

Opinion

Oh, the sound of music

If the original is stupid, banal, vulgar and without a shred of merit can a parody be insightful, inspired, tasteful and memorable? Like a good North American I was clicking through the television channels looking for something to strike my fancy. I passed over a documentary on American involvement in the First World War. I passed by the mainstream networks and entered the cable zone.

Jim and Tammy Bakker leaped out from the screen. No, it wasn't the news, nor a rerun of PTL Club, it was Tammy singing *The Ballad of Jim and Tammy*. My eyes were fixed on the images. This was Much Music, not the Nashville Network, so something was rotten in Denmark or at least that bastion of the counterculture, Queen Street West.

Immediately after Tammy stopped her whining, which was altogether too soon for me, Skip Roper of *Elvis is Everywhere* fame started into *Debbie Gibson is Pregnant With My Two-Headed Love Child*, his latest tasteful foray into the top 30. As you may have expected, I was transfixed.

When Tammy Faye Bakker finished crooning for the return of the PTL moneymaking machine, and Skip Roper had stopped trashing top 30 performers and publications like *The National Enquirer*, I wondered what might be next.

It was Morton Downey Jr., the king of offensive radio, singing an anti-drug song. Well, actually he only wanted drug pushers to die in an inhumane way, and he spiced it up by calling them names. Pretty heavy stuff.

Next came the late Divine, who was a rotund, middle-aged bus driver turned transvestite movie star. He, dressed as she, starred in *Hairspray*. The performance was electrifying, like watching an untalented masochist stick his/her finger in a socket.

My eyes began to glaze as my brain functions slowed. Nina Hagen, a heavily made-up German without an ounce of talent, save to scare children and certain fainthearted adults,



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with BRAD REAUME

performed *Jack Smack* which, I think, was another anti-drug tirade. The talentless can always make the entertainment mainstream with anti-drug messages, it seems.

It was a moment to savor. Philip Michael Thomas, his megalomania bursting at the seams, came on singing *Just The Way I Planned It*. He can't even be contrite in a love song. This guy's just too much, it would be funny if it wasn't so sad. I think he should take the network's Miami Advice and cancel himself.

The penultimate act in the parade of garbage was The Dickies doing a novelty number, *Killer Klowns*, an attempt at parody aimed at the slice-and-dice genre of horror films, I think. Then came The Fleshtones and *I Was A Teenaged Zombie*.

With technology now making videos easy and cheap to produce, the market is close to being flooded with these things. Even videos from recognizable sources are usually idiotic, mundane and basically pointless, but these masterpieces are light years beyond that.

Everybody craves fame, I guess. The market, thank God, will still decide. People are still the arbiters of quality, even if they do support things like television's *Three's Company*, films like a comatose *Nightmare on Elm Street* and contemporary music like top 30's *Debbie Gibson* or the various club mixes. And of course then there's rap, which rhymes with...

It was interesting to see the horrible. Much Music played the selections because it was Halloween and they were scary. Believe me, they were scary.

Criticism has its place

Most pieces of human behaviour fit together, hand-in-glove. There are employers and employees; men complement women, together they have children and life goes on; people like to praise and be praised; peanut butter and jelly.

But there's a glaring mistake in the natural order of things. There is one thing everyone wants to give and no one wants to receive.

It's criticism. You can call it correction, feedback, guidance or any other nice-sounding name, but most people still hate it.

It is a rare person who likes criticism. It is the bane of relationships, the fear that motivates employees.

Yet it is crucial. After all, how do we teach a child, if we can't correct his mistakes? How can we know if we're doing a good job if our strengths and weaknesses aren't evaluated and communicated to us? How can we get better at sports, school, as teachers or businessmen, unless someone tells us what we're doing wrong? We can't.

It is crucial to be evaluated. Acting positively on criticism is the primary way we improve. Criticism can be stressful, but only if it is misused. If you view it as information, a stimulus, guidance on how to improve, then it should be relished.

Instead, many people view it as a personal attack. Their defenses go up, counterattacks are planned. The information itself, sadly, goes in one ear and out the other.

The truly wise person, the strong person, will actively solicit criticism. He wants it, chases it, is excited by evaluation because it is an opportunity to learn. Of course, you don't have to agree with all of it, just consider it, and use what you think will help.

It makes sense, doesn't it? We should like criticism. Then why do most people hate it?

Part of the problem is most people don't



Psychology
with ARNOLD
RINCOVER

know how to criticize constructively. Here's an example. When a couple concerned about their failing relationship goes to a therapist, they're both on their best behaviour... at first.

Both seem rational, both seem right, both have valid points to make and in all things appear receptive. In a short time, however, all that good stuff goes out the window. Criticism rears its ugly head.

"What do you mean I don't keep the (expletive) house clean? How many times have I asked you not to throw your (expletive) underwear all over the (expletive) floor? Every (expletive) day I find your (expletive) socks, shoes, shirt, pants in every (expletive) room in the (expletive) house." And so it goes.

Nagging, yelling and swearing form one approach to criticism, and it may seem to work — the yelling may be so obnoxious and exasperating that he'll do anything to prevent it.

Different variants on this theme are played out every day in millions of homes, jobs, and social situations. Some people use pointing, posturing, not speaking, threats or other strategies, but all are designed to change a person by being negative — they say, "I'm going to make life miserable until you do what I say." It usually degenerates into counterattacks, troop deployments, back-stabbing, the destruction of reputations and self-esteem.

There are better ways to get our message across, as we'll see next week.



We're rich in children's arts

A couple of weeks ago, I spent more time away from my children than I have ever done. What was I doing? Taking courses and attending conferences — all related to children.

Patricia Quinlan, the author of four picture books, the latest being *Anna's Red Sled*, presented a two-evening course through the Learning Annex in Toronto on how to write children's books. I expected a crowd, but only five people showed up.

We got to know one another fairly quickly. The one man in the class was looking for a new field to pursue (I think he may be a waiter or dishwasher — he said he worked in restaurants). Another woman worked full time in an office for an air freight company and wanted to try her hand at writing for children.

A third woman already writes, mostly non-fiction for adults, but was considering expanding her area of expertise. And I'm not sure why her friend came all the way from north of Peterborough to attend the class.

During the course of the evening, Ms Quinlan asked us to mention children's books we had recently enjoyed reading. I could easily draw up a long list, since every night the kids and I are smothered in books spread all over the bed.

The other members of the class had to reach back into their own childhoods to recall memorable stories. Ms Quinlan reminded us that it was essential to become familiar with the children's literature of today before attempting to write for that market. Writing for children is no easier than writing for adults, she said.

Three days later, I found myself at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute among hundreds of aspiring and already published authors and illustrators of children's books. I got another glimpse into the secrets and tips of writing picture books from Paulette Bourgeois, who is a well-established writer for Kids Can Press.

Franklin in the Dark was her first story. She has subsequently written two more Franklin stories (he's a turtle) and other picture books. As well, she has branched out into non-fiction books — *The Amazing Apple Book*, for example.

Ms Bourgeois has a dynamic personality and she does not seem to be the kind of person who would ever run out of ideas for books. Her background is in journalism, so she mulls



**On the
Home Front**
with ESTHER CALDWELL

over her story ideas by asking those all-important questions: who, what, when, where, why and how.

Margaret Springer, a freelance writer for children's magazines, regretted to say that the Canadian children's magazine market is ailing. We have only *Chickadee* and *Owl*, but there are hundreds of American magazines that accept submissions.

A publisher's panel at the end of the day provided participants with information on what kinds of manuscripts publishers look for.

One woman asked, "why does one manuscript get chosen over another?" All the publishers admitted they didn't know, except that something catches their eye in particular manuscripts and those are the ones they consider for publication.


This fifth annual event was organized by the Canadian Society of Children's Authors, Illustrators and Performers (CANSCAIP), founded in 1977 to promote the growth of children's literature in Canada.

Between these two events, I squeezed in a 14-hour day at the Contact conference, sponsored by the Ontario Arts Council. Every fall, members of Milton Performing Arts for Children head for the Constellation Hotel, near the airport, to attend workshops and watch live performances by singers, dancers, musicians, actors, and puppeteers.

We also meet with the performing artists or their agents. How much do they cost? When are they available?

We always return to Milton full of enthusiasm for our next children's concert series. We have difficulty selecting performers for our three concerts since there are so many excellent Canadian children's entertainers.

Canada trails behind no country in its contribution to the world of literature and performing arts for children.



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Ian Oliver — Publisher
Jane Muller — Editor
Neil Oliver — Director of Marketing
Tim Coles — Composing Manager
Dennis Willis — Distribution Manager
Teri M. Casas — Office Manager

Phone 878-2341
Toronto Line 821-3837
Second class mail Registration No. 6913

EDITORIAL: News: Rob Kelly, Karen Smith, Brad Reaume. Sports: Jeff Pasquale. Photography: John Warren, Jon Blacker.
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