

The Post-Prime of Miss Janeane Garofalo

Insisting on being unpleasant doesn't mean you win in the end.



by Bruce Bawer

I suspect that there were more than a few youngish *New York Times* readers who, on July 14, were baffled to turn a page and encounter a 2,500-word [think piece](#) about Janeane Garofalo.

Jane who? Perhaps you're too young to recognize her name, too. But if you've seen *Seinfeld* reruns, you may remember her from an episode in which she played a woman whom Jerry dates because, like him, she eats plenty of breakfast cereal, reads comic books about superheroes, and is dry and sardonic. But he

comes to dislike her, and the relationship ends with them exclaiming, simultaneously at a dinner table, "I hate you!"

She also appeared in *The King of Queens* as a neurotic, irritating ex-girlfriend of Doug's who he dumped because of her overuse of the word "literally."

Plus, she played supporting roles in a long list of extremely forgettable films. Hence the jest, directed by comic Artie Lange at Lisa Lampanelli at a 2006 roast: "Lisa, you're an overweight, annoying female comic. You're seven horrible movies away from being Janeane Garofalo." To which he added: "A lot of people might say: 'Why hit Janeane? She's not here to defend herself.' And the answer is simple: I've met Janeane Garofalo, and she's a f***ing c***."

Well, I've never met Garofalo, who's now 57. But she sure does play a hell of a lot of unpleasant women. Oh, and I almost forgot her [stand-up](#). Some of her sets can be found online. How to put it? She's not exactly – what's the word? – funny. "Is this performance art?" one YouTube commenter queried. In a way, it is. Like most stand-up, it's autobiographical. Only Garofalo doesn't waste time coming up with punchlines to break the flow.

For decades, her sets have focused on how heroically alone she is – not wanting to get married, not wanting to start a family. ("Don't have kids. Nobody knows which way it's going to go.") As she'd repeatedly explained, she'd prefer to avoid the hassle and the emotional risk. "I don't believe it's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all," she quipped in one routine. "I would rather not have loved at all."

Routinely, she mines her own neuroses to a degree reminiscent of a very young Woody Allen – although, again, without the messiness of punchlines:

I don't use a computer.... People say, "Can I email you?" And I

say, "I don't have email." "So how do you get your email?" I swear to God that's the second question... With my cell phone, I don't know how it works ... who did I just agree to meet? ... I must know you, you asked me to lunch...

And every now and then she settles into a nice, long, and utterly predictable political rant, the theme of which is always exactly the same: Don't be friends with Republicans. Don't seek "common ground." They're evil. They're morons. They're racists, misogynists, homophobes, Islamophobes. They hate science. In fact, their whole lives are about hate. If they want to secede from the Union, let them leave. Sometimes these rants devolve into far-left word [salads](#):

Climate change deniers and corporate greed and all this stuff. I have the right to be angry!... At Ole Miss after the [2012] election there was an anti-Obama rally, where they said "the South will rise again."... A lot of people who are anti-choice ... the Doomsday preppers... racists!

Put it this way: Her stand-up is almost all attitude. It's supposed to be entertaining in some way, I guess, that she's so outspoken, that she has such strong opinions, that she's neurotic, quirky, strident, antisocial, self-involved, fiercely independent, and – well – something of a bitch, with intellectual pretensions and a superior attitude.

That attitude was on display big time during Garofalo's stint at the now defunct left-wing radio station Air America, where she and actor Sam Seder co-hosted the *Majority Report* show. In a memorable episode broadcast shortly after the 2016 elections entitled "Handling Your Fascist Family Members This Thanksgiving," Garofalo stated flat out: "I refuse to acknowledge Trump as president. I do not believe he won legally... I don't think a Republican president has won legitimately since the late 1960s."

(Don't worry – it's OK to say such things if you're talking about Republicans.)

And, she added, if Trump *did* win legitimately – well, it was because of “straight-up racism” and “lack of education” and “frontal-lobe” disorders. She flat-out rejected the idea that the reason for his victory was that red-state voters were suffering economically: “In that case they'd have voted for Elizabeth Warren or Bernie Sanders!”

In short, Garofalo is a far-left lunatic who thinks that she's one hell of a smart cookie and that Trump voters are knuckle-draggers. How far left is she? She's so far left that she considers the “corporate media” right-wing. She's so far left that she thinks white people are having babies so that – no kidding – there will be enough white soldiers when the race wars start. She's so far left that, as far as she's concerned, “white working-class male” is a synonym for “racist.”

Of course, it's Garofalo's politics that landed her that 2,500-word *Times* profile. Not that her politics features importantly in the piece, which is entitled “Janeane Garofalo Never Sold Out. What a Relief.” Author Jason Zinoman's premise is that Garofalo could've had a much, much bigger career, just like her old pal Ben Stiller. But that would've meant selling out. And – heaven bless her – she hasn't sold out!

(To be sure, a look at the list of her [credits](#) on IMDb – *Wet Hot American Summer: Ten Years Later*; *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*; *Michael Bolton's Big, Sexy Valentine's Day Special*, etc., etc., etc. – hardly supports the thesis that Garofalo has been particularly selective in picking projects. But let's move on.)

Zinoman sums up the trajectory of Garofalo's career. In his view, she's always been a smart comic. A comic for smart people. He apparently thinks this because she uses words like “Luddite” and “reticent” and “soupçon.” In the 1990s, he

asserts, she was a “Generation X icon.” (I guess I missed that.) But now? Now she performs for sparse crowds in obscure venues alongside “young unknowns.”

How can this have happened? Surely it can’t be the quality of her gags. Zinoman quotes some of them, to show just how hilarious she is:

- *“When someone tells me I can’t do something,” she said, holding the pause with precision timing honed over three and half decades of telling jokes, “I’m grateful.”*
- *On her 1995 HBO half-hour, she walked onstage to applause that she immediately mocked: “You just did that because this is on television.”*
- *“I’m not ready for Eileen Fisher,” she said in characteristic deadpan. “I can’t cross that Rubicon.”*

See, “Rubicon”! Smart, right?

(I looked up Eileen Fisher. She’s a dress designer.)

Zinoman describes the evolution of Garofalo’s stand-up. By the time her art was fully formed, he writes: “[A] sharply honed point of view mattered more than accessible setups and hard punch lines. Her humor leaned on stories and a political sensibility, refracted through a culturally savvy lens.” And maybe *this*, he suggests, is why she’s not queen of the hill, top of the heap.

But then Zinoman rejects his own line of argument and maintains – as is probably obligatory at the *Times* these days – that Garofalo is simply a victim of sexism:

Whereas Stiller shifted into blockbuster movies in the 1990s, Garofalo ran into choppy waters in the mainstream in ways that now seem clearly sexist.

But in that case, how to explain, say, Hannah Gadsby? Gadsby’s

material is *all* “point of view” and “political sensibility.” The whole point of her 2018 special, *Nanette*, is that when somebody like her – that is to say, a member of one or more oppressed groups (in Gadsby’s case, hefty lesbians) – tells self-deprecating jokes, it’s an admission of self-hatred and a concession to bigots. And if you find such jokes amusing, then *you’re* a bigot. And so instead of being funny, Gadsby rants about homophobia, misogyny, etc.

It made her the Left’s favorite comic. And although only 26 percent of Rotten Tomatoes users gave it a thumbs-up, it won her a 100 percent score from [reviewers](#). (Because what critic who values his job would dare criticize a show so drenched in PC?)

But how, then, to explain why Gadsby is a superstar and Garofalo is working dives? How, for that matter, to explain the immense success of, say, Sarah Silverman, Wanda Sykes, Melissa McCarthy, Amy Schumer, and Whitney Cummings? Back, I guess, to the “didn’t sell out” theory.

Apropos of which, Zinoman admits that he always found the term “selling out” ridiculous. But he then proceeds to ponder the concept at length. Did Garofalo sell out? Or not? On the one hand, what’s so bad about success? On the other, isn’t it healthy to be skeptical of success? And isn’t it true that the best comics are never the most successful? Zinoman posits that a fear of selling out was the hallmark of the 1990s, when Garofalo, he claims, was the comedy equivalent of Kurt Cobain. And he concludes his piece with this flourish: “It would be easy to see Garofalo performing with comics half her age to a sparse Brooklyn crowd as a portrait of decline. But to my Generation X eyes, it looks like a kind of triumph.”

Well, to my Baby Boomer eyes, it looks somewhat different. What happened to Garofalo? No, it’s not about selling out or not selling out. What happened is that she morphed, as one will, from a relatively young and cute-ish chick whose jokes

about her own independence, irreligion, and indifference to love, marriage, and motherhood could seem, if not hilarious, then whimsical, into – well – a woman of late middle age who's heading into what bids fair to be a very lonely old age, and whose riffs about the once-adorable personality quirks that got her here just aren't remotely droll anymore.

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