

Lady Dynamite and other Netflix comedies

Ed Hightower
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There is plenty of room for satire in American life.

“On the nightly television news, after all, one is confronted with politicians and government officials, hirelings of finance and industry, who preach ‘moral values’ with a straight face. Cabinet ministers and generals, responsible for violence and terror around the world, praise peace and global harmony. None of this meets with a challenge in the media. The present situation is unreal, and almost unbearable.”

So wrote WSWs arts editor David Walsh four years ago.

In the cultural or entertainment sphere too, one could rattle off many examples of hypocrisy, the worship of wealth and privilege and a general inclination toward escapism, conventionality and intellectual fraud. A brief flipping through the channels on television indeed confirms the painful fact that “the present situation is unreal, and almost unbearable.”

Such an environment creates a contradictory atmosphere for artists. On the one hand, the pressure to conform, to appeal to the lowest common denominator, can be irresistible at times, as can a certain tendency to create only for the most narrow, insular layers, writing off any possibility of mass appeal. At the same time, and particularly in regard to the art of comedy, the present situation presents tremendous opportunities. The venal corporate executive, the corrupt layers around the legal system, the brazen insincerity of religious charlatans, the banality and brutality in Hollywood—all of these virtually beg for ridicule.

This reviewer welcomed the news last year that Netflix had signed on for a five-episode sketch comedy program called *W/ Bob and David*, a reprise of the critically acclaimed 1990s series *Mr. Show with Bob and David* (with Bob Odenkirk and David Cross). Maybe some of the irreverent, anti-corporate satire that marked the old HBO program would emerge to meet the challenges of this decade?

A more detailed ~~show~~ ^{review} of *David* is beyond the scope of this writing, but this reviewer places that program among the healthier developments in popular culture in the 1990s. A reader so inclined should watch it, if only in clips available on YouTube. The sketches lampooning the right-wing attack on federal arts funding, the phoniness of “gangster rap” music—mimicked with an East Coast versus West Coast ventriloquism rivalry—and even the pseudo-biographical film *Amadeus* will make lasting impressions.

Sadly, there is almost nothing humorous or healthy in *W/ Bob and David*. The program feels slapped together, lacking the nuanced dialogue and genuine creativity of its predecessor. Some sketches are recycled from the original program, without improvement.

This alone would be disappointing to a *Mr. Show* fan, but *W/ Bob and David* also bears the signs of a movement to the right on the part of the comedians. One episode begins with a faux prohibition on images of the Prophet Mohammed, with imams controlling Hollywood. This display—more in line with propaganda à la Geert Wilders—is painful to watch.

In the same vein, one sketch follows a would-be police misconduct investigator. The big joke is that the police are extremely polite, leaving him dumbfounded. Aside from the “Blue Lives Matter” fanatics, who comprises the audience for this insensitive claptrap?

A retrograde drift also plagues comedian Aziz Ansari’s Netflix series *Master of None*, where the main character, Dev, is a 30-year-old actor making his way in New York City.

Ansari earned fame on NBC’s *Parks and Recreation*, playing an insecure young government employee who aspires to hip hop mogul glamour and excess. This reviewer always found his stand-up comedy more impressive. However, even in his best routines, Ansari’s criticisms of certain hedonistic lifestyles never

goes very deep.

Master of None exists almost entirely on the surface, depicting the unremarkable, often clichéd ins and outs of middle class life. Episodes concern quests for the ultimate burrito in New York, breakups, and relationships with friends and parents.

If the show has anything that resembles a saving grace, it is the boldness with which Ansari portrays the self-centered and privileged character of identity politics. This plays out in an episode where a producer makes a double entendre to Dev about curry—an Indian dish and a verb. Dev later feels he is offered a role by the producer as something of an apology. He explains to rapper Busta Rhymes: “I don’t think you should *play* the race card; *charge it* to the race card.”

“Everybody’s depressed ... it’s called being an adult”

In *Lady Dynamite*, Netflix has created something more meaningful. Comedian Maria Bamford stars as herself, struggling to maintain a career in Hollywood without destroying her fragile mental health.

The show treads a fine line between comedy and tragedy. In the face of the protagonist’s panic attacks, depressive bouts and fits of bipolar mania, one can laugh at the circumstances and still feel deeply for her even when she is screaming into a sponge. The illness is funny, but it is frightening. The craftsmanship here exceeds expectations.

Maria Bamford successfully mocks the superficiality and excesses of upper-middle class life. In one scene, she humors her best friend who is eager to show off her new luxury condominium. Maria tries to be enthusiastic for her friend’s new purchase, even though she has to use a virtual reality headset to tour the place, which is physically located inside a hot-shot realtor’s office. The illusion makes Maria ill. What a healthy metaphor!

Other notable scenes feature Maria’s cutthroat, foul-mouthed agent and her many mental health professionals (she has a psychologist, a life coach, and even a “loaf” coach to keep from being overwhelmed by all her treatments). The various professional helpers, medicines, self-help groups, etc., are not much aid in a

cold, calculating world. The slogan on one of Maria’s tee shirts, “Wake up, be amazing, repeat,” has a welcome irony to it.

The most satisfying and daring scene finds Maria concerned about her ability to interact with African American fellow cast members. She attends a 12-step program for this called PURE, or People United for Racial Equality. Instead of introducing themselves as alcoholics or gamblers, PURE members simply say “I’m so and so, and I’m white.”

Other members nod when Maria confesses to having few minority friends, but desiring to be “more cognizant of racism and white privilege.” When Maria says she does not understand why she is racist simply for being white, the group leader explains, “We believe that interfering or even trying to relate is an implicit insult to people whose struggles we couldn’t possibly understand.”

PURE uses the slogan, “If you’re white, keep it light,” to remind whites not to burden minority people with more suffering by asking them questions about race. Instead, talk about the weather, sports and so forth.

Lady Dynamite has limitations. Bamford’s protest outlook pervades some scenes. Thus, a dull instrument is raised against big corporations, consumerism and so on. One wonders what powerful comedy would result from turning her craft against the union bureaucracy or the left fraternity around the Democratic Party. We can hope that if she does not, others will.



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