

HBO's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*: Season Eleven in light of the events of 2022

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The HBO comedy series *Curb Your Enthusiasm* aired its eleventh season last October, and a twelfth season is currently filming. Since first airing as an hour-long special in 1999, *Curb* has garnered 51 Emmy nominations, including 10 for best comedy.

In *Curb*, Larry David stars as himself, the now wealthy co-creator of the hit NBC sitcom *Seinfeld*. He fumbles awkwardly through Hollywood life, engaged in a great deal of “nothing,” much like the characters in *Seinfeld*. Each 30-minute episode follows a general story outline with much improvised dialogue. This format plays to the versatility of the cast, which includes comedians J.B. Smoove (Leon Black), Susie Essman, Richard Lewis and, in Season Eleven, Tracey Ullman.

As was the case with previous seasons of *Curb*, the eleventh contained some genuinely comic and satirical elements. The excess, vanity, shallowness and hypocrisy of the Hollywood elite were at the center of its funnier moments.

There are reasons to comment on the season, even after the somewhat lengthy delay. David's program has gained many devoted followers on the basis of its skeptical, jaundiced view of the upper middle class, and its generally anti-establishment attitude.

The past year, however, has been filled with social and geopolitical upheaval. The landscape is not the same. This has put many individuals and entire social groupings to the test. The delay provides an opportunity to probe *Curb* more thoroughly in light of tumultuous and historic changes.

Not the least of these is the rapidly escalating NATO war in Ukraine, the largest land war in Europe since World War Two. In response to US and NATO provocations, particularly since their organization of a fascist-supported coup in 2014, the Putin regime embarked on a reactionary invasion in February 2022. Washington is attempting, through a conflict with the most horrific consequences for the Ukrainian and Russian populations, to dismember Russia and gain control over the Eurasian land mass. This is part of the preparations for a confrontation with and onslaught against China.

At the time of this writing, US President Joe Biden and Congress have funneled at least \$50 billion to the fascist-laden Ukrainian military. The NATO-supplied Ukrainian forces have pushed Russian forces out of the area of Kharkiv and elsewhere. The Russian government has threatened to use nuclear weapons to reverse the defeat. Washington and London assure that they are

“undeterred” by Russia's nuclear threats, and proudly announce their own willingness to engage in a nuclear third world war.

These developments threaten human extinction. The political and social forces immediately responsible for this state of affairs—the Biden administration and the Democratic Party hierarchy that unanimously supports this war—deserve the collective contempt of every working person on the planet. They are liars, hypocrites and criminals of the first order.

A sensitive and serious artist (including a comedian) attuned to the historical and social context to any significant degree could give the most colorful, full-throated expression to the antiwar instincts or sentiments of billions of people. The unimaginable recklessness of imperialism, its hypocrisy and criminality, offer no shortage of satirical subject matter. Biden, his cabinet, figures like Nancy Pelosi and Charles Schumer, all of these deserve savaging.

Curb fails here, to put it mildly.

The season finale in particular strikes an ugly and shameful note. Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman—a manufactured Democratic Party hero and US intelligence apparatchik, formerly of the National Security Council—reprises his role of transcribing a phone conversation in July 2019 during which former President Donald Trump pressured Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelensky to investigate Hunter Biden for political purposes.

Curb features Vindman transcribing a call Larry David makes to a city council member, bribing her to do “a big, beautiful repeal” of the fence ordinance which is “such a disgrace that really ought to be looked into.” In asking Vindman to keep a lid on it, he describes it in Trump-talk as “a perfect call.”

There is not the slightest criticism of Vindman, the basis for Trump's first impeachment or of US machinations in Ukraine. Rather, the characters in *Curb* wine and dine Vindman and laud his courage *ad nauseam*, and he even “gets the girl” in the final sequence.

This kind of “comedy” speaks to the outlook of the complacent, affluent layers in and around the Democratic Party in Hollywood. Beyond that, it will please the swathes of military and intelligence figures who have flocked to the Democrats. For these CIA Democrats, as we have termed them, Trump's disruption of military supplies to a client regime on Russia's doorstep—*not* separating immigrant children from parents, *not* illegally using funds for a border wall—was the ultimate sin.

As the WSWS wrote about Vindman's testimony and its

implications at the time, “In threatening the supply of US military aid to Ukraine ... Trump is seen to be undermining one of the most critical operations of American imperialism over the past two decades: the installation of a US puppet regime in Ukraine, the second-largest component of the former Soviet Union. Ukraine is widely regarded as a front-line state in any future war between NATO and Russia.”

In addition to the escalation in Ukraine, another aspect of the world situation that has worsened since last October is the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, the Biden administration and the entire American ruling class has embraced a “forever COVID” policy, declaring the pandemic to be “endemic,” and thereby has condemned countless people to death and many more to disability.

Season eleven of *Curb* engages this world-historic phenomenon on the narrowest, flimsiest possible terms.

In the first episode, when Larry David’s colleague, comic Albert Brooks, hosts his own self-indulgent “live” funeral, the “mourners” find a hoard of hand sanitizer and personal protective equipment in his cupboard. The episode revolves around the social ostracism of the COVID hoarder. The mourners—assembled to abet the megalomania of a fake funeral—upbraid the “deceased” when it seems his actions will meet with public disapproval. There is something honest here, perhaps accidentally, about this social layer and its acute sensitivity to changes in the winds of public opinion. But they do not wear masks or have the good sense not to gather for such an idiotic spreader event.

As in earlier seasons of *Curb*, the show fares far better in depicting the intricate and silly web of career and social obligations, dinner parties, funerals, destination weddings, renewals of wedding vows, pitch meetings, charity concerts—in general, the world of Hollywood “haves.” Here Larry David lands some punches.

The scenes dealing with film and television production—especially with actors, agents and network executives—hit hardest.

Season Eleven opens with a burglar drowning in Larry’s pool, which—in violation of a Santa Monica city ordinance—has no perimeter fence. The burglar’s brother blackmails Larry. He must cast the blackmailer’s daughter as the female lead in the fictional Netflix series *Young Larry* so the authorities won’t get involved in the pool issue.

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The daughter cannot act, threatening to derail the series, and Larry courts stuffy (and gassy) city council member Irma Kostroski (Tracey Ullman) to get the fence law repealed and outflank his blackmailer.

In one of the stronger episodes, *Man Fights Tiny Woman*, Larry decides to allow a petite, female chauffeur to lug around his baggage. He was torn initially, not wanting to appear either unchivalrous or too traditional in his views of gender roles. The arch-vulgarian, Seth Rogen, as himself, fumes at Larry for his appearance of insensitivity and its potential to hurt his precious career.

“I’m working with you. I’m associated with you. People are saying our names in the same sentences. Try not to do things that make you very much seem like an asshole to anyone who is

looking at you,” implores the self-styled ‘everyman’ Rogen.

In the ensuing exchange, David insists that “there are certain things that I would prefer a man doing, over a woman” and “there are also things that I’d prefer to have a woman do over a man,” with Rogen desperately trying to ward off such dangerous, “outdated” notions: “Larry, just stop naming professions and which sexes should do them and which ones shouldn’t. Don’t do that. All sexes can do all jobs.”

The situation crescendos when the same female chauffeur insists on carrying Larry’s luggage, and his efforts to forcibly retake them hit YouTube and go viral under the title *Man Fights Tiny Woman*. It’s too much for Rogen, who reneges on his guest appearance.

In another failed effort to secure acting talent, Larry and manager Jeff Greene (Jeff Garlin) reluctantly attend a rock music performance by Dylan O’Brien and the Entrails. The performance is a festival of the most childish self-obsession, with the titular Dylan O’Brien (from MTV’s *Teen Wolf*) running across the stage between instruments, each one played worse than the last. Dylan boasts about his restaurant where you can bring your dog; he’s very “spiritual” and open-minded and, naturally, cannot accept the slightest criticism. *Curb* paints a vivid and hilarious image here of the delusional “hot, new” actor and pseudo-Renaissance man.

But Larry David’s idiosyncratic anti-heroism begins to grate in Season Eleven. Refusing to pray for the health of an ailing acquaintance is one thing (Larry knows praying won’t help because...after all, he lost his hair). But it’s hard to watch the casual removal of a Holocaust victim’s shoes, even if Larry really appreciates their old-world craftsmanship. It’s simply distasteful and disrespectful, in the bad sense.

It is a serious challenge for any artist to distance him or herself from his or her own social milieu, to stand apart from the latter sufficiently so as to be able to subject it to serious, critical treatment. However, detaching oneself from the preferences and prejudices of one’s upbringing and social setting is obligatory if the artist is to see, feel and portray life in great depth.

At his best, Larry David *can* and *has* done this. His ridicule of identity politics and #MeToo in Season Ten of *Curb* testifies to an ability and willingness to cut against the grain. It would have been a higher note to end the series on.

One wonders what Season Twelve will offer, given the further shift to the right by the Democratic Party and the social forces for whom they speak.



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