



CONSUMING PASSIONS

Dearth of Mirth

Australia currently has no prominent satirical magazine appearing more frequently than quarterly. Whether this is a reflection of absurdly stringent libel laws, the monopolistic nature of magazine production and distribution, or simply an atrophied political culture, it's a pretty deplorable state of affairs.

Freedoms which aren't exercised are always liable to be taken away, and a healthy scepticism about the all-encompassing wisdom and competence of politicians and 'important people' is surely one of the most obvious signs of a society confident of the strength and value of its pluralism. Given the sense of humour and disrespect for authority which are so integral to Australia's national self-image, it's doubly disappointing that its supposedly larrikin spirit is transferred so feebly to the printed page.

Any examination of the current state of Australia's satirical magazines has to begin (and almost end) with *The Eye*. Now appearing only quarterly, *The Eye* seems to be on its last legs, but it has never really succeeded in capturing the public's imagination. This is possibly due to the circumstances of its birth, the acrimonious departure of Brian Toohey from Fairfax. The

raison d'être of the magazine has always been Toohey's commitment to independent investigative reporting, rather than an overwhelming urge to make people laugh just for the hell of it. (Ironically, a parallel could be drawn here with the *The Independent Monthly*, brainchild of Toohey's old Fairfax foe, Max Suich, particularly in their monotonous use of former or current Fairfax jourmos - in a way the two publications are simply a new means of pursuing an old quarrel.)

As a result, *The Eye* has continued to publish good straight stories (albeit on fairly predictable topics), but the satirical element has always seemed, to me at least, rather heavy-handed and unnecessarily convoluted. *The Eye's* approach is to bludgeon its targets with abuse and vitriol, often making them look clever and dangerous rather than ridiculous. Like its late, lamented predecessor *Matilda*, *The Eye* also succumbs too often to the temptation to borrow shamelessly from Britain's *Private Eye* (even down to the name).

What ultimately makes *The Eye* far less effective than its British mentor is its all-too-obvious political stance, and, above all, the cardinal sin of taking itself far too seriously. An example is its po-faced self-promotion as "magazine of satire, comment and independent reporting" which is "attempting to fill the gaps left by the Big Boys and inject a little humour". It always reminds me of the prompter for a TV sitcom audience holding up a big sign saying 'LAUGH!', just in case you're not sure if it's appropriate.

Because *The Eye* is genuinely independent and admirable in its intentions, it almost seems disloyal to criticise it. However, it fails the acid test of any satirical publication: does it make you laugh? The answer in the case of *The Eye* has to be 'not nearly often enough'.

Although no doubt Brian Toohey would decry anything which

smacked of the free market, he could hardly deny that *The Eye* is desperately in need of a stiff dose of competition. The rest of the field is nowhere. The only other magazine worth a mention (which I have come across at least) is Brisbane's *Cane Toad Times*, which manages to drag itself into public view "about twice a year" according to one of the editors. It's barely worth the wait. CTT manages to fill up 50 A3 pages without raising much more than a mild titter. The articles are typically long-winded, grossly self-indulgent and largely concerned with nostalgic reminiscence (incinerating ants with a magnifying-glass - craaaazy!), drugs, sex and tediously repetitive digs at Sydney and Melbourne.

Like *The Eye*, CTT reveals much through its self-image - you can always be sure that anyone persistently describing himself or herself as 'weird' or 'eccentric' almost certainly isn't (except Hunter S. Thompson). The most damning indictment of the magazine in the issue I saw was the revelation that *The Big Gig* is their idea of great television - I mean, how weird is that. On the cover, CTT carries the bold tag, "Australia's Humour Magazine". 'LAUGH!'

And that, it appears, is that. The only other magazine aspiring to satire which I've seen in the shops in the last year, was the execrable *Tom Thumb*, which was so bad that it wasn't even worth the cover price to take it out of the shop and find out who published it (except perhaps to write them a rude letter).

Satire is not dead in Australia, nor is its market - purveyors of incisive, rude, self-deprecating and often hilarious comment do exist, and have a huge audience. Unfortunately for magazine addicts, they're only on the radio, between 2.00 and 6.00 on a Saturday afternoon. Is the Slaven-Nelson Corp. destined to be the only light in the darkness?

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