

Are Fat Suits the New Blackface?

Hollywood's Big New Minstrel Show

Marisa Meltzer / WINTER 2002

IN SAN FRANCISCO, MOVIE PREVIEWS ARE MORE THAN JUST ads—they're a chance for notoriously politically correct audiences to vent their disapproval of Hollywood, corporate America, and the powers that be. The standard mode of expression is hissing. I've witnessed *The Patriot*, *Rush Hour*, and several Freddie Prinze Jr. vehicles getting the San Francisco treatment. But over the summer, during a preview for *Shallow Hal*, no one in the audience saw fit to register sibilant protest against one of the most disturbing and offensive cinematic trends in recent memory: the fat suit. Gwyneth Paltrow stars in the Farrelly brothers comedy as Rosemary, the 350-pound love interest of womanizer Jack Black, who, because he can suddenly see only "inner beauty," falls in love with the Skinny Rosemary; the rest of the world sees Fat Rosemary waddling her way through the movie. Watch Fat Rosemary shop for clothes! Watch her do a cannonball into a pool! Watch her drink a really big milkshake—all by herself! The preview audience laughed uproariously. Not a single "ssss" was heard. I felt a little queasy.

Leaving aside the incongruity of "inner beauty" being taken so literally, the culturally tired but no less annoying assumption that thin = beautiful, and the fact that Black is no paragon of svelte pulchritude himself, *Shallow Hal* isn't an isolated case. Au contraire; Gwyneth has jumped on a veritable fat-suit bandwagon. A brief history of the fat suit would have to include

Goldie Hawn, living large and vengeful in *Death Becomes Her*; Robin Williams—annoying as ever—as the chubby, dowdy Mrs. Doubtfire; Martin Lawrence and a pair of really weird saggy boobs in *Big Momma's House*; Mike Myers as Fat Bastard in *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*; and Eddie Murphy playing an entire fat family in both *Nutty Professor* movies. More recently, there's Martin Short, unable to cross his legs in his new Comedy Central talk show *Primetime Glick*, and Julia Roberts scarfing down cookies as a (gasp!) size twelve in *America's Sweethearts*. Fat people are now America's favorite celluloid punch lines. Wanna make a funny movie? It's a pretty easy formula: Zip a skinny actor into a latex suit. Watch her/him eat, walk, and try to find love. Hilarity will ensue.

Of course, no conversation about the fat suit could be complete without a mention of Fat Monica, inhabitant of several flashback and alternate-reality episodes of *Friends*. While I will refrain from airing my personal theories about Courteney Cox Arquette's body image and eating habits here, I believe Fat Monica really takes the proverbial cake. She dresses badly, has no self-control, eats junk food, has poor hygiene, and is a virgin. She's the opposite of the control-freak Thin Monica, who has the husband, the job, and the adoring friends. Even worse than all that is the dance Courteney does in full fat drag to entertain the studio audience between takes. She calls it "the popcorn," and apparently folks watching find it quite comical. It involves her moving rhythmically in her latex suit. A fat person shaking her bod: mmmm, funny.

It's here that the true nature of fat-suit humor is revealed in all its glory. See, it's fairly acceptable to satirize a group of people we envy. Movies like *Legally Blonde* and *Clueless* work because we're laughing at rich white girls. Their problems are supposedly our fantasies—which boy to date, which pair of Manolos looks better with the Versace dress, which color SUV to drive—and these comedies treat them with the utmost affection. But when the punch line is a group euphemistically (and often erroneously) called a minority, things start to get dicey. Over the past several decades, comedy has gradually become less broad and more sensitive to overt racism (and to a lesser extent, to sexism and homophobia). Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker may trade black and Asian jokes in the *Rush Hour* series, but we've come a long way since Peter Sellers was cast as bucktoothed Chinese sleuth Sidney Wang in *Murder by Death*. By now, the cardinal rule of humor—you can

make fun of a group only if you're part of it—is familiar enough to be a punch line itself. (Remember Jerry Seinfeld's outrage over his Catholic dentist's Jewish jokes?) But fat people are the last remaining exception.

In the spring and summer of 2001 alone, we were inundated with images of thin actors playing fat. It's not like there's a dearth of fat actresses out there, as if some casting director is saying, "We've been searching for a fat girl to star in the next Farrelly brothers film, but so far there are no takers." (Camryn Manheim and I aren't friends, but I'm pretty sure she wasn't offered Gwyneth's *Shallow Hal* part.) With a real fat woman in the lead, the movie wouldn't be funny—it would just be uncomfortable. Watching actual fat people on the big screen would be so authentically painful—because fat hatred is still deeply entrenched in American culture—that audiences would be unable to laugh. It's not just the exaggerated dimply thighs and man-boobs that keep us buying tickets; the crux of the joke is not the latex suit's physical fakeness but the ephemeral nature of the thin actor posing as fat. We all know that Julia, Goldie, and Gwyneth (and Martin, Mike, and Eddie) will return to their slender glory for the next part, and that's comforting—because otherwise we would have to confront the mean-spiritedness behind our giggles.

Such virulence makes all this faux fat seem very old-fashioned; it reeks of our country's less-than-perfect past. After all, it seems like a long time ago—although it was not—that great white actors of the twentieth century performed in blackface. The closing credits of Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* display a parade of them. There they are: Shirley Temple, Lucille Ball, Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney, and more, totally oblivious to the true meaning of their actions. Someday you'll see footage of Oscar winners Julia Roberts and Gwyneth Paltrow trundling along in their fat suits. It'll be depressing and pathetic, but it won't, in the end, be funny.