his eyes, stabs his finger forward and starts playing Russian roulette with the nuclear holocaust, one is forced into a nightmarish realization of how impotent we are to save ourselves.

THE TEAM of Nichols and May contains in Elaine May the most skillfully acerbic social satirist of all her contemporaries—except for Lenny Bruce. She too, however, has no discernible point of

view other than that everyone—and every institution—is indeed vulnerable. She and her partner have allowed techniques that once projected the illusion of spontaneity to calcify. It is encouraging, therefore, that they have decided to abandon the revue approach to humor (a program of swiftly paced sketches), and are taking the summer off to write a play.

In one number, a Pirandello-like exercise in American family life, they have already indicated a brilliant capacity to penetrate into the marrow of frustrations and short-circuited emotions that corrode most marriages and begin to twist the children of these unions as soon as they can hear. The sketch begins to gather momentum as a brother and sister imitate their parents. As they parrot the epithets they've heard their parents exchange, the boy and girl *become* the parents and are hurled into a bitter, slashingly destructive argument. Suddenly the parents become Nichols and May, who seem to be arguing with each other violently in "real life." When Nichols wrenches his partner's arm viciously, the audience is panicked, no longer sure of what is real and what isn't. This is precisely Pirandello's point and one that can be the basis for the kind of organically cleansing comedy that hardly exists at all among the "new" comics.

It is in Lenny Bruce—and only in him—that there has emerged a cohesively "new" comedy of nakedly honest moral rage at the deceptions all down the line in our society. Bruce thinks of himself as an ethical relativist and shares Pirandello's preoccupation with the elusiveness of any absolute, including absolute truth. But Bruce also insists on looking behind the careful façades we all create. His comedy ranges through religion-in-practice (what *would* happen if Christ and Moses appeared one Sunday at Saint Patrick's?); the ultimate limitations of the white liberal; the night life of the hooker and her view of the day; and his own often scarifying attempts to make sense of *his* life in a society where the quicksand may lie just underneath the sign that says: *Take Shelter When The Civilian Defense Alarm Sounds*.

Bruce, however, does not turn a night club into Savanarola's church. More than any others of the "new wave," Bruce is a thoroughly experienced *performer*, and his relentless challenges to his audiences and to himself are intertwined with explosive pantomime, hilarious "bits," and an evocative spray of Yiddishisms, Negro and show business argot, and his own operational semantics. Coursing through everything he does, however, is a serious search for values that are more than security blankets. In discussing the film *The Esther Costello Story*, Bruce tells of the climactic rape scene: "It's obvious the girl has been violated. . . . She's been deaf and dumb throughout the whole picture. . . . All of a sudden she can hear again . . . and she can see again. So what's the moral?"