

The Irreverent Raging Grannies

Humour as Protest

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C'est en Colombie Britannique que les "les mémés déchainées" ont débuté leur action qui a inspiré les femmes à travers le Canada et même outre-mer, mais c'est aux USA, depuis la guerre en Iraq, qu'elles ont attiré l'attention des médias sur leur action et sur les résultats inattendus.

♪ Hey, look us over / Grannies proud and strong
Time to hear our voices / Time to hear our song
Silent for too long / Speaking up at last
Cause now the earth / Is crying out
—*Hear the Grannies' Voices Sing!*
Tune: *Hey, Look Them Over*

When Canada negotiated the Free Trade Agreement with the United States no one anticipated that one of its most unique exports would be the inspiring example of the Raging Grannies. Started in 1987 in Victoria, British Columbia, there are now more than 70 dynamic groups of Raging Grannies busy raising a little hell for authorities across Canada, Japan, Greece, Israel, and in the United States, especially since the war in Iraq. Using the persona of a granny, the Raging Grannies battle social and political dragons with wit, humour, songs, and dynamic actions, inflicting giggles on unsuspecting audiences and, from time to

time, raising eyebrows and provoking reactions from authorities. They developed the art of the satirical song and creative performance to draw the attention of public and authorities to peace, social justice, and environmental issues.

Feminist performance art is “characterized by an inordinate ability to mix disparate elements with wild abandon and to confound categories, social positions, and hierarchies of space, language and class; to provide both a ‘festive critique’ and an extreme utopian vision of society at the same time; and to reconfigure the world through laughter.” (Maria Tucker cited in Mars 23)

While the Raging Grannies often claim not to be entertainers, there is no doubt they are performers. They use satirical songs, props, costumes, and more importantly creative actions that highlight information that authorities prefer was ignored. At other times their performances reveal the absurdity of a policy or set of policies.

Their performance is grounded in their aging body as grannies but they have released themselves from any conventional formats: they often sing off-key, dress like clowns, yet their lyrics and actions point to

very serious matters. They are not singers, not actors, but they use both songs and theatre to express their views while having fun, and take a political stance. They use humour to promote social and political change rather than entertain. Most are feminists who want to express their views on the public scene to have an impact on the social and political realities and join a chorus of voices that refuse to be silenced.

At times called “recycled teenagers,” the Raging Grannies have mastered what Randy Gledhill called “theoretical subtext, comedic timing, and irreverence” (46) and point out that they are not entertainers but interveners on the political scene. And intervene they do, with zest and flair and a dose of outrageousness. In this article I examine the use of humour and creativity by Canadian Raging Grannies and how their example inspired to action Raging Grannies and other grandmothers against the war south of the border with unexpected consequences.

In the mid-1980s, I was friend with many of the women in Victoria who became the first Raging Grannies in 1987. An activist, I had joined them a few times for street theatre and a five-day walk for peace and disarmament from Victoria to Nanoose Bay, B.C. However, I was out of the country when they became the Raging Grannies and was



Raging Grannies going to a protest against pesticides during their Un-convention at Queen's University in Kingston in 2002. Photo: Carole Roy



Raging Grannies and their playful spirit gathered for their Un-convention at Queen's University in Kingston in 2002. Photo: Carole Roy

wonderfully surprised at their new formation, although I never had any desire to join, possibly because I was significantly younger. But they remained a source of inspiration.

When I entered graduate school in the late 1990s, I realized that although they had been very important figures in my life, individually and collectively, there was no comprehensive work about them. This realization happened at a time when I was coming to understand that women's collective resistance was often erased from the official historical record. I was also keenly aware of the aging process and how some were becoming frail. I realized that

they might pass away and I wouldn't know their stories.

Initially I planned to interview only a few of the original members of the Victoria group but it later grew to 46 in-depth interviews with 36 Grannies from 12 groups from Victoria and Gabriola Island, British Columbia to Halifax, Nova Scotia. I also examined the rich archives of three groups who kept various documents. I also examined media reports, mostly print, but also a few TV programs. The material used in this article comes from these interviews and archival research.

The original Raging Grannies were a loosely connected group of

anti-nuclear activists. When they started in 1987, they were eleven white, mostly middle-class, educated women. Some were artists and businesswomen, others had been homemakers, anthropologist, teachers, or counsellors. Most, but not all, were politically progressive while one woman whose husband was a retired military officer defined herself as conservative very afraid of nuclear bombs, as she knew they were on U.S. warships or submarines. The impetus for action came from the sense of threat they felt from the visits of U.S. warships/submarines powered by nuclear reactors or carrying nuclear arms in the waters around Victoria where U.S. Navy ships often stop for sailors' rest and recreation. However, the range of issues they focus on quickly expanded to include social and economic justice, and ecological issues. What is remarkable is how creative these women were and that such a small group could create a persona that is still relevant and a vehicle for political expression across borders and cultures.

Confronting Invisibility with Outlandishness

While the digital world makes it possible to ignore bodies, the Raging Grannies ground their performing identities in the body as older women. They claim the right to be themselves, the right to the limelight, to be seen and heard. According to Granny Joan Harvey, Raging Grannies have experienced the invisibility and dismissal older women in North American societies often encounter:

Middle age women become invisible because they're not seen as possible sex partners, so men and women start to ignore middle age women, menopausal women, and post-menopausal women. Older women are completely transparent and invisible: you try to go anywhere to do something, and

you can stand there for hours, you're not there. For the most part in our culture ... older people are not revered and respected, they are ridiculed. (Personal communication, March 18, 2002)

The Grannies know that in order “to be heard they have to be seen” and they understand the importance of creative dramatic actions to make “themselves colourful for print and TV” (Kaplan 24). They have created a distinctive persona that allows collective identity and individual creativity at the same time: along disarming smiles, they wear outrageous hats, gaudy shawls and frilly aprons, colourful vintage clothing, and pink running shoes. At times they add long white gloves and patent leather purses to display matronly dignity. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall suggests that women’s resistance that is individual and non-dramatic tends to attract scant notice (qtd. in Romalis 176). Outlandish bonnets and colourful aprons cannot be ignored. The “costume” also serves to highlight and challenge stereotypes even as it signals playfulness and allows onlookers to enter the reality of banter and play. For those Grannies who described themselves as shy, such attire empowers them to speak up. The Raging Grannies refuse to be “good girls” who do not draw attention to themselves or their ideas. They are compassionate *and* tough, smart, opinionated, and feisty, characteristics Regina Barreca associates humour with “bad girls” who say what they think (qtd. in Mars 28). Their profound social and political engagement is born in the eyes of long-living, wise women.

♪♪ Wrinkle wrinkle aging star
Who cares how old you are?
Your hair is grey, your dentures
click
Your bosom sags, your ankle’s
thick
Your joints all creak, your ar-
thritis plagues
...

... to hell with being beige
We won’t stay cooped up in a
cage
Our eyes are dim but our
tongues are sharp
We go out on a limb, our wits
are sharp
Tune: *Twinkle Twinkle Little
Star*

By acknowledging aging they re-

The Raging Grannies insist they will not shut up. They articulate and express their views through satirical songs and choose to perform humour rather than trauma.

veal and resist invisibility in a society in which older women are supposed to deny their age and try to look young as long as possible.

Singing Warriors: Deadly Serious Kazoo Playing Troupe Inflicts Laughs

♪♪ We’re fed up with knitting /
Quietly sitting
We’re fed up with missiles /
We’re blowing the whistle
The Grannies are raging, hur-
rah, hurrah!
Tune: *The Campbells Are Com-
ing*

The Raging Grannies insist they will not shut up. They articulate and express their views through satirical songs and choose to perform humour rather than trauma. To treat serious topics with wit and “silly little old ladies who are fireproof” is

a winning combination says Granny Betty Brightwell (personal communication, May 16, 1998). Granny Alma Norman says:

We are more likely to respond to ridicule than to head-on attacks because nobody likes to be laughed at. So if you present something in a satirical way and ridicule ... it’s easier to get under their skin. Whereas if you come on seriously and you say, “Well, you did this and this and this and this and this,” very analytically, then what you might get is, “Oh yes well, but this is the explanation, and this is the reason, and this is the background.” Then you’re into one of these pointless arguments. (Personal communication, March 23, 2002)

Unpredictability and the revolutionary power of humour disrupt routines and attract attention. In *The Methods of Non-Violent Action* Gene Sharp suggests that humour and satire can at times be acts of public protest (148). While humour acts as a “lubricant to smooth social interactions,” it also serves to express hostility and aggression, according to Mahadev Apte (261). Humour signals rebelliousness; laughter is an act of freedom that cannot be coerced (Isaak 14, 26). Political humour allows citizens to counteract “The state’s efforts to standardize their thinking and to frighten them into withholding criticism and dissent” (Benton 33). Jo Anna Isaak also suggests that humour elicits a communal response of sensuous solidarity as laughing reveals common understanding even among strangers (5). Regina Barreca, who writes on women and humour, suggests that:

Women are more likely than men to make fun of those in high and seemingly invulnerable positions.... Women look at those in power, or at those

institutions we were taught to revere, and laugh. In this way women's comedy is more "dangerous" than men's, because it challenges authority by refusing to take it seriously. (13-14)

She also suggests that it "questions the way the world is put together" (179) and "is often directed at the bizarre value systems that have been regarded as 'normal' for so long that it is difficult to see how ridiculous they really are" (185). Humour is, therefore, transformative, opens up new perspectives, and can be effective in dealing with stressful situations.

From the beginning, the Raging Grannies grasped the educational potential of humour. They all agree humour is an important tool in their approach. Their humour is fun but also has the serious intent of getting "the point across, perhaps a little more gently," says Granny Angela Silver, who believes that people take it in "a little better than when you just give it to them straight" (personal communication, March 27, 2002).

Granny Fran Thoburn suggests that humour is a survival mechanism when confronted with "such exceedingly tragic material" (personal communication, May 13, 2002). "Most humour comes out of pain ... personal pain, group pain," says Granny Rose DeShaw, who sees humour as one way for activists to prevent burn-out (personal communication, March 21, 2002). Granny Mary Rose explains the sustaining power of humour:

If you thought about some of the things that are going on you'd be weeping all the time, and if you don't relieve it you just can't go on. So you have to break up the tension I guess and laughter does it. (Personal communication, May 10, 2002)

Granny Ava Louwe connects challenging times and reactions to Grannies' humour:

I think the times are so stressful for people that when they listen to Grannies singing songs of humour it gives them a chance to vent some of their own stress through laughter.... It's non-threatening to the audience. (Personal communication, March 23, 2002)

But she goes further. Humour, she says, "seems to open avenues

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of connection" with the audience (personal communication, March 23, 2002). Humour requires and reveals common ground. At times, the anticipation of what might happen makes people laugh. In 1987, when the first Victoria Grannies stood on the stairs of the British Columbia Legislature ready to present their "briefs," a clothesline of women's underwear contained in a laundry basket, to a parliamentary commission reviewing a moratorium on uranium mining in B.C., the crowd laughed in anticipation of the surprise and shock of serious-looking, self-important politicians receiving such unusual briefs. The laundry basket represented women's work but also poked fun at pompous politicians. When the crowd spontaneously laughed together they revealed their common understanding of the situation and helped to establish a sense of con-

nection and togetherness instantly. "Humour breaks down barriers, eases the interactions. We're basically preaching but not in a preachy way.... I think they're disarmed a little bit at first, then they understand the message and it's too late" (Seifred, personal communication, March 28, 2002). At times power is not enough to win the contest of wit. How could authorities forbid a crowd to laugh?

Laughter by its very nature changes your perspective on things. It takes you to a higher plane. When you're in a certain frame of mind and something strikes you as funny it automatically opens you up and elevates you and you get a new perspective. (Louwe, personal communication, March 23, 2002)

Louwe's comment is echoed by Barreca:

Humor doesn't dismiss a subject but, rather, often opens that subject up for discussion.... Humor can be a shortcut, an eye-opener ... to get to the truth of the matter. The best humor allows ... for joy, compassion, and a new way of looking at a very old world. Seeing humor as a way of making our feelings and responses available to others without terrifying our listeners can free us to take ourselves less gloomily, although not less seriously.... When we can frame a difficult matter with humour, we can often reach someone who would otherwise withdraw. (10)

"Humour is a creative act. It requires finding an angle, a thread that sheds light on a particular situation" (Hébert-Ferron, personal communication, March 25, 2002). Humour brings together frames of reference that collide and make us laugh because of the unusual associations, like the play on briefs

in the context of the hearings by a governmental commission. Humour also requires sophisticated analysis and imaginative metaphors to reveal new connections between facts that are usually unrelated, which leads to new perspectives. When we can see an alternative perspective, even an unrealistic one, we glimpse possibilities and we may be more able to imagine new solutions, go beyond analysis to envision new scenarios.

Women who use humour use power. Nancy Walker tells us that,

women's political and domestic humor has always been an effective challenge to long-held and oppressive ideas . . . [but] has been largely omitted from the official canon . . . been allowed to go out of print, to disappear from all but the dusty reaches of library shelves." (qtd. in Barreca 185)

Let us make sure that the Raging Grannies' example does not end in the dustbin of history. With colourful outrageous costumes, biting satire, and deadly serious intent, the Raging Grannies manage to captivate the attention as they engage the audience visually, musically, and cognitively. Granny Lorna Drew believes that the need for humour is greater in difficult times and "in groups from the margin" (personal communication, March 11, 2002) which is supported by renowned adult educator Phyllis Cunningham's comment that "the struggle begins on the margin" (157). The confines of gender and age stereotypes for older women define some of the margins in a patriarchal society with an active idolization of youth. The Raging Grannies' use of humour is possible because they are willing to make themselves vulnerable and challenge the stereotypes often associated with older women. Granny Lorna Drew brought up vulnerability as a factor involved in humour:

You can't make people laugh without exposing yourself. I don't think so. I think a stand-up comic is probably a good example of being terrified but you go and you do it anyway, and you say, "Look, this is me making a fool of myself. I can do this, and if I can do it then you can do it. It's okay to be a fool." But it's scary to be a fool. It's not okay to be a fool

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in this culture; the other people don't like fools and lock them up. Now they're doing worst than that. So the old comedic notion of the clown is part of the Grannies' agenda, the wise fool. To be a fool you ought to run the risk of being as vulnerable as fools were. But then you invite people to put down their defences as well when you're doing that, and to laugh at you and then it turns out that they're laughing with you. (Personal communication, March 11, 2002)

Humour creates space for reflection and allows us to realize that there might be alternative views and even if the humorous take is not in itself practical, it can broaden our thinking, allow us to make new connections and develop new perspectives, something essential in the search for creative solutions.

Daring Actions: Inspiration Flies Across the Canada-U.S. Border

Raging Grannies are also known for dynamic and creative actions. During the escalating threat of war in the Persian Gulf in the early 1990s, the original Victoria Raging Grannies who are WWII veterans resurrected their "uniforms" while others created look-alike uniforms. They then proceeded to the Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment Office to sign up for a tour of duty in the Gulf as they felt it was unnecessary to risk young people's lives for oil ("Raging Grannies ready for war" A1). The military officials, who could not discriminate on the basis of age, had to work through the paperwork, to the delight of the media and a photograph of a Raging Granny in all her military regalia appeared on the front cover of the local daily newspaper, *Times Colonist* (November 3, 1990: A1). This action got more than chuckles as Raging Grannies in Toronto and Montreal also paid friendly visits to their local Canadian Army Recruitment Offices.

Inspired by the action of Victoria Raging Grannies a decade earlier, the Tucson Raging Grannies recently made the news in the *Boston Globe*, *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, CNN, BBC News in the UK, KPHO.com in Phoenix, Arizona, to name a few. On July 13, 2005, the Tucson Raging Grannies, women in their 60s, 70s, and 80s who held peaceful protests at the Tucson United States Army Recruitment Center for the last three years, stepped in to enlist and volunteer for a tour of duty in Iraq "so their grandchildren could come home:"

We went in saying we were here to enlist, but they didn't believe us, Pat Birnie, a spokeswoman for the group, told the BBC News website. "We read a statement, sang songs, and then we left." Ms Birnie, 75, said the protesters were well outside the

centre when police arrived and said they were trespassing, a criminal offence. She said the charge was an “overreaction,” and that the grannies had been serious about joining the army. “We would like to replace our young who are in the firing line,” Ms Birnie said. (“US anti-war grannies face justice”)

Nancy Hutchinson, an Army spokeswoman in Arizona, reportedly questioned the Grannies’ desire to enlist, suggested this action harassed recruiters, and told Arizona Press news agency that “those opposed to the Iraq war should contact their legislators rather than bother recruiters.” She added that “they need to direct their frustrations at people who have the power to change things” (qtd. in “Raging Grannies’ fight to enlist in the army”). The same news article reported that 74-year-old Granny Betty Schroeder thought her group might contact the Pentagon to see if they could be sent to Iraq and added: “This was not a performance, a joke or civil disobedience. This was an enlistment attempt” (“Raging Grannies’ fight to enlist in the army”).

While charges were ultimately dropped in Tucson, a coalition of Raging Grannies and other grandmothers against the war in Iraq, aged 59 to 91 years old and calling itself the Granny Peace Brigade, were inspired to enlist at the New York City Times Square military recruiting center (“18 grandmothers arrested at Iraq war protest”). Finding the door locked, the 18 grandmothers, some who are blind or walked with canes or walkers, read a statement and sat down on a ramp before police arrested and charged them with disorderly conduct, although they were apparently not blocking access to the recruiting station. After the judge refused to dismiss the charges at a court appearance January 10, 2006, the 18 women spent a week at their trial in Manhattan Criminal Court on April 20, 2006 and were

found not guilty of disorderly conduct. In fact they had been arrested without good cause as they had not blocked any door and only read a statement expressing their anti-war views. The people blocking the door of the recruitment centre were police themselves, a fact that was made clear by the defence! Their action inspired groups of Raging Grannies and other older women to stage similar enlisting actions in at least ten cities across the U.S. on Valentine’s Day 2006. Finally, the Raging Grannies (from various cities in the U.S.) and the Granny Peace Brigade were asked to walk at the very front of the large peace march planned for Saturday April 29, 2006 in New York City. They also went on a ten day-trek from New York to Washington, arriving in Washington for the July 4th celebrations, contacting people along the way. They have become the front line of an impatient movement to stop the war.

San Francisco Raging Grannies: Peaceful Protest Results in the End of Domestic Spying

Raging Grannies often act in unexpected ways and at times such actions have unexpected consequences. The San Francisco (Peninsula) Raging Grannies, along with other groups, chose the state Capitol in Sacramento for a peaceful protest against the war in Iraq on Mothers’ Day (May 8, 2005) and “called on Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, the commander in chief of the California National Guard, to bring the Guard home from Iraq” (Norris). But matters did not stop there. The *San Jose Mercury News* wrote that:

Schwarzenegger’s office called on the same National Guard to monitor the protest as part of its new intelligence unit’s “Information Synchronization, Knowledge Management and Intelligence Fusion”

program. It has “broad authority” to monitor terrorists’ threats, which becomes distorted and violates the Article 1, Sect. 1 rights of those who clearly are not terrorists. (Norris)

When it was publicized that Raging Grannies and others at the protest had been spied on by the National Guard, the Grannies accepted an invitation to meet the Acting Adjutant General of the National Guard, who cordially received them at the Joint Forces Headquarters in the state capital on July 7, 2005. While Grannies wondered how the National Guard was planning to show they had not been spying on them, Grannies brought along homemade cookies and tea, creating an action out of the visit. While Grannies were packing up after the meeting, they noticed an anti-Muslim poster on the wall:

It was a binder-sized piece of paper that was xeroxed, says Gail Sredanovic. It had a picture of General Pershing with a long account of really sadistic things he did to Muslim prisoners. He tied 50 prisoners to execution stakes and in front of them he slaughtered a pig and dipped his bullets in the pig’s blood and killed 49 out of 50 Muslims, who would not be able to get into heaven because they had been contaminated by the pig’s blood. The conclusion was something like, “Pershing had no more trouble with the Muslims, and we need somebody like him today.” (Rothschild)

Not only did the peaceful Mothers’ Day protest by the Peninsula Raging Grannies reveal a new level of monitoring of citizens that Senator Dunn and others were unaware of, but their willingness to engage with the National Guard and confront them creatively helped reveal the support among the Guard for violence toward Iraqi citizens. In the end, there was victory as:

The California National Guard has dismantled an entire domestic surveillance division inside state military headquarters and dismissed the colonel who was tapped to set it up. In a memo Wednesday, Adjutant General Maj. Gen. William Wade wrote: "Effective immediately, I have discontinued the Civil Support Division—to include its functions of Domestic Watch Center, Information Synchronization Center and Combined Intel Fusion Group." (Holstege)

The Raging Grannies is a movement that spread from women hearing news report on radio, TV, or reading articles in newspapers about actions some Raging Grannies did in this or that place. Their use of humour is often what gets them noticed by the media. We even recently found out that a group of Raging Grannies exists in Israel and no one had heard about them. Apparently, a woman saw a group of Raging Grannies while traveling in the U.S. and went back to Israel and got a group of friends together. But we need to do more investigation of this group as there is not much information available at the moment. What it demonstrates is that the cleverness of the Raging Granny persona can be easily borrowed and used by groups geographically and culturally distant as there is no central organization although the Grannies do have an active network.

The Raging Grannies have the courage to care and speak up, subversively using their credibility to gain entrance to all kind of places without being noticed, until they get into action. They have crashed parties, meetings, official visits, receptions, governmental commissions and hearings, among others. They demonstrate that creativity, humour, and fun can be effective tools for movements working for social change as they offer sustaining power to what we know are life-long

struggles for peace and justice. They are brave and when necessary put their bodies on the legal line, risking arrest and jail. They transform despair and anger into action, challenge stereotypes of older women, and broaden our understanding of what aging means (Roy).

♪ Criminal Grans

We're criminals exposing stuff that's going wrong
Belting out our biting messages in songs
We poke and pry and then expose
What you'd prefer folks didn't know
We're an old and wrinkled Danger.
We're pesky Raging Grans.

We're mouthy older women
We pesky Raging Grans
We've got our eyes upon you,
we're checking out your plans
We're done it twice and will once more
Expose your sneaky tricks before
They end in Too Much Damage
We're watchful Raging Grans.

Try and put the lid on, try and shut us up!
Pepper spray won't do it—nothing makes us stop
We've been around and we don't scare
We're here, we're there—we're everywhere.
Don't even think to Gag us
Here comes the Raging Grans!
Tune: *Lili Marlene*

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