RACIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY IN STAND-UP COMEDY PERFORMANCE

Alina Bogdan, PhD Candidate, "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați

Abstract: For years now, many have turned to humour when trying to deal with sensitive subjects which some consider almost taboo. This reach-out towards comedy depends, most of the time, on self-deprecation and exaggerated ethnic stereotypes. The 20th century represented the peak in the process of globalization, when everyone tried to fit in somewhere, to be a part of something bigger. An important branch in this process was and still is ethnicity, a topic used without shame by many stand-up comedians. America was one of the first places in which comedians ventured to employ such themes, usually accompanied by different subjects concerning Latin, Jewish, African-American and Native American humour. A good case in point is Eddie Griffin, as his stand-up comedy shows include references to "white guys", "Latin brothers" Jewish and African-Americans, simply referred to as "niggers", a taboo word with offending connotations which African-Americans usually employ about themselves, especially in humourous contexts, but which is better left out of any conversation between people of other races. The audience for these comedy shows is made up of persons with different cultural backgrounds, their reaction being a positive one throughout the comedy act; thus, intercultural dialogue is encouraged by the nature of this humour used by stand-up comedians during their performances on stage. The aims of this paper are to account for the way in which racial and ethnic identity issues are tackled in the field of humour, especially in the case of stand-up comedy, to discuss the reception of the taboo jokes and to describe how the African-American comedian approaches this type of humour during his live performance.

Keywords: racism, ethnicity, humour, stand-up comedy, Eddie Griffin

This paper focuses on analysing different taboo topics used by comedy performers in front of an audience, outlining the manner in which the joke is perceived by the public and the impact it produces. It takes a step towards something that is still new to many, the study of analysing and translating humour, but not any type of humour, the stand-up comedy type. The research done in the field of comedy and humour is vastly explored if compared to the study of stand-up comedy.

At the same time, this undertaking represents a step forward into the study of humour. If throughout the years researches have fixed their attention on humour represented by jokes or puns, this time the focus is on a different category of humour, namely stand-up comedy. In order to make this type of act appealing to the public, the performer has to bear in mind that not only the nature of the subjects that he or she uses is important, but also has to pay attention to the manner in which the message is perceived by the audience.

When I say comedy, I refer to humour which, according to The Oxford English Dictionary, is described as "that quality of action, speech, or writing, which excites amusement; oddity, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality, fun" and that it represents "the faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it in speech, writing, or other composition; jocose imagination or treatment of a subject". Humour research has tended for a long time to focus only on analysing stand-up comedy from the perspective of the joke, analysing the structure of the joke as mere text. Lately, humour researchers have approached a new different side of humour, analysing stand-up comedy through the performer – audience connection, and the response each joke receives from the public.

Starting with the 20th century, everything has started to evolve even more, and the process of globalization reached a higher point at that time. It was the time when everyone tried to fit in somewhere, to be a part of something bigger. Some used humour to evolve, seeing the fun part in everything that was wrong and bad, thus topics regarding ethnicity

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were not excluded. Now, it is used even more by many to point out the hatred and racial issues that are still taking place even if America is considered the land of the free, where everyone is equal and share the same opportunities. And again, America was one of the first places in which comedians ventured to employ such themes, usually accompanied by different subjects concerning Latin, Jewish, African-American and Native American humour.

When saying humour, I first of all refer to stand-up comedy, and one of the representatives of this type of comedy is Eddie Griffin. Born in Kansas City, Missouri, actor and comedian, Eddie Griffin is known for his role as Eddie Sherman on the *Malcolm & Eddie* show and for his performance in the movie *Undercover Brother* (2002). He started his career as a stand-up comedy performer when he was a young boy, but the show that launched him was the 1997 *Voodoo Child*.

Not many know what stand-up comedy is really about, according to dictionary.com, stand-up comedy is "a comic monologue performed by one person standing on a stage; also called stand-up", a general definition similar to other dictionaries which sadly is not very elaborate and which leaves aside many important details.

After analysing several shows of different stand-up performers, I have reached to the conclusion that in order to define stand-up comedy certain things have to be taken into consideration, that is why I tried to put together a definition for stand-up comedy: Stand-up comedy is the comic manner in which an artist (he or she) performs on stage in front of an audience. The artist is known as a stand-up comic or comedian. The performer's monologue consists of short jokes or funny stories, most of them having general themes such as politics, religion, everyday life etc. In helping with the performance some artists use props, music, costumes, etc. or simply resume to gestures or face expressions. Stand-up comedy can be performed almost everywhere, from pubs, clubs, bars to theatres and arenas.

Eddie Griffin's stand-up comedy shows include references to "white guys", "Latin brothers" Jews and African-Americans, simply referred to as "niggers", a taboo word with offending connotations which African-Americans usually employ about themselves, especially in humorous contexts, but which is better left out of any conversation between persons of other races.

During his show, he recalls a white friend who told him some jokes, even if it was someone close to him, he made nigger jokes that were not accepted very well, he recalls laughing to the first one and beating him after he told the second one.

"What do you call a nigger in a tree with a suit and a briefcase?
Branch manager"
"What's the difference between a nigger and a snow tire?
Snow tire don't sing when you put chains on it. "
(Griffin, E. *Freedom of speech,* 16:30)

His joke was received with laughter even by the white audience, because, even if he recalled beating someone for telling racist jokes, he used humour to avoid upsetting anyone.

As it can be seen in all of his televised acts, his audience for these comedy shows is made up of people with different cultural backgrounds, their reaction being a positive one throughout the comedy act; thus, intercultural dialogue is encouraged by the nature of this humour used by stand-up comedians during their performances on stage.

Stand-up comedy is not just any type of art, one day you are here the next you are gone, meaning if you are not capable of creating a discourse that can keep the audience laughing the show can end sooner than expected. The connection between performer and audience is seen at the beginning, the opening sequence being very important in anticipating the success of the show, it is what gives the show fluidity.

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In his acts, he reaches a point when he thanks white people for bringing them to America, a country that has so much to offer, the reference is made here to their presumed origin as slaves in Africa. He also points out to a line that white people say which causes moral conflict, usually when a black guy does something wrong someone tells him "Why don't you go back to Africa?". To mock this question he uses irony and answers with a different question "Why don't you go back to bloody England?", imitating an Englishman's accent with sarcasm. As it can be seen throughout his comedy shows that sarcasm and irony are very much used to make a statement.

Eddie Griffin started as an actor and slowly managed to enter the stand-up comedy business, this activity is in fact a job, a job which requires "a lot more than wit" it is not a nice career, everything depends on perseverance, wit and especially on the crowd. There is no special school for this job.

Being an actor helps him in producing humour and laughter, the way a comedian acts on stage is about 50% part of the success, the rest is made of the jokes used, the connection with the audience, the way in which the audience reacts to certain jokes. Different audiences means different techniques on stage, but with Eddie Griffin this rule does not apply 100%. He does not refrain from using sensitive topics and very clearly speaks his mind, he is not afraid of using a vulgar language. It is, nonetheless, curious is that the audience does not seem disturbed by language or gestures.

Here we can talk about the concept of "self-mockery", he uses himself as an example for the jokes he approaches, starting jokes with "remember when we was young/ growing up?", "do you remember that?", he connects with the audience, making them part of the topic he will approach next.

As a comedy performer, he ridicules himself by telling stories from when he was young, jokes which present him as a dumb person and also he is not scared of talking about the black days, about slavery and how they were suppressed, even posing as one and describing how he would have managed those times. He draws a parallel from that time up to the present; the way a black person was seen and treated and the way African-Americans are now, pointing out the fact that even the president of the United States of America is black.

Many artists go on stage trying to impress the audience with something other than jokes, but that is not the case here. Most of the artists like to use props, most frequently they use a chair, moving it around pretending it is a person or an animal. He took advantage of the fact that his gestures were very expressive and used them to make the audience respond better to his comedy number.

During the performances, Eddie Griffin acts as if he were talking directly to the public, this is one of the key elements in receiving a positive reaction from the audience, and another key element is using punch lines. These elements have the ability to restore the attention of the audience if a topic previously used did not have that much success.

Similar to the punch line is the method called calling the room, it is the way in which the performer connects with the audience when he feels that he is losing their attention, then he turns to topics with a higher degree of impact, such as slavery, Jesus Christ or even other performers from the field of stand-up comedy as Richard Pryor, an icon in the history of humour and stand-up comedy, or Jerry Seinfeld who is a white stand-up comedy performer and a well-known actor.

One of the taboo words that I will discuss further on is "nigger". When can someone say "nigger"? Why is this word considered offensive when it is said by persons that are not African-Americans? The meaning of the word "nigger" between African-Americans has a different meaning, as Eddie Griffin explains it, "nigger" is a term of endearment that they use among themselves, advising white people not to use it.

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Racial-ethnic jokes do not go both ways, white people have to be careful when using terms such as "nigger" or "negro" or when they make any reference to people of colour, whereas African-Americans do not seem to take into consideration this restriction when it comes to jokes about white people. This is also the case with Griffin's stand-up comedy shows: he ridicules white people and points out that they should not say the word "nigger" unless they want to be beaten. The funny part in this situation is that the audience is formed not only of African-Americans, but it also includes white people, Chinese, Latino etc., and they do not seem to mind this type of jokes, in fact they laugh and respond in a positive manner to them.

A different topic regarding racial-ethnic restraints is linked to the religion, more specifically when speaking about Muslims and their faith. He tackled this subject, first of all saying that Muslims are the most devoted faith, that they would even strap a bomb to their chest for Mohamed and that this will never happen with a Christian. Second, he linked the topic to industry and to Wall Street, that you will never see them use products like Nike because they manufacture their own shoes, Muslim women do not use Maybelline products because they are veiled up and that you cannot see their faces.

Eddie Griffin does not stop at this point, he also mocks the beauty of Muslim women, saying that he understands why the men marry several times, because women wear the burka and that the only body part of the women that can be seen before a wedding are the eyes. He laughs and quickly finds an explanation for this custom, thinking that they are playing the law of averages therefore they are gambling with their future because they do not know if they get lucky enough to marry a beautiful woman or not.

Racial and ethnic issues are still a problem, even now, when everything has evolved, society has changed, information is free to the public and they have more opportunities than in the past. It is true that the events from the past influenced the present as we know today and that many things have changed, but not all of them changed into good. People learned how to be racist in a polite manner, they do not say *nigger* but use somewhat polite rejections, Eddie Griffin points out some of them:

"We're not hiring, translation nigger
I'm sorry, your bank loan has been denied, nigger
Pull over, nigger"
(Griffin, E. *You Can Tell 'Em I Said It*, 5:40).

As the artist said it, each line should have been followed by the word "nigger", because even if they do not say it, he knows what they are thinking and that even if there is a black president, things would not change very soon.

The topics tackled above are sensitive for many and even today are considered taboo. Why? People today are afraid of evolution; they are scared of accepting something unknown to them, that is why some of them are guided by fear and bad judgement. Stand-up comedy comes as an exception: artists talk about these subjects without being afraid of the effect it will have on the audience, knowing that humour is an escape route.

Telling the truth, as painful as it can be, in a humorous manner is the way in which they try to help society, by pointing out the obvious in order to be fixed. The good part in all of this is that throughout every show Eddie Griffin managed to establish a connection with the audience, which was more than pleased by his performance, all of his jokes were received with laughter and applauses. The disadvantage in this area of comedy is that the show is live, an hour of live comedy, a period of time when everything can change in a moment, and from total success to reach total failure without even noticing.

The audience is what keeps the show alive and the jokes to advance naturally, as a single person you cannot fully control everyone in the public, there are some challenging moments when you have to improvise so that the show does not end sooner than expected.

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Throughout the show the audience responded positive to the jokes, providing the artist with a proper environment for joke telling. The artist resumed to hand gestures or face mimics to improve the quality of the jokes, also he managed to put together a real-time conversation, through the use of gestures, turning his head to the left or right as if he was facing someone and using different accents.

In regards to what I said above, I can conclude this analysis by saying that unfortunately the topics that were mentioned above are still considered taboo for many and that the art of stand-up comedy is helping the society in taking a step forward to get over these issues. The audience is indeed a key factor in the wellbeing of these shows, because no matter their nationality and gender they all are American citizens. It can be said that humour and laughter eventually helps people to go above prejudice, wrong conceptions and things that are easily misinterpreted.

As a final remark, I can state that humour in the form of stand-up comedy is more than meets the eye, through this type of humour artists such as Eddie Griffin go on stage, grab the microphone and topic after topic manage to create something memorable. Performing live on stage is not an easy task, and Eddie Griffin proves that you need experience and talent to be able to practise this job. After those mentioned above, I can say that there is no type of subject that can be avoided during such a show, if he managed to produce laughter when talking about racism and ethnicity there is no stopping him from speaking about whatever topic he desires, bearing in mind the thought that he can do it.

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