

EDITORIAL

Humour... or Stereotype Reinforcement?

We waited to see if there would be any response to the questionnaire put out in our frosh issue concerning the now infamous orientation tape. Now that it seems to have moved out of the volatile area of hot news, I suspect it is time to make a few comments about it. It must be stated quickly that these comments did not affect the approach taken towards the reporting on the issue and that these comments are being made at this time so as not to cause undue bias in the treatment of the issue as a news story.

Having said that, I should state that quite simply I may now be too old to understand what high school graduate regard as funny and appealing. If indeed, the material that I heard on the orientation tape is geared to the interest and intelligence of the graduating high school student, then I think professors should understand the difficulties they may be having conveying basic information to students without the song and dance of entertainment, teaching. Frankly, the tape can be very easily dismissed as a silly little thing. Granting it the status of offensive may be giving it more credit than it deserves. That is one way to look at it because it is a silly tape until we get to the tasteful and well presented section on alcohol awareness which is on the flip side. But the silliness shouldn't surprise anyone and the silliness is a valid reflection on the kind of humour that people deem funny on campus. The skit on the tape is a perfect example of what we are sometimes forced to sit through at our annual Red and Black shows. When at these shows, people groan because of some sexist, racist or tasteless slur the inevitable response is that it is all a joke and shouldn't be taken seriously because seriousness was not intended.

Well, I think that some of the content of the tape was sexist in its portrayal of women as daft and doting. The characterization of the woman was wonderfully executed. She was an irritating, dim-witted, and sexually minded woman whose primary concern was to get the attention of the host of the programme. I find that offensive and unfortunately, I can't see why it was done that way because not once did I feel torn between the sheer humor of the piece and my own values. The stuff was not funny at all! It was a clever idea, though. Using the concept of a game show as the vehicle for conveying in a unique way, information about frosh week is clever and at times the thing worked marvelously well, but more often than not, the piece was repetitive and void of any genuine sparkle of humour. Top it off with that sad portrayal of women and you have a controversial poor product on your hands.

Is it enough to argue that the thing was merely a joke and not to be taken seriously? For many years, racist, sexist and homophobic jokes have been deemed acceptable because they "were not to be taken seriously." Despite this, when one begins to examine the anatomy of humour it becomes obvious that jokes play a significant part in reinforcing stereotypes about people. Humour helps to soften the abrasive edge of certain emotions and feelings many of which are based on bigotry. But the dilemma is even more complex when it comes to media. Here the public is drawn into a situation in which they must contend with the assumed authority of the media. As a writer, I am often forced to struggle with the nature of the characters I create in the context of the work itself. I have to realize that if I have only one female character in my play and she ends up being a prostitute or a traditional house-wife figure, I could be seen as a writer who is reinforcing a stereotype. I can, in response, pull the character, change her, or go ahead with the character I have drawn with a clearer understanding of why I have done so. Usually, when I do the latter, it is after much thought and after I have convinced myself that it is worth the fuss that will inevitably ensue. Ultimately, I will be held accountable and for all my actions I have to be convinced that I have said what I want to say for certain specific reasons.

I am afraid I can not be convinced that such serious consideration went into the writing of the script for this frosh tape otherwise prudent heads would have realized that the "joke" was not worth the hassle at all separate and apart from the fact that the "joke" was making no worthwhile statement. Next years Frosh workers should see that the responsibility of media is tremendous and taxing and that very often we have to realize that once we become representatives of students, the decision making process becomes even more complex and involved.

Finally, I must say that credit should be given to those who volunteered to make this tape and to be involved in Frosh week planning. That is a commendable thing and it must not be obfuscated by the headaches that this tape brought on. Nevertheless, I can't help but support CHSR in pulling out of the tape credits especially in light of the fact the CHSR is becoming increasingly one of the leaders of feminist thought on campus. I suggest to next years volunteers that they go for genuine funny and not silly. I listened to the tape and it felt like one of those SCTV episodes that really bombed. Potential was there, but execution sucked. Mais, c'est la vie, oui?

by Kwame Dawes

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