Opinion
NCR Voices



Dame Edna in 2012 (Wikimedia Commons/Eva Rinaldi)



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Editor's note: *The following is reprint of a weekly Tuesday newsletter from NCR columnist Michael Sean Winters. You can sign up for the weekly newsletter here.*

Last Friday, I read at Boston.com that the Board of Selectmen in the town of North Brookfield, Massachusetts, had granted permission to hold a LGBTQ pride event, but there was a catch: "The event was only permitted so long as organizers removed a drag show performance from the celebration." Boors, such boors.

Then, on Saturday, came the news that Australian comedian Barry Humphries had died in a Sydney hospital at age 89. Most of us knew Humphries by his stage name: Dame Edna Everage, the most prominent drag queen in the world. How prominent? In 2002, at the Buckingham Palace concert celebrating Queen Elizabeth II's Golden Jubilee, Dame Edna was tasked with introducing the guest of honor, the queen herself!

My all-time favorite Dame Edna performance was her interview of Canadian singer k. d. lang. It may be the funniest 10 minutes of television you will ever see. Her interview with Boris Johnson in 2006 wins the silver medal.

America did not used to be so uptight about drag queens. I wonder if the Board of Selectmen in North Brookfield would permit a showing of the 1959 movie "Some Like it Hot" starring Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon. The two Hollywood stars are cast as musicians who, having witnessed a mob killing, flee in disguise as members of an all-female band. That is, they are in drag through most of the movie. It is hilarious.

There is a Catholic Church in North Brookfield dedicated to St. Joseph. I have never been, but from the photos it looks like the kind of lovely, rural church of which New England is full. Still, I kind of wish the local parish had been dedicated to St. Joan of Arc. She, remember, in her saintly effort to defend her country, dressed as a man and led the French troops into battle, and not just to battle but to victory. The equestrian statue of her in Place des Pyramides in Paris is one of my favorites. Joan was not performing, to be sure, but she did bend notions of gender in her day! She did so because she had to, and thank God she did.

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The first time I saw someone in drag I was in junior high. Our town had formed a community players troupe and my favorite uncle, who lived across the street with my grandmother, was named director. He was what we called "a confirmed bachelor," and after a successful performance of "Pirates of Penzance," he suggested we stage the play "Charley's Aunt." The Victorian-era farce centers around an Oxford student, Charley Wykeham, whose aunt, Donna Lucia d'Alvadorez, is set to come visit. When she is delayed, Charley convinces his friend Lord Fancourt Babberly to pose as his aunt, and so serve as a chaperone. What could go wrong?

Jack Benny played the role of Babberly/Donna Lucia in the 1941 movie version of "Charley's Aunt." My uncle was better. Much better. He went for the full camp rendition. When he came on to the stage, dressed head to toe in black lace, flicking his fan open with a loud crack, he was in his glory. He kept a photo of him playing Charley's aunt in his house and we placed it near his casket at his wake.

I hope my uncle is at the pearly gates to welcome Barry Humphries. On his Twitter feed, Archbishop Charles Scicluna of Malta posted this video of Dame Edna entering the royal box at a British theater in 2014. It is hilarious. As the archbishop noted, it is "a poignant image of our last trip when 'a better seat' is found for us." May the angels greet Humphries, and may they be dressed to the nines when they do!

And I hope the Board of Selectmen in North Brookfield, and all those politicians who think banning drag shows is a good idea, will someday learn what fun they're missing.

Links

In The New York Times, Doug Sosnik, a former advisor to President Bill Clinton, writes about the fact that educational attainment is now the "new fault line" in American politics, what he calls the "diploma divide." It is a dangerous divide, shaped by both economic interests and cultural concerns, and easily exploitable by culture warriors of both the left and the right.

The Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose in London is sponsoring a series of four lectures on neo-liberalism by Damon Silvers, who served as policy director and general counsel to the AFL-CIO for many years. Silvers has been a key player in the effort to strengthen relations between the Catholic Church and organized labor, helping to organize and host the three conferences on "Erroneous Autonomy," which

Stephen Schneck and I also worked on when Schneck was the director of the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies at Catholic University of America in Washington. Be sure to tune in.

Good news for those advocating for immigration reform: Susan Rice is stepping down as domestic policy advisor to President Joe Biden. Sources in both church and state tell me she has been the principal obstacle to more humane immigration policies. Politico has the story.

In The New York Times, conservative columnist and gun owner David French points out that today's gun culture not only lapses into idolatry, but champions those who brought guns to combustible situations. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott has called for a pardon for a man convicted of killing a Black Lives Matter protester, citing the state's "Stand Your Ground" law. But the governor ignores the actual evidence produced at trial, which showed the murderer did not stand his ground; he went looking for a fight. It is good to see these arguments coming from conservatives, not just from liberals.