

BLACK

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the things they've thought. Someone is finally talking about the way things really are. Someone is finally pointing out that the emperor's butt-naked, and it ain't a pretty sight.

They laugh because reality is so absurd. They laugh because it's a relief someone is finally speaking the truth.

Some comics get laughs by exaggerating a situation. But Lewis Black doesn't need to exaggerate.

As he puts it, "The reality's really gotten nuts."

For example, he's incredulous that President Bush actually raised the possibility of World War III a couple weeks ago.

"That's unconscionable," he says. "That is not a WW III situation. There's no reason to go that far. It's extraordinary."

Reality is so absurd, he says, there's no reason for him to exaggerate. The jokes practically write themselves.

"I don't know what my job is, any more," Black says. "I go from country to town and hold up a newspaper and say, 'Read it.'"

Reality, he feels, is crazier than anything he could make up on his own.

Lewis Black will return to the Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall Saturday, Dec. 29.

Talking to him on the phone is a totally different experience than seeing him perform on-stage or on the screen.

He's quiet-spoken, talking in low, modulated tones, almost like a mild-mannered Clark Kent.

He's upset his publicist scheduled six phone interviews for him back-to-back-to-back, all in one morning, but he doesn't rant. He's polite, but he's tired:

he's just finished taping a series of new shows for Comedy Central, and he's about to leave for Iraq.

The new series of shows, which will air on Comedy Central in March 2008, is called "The Root of All Evil."

"I play a judge," he explains, "and a variety of comics come through and try to convince me who's more evil: Kim Jong-il or Tila Tequila, Paris Hilton or Dick Cheney, Oprah or the Catholic Church."

In every show, two comics will appear before Black in a faux courtroom setting and try to convince him that their client — an actual personality or a pop phenomenon — is the more evil. Chick flicks are pitted against videogames, YouTube vs. porn.

After hearing that week's two comics plead their cases, Black rules.

The show is quite likely a send-up of CourtTV, reality courtroom shows and our skewed justice system as much as it is comedic commentary on current events and pop culture.

As for leaving for Iraq for a week — Black isn't joking.

"It's a USO thing with Robin Williams," he says. He's going because he was asked.

"You can't say no," he says, adding that "the marketplaces are clean, everything's fine."

You know he's joking, parroting the government's lines.

"These guys have been supportive of me," Black says, referring to the troops. He doesn't know quite when it happened, but at one point he realized that more military people were flocking to his shows. Marines have come up to him and told him, "You're my favorite comic." He played a Marine base in the U.S. and received a standing ovation before he even said a word.

"They do a job and they do it well," he says. "The military is way ahead of (this

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—Lewis Black

administration.) They seem to have an idea of what to do more than the powers that be. They got the general gist of it. There's a level of incompetence and they're aware of it."

He's not sure what to think about the current crop of presidential candidates.

"I'm just starting to pay attention," he says. "They started (campaigning) so early."

The Democrats, he says, make him wary because they didn't stand up.

"Over the past, there's been a void in leadership," he says. "And the Republicans, when they debate, it's like it should be in black and white, it's like 1955. You've got to be kidding me! These are the candidates? This is what you came up with?"

"I would rather watch Fred Thompson eat porridge than listen to him speak."

Black doesn't trust the polls.

"It's more volatile than they're saying," he says. "They have no idea how to read the public. People have been angry, the American people. There's a level of anger that has nothing to do with 'Fifty percent feel this and 50 percent feel that.' Most people feel: 'Come on, figure it out. This is madness.'"

Black, ironically, was born in Washington D.C. and raised in Silver Spring, Maryland. According to an interview in "The Progressive" with Antonio D'Ambrosio, "During the McCarthy era and the Vietnam War, Black's mother,

father and grandfather would condemn — loudly and outrageously — the government's misuse and abuse of power. He told me his dad would say, during Vietnam, 'If I knew it was going to be like this, I would have stayed in Russia,'" D'Ambrosio wrote.

Asked about the influence of his childhood years on his current career, Black says: "My mother was a yeller. I guess I get that from her. And my father had a good sense of humor. He gave me a copy of 'Catch-22' when I was 12 and said 'Here, read it.' It was an open household, in what we talked about. It was like that. My friends liked hanging out there."

Black's known for his HBO specials, "Black on Broadway" and "Red, White, and Screwed" as well as for his "Back in Black" appearances on "The Daily Show," and, believe it or not, his "Celebrity Forecast" appearances on the Weather Channel, where he spoke in front of a weather map, scoffed at the list of time delays at airports, and told the meteorologists that they had the easiest job in the world. He was named Funniest Male Stand-Up Comic at the American Comedy Awards in 2001 and received a Grammy earlier this year for Best Comedy Album for "The Carnegie Hall Performance."

He doesn't have to work himself up before going on-stage, he says. "Usually something happens during the day (to set me off)," he says. "It's pretty easy. It's like anything else; comedy is a muscle, it's true. I hit the stage, I go with it."

His current stage show evolved from his HBO show but "It's totally different from that show," he says, adding that he might record the show and a section of it could end up on a CD.

When he's on stage, Lewis Black says: "It's fun, I enjoy doing it. It's cathartic." ■

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