

Requiescat In Pace, Henny Youngman: Comedy Meritocracy Rises At Friars

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Rob Reiner sat in a big beige armchair on the stage of the New York Hilton's Grand Ballroom on Oct. 6. With his moon face and trimmed beard, the actor-director resembled a black-tie Santa. And at that moment, Santa was waiting to be mugged by a puppet.

At the podium to the right of Mr. Reiner, Triumph, the Insult Comic Dog, swayed like a canine cobra, connected to the arm of Late Night with Conan O'Brien writer Robert Smigel. Mr. Reiner was the object of ridicule at this, the first Friars Club roast of the new millennium, but Triumph's first order of business was the dais of talent.

"You know, some people say the place is old and stuff, but I think the Friars Roast and the Friars Club is better than ever," Triumph said in his South American tough-guy accent, which elicited a loud cackle from dais-sitter Al Franken even before Mr. Smigel fed the puppet its trademark "For me to poop on!" punch line.

"I mean, come on, what the hell happened to this place anyway?" Triumph wondered. "You used to have Sinatra come by, now you've got these fucking old guys. You ever seen Alan King naked in the steam room? Normally, I have to eat grass when I want to puke." From his seat on the dais, Mr. King, the Abbot of the New York Friars, flashed a crocodile smile as the Comedy Central cameras rolled. "I'm telling you," Triumph continued, "Alan King -- his nutsack hangs lower than Rin Tin Tin's."

Next, he zotzed Friars Dean Freddie Roman -- "You look like a chew toy I used to play with" -- before proceeding to everybody's favorite Friars doormat, actor Abe Vigoda -- "Okay, Abe, play dead."

But then Triumph ran out of old guys. Sure, artist LeRoy Neiman was up there, as was actor Tony Lo Bianco, and last year's roastee, Jerry Stiller, and his wife Anne Meara; but when it came to the old comics, the guys who made the Friars Roasts into great, gory celebrations of bad toupees, the cathartic gut laughs and ego decimations were gone. Henny Youngman and Joey Adams had gone to the Great Green Room in the Sky. Dick Capri was missing in action, and Pat Cooper hadn't set foot in the Friars Club for over a year. "They're hypocrites and a bunch of phony bastards. Other than that, I like them very much," Mr. Cooper said by phone. "The Comedy Channel took it over, and they've turned around and

destroyed an oil painting. There's no schtarkers in there. They're executives now, Alan King and Freddie Roman -- drunken executives."

You knew the schtarkers because, when they smiled, they had blood on their teeth. Sometimes it was their own blood, because they could take it. They were warriors of comedy, and now they have been replaced by the stealth bombers: Harvard boys and the sons of schtarkers, like Mr. Reiner, whose father is the great Carl Reiner. This new cerebral-comedy meritocracy studied humor the way that former Treasury Secretary Bob Rubin studied economics. They had all enjoyed a measure of success. And this night, the dais was full of them: Billy Crystal, who had spoken first, then left for a Yankee game; Mr. Franken; This Is Spinal Tap actor Michael McKean.

They were very funny, but they were not schtarkers. Their humor was detached, a little academic, as though they were delivering the cloned sheep of Friars' jokes, lab-tested for Comedy Central. And if ever there was a symbol of that detachment, it was Late Night's Mr. Smigel. The schtarkers could look you in the eye, perform the equivalent of a prostate exam and make you laugh about it. Mr. Smigel delivered his put-downs via a puppet. Barry Dougherty, author of the New York Friars Club Book of Roasts, said it was the first time in memory a hand puppet has participated in a roast.

But though there were fewer of the kind of intestine-knotting laughs that the schtarkers were so good at producing, in the end the new guys were paid the ultimate compliment when Mr. King got up and said, "I think this is one of the best roasts I've ever been to."

At the beginning of the evening, Mr. King had performed his Abbot's duties of setting the tone. "The other day I was thinking about our guest of honor, Rob Reiner. I was getting a colonoscopy," Mr. King said, "and I realized that Rob would be going through a similar procedure. We're going to try to remove Rob's nose from Al Gore's ass."

Mr. King moved rapid-fire through a series of bald jokes. "His balls are bald," he said of Mr. Reiner. "Which gives lie to the old adage that grass never grows on a busy street." At this, the Comedy Central cameras projected a laughing Triumph on the big-ass video screen. That's right: Mr. Smigel spent virtually all of his dais time underneath the table, a distinction that not even Foster Brooks could claim. Mr. King then zeroed in on Mr. Reiner's career. When he was playing Meathead on All in The Family, he said, co-star Jean Stapleton caught him "jerking off" in his dressing room. "He won an Emmy for that role," Mr. King continued, then clarified: "No, not the jerking off." For that, Mr. King added, "he would have come in third."

As for Meg Ryan's famous fake-orgasm scene in Mr. Reiner's film *When Harry Met Sally...*, Mr. King said that Mr. Reiner had gotten the idea "from his first wife, Penny Marshall... Now, Rob had to fake it, too."

It would not be the last joke about Mr. Reiner's schlumpy ex-wife. When comedian Jeffrey Ross took the podium, he admitted to being nervous. "I figured, how do you embarrass a guy that fuckin' married Penny Marshall?" Mr. Reiner seemed to wince at that one. But Mr. Ross kept them coming: "I wouldn't fuck Penny Marshall with Penny Marshall's dick. I'd rather fuck Peter Marshall. Apparently, Penny and Rob had a bitter divorce settlement. She got the talent. He got the tits."

On a night when most of the roasters confessed that they barely knew Mr. Reiner, it's understandable that jokes about Mr. Reiner's weight were plentiful. Mr. Crystal, who was first to the podium in what appeared to be this year's Oscar-telecast tuxedo, started the butterball rolling when he told Mr. Reiner: "Roast is such a perfect word for you, because you're a brisket in a suit." If Mr. Gore gets elected President, Mr. Crystal said, Mr. Reiner was going to get a Cabinet post: "Secretary of Sheet Cake."

Yessiree, Mr. Reiner was a man who loved to eat, Mr. Crystal said. "When his boxer shorts were declared federally protected wetlands," he had a bite to eat, Mr. Crystal said. That one made Mr. Reiner dissolve in a wet wheeze. Mr. Crystal continued: "To inspire Meg Ryan in the orgasm scene, he told her, Think about pancakes. His neck has love handles. His balls are fat."

"Do you have any more fat jokes?" Mr. Reiner piped up.

Triumph, the Insult Comic Dog, did. "You fat fuck!" he told Mr. Reiner in a raspy stage whisper. "Look at you! What happened? Did you swallow Carroll O'Connor?"

The crowd spat out lungfuls of carbon dioxide. "You're like Orson Welles without all that genius baggage," Triumph continued. Then the dog brought up Mr. Reiner's pet charity, *I Am Your Child*. "He actually got the name for that from one of his kids," said Triumph. "Of course, it was longer at the time. It was, 'I Am Your Child. Please Don't Eat Me!'"

As with any Friars roast, the dais-sitters were fair game, and perhaps that was why so many of Mr. Reiner's Hollywood friends had stayed away, save for actor Richard Dreyfuss. "Where's your Spielberg, where's your Hanks, where's Poppa?" Mr. Crystal had asked. "Where's Lieberman?" Mr. Crystal asked, referring to Senator Joe Lieberman. "Oh, it's Friday. If he really liked you, he would have walked."

In their absence, the Friars had assembled one of the more eclectic daises in recent memory. The old standbys such as Dr. Ruth Westheimer and Mr. Vigoda were there, but obviously someone at the Friars or Comedy Central had been trying to freshen up the demographics, for there, inexplicably, were Vanilla Ice, former New York Doll David Johansen, former Soprano Vincent Pastore, Patty Hearst, actor Miguel Ferrer and Four Blondes author Candace Bushnell.

At a roast where not too many of the jokesters knew Mr. Reiner or wanted to risk the wrath of a big-shot movie director, this came in very handy. "What the fuck happened to you, Vaneela Ice?" Triumph wondered. "You disappeared faster than my cock in a St. Bernard." Dr. Ruth? "I sniffed her crotch once. It smells like the mummy's tomb." Mr. Neiman? "Nice paintings," Triumph said. "I haven't seen crap like that on paper since I was a puppy."

As one of the eldest members of the dais, Mr. Vigoda bore joke after joke about his mortality and, bless him, handled every one with trademark wide-eyed grace. "I love Abe. The man needs Viagra to keep his head up," Mr. Crystal told the crowd. "It's great he's out tonight. But at his age, there's a fine line between getting out for the evening and just wandering off."

But perhaps the person who took the most hits was comedienne Brett Butler, who was needed for her past dalliance with substance abuse. "She's the only person who's had her head in more toilets than me," Triumph said, adding, "Here's something we're both used to hearing: 'Roll over.'"

And newcomer Adam Ferrara said: "I kinda miss the old days, when Brett would let you touch her tits for a Valium." There were moments during this time-release haranguing that Ms. Butler seemed to be gritting her teeth. Mr. King seemed to sense it, too, because at the end of the roast he made a special point of saying: "And to Brett, I love you so much, with your big tits and your big ass. We're glad you're here -- half of these guys wouldn't have anything to say."

During her turn at the podium, Ms. Butler said she didn't really know Mr. Reiner and, "when I met him that one time, he did most of the talkin'. It's really hard for me to say anything with my mouth full."

"It was fabulous!" Mr. Reiner interjected, perhaps happy that someone was turning the subject to sex instead of his weight.

And, oh, the sex that Mr. Reiner supposedly had? "You worshipped your father," Friar Stewie Stone told the director. "You did everything you could to follow in his footsteps. It wasn't easy fucking Rose Marie, but it was a show-business tradition."

Mr. Reiner blubbered with laughter. Mr. Stone pressed on. When Rose Marie asked Mr. Reiner to stop fucking her, he said he couldn't. So she said: "At least wait for Morey Amsterdam to finish."

Actor Kevin Pollak, who starred in *A Few Good Men*, which Mr. Reiner directed, told the audience that Mr. Reiner was a "big fag. Not that that's a bad thing. Of course it isn't, unless you're me and, in order to get a role in *A Few Good Men*, you have to let this Jewish Paul Bunyan ride your rectum around the room like a Shetland pony."

"And you loved every second of it," Mr. Reiner said. Unlike most Friars roastees, who tend to sit quietly and take their punishment, Mr. Reiner, director that he is, kept up a dialogue with his roasters, often helping to set up their jokes. So much so that, at the end of the evening, Mr. Pollak told him breathlessly: "You were beyond a good sport -- you were an enabler!"

Richard Belzer was one of the last comedians called up to the podium, and by then most of his jokes had already been used by those who had preceded him. But if there are any young schtarkers in this world, Mr. Belzer is one of them, and he turned his lack of material into an improvisational high point of the evening. When he got to the podium, Mr. Belzer found Triumph's cigars still laying there and displayed them to the crowd, saying, "Props, the enemy of wit."

"Forty fuckin' jokes down the goddamned drain," Mr. Belzer said before tearing up his notes. But when one of those jokes fell flat, Mr. Reiner said: "There's silence!"

"It's all right," Mr. Belzer replied. "I'm a dramatic actor on a big fucking series. I don't give a fuck about this fucking shit. This fucking place or any cocksucker and" -- here Mr. Belzer's comments were drowned out by the laughter, but the crowd piped down in time to hear -- "you and all your famous friends: Fuck you all." Suddenly, Mr. Belzer stopped and said: "Did I say that or was I just thinking it?"

Mr. Belzer had brought along a copy of Roger Ebert's review of Mr. Reiner's *North*, and he got Mr. Reiner to come up and read it. The review began: "I hated this movie. Hated, hated, hated hated hated this movie. Hated it. Hated every simpering, stupid, vacant, audience-insulting moment of it."

When Mr. Belzer returned to his seat, the roastmaster, Mr. McKean said, "Belz, I loved you in *The Vagina Monologues*."

"So did your wife," Mr. Belzer retorted.

Next-to-last on the list was a relatively unknown comic named Adam Ferrara. But by the end of his set, Mr. Ferrara had made his bones as roast-worthy, if only for

his joke about Mr. Roman's genitals: "There's no delicate way of saying this," Mr. Ferrara said. "Freddie's dick looks like a button on a fur coat. "

Al Franken was the evening's anchor man. "About two years ago, we were at dinner at the White House; I was sitting next to Rob," Mr. Franken said. When the President came over, Mr. Franken asked him to sit down and talk to Mr. Reiner. Mr. Franken looked down at his pal from the podium: "Remember what the President said? He said, 'I'd rather have Ken Starr fuck me in the ass.'"

Mr. Franken told the crowd that Mr. Reiner's father, "frustrated with his career as a second banana to Mel Brooks," used "Baby Rob" as a "human pinata," which, Mr. Franken added, "led to the horrible failure of Ghosts of Mississippi."

"How come you didn't go for North?" Mr. Reiner asked.

"Exactly," Mr. Franken replied. "What POSSIBLY could explain North?" Suddenly, this Mr.-Reiner-as-enabler act was starting to look a little too polished. But Mr. Franken forged on to detail Mr. Reiner's alleged sexual abuse at the hands of his father. "On a typical night, Carl would slip into Rob's bed, roll him over, swab him down and say something like, 'I'm thinking about hiring Morey Amsterdam to play Buddy Sorrell, what do you think?'

"Well, the success of The Dick Van Dyke Show changed things dramatically," Mr. Franken said, "but the abuse continued. Carl started inviting many of his famous friends to fuck his son. That list includes some of the greats in comedy: Paul Lynde, Dom DeLuise, Rip Taylor, Danny Kaye, Charles Nelson Reilly and Rock Hudson -- whom," Mr. Franken added, "I frankly don't think is that funny."

They called Mr. Reiner up to the podium after that, and Mr. King and Mr. Roman gave him a translucent statuette of a flame-licked Friar. "Sophie Tucker used it as a vibrator," Mr. Roman said.

Mr. Reiner said the evening had reminded him of a moment that, he had been told, had occurred at another Friars Roast long ago involving the actor Pat Buttram, who was Gene Autry's sidekick, Mr. Haney on Green Acres and, apparently, a helluva roast participant.

"Alan, you might have been there," Mr. Reiner said, "but Milton Berle and Red Buttons and Joey Bishop and every comedian in the world was up and they were all getting hysterical laughs, and Pat Buttram, in his way, wandered up to the podium and he said" -- here Mr. Reiner approximated Mr. Buttram's cornpone voice -- "'I kinda dozed off ... Has the subject of finger-fuckin' Kate Smith been taken?'"

Mr. Dreyfuss could be heard honking like a goose. "I just thought 'It's not going to get on television,'" Mr. Reiner said. And then, just in case it did, Mr. Reiner -- not

a schtarker, just a guy who appreciated them -- said: "Joe Lieberman? I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Joe Lieberman. I'm supporting you. Don't take this out against me."