

Are Women Funny? I Tackle the Issue. [Spoiler Alert: Women Are Funny]

by Joe Mulder

Plenty of women are funny.

Now that that's out of the way, I want to say stuff.

It would be difficult to be a bigger fan of Adam Carolla than I am. I've been listening to him on the radio, and after that on my iPod, for over a decade now and I feel like I know him well (it's difficult to talk that long and that often without revealing your true self openly and honestly for all to hear, although I suppose certain people like Jim Rome and Tom Leykis have been able to accomplish just that). So whenever any of his comments cause the internet to go into a bit of a tizzy, my ears naturally perk up. It's almost like the internet is picking on a friend of mine, except for how Adam Carolla is not actually a friend of mine at all (though I have met him a couple of times, if anybody is wondering. Which it occurs to me you almost certainly aren't).

If you missed it, the story from yesterday was that Adam Carolla became the most recent in a long, lamentable line of men who have proclaimed that "woman aren't funny." Most of the men who are famous for having said that actually never quite said that, exactly, but that never stops anybody these days. For the purposes of clarity, it's probably a good idea to look at what Adam actually said to the *New York Post* that caused all the kurfuffle:

Q: Do you hate working with women?

No. But they make you hire a certain number of chicks, and they're always the least funny on the writing staff. The reason why you know more funny dudes than funny chicks is that dudes are funnier than chicks. If my daughter has a mediocre sense of humor, I'm just gonna tell her, "Be a staff writer for a sitcom. Because they'll have to hire you, they can't really fire you, and you don't have to produce that much. It'll be awesome."

Q: The "are women funny" debate has grown very contentious. You're not worried about reactions to this?

I don't care. When you're picking a basketball team, you'll take the brother over the guy with the yarmulke. Why? Because you're playing the odds. When it comes to comedy, of course there's Sarah Silverman, Tina Fey, Kathy Griffin -- super-funny chicks. But if you're playing the odds? No.

There's plenty of stuff there with which to disagree, even for a huge fan like me; but anybody who takes the time to parse these particular quotes will notice that he never actually proclaims that women aren't funny. He says that women

aren't as funny as men, and that if you've got to hire somebody to write comedy for you then the odds are in your favor if you pick a man instead of a woman, but that's not the same as saying that women aren't funny. And I do think it's safe to say he's wrong, but not as egregiously as it might seem. After all, it's easy to hear through the grapevine that Adam Carolla proclaimed "women aren't funny" and label him a douchebag. It's not as easy to dig deeper, though.

Did he actually say that?

No.

OK, what did he actually say?

"[D]udes are funnier than chicks."

OK, so that's what he said. Is it true?

No.

Then why did he say it?

I have some theories.

For one, I think it's a generational thing. To be funny is, when it comes down to it, to be either self-effacing or aggressive, and although I'm no sociologist I think that throughout American history up until maybe a couple of decades ago those traits were possibly seen as less than ladylike. Adam Carolla is 48. I'm 34; anyone younger than I am (and pretty much any relevant young up-and-coming comedic talent falls into that category) has been raised in a cultural climate in which gender roles have blurred or even reversed in certain instances (one example: since 2000 almost 60% of enrollees at U.S. colleges have been women; I don't know what the percentages were in, say, 1961, but I'll bet you a dollar there were more men than women going to college back then).

[actually I just looked it up; "That contrasts with 1960, when there were 1.6 males for every female graduating from a U.S. four-year college and 1.55 males for every female undergraduate."]

That's just one example, but it amounts to a seismic cultural shift in the course of just a couple generations. Therefore, I submit that it's not crazy to think other seismic cultural shifts have occurred in that time, and that maybe "having their comedic sensibilities encouraged rather than discouraged" is something that girls and women have been doing a great deal more of recently than in the past. There may or may not have been as many funny women as funny men in Adam Carolla's formative years, but where he goes wrong is to attribute that fact (and I only call it a "fact" for the sake of argument so don't get mad at me) to something innate in the sexes, rather than to the effects of societal conditioning. It would be like looking at the rosters of every NHL team and concluding that

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white people were inherently the best hockey players on the planet. It's obviously a flawed conclusion; hockey players are overwhelmingly white because hockey is only played in Canada, Scandinavia and the suburbs of Minneapolis. Hockey players are white because only white people play hockey. Comedians are men because only men do comedy (or did, up until about a generation ago. With notable exceptions, obviously; but come on... if you're not going to let me make a few points by generalizing and oversimplifying, then we'll be here all night).

The hockey thing is not the world's best analogy, perhaps, but my point is that Adam Carolla may only be guilty of surveying a comedy landscape that may have existed to some extent up until the '80s or '90s, assuming that things have remained the same since then, and misinterpreting why they were that way to begin with. Which is still a surprisingly tone-deaf assessment for such a perceptive man to make, but if you're being honest I do think you have to admit that that's not the same as being a sexist pig (after all, at the risk of employing the "some of my best friends are black guys!" defense, I'd point out that on his radio show and subsequent podcast dating back to 2006 Adam Carolla has, of his own volition, employed two whip-smart and hilarious female sidekicks in Teresa Strasser and Alison Rosen).

One more contributing factor: in Adam Carolla's new book he talks about being a semi-literate, athletic, yet directionless post-high school loser who thought maybe he'd look into being a firefighter. This was in the early '80s. He put in an application and never heard anything back until, literally eight years later, he got a call that said something to the effect of, "We got to your firefighter application, come down and check us out next week." He went to check them out and found himself in line next to a smallish olive-skinned woman and, having waited eight years to hear from anybody, he asked her when she'd put her application in. "Tuesday," she replied.

If that's your life experience when it comes to something like affirmative action, then maybe it's a little more understandable if you're a bit prickly regarding the concept of hiring a certain type of person just to make sure you've got enough of that type of person on staff. Not excusable, perhaps, but at least understandable. It's like how my late grandfather was pretty racist, which is obviously bad, but given that he fought in WWII in the Pacific theatre for a few years you were always kind of tempted to cut him a little bit of slack when it came to his distaste for the Japanese.

Anyway. This has been my attempt to reconcile somebody I deeply enjoy and admire saying things with which I fundamentally disagree. "Women aren't funny" is a nonsensical thing to say, as nonsensical as saying something like "tall people aren't funny" or "people with attached earlobes aren't funny." Thankfully, it wouldn't occur to almost anyone my age or younger to claim that women aren't funny. And Adam Carolla didn't say that, which is worth

noting. I think it's also worth noting what he actually did say, and why I think he said it, and that I still think he was incorrect.

[People with attached earlobes, by the way, are horrific genetic freaks]
