

# Humour is encouraging!

Conversation with Ragna Wallmark\*

## What is the difference between children's humour and adult humour?

Children laugh at the same things as adults and they laugh about them together. When watching something next to their parents they may laugh because the grown-ups laugh.

But there are things that small children, at least, laugh about that grown-ups don't laugh about in the same ways. When a child at the age of three or four, who learns the appropriate way to talk and the appropriate way to behave, sees the mother start doing things like putting bed sheets out on the floor instead of putting them onto the bed, he/she would find this hysterically amusing. They are testing what's right and they have a sense of what is appropriate. When someone does something in the 'wrong' way they can say, "Oh, I know how it should be." That's really reassuring for the child. But this boundary area is tricky, because if a child really doesn't know what is appropriate, if they are not sure, they'll just be confused (by such humorous mistakes).

Slapstick works a lot with children when they are six to seven years old. Slapstick is, of course, when people are not able to handle things like tying their shoe strings, tying them to the other shoe instead of to the correct one, and not noticing that they are wrong and hence falling.

That's very amusing when you're seven, unless those people really hurt themselves and start to cry. But if they seem to be okay, and happy even, when they roll around and say "Aie!," then children don't feel sad.

## Is there something like a Nordic humour?

I really don't know. I've always thought that humour in Sweden is very much like British humour, because some of the British series do very well in Sweden. They don't do well in France or Germany, I think. I don't know whether there's a special Nordic children's humour. Definitely, there is a sort of humour that children share among themselves such as naughty stories, or the sort of stories



that grown-ups wouldn't understand, and this makes them laugh a lot amongst themselves.

*Pippi Longstrom* (*Pippi Longstocking*) is a good example of children's

humour which grown-ups sometimes get scared of. Now and then in Sweden we get a so-called *Pippi Longstrom* debate. That is when you cross a border in a television programme or in a book, and you do something that's challenging. The grown-ups start to wonder: "Well, will the children take this seriously? Will they understand the humour?" Maybe children will do something that they are not supposed to do like Pippi Longstrom going to the party, grabbing the cake in front of everybody without waiting for the grown-ups to take some first! People were outraged about that in the 1940s. They thought it might teach children to behave really badly. Actually it has had exactly the opposite effect because children are so aware of what is allowed and what not. They laugh a lot about someone daring to do what's not allowed in reality ... and yet they would never do it.

## What is and what is not funny across the globe?

Handling authority is something that works everywhere, but it's different in different cultures, of course. In Sweden it's not very dangerous to say something against your teacher. It might really be dangerous in South Africa or Australia. In Germany you don't laugh a lot about those in positions of power; that's the way we view you. Germans are very respectful of their authorities. You can laugh

about grown-ups being sort of mad or off their heads, but this seldom applies to teachers or authorities. But the universal element of it occurs when someone who is small, and without power, gains power by humour.

Something else which I think works all over the world is visual humour accompanied by music, or sound effects. But there are specific limits in different countries to what is negotiable in humorous terms: In the Western world you could joke a lot using food. Spoiling food wouldn't be funny in a continent where there's not enough food and people are close to starvation, as in Africa. They wouldn't understand it. Why would someone throw food away in that way? And we can see a lot of it on TV. For example, cakes are thrown all over the place in American and many European programmes.

And I haven't seen someone trying to be funny in connection with the murder of our Prime Minister. And that was in 1986. I've not yet heard or seen anyone trying to be funny about the fact that he was shot. There are certain things that will be taboo for a long time or forever. Although you can make jokes about wars, Taliban, terrorists, also reflecting people's fear of these things.

### **What is humour in children's television mostly based on?**

Visual humour and 'nonsense' work well with children. In children's programmes, Americans for example rely a lot on technical effects, whereas humour for teenagers and grown-ups is largely based on linguistic comedy. Sound and music are great elements in European humour. Put the wrong music to the pictures, for example, which can change the picture altogether. Making dangerous things look funny – this is a very strong element in humour. Because, even for chil-

dren, all humour is, in a way, based on things they are afraid of. For example toilet humour: Most people are really anxious about farting in the wrong place. If you're going to make a speech, and then go up and –. That's a terror for people. Seeing people doing exactly that makes us laugh, of course. A lot of humour is based on things you are really, really basically afraid of. Toilet humour works especially with small children. That's something about their bodies that they recently learnt how to control. And they're still afraid of not being in control. Playing to the expectation, or to the wrong expectation. When we as an audience know something that they don't know on screen, that's hilarious. It's always humorous toying with people who have power over you like teachers or parents.

### *A lot of humour is based on things you are really, really afraid of*

There are some humour issues that aren't suitable for children. A drunken person is not funny for a child, they're scary; especially if the child is close to someone who drinks too much. It's not funny to see someone being drunk. It is, however, funny to see someone acting sort of "mad", and doing the same things as a drunk person, but without alcohol.

And I would cut out irony, because this doesn't work until you're well into your teens. There have been many attempts to use irony with children, and it doesn't work at all. I don't think it would work anywhere. It could even be scary for small children, because they may take it literally.

### **Is there something like good or bad humour in children's television?**

There should be humour in all sorts of programmes. Different sorts in dif-

ferent programmes. It's very hard to make children's programmes without humour in them, even if they're about serious subjects. You should always be able to turn them into something humorous. In a manner of speaking, humour can lift children up and make them see difficult things from another angle. It works best if it is done with warmth. Nasty humour doesn't work very well amongst children. It could, but it's difficult.

One thing that children love is revenge done in a humorous way. If some authority has gotten at you, and you can, by humour, succeed over that person in one way or another. You can win morally even if you're punished for something if you can use humour to undermine the punisher or the punishment. This works marvelously with children because they're so often not the ones who have the power of making decisions. They constantly lose against the grown-up world. And when they can take revenge in a humorous way, it works really, really well. I think we should look for more like that in children's programmes. Because they need it. It gives you courage! ■



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