



## The Comic Offense from Vaudeville to Contemporary Comedy: Larry David, Tina Fey, Stephen Colbert, and Dave Chappelle

By Rick DesRochers

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*The Comic Offense from Vaudeville to Contemporary Comedy* examines how contemporary writer/performers are influenced by the comedic vaudevillians of the early 20th century. By tracing the history and legacy of the vaudeville era and performance acts, like the Marx Brothers and The Three Keatons, and moving through the silent and early sound films of the early 1930s, the author looks at how comic writer/performers continue to sell a brand of themselves as a form of social commentary in order to confront and dispel stereotypes of race, class, and gender.

The first study to explore contemporary popular comic culture and its influence on American society from this unique perspective, Rick DesRochers analyzes stand-up and improvisational comedy writing/performing in the work of Larry David, Tina Fey, Stephen Colbert, and Dave Chappelle. He grounds these choices by examining their evolution as they developed signature characters and sketches for their respective shows *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *30 Rock*, *The Colbert Report*, and *Chappelle's Show*.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

Through imaginative pairings, including Groucho Marx and Larry David, Mae West and Tina Fey, and Will Rogers and Stephen Colbert, *The Comic Offense* demonstrates how today's cutting edge comedy builds upon the legacy of Vaudeville, demonstrating yet again that everything old is new again. Along the way, readers will develop a deeper understanding of how comedy has spoken to us across time about issues of gender, racial, and ethnic identity. The analysis is insightful; the examples are provocative; and the writing is engaging. Henry Jenkins, Provost's Professor of Communications, Journalism, Cinematic Arts and Education, University of Southern California, USA, and author of *What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* In unfolding the history and legacy of American vaudeville and its influence on such contemporary comics as Larry David, Tina Fey, Stephen Colbert, and Dave Chappelle, *The Comic Offense* explores the concept of 'the vaudeville aesthetic' through the lenses of race, gender, religion, and class. The connections Rick DesRochers draws between early and contemporary comics are timely and fascinating, illuminating the rarely discussed modern influence of vaudeville. Joanna E. Rapf, Professor of English and Film & Video Studies, University of Oklahoma, USA DesRochers (theater, Long Island Univ., Post) offers a unique analysis of modern American comedy through pairing a vaudeville-era performer with a contemporary comic: Groucho Marx and Larry David, Mae West and Tina Fey, Will Rodgers and Stephen Colbert, Bert Williams and Dave Chappelle. The volume begins with an analysis of the vaudeville aesthetic and traces its evolution through radio and television into post-1960s stand-up and improv comedy and finally into new media (Internet, and so on). Then, through four chapters, each devoted to one pair, the author examines how performers of the last century reinforce, deconstruct, confront, and undermine stereotypes of ethnicity and gender, considering not only the pairings listed above but also relevant and similar comedians. Eminently readable and yet densely packed with history, theory, and jokes, the book is an excellent model for how to write about comedy, given E. B. White's famous dictum, "Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it." The humor is alive in this volume and shown to be part of a living tradition of social commentary through comedy. Summing Up: Essential. All readers. -- K. J. Wetmore Jr., Loyola Marymount University CHOICE, January 2015

#### About the Author

**Rick DesRochers** is an Associate Professor of Theatre at Long Island University Post, US, and an Associate Artist at the PlayPenn New Play Development Conference. He has served as the Literary Director of New Play and Musical Development for the Joseph Papp Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival and The Goodman Theatre of Chicago, as well as the Artistic Director of the New Theatre in Boston. He holds an M.F.A. in stage direction and dramaturgy from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, US, and a Ph.D. in Theatre from the City University of New York, Graduate Center. He is also the author of *The New Humor in the Progressive Era: Americanization and the Vaudeville Comedian*.

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