by Geoff Pevere

"We may be cheap and we may be dirty, but we’re Canadian."
— from Jack Darcus’s Overnight (a contemporary Canadian comedy)

“My sperm swim fucking well.”
— from Giles Walker’s 90 Days (another contemporary Canadian comedy)

N
o small task this: to trace, examine and analyze the growth and development of “Canadian humour” in popular media over the past couple of decades. Even putting specific definitional problems temporarily aside (i.e., What’s “Canadian”? What’s “humour”? Can “funny” be analyzed and stay “funny”?); a virtual horror house of potential hazards and flummoxing ambiguities remains. Besides, as the specificity of Canadian culture itself remains an area more speculated on than mapped out, the consideration of any subdivision therein becomes an exercise fairly destined for storms of contention and inconclusiveness.

Still, certain things can’t be denied. Comedy, or at least comedy as manifested in the North American cultural context, has undergone some profound and distinctive developments the past 15 or so years, and Canadians have played an instrumental role in this evolution—nearly every popular recent comedic phenomenon, from the first airing of Saturday Night Live in 1975 to David Letterman’s contemporary makeovers of the talk show, is virtually inconceivable without the participation of Canadians as key creative collaborators.

But there’s more to this apparent Canadianization of popular contemporary comedy than the fortunate presence of a bunch of highly-placed Canucks in the Trojan horse of the Yankee entertainment industry; funny things are happening at home too. Filmwise, 1986 was remarkable not only for its unprecedented cluster of culturally distinguished and artistically mature Canadian works, but for the often profound and always self-conscious humour of those works. Without much perversity of critical double-jointedness, it’s perfectly reasonable to interpret Dancing in the Dark, The Decline of the American Empire, The Fly, Loyalties and Sitting in Limbo as comedies of a sort. Moreover, surely something has happened since the days when Canadian movies endlessly unspooled dreary, snowbound stories of doomed illiterates driving to foreclosed failure in beat-up convertibles, C&W wailing timidly from the car speakers. Maybe not something unequivocally positive or praiseworthy (more on that later) but something too consistent and striking to ignore.

On television, similar silliness has prevailed in our most memorable recent moments. Nobody needs to be reminded about last year’s otherwise overpraised CBC production of that withered literary chestnut Anne of Green Gables, it’s that its terminal shruginess is always undercut by a canny ironic (and, for productions of this type, decidedly unusual) sense of humour. Seeing Things and Switchback, two examples of Canadian programs Canadians actually choose to watch, are high-giggle quotient shows. And, were it not for the issue of intention (always an essential one in terms of distinguishing comedy from other dramatic forms), He Shoots, He Scores would surely qualify as one of the most awesomely funny Canadian TV productions of the age.

So what’s happened? Canadians have never been known as a particularly riotous lot. If anything, the favoured stereotypical perception of the Canadian held abroad has been that of a stern, doormat, sexless Protestant bent to sport the centuries. But it’s perfectly reasonable to find determinant: nearly all the principal, distinguishing characteristics of Canadian comedy (and thus the collective national subconscious), what’s to laugh at?

Certainly, in terms of our sputtering cinematic tradition, this tendency to the bleakly hopeless has been a profound determinant nearly all the accepted classics of the production 1964–1978 period, including Le Chat dans le Sac, Nobody Waved Goodbye, Pour la suite du monde, Goin’ Down the Road, La Vraie nature de Bernadette, Mon Oncle Antoine, Le Vieux pays ou Rimbaud est mort and Paperback Hero (The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz), a movie made by the collaborative expatriate sensibilities of Ted Kotcheff and Mordecai Richler, is the conspicuous exception, are characterized by a common, shoulder-sloping defeatism. Each, in its way, is about the futile attempts of an individual to buck either fate or the established order (which, in Canadian terms often amounts to precisely the same thing). Each suggests happiness, in the high-spirited, heel-kicking Hollywood sense of the term, is impossible. Tranquility, not serenity, comes from the acceptance of one’s lot. Transgressors are always punished and frequently killed.

Yet, before generalizations take hold, a significant distinction needs to be drawn between the traditions of indulgent, fulsome tristesse evident in other snowswept cultures—and prominent in the otherwise wildly diverging world of artists such as Chekhov, Strindberg, Munch, Bergman, Dreyer and Tarковский (to name but a few of the great northern moaners)—and our own. Unlike our Northern European counterparts, Canadian artists have not been able to establish a richly atavistic tradition of our terminal depression—something which the Swedes, Danes, Norwegians and Russians, bolstered as they are by the depth of history and the culturally-emboldening powers of indigenous language, have managed quite nicely. Short both on historical and linguistic traditions, Canada has not erected out of its Northern unhappiness the same protective cultural edifices these other countries have. Thus our resignation has not the authority or sheer depressive assurance of something like the films of Ingmar Bergman or the paintings of Edward Munch—our collective cultural wail, in its timid whining. Moreover, it is made ridiculous by being uttered in the shadow of the most culturally formidable presence on the planet—a force which, moreover, has acquired an unprecedented international currency by trading in prefabricated positivism; that is, by manufacturing and exporting good feelings.

Ironically, the incalculable presence
and impact of mass-produced American positivism has had a peculiarly enriching and even distinguishing effect on homegrown cultural (particularly pop cultural) activity. It has lent to our fiction-making endeavours an ambivalent sense of anger and envy, a sense of detachment and alienation, and it’s this cultural (activity). It has lent to our sense of anger and envy that has defined and explained the malaise soaking through so much Canadian culture. Indeed, one is tempted to say that malaise is Canadian culture.

Well rats! For, as strong philosophical similarities once bound the otherwise-diverse Canadian films of the Great Gray period, there are thick bonds holding together the various manifestations of contemporary Canadian comedy. Not only that, these ties bind both periods: given that alienation is only a short skip from irony, one can easily interpret our current comedy as the legitimate child of our former fatalism.

Perhaps nothing has encapsulated this movement from the morbidity futile to the smirkingly self-conscious than a simple, epiphanic skit once performed on the now sadly defunct SCTV program. Presented in the context of a deliberately bang-on spoof of CBC television (including a Hinterland Who’s Who? parody that asked: Who Cares?), the standout sketch was a take-off on that echt slice of cinematic Canadiana, Shebly’s Goin’ Down the Road. A re-creation/rewriting of one of the TV’s first postmodern comedies, it offered a pair of uneducated Maritimers whose dreams of prosperity crash on the sidewalks of Toronto, the SCTV answer featured two duck-tailed, moon-bathing unemployed Newfie professionals; John Candy and Joe Flaherty; heading for Toronto in search of “doctorin’ and lawyerin’ jobs.” As parody, the piece was ruthlessly thorough; right down to the Tom Connors haircuts and Shebly’s signature moments of prolonged, speechless silence between characters. And as evidence of cultural distance travelled, it was nothing short of apocalyptic – the translation of one era’s predominant pop-cultural mode into the terms of another’s. Stylistically, it heralded both the current movement of Canadian popular culture from doocudramatic realism to hermetically-sealed parody (a logical if not necessary movement, given that both imply a ghost of non-judgmental detachment between observer and subject), and the general switch from tears to jeers.

If the close proximity of alienation to irony is feasible, this shift in cultural tone from self-hating despair to smirking detachment is symptomatic of a more insistent, even dominant Canadian cultural survival: given that out and out positivism is practically impossible in a country permanently dichotomized on either side of the fence, the reaction itself reflects the shadow of its own cultural, economic and military puniness, ironic detachment is the only logical alternative (mass suicide being illegal and therefore not attractive to Canadians).

This also means the Canadian impulse to irony must have been around, in some permutation or another, as long as the impulse to alienation has (that is, “impulse to alienation” isn’t oxymoronic). And, in the terms of this writer’s thirtyish, TV-pickled Southern Ontario recollection, it has: while I’ve certainly vividly remember winning in my flannel jammies each time Ed Sullivan patronizingly introduced Wayne and Shuster as something like the “clowns from Canada” (at the time, I didn’t think they were funny and therefore found their status as Canadian entertainment eminently somewhat appalling). I have since found profound respect for their comedic prescience: Wayne and Shuster’s specialty was the movie and TV Canadian Air Force is further, time-tested, testimony to the Canadian knack for the bull’s-eye raspberry.

But there’s something sinister afoot in all this mycketting-up. The rise to pop-cult prominence of Canadian humour has coincided with a general shift in the tone of North American popular comedy, which has in turn coincided with the larger rightward ideological drift of the past decade. This is not to say that, by definition, the parodic alacrity so evident in Canadian comedy necessarily demonstrates a deep-seated, latent Canadian Reaganism (despite the damning proof offered by our own latent Reaganisme, Brian Mulroney), but the coincidence between the current state of comedy in general, the nature and success of Canadian comedy in particular, and the current ideological climate must be distinguished from (including a Hinterland Who’s Who’s Who! implicating untold and ironic, exquisite, indeed mirthful-worryism is the governing, schtick-binding attitude of Ghostbusters, Leterman, Murphy and Rivers. Each exercises denial, superiority and ‘Us-Again-Them’ condescension as a veritable comic m.o. Each trades in various forms of clay-pigion slaughter by pitting the superior wit-making abilities of the comedian against someone suitably serious, stupid or simply uncomprehending (e.g., Leterman’s guerilla tactic streeters – he’s Geraldo Rivera with wisecracks – Rivers’ constant character attacks on absent celebrities. Murrays’ constant sadism, sexism and homophobia, and chief Ghostbiller Bill Murray’s defamation of the horrors of the unknown with an ever-ready supply of stinging schtick: ‘he slimed me. Boy, do I feel good!'). To know an expert use of the xenophobic cultural centricism that is a virtual governing principle of the Reagan administration – anything different or not aligned in the centre is fair game for media ridicule, if not (in the case of Grenada, Libya or Nicaragua) outright military aggression – and each would be nearly inconceiva-
ble without the creative participation of Canadians: Dan Ackroyd and Ivan Reitman on Ghostbusters, Toronto's Mark Breslin as the chief comedy consultant for Joan Rivers' show; Eddie Murphy's SNL apprenticeship; the presence of Thunder Bay's finest and smartest son Paul Schaffer, as musician and creative collaborator, on Late Night With David Letterman.

And small wonder: as American popular culture has increasingly adopted an attitude of defensive detachment as a strategy for euphemistically deflating the constant threat of both internal and external disharmony (for as The Village Voice's J. Hoberman noted about the apocalyptic, God-summoning climax of Spielberg's Raiders of the Lost Ark: trouble can't hurt you if you look the other way), the tried-and-true culturally-entrenched Canadian attitude of cultural alienation has become eminently bankable and enlistable to the neo-conservative cause. Ironically we've been put to work dispensing irony in the service of the very cultural industry that once, in its refusal to allow us Canadians to join in on the fun, made us such a wryly sarcastic race in the first place.

(Interessingly enough, CBC-TV has provided recent proof, thanks to an excruciatingly dim-witted show called We Don't Knock, that this process has come full circle, and that we're now getting back, in its cheapest and most thoughtless form, the fallout from the kind of comedy we've so successfully exported southwards. Taking as its model the ugliest regular element of the David Letterman show -- when the host goes into the street, armed with microphone and camera crew in order to harass unsuspecting passersby -- We Don't Knock has built an entire show out of exploiting the natural disadvantage of people unprepared for media assault: every week, hosts Howard Busgang and Shawn Thompson -- who together lend new depth to the word 'smarmy' -- barge into places in order to make fun of people less witty and composed than they are. Funny.)

Ultimately, what's disheartening about this co-optation of Canadian comedy modes into neo-con American pop culture is not just that (once again) it places Canadian cultural expression in terms of a regressive political ideology, nor even that it might imply a pre-existent Canadian sympathy with that ideology (it's a profoundly specious political conceit -- or maybe wishful thinking -- to assume that Canadian necessarily implies Un-American), but that it almost always results in a substantial depletion of the creative powers of the Canadians co-opted: SNL's Ackroyd is the only original cast Canuck to maintain a consistently high (if not particularly bright) public profile, while ex-Torontonian Gilda Radner has seemingly been doomed to playing second banana to husband Gene Wilder in such Baccid Wilder-directed vehicles as The Woman in Red and Haunted Honeymoon. (This may have as much to do with a celebrity-making system peculiarly more approving of male than female comics as anything else -- witness also the disparity between the post-SCTV profiles of the show's men and women -- but it doesn't explain the depletion of Canadian comic juices that seem always to accompany the process of moving from smallscreen sketch-making to bigscreen megastardom. Then again, maybe it's just coke.)

In addition to Ackroyd, none of the finest contemporary Canadian funny-people have borne out the promise of their early careers after making the leap: Eugene Levy -- one of SCTV's most prolific and fearless collaborators -- is apparently unacceptable unless faking in the ample shadow of John Candy (Going Berserk, Splash, Armed and Dangerous); Rick Moranis, another creepily chameleon-like character satirist, has acquired a dubious star status by playing a gallery of nerds in obensively-budgeted FX extravaganzas such as Ghostbusters, Streets of Fire and Little Shop of Horrors. Dave Thomas, recently employed as a TV hawker for everything from phone calls to hamburgers, and Catherine O'Hara, possibly the most inventive female comic talent of the age, has become more available (notwithstanding her unfortunate appearances opposite Thomas pitching Ontario horseracing). As for Martin Short, who's done double-duty on both SCTV and SNL, it's too early to tell -- although Three Amigos, his first Big Movie, isn't much to hang high hopes on. Howie Mandel, a standup comic turned primetime actor (St. Elsewhere), will probably be remembered, if remembered at all, as a primetime actor.

But it's somewhat shortsighted (not to say typically Canadian) to assess the entire state of Canadian comedy on the basis of those few practitioners with either the clout to Go Hollywood or even the failed ambitions to do so. It is also somewhat typical of our sloe-shouldered, mokey national character to study an indigenous cultural phenomenon (something called Canadian comedy) almost entirely as it is manifested in American cultural terms (much as we'd like to claim it, Saturday Night Live isn't ours -- Check it Out and Hangin' In, on the other hand, are). While in comedy terms, this looking elsewhere for affirmation of our own cultural vitality is somewhat more justified than it would be in terms of art and literature (which isn't to say it isn't done), it still zucks excluding some fascinating -- if less media-magnified -- signs of comic life quite happily settled north of the 49th.

While the almost total lack of a Canadian TV comedy tradition (I hear you: but Stephen Leacock does not constitute a tradition) has necessitated the southward migration of much of Canada's finest TV comedy talent, there's been a notable surge of contentedly homegrown Canadian visual comedy of late.
And what is even more interesting given the lie-down-and-die determinism and bleakness that has characterized Canadian cinema since nobody waved goodbye, this surge - small and pink as it is - has taken place on film.

Over the last few years, a veritable bumper crop of low-budget, independent and regionally-produced films has appeared that cleverly testify to both the indigenousness and integrity of the peculiarly postmodern mode of contemporary Canadian humour. For these filmmakers working outside of the dominant entertainment industry channels (which means slightly more, but not much, than working outside of Toronto), many of the same forces which have shaped our film and literary traditions, as well as our currently popular contributions to TV comedy, have been at work, but in significantly different ways. Thus, while a common sensitivity to our exclusion from the big cocktail party of North American culture is a principal source of comic and creative energy, the subtext of the former is hilariously alongside raunchy hardcore clips, the latter is a thinly veiled, coy, lipsmackingly sexist TV ad.

Filmmakers working outside of the mainstream have nevertheless managed to do something particularly effective in terms of expression from so-called 'detached irony', speaks with far more force and urgency in the comparatively uncompromised independent realm. It also binds, on a political level, an otherwise formally and geographically disparate group of films into a semblance - albeit an entirely legit one - of cultural solidarity. Not only do each of these films have a shared object of critical concern - the schizophrenic effects of longterm exposure to cultural transmissions not of our own - they are bound by a method of attack: satirical derision.

Some noteworthy examples:

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