

IN FULL BLOOM

Four decades ago the hand-lettered program for Bloomers' very first production declared that "the time has come to show that women can be funny, too." Penn's all-female musical comedy troupe has been proving it ever since.

By Caren Lissner

THE scene opens with four young people on a stage—three sitting on folding chairs and one leaning casually against a reception desk. They're women but they're playing men, outfitted in dark, nearly identical sport-jackets and short-haired wigs. The one at the reception desk, speaking in a deep voice, finishes a story about a coworker named Jen with the confession, "To tell you the truth, I've always found Jen to be pretty attractive."

Suddenly, he adds, "Oh wait! I'm sorry. Can I not *say* that anymore?"

"Better watch out," a buddy chimes in. "You don't want a lawsuit on your hands."

They all laugh.

The "#NotAllMen" skit—a skewering of dismissive reactions to the #MeToo movement (re)launched in 2017—gets more exaggerated as it goes along. The four "men" wonder if it's still okay to like Woody Allen movies, and one complains that his girlfriend expects him to be "woke" and read "Cat Person" (a *New Yorker* short story about male-female relations that went viral in 2017). Things quickly escalate to indignant rants about no longer being able to walk around in the office, um, indecently exposed, or permitted to hit on "hot" summer interns—even when prepared to offer a full-time job. Each concludes with an increasingly sarcastic "Oh, can I not *say*

that anymore?" amid much mugging and wild gesticulating.

The aggrieved male round-robin screeches to a halt when the fourth fellow brags about hiring a hit man to kill his "bitch of a wife," whose absence made him so lonely he had to defile a goat. The others suddenly freeze in shock. "Can I not say that ... anymore?" he asks weakly.

End scene.

The sharp humor and cultural references in the skit—which debuted on campus in Bloomers' Spring 2018 show, *Shakespeare in Bloom*—are typical of Penn's all-female comedy troupe, which is currently celebrating its 40th anniversary. The group also offers plenty of more



time-honored, site-specific humor: the same show featured a College student's wistful, "If I Were in Wharton," sung, inevitably, to the tune of "If I Were a Rich Man" from *Fiddler on the Roof*, the source as well of the Mask and Wig standard, "Tuition." The more recent Fall 2018 show referenced the pop-cultural phenomenon of reality TV with *The Bachelor: Will You Accept This Show?* which played to a record five sold-out audiences at the Iron Gate Theater in October (250 people per performance), including a cadre of Bloomer alumnae on hand to kick off the anniversary year. The show skewered everything from fundraising for Penn (to the tune of Sweet Charity's "Hey, Big Spender": "Let me get right to the point, buildings don't get named for everyone I see!") to organized religion (a Last Supper parody "nailed it," as the Jesus character said). Clips from these shows can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/user/BloomersComedy/videos>.

In the four decades since its founding as the country's first all-female college comedy troupe, Bloomers has served as the launching pad for alumnae pursuing careers as performers, producers, or in other aspects of the entertainment industry, and has provided valuable preparation for women in any field—from finance to technology, education, law, or medicine—where one needs to be confident, sharp, and in command of a boardroom or operating room. "Being a Bloomer has been an unexpected boon to my life as a cognitive neuroscientist," noted Laurel Buxbaum C'82 in the February 2017 edition of the Bloomers Alumnae Association's recently revived newsletter. "When I stand up to give a research talk to a group of scientists—not all of whom are necessarily sympathetic—I'm grateful for those years of experience in being warm and humorous on the stage."

While there have always been beloved female comedians, from Lucille Ball to Carol Burnett to Gilda Radner, Jane Curtin, and Laraine Newman—the women in the iconic first cast of *Saturday Night*

Live, which premiered in 1975—recent years have seen a surge of women in comedy. In the most recent Emmys, three of the six series nominated in the sketch comedy category were hosted by women (Amy Sedaris, Sarah Silverman, and Tracey Ullman). Figures like Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Melissa McCarthy, Amy Schumer, Mindy Kaling, and the *Broad City* duo of Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson have created some of the funniest and most highly acclaimed comedies in TV and film of the past decade, and at *SNL* women have mostly been the standouts in recent (Kristen Wiig, Vanessa Bayer C'04) and current (Kate McKinnon, Cecily Strong, Aidy Bryant) ensembles. That heightened visibility has helped spark new interest in Bloomers. This year, only about a quarter of those who auditioned for the group were accepted, according to Bloomers' chair Lauren Sorantino C'19. And the five sold-out performances in fall set a record: "We usually do four performances of a show and we recently moved to a larger theater, so selling out five shows this fall was a big moment in Bloomers history," Sorantino notes.

Bayer—probably the most famous Bloomers alumna—spent seven years at *SNL* and followed that with a number of well-received film performances [including—full disclosure—the adaptation of author Caren Lissner's novel *Carrie Pilby*—Ed.]. She has often discussed the group in interviews. In fact, when she left *SNL*, fellow cast member and "Weekend Update" cohost Colin Hanks wrote a song suggesting that the rest of the players were a little *too* familiar with Bloomers stories: "She plays little boys/but she's always a woman to me/yes we have heard of Bloomers ... she's the funniest, sunniest person you'll see."

Bayer was also the headliner a few years back at LaughtHERfest, a day of comedy panels and performances on campus that Bloomers sponsors annually. Other featured LaughtHER performers, in addition to student groups, have included Michelle Wolf, who did a controversial set at the

2018 White House Correspondents' Dinner and hosted the shortlived Netflix show *The Break with Michelle Wolf*, and current *SNL* cast member Melissa Villaseñor.

If comedy was for a long time a man's game in the world beyond campus, on campus, all-male performing arts groups like Mask and Wig (founded in 1889) and the even more venerable Glee Club (which got its start in 1862) had a big head start on Bloomers—not to mention, in the case of Mask and Wig, its own clubhouse in Center City Philadelphia. One benefit of longevity for these groups has been the development of robust and active alumni associations.

Bloomers may not be able to offer an off-campus hideaway or the additional Mask and Wig perk of a personalized drinking mug hanging behind the clubhouse bar, but over the last couple of years they've made strides to build involvement among former Bloomers.

Spearheaded by group founder Joan Harrison C'81, chair of the Bloomers Alumnae Association (BLAA), the new group recently held workshops, retreats, and regional networking events with current students and recent graduates. The students have responded enthusiastically, joining alumnae for leadership seminars and landing sought-after internships at top talent agencies and entertainment companies in Hollywood and New York.

The alums recently held a host of celebrations for their anniversary—including an alumnae/student dinner and party near campus on the final day of the fall show—and have been discussing what they want to do in the future to help smart women pave the road to success with laughter.

First Bloom

It all started when, newly arrived on campus in the fall of 1977, Joan Harrison saw her first Mask and Wig free show and was inspired.

"I was a full-scholarship kid. I felt like a fish out of water. I couldn't find my

posse,” she recalls. “Then I went to see Mask and Wig, and I was dazzled. I said, ‘I want to do that.’ I was quickly alerted that that would never come to pass.”

Others had tried—and were met with a response neatly summarized in a September 1970 *Daily Pennsylvanian* article headlined “Girl applicant turned away by Mask and Wig.” The story described how sophomore transfer student Suzy Sang’s request for an audition had been denied, with the club’s board of governors voting—unanimously—to continue their male-only tradition. Mask

and Wig “will not be accepting girls and that’s all there is to it,” the board’s spokesman declared. “Letting girls play girls would change Mask and Wig from what Mask and Wig is.”

With that route blocked, Harrison says, “It seemed an obvious idea to create a female comedy group.”

She discussed her plan with roommates Barbara Finkelstein C’81 and Amy Albert C’81 and in the fall of 1978 they posted flyers around campus saying, “Women, the time has come for the first all-female musical comedy group in the

Ivy League. Please join us at the initial meeting of Bloomers.”

“The idea,” recalls Finkelstein, an educator who went on to found a charter school in Teaneck, New Jersey, “came from the fact that we had a bunch of friends who were Mask and Wig, and we sort of felt like, all these guys are doing comedy and dressing up in drag, and why aren’t women doing comedy?”

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Harrison didn’t know what to expect. Much to her surprise, 200 women showed up. After she read aloud from the flyer, “There was a spontaneous standing ovation,” she says. “I thought, ‘Whoa. There’s enough support and—let’s hope—talent in this room to make this happen.’”

In October of 1978, the troupe received student activities funding. With Harrison as director, they began cobbling together their first show, *Fruit of the Bloomers*, to run in March of 1979. Finkelstein choreographed the show and Albert was the producer. Jackie Green C’81, who joined up after seeing the flyer in September, helped script the show and became known as one of the group’s most clever writers.

Finkelstein says she didn’t know how big the idea would become. “My mom [Rena Fineman CW ’51] went to Penn,” she says. “She was a Philly girl. She went to Overbrook High School and she actually got a full ride to Penn. She was in the College for Women. The fact that we had



Clockwise from top: Selling tickets on Locust Walk for the first show, *Fruit of the Bloomers*, in Spring 1979 (from left: Rochelle Berliner, Jackie Green C’81, Sally Katz C’82, Laurel Buxbaum C’82, Joan Harrison C’81, Kathy Kelrick C’81 GEd’81, Sandy Benson C’82, Myra Schwartz W’80). For the price of \$2 (\$2.50 at the door), the audience got to see a Doo Wop song about The Wawa performed by Wendy Rogers C’82, Benson, and Karen Moore C’81; a history lesson in song from the Morton Salt Girl (on the S.A.L.T. treaty), Marilyn Monroe (Monroe Doctrine), Charlie Brown (*Brown v. Board of Education*), and Carmen Miranda (*Miranda ruling*); a skit featuring a dental hygienist (Maxine Annapolen Nu’82) visiting schoolkids, and much more.

Photos and caption info courtesy Joan Harrison.

this all-female performing arts group, musical comedy group, she was very impressed. Women in her day were really second-class citizens. I didn't think it would be such a big thing, truthfully. We were trying it out. The fact that it's still going on now is pretty amazing to me. Joan really has been a huge impetus."

The name Bloomers came from Amelia Jenks Bloomer, a women's rights and temperance activist who created and edited *The Lily*, the first US newspaper edited by and for women. She was also prominent in the movement for women's dress reform, advocating for pantaloons for women as a safer and more comfortable alternative to restrictive corsets and dresses, which became known as bloomers as a result.

"Just as suffragette Amelia Bloomer allowed women the opportunity for freer dress," explained a hand-drawn program for the Spring 1979 show, "Bloomers hopefully will allow Penn women a chance for comedic expression for years to come. Bloomers is the first group of its kind in the Ivy League ... because the time has come to show that women can be funny, too."

The first show skewered the usual subjects: Penn life, the Ivies, religion (okay, Judaism), pop culture, Broadway, and politics. "Back in the Oval Office: What If?" imagined "the anti-feminist Phyllis Schlafly as president," Harrison remembers. "She inadvertently pressed the nuke button while giving herself a manicure." Other titles included "Academia Nuts," "Snort 'N Blow," and "JAPs at Lunch"—of which Harrison remarks, "I'm not proud of that skit," noting that it wouldn't be performed today. Sorantino agrees that, while Jewish women jokingly still use the term "JAP" on campus, Bloomers wouldn't write such a skit now.

While Harrison and company didn't try to storm the gates of the all-male

performing arts bastions, she does recall attempting a little consciousness-raising at the time. "I talked to the storied Glee Club director Bruce Montgomery regarding a couple of drinking songs that I thought demeaned women and were anachronistic in general," Harrison says—though she doesn't think she was taken seriously.



The lines of communication and cooperation are more open today—as indicated by the (first ever!) combined show put on by Bloomers and Mask and Wig for this year's incoming freshman class during New Student Orientation on August 31. "We filled a 900-person theater," says Bloomers chair Sorantino. "It's likely we'll continue collaborating with Mask and Wig."

The men's group has also reached out "for advice on how to write women, or whether something is problematic," adds Fall 2018 show director Katie Marshall

C'19. "Mask and Wig members have asked us for advice. I think there's an effort across campus, with everyone striving to make an effort to be the change they want to see."

Evolution

From the beginning, Harrison had focused on recruiting freshmen and sophomores so Bloomers could thrive after her graduation. Her plan to build a strong foundation worked. After she and her cohort left, women like Nicole Grindle C'83—now a producer at Pixar whose most recent credit is *Incredibles 2*—were ready to take their place.

"Freshman year, I was in the School of Engineering, which did not turn out to be a good fit for me," Grindle says. "I took a semester off, and when I returned, became friends with some different folks, one of whom was Cindy Rae Dubow [C'84]. She was a cast member and invited me to the show that spring. I had also become involved in a number of other theater groups, but this ... was all women, all original, and very funny." She was accepted during fall of junior year and became a director the following year.

Grindle remembers one skit that included three cultural touchstones of the late 1970s/early '80s:

A *Family Feud* match in which the family from the movie *Ordinary People* took on the Kramers of *Kramer vs. Kramer*.

"The standout performance was by Mary Albanese [EE'83] as the dead brother in *Ordinary People*," Grindle says. "I couldn't not laugh every single time we rehearsed it."

Albanese went on to found a tech company "that I sold around 1999 (very lucky! Dotcom boom), then I raised my kids," per her entry in the BLAA newsletter.

Another skit parodied the 1980s Kim Carnes chart-topper "Bette Davis Eyes"

as “Pennsylvania Guys.” That one “was a hit with the audience because the lyrics did a great job of nailing the horny Penn guys,” Grindle notes.

“But I mostly remember how much I enjoyed working with the other women in the group to make this thing happen. They were an amazing collection of brave, funny, energetic, and very talented people,” she adds. “It was undoubtedly the thing that propelled me into becoming a TV and film producer.”

Other Bloomers alumnae say being in the group taught them to manage diverse personalities in fields like law, government, and education. They honed their skills by dealing with Bloomers’ different sections of Cast, Band, Business, Costumes, Tech, and Writing.

“Bringing together the different sections teaches you leadership lessons,” says Meghana Jayam EAS’18 W’18, who served as chair of the group during her senior year while finishing up her M&T degree. “I learned to make tough calls. During show week, you bring all of the parts together. It’s about balancing different people’s needs.”

At one point, Jayam considered dropping out of the group due to her rigorous coursework. Nevertheless, she persisted, and from then on made a point of supporting other overworked students so they could stay in Bloomers. “It’s important to take time” to study different subjects, she says. “I always talk about Bloomers in job interviews. It’s where I learned my people skills.”

The value of those skills extends to some pretty surprising places.

Nani Coloretti C’91 found that hers came in handy when she served as deputy secretary of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development under President Barack Obama in 2014–2016 and as assistant secretary for management in the Department of the Treasury from 2012 to 2014. And earlier when she worked for San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom developing the city’s \$6 billion annual budget—which she once had five

minutes’ notice to present at a press conference. “It’s about reading your audience and making sure you’re funny and relevant all at the same time. You make sure people are listening and that you have the timing,” Coloretti says.

“Humor has evolved,” she adds, to the point where, as various studies have shown, people are turning to late night comedy shows for their news fix. “Since people are consuming a lot of information, it’s almost taken on a more impor-

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tant role. You’re going to be the explainer, but also funny. Even with political humor, dark humor, there are elements of truth.”

Treasury, it turned out, was a lot of laughs—which helped cut the (also considerable) stress involved in the job. “Everyone there was really smart and just so funny,” Coloretti says. “We were facing down some really tough issues. Humor helped in senior staff meetings. There’s the towel-snapping sort of humor guys do to each other. Not all of it was like that, but it helped that I could add jokes that were different. To me, humor can also be kind and accessible.”

Changing Times

But can humor be “kind and accessible” and still have bite? Does a “woman’s touch” take away from the sharpness of a joke?

Current Bloomers say they do pay attention to determine if a skit will offend—but that this only helps them strengthen the material. Since the early 1990s, com-

mentators have been arguing over the impact of “political correctness” in shaping acceptable comedy performances on college campuses. It’s often claimed that students have become too sensitive, while others point out that objections to sexist, racist, or otherwise offensive material is merely a sign that women and minority groups are finally pushing back against decades of lazy and unfair stereotypes and behavior that were accepted for so long they became institutionalized.

On or off stage, women face challenges that men generally never have to consider. Take clothing. Since women are judged more often on their appearance than men, any difference in their looks, dress, or body can make them feel vulnerable. Yet women’s professional or formal clothing invariably highlights their differences (and high-heeled shoes literally slow them down), whereas men’s clothes are often uniform, dark, and cover up their differences.

The nearly identical suitjackets worn by the four performers in the aforementioned “#NotAllMen” sketch point to a larger issue, one that is also reflected in the name “Bloomers” itself: there are many challenges to being a woman in society that men don’t have to think about and often don’t recognize. In a group like Bloomers, women can be more comfortable joking and sharing ideas without having to constantly explain themselves, defend themselves, and compete.

“It’s a bit of a safe space,” says recent grad Jayam. “Women 18 to 22 are in their formative years. It’s when you’re developing your sense of, ‘What is my role in the world and society and how can I contribute?’ Being in Bloomers was so important during my formative years. It helped me understand more about the world and [about] learning with a group of people who are different from you. I’m an Indian girl who grew up in Saudi Arabia. I was one of the few women of color in Bloomers. I was able to contribute my perspective.”

“Meeting the younger Bloomers has been inspiring, educational, life-affirming, America-affirming.”

All of these perspectives and differences have taught the members to listen and learn, says director Katie Marshall, whose parents—Jaimee Orans C’85 and Richard Marshall ME’85—were fans of the performing arts while at Penn. “I never want anyone to come to our shows and feel attacked or unwelcome,” Marshall says, noting that both women and men appreciated the #NotAllMen sketch. “It’s important to be tasteful and within boundaries.”

She says the group’s leaders take seriously any criticism of a joke. “I’ll have people come up to me and say, ‘I think this line is a little bit problematic,’” she adds. “I can think of at least two instances with a recent show in which younger cast members brought up that something might come off as offensive, and we agreed. We may be policing ourselves too much at times, but this time we said, ‘That’s a good point.’ If it’s a distasteful joke, at the end of the day, we’re better off [revising it] because the sketches are better.”

Jayam recalls criticism that a past show—featuring a skit in which President Donald Trump W’68 figured, plus others touching on “the political landscape or political correctness”—was too political. “The language we use can set off a trigger in the audience’s mind,” she says. “It could be a reference to Twitter, and people think, ‘Oh, Twitter is Trump.’ It’s almost a life lesson, how things can be taken a different way.”

While audience sensibilities are a concern, the group doesn’t want to make its own members uncomfortable, either. That sensitivity wouldn’t necessarily be a priority in a co-ed group.

Back in 1991, the *Harvard Lampoon*, the famous seedbed for *SNL* and late-night comedy show staff writers, got flak over a de facto hazing ritual exposed in a *Rolling Stone* article. During what was known as “Phool’s Week,” prospective members sometimes simulated oral sex, were expected to drop to their knees to recite dirty limericks about themselves, and submitted written applications that got returned with handwritten responses such as “Blow me.”

Members of an all-female troupe are less likely to have to worry about being viewed as sex objects, to encounter sexist traditions from another era, or to be told they’re being too sensitive if they question any of it.

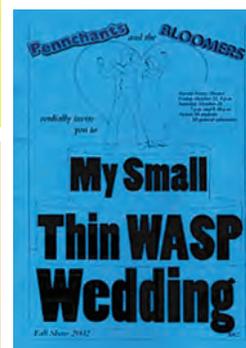
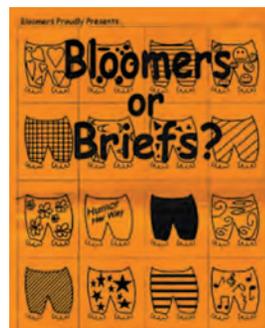
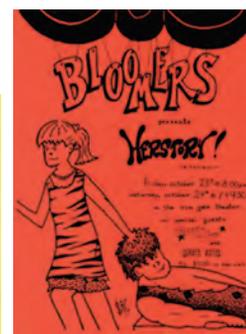
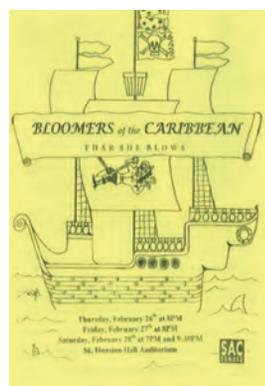
According to Sorantino, Bloomers does have an initiation ritual, but it’s not at all like hazing. (She preferred not to elaborate, “not because we haze, but so it stays a surprise to new members.”)

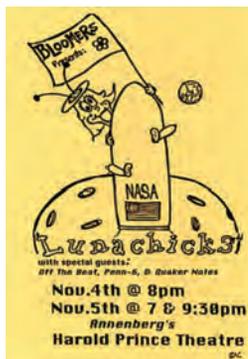
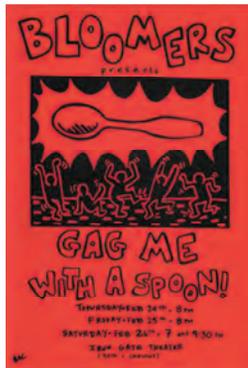
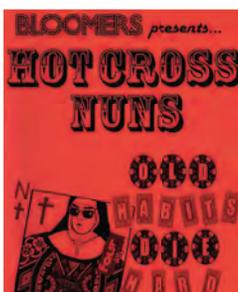
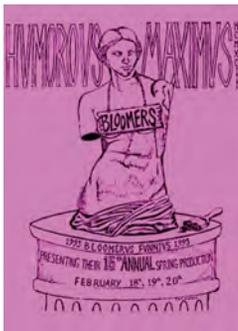
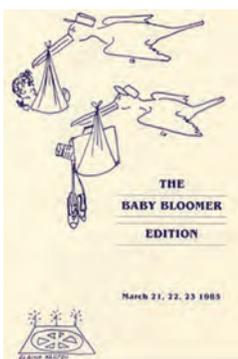
“Spine Building” Across the Generations

Harrison, a longtime TV executive, decided to see if she could create a strong alumnae group in 2015 when she and her husband were writing their will and wanted to leave a bequest to Bloomers. Her Class’s 35th Reunion was also approaching, “Which got me to thinking,” she says, “I could launch a Bloomers alumnae association with the original Bloomers.” Tracking down a core group, she asked, “Will you join me?” They all said, ‘Without question.’ I will never forget our seeing each other for the first time in decades,” she adds. “It was one big joyful love-in. Since then, we speak constantly and have gotten together lots of times both here and abroad. So in giving a gift, I got the biggest one of all.”

Dozens of alumnae have gotten involved since, and the launch of the BLAA has created opportunities for Bloomers past and present to learn from each other. They have run intense weekend getaways with guest speakers, including Coloretti and Kristen Gibbons Feden, a non-alumna who successfully prosecuted Bill Cosby on charges of indecent sexual assault as a Montgomery County assistant prosecutor.

In the December 2017 BLAA newsletter, Harrison asked the alumnae to tell current students what they wish they’d known upon graduation. The responses were not just about careers or comedy but touched on issues like navigating friendships, family, and the search for true love.





“Never ignore your friends just because you are now in a romantic relationship/married,” advised Rebekah Darcy Beneteau C’85, a sex and intimacy coach. “They are the ones who will always be there for you, and their presence in your life is part of what your partner fell in love with.”

Susan Borke W’80 instructed younger women that, “when it comes time to negotiate your compensation—for a job, a gig, or a raise—think like a man. Ask for more than you were planning, more than you think is enough.”

“Go out by yourself sometimes, and get a therapist as soon as you wonder if you need one,” counseled Nina Kao C’16, now a music teacher. “And buy cheap furniture because you’ll move again.”

Sorantino says she and her peers have gotten a lot out of interacting with the alumnae. She sees Harrison as a “mother figure” and enjoyed getting to know Coloretti at a retreat. “She had a high-profile job in the Obama administration,” Sorantino notes, “and it was so funny to see her unwind and drink with us, joke around.”

“Meeting the younger Bloomers has been inspiring, educational, life-affirming, America-affirming,” says Harrison. “The collective success of Bloomers graduates, not just in the arts, is remarkable. There’s much to be said for the liberation and spine-building that comes from performing comedy at a young age.”

“I am, by nature, a somewhat quiet person,” Sorantino adds. “I was not very comfortable speaking in groups. [Bloomers] forces you to put yourself out there. I think it would have been intimidating to [share ideas] in a room with men in it. I speak out more in class now. At work I’m more comfortable sharing opinions.”

Vanessa Bayer, who joined Bloomers after seeing them at a performing arts night for freshmen in Fall 2000, echoes the value of a comfortable place to hone one’s craft. “I just think it’s great to have a safe space where women can express

themselves and find their voices, comedic and otherwise,” she says. “I feel that having that experience has been invaluable in my success today.”

But she suggests that the world’s attitude toward funny women may be changing. “I have noticed that a lot of the female comedians I’ve worked with were straight-A students, while a lot of the men were class clowns, so I think there’s something to be said for society rewarding genders differently—but I don’t know if that’s still the case,” she says. “At the end of the day, funny women have been around forever (Carol Burnett, Gilda Radner, Lucille Ball, the list goes on), and while I’m thrilled that there seems to have been a greater platform for funny women in the past decade or so, I hope that one day soon, rather than talking about funny women vs. funny men, we’ll just be talking about funny people.”

Bloomers is doing more than helping women sharpen their senses of humor; it’s training them to find their place and make their contribution in a changing and challenging world.

“I think women’s use of humor is generally different than men’s, because we are often trying to navigate a dynamic in which women with power can be threatening,” says Pixar’s Grindle. “Sharing humor with other professional women has been the antidote to the frequent microaggressions and humiliations that have come from being a professional woman in largely male organizations. Nobody has ever reacted negatively to my sense of humor, but certainly there have been times when they have ignored it, talked over it, or even used it and taken credit for it. And fortunately, I have enough of a sense of humor to laugh it off and move on.”

Caren Lissner C’93 (carenlissner.com) is a humor writer and journalist whose first novel, *Carrie Pilby*, was recently made into a comedy film. She is finishing up a new (and sometimes funny) novel.