

The Business Of Comedy Is No Laughing Matter

Every six or seven years, it seems, a new brand of genuinely innovative comedy arises. Monty Python. *Saturday Night Live*. George Bush. *Kids In The Hall*. We're so damn happy when someone funny comes along — remember junior high? How much easier were those formative years thanks to Eddie Murphy's ice cream man routine?

During the dry spells, though, we're left to fend for ourselves among tired stand-up comedians ("What's the deal with airline food?"), lazy sketch comedy ("It's Pat! Is it a he? Is it a she? Whoo-hoo!") and increasingly irrelevant satire (*National Lampoon Magazine* — "Humor for Privileged White Men"). These things make us *unhappy*. Crime rates skyrocket. Middle East tension rises. You get cavities.

It's a good thing we 20somethings are such renowned self-starters, or we would be forever at the mercy of these fickle comic winds. Whether in stand-up, sketch comedy, improv, satire or television sitcoms, the newest and bestest comedy these days is coming from the young 'uns. These productions may not be as slick as *SNL* or as big as Roseanne, but they've got a powerful ace-in-the-hole: They're funny.

Thinking Feller's Onion

One crew of adolescent malcontents is in the process of mounting a full frontal assault on comedy convention — Onion Inc. What began as a self-described "floundering, text-heavy rag" [satirical weekly newspaper to you] is now a syndicated creative think tank with ambitions in radio, television and film. They're sort of like the Illuminati, only with bathroom humor.

Founded in 1988 at the U. of Wisconsin, *The Onion* is the mothership publication around which the group's various interests revolve. Distributed on half a dozen campuses, *The Onion* draws its writers and contributors from a pool of full-time students, semi-students and ex-students in the Madison/Milwaukee area. Typical headlines include "Sad Platypus Learns to Like Himself" and "You Were Adopted." [See slacker priests exposé below.]

"We've had six or seven years of solid funny stuff," says publisher Pete Haise. "We have a core of people writing and editing in Madison. We're inundated with ideas all the time."

Haise says this saturation level has kept *The Onion* fresh, so to speak, while other satirical publications have wilted. (Incidentally, *The Onion* does not, as a rule, condone vegetable metaphors in its articles.)

"The *Lampoon* is very weak now," he says. "What was once a thriving bed of creativity is not even close to what it used to be. The incredible energy that comedy requires is just not there."

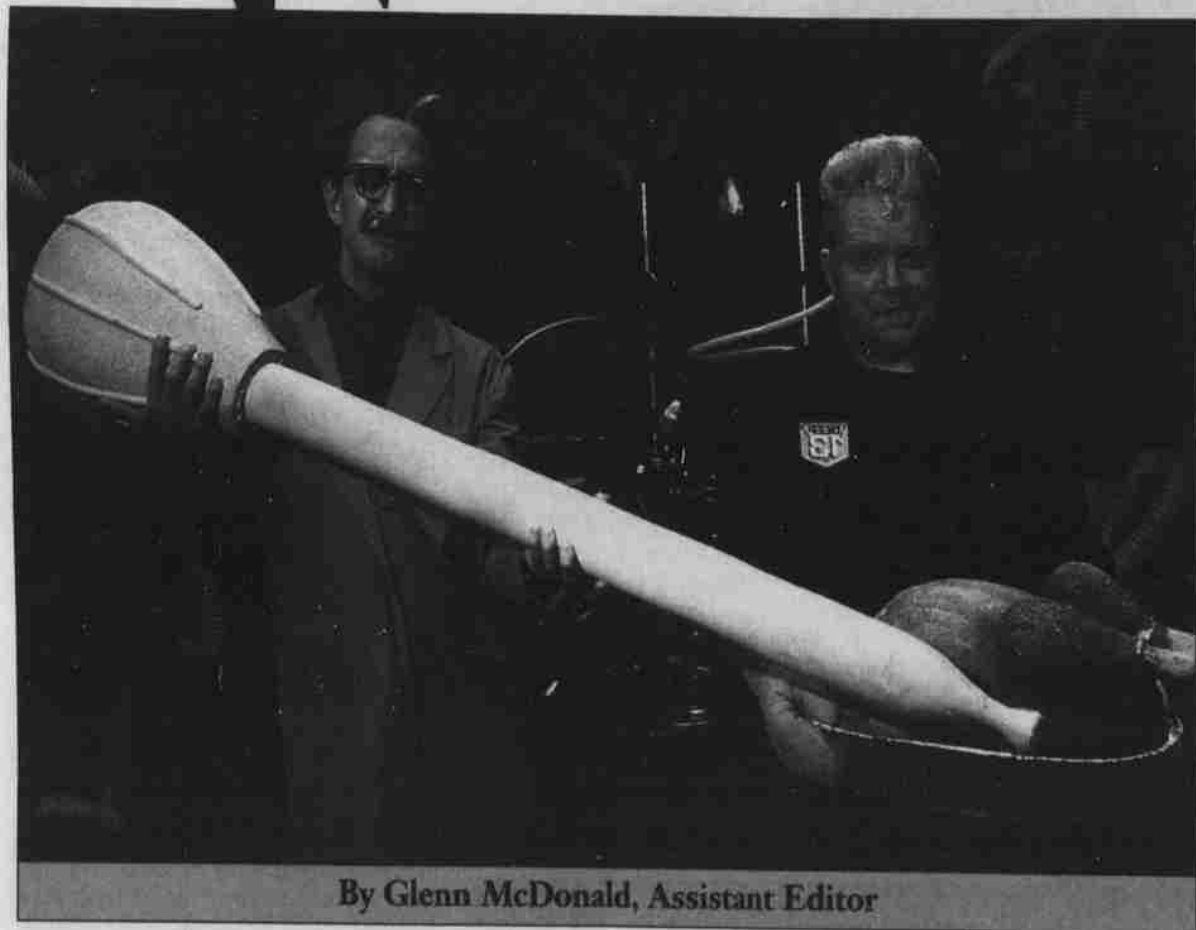
Onion Inc.'s latest attack is the TV sketch offensive *The Comedy Castaways*. Drawing equally from absurdist maestros Monty Python and more contemporary sketch formatting, the *Castaways* rely on inspired premises and consistently funny dialogue. It may be the best-written sketch show around.

"I think what sets us apart is we've intentionally formed a tightly knit group of funny performers," says Scott Dickers, *Castaways* executive producer. "A lot of these other shows are created by 50-year-olds, written by 40-year-olds and performed by 35-year-olds."

Dickers says the group is currently in post-production on the first two episodes and is pitching the pilot to NBC, Fox and HBO. Dickers denies rumors that Onion Inc. secretly wants to rule the world.

White Men Can't Tell Jokes

Another tired convention that's quickly crumbling these days is the traditional male dominance of comedy. Betsy Boyd, a senior at Brown U., has been working with her sketch comedy troupe *Hard To Kill* for two years. Last summer, she interned at NBC's *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*.



By Glenn McDonald, Assistant Editor