

The Cobra's Nose

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Benedick: What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?

Beatrice: Is't possible Disdain should die whilst she hath such meet food to feed it as Signor Benedick?

Courtesy itself must convert to Disdain when you come in her presence.

The Cobra's Notes

The quote above comes from Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*—which wouldn't be a bad description for *The Cobra's Nose* to tell the truth.

Coming up on a year ago, I was having dinner with my Aunt Jan and cousin Evelyn. The subject of movies and babes therein came up, and I was once again reminded that weirdly intense character actors with slitty eyes and big honkers are not everybody's cup of tea. No problem—more Brad Dourif for me! Even my babe selections that I imagined would be non-controversial, like Ralph Finnes and Edward Norton, were dismissed as "quirky." But names, such as George Clooney and Brad Pitt, presented as reasonable alternatives did not satisfy. Would I watch them in *Ocean's Eleven* remake? Absolutely not. On top of everything else, that movie had Julia Roberts in it, and don't even get me started on her.

That's when Aunt Jan leaned back in her chair, gave me an appraising stare, and asked if maybe I wasn't just a humongous snob? She put it more gracefully than that. Evelyn, whose tongue had been occupied the previous few minutes, popped a neatly knotted cherry stem out of her mouth and concurred.

I was more shaken by the accusation than I had any right to be, and railed against its blatant unfairness and inaccuracy with a fervor that only proved there was something to it. Having made no progress in altering their opinions (fat chance), I complained to my beloved mother.

"Snob! Me! Can you believe it?"

Mom said, "Ah..."

We were taking in Scottsdale's gallery district, and my irritation with being called a snob was conflating with my dismay over what was on display in the shops. Before Mom had a chance to expound on her, "ah....," I boiled over.

"Can you believe all the ever loving crap these charlatans are trying to sell to people? Who would buy it? Who would make it? Big blue dogs. Fluorescent cacti. Have you seen one decently rendered hand or foot all day? Those people have some nerve calling themselves 'artists.' I don't know how they can look at themselves in the mirror."

Stopping short, I looked at her, and said,

"Ohhhhh...it's stuff like that, isn't it?"

"Yeah," she said, quickly. "But that's okay."

I wasn't so sure, and for months tortured myself. That popular opinion does not always resonate with me is true enough. Was it also true, though, that my opinions were not based on principle, as I had thought, but on pique directed at beautiful, successful people? Is George Clooney truly the new Cary Grant? On top of it all, popular culture was letting me down. Months went by, and I couldn't find a really engaging book or TV show. Movie after movie let me down, and this was during Award Season. There are maybe three movies released between *Igby Goes Down* and *Finding Nemo* that I could recommend (and Crispin Glover's remake of *Willard* is one of them). I began to wonder if snobbery wasn't killing my enjoyment and ruining my life. Then I saw *About Schmidt*.

About Schmidt was made by director Alexander Payne and his writing partner Jim Taylor, (continued on page 8--yeah, this one kinda got out of hand)



QUEENS OF THE MIDDLE AGE

Shane Stirmers, Partick McGovern, and Her Majesty Peggy Xenos (be sure to come to her surprise birthday party August 2nd, you can call her for details)

Just in Case You Were Wondering if I Missed Working the Phones...

My cel phone is a bottom of the line Verison model, powered by the cheapest calling plan I could find—thirty bucks every two months. So far, I've never run out of minutes, though once I ran out of time and lost them all. That was a hassle and a drag, and in order to avoid it, I listened carefully to the countdown messages that preceded my infrequent calls. When for some stupid reason I awoke at 6:30 a.m. and thought I'd better check in on my remaining time, I got to the one that said my account would be terminated at midnight. I figured the time had come to renew. Later that night, when the minutes were cheaper.

That in mind, I went to work, came home, took a nap, woke up at about nine, and made a call on my cel phone so I could get the number I was supposed to call to renew. Instead, I heard the following:

"Your Verison account has expired. Please call a Verison representative to renew your account."

Then my own phone hung up on me and wouldn't let me call anybody! My local Verison vendor would be of no help. They start pretending they don't see or hear you starting at about ten minutes before their kiosk closes, and this was about ten minutes after. Fortunately, the 800 number was in the book, so I called it instead.

Using my home phone, I pressed all the appropriate buttons and eventually got a customer service guy on the line. Knowing how prickly customer service types can be, and how futile antagonizing them is, I started out humble with Duane. After all, I had pushed the limits of my subscription. What can I say? I must have a trace of that daredevil gene. Do the same thing with my cable bill. Also, in some parts of the country, it was past midnight already. My strategy was to admit all this, but then explain I live in Arizona I had almost three hours to go.

"Your account expired at midnight," he said.

"But it's not midnight yet," I said. "I have almost three hours."

"No. Midnight occurred last night."

"No. I the message I got this morning was that my account expired at midnight. Midnight doesn't occur for another three hours."

"No. When you got that message, at let's see...6:26 a.m. this morning, your account had already expired at midnight on that day."

"That day being today?"

"Yes."

"May 29th?"

"Yes."

"Midnight hasn't happened yet today! It's three hours away!"

"No. Midnight on the 29th occurred on the minute past 11:59 on the 28th."

"So when the message told me I had until midnight, it meant six and a half hours in the past?"

"Yes."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Yes it does."

"No it doesn't!"

"Yesssssss it does."

"So, if I called you at six-thirty in the morning and told you I'd meet you at midnight, you'd think I meant six and a half hours ago."

"That's how computers think."

"But it doesn't make any sense."

"Yes it does."

"Will you admit the message was misleading?"

"No. The computer has it's own logic. It makes sense to the computer."

"But the computer was addressing a human. Don't you think it should make sense to the human?"

"It made sense to the computer."

"Do you understand how a human might be confused?"

"I guess."

"Will you tell whoever programs the computers that they're confusing the customers?"

"No. You write them if you want. I'll give you an address."

There was some more blah blah blah, but eventually he agreed to take my thirty bucks plus tax so I could maintain the fine and cheerful service of Verison. Hopefully, I pressed on.

"Listen. Can I get my minutes back?"

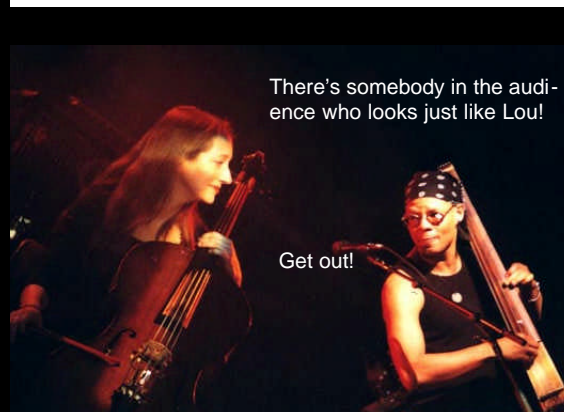
"You really don't have that many of them. I might be able to do something, but hardly think it would be worthwhile."

"Oh, yeah? Well, let's go ahead anyway."

Sounds of keyboard tapping.

"\$17.36 has been added to your account. Will there be anything else?"

I toyed with the idea of asking why I wouldn't have been interested in increasing my balance by fifty percent just by asking, but by that point it nearly was midnight. Of the following day, according to Duane and his computer. I wonder what would have happened to my minutes if I had let the clock tick past 12:01?



As I age, and as rock and rollers die off at a precipitous rate, my list of "must see" artists grows shorter. Fortunately, one name was ticked off under the best possible, that is to say, non-death, bitchin' concert circumstances. That would be **Lou Reed** (not me) seen to the far left of these words. Best known for the song "Walk on the Wild Side," which he didn't bother with at the show, Reed sings about fragments of the population rent by drug abuse, depression, and all manner

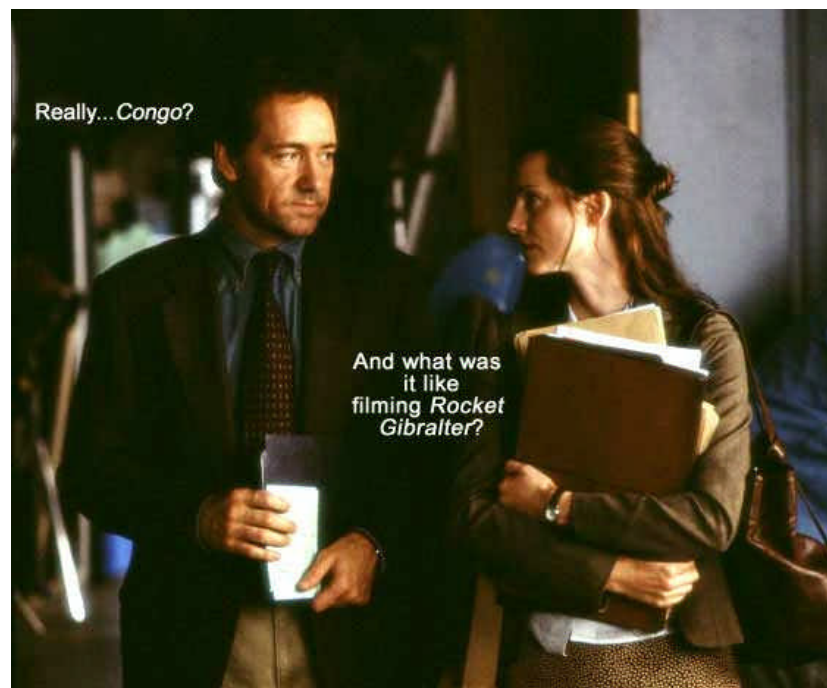
of perversity. Trick is, he sings them with such a parched unsentimentality that you realize in certain circles, overdoses, suicides, and other exotic sources of despair are *com monplace*. In refusing to treat his subjects as novelties, he emphasises their humanity. And even after doing the cranky bit for some forty years, he seems like a heck of a guy.

Deconstructing *The Life of David Gale*, or “Come and See the Violence Inherent in the System!”

A few weeks ago, actors Kevin Spacey, Kate Winslet, and Laura Linney were on the Charlie Rose show along with Alan Parker, who directed them in *The Life of David Gale*. Now, Rose is an enthusiastic host, especially with entertainers, and his ingratiating manner is contagious. Still, the praise that gushed out of the actors about the script, about the finished film, and particularly about the director (which Parker lapped up like an overfed tiger), seemed excessive even by press junket standards. The only pauses in their revelry came when Linney uttered hesitant explanations for some of her previous film work, how she was ashamed to have prostituted her gifts on unworthy projects, but how she felt honored and redeemed by having worked with such distinguished company on such a notable and important film.

The other guests were gracious, telling her that these things happened—though perhaps not to them personally. I was thinking yeah, *Congo* was a long time ago, lighten up. After her third apology or so, it hit me—she was talking about *The Mothman Prophecies*! After all, that was the movie she chose to follow her Oscar nominated turn in *You Can Count on Me*, her Emmy winning role in *Wild Iris*, her striking villainy as Bertha Dorset in *The House of Mirth*, and a few other high-minded projects. And then she goes and makes a *genre* film for money! The horror! *Mothman* isn't a perfect film, but it made an honest effort at dramatizing the interference of unknowable entities in human lives. It didn't have the genius to pull off the unwieldy source material, but it was intelligent and ambitious in its way. Furthermore, as a sympathetic sheriff's deputy, she proved for the second time (after *Primal Fear*) to be the rare co-star capable of humanizing Richard Gere.

So it bothered me to see her soliciting, and receiving, the smug reassurances of the people responsible for the likes of the appalling *American Beauty*, *Holy Smoke*, *Quills*, and one of the most pernicious mainstream movies I've ever seen—*Mississippi Burning*. These movies are not just bad they are toxic. This is not to say they should never have been made, or that their distribution should cease. I do not believe in censorship. But just as artists have the right to create, audiences have the right to criticize. Restraint in art is important, though. For every horrific image, sound, or statement in the world, even if the creator had only noble or educational intentions, there is at least one person getting off on it—probably right now. Vigilance is essential, and over-reaction—up to



the point of physical harm, the destruction of unique artifacts (with the exception of that Koran written in Saddam's blood), or that of another person's property—is in-bounds. While I do not necessarily agree with the behavior, for example, I will vigorously defend the right of any American to destroy his or her Dixie Chicks cd.

Likewise, I cannot fault the passion with which the

actors and director promoted their project, nor with how dismissive they were of the typical Hollywood product—trite little nothings in comparison to *David Gale*. In fact, they intrigued. After getting an ear-full about what they thought was stupid, I could not wait to see what they considered genius. By the time Charlie Rose was finished with their segment, the movie had jumped from my list of "skipable agitprop" to "must see." For while it is unwise and unfair to use members of the entertainment industry as guides to, say, foreign policy, when they pronounce upon the worth and politics of their own work, it's game-on.

Simply by setting *David Gale* in Texas, the filmmakers put the movie's

politics center stage. You cannot look at the doofus bible-bashing governor and not recognize the swipe at the former Texas governor and sitting president, and the constituency that put him in both positions. That's why, early in the movie, one of the character states that something like 77% of American serial killers vote Republican. This seems counterintuitive, because the movie takes pains to indicate that Republicans/conservatives are very keen on executing murderers. Whatever, as long as people die. After that, the complaints about those benighted legions get pretty feeble. *The Book of Virtues* is boring? Ooooh, stop! You "don't trust a state with more churches than Starbucks"? As Mark Steyn pointed out, that would be all of them. Also, the waitresses are gauche.

As it turns out, the Republican bashing is a smoke screen. It's something like that bit in *The Manchurian Candidate* where the benign liberal congressman says his malign McCarthy-ite colleague and his Lady MacBeth styled wife could not be more dangerous if they were paid Soviet agents. The joke was they were paid Soviet agents, and the more they carried on about the Communist threat the less likely the American people were to take it seriously. Likewise, *The Life of David Gale* comes on with liberal bluster a-plenty, but its liberalism is a joke. By the time it ended, I was persuaded the filmmakers really and truly believed conservatives want to execute murderers. I was more convinced that they, consciously or not, imagined that there is nothing in this world more arrogant, deceitful, treacherous, and finally murderous than liberals with an agenda.

And let me be clear here, too, that by "liberal," I am not referring to classical liberal philosophy that inspired, for instance, the Constitution of the United States. Rather, it is the oppressive mess that currently goes by that honorable title. Rather than an adherence to a handful of noble principles, such as the rule of law and certain inalienable rights for all people, contemporary liberalism wallows in self-pity and self- (continued on page 6)

Cult Television

You hear about "cult TV shows," and usually they're just programs that aren't widely popular, but their small, intense followings include the Star Trek convention set. But now, there is a show that actually puts cult methods of ego-destruction and indoctrination on display. And having visited the occasional Star Trek convention, one can only hope that crowd will tune in.

What Not to Wear began as a British TV show which I first heard about whilst in, ahem, London. The woman who sold me a theater ticket complimented my coat, then launched into a tirade against this programme about horrible women who insulted people's attire, threw it in the trash, and forced them to alter their appearance. "Isn't that awful? Who would agree to such a thing?" she asked in a voice that made agreeing with her seem advisable. Still, wandering around town and riding the tube, I could not help but conclude that London contained one dowdy-ass populace and a massive style makeover wasn't the worst thing that could happen to it.

That said, the show, which runs on Tuesdays on the BBC America channel, is pretty much as the ticket lady described. It's hosted by two British "style journalists" named Trinny and Susannah, who open each episode by tearing off one another's clothes because every single item is "frumpy!" "too dainty!" "too ditsy!" They slap at one another's chests—"needs tits!" "bustly!" Finally, they are shown from the waist up, naked, but with their hands strategically cupped. Then they drop their hands and the censurable area is covered by the show's title.

Then the hostesses recite some version of the film's credo: Your friends won't tell you how awful you look—but we're not your friends. Then they roll a clip reel of the target's peers opining about his or her (usually her) appalling appearance. Unbelievable, the things they say about the fashion impaired, knowing full well their comments will be viewed by the target and aired on national (now, international) television. Perhaps the most rewarding episode of the British What Not to Wear came after a newly styled woman heard her fat husband graciously declare that maybe now he wouldn't trade his wife in for a younger model after all. His wife reported him to the show, and at least two nations got the pleasure of watching Susannah ask him what bra size he wore.

The American version (on The Learning Channel) of the show is somewhat more humane. The friends and family in this country emphasize potential rather than failings, and the hosts Wayne and Stacey are about one quarter as bitchy (still plenty). Both shows, however, feature clips of extensive surreptitious videotaping of the victims from low, unflattering angles. The legality of the surveillance is never addressed, but it does occur in bedrooms and shows various states of undress (Susannah: "Rather nice tits"), as well as the workplace, malls, restaurants, etc. The British version refers to "our" cameras, the American one places the responsibility with the friends and family.

Either way, the fact of the videotape enables the hosts to alienate the targets from the peer groups to whom they would normally turn to for support. We may not be your friends, the hosts in essence say, but neither are they. They insulted you, spied on you, and betrayed you to the fashionistas. All we want to do is give you a check for two thousand pounds (five thousand dollars in the US) and help you buy clothes. You don't know us, you don't like us—but we're here to help you. And you can trust us. Not them, us.

The initial meeting between the hosts and the target occurs in a public place in the company of the perfidious friends. The effect is sort of like the climax of Freaks in reverse—the assembled seem on the verge of chanting, "one of us, one of us." The target folds and is whisked off to London or New York, depend-

ing, for shopping and indoctrination.

That's where highlights of the videotapes are shown and the deplorable presentation of the target's ass is revealed. God help her if she wears pants with a word written across the rear end. Given enough time and film, it's unlikely anybody's posterior could survive the What Not to Wear treatment, but when the aim is ego annihilation, the hosts are unscrupulous. The guest cringes and moans as the



Trinny & Susannah monitor a target's shopping expedition in BBC's *What Not to Wear*

and she is thrust into a small room with mirrors on every wall. "Well, I was told that black and yellow go together...", she ventures. "And who told you that, a leopard?" BAM.

The goal is not merely a new look, but a new outlook. When Susannah remarked that a particular mark didn't seem to care about how she looked, Trinny replied, "If we make her look good enough, she'll care." In fact, most bad dressing on the show seems to be the result of defeatism, the targets have given up on their bodies and their wardrobes. Some even take pride in how little investment they've made in their appearance. The majority of targets are chunky and on the wrong side of nubility, and whatever fashion sense they might have possessed was abandoned in favor of stretch fabrics and spangled sweaters. The strategy only exaggerates whatever flaws the clothing was meant to conceal. With the clothes safe in the trash, the hosts focus on the body.

Body image is where all the ego-shattering advance work has been done by the targets themselves, and that's where the hosts begin the reconstruction effort. Nobody has a perfect form, they explain, but these are your best points. That the clothes have been demonized helps the process. Bad clothes caused the appearance problems, good clothing can solve them. The body gets a break. Or, in the case of the BBC version, it gets felt up. Lifting bosoms, fondling buttocks, those women cannot keep their hands off the guests. This seems counterintuitive for British people, but it does seem to alleviate the previous abuse. Plus, well, you get the feeling that some of the targets haven't been touched so appreciatively in a long time. (And I don't think it's co-incidental that the most recalcitrant guests on WNTW have been those with the best figures. The ego destruction didn't take, so in the end, they drift back to trashy fashion.)

Next come the dressing rules.

As any devotee of the makeover genre knows, this stage is fraught with peril. Even an old pro like Oprah tends to favor unsustainably trendy looks (and more makeup than a Fox News anchor, but more about that later). And frankly, sometimes the high style WNTW hosts look like trouble. Trinny and Susannah, for example, have a distinctly Patsy and Edina dynamic. But while they keep an eye on contemporary fashion, when they set out the rules they are quite particular. The rational behind recommending a high vs. a scooped neck blouse, or a straight vs. an A-line skirt, is explained in detail.

The hosts are mindful of the demands the marks make on their clothing. Having observed them in their natural habitats, the hosts get a feel for what would make the guests feel comfortable as well as stylish. Nor do they try to eliminate the targets' natural tendencies, though they do try to redirect them in a more flattering direction. A passion for bubble gum pink is redirected toward a more sedate maroon, for instance.

(continued on page 5)

(continued from page 4) When she is fully briefed, the target is permitted to take her money (and a camera crew) out shopping.

She has one day to follow the fashion rules on her own, though she confides her difficulties to the crew. Though some targets are more feisty than others, all are pretty game about the rules. Which is sort of surprising, considering the abuse they just suffered. The next day, they shop again, this time with the stylists monitoring them remotely from a nearby café or the like. If she is caught misinterpreting or defying the rules, the stylists storm in and give her a good dressing down. If she chooses something acceptable, they lay on the praise. And they always, always find reasons to praise her shape or coloring. And before you know it, they're striding out of dressing room stalls like supermodels.

The last part of the transformation is hair and make-up. This is where the American version is clearly superior. On the BBC show, it happens off camera and little is made of why such and such a cut or color. In the TLC version, the hairdresser is shown detailing why a this length is more appealing than that one, what highlights do for the complexion, and how to sustain the look. The cosmetologist glances over the guest's make-up, explains why she is throwing most of it out, then introduces new colors and application techniques. She understands that many of the guests do not wear much or any cosmetics due to considerations of time and modesty, so she tends toward light, natural looks that generally take less than five minutes to accomplish.

The guest parades her new self for the hosts, and receives an enthusiastic send off, but the real finale is her unveiling before the rats who turned her in. Then you see the makeover has gone bone deep. Formerly meek guests walk with confidence, duds become flirtatious. They have more than style, they have *grace*. Most important, they look much, much better than their friends and family.

That's what got me over ethical objections to the show. I'm serious about the cult-TV business. The modus operandi these shows put on display is an innocuous version of what got people into Jonestown. But the transformation of the guests isn't into a new person, but into a better self—not just prettier, but happier. The withered old boss may remark that the true beneficiaries of the experience are "all those forced to look at her now."

The audience and the guest know better.



Cookin' with Cobra For Summertime!

In the heat of summer, The Cobra's Kitchen of New and Pleasant Tastes has been busy devising recipes for your edification. Alas, all that time and effort resulted in:

"Next time you head for the pantry, instead of grabbing just the one bag of cereal...try grabbing two! And might I be so bold as to recommend you grab the Berry Krunch O'Bunch (fake Crunch Berries) and Magic Stars (fake Lucky Charms). Pour about half a bowl full of one, your choice, then top off with the other. Add milk, eat in front of the TV, preferably whilst *The Bob Newhart Show* is on."

and,

"Foran invigorating taste sensation that will get you going in the morning, add chocolate milk to your coffee!"

Fortunately, as is so often the case, my Aunt Jan had a better idea. What follows are two original recipes of hers, which sound delicious, and better yet, plausible by Cobra standards. Even more so when she claimed that potatoes could be found pre-boiled, cubed and salted in most grocery stores. Others have backed her story, and some day when I run out of Hot Pockets, I intend to do some research of my own on the matter.

The easy recipe is:

- 6 medium rose or white spuds, boiled, peeled and cut into 1/2 inch cubes/or 3 cans boiled new potatoes cubed, salt & pepper to taste
- 1 pint Dilly Dip (Grocers produce dept.)
- 1 bunch green onions, chopped
- Combine & eat

The more complex, yet reportedly yummiier version is:

- 6 medium rose or white potatoes, GENTLY boiled, peeled & diced (you can also cut them in half and slice them thin for another look)- salt & white pepper
- 2 oz. cream cheese - softened
- 1/4 C. sour cream
- 1/4 C. mayonnaise
- 1 bunch fresh dill, chopped fine
- 1 bunch green onions, chopped
- Toss and eat. Quoth Aunt Jan, "This one is so easy it makes the other one seem silly." Try it and let me know.

A Note from the IRS

Seeing as my income last year was considerably more complex (and, believe it or not, far smaller) than in previous years, when tax time came I decided to sort of wing it. A few months later, I received a small check, and a note from the IRS which read in part:

You didn't include all the income shown on your Form(s) W-2, or 1099 in the income section of your return.

You reported that you can be claimed as a dependant on another person's tax return. (This was a new one for me. -ed.)

You subtracted your deductions from your adjusted gross income incorrectly.

The amount you reported as total income tax withheld doesn't match the amount shown on your Form(s) W-2 or other supporting documents.

They were nice enough not to note that I sent my return in a day late. So I've got to give the government credit for being civil about it and not recommending any jail time. Or maybe they're just used to it by now. I get basically the same results when I really try.



Order online at www.HawaiiGrownCoffee.com

or call (801) 237 2255

"It's really good!" --Cobra

(continued from page 3) righteousness that poisons reasoned debate. This isn't to say conservatives are entirely civil or blameless in public discourse. But frankly, the complaints against them are numbingly familiar whereas liberals seem bottomlessly ridiculous. That's one reason the work of equal opportunity offenders like Trey Parker & Matt Stone (of



South Park fame), Mike Judge (*Beevis & Butthead*, *Office Space*, *King of the Hill*), and the team behind *The Simpsons* is so potent—the liberal establishment constantly supplies the cre-

ators with red meat. Attacks against pious squares, in contrast, are the creative equivalent of licking lichen off of a rock. To extend the metaphor, *The Life of David Gale* may be a symptom of liberalism that has been so deprived of fresh conservative meals that it has begun to eat itself.

The movie's title character, played by Kevin Spacey, is a liberal philosophy professor convicted of the clumsy yet brutal rape and murder of his colleague and fellow death penalty abolitionist Constance Harraway (Laura Linney), who finds himself on death row. That's like three ironies just in the set-up, and a first taste of the movie's cutesy cleverness. (Incidentally, there are spoilers ahead, so if you wanted to watch the movie with the expectation of being amazed by its twists and turns, well you wouldn't be because the twists and turns are lame, but here's your heads up anyway.)

First, if Gale were so smart, why would he have made such a botch of the murder in the first place? The state's case against him was strong enough that he was promptly convicted and sentenced to die, and none of his appeals were granted. This despite the fact that he had no motive and that there was compelling evidence that the crime had been videotaped, though a tape had never been recovered. Then again, if he were so smart, why would he have hired such a lousy lawyer? It's almost as if he wanted...but that will have to wait a moment.

Next, liberals don't do that sort of thing, as the character mentioned above asserts, because it is virtually unknown to their worldview. But the only time Gale is shown lecturing, his subject is Lacan—one of the most influential of the post-modern philosophers. Now this is a gross simplification, but post-modernism denies the possibility of objective truth (because knowledge can only be gained and interpreted by individuals biased by their personal and cultural experience), and therefore post-modernism tends toward relativism. Therefore, the rape and murder of an innocent woman can be made equivalent to the "state-sanctioned murder" of the perpetrator by the government because, in the end, both "victims" are equally dead. If *The Life of David Gale* were meant to be an indictment of the



American legal system, Gale might have been shown lecturing John Stuart Mill or some such. Instead, the screenwriter chose to focus on the one that is as fashionably liberal as it is morally questionable.

Finally, the scandalous murder of one gentle, liberal, death penalty by another would be so damaging to the cause that it smacks of Vast Right Wing Conspiracy plotting. The governor speaks the to the abolitionist's weakest argument when he takes out a pen and asks Gale to name one blameless person whom the state killed. Now Gale himself is the innocent on death row.

Except...well, I don't know how handy you are with mysteries, but I'm no great shakes and I had this pup licked by the time I had the information above. For the purposes of drama, however, another character, played by Kate Winslet, is introduced and gets to be the exposition receptacle. As Bitsy (rhymes with "ditsy") Bloom, Winslet's eager beaver reporter accepts David Gale's exclusive offer to hear his life story in three installments in the days before his execution. She is hot, hot, hot off a cover story for which she went to jail rather than reveal the identities of her child pornographer sources, that's how much integrity she has. Her crusty old while male editor smells a rat. Maybe, just maybe, longtime provocateur Gale has an ulterior motive for specifically requesting a pretty and emotional young woman with a reputation for going to lengths to protect the disreputable tell his story.

He backs down when Bitsy and her sassy black woman colleague threaten him with a sex discrimination lawsuit, but sends along a young male intern to keep an eye on things. Oppression! Although he comes equipped with lots of fun facts about Republicans and serial killers, the intern smokes and is a emissary of The Man, and that's plenty of reason for Bitsy to get on her high horse and be thoroughly nasty to him. He passive-aggressively retaliates by failing to exchange their worthless rental car, bound to break down in a crisis.

She also bars him from the conversations with Gale that he was sent along to monitor. This frees Gale to get all weepy and vulnerable without another man around to roll his eyes, elbow Bitsy in the ribs and ask if she's getting a load of *this*. Movie fans have seen this routine before, in Spacey's Oscar winning turn as Verbal Kint in *The Usual Suspects*. There are those who were shocked, shocked by the end of that movie when they were given reason to suspect that the events shown were extemporane-

ously invented by Kint. (Fictional narrative in a movie? Well I never.) In *Gale*, as in *Suspects*, Spacey's character gives his fictional audiences the story they want to hear. In the latter, the gullible police dug the tale of criminal conspiracies and shadowy masterminds. In the former, an intolerant, self-righteous, lawsuit-threatening harpy is shown a nightmare world of PC doublespeak and utter lack of morality which is the natural extension of her own liberal tendencies.

For example, a slutty young woman, recently expelled from college, seduces Gale then cries rape. Although she drops the charges, and has a reputation for dishonesty and manipulation, (continued on page 7)



(continued from page 6) Gale's career is obliterated. The board votes to fire him, and his friend Constance confesses that though she voted in his favor it was a betrayal of her politics. She felt deep guilt over her decision, and she thought he was *innocent*. Gale's adulterous wife leaves him after the scandal, and though he has a stellar record as an academic as well as a clean rap sheet, he cannot find another position. Sexual politics on college campuses have been a hot button issue for years, with insensitive, knuckle-dragging conservatives coming down firmly on the side of due process because of these sorts of injustices, perpetuated by the kindly liberal academic establishment. But hinky campus politics are just a side note, and crack reporter Bitsy doesn't pursue that story.

Finally, Gale gets work as a clerk in a Radio Shack knock-off—doing a job fit people with only high school diploma is a special humiliation for him. He goes on benders in ethnic neighborhoods, and his alcoholism threatens his work with the anti-death penalty gang. Why a volunteer organization which sympathizes with murderers, whom they admit are guilty, would get so particular about a drinking man isn't convincingly explained. Sure, Gale's behavior is unseemly, but it is not felonious, and the chances for the rehabilitation of an alcoholic are far greater than those of violent criminals. Why the breakdown in tolerance?

Bitsy doesn't follow up on that one, either. Even Gale seems so fixated on selling a conservative conspiracy that he glosses over the many betrayals of his liberal friends. And as bad as they seem already, they only get worse. The creepy cowboy who has been following Bitsy around turns out to have been a confederate of Gale and Harraway's. That a rangy, soft spoken, Texan cowboy who helps ailing, single ladies with their yard work is so obviously a villain is a good indication of where this movie is coming from. Bitsy immediately suspects it is he who broke into her hotel room and left a videotape hanging by a string from the middle of the ceiling. The tape shows Constance's last, agonized moments as she suffocates and dies. She is naked, extensively bruised, has her hands cuffed behind her back, and a plastic bag over her head, taped securely around her neck. It's a nasty bit of film to which Bitsy showily emotes, and Parker finds excuses to show it again and again. Then to have Bitsy recreate it with a bag taped over her head and nearly suffocating (but not nude—this is Winslet in a rare, fully clothed performance). Then to show an extended version that implicates the cowboy in Harraway's death. Then to show another extended version that proves David Gale was also on the scene and schemed with them to assist Constance's suicide, then his own. That was the version Gale sent to Bitsy after his execution. Recorded on a videotape with the words "OFF THE RECORD" scrawled on the spine, it's an f-you from beyond the grave to her journalistic principles and human sensibilities.

That revelation is the movie's final plot twist. Constance, because she had leukemia, figured she didn't have a life worth living and so stripped, taped a bag over her head, and put handcuffs on, knowing she had swallowed the key and unless her friends intervened she would die horribly. Because he lost his nifty professor gig and had to work a low class job, lost his child to his cheating wife, Gale decided his life wasn't worth living either. They end up equally dead, but Constance's last moments in the presence of her right thinking liberal friends were of abasement

and suffering, and they were caught on tape for the future edification/amusement of strangers. Gale's, at the hands of the government, was too boring for Parker to depict (and executions are not filmed by agents of the state).

The pro-death penalty camp stakes its position in the sanctity of life. That valuation extends to the sick and unfortunate, and underpins their (generally) related opposition to abortion and euthanasia. Human life is too precious to be denied to any but those who have committed gross offences against it. You may or may not be persuaded by that argument, and there is cause to be troubled by an ultimate punishment levied in an imperfect world. But it cannot be refuted by the words and actions of vile characters in a movie that traffics in faux death porn. Gale and Harraway sentenced themselves to death over quality of life issues that even the most enthusiastic death penalty types would have found insufficient, and using abominable means. Harraway's grotesque self-murder, sanctioned and abetted by her friends, is bad enough, but Gale essentially made the unwitting people of Texas the accomplices in his destruction, using the state penal system as his weapon of choice. Then he sold his story to Bitsy's news organization for a million bucks, which strips the last vestiges of principle from his acts and reduces them to an especially complicated and expensive murder for hire (a capital crime, by the way).



The Life of David Gale was conceived by Charles Randolph, who according to the reputable Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) is doctor of philosophy and a former philosophy professor. Like the movie's intern, I have to wonder if an apparently smart person didn't have an ulterior motive in perpetrating such an ungainly offense. He worked within the university system: did he mean to decry the corrosive unfairness of politically correct behavior of his colleagues? Did he, like novelist Richard Condon and screenwriter George Axlerod of *The Manchurian Candidate*, take an incendiary concept as far and in as many directions as possible for artistic effect? Should the audience take *David Gale* as a parody of modern liberalism? Whatever his intentions, and those of the actors and director, I don't think they have any other choice.

The reason I spent so much time picking on *The Life of David Gale*, though it was poorly received both by critics and the public at large, is because it makes so many contemporary liberal assumptions then exposes the moral bankruptcy behind them as effectively as if it had been written by the combined staffs of *The National Review*, *The Weekly Standard*, and *The New Criterion*. There's fun to be had in that idea. For instance, "David Gale" is the name of the late actor who played the villain in the legendary splatter flick *Re-Animator* (which Kevin Spacey's character referred to in *American Beauty*). That actor also bore an uncanny resemblance to the Democrat presidential front-runner John Kerry (who recently made that infamous "regime change in Washington" crack). Coincidence? Yeah, probably. But the intensity and absurdity of left-leaning artists and art over the past few years has produced especially dismal work. I hope against hope that *The Life of David Gale* is the nadir, because if the utter failure of such an ambitious, expensive, and high-toned project doesn't prompt a correction, Hollywood is as self-destructive as its title character.

(continued from page one) who also made *Citizen Ruth* and *Election*—easily one of the best American movies from the past ten years. Those movies demonstrated the strength of presenting diverse characters in an evenhanded way, and a knack for withering detail. After writing the third *Jurassic Park* film, which I also enjoyed, Payne and Taylor made *About Schmidt*—their most acclaimed film to date, and one of the most acclaimed films of the last year, starring one of the most luminous movie entities of all time, Jack Nicholson.

It is also a relentless ad hominem rant, a dismal waste of talent, and my new yardstick for measuring snobbery. The only thing about it that rings true is its unbridled contempt, starting with Schmidt himself and extending to the audience. Schmidt is shown at his retirement dinner. Cut to a picture of cattle on the restaurant wall. Cut to Schmidt. Cut to an image of a slaughterhouse. Cut to Schmidt. Cut to the steak on his plate. Cut to the audience screaming YES! THANK YOU! WE GET IT! Schmidt is retiring from Woodman of the World Insurance Company. That he is in insurance is bad enough, but get a load of that name! "Woodman," woodman—he's a wooden man. And they're all over the world, the poor schlubs. Maybe you know one of them. Maybe you *are* one of them. Anyway, if you don't get it right away, don't worry—Payne shows the stolid WOODMAN office building a whole lot of times in hopes you'll catch up. Fittingly, Nicholson gives a wooden performance. It's as if he researched his part by watching the same tapes Gwenyth Paltrow studies when she plays at being common.

The movie isn't just vicious, it's sloppy. I get why Schmidt listens to Rush Limbaugh—that's the sort of thing that telegraphs "mean and stupid," to use Janine Garafalo's elegant formulation. But why do the filmmakers hold their noses and show Schmidt treating himself to a Blizzard at the Dairy Queen? Does that purchase have some sort of arcane, insurance-selling, Republican loser connotation of which I had been blissfully unaware? And what about trying to provoke laughs by merely showing a Tony Roma's later on? Does having enjoyed a meal there rule me permanently incapable of getting the joke?

So here's my new rule on snobbery: It's on, as long as it is a) specific, and b) have an eye for the human. Not the "humane," mind you. As a registered Republican, I am not required—or expected—to be nice to anybody. But a basic respect for the complexity of human beings is essential to art. If, as in *About Schmidt*, you begin by comparing your title character to cattle—where do you go? The answer in that movie is to make everybody else in it even worse, but it's a demoralizing endeavor.

Now, it's not in my nature to go around thinking everybody and everything is wonderful as is. A certain free wheeling dissatisfaction is necessary to progress and enlightenment. Great art isn't just about feeling good or superior any more than responsible criticism is about petty carping. So while I can't and won't give up snobbery, I pledge to be the best snob I can be. Heck, I've even caught quite a bit of that *Ocean's Eleven* remake on cable. It's awful. But whereas a year ago I had suspicions and prejudices, I now have a list of complaints. With popular culture, though, you never know where and when you might see the next wonderful thing. So I intend to keep my eyes open and seek after that which is virtuous, lovely, or of good report. Or has Brad Dourif in it. I'll watch that guy in *anything*.

Hope you enjoy volume 39.



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Brad Dourif for the Hell of It
Here in *X-Files* episode "Beyond the Sea"

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Why so long between *Cobras*? The biggest factor is my job, where I am required to do things for literally hours at a time. The things themselves are not interesting enough to dignify with column space, but jeez there are a lot of them. My recently departed boss's equating the work with shovling out a stable with all the horses still inside is apt. Which is why over time *The Nose* went from monthly, to bi-monthly, to quarterly, to do you happen to remember this *Cobra's Nose* thing? (Which reminds me that because he answered a distribution question re vol. 38, Steve Sampson won a free year's subscription of *The Cobra's Nose*. Read slowly, Steve--make it last.)

There was also the suicide attempt by my iMac, which is still too painful to talk about.

Suffice it to say that all I can afford to do these days is stay at home, pet Partick's "dog" Mojo, and type. Type, for instance, about visiting the Jensen-Tenney family reunion in picturesque Kanab. As is our custom, the Elegant Evelyn and I stayed at the Parry Hotel, home away from home for all the big stars. Last year, we were booked in the room between the ones where Yvonne deCarlo and Gabby Hayes stayed (the names are written above the doors). This year, we were set to reside in the James Arness suite, and were thrilled to death by the prospect. I mean, come on--James Arness was *The Thing*. But when we checked in, we got the Frank Sinatra suite instead! Frank Sinatra! Wooo! As you'd imagine, Sinatra was booked close to the lobby (a welcome fact after a hard day of jet skiing left me walking like a dork) and had a nice view of the pool. Thanks to my splendid Aunt Carolyn for making it possible.

And other stuff, but you'll have to wait for the next *Nose* to see what. Till then, then.