



Laughing Matters in China

China's version of "The Daily Show."

(Note to self regarding future gigs in China: Please do not do.)

I even asked the client, "Can I try physical humor? Maybe some prat falls?"

The e-mail response that came back stated: "Very unlady-like, please do not do."

It was a long flight, so I had time to prepare material on the plane. The glamorous Cathay Pacific Asian stewardess was my audience. I started by explaining the premise of my speech: Take your job seriously, but not yourself. Make fun of yourself.

She registered horror. "Oh, no! We not talk about or make fun of our shame."

No self-deprecating humor? Nothing about failed romances, failed diets, penis size? Those are the staples of American humor. Nothing makes us laugh as much as our inadequacies. What could I possibly talk about? We were over the North Pole when I got the stewardess to laugh. I asked her why she was covering her mouth and she said, "Laughing at someone is considered rude. Very rude."

"Oy!" I exclaimed.

"Oy? What does that mean?" she asked. And there went my Jewish material.

There was no way I could be funny in China. I was going to be a sitting duck, or perhaps a Peking Duck. After 16 hours on the plane, I came up with only three minutes of material.

Checking into the Grand Hyatt, I was a wreck. But so was the clerk at the reception desk. He couldn't stop apologizing, telling me the server was down and it would be an hour before it was

repaired. That was it!

Thank you, Grand Hyatt. Thank you, God. Thank you, Buddha. Mostly, thank you, Internet Explorer, all servers, cell phones and Windows Vista. I'd finally found something I could joke about that defies time zones and cultural differences. We are all alike in our dependence on the Internet. I sent a text message to the client, asking: "Can I poke fun of technology?"

What came back was, "Please do."

It was the night of the black-tie event with China's most influential business people. I started my act asking the audience if technology was stressing them out.

"How many of you, when you talk without your Blackberry, your thumbs still move?"

Bada-boom, bada-bing! They laughed! I continued on, joking about the frustrations of modern day life.

"Do you stay in a bad relationship because you can't handle upgrades?"

I was a hit. I turned a problem into many punch lines. Onto my next gig—a comedy workshop in Berlin. Oy!

As a motivational humorist and a former stand-up comic, I was hired to entertain at a prestigious Hong Kong awards ceremony because last year's speaker bored the audience. I was excited about the gig until the client asked to see my material and next to every joke wrote: "Please do not do."

The client wanted nothing about marriage, the economy, the workplace, relationships, dogs—basically, any bad news or problems. The title of my gig was "Workplace Humor: Turning Problems into Punch Lines." Although I consider myself something of an expert on this, I couldn't figure out how to turn this problem into a punch line. I couldn't mention problems and all of my punch lines were vetoed. My speech disappeared faster than a bowl of pork lo mien on a Sunday night.

The Chinese corporate lawyer suggested, "Why don't you joke about how beautiful a Hong Kong sunset is?" She will clearly not be asked to create



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