

W PROOF!
Women
are

funny

Meet Tina Fey, the poster girl
for a new breed of female
comics who are finally putting the
'women can't do comedy' myth to bed

B

arack got the Oval Office. Michelle got the cover of *Vogue*. But the alternative winner of last year's US election was Tina Fey. Already a successful writer and producer, her career went into hyperdrive last autumn, when her uncanny impressions of Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin had the nation paralytic with laughter. Suddenly this 39-year-old mother-of-one was the most influential and hilarious person in the world.

It was about time. While Obama shut the mouths of critics who said they'd never see a black man in the White House, Fey stomped on the notion that 'women aren't funny'. As if to punctuate her achievement, *Vanity Fair* commissioned Annie Leibovitz to photograph a dozen 'women of comedy' - placing the likes of Sarah Silverman, Amy Poehler and Sandra Bernhard alongside Fey in a sumptuously-shot spread.

This is the same *Vanity Fair* that, last year, ran an essay by veteran writer and professional stirrer Christopher Hitchens, entitled *Why Women Aren't Funny*. Which begs the real question: why has this myth been proved so persistent? One quasi-Darwinian argument holds that chaps evolved a sense of humour out of necessity. As males were judged on their brains and females by their looks, bullied schoolboys reacted with witty repartees; bullied schoolgirls reacted with anorexia. Eager-to-please men honed their one-liners; eager-to-please women wore shorter skirts. In at nutshell, because the survival of the species didn't need women to be funny, just beautiful, women weren't funny.

Even if you think there is some truth in this, it's clear that women have now caught up. The boundaries



COMEDIANS TINA FEY (FAR LEFT) AS SARAH PALIN AND AMY POEHLER AS HILARY CLINTON IN THEIR INFAMOUS SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE SKIT



FUNNY HA HA: ROB LOWE (LEFT) AND TINA FEY STAR IN NEW COMEDY FLICK THE INVENTION OF SOLINGEN

between the sexes have blurred - grown men suffer from body issues, teenage girls respond to their bullies by starting bitchy, jokey Facebook groups. If we've finally reached an equality of neuroses between the sexes, can we now accept we're equally funny?

Of course, it's more likely that women have always been as funny as men, they just haven't been as loud. Psychologist Cliff Arnall, of thefeelconsultancy.com, says: "Men and women are both born with a desire to make other people laugh. But seeing humour as a sport - whether its holding court in the pub or doing stand-up - requires assertiveness and aggressiveness, both of which are traditionally male traits."

Comedian Jason Manford adds: "Women have always been funny, it's just some men have a problem with funny women, so those women decide to stop being funny. And be feminine instead. Boring!"

Hollywood funnyman Ben Stiller agrees: "There's a certain 'mens club' attitude about comedy. It's harder for a woman to be funny in men's eyes because I think men want to see women in a certain light."

So does that mean women can't be funny and feminine? As funny women grew louder, they still felt compelled to conform to a female stereotype, cracking gags about their periods, rubbish men and their body hang-ups - think Jo Brand moaning on about her weight. Comedian Sandra Bernhard even rallied against the fact that women have, historically, not been 'allowed' to do social commentary - confined instead to self-deprecation. "It's the last gasp of the white male, the patriarchy that excludes us," she told feminist magazine *Ms.* "They are digging their heels in harder than ever."

Thankfully, period gags are in the

past. Today, Sarah Silverman takes on race. Tina Fey takes on politics. Catherine Tate takes on social stereotypes. And they all win. So Tina Fey isn't just a funny woman. She's a poster girl for a new breed of comic, who ignores menstruation in favour of current affairs. In fact, she isn't a funny woman, because her humour is nothing to do with being a woman. Tina Fey is just funny.

Ben Stiller sums it up neatly: "There's nobody as strong or as funny as Tina Fey - male or female - she's having a great moment right now." S

OUR FAVOURITE GAGS BY WOMEN

- 1 "Before I met my husband, I'd never fallen in love, though I'd stepped in it a few times."
RITA RUDNER
- 2 "In the beginning there was nothing. God said, 'Let there be light!' And there was light. There was still nothing, but you could see it a lot better."
ELLEN DEGENERES
- 3 "Did Graham Norton break your heart, sir?"
CATHERINE TATE, AS LAUREN
- 4 "I don't care if you think I'm racist, I just want you to think I'm thin."
SARAH SILVERMAN
- 5 "My favorite animal is steak."
FRAN LEBOWITZ
- 6 "I know what men want. Men want to be really, really close to someone who will leave them alone."
ELAYNE BOOSLER
- 7 "I can't believe Amy Winehouse self-harms. She's so irritating; she must be able to find someone to do it for her."
ZOE LYONS
- 8 To Debbie McGee: "So, what first attracted you to millionaire Paul Daniels?"
CAROLINE AHERNE AS MRS MERTON

Tina Fey on female humour and growing up witty

Were you born funny?

"Everyone was funny in my house when I was growing up, so that helped. And my parents were always very generous with encouragement and praise. I think every kid has something they gravitate towards, that they are good at. Being funny is just my thing."

Many comedians had difficult childhoods. Did you?

"I was quiet and nerdy, but mostly a happy child - though I had a pretty rough puberty. Growing up as a girl is always traumatising, especially when you start getting your boobs at 10. But it builds character. When I was 11 or 12 I found comedy was a way to ingratiate myself with the popular kids. I could make them laugh. After a while, it became part of my identity."

Is there a difference between male and female comics?

"Male comedy is more boisterous. Usually it involves robots and sharks and bears - that kind of thing. Female comedy is more likely to be about human behaviour and relationships."

Some men have said that women just aren't funny?

"It's irrelevant to me what certain people say. But what's unfair is when one woman does comedy that isn't funny and it somehow reflects on all women. Nobody watches a terrible male stand-up comic and says, 'God, men just can't do this.' There are just as many awful comedians who are men."

Q&A