

**KIDS
IN
THE
HALL
22
MINUTES**

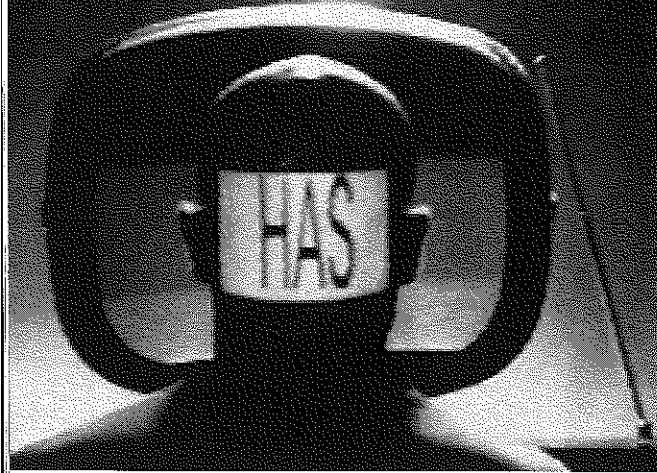


by **Julia
Creet**

How Does Lesbian Parody Fare in Newfoundland?

**“This Hour Has 22 Minutes”
Takes Diesel Dykes to the
Streets of St. John’s... and the rest of Canada**

On Monday nights in the '94-'95 television season, sandwiched between the buffoonery of “Kids in the Hall” and the patter of prime-time news was a show so politically sensitive that it came with a warning. “This Hour Has 22 Minutes” is a satirical examination of daily events. Some viewers may not share this sense of humour.” The disclaimer was tongue-in-cheek, although, as the show’s writers and producers clearly hoped, necessary. The popularity of “This Hour Has 22 Minutes” and its writers/actors — Mary Walsh, Cathy Jones, Rick Mercer, and Greg Thomey — constitutes, ironically, something of a success and a failure. By way of explanation, let me tell you about my favourite two minutes of “22 Minutes,” why I think it’s funny, and my search for viewers who might think it is not.



Walsh appears twice as Genoa Hallerstein, "This Hour Has 22 Minutes" special-affairs correspondent from New Jersey. Hot under the harness, so to speak, Hallerstein (close cousin of U.C. San Diego queer theorist Judith Halberstam?) pulls a smaller-than-life cardboard Paglia from a garbage bin as she storms into an alley. "Camille Paglia. What a heist-meister. Don't talk to me about that lipstick lezzie. She talks the talk but she don't walk the walk. Her whole shtick, she lifted it from me. And now in the sleaziest lesbosploitation move ever, she's an open lesbian? Oh please. Listen Camille, I

am a second-generation lesbian. I am the product of a diesel-dyke and a turkey-baster." Unlikely combination. But hey, every body has a story, and Genoa looks like what you might expect of this confused progeny: Joe boxers ringing her blobby white belly, spiky bad hair, army issue slashed sleeveless shirt open to a pointy white bra, woman's symbol tattoos. Unappealing, but ours.

This is an alley where lesbian lineage counts and where Paglia is "nothing but the darling daughter of a couple of heterobucolic breeders." She gets the boot from the butch-guard. "Oh you're so butch Camille with your 'I've kicked and hit more men than any other leading feminist in the world,'" jeers Genoa, feigning femininity. "Ohhh — take a number darling! And stand way behind me. Because you are looking at the original Macho Slut." We'll forgive her slight exaggeration here — surely Pat Califia claims that distinction — for Genoa is at least passionate about authenticity. "[W]here does she get off saying that she was on the cutting edge of butch-feminism because she was wearing Amelia Earhart Hallowe'en costumes in the fifties? (Incidentally, for those who have an interest in Amelia Earhart, see Mary Russo on aerialism in her book *The Female Grotesque*.) Oh, check out my baby pictures, Paglia! Read 'em and weep. I've been wearing a thigh harness since birth." (Grabs thigh with thrusting gesture.) With that lesson in butch realness, Genoa moves on to intellectual property. "She heisted *Vamps and Tramps* from my book. I wrote *Clamps and Lamps* three years ago. I talked about stratification and desexualizing. I called it infirmity feminism. I did the guys in dog collars and chains years ago." In a final burst of exasperation, Hallerstein tops Camille once and for all: "*I'm obnoxious. I have an obnoxious personality. I'm an egomaniac.* And I even talk faster than she does." Sorry Genoa, not quite. But Hallerstein really is obnoxious and Mary Walsh is not a lesbian.

As the credits roll for the "Best of '94" show, Walsh on Paglia is followed by Cathy Jones: "Joe Crow, here." White woman plays indigenous man. Not something you see everyday on television. All of a sudden I'm worried. It's a parody about someone else. Racist possibly. These folks have no fear. Joe Crow squatting on a rock says, "Listen to your mother," and talks about bears shitting in the woods and the Quebec hydro-electric dam which might grow back "like unwanted facial hair after dinner." One wonders — until he dances away from us chanting "R-E-S-P-E-C-T" à la Aretha Franklin (but in muted tones): "Find out what it means to me." At that moment I want nothing more than to find out what it means to him and them (or do I?).

I took a tape of these skits to a seminar on postmodern lesbian culture. Were they offended by the characters, I asked. No, but what would our parents think? What about that hypothetical viewer in Saskatchewan? Would they find Genoa not only offensive — for different reasons — but, missing the inside jokes, a believable stereotype? And Joe Crow made just about everyone nervous. What would the Native communities think?

The more I thought about the question of the imaginary viewer (easier in some ways to think about than oneself), the more it intrigued me. What *about* that viewer in Saskatchewan? Or Nova Scotia or Newfoundland? How would one find out?

I called the CBC. I'm sorry we can't release that information, someone said; call the producer. So I called Michael Donovan, the executive producer of "This Hour Has 22 Minutes," a thoughtful man who can't quite figure it out. "I used to have ideas

"Oh you're so butch Camille with your 'I've kicked and hit more men than any other leading feminist in the world,'" jeers Genoa, feigning femininity. "Ohhh — take a number darling! And stand way behind me. Because you are looking at the original Macho Slut."

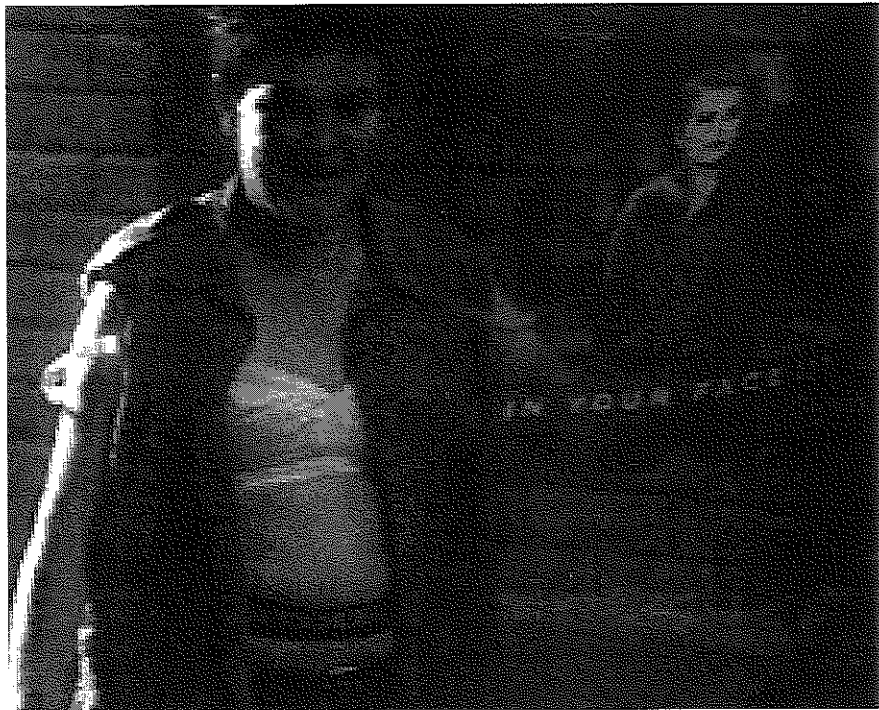


and now I have none," he said, as a general statement, but also in response to my puzzlement (and his) about the lack of recorded response to "This Hour." We try, he said, to test the limits of tolerance, to push for reaction like the show's predecessor, "CODCO," which elicited a letter-writing campaign from east to west protecting religious sensibilities — sensibilities which finally caused Andy Jones to leave the show. But according to Donovan, letters in response to "This Hour" have been uniformly positive, asking for more of such-and-such or reminiscing about how much this or that character was almost exactly like someone near and dear. I imagine myself writing: "Dear Mr. Donovan: I just want to tell you how much I enjoy your show, particularly the character of Genoa Hallerstein. She reminds me of so many women I know (myself included) with her bad-hair bravado, her sexual braggadocio, her feminist one-up-womanship, and her theoretical chic. But, please, don't give her too much air time, she really is obnoxious, like all of the righteously hateful. After all, who'd go to hear Paglia more than once? Yours truly . . ."

"Dear Mr. Donovan: I just want to tell you how much I enjoy your show, particularly the character of Genoa Hallerstein. She reminds me of so many women I know (myself included) with her bad-hair bravado, her sexual braggadocio, her feminist one-up-womanship, and her theoretical chic."

In a very pre-postmodern way I wanted to know where Genoa Hallerstein came from. Perhaps to reassure myself about Joe Crow too. So I called Mary Walsh. "Why target Camille Paglia?" I asked. "Because she's mean," said Mary. I watch Paglia reruns on WTN (a channel which provides endless fodder for "This Hour"). Paglia puts down everyone within reach. As a feminist, she trashes feminism; as a lesbian, she despises lesbians. She is both pre- and post-feminist, claiming canonical intellectualism, Hellenic aesthetics, and drag queens as heroines. She is the vanguard, putting the boot to both Dick and Jane.

"Paglia can't possibly believe in what she says" Walsh points out with circular certainty, "because what she says has no basis in truth." Far from being in the vanguard, Paglia is following the trends she says she's setting and profiting by it. "She is up to her glamour-dyke neck in this sick patriarchal culture of acquisition and consumption and the cult of the buck at no matter what cost to whom," says (in one breath) Walsh through Hallerstein. In contrast, Hallerstein is absolutely sincere in her insistence that she (an imaginary character) is Paglia's precursor on all counts. The hollowness of the word "pastiche" comes to mind: a parody without an original, because the original is already a copy. This is an idea which has been used both as a critique of the emptiness (and humourlessness) of postmodernism by Fredric Jameson and alternatively as a testament to its political potential by Judith Butler. (See Jameson's essay, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic* and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*.) Walsh, however, is resistant to the idea that there is anything postmodern about this parody (though Paglia qualifies all by herself). No, there is something too humanistic about Hallerstein. "I know what's in my heart" says Walsh, meaning that she knows what's in Hallerstein's heart also. Walsh has no lesbian agenda: "I'm not doing a homo-promo here," says Hallerstein. Nonetheless, as in most parody, she has some affection for the thing she plays, legitimizing and subverting it at the same time. Genoa is an outsider revelling in her outsider-ness, with no apology, no blame, fiercely proud of who she is, willing to take on all imposters. Walsh's sincere parody stands in stark contrast to Paglia's self-aggrandizing sniping. Genoa as a television character is somehow far more real than Paglia as a stand-up intellectual; she excites me, whereas Paglia leaves me stone cold.



**“If you’re out,
you’re in!”**

**“If you’re out,
you’re in!”**

According to Mary Walsh (who should know), Genoa Hallerstein was the only character ever to draw a spontaneous standing ovation from the studio audience in Halifax where “This Hour Has 22 Minutes” is taped. Even on the streets of St. John’s, where Newfoundland conservatism runs deep, there are surprising reactions. “Mary,” said an old man who approached her, “Love that diesel-dyke.” I’m not sure that Genoa could ever be reproduced as effectively as the first time she entered the alley. (Her second appearance on “This Hour” lacked focus, though her rally cry — **“If you’re out, you’re in!”** — is a keeper.) But she does deserve dissemination, to as wide an audience as possible. I don’t mind being her cheering section, her adoring audience; I might even lick her boot if she asked me to. For all my years of lesbian outness, activism, and intellectuality, I wonder if Genoa hasn’t done more to further a lesbian agenda than most political polemics. To understand Genoa, a viewer must have inside information, must be able to read the codes, know the significance of the words “macho” and “slut” in combination. “[remark] 2: Parody is only perceptible to those who know the model.” (Bernard Dupuis, *Gradus, A-Z*.) A viewer who recognizes the walk and the talk must acknowledge a presence that has staked a territorial ground of “visibility.” Genoa Hallerstein makes me proud of that knowledge, makes me laugh at myself, makes me feel loved, even if I would give her wide berth in a bar.

The edge of this company of humourists seems to cut with rather than against the grain of national humour. Its members are Newfoundlanders telling Newfie jokes about themselves and the rest of us. So what does this say about us, about the viewer in Saskatchewan, about the Native Canadian? Both Donovan and Walsh say round-about reports are that people from Native communities approve wholeheartedly of Joe Crow, who did, after all, provoke a discussion in our class about the significance of bear shit, facial hair, the Great Whale hydro-electric dam, and the dyke with (bad) attitude. “Who watches your show?” I asked Donovan. I was told it’s proportional across the country: rural/urban, older, mostly with post-secondary education. I should have asked for numbers. Maybe I should call the CBC again. The humour seems to appeal to a wide swath of viewers but in unknown numbers.

So much for empiricism, back to the question of subjective response. What strikes me the most about these parodies is, and here I begin to sound not only like a sycophant but a raving nationalist as well, how they would play in the States. I’ve spent lots of time in American TV land — haven’t we all. Thus, I can understand the apocryphal bridge-playing friend of Donovan’s mother (a recent immigrant from the south) who said that she found Canada puzzling, especially the news; then she proceeded to describe “This Hour Has 22 Minutes.” Nice story, Donovan. We try to be an antidote to news, he says, an antidote to depression; we believe in the value of silliness. I then asked Walsh, “Doesn’t the popularity of your show [the series concept was created by Walsh] also constitute a failure? Isn’t political satire supposed to piss people off?” Yes, she admitted, she is a bit uncomfortable with its popularity. But she

pointed to the temper of the times: helpless and hopeless, with nobody doing much politics or parody. “This Hour” at least provides a half hour — make that 22 minutes — of some kind of protest.

A “CODCO” Coda

As a final note, since I’m on the topic of “CODCO” alumni, I would like publicly to applaud some of the best queer acts I’ve ever seen: Tommy Sexton singing “My Heroes Have Always Been Drag Queens” (to the tune of “My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys”), with his cherubic face, his fancy shirt, and, as the camera pulled back, his high heels and gartered stockings. You are missed, m’lad. And Andy Jones’s belly in the eight-year-old girl’s interpretive dance segment of his stage play “Still Alive.” And Greg Malone as Barbara Frum. (Who is also missed, but can’t somebody tell her son to shut the fuck up? Greg, I think it’s incumbent upon you to don your wig one more time and do it.)

**22
MINUTES**