

# FOREWORD

Rodney Marks

There are some politicians and political events that outdo satire itself. US satirical songster Tom Lehrer commented that awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to Henry Kissinger in 1973 made satire obsolete<sup>1</sup> and the remark by British satirist Peter Cook that “the heyday of satire was Weimar Germany, and look how it stopped Hitler!”<sup>2</sup> kills all laughter. The USA’s forty-fifth president, Donald Trump (elected November 2016), and the President of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte (elected June 2016), are both self-parodying leaders with anti-establishment rhetoric. Many satirists find them beyond intelligent humorous criticism, and resort to blunt insult comedy.<sup>3</sup>

Richard Nixon, US President from 1969 to 1974, made an appearance on *Laugh-In* (16 September 1968) in order to soften his image and make himself more electable: it seemed to work well. Since then, every US president and many candidates for office have used satirical TV programmes to humanise themselves, to demonstrate self-deprecation and to show voters that they are just regular folk. Barack Obama, US President 2009–2017, appeared seven times on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* up to 21 July 2015, just before Jon Stewart left his 16-year tenure as host on 6 August 2015. Stewart has been accused of being in love<sup>4</sup> with Barak Obama and more seriously of giving the President easy access to the show’s demographic and endorsing Obama’s policies on air.<sup>5</sup>

The annual White House Correspondents’ Dinner with the president of the day has been hosted by the White House Correspondents’ Association since 1924. From 1983 onwards, it has taken the form of

a “roast” or send-up of the president and also of the media, delivered by one or more comedians. Presidents have also been involved in delivering comedy directed at the media and at themselves. Whilst usually very funny, the event has been criticised by the fifth estate (bloggers and other alternative media) for its “coziness” between the fourth estate (the mainstream media) and the president. Using the best comedy writers available, the president typically hilariously lampoons the media and himself, but clearly for a political purpose: the satire makes him more likeable and promotes his policies and programmes.

In Australia, satire is often associated with television, but most especially with the national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), aligning the establishment with the voice of satire. In theatre, something similar occurs with the Sydney Theatre Company’s annual satirical *Review at the End of the Wharf*.<sup>6</sup> This has been going on since 2003 and become part of the arts establishment. As with victims of political cartoonists’ jibes in newspapers and online, political and societal leaders know they are making an impact if they are the subject of the joke in such venues.

The current prevailing culture of the ABC has been shown to be left-leaning (to the Green and Labor Parties).<sup>7</sup> The Greens in Australia have never formed or contributed to a government and see themselves as the voice of dissent, to the left of Labor. The current Liberal-National Party coalition is conservative, more to the right. How is it then that employees of the Sydney Theatre Company and the ABC, with salaries and entitlements provided by government funding, are allowed to bite the hand that feeds them? How fearless, intelligent and effective can these satirists be? Studies have shown that under Soviet rule, the KGB employed joke writers to disseminate gags against the regime as a deliberate safety valve.<sup>8</sup> The same appears to be true in democratic societies like the USA and Australia. So, satirists and their audiences are not undermining government power and policies: satire in fact sustains those governments. A little rebellion with laughter prevents a more dramatic upheaval and the last laugh is on the satirists.

## REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE

Satire is not only attractive for individuals as expressions of opinion and entertainment, it is also valued for organisational purposes. Is this the ultimate co-option of satire, to have commercial sponsors rather than

political allies? I do not think so. I am a comedian myself, performing as a comic hoaxer at business events within the genre of the corporate impostor. I employ satire in every performance I do. Based in Sydney, I am Australian, and have performed all over Australia but also in a dozen or so other countries. Since 1991, I have had about 2500 performances, for the private, public and the non-profit sectors alike. My satire is enjoyable, both for me and my audiences, but it is also playing with fire. I enjoy that. Its true purpose is instructive and liberating—at least from some corporate and personal straightjackets. This is what I am paid to do.

I arrive at an event—in the persona of a plausibly real character agreed in advance with whoever is hiring me in the hosting organisation—and I work the room, schmoozing with attendees. If it is a conference, I will attend a regular seminar on offer along with other delegates and ask a question; if it is a dinner, I will attend pre-dinner drinks and socialise normally. This mixing and mingling establishes the credibility of my comic character. At some agreed point, often one advertised in the formal programme of the event, I will be called to a lectern to deliver a keynote address. I tailor my remarks carefully and with months of preparation to the particular institutional culture and language. Business being what it is, that often involves appalling jargon and I pursue this and other aspects of the received wisdom to their logical ends. It is painful for the audience and sometimes risky for me—certainly risky for my hosts who are in on the secret and paying me good money for the act.

At the conclusion of the speech, the performance continues with a Q&A session. These questions are not set up or organised in advance. Those in-the-know about the hoax remain passive observers. This time gives other people in the group with the capacity to be funny and who have tumbled to the secret of the impersonation a chance to have some revenge—not really on the corporate impostor, but on those who booked him.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes it takes time before the impostor is unmasked, but the impact is correspondingly magnified when that eventuates. This is what happened for a client of mine—a brick-making company—at a corporate event they held at a large hotel in Melbourne on Saturday 26 June 1993. For this company (let us call it Goodbrik), I portrayed Mr. B. Rick Wall, Executive Assistant to the Chief Executive, Advance International Limited (we shall call it), the US company that owns little Australian Goodbrik.

At the event, I attended a seminar as a US impostor and was welcomed like this: “Rick would like to say a few words to us now about

Advance's proposed new management style: including their approach to [a] subsidiaries' performance appraisal, [b] T[otal] Q[uality] M[anagement],<sup>10</sup> [c] reporting, and [d] corporate communication. Over to you, Rick." I spoke some corporate gobbledegook for a while, just long enough to establish the character's credibility. A pre-prepared "outro" (opposite of intro) was then read by someone in a position of authority: "Thank you, Rick, for those comments. We appreciate you taking the time out from your busy schedule to join us this afternoon and look forward to your keynote after-dinner address this evening. Thanks again, Rick." Surprisingly, no-one saw the joke in the name. I was asked if I was related to the Walls of Bendigo [a local country town], and responded: "No, the Walls of Jericho". "Oh", was the reply.

My after-dinner speech was introduced this way: "It is once again my privilege to introduce Mr. B. Rick Wall, executive assistant to the new chief executive at Advance. As Advance is the ultimate 'owner' and controller of Goodbrik, we thought that it might be useful to obtain a view from above. Rick was a senior general manager at Esso prior to his being head-hunted across to Advance. He is a qualified engineer, and has a background in turn-around management, downsizing, and restructuring organisations. He informs me that after the presentation he would be pleased to take questions. Please join me in welcoming Mr. B. Rick Wall".

There were 500 people at 50 tables of ten: a full house. Things had been going badly for the company. There was a recession and hundreds of people were being laid off. Morale was low as evidenced by high levels of petty theft and absenteeism. People felt that they would be the next group to be "let go". So I drew some predictive scenarios or "word pictures" for the audience. There were, I falsely claimed, rows of staffed tables just outside the banquet room doors, with pay-out packages for everyone, listed alphabetically. I talked suitable MBA talk at great length and issued veiled threats about the need for legal action. Silence ensued. A young woman began to cry.

Next, a succession of four heroic workers stood up to defend Goodbrik. The first, from the finance department, said, "I know what you're talking about—the \$30,000 that went missing. Well, we found the guy. He needed a bridging loan following a messy divorce. We retrieved the money and sacked him. But we didn't go to the police as required by law". I said no, that wasn't the issue. The confessor looked crestfallen. A second executive stood up and said: "I know what you're alluding to. That overseas deal that ended up with a great loss. We had a

go and bribed the local officials but to no avail”. No, I said, that wasn’t it either—and did he know that bribery was a crime? A third executive took the floor and said, “Look, I know we’ve lost profitability, but in a price war it is market share that counts. When the recession lifts we’ll be sitting pretty”. No, it’s not that either, I said, and added that I was until now unaware that Goodbrik was unprofitable, and did he know that this was a career-limiting move?

I looked across at the advertising department table, the people who booked me to improve morale and hence productivity. They had their faces buried in their hands, thinking that this was all disastrous. But as the satiric performer, you have the best “feel of the room” since you are at the focal point and everyone’s attention is tightly held. I felt that I could pull it off, so I kept on ramping up the mood without letting slip my mask.

A fourth and final questioner stood up. He was the sales manager, an important figure in the chain of command. This was the target I wanted.<sup>11</sup> The sales manager started counting on his fingers: “Let me get this right. One, we’ve put our financial house in order. Two, we’ve given the international thing a go, as directed. Three, the market share battle is being won”. He went very red in the face and also on his bald head—and he got it! He swore loudly and laughed. My recollection then is of 500 people standing as one, yelling not at me but across the tables at each other: “I knew it”, “Nonsense!”, and much swearing. Pandemonium ceased when the MC read the outro I had prepared: “In case you haven’t guessed by now, we have been witness to a comic hoax. Mr. B. Rick Wall—or BRICK WALL—is corporate comedian Rodney (Hoaxes and Jokeses) Marks. Along with many of us here at Goodbrik, he believes that we should be more sceptical of outside experts, especially when we have the talent, skills and experience within our own ranks to solve our own challenges. Thank you, Rodney Marks.”

My opinion of the quality of this show was at odds with the views of the booking executives: they had suffered greatly and it took a long time for me to receive payment—a form of punishment for making their advertising department squirm on the night. But to me it was a success, albeit a risky one, and the report in at least one national magazine endorsed my judgement.<sup>12</sup> My style of satirical hoaxing is different to many comedians’ who work this same circuit, but comedians in demand have much in common.<sup>13</sup> What is essential is mentioning and satirising key individuals, organisations, management language and fads, products and services. This tailoring to the individual organisation gives each

performance a one-off appeal so that the audience members feel special, even as they are being critiqued in a very targeted way.

Subtly, a number of messages are delivered:

1. That criticism is acceptable, as long as there is evidence to support it (for this I have to prepare as realistically as an MBA student seeking top grades).
2. That results are more important than personal ego (I too have suffered failure).
3. That being human (having fun) is compatible with being an employee.

Certainly, I do enjoy my work.

## CONCLUSION

Maybe satire does have a bite, even when it is paid for or co-opted by its targets. This book is a collection of scholarly studies reflecting the serious research that has taken place here in Australasia and elsewhere into the satirical mode, its origins and impact. These scholars are my friends and colleagues and I have followed their arguments with great interest over the years. I recommend their work to you and hope to see you at a corporate event in the future.

Sydney, Australia  
November 2016

## NOTES

1. Todd S. Purdom, “When Kissinger Won the Nobel Peace Prize, Satire Died”, 30 July 2000.
2. “Political Satire: Fringe Benefits”, 24 August 2000.
3. Sarah Lyall, “When Reality Tops Parody”, 5 November 2016, p. B1. See also Chap. 9 by Robert Phiddian.
4. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, Christina Littlefield opined: “Rewatching President Obama’s appearances on ‘The Daily Show With Jon Stewart’ is like watching a love story unfold, with the initial meet-cute, the excitement of the initial courtship and the snipes that come after the honeymoon period wears off and the relationship reaches a comfortable security” (“When Barak Obama Met Jon Stewart: A Love Story”, 21 July 2015).

5. Kyle Smith, “Jon Stewart’s Secret Obama Meetings Reveal He’s a Partisan Hack”, 29 July 2015.
6. The name refers to the Wharf Theatre, home of the Sydney Theatre Company, a government-funded arts entity.
7. Pia Akerman, “It’s Easy Being Green at the ABC”, 21 May 2013.
8. “Author Interview: Christie Davies (*Jokes and Targets*)”, 2011.
9. For more detail of how this works, see Rodney Marks’ personal website at: [www.comedian.com.au](http://www.comedian.com.au).
10. A notorious buzzword at the time in management circles.
11. Sometimes a comic hoaxer is booked by the boss, sometimes by middle management. Being booked by the boss can be tricky: it is important not to be seen as an instrument of authority. Being booked by middle management as in this case allows the performer to roast people up and down the chain of command.
12. Lenore Nicklin, “Stand-up Chameleon”, 13 December 1994.
13. Most see themselves as comic hoaxers, not amateur pranksters. On the distinction between hoax and prank, see Rodney Marks and Jessica Milner Davis, “Hoax and Prank”, 2014.

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## NOTES ON AUTHOR

**Rodney Marks** is an Australian comedian, hoax speaker and corporate impostor ([www.comedian.com.au](http://www.comedian.com.au)). Since 1991, he has presented faux invited keynotes at business events. Rodney holds a BA from the University of New England, Armidale, Australia, an MBA from the Australian Graduate School of Management (AGSM), and an MPA from Harvard University's Kennedy School. He has been artist-in-residence at the AGSM and at Harvard, and visiting professor-at-large at the University of New South Wales. He has given more than 3,000 satiric performances, mostly in Australia but also in New Zealand, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Singapore, Malaysia, India, Mauritius, England and the USA. He is a founding member of the Australasian Humour Studies Network and his publications include: *The Management Contradictionary* (with Benjamin Marks and Robert Spillane, 2006, and a completely revised and updated version, *Funny Business: Management Unmasked*, 2017), and (with Jessica Milner Davis) "Hoax and Prank" in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* (Sage: 2014).