

The Laughing Sadist

BY STACEY SZEWCZYK

In 1981 Lorne Michaels, wayward producer of *Saturday Night Live*, was approached to help revive the once-controversial late-night series. Following its abandonment by him, Dan Aykroyd, John Belushi and the entire original cast, the show had turned into what network insiders referred to as "puke" and "dog shit." Michaels suggested re-hiring Michael O'Donoghue, one of the more notorious original *SNL* writers, whose mean-spirited setpieces included skits portraying Tony Orlando and Dawn plunging 10-inch needles into their eyes, and "Least-Loved Bedtime Stories" read by "Mr. Mike," a sort of Satanic haberdasher.

After berating the show's new cast members (with the exceptions of Eddie Murphy, Christine Ebersole and possibly Joe Piscopo) as "losers," O'Donoghue installed himself in an office designated with a skull and crossbones and the title Reich Marshall. He then proceeded to book the downward-spiraling Belushi and the L.A. punk band Fear for the Halloween show. Forty DC skinheads were brought to the NBC studios for the live taping.

When the band ripped into its first song, "Beef Baloney," the punk plants rushed the stage, creating a throbbing mass into which lead singer Lee Ving promptly dove. When his microphone fell over, someone grabbed it and yelled, "New York sucks!" O'Donoghue, who had recently had the beloved Don Pardo fired as the show's announcer, went into raptures. Frazzled acting-producer Dick Ebersol aborted a doomed mission and inserted a short film. O'Donoghue was asked to vacate his bunker a few episodes later.

Though it contains equal parts Ed Wood and Larry Flynt, the Michael O'Donoghue story remains a far more obscure one, more likely the subject of a Website than a major motion picture. Familiar mainly to late-night

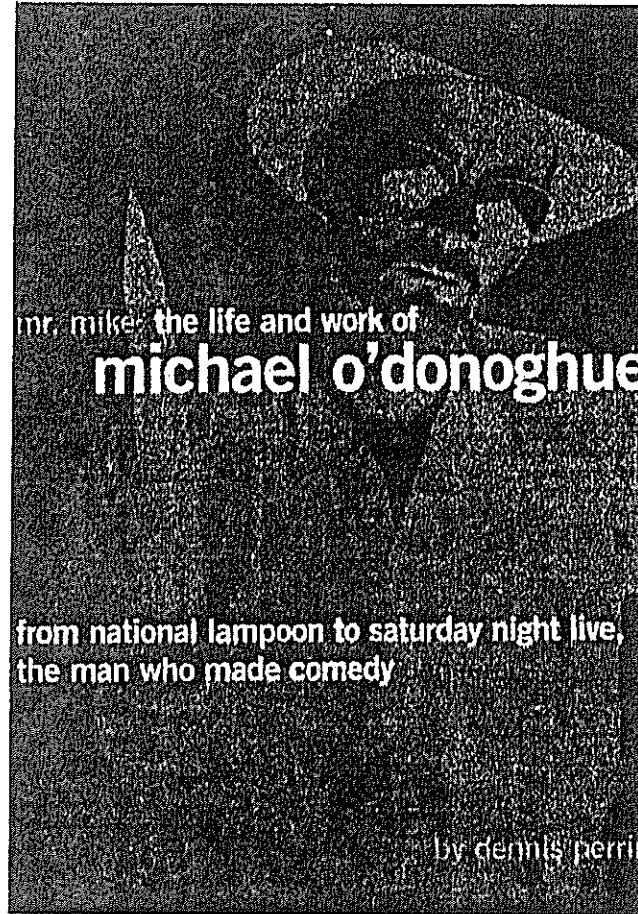
tv cultists, he was one of those peripheral figures, as dear to Baby Boomers as minor poets and master forgers were to an earlier generation of culturalists, who infuse the big picture with much-needed nuance.

Perrin's biography, *Mr. Mike: The Life and Work of Michael O'Donoghue*, strives to be more than a half-campy salute to a man possessed of a particularly evil sense of humor. It is a lovingly rendered, serious study of O'Donoghue's capital-G Genius and of the development of the "unedited" brand of humor that characterized *National Lampoon* and *Saturday Night Live* during their heydays. Howard Stern and the creators of *Airplane!*, *Punk* magazine and *This Is Spinal Tap* all owe him a buck, as do Trey Parker and Matt Stone, Quentin Tarantino and those among Perrin's pals, including novelist Darius James and cartoonist Mike Diana, who are dutifully cited in his book.

People born funny often possess, along with wit, a physical anomaly. Dan Aykroyd's pear-shaped body and duck feet, like the Chihuahua head that sits atop Sandra Bernhard's model body, awaken a suspicion that he's always got a deadly zinger ready under wraps. (Richard Nixon also had this quality, though in his case it was due more to his having been a head of state with the general mien of a spider.) In O'Donoghue, that funny "way" lay in the housing of a sadistic wit in the weak-chinned, haunted-eyed, shrimp-fingered body of a textbook masochist. One gets the sense that humor alone saved the man from a life of progressive degradation.

Perrin's history bears this out. An introverted boy, isolated with rheumatic fever from age 5 to 7, "Pete Donohue" (so-called to avoid confusion with his father Michael, who had changed the family surname) spent his formative years alone in his room reading, compiling scrapbooks and playing with the family cat, Satan (an early witticism). Throughout his school years Pete was an outsider geek who developed a quick acidic tongue with which to combat the "big rubes" of his upstate high school. O'Donoghue's mean wit thus evolved not out of a desire to crack up his classmates, but to fuck them up, a skill all chess-club wiseguys aspire to.

As an English and philosophy student at the conservative University of Rochester in the late 1950s, O'Donoghue's falling grades, his instigation of a cocoa fight in a frat house and his arrival at a campus costume party dressed as Hitler preceded his dropping out and moving to San Francisco to pursue the bohemian lifestyle. After a literary magazine he attempted to launch flopped and he finally got laid, O'Donoghue returned home and wandered around his native Sauquoit, NY, feigning blindness. Soon after he joined a Rochester theater



Mr. Mike: the life and work of
michael o'donoghue

from national lampoon to saturday night live,
the man who made comedy

by dennis perrin

MR. MIKE
by Dennis Perrin
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group and wrote confrontational pieces based on French avant-garde texts like Mirbeau's *The Torture Garden*. He eventually accumulated a card cabinet full of ideas that failed to knock the socks off Rochester.

At 23, he married a divorced mother of three. When one of his scripts was unexpectedly published in the *Evergreen Review*, he divorced her and moved to New York, where he got a job as an "idea guy" at the Electric Circus on St. Marks Pl. He moved in with a rope sculptress and began staging violent performance pieces in their Spring St. loft.

When he adjusted his sights from serious avant-garde drama to something more on the order of *Jokes for the John*, his career as a humorist took off. The *Evergreen Review* launched his *Phoebe Zeit-Geist* comic strip (illustrated by Frank Springer), a Barbarella-esque adventure series featuring a perpetually naked bourgeois babe. The book version came out from Grove Press in early 1969.

O'Donoghue was encouraged enough to pitch and sell *The Incredible, Thrilling Adventures of the Rock* to young George Trow at Random House. Later that year, Trow asked O'Donoghue to join him and some friends on

the staff of a new magazine called *National Lampoon*. The staff, comprised mainly of recent *Harvard Lampoon* alumni, saw O'Donoghue as a man of experience. He would deliver such classic *Lampoon* pieces such as "The Vietnamese Baby Book," "Son-O-God Comics" and "Tarzan of the Cows," and his steady infusion of "sex, violence and bad taste" was essential to the success of the magazine, whose circulation by 1973 hovered around 800,000 copies monthly.

In 1975, Canadian Lorne Michaels was hired to produce a new late-night comedy show geared toward the twentysomething demographic that had turned on to the *Lampoon*, Monty Python and midnight movies like *The Groove Tube*. A mutual friend put him in touch with O'Donoghue. While still at *National Lampoon*, O'Donoghue and writer Anne Beatts had moved into an apartment on 16th St. together and adopted the habit of wearing vintage resort wear to the office.

The show debuted that fall. Its controversial humor and experimental format were to a large extent shaped by O'Donoghue. Some of his best pieces from the first few seasons include "The Norman Bates School of Motel Management," "Potholders" (in which Laraine Newman and Jane Curtin portrayed miltweaving Manson girls Sandra Goode and Squeaky Fromme) and "Needles" (in the eyes).

The pressure of a weekly show ultimately took its toll on O'Donoghue and Beatts' romance. When they broke up, Beatts went into therapy while O'Donoghue became Mr. Mike. Following his departure from *Saturday Night Live* at the close of the 1978 season, he wrote numerous unproduced screenplays. *Mr. Mike's Mondo Video*, a comedy cobbled together in 1979 from bizarre footage (much of it badly shot by O'Donoghue himself), demonstrates how often his ideas veered toward the commercially unviable. Between 1984 and 1994, O'Donoghue projects that were "stalled, canceled, or otherwise abandoned" include such intriguing titles as *Biker Heaven*, *Factory of Fear*, *Kittens in a Can* and *The Badger*. Only with *Scrooged* did he finally hit. He bought a house in Ireland with the royalties and married sweetheart Cheryl Hardwick, co-musical director of the *SNL* house band. They lived there and on 16th St. until Nov. 8, 1994, when O'Donoghue suddenly died of a massive brain hemorrhage.

There is every indication that Mr. Mike, the quietly psychotic character for whom O'Donoghue is best known, was a direct reflection of his inner life. O'Donoghue cher-

ished his demons and ultimately earned his living exorcising them through his work.

Yet Perrin, who claims to have befriended O'Donoghue shortly before the end of his life, forgoes any attempt to examine those demons in favor of unhelpful psychobabble like an examination of the formative influences of Mr. Mole from *Wind in the Willows* on O'Donoghue's comic sensibilities. Perrin condemns "necro-porn" like *Wired*, Bob Woodward's psychological study of John Belushi. Instead, he keeps a fan's respectful distance from his hero, and limits his examination of O'Donoghue's life to superficial aspects that informed his work, generously providing long, detailed descriptions of the best of it.

Perrin doesn't really get the joke. He slides the sort of dirt that O'Donoghue found fascinating and adopted as the basis for his reverence-wrecking comedy. For example, aside from a passing reference to O'Donoghue's youthful fondness for the silky feel of fabrics customarily reserved for women's clothing (along with a more general clothing fetishism he would indulge in throughout his life), there is precious little here about the man's sexuality. For gossip, Perrin delivers only the most perfunctory skinny on the "savage level of verbal sparring" at *National Lampoon* dinner gatherings and not much more on O'Donoghue's bitter feuds with fellow *Lampoon* writer Doug Kenney, Tony Hendra (of *Spinal Tap*), Chevy Chase, Lorne Michaels and countless others. One of the book's few drug-related revelations involves O'Donoghue's falling off a cliff while tripping in Mexico and very nearly killing himself in a manner eerily similar to the way Kenney did when he fell (dove?) into a crater in Hawaii. Anything else is left untouched by Perrin.

Mr. Mike opens with a posthumous x-ray of O'Donoghue's brain. Someone has taped it to a glass case in his W. 16th St. apartment. The scene is his wake, and schmoozing among O'Donoghue's friends and enemies are sycophants and disconnected acquaintances who aren't sure how to mourn the death of a man who spoofed cancer, death camps and serial killers. "Well, why not have his blood in a plastic bucket?" offers one of his closest pals—indicating that whoever taped up that x-ray really didn't understand O'Donoghue at all.

As long as Perrin's biography is the only available reference text, few people outside of his immediate circle ever will.

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