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Aristotle...Dead? Or Alive?

“Two cannibals are eating a clown. One says to the other, ‘Does this taste funny to you?’” (*Kaplan 7*)

Comedy seems to capture what we are all thinking but can't express. Ranging from dark shrewd comedy to corny little jokes, comedy always seems to bring people from all backgrounds together to provide a sense of community that we all can relate to. In discussions of comedy, a controversial issue is whether it has changed. While some argue that comedy has remained the same since Aristotle, others contend that comedy is entering a new era of strategy, one free of past beliefs. This new strategy includes a unique combination of Black, Slapstick, Romantic, and satire comedy. To generalize comedy like this, one would have to ask themselves how comedy works as a whole. Over the course of a month I have analysed these different types of comedy through comedians such as Will Ferrell, Kevin Hart, and Louis C.K. Through my research, the question remains constant: Is Aristotle still alive in comedy today?

Before I dive into the realm of comedy in our world today, let's go back to about 300 B.C.E. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle separates comedy into three general subordinate

categories: Slapstick, Romantic, and Satire. Aristotle's definition of Slapstick Comedy or rather "Farce" is when characters of tales of absurd possibilities lead into wild coincidences with endless twists and complications. Romantic humor as Aristotle describes is when two iconic well matched characters fall in love, head over heels, through the somewhat seemingly perfect matchup. Aristotle's last category, Satirical Comedy, is described as the joker's comedy, whose characters are full con-artists, criminals, and tricksters.

However, despite these categories, Aristotle's writings repeatedly state how comedy itself has no art, and in fact comedy doesn't have to be funny in order to be considered comedy. Aristotle defines comedy, "In essence: A comedy is a story of the rise in fortune of a sympathetic central character" (Simpson). This central character commonly focuses on relatable topics. These relatable topics provide a common ground for the viewer to be somewhat also sympathetic towards the comedian. Aristotle claims Comedy originated with *Komos*, a festival type performance in which a group of men would sing, dance and frolic around while people laughed at them. Of course, this performance was known at the time as "stand up" comedy. However, the words "stand up comedy" in that time were best known for the literal sense of standing up. Scholars aren't one hundred percent positive about this. However that being said, if it is true, it would put a whole new meaning to the concept of stand up comedy. Either way, this initial beginning with *Komos* has transformed into a wide range of comedy in our world today. In assimilation, Steve Kaplan shares his theories of comedy as well: "Jokes are not the most important element in a comedy. Characters are. Characters who are not

perfect. Who don't know. Who do what they need to do in order to win. Who see the world in their own particular, peculiar way" (7). Aristotle would contend to these views as well, seeing that characters do indeed play a very important role in the storytelling process, and according to Aristotle, the story is the most important part. In the end, a good story will come hand in hand with good characters.

"The two things in the world we all share in this world are laughter and pain. We've all got problems. The levels of those problems vary, but we've all got problems. When you can take things that are painful and make them funny, that's a gift - to you and your audience" (Hart). Comedian Kevin Hart takes a confessional tone to his stand up routine. Often talking about his family and the hardships he faces, his comedy not only relates to general population, but also seems to teach life lessons in the process. Kevin Hart was born on July 6, 1979 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Youngest of two kids, Hart was raised by his single mother Nancy. His father, Henry Hart, was in and out of prison during Kevin's childhood due to his cocaine addiction. Ironically enough, this is where Kevin's Comedy had originated. As a coping method, Kevin used his childhood pain in his comedy. To this very day, Kevin continues to stem his comedy from from the painful childhood he once had. This relation to his family would be considered the "Aristotle" type relation that is necessary for his comedy to keep people engaged. Kevin talks about his dad in his routine: "Drugs make you do stupid shit man. Stupidest thing my dad ever did on drugs, when I was a kid I remember my dad came to my parent teacher conference. Which is when you go to yo kids school, talk to their teachers etc.,

and see how they doing. My dad shows up with sweatpants on and no drawers. This N****'s dick was all over the place, ok. Listen....." (Hart) Hart's comedy affirms Aristotle's teachings of repetition and relation in itself as a whole. In addition, Kevin provides a certain vision to all of his stories, a vision that puts you at the scene of the joke. This storytelling vision and high energy on stage could compare to Aristotle's thoughts about *Komos*. Though Kevin may seem like he falls under Aristotle's category of Satirical comedy, I believe he belongs in a separate category. Hart's mix of Black humor all the way to his slapstick humor define him as his own.

Another comedian that has a one of a kind sense of humor is Will Ferrell. According to his online Biography, Ferrell's Comedy journey surprisingly started after graduating from USC in 1989 with a degree in sports journalism. Will's first job out of college was an internship for NBC's sports department. It was there where he realized his true calling to be a comedian. He had his "aha" moment after ad-libbing an on air joke that brought the laughter of many. Realizing his potential, he moved back in with his parents to begin his pursuit in a career of comedy. From taking acting classes to landing parts in the regional theater, Ferrell was climbing the ladder fast. Eventually, he made it to SNL where he was then picked up for his outstanding talent. Valued by these acting skills, Ferrell makes up the 1% of comedians that manage to make people laugh harder and harder each time. His style is more from Aristotle's absurd comedy point of view, combining the exaggerated emotions and expressions to provide an overall one of a kind art. According to Ferrell, "What I recognized when I started doing comedy was that I'm probably not the wittiest, not the fastest on my feet, but the one thing I can

guarantee is that I won't hold anything back.....It was just funnier to me, and it played funnier, when instead of just yelling at someone in a scene, you're yelling to the point where you're losing your voice—that one extra step. If that's what's called for within the context, isn't that our job as comedians?"(*The New York Times*, (Mar. 23, 2016))

Through analysing his work, Will's Comedy seems to be free of personal reflection from his life and rather focused on a charismatic charming character that has absurd things to say. In 2004 Ferrell starred in a movie called *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*. Being maybe one of the greatest hits of all time, Ferrell releases his true comedian skills through a classy man like himself with a rage of sexyness and stupidity. Will's character Ron Burgundy, "Discovered by the Germans in 1904, they named it San Diego, which of course in German means a whale's vagina" (McKay) This is one of the many examples of how Will Ferrell always plays the role of an innovative original character. When relating Will to Aristotle's writings, he would fall under the category of being a slapstick comedian, due simply to his absurd nature. According to Aristotle, "The characters of "farce" are typically fantastic or absurd and usually far more ridiculous than those in other forms of comedy" (Aristotle, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Will Ferrell's creative, one of a kind humor, is what keeps his fans coming back every time.

Another great comedian of our modern age is Louis C.K., who is known abroad for his stand up comedy as well as his top hit show "Louie". C.K. falls under Aristotle's category of "Black Comedy". Although this was not one of his original genres, Black Comedy stems from Aristotle's theory of "Satirical Comedy". As it was transcribed,

“Satirical comedy spills over into so-called **Black comedy**--where we're invited to laugh at events that are mortifying or grotesque” (Aristotle, *Poetics*). Starting in his teenage years, Louis began with local stand up in Washington DC and quickly climbed the ladder of success. In the early 1990's C.K. landed a job for the Conan O'Brien show as a staff writer. Later, Louis found success through his sitcom “Louie”. His Black humor seems to attract audiences from all over despite the dark shrewd jokes that some claim to be offensive. Reporter Nico Lang quotes one of Louis's funny lines, “It's like when you're talking to a girl at a bar because you're attracted to her, the first thing you say is always gonna be dog shit. The most honest thing you could say to her is ‘I wanna fuck your face.’ That's the most honest thing you could say.”(Nico Lang) C.K.'s savagery content seems to fade away the discomfort of it all. His shrewd style is risky and can potentially be costly. Making jokes like these and many others for instance about racial slurs, etcetera, is risky because society draws the line when these limits are surpassed. Though despite this, the underlying fact is that these jokes make his comedy acceptable. Thus, earning him his fame and comedic value. Aristotle shares, “Comedy exists in the gap between expectation and reality, and it's the “not knowing” of the character that creates that gap” (Cafaro). The “not knowing” is what Louis provides for his viewers and is what they essentially crave. In essence, once his humor gets dark, there is no telling what will follow.

“A happy ending is all that's required. In fact, since at least as far back as Aristotle, the basic formula for comedy has had more to do with conventions and expectations of plot and character than with a requirement for lewd jokes or cartoon

pratfalls" ("Comedy and Tragedy"). Well, This story indeed has a happy ending.

Aristotle was correct in how comedy has many forms and many approaches. I

discovered that Aristotle in fact still remains in the comedy our world provides today.

The only thing that has changed is the manner in which humor is essentially conducted.

Aristotle said himself that there is no true form of comedy, comedy is open to

interpretation. What we have done is further expanded on Aristotle's work. His ideas live

on forever in the minds and hearts of comedians today.

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