

Profanity-laced 'comedy' is no longer a mere laughing matter

Last week, a column was brought to my attention that says plenty about the state of American society, particularly how it has become increasingly popular and acceptable to degrade the English language at almost every turn.

The column was the work of Berl Falbaum, a former Detroit News reporter who later became a speech-writer and media consultant for three major corporations. As the author of a dozen books, Falbaum is a gifted writer and storyteller who as a young boy lived in Shanghai as a refugee from Nazi Germany during World War II.

Now, as a periodic columnist, Falbaum has found time in retirement to offer commentary on all sorts of pertinent topics, including this column (reprinted with permission) on a subject that should rankle everyone who believes in the power and the beauty of the spoken and written word.

Best regards,

Jack Buchanan, President

By Berl Falbaum

Reader discretion advised: If you are not bothered or offended by the vulgarity in our entertainment culture, don't read this column.

This warning follows an alert broadcast recently at the start of the program honoring Jon Stewart, the political satirist, with the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor from the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

The program began by advising viewers to use discretion in deciding whether to watch the 90-minute program from stand-up comics honoring Stewart.

I was not expecting such a heads-up from this venue sponsored by a classy sophisticated arts center which devotes itself to promoting the greatest artists in the world. I was not watching a violent TV show, an X-rated movie nor was I listening to profanity-laced rap and did not understand why I was warned about the upcoming content.

But it didn't take long to comprehend why a "viewer discretion" was aired. The first of several comedians delivering tributes was political and social satirist David Chappelle.

Throughout his presentation, many of his one-liners were "beeped out" because of his use of profanities. He was followed by several other comics, most of whom used vulgar language as well.

Finally, Stewart took the stage at the end, and in telling us how honored and humbled he was by the prize, he delivered his quota of beeps, which brought a *&^%\$#@ from me. To be exact, he was "beeped out" 15 times in a 12-1/2-minute speech.

Again, I asked myself "why?"

The respective lines, colored with obscenities, would have been just as funny -- if not funnier -- without the profanity. This is not sophistication; it is juvenile.

The venue was not a nightclub where such profanities and vulgarities have become routine. This emanated from the Kennedy Center, which states that it is "the nation's beacon for the performing arts, engaging artists and audiences around the world to share, inspire, and celebrate the cultural heritage by which a great society is defined and remembered."

A great society is not defined by beeped language and crude beeped jokes



that cater to the most beeped basic instincts of audiences.

My wife and I had a similar reaction when we were introduced to a show, "The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel." It is not an exaggeration to state that almost every sentence includes at least one f-bomb.

One review of the show lists eight profane words "to look out for" (Using my discretion, I won't list them for you) and then advises, "There's more."

It's endless, exhausting, frustrating, bewildering and, ultimately, sad, given that it is a measure of the depths we have reached in our entertainment culture.

When I watch and listen to today's comics, I think back to some classic performers, i.e., Bob Hope, Jackie Gleason, Red Skelton, Jack Benny, Eddie Cantor, Red Buttons, Bob Newhart, Victor Borge and so many others. Collectively, I don't think you could find even one "damn" in all their monologues.

Profanity-laced 'comedy' is no longer a mere laughing matter

Let me assure the younger generation and critics of my stodginess: These comics were funny, very funny.

The irony of ironies: Mark Twain, for whom the prize is named, did pretty well without vulgarities.

I was surprised that the Kennedy Center, given its high artistic standards and values, did not ask -- demand -- that the comics clean up their acts.

I will agree that profanity has its place. It can add important nuances to a satirical monologue on politics or in the profiling of characters in fiction. But it has to be used in context -- and sparingly. Its haphazard use mitigates the shock value and adds nothing to the comedian's objective. The endless repetition becomes tiresome and onerous.

Yes, times change but decency and good taste do not. I am delighted that we now address issues which, in the past, we refused to discuss. I applaud our openness in analyzing subjects which in years gone-by were taboo to debate in public.

But we don't have to go into the sewers to do so. In a word, it is gratuitous, a cheap attempt by comics to show sophistication and convince audiences of their "courage" to attack sensitive social, political and sexual issues.

Indeed, it is just the opposite of courageous and insightful. It is an easy way to get around making a point cleverly instead of profanely. The former takes thoughtfulness and creativity; the latter represents bankruptcy of talent.

OK, call me a fuddy-duddy and a prude. I wear those badges proudly.