

A Funny Thing Happens When David Zucker Writes Rules

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In 20 years of writing, producing and directing comedy, I never once read a book about it. Prior to that, the longest time I ever went without reading a book was perhaps the four years I spent in college. But that makes it no easier to write about.

In writing ``The Naked Gun 2 1/2: The Smell of Fear,`` I have relied on 15 simple rules of comedy that were formulated while making films with my brother, Jerry, and my partner, Jim Abrahams. (We used to have 19 rules, until four were thrown out after the Falklands War.)

It has been said that comedy is all but impossible to teach, but we found that it was possible to list certain things not to do. These rules are listed below in no particular order. And please don't try these at home.

1. Joke on a joke: We never try to do two jokes at the same time. When Leslie Nielsen, who plays the role of Lt. Frank Drebin of the Los Angeles Police Department, delivers a punch line, he always does it straight; he never tries to be funny on top of it. Likewise, if there is something funny going on in the background, the foreground action must be straight and vice versa. An example in politics: Dukakis and Quayle on the same ticket.

2. Unrelated background: A joke happening in the background must be related in some way to the action in the foreground. A good illustration of this rule occurs in ``Naked Gun 2 1/2`` as Leslie Nielsen complains to George Kennedy over drinks, ``Is it just me, Ed, or is the whole world crazy?``

As George tries to reassure him that ``no, it's just a small percentage of the population,`` the waiter turns to leave and we

see that he's naked under his apron. Unfortunately, half the audience fails to notice this because they're still laughing at the silly drink the waiter has brought the lieutenant, a blatant violation of the joke-on-a-joke rule. But at least now they'll all have to come back to see the movie again.

3. Acknowledgment: Actors in the foreground must ignore jokes happening behind them. In ``Airplane!`` Robert Stack and Lloyd Bridges engage in an argument, while behind them watermelons crash down from the ceiling and Indian spears thud into walls. The actors do a fine job of ignoring the spears and watermelons, but because this bit violated rule No. 2, audiences still didn't laugh. All in all a disappointment, but nothing like the crash tests of the Yugo.

4. Breaking the frame: It's usually not a good idea to remind the audience that they're watching a movie. Robert Hays gets away with it in ``Airplane!`` after Julie Hagerty scolds him in an early scene. He turns to the camera and complains to the audience about his plight.

The movie has to be a strong one to withstand more than one or two of these, because you run the risk of breaking the spell. The suspension of disbelief is of prime importance, much as it was during the Reagan administration.

5. That didn't happen: Completely defying logic is bad, but something that is on and off the screen so fast that we can get away with it is OK. Example: Robert Stack in ``Airplane!`` yells to Lloyd Bridges, ``He can't land; they're on instruments!`` And of course we cut to the cockpit and four of the actors are playing musical instruments. Seconds later, in the next scene, the saxophone and clarinets have disappeared. If it's done right, no one in the audience will ask where the instruments went.

6. Can you live with it? Once a joke is made, it can't be allowed to hang around after the initial laughs, like Gary Hart. In ``Naked Gun`` Leslie and George are seated in a car, munching pistachio nuts.

In the process, their lips and faces get smeared in red. But in the next scene, when Leslie goes snooping in Ricardo Montalban's apartment, he's got to be clean. This rule also applies to personalized license plates. How long can ``HI 2 U`` be funny?

However, Jim Abrahams once found a way around this. In the early '80s, he ordered the license plate of his Volkswagen Rabbit to read, ``BOBS MG,`` just so when somebody pulled alongside him and pointed out that it wasn't an MG, he could reply, ``I'm not Bob, either.``

7. Ax-grinding: Belaboring an ideological point past the humor of the joke. We never ax-grind. Except for, well, maybe some environmental stuff. Sometimes.

8. Self-conscious: Any jokes about the movie business or comedy itself. A strict no-no, except for an isolated instance in ``The Kentucky Fried Movie,`` where the bad guy listed all his nefarious activities, including ``gun running, drug trafficking, motion picture distribution. . . .``

9. Trivia: A joke understood by so few people as to make it not worth the effort. In ``Top Secret!`` a character during an ambush cries out, ``My God, they're going to kill us all!`` An arcane J.F.K. assassination conspiracy reference. Since the movie's release in 1984, only one person we know of has gotten that reference, not enough to make ``Top Secret!`` a hit.

10. Straw dummy: A hollow setup for a joke or when the target is fabricated. Even if the joke hits the target, who cares? We once had an elaborate sequence written for ``Naked Gun 2 1/2`` involving Leslie being trapped in an oil barrel processing [plant](#). But the jokes all depended on machines that we made up ourselves in an elaborate and expensive set.

Fortunately, Paramount insisted on deleting the scene, saying they needed the [money](#) to pay the lawyers to explain what they were doing to Art Buchwald. 11. [Jerry Lewis](#): We don't do anything that Jerry Lewis would do. (OK, maybe a telethon, but that's it.)

12. Technical pizazz: We don't do lots of [car](#) crashes and fancy special effects. Mindless action without a comedic payoff never works, except at the Democratic National Convention.

13. Piling on: When a particular target has had enough and it's been used up. In the '70s, Nixon jokes. In the '90s, Quayle jokes. Or a reference to Richard Simmons in any decade.

14. Hanging on: Knowing when a joke, or a newspaper article, has gone too long.

15. There are no rules: And so we've tried to follow these rules as closely as possible, realizing that perhaps what is most important is knowing when to ignore them. And of course this is all in the interest of making better cinema for the moviegoer.

I feel strongly that the [Hollywood community](#) has a responsibility to the public, to play an active role in this effort and to limit the amount of cosmetic surgery done to any one person.