

Traces of Humor

By Olayemi Titus Falodun

“You put them to sleep, you wake them up,” were the wise words of the judge in Paul Levine’s first trial as a lawyer. Levine put that advice to good practice beyond the courtroom, as he returned to his alma mater as inaugural speaker of the 2007-08 Penn State Forum series. At the Penn Stater Conference Center and Hotel, with over 300 guests present, Levine kept everyone awake with laughter and wit, outlining the ways in which he has used humor and politics throughout his career.

Levine is celebrated for the Solomon and Lord, as well as Jake Lassiter Series. Additionally, he wrote TV scripts that include CBS’ *First Monday* and *JAG*. Still, it is Levine’s quips that transform him to George Carlin with a typewriter, and distinguishes him from others. Similarly to Carlin, Levine is able to capture a scholarly audience’s taste for insight, with a hint of tongue-in-cheek. In a room seated with ranging views, from President Graham Spanier to a wide-eyed student writer, Levine brought laughs to all. Paralleling his abilities to that of a storytelling caveman explains Levine’s sense of humorous social commentary.

He formed an anagram from Monica Lewinsky’s name (insane milky cow), drawing the hilarity out of a real life drama at the time. The whole Lewinsky episode with former President Bill Clinton was an issue in the court of public opinion, while being a crucial mark in American law as to what is lying. That anagram can serve as a metaphor to *white lies* and the media’s milking of a story for all it’s worth. Either way, a simple wordplay on a name becomes the catalyst to public discourse about the ridiculousness of a serious political issue. However, the White House is not the only place where one encounters politics and humor as Levine points out.

Being dubbed the “oldest rookie writer in Hollywood,” Levine continues to search for his niche in Tinsel Town, while finding a studio that will pick up his story ideas. You would think a John D. MacDonald fiction award winner would make a smooth adaptation on screen. Unfortunately, he has to write for younger producers, directors, and audiences, who are more focused on science fiction. Levine has discovered the limits of his authority after selling one of his first scripts. The director overseeing the movie production (of his script) was in charge, despite Levine’s interest to monitor the production. The director told him that selling a script was like selling a car, “you sold the car, and now you want to drive it. What you’re really going to do is watch me driving pass.” So much for creative licensing; it means nothing without a story under your control.

There is, however, one story under Levine’s control, his life. The former *Daily Collegian* editor-in-chief turned famed writer released *Trial & Error*, a recent installment of the Solomon and Lord Series that continues the Levine way of writing. He also plans for a Mexican migrant labor basis for an upcoming book. Self proclaiming that he is bad predictor, I wonder if Paul Levine foresaw his writing opening minds up for discussions and mouths up for laughter. Essentially, that is what his speech did.

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