

TRIVIAL PURSUITS: The Seinfeld Show

As a kid, I lived all week for two weekend joys: the interminable Saturday matinee fronted by our local Bijou to give parents down time, and Jack Benny's Sunday night radio program. Even back then I wondered how Benny managed to reduce listeners to helpless laughter. At the movies, or in front of our giant audio console one always knew what a melodrama, detective tale or comedy was about. But Benny didn't seem to be "about" anything. The action -- such as it was -- always took place before or after the show, never during the show. Week after week, the same characters arrived at Jack's apartment or some other familiar locale to noodle around, occasionally rehearse, but mainly take pot shots at Jack's chronic pretensions -- phonying up his age, his toupee, his inveterate cheapness, so forth.

Only years later did I come to appreciate the art informing the show's apparent insubstantiality, the scripwriters' exceptional skills in mining the humor in quotidian circumstances, Benny's uncanny sense of timing, his hilarious deployment of silence and doubletake. A curious comfort derived from close acquaintance with Jack's sidekicks. People like Mary Livingston, Rochester, Phil Harris came to be regarded as family in my family. We took the same delight in their follies and foibles as we did with those of favorite (and not so favorite) relatives, relishing the subtle variations upon customary send-ups and put-downs.

A deal of ink has been put to paper trying to account for the

astonishing popularity of the Seinfeld show, now in its eighth season with at least one more to come. Why would the trivial pursuits of four extravagantly self-absorbed Manhattan singles strike such a responsive chord across America? According to a recent pop culture investigation, Seinfeld speaks to the urban alienation which once informed Jewish immigrant experience, and which -- with the closing of the frontier -- now supposedly pervades the culture at large.

Not that there's anything wrong with that (to quote Jerry's reflexive postscript to his frenetic denials of homosexuality occasioned by a misguided newspaper story). However, the show's appeal seems far more overdetermined; becomes much more comprehensible when one perceives how Seinfeld replicates and updates Benny's strategies, as well as other earlier comedic styles.

I haven't been able to ascertain whether Benny has been a conscious influence upon Seinfeld and his gifted compatriots. Seinfeld says he wanted to make a living making people laugh as far back as late childhood. Through devouring TV shows and movies in his formative years, then performing during a 12 year stand-up career, he was exposed to a wide gamut of humorous traditions. Of these, Jack Benny's radio and later TV work seem seminal to his sensibility, whether by intention or absorption. Beyond Benny, one also discerns the imprint of George Carlin, Lennie Bruce, the Marx Brothers, Abbott and Costello (Jerry has notably spoken of the famous slapstick duo's influence), Jewish Borscht Belt vaudeville,

Thirties and Forties screwball comedies, French bedroom farce of the fin de siecle, and -- even further back -- the Italian commedia del'arte.

For the few uncognoscenti out there, the quartet of thirtysomething characters in Seinfeld's commedia consist of:

Jerry Seinfeld (Jerry Seinfeld): club and occasional TV comic enjoying a modest success. Boyishly handsome, obsessively neat; a frequent consumer of whole grain cereal, basketball games, bad movies, and alarmingly pneumatic young women who keep ditching him on the flimsiest of pretexts, when he's not disposing of them on equally slim grounds.

Elaine Benes (Julia Louis-Dreyfus): presently employed as a reader in a publishing house. Diminutive beauty with a sassy in-your-face disposition, huge dark eyes, cheek bones to die for, a mop of fashionably disarrayed brunette locks, an a la page wardrobe belying her limited means. She and Jerry were lovers until they discovered friendship suited them better (she faked her orgasms; he counted his). Her numerous infatuations regularly culminate in the disillusioned pits.

George Costanza (Jason Alexander): lived with parents forever while unemployed until lucking into a minor job with the NY Yankees organization which he performs with minimum competence and maximum irritation to all. Jerry's best friend since highschool and frequent foil for his barbs. ("You need major help, a team of psychiatrists; you need to travel to Vienna, have reports, case studies!") Short, balding, hypochondriacal, craven, unremittingly

humiliated, depressively grandiose. Lacking any vestige of personal dignity, George is endlessly preoccupied with injuries to same (vide infra). In aid of inflating his tattered ego to potential dates or bosses, spins extravagant tall tales which always are catastrophically exposed.

Cosmo Kramer (Michael Richard): ex-compulsive gambler, means of present income obscure. Marfan lanky and gangly; sports a Brillo haircut, clothes lifted from a Fifties do-wop ensemble, and a more than passing resemblance to Mr. Punch. A manically uncensored talker, flailer, moocher, rulebreaker, pratfaller, and chief source of Seinfeld's physical humor. Lives on Jerry's floor, frequently out of Jerry's refrigerator (as do the others). Blissfully unaware of his total weirdness, basks in a two-year old's aura of omnipotent self-confidence. Harebrained get-rich-quick schemes have included a chain of make-it-yourself pizza restaurants, and a male brassiere ("The Mansiere").

Peripheral personalities include relatives (chiefly Jerry's retired parents, roasting in their Florida condo -- they've yet to master the air-conditioner, and George's extravagantly dysfunctional folks, who are clearly waiting for him to die so they can divorce); employers, friends and enemies (notably Newman, a sardonic obese postman Jerry views as the quintessence of evil for reasons never explained). However, as we say in litcrit, the central narrative trajectory involves this unlikely gang of four in ever shifting combinations and permutations. Like Benny's cast, their external circumstances may change, but their quirks and

defenses are fixed as the motion of the stars. Like Benny and the Bourbon kings, they remember everything and learn nothing.

From a Freudian perspective, George is Superego Guy. He's at the cookie-jar stage of super-ego development, with a few swiss-cheese lacunae thrown in. While he can tremble with incipient guilt at causing a feather's fall, he will cheat or prevaricate whenever he believes he won't get caught (e.g., visiting a Eurotrash boutique daily to hide a fancy suit which is going off next week at half price from other potential buyers). Kramer's disinhibited shenanigans smack of untrammelled instinct, pure Id energy, whether distributing a bag of defective condoms, or seducing Elaine to kidnap a dog across the courtyard whose barking is savaging her sleep. Jerry and Elaine interpret as ego representatives, better tuned in to what passes for reality on the show, steering a precarious path between the wretched excesses of George's hapless guilt and Kramer's lunatic impulsivity.

All four share a sharper Nineties version of Jack Benny's unfocused modus vivendi and gentle amour propre. Their post-adolescent slacker lifestyle is devoid of ambition (saving Jerry), or responsibility to spouse, children, whatever. Their central interests are great food (mostly Chinese take-out), great clothes, great sex, and movies great or bad. They occasionally agonize over commitment, but laziness and finickiness quickly put paid to courtship, let alone long weekends (Jerry opts out when he discovers a lover eats her peas one at a time). Their narcissism could gag a herd of goats (Jerry's is especially egregious).

Exasperating as the protagonists can be, they're also touchingly supportive of each other. Much of the clique's click devolves around their sheer love of shooting the breeze for its own sake, a la Benny. Their gab is wickedly racy and irreverent, punctuated by get-outta-here doubletakes (watch Jerry when Donna Chang, a Jewish girl he thought was Chinese over the phone and changed her name from Changstein, tells him a delay in delivering their Chinese food is "redicurous"). Discourse sizzles with ironic ripostes that would do Tracy and Hepburn proud, with one-liners whose economy and compression Freud would have deemed the soul of wit (e.g., deriding the trendiness of both the sauce and the town, George nominates Seattle as the "pesto of cities").

Much of the talk spins around outrageously taboo or politically incorrect subjects: nose-picking, ascertaining the bride at lesbian weddings, sex with paraplegics, ill behaved, immunologically challenged bubble-boys, masturbation (arguably the most famous episode involves a contest to determine who could stay manually continent the longest. Everyone lost.).

As in the classic Saul Steinberg cartoon, there's no "there" out there beyond Manhattan. The action mostly transpires in Jerry's preternaturally immaculate apartment or, since no one ever cooks, in a luncheonette down the street (about ten blocks from my digs). Episodes typically begin with a brief clip from one of Jerry's stand-up routines -- all one usually sees of his performance, obscuring the piquant fact that he's always already performing. The subsequent plot is an extended riff on the clip's

subject -- finding parking spaces, the vagaries of answering machines, death, et cetera.

Consonant with the opening monologue's minimalist content and completely in the Benny vein, nothing much ever seems to be happening on Seinfeld. The Benny-ish laid back self-referentiality is raised to a xenith of uncanny absurdity during the episodes in which Jerry and George pitch a TV series to NBC about themselves (as did Seinfeld and his co-producer Larry David), featuring actors playing themselves, doing -- "nothing!". (Kramer even sneaks in to audition for his own part, but has to leave when he is gripped by a peristaltic rush.).

The hall-of-mirrors construction here typifies the immense and self-reflexive artfulness underpinning Seinfeld's seeming triviality, endless navel-gazing, and chasing after one's own tail. Under the cloak of a harmless sitcom, the show has been conducting a subversive interrogation into what Virginia Woolf termed the cotton-wool of everyday life. Beyond puncturing pomposity, Jerry's wit defamiliarizes the familiar, exposes an inherent strangeness lurking at the core of the quotidian -- e.g., on the check presented in a cover with a tassle, Jerry muses: "What is this, the story of the bill? Have I graduated from this restaurant?"

Ordinary frustrations are consistently raised to lunatic hyperbole for Jerry's people, underscoring the flimsiness of their gargantuan narcissism against the obduracy of events -- as in yet another Chinese food episode where an inscrutable maitre'd keeps

assuring the ravenous quartet -- "only ten more minutes" -- while the entire world is being admitted to pig out.

Assessing minute injuries to self esteem commands a lion's share of Seinfeld, e.g., when Jerry gets "re-gifted" (in Seinlanguage, that's when a former host gives you the bottle of wine someone else bought him). Inordinate time and effort is also expended in voyeuristic peek-a-boo, trying to figure out "what's really going on" beneath one supremely unimportant surface or another, e.g. Jerry's obsession with discovering whether a girl friend's breasts are real or a surgeon's triumph. True to form, his maladroit sherlocking infuriates her into quitting the relationship; on the way out, she taunts him that he'll never get to handle the goods.

Whether pursuing the redress of petty grievances or the truth of some profoundly insignificant matter, or whether enticed by Kramer into taking a quiet pee in an apparently empty mall parking lot: depend upon it -- instant karma will get you in Seinfeld's world, just as in Hitchcock's Calvinist universe. A tightly wound up chain of cause and effect reminiscent of Psycho or Attic tragedy inevitably precipitates excruciating disgrace. Thinking on it, it appears that anything transgressing the status quo, ill or well intentioned, can set the clock of nemesis ticking towards a fatal count-down -- e.g., Jerry decides to have his hair cut secretly by his barber's nephew, and precipitates a vendetta out of Cavalliera Rusticana (complete with an uproarious satire of Puccini on the sound track).

In sum, the pleasures of Seinfeld are numerous and complex. One can identify with and/or feel superior to the madcap four, as they fall and rise again like cartoon characters from their largely self-induced misfortunes. One can savor their wit, deride their fatuous yuppy ambitions, enjoy the twists and turns of scripts which serve up a closure satisfaction as gratifying as the cleverest detective story.

But beyond mere entertainment, one also discovers a latent sadness that's encountered in much great comedy, and here resides in the compromised compassion and narrow narcissism so native to the age, which afflict Jerry and his crew. Trapped in Buddhist hell on a consumerist merry-go-round, they are driven by unslakeable desire, fated to feed and never be sated, to search and never find. Seinfeld has said: "To live is to keep moving". The motion on Seinfeld is gyroscopic. Its characters spin in place simply to keep upright in an existence whose relevance to the universe is about the same as a gas station in Altoona, Pennsylvania.

Not that there's anything wrong with that.