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Commentary on Kramer: Michael Richards' rant, racism and to heck with hecklers

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This still image captured from video, released by TMZ.com shows comedian Michael Richards during a comedy routine at the Laugh Factory, in West Hollywood, Calif., Friday, Nov. 17, 2006. Richards, best known for playing Jerry Seinfeld's eccentric neighbor Kramer on "Seinfeld," stunned the audience, shouting racial epithets at people who heckled him during the standup routine.

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By **Robin A. Rothman**
Times Herald-Record

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"I lost my temper on stage. I was at a comedy club trying to do my act and I got heckled and I took it badly and went into a rage and said some pretty nasty things to some Afro-Americans - a lot of trash talk."

So went an apology from Michael Richards, former star of the hit sitcom 'Seinfeld' and shunned celeb du jour after a potentially racist tirade at a comedy club last weekend.

"Shut up! Fifty years ago we'd have you upside down with a f***ing fork up your ass," he told black members of his audience.

In an attempt to alleviate the public backlash, Jerry Seinfeld, who was already scheduled to appear on "The Late Show With David Letterman," invited Richards on to address the public and "explain what happened."

Richards says he has some personal issues to work on. And that's true enough. The hatred that Richards demonstrated isn't something that is borne suddenly in a pressure situation; it exists already.

We're not a stupid nation (are we?). We know that racism is still a huge problem. And every once in a while, a celebrity - be it an A-lister like Mel Gibson or a D-lister like Richards - is kind enough to provide us with documentation, allowing us to bring that issue back into the public consciousness.

But there's another issue Richards' rant brings to light, one that isn't being discussed. It's not even remotely as important as racism, but it's prevalent nonetheless.

Hecklers: What's the deal with them?

Why do people pay good money to go to comedy shows only to ruin it for the comedian, the audience and themselves? This was a question posed this weekend by another comedian: Patton Oswalt, who was in the middle of his 8 p.m. performance at Caroline's in New York City when he finally had enough.

He turned to the table in question and he pointed out that there's a trick he likes to play when people are talking loudly during his set. He lowers his voice to almost a whisper and slowly but surely the loudmouths lower their voices as well. But why, he wondered, would you waste your money on a ticket to a show? He compared it to spending \$5,000 on a prostitute then ahem, taking care of one's own business before partaking in the pro's services.

"What," he wondered, "could be so important?"

When one of the guilty party's cohorts explained that his friends were foreign and that the act was being lost in translation, Oswalt didn't back down. He asked where they were from. Upon learning

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they were from Holland he dug in.

"Set-up, set-up, set-up, punchline... wooden shoes."

Oswalt turned the tables by handling the situation that way. For the rest of the set, he provided sidebars to aspects of his jokes. When he referred to his experience in an Amsterdam coffee house as being like Templeton the rat, he turned to his new foreign friends and, in rapid-fire style, explained that "Charlotte's Web" is a children's book by E.B. White in which ... etc.

Heckling is so much a part of the comedy experience that in this last season of "Last Comic Standing," the contestants' first challenge was to heckle and be heckled.

In fact, many of the comedy shows I've attended in the last few years have boiled down to a comedian dealing with the dumbasses in the audience. At Bananas a couple years back, Dave Attell had a table of rowdy military at a front table that took his act completely off course, to the extent that the majority of the show was Attell insulting the women at the table and their dates thinking it was a blast.

At Dane Cook's HBO special in April, one of two hecklers made it into the final cut. The one that didn't air was a young woman in the front row who wanted Cook to take a picture with her in the middle of his set. The one that did air was a drunk young man who approached the stage. After indulging him for a minute or two, Cook pointed out that he needed to get back to his show. But as Jake, as he tells Cook his name is, walked up the steps back to his seat, Cook jumped off the stage and ran after him, tapped him on the shoulder and said "Jake, good to see you man."

And though I wasn't there, I've seen the footage of Bill Burr's now legendary performance in Philadelphia. When the crowd wouldn't let him do his act, Burr began a 10-minute barrage of insults directed at the citizens of Philly. Counting down between slams, Burr refused to give up even a second of his allotted time. The set is painful, but poetic.

Even during Monday's Letterman episode the topic comes up. Seinfeld wrote the forward to the book "I Killed: True Stories of the Road from America's Top Comics," a series of first-hand accounts by comedians. He tells a story, in the book and repeated on the show, about beng heckled by what he later learned was a mob boss. The punchline being that it was Seinfeld who was thrown out, not the heckler.

How one deals with hecklers says almost as much about the comedian as his or her regular material. So what does this brouhaha tell us about the artist formerly known as Kramer? Stick to the scripts, guy.

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Read [about the apology](#)

[Video: the tirade \(disturbing language\)](#)

[Video: the apology](#)

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