

BROCK'S BANTER: The Healing Power of Laughter

By Brock Weir

?REMOVE HER!?

It wasn't something I expected to hear coming from behind me last Wednesday night.

After all, if experience was any indication, when I stepped through their doors, I was in for a relatively placid ride, one that was more for relaxation than anything else.

Yet, here we were.

I was sitting there as what can be best described as the equator between two poles, a situation I have occasionally found myself in, but rarely with this much intensity.

It was as though a long-festering zit had burst, lanced with an unexpectedly pointed object.

In this case, however, that pointed object was observational humour.

Let's backtrack a moment.

Last Wednesday, I hit the road for the Lucille Ball Comedy Festival.

The annual festival has taken various forms over the years ? from a celebration of new comedy, to a week-long salute to the woman herself and all those who contributed to her legend, and back again ? and, with few exceptions, I haven't missed a festival in over 18 years. As such, the yearly trek to Jamestown, NY, Ball's birthplace, about three-and-a-half hours from here has become a family tradition.

As strange as it might sound, I don't remember a time when ?Lucy? was not in my life.

I don't remember a watershed moment when I discovered this singularly hilarious woman as a child. In fact, my earliest memory of television is at the age of three when my brother shouted to me excitedly from another part of the house that he had done what was previously unthinkable ? he found ?Lucy? on TV in glorious technicolour.

We didn't really grasp the fact that Lucille Ball had multiple TV series at that time, and this was not ?I Love Lucy? but rather the follow-up series ?The Lucy Show,? which reunited Ball with her long-time sidekick Vivian Vance as new characters with new families and, once the first of six seasons had passed, with all the colours of the rainbow.

Obviously, looking back, if finding ?Lucy? in colour was something of a revelation, it stands to reason that the lady, the legend was firmly lodged in my own consciousness and a regular part of my life, well before the advanced age of three.

I was in my teens before I could convince my family to take me to Jamestown which had, at that point, just opened a new museum in tribute to Ball and her first husband, Desi Arnaz. Since its opening, it became something of a pilgrimage for fans of both incomparable entertainers. It was easy to see why when I first walked through their doors on a snowy March Break. It was a dreamscape. So many things I had only read about in books ? objects from their lives, letters, art ? were right before me, not to mention bona fide props from the TV universe I had known so well.

It was basically Game Over for me when I found out they had an annual festival in her honour, and there was no stopping my campaign to experience it firsthand the following May.

The special guest that year was legendary entertainer Carol Channing, who took the stage to talk about her own iconic career and her recollections of working with Lucille Ball. 18 years later, 97-year-old Ms. Channing is going strong ? and so is the festival.

Focus has shifted away in recent years from saluting those who lived and worked with the redhead ? a necessity as, over the passage of time, these people are sadly becoming fewer and fewer between ? back to its original focus of fostering new comedians, comedy forms, and providing a platform for established entertainers.

This year, the small community of Jamestown marked a milestone: the opening of the new National Comedy Centre, dedicated in Ball's honour. Described as the ?Cooperstown of Comedy?, the opening week festivities were presided over by Ball's daughter, actress Lucie Arnaz, the legendary Lily Tomlin, SNL alums Dan Aykroyd and Laraine Newman, Amy Schumer, Lewis Black, along with the families of late comedians George Carlin, Lenny Bruce, Rose Marie, Harold Ramis, and many more.

Also on hand, were comparatively new comedians on the scene like Tom Cotter and W. Kamau Bell.

Over the years, Jamestown has always emphasized the ?healing? power of comedy.

This topic has been explored in many ways over the years, from comedians and comedic actors (and there is a difference) sharing how comedy had helped them out of particularly dark times in their lives, as well as medical professionals who have focused on the benefits of laughter ? but armed with the stats to back it up.

This year was no exception, but there was something different in the air on Wednesday night in a showcase of comedy featuring

Messrs. Black, Bell, Cotter, along with Kerri Louise and Judy Gold.

If the medical professionals are right, there was a lot of healing in the room as belly laughs rang out through the rafters of the Reg Lenna Centre for the Arts, a magnificent venue built in 1923 as a movie palace and Vaudeville house, as each comedian tackled topics as mundane as getting the kids off to school to sacred cows like the incumbent President of the United States.

Things, however, took a turn when Mr. Bell took the stage.

A political observation comedian who has doubled down this role through hosting CNN's United Shades of America, he lived up to his reputation by commenting on the state of American society.

The third comedian in that evening's lineup, his ground was already well-worn, with the previous two comedians needling the exact same targets.

But something was different when he came on the stage.

The atmosphere certainly changed. But why? Was it the fact he happened to be the only African American on the bill that was a game-changer for some people in the audience? Did his lived experience as an African American make his observations too real or too raw for some of the comparatively coddled melanin-challenged audience members to accept?

Whatever it was ? and I suspect those were the reasons ? when he touched upon the controversial topics of football player Colin Kaepernick and ?taking a knee? during the national anthem, a woman in the second or third row began to heckle, and wouldn't let go. The disturbance was such that Mr. Bell abandoned his set, sat down on the lip of the stage, legs dangling down in the audience, to have a direct conversation with this woman. Of course, given her heckling, reasoning was lost on this woman, and she persisted ? thus prompting that call of ?REMOVE HER? from somewhere in the vicinity of my left ear.

At an event celebrating comedy, including George Carlin's ?seven dirty words? and Lenny Bruce's fight for the First Amendment, it seems people have somehow lost their collective sense of humour.

If the healing powers of laughter hold water, it certainly has its work cut out for it in this divided world.

Having experienced everything else this past weekend, however, I think it is more than up for the challenge.