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Commentary, analysis and investigations
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May 8, 2008 - Issue 276

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**The Re-Education of Jay Leno:
A Mother's Day Reminder to Respect Black Women (and all Women)
Between the Lines
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The Jenesse Center is the oldest and most respected domestic violence organization for black women in the city of Los Angeles. Its battered women shelters and family protection programming are services of great renown and offer women and children the opportunity to get new starts in their unstable lives. Not many groups do "God's work" in the way they do, so it's important to hold them up in high esteem and defend them against any assaults of esteem of their clients and supporters. Why? Because domestic violence often begins with verbal assaults on a woman's self-esteem, but evolves into continual psychological and physical attacks on her person that does lifelong damage.

So when the Jenesse Center holds its annual fundraiser, it's "Silver Rose" luncheon, the community turns out en masse. Oscar winning Actress, Halle Berry, has adopted the agency and become its spokesperson, as an extraordinary example of a woman being able to shine in the aftermath of domestic violence, overcoming her own history of abusive relationships. The Silver Rose luncheon takes on an air of celebrity as women (and men) from all walks of life come together to recognize those in the community who do good works and to raise money to sustain the program.

This year, Halle leveraged her Hollywood contacts to the hilt and brought in late night TV host and comedian, Jay Leno, to conduct a live auction. Leno is respected for his charity work and the community appreciated him being there. And, as with all comedians, you never know what you're gonna get in terms of what they think is

funny. Comedian/borderline "crazy" funny-woman, Wanda Sykes was Mistress of Ceremonies, so you kind of expected the unexpected, given Sykes' brand of humor. However, she was quite tame (relatively speaking) - maybe in deference to the occasion, or the cause. It was Leno who stole the moment - and not for the best thing he could have been known for. Leno was in rare form, making fun of Michael Jackson, and other things black people tend to laugh at. But when the live auction began in the passion of trying to get more money from a wealthy, well connected female bidder, Leno asked a male bidder, "You're not going to let that bitch out bid you, are you?"

It was a moment that both he and the audience knew was totally inappropriate. If you've never seen 500 women's face freeze at one moment, it really not a good thing. It's kinda of a glazed "deer in headlights look" where you can see them thinking...and asking themselves "did he just say what I thought he said" or "did he just call that woman a ...?" That look is usually following with some act of aggression, as the "B"-word, even more then the "N"-word, tends to evoke a mad and violent reaction out of most black woman. Jay recognized his mistake immediately (turning beet red in the process) and tried to play it off (a joke about how he watched "Cheaters" so he knows how black woman "kick ass") but he was luckier that 500 bidding paddles weren't thrown at his a** as that's the type of knee-jerk reaction that word provokes. There is never an "appropriate" time to call a woman a bitch, not even in jest, but to use the word at a domestic violence fundraiser, where the audience is highly sensitized to acts of verbal and psychological abuse, was even more outrageous.

Women who have been abused know the word as a cue that the assault is about to begin, first on her self-esteem, just before the fists start flying and her physical person is assaulted. It was tough to sit there and digest this. The only reason I'm not going ballistic on Jay Leno is because he was there doing some good and he wasn't trying to be (I don't believe) vicious in the way Michael Richards was or benignly ignorant in the way Don Imus claimed to be. Jay Leno hangs out with black people on a regular basis so he understands racial (and religious) sensibilities.

In the context of comedy, we understand that comedy, like tragedy, has no limits. But as he found out a couple weeks ago, all Blacks aren't like Kevin Eubanks - we don't laugh at everything. So, here is where we begin the re-education of Jay Leno about black people, in general, and black women, in particular. With Mother's Day on the way, we all have a need to reinforce the love that we have for our mothers, sisters and daughters. What better time to discuss respect for women, in the context of law number one - never disrespect - than on Mother's Day. Not even jokingly.

Calling any woman, particularly an abused woman (of any race) a bitch is as cruel as eating in front of a starving person, hitting a person in handcuffs, giving shoes to a person with no feet or sending a calendar to an innocent man sentenced to life. You have to be really unconscious to let your mind slip like that. Or really ignorant. It's hard to paint Jay Leno as ignorant because of the point made earlier, so that leaves him as being unconsciously careless. I'm sure he wouldn't be as careless if it were a woman close to him. If another comedian had done the same thing to a woman in Jay's life how would Jay have felt? Let's just say that if he had called my mother a bitch, there would have been some f*ckin' fighting up there. In fact, based on some of the women that I knew were in the audience - had he picked the wrong one, there would have been some f*ckin fighting up there.

So, he was really kinda lucky that time and space worked in his favor on this particular occasion. Jay Leno must always be conscious of whom he's talking to, and cautious as to what he talks about, if he's going to help disenfranchised people. Jay Leno must re-educate himself if he's going to play the role of Good Samaritan. He must do it in total sincerity. Then his good works would be perceived as real. His careless mistake (and some women don't think it was a mistake because it came out of his mouth too) at the Jenesse fundraiser gives the impression he was there just doing a friend a favor.

Jay Leno raised more than \$30,000 (the final count is not in) for the Jenesse Center and this commentary is not intended to take away from the good he actually did. It is to point out that the bad shouldn't outweigh the good, and calling a woman a bitch, in front of 800 people, negates the good Leno was there to do. I mean, is the charity supposed to be glad he showed up, take the money AND ignore the insult?

I don't think so. Jay Leno should publicly apologize to Jenesse Executive Director, Karl Earl, Halle Berry, the Board and supporters of the Jenesse Center, in a newspaper and in their program at next year's fundraiser. I suppose asking a comedian to take the word, bitch, out of their vocabulary, might be a little much (though it would be wise to do it), but might want to save that for your white audiences. White women tend to play with that word a little differently than black women. In conclusion, not even Jay Leno can be so unmindful of his surroundings that he consciously offends the masses. It's like slapping a woman and maintaining that you still love her. That's the way batterers and abusers show "their love." In the end, the woman discovers it's not really love at all. Just another level of abuse, whether the abuser is a drug dealer or a comedian.


So for all the people that were offended by Jay's slip (or slap), we extend to my mother, my wife, my sisters, my daughters, and all mother's everywhere...


A Happy Mother's Day.

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