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It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia: Scaring Away All the Critics, but Still Adding to 'Our National Conversation'

Dianna Schepler

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While it does not receive much critical attention, FXX's *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* is a big hit with its audience, and even after nine seasons, does not seem to be slowing down. Recently renewed for two more seasons, it will air at least 12 seasons, and be the "the second-longest-running live-action comedy in TV history" (Adams). As a satire, and over the course of nine seasons, *Always Sunny* has addressed topics most shows are incapable of covering (or unwilling to cover). They, more honestly than most, consider deep-seeded American societal issues. This includes their analysis of what it is to be a trans individual in America today, with the character, Carmen. Carmen is a thoughtfully considered and nuanced character, and while aspects of her character follow some trans-character traditions, she is utilized to critique those traditions and the ways in which Americans treat gender identity.

During a panel at the *Paley Fest 2009*, the creators explain that *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* was initially conceived by Rob McElhenney. When he was unable to find acting-work, McElhenney came up with, what he thought was, an idea for a short film, as a way to show-case his talents. He contacted a few close friends, including his fellow executive producers and co-writers, Charlie Day and Glenn Howerton, to help him create it. They then shot a \$200 pilot, which they sold to FX, as *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* ("It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia- Sunny Side Up). The basic premise behind the show, as McElhenney explains in an interview with *The AV Club*, "has always been about deconstructing the sitcom" he goes on, adding when considering "the traditional sitcom, it's always about making the characters more likeable, making them more nice, making them ultimately...a little bit fake. We...thought, 'Well let's just do the opposite of that. Let's try to make them as deplorable as possible'" (Keller).

Rather than just simply making their five leading characters, Mac, Charlie, Dennis (played by McElhenney, Day, and Howerton), Dee, and Frank, the most debauched characters possible, their comedic-material would be structured around the satirical.

Multiple academic articles have been written attempting to define what satire is, all they seem to agree on, is that it is a complicated genre to define. In *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, Conal Condren explains that what “all these specifications of satire do share, however, is an element of censoriousness” (378). Basically, this is saying that, all satire should be extremely critical of something. Lisa Colletta considers satire today in, “Political Satire and Postmodern Irony in the Age of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart,” where she explains satire as being “defined as a form that holds up human vices and follies to ridicule and scorn” (859). That is exactly what the writers of *Always Sunny* are doing, with their deplorable characters, McElhenney explains, that the five-main “characters are just a cross-section of the American public... ultimately we’re just taking a look at American culture” (Keller). The circumstances they present, regarding our culture, are not at all positive; McElhenney admits, a goal involving their lead-characters is to make them “as pathetic and depraved as we possibly can” (Keller). This, also, makes sense, concerning their status as a show that works employing satire, because as Colletta clarifies, “satire achieves its aim by shocking its audience” (860). In fact, Colletta explains, ultimately, the goal of satire is “to shock its audience out of complacency and sentimentality (which is often the companion of convention and hypocrisy)” adding, “satire is usually aggressive and most often subversive toward power structures and the status quo” (860). This is another idea McElhenney has specifically addressed, saying “I don’t think it is our responsibility to

dictate to other people what we think our position is and that we just try to present both sides of the argument and that there are hypocrisies on both sides of the argument” (Bendix).

It was important for me to establish that *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* is satire, before discussing Carmen specifically, because considering the nature of satire, it may not be immediately apparent how progressive the show is with their trans-representation. The non-traditional is something McElhenney is familiar with, even as someone who is a cisgendered, heterosexual, white, male, he “was partly raised by his biological mother and her female partner” (Bendix). Considering his upbringing, McElhenney probably has first-hand experiences with how hateful and impertinent others can be when they encounter someone they believe is separate from the norm. I imagine he has used some of these experiences to develop Carmen and the ways in which the main characters and other people, react to and treat her. I also want to mention that, while Dee and Frank (two of the five main characters) were not in the original \$200 pilot, Carmen is, which leads me to suspect she is significant to McElhenney’s aspirations. Carmen appears in only four episodes, but as the show progresses Carmen becomes a more thought-provoking character.

Carmen first appears on the TV show, in episode four of season one (the story is based on the original \$200 pilot), which is titled, “Charlie Has Cancer.” At this point Carmen is living as a woman, and is pre-op. She is played by Brittany Daniel, who is a gorgeous woman, by nearly every definition of beauty. In a scene that starts at about 4:50 into the episode, Mac, McElhenney’s character, is supposed to be looking for a date for his friend, Charlie, but is clearly looking for a date for himself. Mac, standing

next to Carmen, gives her an incredibly obvious, creepy, and rude, up-and-down full body scan, just before he compliments her looks. Clearly enjoying the attention, she encourages Mac with her body language. Mac, excited to have found a potential mate, goes to his friends at the bar, just a few feet from where he was standing with Carmen, to brag about how good-looking *his* prospect is. The gang (as the main characters refer to themselves) is not respectful, calling her a “tranny” but also acknowledging how attractive they find her. She is so attractive, Mac did not even notice, as Dennis points out the “unmistakable bulge of a large penis” in Carmen’s jeans. At 6:00, Mac goes to Carmen to confront her for lying to him about her gender, to which she responds he is the one who lied to her, (because he said he does not work-out), saying “I’ve seen you at the gym, you’re ripped;” complimenting Mac and catching him off-guard. With that compliment, Mac seems to relax and no longer seems bothered by her trans status, as the scene ends with Carmen shifting her “unmistakable bulge,” at 6:43.

The next time we see Carmen, is still in “Charlie Has Cancer,” in a scene that starts at 12:04. Dennis comes home, to the apartment he shares with Mac, where he walks in and immediately displays a shocked face. He is shocked, because he has just walked in on Mac and Carmen alone; the couple is not doing more than watching TV, but Mac looks shamed and Dennis looks uncomfortable. Carmen stands, and the camera shifts angles, altering its gaze, so that it is eye-line with Carmen’s genitals and Mac, who is sitting. Carmen’s pants are, again, extremely tight, and clearly display her “bulge,” which Mac is trying to shift his own gaze away from. Carmen leaves, around 12:49, and Dennis begins to challenge Mac’s decision to hang-out with Carmen. Mac’s response is defensive, he argues, “She’s getting it removed...I’m just putting in my

time...so that afterwards, I'll be...first." Dennis' response to that is a simple "gross." When Dennis says "gross" in response to Mac "putting in time" I am pretty sure he means that Mac is "gross" for dating Carmen at all, but it could also be a judgment about how manipulative Mac is being. Regarding that scene, it is interesting to note that in the very next scene Dennis seduces, and has sex with, a woman, his good friend, Charlie is "in love" (said at 14:21) with, so he is the actual gross person, and his judgments is less important (to the audience), because he clearly makes an immoral decision.

Later, again in "Charlie Has Cancer," we see Carmen, when Mac uses a friend's cancer diagnosis to seduce Carmen (which Dennis had done to seduce Charlie's "love"). That seduction is followed by a montage (that starts at 15:17) that contrasts the relationship that Mac and Carmen have, with that of Charlie and his love interest. This montage illustrates that Mac and Carmen seem to be an incredibly compatible and fluid couple, which is made clearer by how awful Charlie's date is going. After the montage, at 18:31, Mac calls his mom, about Carmen, telling her "...this girl is amazing...I got butterflies in my stomach. There's one little issue—" Mac is cut-off because Carmen comes up behind him, for a hug, and his reaction is to punch, blindly (which they address at 9:22, in a flashback, where Mac says, talking about Dee, "She grabbed me from behind, it was instinctual"), the person behind him. That is when the most noteworthy thing happens; two community members get upset that Mac is "beating on that chick." Mac explains to them that "...it's a dude. She has a penis, so it's okay" to which the community members respond, "Isn't that a hate crime?" and begin chasing

after a fleeing Mac, to punish him properly for breaking (even accidentally) Carmen's nose.

In "Charlie Has Cancer," Carmen is presented as a confident, undeniably attractive woman, who is fun and a great match for Mac. In this episode, Mac is torn between his strong feelings for Carmen, who he connects with on an emotional level, and the social expectations of his undeniably horrific friends. He was ready to tell his mother about his feelings too, which shows how serious he was taking the relationship, even if he claims he is just "putting in time." It is also important that the only person to deem their relationship "gross" is, possibly, one of the most depraved fictional characters of all time, Dennis; who under no circumstances should be seen as a suitable judge of behavior, or anything else (Warner). At *Paley Fest 2009*, the creators also remarked that none of their main characters serve as a "voice of reason;" Charlie Day, even noted that the world outside of the gang is, actually, what most often would serve as a "voice of reason." Considering that remark, the characters that chase Mac down, after punching Carmen (in a misunderstanding, not a hate crime), have the most reasonable voice.

The next time we see Carmen is in season three, episode ten, "Mac is a Serial Killer." Again, Carmen is dating Mac (even after he broke her nose and abandoned her in a park), and he, again, seems to be trying to keep their status, together, a secret from his friends. In their first scene (at 3:31), it is obvious that neither person is being reasonable about their relationship. Mac is pressuring Carmen to have her "situation down there" removed and she is trying to have a serious relationship with him, even though he is clearly uncomfortable with it. She manipulates him, by telling him,

seductively, that “You seem like you can handle anything” adding, “with that body,” when Mac starts getting uncomfortable. He agrees, telling her, “...physically, sure, I guess I can handle pretty much any situation.”

I think it is interesting that while much of the Carmen-episodes have focused on her physically, she focuses on Mac physically. In two different episodes, when he gets uncomfortable, she compliments his body, knowing that will divert his attention away from his discomfort with their relationship. In conversation, Mac even admits that “physically” he can handle anything, which suggests that he is not mentally capable of handling the psychological aspects of their relationship. Mac actually confesses that idea more clearly, in a 35 second scene (from 16:12-16:47), where Mac and Carmen’s relationship finally ends. The scene takes place in Carmen’s bedroom, she is undressed on the bed, and Mac is next to the bed getting dressed, telling Carmen he had “fun,” as he rushes to leave; implying they have just had sex and he wanted to flee immediately after. Carmen, picking up on Mac’s unease, asks Mac to take her out on a date and expresses her frustration with him, saying she thinks he is “afraid” to be seen with her. Mac’s, disturbing, response is “I don’t care if people see us together. I just don’t want them to think we’re dating,” adding, when Carmen grows more agitated, “I’m not ashamed of you. I’m ashamed of myself.” Following that, Mac returns to his apartment, saying Carmen never wants to speak to him again.

We do not see Carmen again until season six, episode one, “Mac Fights Gay Marriage.” The episode starts with Mac trying to get into a gym, using someone else’s membership. He is being asked to leave the gym, when Carmen approaches him. Hearing his name, Mac turns, to meet Carmen face-to-face, he reacts by saying “Hey!

Tranny! Carmen.” Which shows that first, Mac recognizes his name, then he remembers her trans-status, then, finally, he acknowledges her as a person, calling her by her name. Without letting her respond, with more than some facial expressions, he continues his greeting saying, “Sorry. How you doing? Wow. You look great. Sweet camel toe...” With that apology, Mac illustrates that he recognizes that he should not greet a person by their gender identity (worse still, using a slur), but then quickly moves his focus to another taboo topic, how she is looking. When he finds out Carmen is now post-op, he gets irritated with her, apparently forgetting the appalling ways their relationships have ended, asking why she did not call him, “after.” Carmen’s face registers shock, at that question, possibly at how Mac still has not matured, or she is finally getting offended by his comments. At that moment, Nick, a heavy-set, African-American man approaches, and Carmen introduces him, to Mac, as her husband. Mac’s demeanor quickly goes from excitement to disappointment, as he, unconvincingly say, “You’re married? Great...”

In the next scene, after the opening credits (at 1:51), Mac rushes into the bar he owns with the gang, declaring that he has “big news.” He, very abrasively, tells the gang that he ran into an anatomically-female Carmen and that she is married to a man. Dee, the first to respond, expresses excitement for Carmen, saying, sincerely, “Congratulations to her.” Mac goes on, explaining to them how angry he is with the marriage (which does not perceptibly involve him), because he considers it a “gay marriage.” Interestingly, Dennis, the character who has given Mac the most flack for his relationship with Carmen, critiques his definition of “gay marriage’ asking, “One’s a girl. One’s a guy....how is that gay?” Mac justifies himself, by telling them “...clearly, her

husband is a homosexual;" but also saying that Carmen and Nick's relationship is fundamentally different from the one he had with Carmen. Dee agrees with that idea, because Nick waited until after her surgery to date her, which Mac did not.

By the end of the scene, the gang (except Mac, obviously) proves themselves much more forward thinking than they illustrated in previous episodes, all being, at the very least, comfortable, if not joyful about, Carmen and Nick's marital status. Charlie points out why he believes Mac is actually upset telling Mac, he is actually distraught Carmen married "some guy that's not you." Mac disagrees, depending on the final claim that "Marriage is about procreation." When he cannot find the bar's, nonexistent, bible, Mac storms out, saying "You're trying to confuse me," as he rambles on about "God's work."

Mac, after finding a bible, returns to the gym (at 9:44), to confront Carmen and Nick about their marriage; which except for making Carmen unavailable to Mac, does not affect him. He reads them a passage, which he believes condemns the couple; Carmen and Nick's faces clearly exhibit that they are offended, as they ask what he wants. He explains to them that he is "saying that in the eyes of the Lord, your marriage is an abomination and if you don't get a divorce, you're going to hell." The couple is perturbed, but calm, presumably used to narrow-mindedness. Nick asks for the bible and turns to "Exodus 21, verses 20, 21," which talks about how a Christian ought to treat his slaves. Mac interjects with, "that's not my thing." By this point, Carmen has taken a defensive, closed-off, stance. Nick continues to criticize the pro-slavery attitude he finds prevalent in the bible; essentially arguing if Mac is going to use a literal interpretation of the parts of the bible he quoted, then he must also be pro-slavery and

racist. Mac begins to be less aggressive and gets more defensive, insisting "...that section is not from the same time." The couple is still unmoved, so Mac goes on, insisting, "...I came here to help you guys" expressing his concern for their afterlives, as "gay men." Nick tells Mac "I'm not a gay man," and Carmen adds, "...if anything, you're the one who slept with me when I was a man." Mac grows more upset, but still does not relent, and Carmen requests that he just admit he is upset that she is no longer available. Mac responds, in one of his most illuminating dialogues, by saying, "I'm never going to admit that, Carmen. But come on, I mean, him?... look at my body compared to his... you call this soft body and you gay marry him. And now you're calling me gay...and trying to confuse me with your liberal Biblicisms." In saying he would never admit why he is actually upset, he does admit it is because he has lost any chance to be with Carmen. Then, he goes on, disclosing that he feels even more outraged, because she married a person he does not find attractive.

In Carmen's final scene, in "Mac Fights Gay Marriage," Carmen is accosted by Mac's friends Charlie and Frank, again, at the gym (at 15:23). These two are planning to marry each other, because they want to scam health-benefits (the episode focuses on actual affronts to marriage—Carmen and Nick being the only positive example). Frank is hesitant to enter the domestic partnership, and wants to ask Carmen a question. The question ends up being, who, between Frank and Charlie, would be the woman in their (not sexual) domestic partnership. Finally infuriated, Carmen yells at them, "Neither of you would be the woman. You're both men!" That is the end of the scene, and Carmen's appearance, but what is nice is we do finally see her really angry at how ignorant and

inappropriately this group behaves and treats her; in the past episodes, she always displayed something closer to irritation, but not real anger.

The last time Carmen appears on *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, is later in season six, in the episode, "Dee Gives Birth." Unlike the other three Carmen episodes, Carmen is not the central focus, but she is still incredibly significant. The scene starts at 18:18, with the gang greeting Dee's baby for the first time, in the maternity-waiting room. Carmen and Nick unexpectedly appear, next to Mac. Mac notices her, and for the first time in the series, greets her as, "Carmen," instead of his usual, "Tranny!" Dee, though, explains her presence, by saying, "The tranny's the dad," adding, "We used her sperm and a donor egg;" because as Nick explains, they "had a difficult time finding a surrogate." As Carmen and Nick, lovingly, walk away from the group, Dennis adds, "Those two are gonna make great parents, much better parents than any of us would," which everyone, including Mac, agrees with. What's even more interesting is in "Mac Fights Gay Marriage" one of the only claims he seemed to feel strongly about, in the end, against Carmen and Nick's marriage was their inability to procreate. With this scene, we are shown how inaccurate even that claim was, because Dee never would have procreated on her own; she does not want children, that baby was only born because of Carmen and Nick's union, and their desire for a baby.

It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia may not provide the most gentle scrutiny of American society, but that does not mean their assessment is inaccurate. Rob McElhenney, in his interview with Joel Keller, at *The AV Club*, explains that people will "take a cursory glance" at *Always Sunny*, "and say, 'This show is offensive...'" claiming he finds it "way less offensive" to take "a real look...from a comedic standpoint" than to

over trivialize real-life. In the same interview, he also admits that early on they may have made mistakes because of “ignorance when we first got started... we just didn’t know how to make a TV show yet.” It is important to note, Carmen’s first episode is meaner, in tone, than the later ones she appears in; illustrating that, with *Always Sunny*, the creators are able to learn from their mistakes and alter their tone, when readdressing issues. McElhenney also talks about how he thinks *Always Sunny* should have a place, but says, “I feel like it’s a dangerous and dark world if Sunny becomes mainstream comedy... I don’t know if I want to live in that world” (Keller). In another interview, McElhenney says, specifically about their episode addressing “gay marriage,” that, “It was important to us to make an episode of television that you are never going to see anywhere else which is something I’ve never seen. It’s part of the national conversation” (Bendix). McElhenney mentions the idea, that they use *Always Sunny* to add “to our national conversation” at the *Paley Fest 2009*, too, it definitely seems important to him.

In the Carmen focused episodes, a large part of Mac and Carmen’s relationship is a power struggle. In “Role Identities and Person Identities: Gender Identity, Mastery Identity, and Controlling One’s Partner,” Jan E. Stets, examines the ways couples struggle for control and how an individual’s gender identity effects the struggle. Stets explains “Gender identity is related to biological sex, cognitive development, and cultural expectations” and that “the level of interest in power is the same for women and men” (131). Interestingly, though, while men and women seem to equally desire power, in a relationship, “the self-meanings associated with maleness and femaleness both lead to perception of controlling one’s partner, but for different reasons and to different degrees” (143). Stets is clear, “people do not simply act on the basis of their sex” but

gender identity is a significant factor in relationships, because we have learned, through social exposure how to behave as a man or woman (130). During the experiment, on which Stets' paper was published, they learned that being able to have power, does not necessarily mean exerting it, and that there are a few reasons people in relationships will seek to have control over their partner, related to the social expectations. Stets found that "more masculine people, perceived control appears to maintain masculinity. For more feminine people, control compensates for efficaciousness that they lack (143)." Basically, people, of any gender, with "more masculine" personality traits desire control because they have been taught to have power, where "more feminine" traits seek power, in their relationships, because they feel powerless, in other areas of their lives.

I think we can see this gender-based control struggle pretty clearly in the relationship between Mac and Carmen. Stets mentions, "in American society, one of the ways we express mastery over the environment is by pushing ourselves onto others, manipulating others, forcing our goals onto them, and getting them to do what we want" (145), which we see both Carmen and Mac do several times, during their interactions, whether they are dating, or not. Mac seems to love Carmen, but is uncomfortable with her trans status. In "Charlie Has Cancer" and "Mac is a Serial Killer" his discomfort comes from his focus on her physical aspects; this must make Carmen feel weak, because it is something that she cannot immediately control, so she controls Mac, by getting him to shift his attention from her body to his vanity. Carmen does say in "Charlie Has Cancer" that she is pre-op, implying she had already planned to transition from male to female, especially considering she was already living as a woman. In spite

of that knowledge, and the reality that Carmen cannot safely move faster with the full transition than doctors will allow, Mac is constantly bringing up his desire for her to have the surgery, to make her anatomically female. This is him displaying his insecurities and attempting to exert control, when he feels powerless. It is also fairly clear that Mac is uncomfortable with himself, it would not be unreasonable to assume, he wants this power over Carmen, because he is unable to change his own desire for her, no matter what gender role she is conforming to.

As I mentioned, Jan E. Stets acknowledged that how we have to learn to perform our gender roles, but only considers men and women; Kay Siebler in "Transgender Transitions: Sex/Gender, Binaries in the Digital Age" looks specifically at what trans individuals are being taught, through media, about how to perform their gender roles. Siebler mentions that "the presence of a traditionally marginalized group does not necessarily equate to advancement" (90), explaining that too often, "Websites, films, and television are making gender more rigid" (94). One of Siebler's main ideas is that "the digital realm tells users and viewers is that 'trans' means 'transitioning,' not moving outside of systems defining sex and gender" (75-76). Carmen does fit into the American feminine-ideal; but with her they do break a different, male-to-female transitioning, trans stereotype, that Siebler describes as "high drag" where all the characters "have big hair, lots of make-up, push-up bras, and large implants" and "the stereotypically gay catty attitudes...The MTF transqueers can easily be read as gay men dressing in drag and playing to the stereotypes both of hyper-feminine females and comedic drag performers" (90). Carmen does not fit most of that description. She is played by a woman and feminine, but she also strong, athletic, and subtle with her make-up;

Carmen is different because she does not conform to a male, or female, or trans stereotype.

Not only does *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, break trans stereotypes, but it also recognizes why Mac behaves like he does, with Carmen. Both Stets and Siebler talk about how all people learn how to behave from social exposure. Stets says, "such...norms about what constitutes the ideal male and female that are transmitted through language, religion, or the educational system are important in the formation of one's gender identity" (131). Mac, in "Charlie Has Cancer," is attracted Carmen only until his friends give him trouble about it, this is a good example of how other people (or social structure, as Stets calls it) can influence the ways an individual sees itself and behaves. Mac does not seem overly concerned that Carmen is anatomically male, until his friends use the slur, "tranny" to illustrate their disapproval of the situation. Once his friends develop a more progressive stance, Mac starts using religion to explain why he thinks Carmen and he, or Carmen and Nick, should not be together. When Mac tells Carmen, in "Mac is a Serial Killer," he does not want to publically date her, he admits that it is because, "I just don't want them to think we're dating;" again, illustrating that Mac's shame has been taught to him and is held constant by pressures to perform within socially constructed roles.

When Frank and Charlie go to Carmen, with their ignorant question, in "Mac Fights Gay Marriage" it serves two purposes; they further discuss the social-construction of gender idea and show people how they should not treat others. *Always Sunny* illustrates that we currently hold some very binary beliefs about how people, and relationships work—Frank is so used to marital-relationships being between opposite

gendered people, he does not understand that two men in a love-match, both can play a traditionally male role, there does not have to be a feminine partner, to counter the male; they can just be a couple. Carmen essentially says this and her anger illustrates that the manner in which they brought it up is an absolutely unacceptable way to behave.

Carmen is not what can be problematic, with interpretations of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, it is that people misunderstand the creators' intent. The creators do a good job making their characters terrible enough that the audience is aware it is satire, and that they are criticizing, not applauding, the ways their main-characters behave. In hoping to add to our national conversation, McElhenney is taking on a big job. In choosing to address being trans in America, especially back in 2006, he proved more progressive than most TV creators. While Carmen may not be an ideal representation, considering the major lack of complicated, non-stereotyped trans characters, in the media, she is a big deal.

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