

Good Humor: Confessions of a Joke Whore **By Tara Spinelli for Jersey Moms Blog**

When you dream of your child's future, what do you see? Rocket scientist? Brain surgeon? Leader of the free world?

While those all sound pretty great—I share your enthusiasm—there's another parental fantasy I've been secretly indulging: comedy writer.

I can trace the early roots of my reverence for humor back to *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In*. When I was 7, I would brag that my mother didn't watch TV except for *Laugh-In*. Her affection for the show must be what drew me in, but it was something else that kept me watching even though the jokes, gags, and sketches about sex and politics were beyond me. Sitting on my mother's white shag rug next to black Lucite cube tables, watching a small TV perched on the shelf of a teak wall unit, I remember the *Laugh-In* set's psychedelic swirls and mod flowers, but most of all, the funny women.

There was Lily Tomlin as Edith Ann with her nasal voice, pigeon toes, and oversized rocking chair, and as Ernestine the disdainful telephone operator (“One ringy-dingy...two ringy-dingies...”). Ruth Buzzi played the homely, hair-netted spinster who would hit suitors with her purse. And Judy Carne was routinely tricked into saying “Sock it to me,” which got her doused with water.

Besides Lily, Ruth, and Judy, I remember Goldie Hawn playing the giggly dumb blonde and boisterous, opinionated Jo Anne Worley. Another memorable woman—if played by a man—was Flip Wilson's “The Devil Made Me Do It” Geraldine, later a regular on *The Flip Wilson Show*. Flip also introduced “The Judge”—played at one point by Sammy Davis, Jr. presiding over hapless defendants—with “Here come de judge!” I remember Guest performer Tiny Tim singing *Tiptoe through the Tulips* in his weird falsetto accompanied by his ukulele, and “The Flying Fickle Finger of Fate Award” acknowledging dubious achievements in the headlines. At some point in every show, Arte Johnson in his yellow raincoat rode his tricycle until he tipped over and fell sideways.

I had no awareness of this at the time, but behind all of the great performers was a team of crack comedy writers, including Lorne Michaels, who later co-created *Saturday Night Live*. Among other foundational comedy shows to Lorne Michaels' credit that also hold a place in my humor-loving heart are *Kids in the Hall* and *30 Rock*. In addition to Lorne's shows, my comedy hall-of-fame includes *In Living Color*, *Mad TV* (special shout out to Bon Qui Qui, Miss Swann, and Coach Hines), and *Reno 911*. And I'd be deeply remiss if I didn't mention *I Love Lucy*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *The Carol Burnett Show*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Rhoda*, *All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons*, *Maude*, *Soap*, *MASH*, *Bob Newhart*...getting breathless...too much brilliance...and the animated magic of *The Simpsons*, *Dr. Katz*, *South Park*, *King of the Hill*...but I digress...

As with *Laugh-In*, a lot of SNL's jokes and references went over my 10-year-old head, but to the extent I could keep my eyes open, I watched anyway. SNL and I have been together for decades, through good times and bad (for both of us), with long periods of absence, like when my kids were small. But when the moments of comic genius come, there's not much that makes me laugh more (except you, Jimmy Fallon—call me!).

In the last 6 months or so, I've started to watch SNL with my 10-year-old son and 13-year-old daughter. I've questioned the wisdom of my judgment on this, especially when the material veers in the wrong (so why does it feel so right?) direction, but when my kids get the joke and roar, delight trumps doubt. They know what's funny. And they are each funny in their own right. Which is way up there with kind, compassionate, and smart in my (joke) book. Like anything worth developing, their sense of humor needs to be fed and watered, nurtured, and given plenty of room to grow. The Disney Channel doesn't cut it.

Comedy challenges stereotypes and stupidity, makes us look at our culture with a critical eye, breaks down pretensions and appearances, is equal opportunity, reveals the truth, and I believe reaches parts of our brains responsible for happiness, health, creativity, and inspiration. This isn't a scientific claim. Just a hunch I have from years of laughing. Comedy can appeal to the lowest common denominator, but when it's good, it's elevating, enlightening, and liberating. I'm pretty sure comedy is somewhere in the formula for world peace. Not to mention, when a rocket scientist, a brain surgeon, and a leader of the free world walk into a bar, they have a comedy writer to thank for it.