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and succeeded with the help of her husband, who was near by, in extinguishing the flame, but not before the comb and a good quantity of hair was entirely burned, also part of her scalp.

Eventually I located my grandmother's name ("Miss Ella Van Norden, of New York, is a guest at Woodbine cottage." Olmstedville, March 8, 1906), but like meandering through the dictionary, the slice of life from all the other Neighborhood Notes was far more fascinating.

Maybe another search is in store. Was this the first time my mother's mother visited the Adirondacks? Was Woodbine cottage where she met my grandfather? The 1906 date is three years before she gave birth to my mother. Who knows what detours are in store the next time I go exploring. ▼



Dan Berggren's roots are firmly in the Adirondacks where he was raised, but his music has branched out across many borders. For over 40 years, the award-winning musician and educator has entertained audiences across New York, throughout the US, and overseas in Europe, the British Isles, and Central Africa. Before devoting his life to music, Dan worked in the woods with a forest ranger and surveyor, was a radio producer in Europe, professor of audio and radio studies at SUNY Fredonia, and owner of Sleeping Giant Records, which has produced 15 albums. Dan is a tradition-based songsmith who writes with honesty, humor, and a strong sense of place. His concerts are engaging as he invites audiences to join in on songs that explore the lives of hardworking folks and the many dimensions of home. You can hear samples from Dan's latest CD, *Tongues in Trees*, recorded with his bass-playing buddy, Ed Lowman, at his website: www.berggrenfolk.com. Photo by Jessica Riehl.

High Banter BY STEVE ZEITLIN

Whenever my wife and I do something really dumb or spacey, we call it "Steve and Amanda go around the world in a daze." Like many, long-married couples, we've developed routines for our own personal comedy team of sorts. For instance, Amanda and I take a commuter train home from Grand Central Station. We often arrive at the station separately and promise that we'll meet at the gate. The other day I got to the gate with only a minute or two before the train left—but she wasn't there. I called her on my cell.

"You're not here—where are you?"

She answered, "I'm at the gate."

"Amanda, it's Gate number 35!"

"I am at Gate 35."

Suddenly a passerby tapped me on the shoulder and said, "By chance, is that the woman you're looking for?" We were standing back-to-back, less than five feet apart, and we dissolved into laughter over our unwitting slapstick. Hilarious for an audience of two. Definitely insider humor.

Every couple that has spent years together probably has a comic and straight man embedded in their humor and their folklore. In our comedy routine, I am a fountain of silliness to a bemused Amanda who plays my "straight man." In every photograph on our vacations, I am trying to pose as a Roman statue on a sheared off colonnade, or make it look like the sun is setting in my glass of caipirinha, while Amanda takes the picture and laughs.

Professional comedy teams themselves are, of course, inspired by real life. Lucille Ball was already a successful comedienne when she was offered a sitcom on CBS. She would only agree to do it if they brought on her husband, Cuban bandleader Desi Arnaz. At the time, her producers thought it was crazy to consider the Cuban bandleader for the show—"what television audience would believe that you were married to a Cuban bandleader?" they asked. "I *am* married to a Cuban bandleader," she told them. Commentators talk about her wanting to bring the touring Desi Arnaz closer to home by

putting him on the show, but she must have known from real life that they could be funny together, with her playing the comic and Desi, the straight man (Kantor 2009).

The idea of which partner will be the straight and which one the comic can change. The comedy team of George Burns and Gracie Allen, that from the 1930s through the 1960s took comedy from vaudeville to radio and then to television, switched their roles at one point. When they got started in vaudeville in New York, Gracie was the straight woman and George had all the funny lines. At some point, they noticed that audiences were laughing at Gracie's straight lines, not at George playing the fool. So they switched roles with George playing the straight man, and Allen playing the ditsy lady with all the funny lines.

"For the benefit of those who have never seen me before," said New York comedian George Burns, "I'm what is known in show business as a straight man. After the comedian gets through with the joke I look at the comedian and then I look at the audience like this" (rolls his eyes). Then Gracie would tell a joke. For instance, George walks into their living room and says,

"Those are beautiful flowers."

"Aren't they lovely?" she answers. "If it weren't for you I wouldn't have them."

"Me? What did I have to do with it?"

"You said when I went to visit Clara Bagley to take her flowers. So when she wasn't looking, I did."

George pauses to bring on the laughter. "That is what is known as a pause," he said. "I'm famous for my pauses" (Kantor 2009).

In the documentary *Make 'Em Laugh*, the actor Lewis Stadlen notes that "George Burns and Gracie Allen captured the idea that men are from Mars and women are from Venus. The idea that two intellectual concepts will never meet, but they still love each other." (Kantor 2009). Perhaps the humor is what enables them to love each other, as it does with many couples.

Whether between comedians on the pop culture stage or partners in everyday life, high



Steve whispers a joke to Amanda at their wedding. Photo courtesy of the author.

banter is all about being in the moment. When you are totally at home with another person, you can free associate, creating riffs that you could never have with anyone else. The online Urban Dictionary, in which visitors supply their own words and definitions of urban slang, offers their “top” definition of *banter* as a “supple term used to describe activities or chat that is playful, intelligent and original.” Their best example, an old vaudeville line:

“You, sir, are drunk.”

“Maybe so, but you are ugly, and I will be sober in the morning.”

Andy Davis, an L.A.-based scholar and performer who stages burlesque comedy shows based on his doctoral research into theater history, plays the straight man with his friend David Springhorn in sketches they call Doc and Stumpy’s Burlesque Shows. A classic vaudeville line made its way into their own high banter away from the stage—“that joke just never gets new.”

The great comedy teams are reacting and improvising with each other, as well as responding to the audience. Amanda and I are huge fans of *Saturday Night Live*, which we struggle to stay up to watch every Saturday night. An entire volume could and should be written on the folklore of *Saturday Night Live*, focusing on the improvisatory humor—the banter shared and created by the writers, as well as the banter improvised by the comics

on the live show. One particular favorite was watching comedienne Amy Poehler and Maya Rudolph riff off each other as Betty Caruso and Jodi Dietz on their local TV show, *Bronx Beat*.

Betty: “Its bananas! The whole world is bananas. You know what I say? Live your life cause the world is gonna blow up!”

Jodi: “She’s right. Enjoy your family, enjoy your friends, have a glass of wine.”

Betty: “Have two glasses of wine, have 10 glasses of wine. What do I care? What am I? The police or something?” (“*Bronx Beat*” 2007).

If you’re not in the moment, the world of high banter will slide right past you. High banter is a key ingredient of folk culture and family folklore. It’s also the essence of the poetry duels that Amanda and I have studied in different parts of the world. Both on street corners and stages, poets riff off each other in rhyme, participating in traditions ranging from *extempo* in Trinidad, *desafios* in Portugal, *contrasti* in Italy, freestyle rap in the US, and *repentistas* in Brazil. The banter between couples and others is also reminiscent of what happens when jazz musicians riff off one another. It’s a key element of comedy as it evolved from local humor to its days on medicine and minstrel show stages, vaudeville and burlesque, sitcoms and reality TV—and back into the living room.

For everyday couples, moments of high banter are often enshrined in story—written about or retold. The balance for any creative person is to be both in the moment—with no notion that the banter might make for a good story—and later realizing that—aha!—it *will* make a good story, then shaping and telling the tale to friends or on paper when the time is right.

The Steve-and-Amanda-Go-Around-the-World-in-a-Daze stories are told with great flair by Amanda. In our comedy team, I am the quipper and Amanda is the storyteller, who retells the incident afterwards to an outside audience. Most recently, Amanda attended a the biannual Cousins House Party at the beach in South Carolina, which brings together the women cousins of her generation for a three-day bash of drinking, joking,

and telling stories. The humor rests on a lot of insider knowledge. For instance, many of the Dargan/Edwards cousins are known for generations of wide hips. Amanda told the story of our high banter that followed my purchase of a maroon shirt that had an especially large collar.

Amanda: “You shouldn’t wear shirts with big collars.”

Steve: “Why?”

Amanda: “They make your head look small,” she teased.

Steve: “Your hips make my head look small.”

It was her cousin Martha’s story, though, of a riff between herself and a burly, tough guy in a supermarket that took the comedy cake at the House Party, enshrined forever in the Dargan cousins’ folklore. Amanda’s cousin Martha was in the supermarket, when she heard a loudmouth cursing at his companion. Martha shook her head and said, “Mister, what is your problem?”

“My problem?” he shouted. “I don’t have a problem.”

“Mister,” she said, “your problem’s your mouth.”

“Lady,” he retorted, “your problem, your butt.”

So here’s to high banter, the humorous jazz that occurs when we riff off one another, improvising in those you-had-to-be-there moments where the timing is perfect and conversations are elevated to the point where, as Cole Porter put it, “It’s delightful, it’s delicious, it’s de-lovely.” ▼

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Steve Zeitlin is the founding director of City Lore in New York City. Photo by Martha Cooper.



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