



## TRAGEDY PLUS TIMING

COMEDY IN FILM CAN HELP US COPE WITH THE MORE DIFFICULT PARTS OF LIFE

By Kenya McCullum

Murder. Suicide. Rape. Incest. War. These are all serious societal issues that evoke a lot of deep feelings. If they're on the 6 o'clock news, these topics are horrifying. However, if the same subjects are on the big screen, they can be dealt with darkly and with humor. What is it about us that facilitates these conflicting responses?

The answer is as diverse and complex as we are.

### LAUGHING ALL THE WAY TO THE GALLOWS

Arizona-based psychologist Karen E. Peterson, Ph.D., who specializes in humor therapy, believes comedy is a powerful coping mechanism and a source of healing. As Peterson wrote in *AIDS Prevention and Treatment: Hope, Humor, and Healing*, using humor to treat AIDS patients can help boost their immune system – as well as prevent burnout in their caregivers by releasing tension.

This is not a new idea: In the 1960s, writer Norman Cousins used laughter as part of his recovery from a life-threatening illness. In *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient: Reflections on Healing and Regeneration*, Cousins chronicled how, through holistic treatment, which included a daily dose of laughter from Marx Brothers movies, he was able to overcome his sickness.

Peterson explains the connection between laughter and healing this way: "When you're stressed out, you're not relaxing... You have higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol in the body, and higher levels of stress hormones further debilitate the immune system and it takes its toll. And of course, the immune system's fighting hard enough; it doesn't need any more stress. It's like the immune system's trying to play a song and there's this clashing and banging of drums in the background."

### FROM REAL TRAGEDY TO REEL COMEDY

Oftentimes truth is stranger than fiction, so it's not surprising that those in the movie industry tend to rip stories from the headlines when they're looking for plotlines.

For example, the 1995 film *To Die For* is loosely based on Pamela Smart, a New Hampshire high school employee who – long before Mary Kay Letourneau began the current media obsession with teacher/student relationships – seduced a 13-year-old student and conspired with him to kill her husband. (Smart was convicted in 1991 of several charges, including first-degree murder, for masterminding the killing.)

*The Positively True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader-Murdering Mom*, an HBO movie that debuted in 1993, is a comedic account of Wanda Holloway, who pled no contest to solicitation to commit capital murder for attempting to contract the killing of a neighbor in order to ensure her daughter received a place on a cheerleading squad.

Those who lived in New Hampshire and Texas when these crimes were committed probably didn't find these stories terribly amusing as they unfolded on the local news, so why were they acceptable fodder for comedic cinema?

From a psychological perspective, the use of humor "allows you to laugh in the face of tears," says Peterson. "And I think it's true that from tragedy comedy can grow." Why? One explanation Peterson offers for this is the safe distance black comedy creates for an audience – a distance that is emotionally miles away from the real blood and real tears associated with real-life events.

"People see the movie as something that's unreal. It's fiction. The news is fact," notes Peterson. "It's not funny to know that these horrific things happen to real people on real days of the week. Whereas in a movie, it's fiction, and it's almost like people need to laugh at it sometimes because it's a way of not accepting that it's real."



Groucho, Harpo & Chico surround Florence Rice, *At the Circus* (1939); the croquet clique in Michael Lehmann's 1989 dark hit, *Heathers*.

One way black comedy is able to create this safe distance is through the use of a play signal – an essential element of comedy, such as the tone of a character's voice or a facial expression, that alerts the audience of an upcoming joke. A play signal can be seen by an audience as permission to laugh at even the darkest of circumstances; without one, we know what we're watching was meant to be taken more seriously.

"On the 6 o'clock news we don't have that play signal. You don't have that tone of voice or that look in the eye or anything that indicates this is humorous. It's just the facts," Peterson points out. "Like that old 'Dragnet' show: just the facts, ma'am, just the facts. And it's not funny; it's horrific."

### SCHADENFREUDE: YOUR TRAGEDY IS MY COMEDY

Our proclivity for laughing at tragic events in comedic movies has more to do with human nature than how these events are presented. It can be boiled down to one word: *Schadenfreude*, a German psychological term that translates as receiving pleasure from someone else's pain. Although this is a dark explanation for the appeal of dark comedic situations, our response to them can almost be seen as a form of poetic justice.

"One feels *Schadenfreude* when one's enemy is disgraced," explains Jeffrey Berman, an English professor at the State University of New York at Albany. "One may not feel particularly proud of having those feelings, but it seems to be human to have those feelings, at least in some situations."

Disgrace of one's enemies can take many fiendish forms. For example, in the 1989 black comedy *Heathers*, Heather Duke – the leader of a powerful high-school clique – is killed by her friends. In order to cover it up, Veronica Sawyer and Jason "J.D." Dean doctor a suicide note to create the illusion that Duke suffered from hidden angst that led her to take her own life. Later in the film, the adolescent Bonnie and Clyde also kill two football-playing bullies and cover it up with the same suicidal *modus operandus*.

Although suicide and murder are normally nothing to find pleasure in, *Heathers* puts those murdered in the dual role of victim and victimizer, which makes other characters in the film openly mourn for them while inwardly delighting in the fact they no longer have to deal with them.

"A very dark explanation is that we vicariously identify with people who do bad things to other people," says Berman, who teaches literature courses from a psychoanalytic perspective. To anyone who was bullied in high school, the actions of Veronica and J.D. in *Heathers* may serve as the revenge they wish they could have exacted themselves, but couldn't. In related news at time of print, Daniel Waters, who wrote the script for *Heathers* while working at a video store, is directing *Sex and Death 101*, starring his *Heathers* anti-heroine, Winona Ryder, as a femme fatale who targets men guilty of sex crimes.

"Comedy is tragedy plus timing," as the saying goes. And in the context of comedy, the tragedy seems a lot less horrific and easier for us to process. As long as it's on reel, it feels... unreal. -MPM



"LIFE DOES NOT CEASE TO BE FUNNY WHEN PEOPLE DIE ANY MORE THAN IT CEASES TO BE SERIOUS WHEN PEOPLE LAUGH." —GEORGE BERNARD SHAW