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by CAITLIN FLANAGAN

**T**HREE COMICS SAT around a café table in the chilly atrium of the Minneapolis Convention Center, talking about how to create the cleanest possible set. “Don’t do what’s in your gut,” Zoltan Kaszas said. “Better safe than sorry,” Chinedu Unaka offered. Feraz Ozel mused about the first time he’d ever done stand-up: three minutes on giving his girlfriend herpes and banging his grandma. That was out.

This was not a case of professionals approaching a technical problem as an intellectual exercise. Money was riding on the answer. They had come to Minneapolis in the middle of a brutal winter for the annual convention of the National Association for Campus Activities (naca), to sell themselves and their comedy on the college circuit. Representatives of more than 350 colleges had come as well, to book comics, musicians, sword swallows, unicyclists, magicians, hypnotists, slam poets, and every kind of

boat act, inspirational speaker, and one-trick pony you could imagine for the next academic year.

For the comics, the college circuit offers a lucrative alternative to Chuckle Hut gigs out on the pitiless road, spots that pay a couple hundred bucks and a free night in whatever squat the club owner uses to warehouse out-of-town talent. College gigs pay easily a grand a night—often much more—and they can come in a firecracker string, with relatively short drives between schools, each hour-long performance paid for (without a moment’s ugliness or hesitation) by a friendly student-activities kid holding out a check and hoping for a selfie. For all these reasons, thousands of comics dream of being invited to the convention.

The colleges represented were—to use a word that their emissaries regard as numinous—diverse: huge research universities, tiny liberal-arts colleges, Catholic schools, land-grant institutions. But the students’ taste in entertainment was uniform. They liked their slam poets to deliver the goods in tones of the highest seriousness and on subjects of lunar bleak-

ness; they favored musicians who could turn out covers with cheerful precision; and they wanted comedy that was 100 percent risk-free, comedy that could not trigger or upset or mildly trouble a single student. They wanted comedy so thoroughly scrubbed of barb and aggression that if the most hypersensitive weirdo on campus mistakenly wandered into a performance, the words he would hear would fall on him like a soft rain, producing a gentle chuckle and encouraging

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him to toddle back to his dorm, tuck himself in, and commence a dreamless sleep—not text Mom and Dad that some monster had upset him with a joke.

Two of the most respected American comedians, Chris Rock and Jerry Seinfeld, have discussed the unique problems that comics face on college campuses. In November, Rock told Frank Rich in an interview for *New York* magazine that he no longer plays colleges, because they're "too conservative." He didn't necessarily mean that the students were Republican; he meant that they were far too eager "not to offend anybody." In college gigs, he said, "you can't even be offensive on your way to being inoffensive." Then, in June, Seinfeld reopened the debate—and set off a frenzied round of op-eds—when he said in a radio interview that comics warn him not to "go near colleges—they're so PC."

When I attended the convention in Minneapolis in February, I saw ample evidence of the repressive atmosphere that Rock and Seinfeld described, as well as another, not unrelated factor: the infantilization of the American undergraduate, and this character's evolving status in the world of higher learning—less a student than a consumer, someone whose whims and affectations (political, sexual, pseudo-intellectual) must be constantly supported and championed. To understand this change, it helps to think of college not as an institution of scholarly pursuit but as the all-inclusive resort that it has in recent years become—and then to think of the undergraduate who drops out or transfers as an early checkout. Keeping hold of that kid for all four years has become a central obsession of the higher-ed-industrial complex. How do you do it? In part, by importing enough jesters and bards to keep him from wandering away to someplace more entertaining, taking his Pell grant and his 529 plan and his student loans with him.

But which jesters, which bards? Ones who can handle the challenge. Because when you put all of these forces together—political correctness, coddling, and the need to keep kids at once amused and unoffended (not to mention the absence of a two-drink minimum and its crowd-lubricating effect)—the black-box theater of an obscure liberal-arts college deep in flyover territory may just be the toughest comedy room in the country.

**“YOU CAN'T USE LOGIC** on these people,” Geoff Keith told me over dinner at the Hilton, “or then they think you're a dick.” He was about to walk through one of the frigid skyways connecting a cluster of downtown hotels to the Minneapolis Convention Center, where he would perform for 1,000 potential buyers, but he evinced not a trace of anxiety other than to glance at his iPhone now and then to make sure he wasn't late.

Keith is one of the kings of the college circuit. A few years ago, he was the most-booked college comic, playing 120 campuses. He charges \$2,300 for a single performance.

Keith is 31, fast-witted and handsome, possessed of an acute and often witheringly precise ability to assess people and situations. He rocketed into comedy at a young age; at 22 he spent a year and a half on the road, performing with a popular headliner: Pablo Francisco, who let him do half an hour, and allowed him to tell filthy stories onstage. (Keith was a good-looking kid working big gigs in Vegas and Dallas and Chicago; he wasn't short on filthy stories.) For a while he was in danger of becoming too dirty for mainstream audiences, but he's smart and ambitious, so he toned down his material, put together a television reel, and sharpened his crowd work. He now has TV credits and a following. He lives in Los Angeles, where he kills at clubs, goes on auditions, and waits—impatiently, as do all the young and talented people in Hollywood who have passed 30—for the big break.

Until then, there's the college market, and the logic problem. Trying to explain to these kids any of the fundamental truths of stand-up—from why it's not a good idea to hold a comedy show in the cafeteria during lunch hour, to why jokes involving gay people aren't necessarily homophobic—is a nonstarter, and only serves to antagonize the customers. The logic problem is also responsible for the fact that many of the comics at the convention weren't very funny, and several of those who were funny didn't get much work, despite garnering huge laughs and even standing ovations.

A young gay man with a Broadway background named Kevin Yee sang novelty songs about his life, producing a delirium of affection from the audience. “We love you, Kevin!” a group of kids yelled between numbers. He invited students to the front of the auditorium for a “gay dance party,” and they charged down to take part. His last song, about the close relationship that can develop between a gay man and his “sassy black friend,” was a killer closer; the kids roared in delight, and several African American young women in the crowd seemed to be self-identifying as sassy black friends. I assumed Yee would soon be barnstorming the country. But afterward, two white students from an Iowa college shook their heads: no. He was “perpetuating stereotypes,” one of them said, firmly. “We’re a very forward-thinking school,” she told me. “That thing about the ‘sassy black friend’? That wouldn’t work for us.” Many others, apparently, felt the same way: Yee ended up with 18 bookings—a respectable showing, but hardly a reflection of the excitement in the room when he performed.

If your goal were simply to bring great comics to a college campus, it would be easily accomplished. You would gather the school’s comedy nerds, give them a budget, and tell them to book the best acts they could afford. But then you’d have Doug Stanhope explaining to religious kids that there’s no God, or Dennis Miller telling an audience of social-justice warriors that France’s efforts to limit junk food in schools are part of the country’s “master plan to raise healthier cowards.” You would have, in other words, performers whose desire is not to soothe an audience but to unsettle it, performers who hew to Roseanne Barr’s understanding of comedy: “I love stand-up. I’m totally addicted to it,” she once said. “It’s free speech. It’s all that’s left.”

College campuses have never been incubators for great stand-up; during the 1960s and ’70s, schools didn’t dedicate much money to bringing in entertainers, and by the time they did, PC culture had taken off. This culture—its noble aspirations and inevitable end game—was everywhere apparent at the convention. In the lavishly produced, 144-page brochure, I found a densely written block of text that began with a trumpet blast of idealism—“naca is committed to advancing diversity development and the principles of equal opportunity and affirmative action through its respective programs”—but wound down to a muf-



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fled fart of unintended consequences: “There is no intent to support censorship.”

Bringing great artists to colleges is not NACA’s mission. Its mission involves presenting for potential employment on American campuses a group of entertainers whose work upholds a set of ideas that has been codified by bureaucrats. And in the comedians’ desperate attempts to grasp the realpolitik of the college market—and to somehow reverse engineer an act catered to it—you could see why stand-up is such a singular form: it is mercilessly ineffective as agit-prop.

**B**ECAUSE OF THE INCLINATION to hold a convention in Minneapolis in February is not widely shared, the convention center was largely deserted and dystopian. Homeless men, some wearing hospital gowns and ID bracelets under their parkas, slunk quietly inside to keep warm, although if they panhandled or menaced anyone they were bounced back onto the urban tundra by security guards. Vast expanses of the structure loomed in all directions, and empty escalators wheeled ever upward. During the day, “educational sessions” on topics of inexpressible tedium—“Wave Goodbye to Low

Volunteer Retention”—droned on, testament (as are the educational sessions of a hundred other conferences) to the fact that the growth field in higher education is not Elizabethan literature or organic chemistry but mid-level administration.

All of this was enlivened—mightily—by the fact that the doors of the main auditorium regularly swung open for two-hour variety shows. These shows were like episodes of America’s Got Talent—jolly and sparkly, sometimes diverting and sometimes wearisome—but in contrast to the lectures on volunteer retention, the gloomy convention center, and the gelid metropolis beyond, they came to seem like examples of the highest reaches of human achievement, and it was not mere journalistic zeal that had me thundering down the main aisle to grab a good seat for each new showcase.

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The kids in the audience belonged to their schools’ student-activities committees, and had thus been appointed the task of picking the paid entertainment for the next year. I found them, as a type, to be cheerful, helpful, rule-following, and nerdy. They were also—in the best sense of a loaded word—inclusive. “We don’t want to sponsor an event that would offend anyone,” Courtney Bennett, the incoming president of the student-activities board at Western Michigan University, told me. The naca kids were impossible not to like, although nothing about them suggested a natural talent for identifying original forms of artistic expression. They would cluster around their grown-up advisers like flocks of ducklings to powwow about the performers they had seen. Then, with the casual ease of people spending someone else’s money, they would use an app to blast potential dates to the artists they liked. These were the buyers, then: one half of the equation.

The entertainers were the other half. They had come to the event on their own dime, and were trying to do whatever it took to please these young people so that they could get some road work. Their first step might have been to read the convention brochure. naca, it explained, is dedicated to “promoting the importance” of “eliminating” any language that is “discriminatory or culturally insensitive.”

O, Utopia. Why must your sweet governance always turn so quickly from the Edenic to the Stalinist? The college revolutions of the 1960s—the ones that gave rise to the social-justice warriors of today’s campuses—were fueled by free speech. But once you’ve won a culture war, free speech is a nuisance, and “eliminating” language becomes a necessity.

The process begins, as such processes always do, in a committee of “undisclosed members.” In the fall, an anonymous group of staff and volunteers reviews hundreds of submission tapes to determine which performers will get to showcase their acts at the convention. What this seemed to boil down to, when I looked at the slate of performers who had gotten a golden ticket, was that comics who even gestured toward the insensitive had been screened out, and those whose racial or ethnic background contributed to the diversity of the slate had been given special consideration.

There were comics of Nigerian, Afghan Pakistani, Indian, Hispanic, and Korean—African American heritage. Some were very good. But others barely had the 15 minutes necessary for a showcase; it was hard to believe they would have the hour needed for college work. Many of these younger artists thought that if they could just get the gigs off this audition, they could then do their regular club act once they showed up on campus. They were mistaken. Tell a joke that upsets the kids, and the next morning the student-activities director is going to be on the phone: to your agent, to NACA, and—more crucially—to his or her co-equals at the other four colleges in the region that you booked.

Geoff Keith had counseled Chinedu Unaka and Feraz Ozel not only to work clean, but also to confine any jokes about ethnicity to their own heritage. Unaka delivered an original and interesting set about growing up black in Los Angeles, the son of Nigerian—not African American—parents; Ozel, whose family is Middle Eastern, also did a bit about his cultural background. They were both well received, but they earned few bookings. Who could predict how such jokes would go over back on campus? Zoltan Kaszas, on the other hand, did a cheerful, anodyne set about Costco, camping, and pets. He was the breakout star of the convention. “Look at him,” one student group’s adviser said to me as more than 40 campus reps clamored for a visit from Kaszas. “His career just got made.” Another victory for better-safe-than-sorry.

As I listened to the kids hash out whom to invite, it became clear that to get work, a comic had to be at once funny—genuinely funny—and also deeply respectful of a particular set of beliefs. These beliefs

included, but were in no way limited to, the following: women, as a group, should never be made to feel uncomfortable; people whose sexual orientation falls beyond the spectrum of heterosexuality must be reassured of their special value; racial injustice is best addressed in tones of bitter anguish or inspirational calls to action; Muslims are friendly helpers whom we should cherish; and belonging to any potentially “marginalized” community involves a crippling hypersensitivity that must always be respected.

The students’ determination to avoid booking any acts that might conceivably hurt the feelings of a classmate was in its way quite admirable. They seemed wholly animated by kindness and by an open-mindedness to the many varieties of the human experience. But the flip side of this sensitivity is the savagery with which reputations and even academic careers can be destroyed by a single comment—perhaps thoughtless, perhaps misinterpreted, perhaps (God help you) intended as a joke—that violates the values of the herd.

When you talk with college students outside of formal settings, many reveal nuanced opinions on the issues that naca was so anxious to police. But almost all of them have internalized the code that you don’t laugh at politically incorrect statements; you complain about them. In part, this is because they are the inheritors of three decades of identity politics, which have come to be a central driver of attitudes on college campuses. But there’s more to it than that. These kids aren’t dummies; they look around their colleges and see that there are huge incentives to join the ideological bandwagon and harsh penalties for questioning the platform’s core ideas.

Meanwhile—as obvious reaction to all of this—frat boys and other campus punksters regularly flout the thought police by staging events along elaborately racist themes, events that, while patently vile, are beginning to constitute the free-speech movement of our time. The closest you’re going to get to Mario Savio—sick at heart about the operation of the machine and willing to throw himself upon its gears and levers—is less the campus president of Human Rights Watch than the moron over at Phi Sigma Kappa who plans the Colonial Bros and Nava-Hos mixer.

**A**FTER GEOFF KEITH AND I finished dinner, we made our way to the auditorium and fell in with a group of other comics who were heading over to catch his set. Keith is deeply respected in this crowd: he may still be developing his career in the real comedy world, the one where you perform for grown-ups, but he can book as many colleges as he wants.

Keith was dressed not in the understated clothing he wears in comedy clubs, but in an almost clownish getup: bright-pink pants, a green shirt, a polka-dot tie. The outfit was strategic—he didn’t want a kid forgetting his name and booking the wrong comic; he would remind the audience to think of him as the guy in the pink pants. Instead of performing for 15 minutes, he would cut his set short at the first big laugh after the 12-minute mark, so that the act would seem to fly by. He would tell jokes about his fiancée’s strict father, and getting out of jury duty, and tricking someone by using an English accent. The students would love him, and book him in great numbers, as they always do.

But he would not tell the jokes that kill at the clubs. He would not do the bit that ends with him offering oral sex to the magician David Copperfield, or the one about a seductive woman warning him that she might be an ax murderer, or the one about why men don’t like to use condoms. Those jokes include observations about power and sex and even rape—and each, in its complicated way, addresses certain ugly and possibly immutable truths. But they are jokes, not lessons from the gender-studies classroom. Their first objective is to be funny, not to service any philosophical ideal. They go where comedy always wants to go, to the darkness, and they sucker-punch you with a laugh when you don’t think you should laugh.

And maybe you shouldn’t. These young people have decided that some subjects—among them rape and race—are so serious that they shouldn’t be fodder for comics. They want a world that’s less cruel; they want to play a game that isn’t rigged in favor of the powerful. And it’s their student-activities money, after all—they have every right to hire the exact type of entertainment that matches their beliefs. Still, there’s always a price to pay for walling off discussion of certain thoughts and ideas. Drive those ideas underground, especially the dark ones, and they fester.

Sarah Silverman has described the laugh that comes with a “mouth full of blood”—the hearty laugh from the person who understands your joke not as a critique of some vile notion but as an endorsement of it. It’s the essential peril of comedy, as performers from Dave Chappelle to, most recently, Amy Schumer understand all too well. But to enroll in college and discover that for almost every aspect of your experience—right down to the stand-up comics who tell jokes in the student union—great care has been taken to expose you to only the narrowest range of approved social and political opinions: that’s the mouth full of blood right there.