

I don't want to be nothing but a comedian.

[THE CHRIS ROCK INTERVIEW]

By Steve Marsh

Photograph by Nigel Parry/CPI Syndication

For a guy with such an incendiary rep, when discussing the English language, Chris Rock comes off a little fussy.

"When it comes to writing jokes," Rock says, "one word is going to be the difference between how big your laugh is." He continues in his distinctive cadence, the pitch of his voice gaining altitude every so many beats, as he seems to seek the refrain to drive his point home. "A lot of times I have a joke and it's literally *one word off*," he says. "*Just one word! You can use another word that means the same thing and it just doesn't give you the same effect.*"

Even Rock's ability to sound extemporaneous onstage is calculated: "I don't think I've ever written out any joke," he says. "I have the topic and I riff"—rephrasing and rephrasing until eventually stumbling on the perfect lyrical pattern. "So it always comes out with the passion of argument." (This might be the reason he still hasn't achieved that iconic scripted comedy performance as an actor. He, however, offers a different set of reasons: "With movies, a lot of time you get a consensus—especially if you don't have a strong director, *you get a little bit of all of us!* Which is good *sometimes*, but if I want to go see a Jim Carrey movie and I only get a little of Jim Carrey's sensibility, that kinda stinks.")

His attention to linguistic detail is evident in his latest movie, *Good Hair*, a documentary about the African-American hairstyling industry. It's a personal project—he's wanted to do a documentary on the Bronner Bros. International Hair Show in Atlanta for 17 years. "It happens twice a year, and it was just one of these times where I finally had free time on my hands," he says. "I was around my old crew from *The Chris Rock Show*, and I was like, let's just go and film this stuff." He

The black Michael Moore: Chris Rock gets to the roots of the \$9 billion African-American hair industry in his new documentary *Good Hair*.



actually started shooting it with his own money. "Everybody thought I was crazy with the hair," he says. "People were like, 'Really? Who's it for?'"

HBO agreed to pay for the film "at the last minute," and by that time, the project had become even more personal. "Now it's years later and I have daughters and I come at it a whole 'nother way," he says. "Like, I do my daughters' hair sometimes—I'll just brush it out and put it in a pony tail or puffs or whatever. And if I don't get it right, oh my God! They don't even want to go to school."

The movie's narrative is actually framed by a question from his youngest daughter, Zahra: "Daddy, why don't I have good hair?" This has been the sweet little story that has been passed around to promote the movie. So I ask him if his initial response was an honest, "*Sweetie, let me spend a few months in preproduction researching a documentary, and I'll get right back to you.*" "No," he says, "I just changed the topic." He gives the example of the parent who overreacts to a child who falls down. "It's the same thing with words," he says. "A kid will say anything, curse, do anything—your job is to control your reaction."

Going Michael Moore on us is an unusual move for such a mainstream star, but in many ways, he's a natural documentarian. Since his breakthrough 1996 HBO special, *Bring the Pain*, it's been obvious that Chris Rock believes comedy is half about making people laugh and half about bringing them to a revelation that would be uncomfortable if they weren't laughing. Before a standup set, he says, "I would still get all those facts and figures—I want to know as much about a topic as possible. I might not say 'em verbatim, because it comes off preachy and medicine-y," he says. "And who wants to be that guy?"

"Whatever I do, I'm trying to make it entertaining," Rock says. "I don't want to be nothing but a comedian." The movie transcends its racial niche because Rock's facility with language enables him to dissect the black hair industry's marketese by making fun of it. At different points of the film, he riffs in the slang of addiction or the drug trade

(alongside an ironic blaxploitation soundtrack) to describe how hair that is donated to Hindu temples in India is manufactured into weaves and sold to women in salons at 150 percent markup. In one scene, as an industry spokesman searches for the precise words to explain why a black woman would spend thousands of dollars a year searching for "a solution, if you will," to her kinky 'fro, Rock instantly reframes the conversation by interjecting, "the antidote?"

"Oh, that's just one of those ways you can tell somebody's over 40," Rock demurs when I bring this up. "Cause it used to be in all the cartoons, you know . . . somebody's in trouble! Do you have an *antidote*?!" Still, he acknowledges that language is a way to get at the truth. "I hate when I'm watching an interview and the reporter lets something slip by. It's like, are you kidding me?"

Ultimately, Rock believes that comedy can help people understand each other—that the only limit to comedy is timing, but not in the traditional sense of setup-beat-punch. "Seinfeld and I have this continuous argument," he says. "He's all about the jokes, and I'm all about the show. Jerry's whole philosophy is that you can open or close with any joke you have—you have these great soldiers that do whatever you want. On the other hand, I think some jokes only work two minutes in. And there are other jokes that you can only tell after you've had their attention for 45 minutes." Of course, there are always exceptions: "Most comedians close with the dirty stuff, but on his special, Eddie Murphy opens with the *dirtiest stuff ever* and closes by talking



Rock watches as a young girl gets her hair "relaxed" with sodium hydroxide in *Good Hair*.

about a cookout or his mom making him a hamburger," Rock marvels. "It's like an impossible feat!"

Rock says he has as much fun watching a guy like Alan Dershowitz as he does watching Seinfeld. "I love a good lawyer," he says. "A good lawyer is not that different from a good standup. A good standup can joke about anything—basically *argue* anybody's side on anything."

One of the reasons *Good Hair* is so funny is because, like a great lawyer, Rock withholds judgment as he makes his case. For a comedian, being likeable is almost as important as being funny. And in *Good Hair*, Rock isn't a bully, judging neither the Jheri curl hucksters nor the women buying into their game—he's just a funny dude trying to figure out why black women spend so much money trying to get white women's hair. You root for him by laughing him on. "I mean, part of it is I'm a guy doing this movie," he says. "If a woman did it she would have the luxury of being more judgmental. But being a guy doing this topic, it was almost like a white guy doing a documentary on race. I know the first reaction from women when they hear I'm making this movie is: 'He's going to have funny hairdos on screen and make fun of women with weaves and that's it.' Nooooope, not gonna do that."

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This black Michael Moore thing really might have legs. For one thing, it solves the challenge many great comedians face: fame's tendency to warp their relationship with an audience. Greats such as Steve Martin walked away, because maniacal crowds made it impossible for them to gauge new material.

Rock says he's "definitely had too-many-people-screaming-at-a-show shows," but believes he can still get better as a comedian, good enough to offset all that adulation. "In a weird way, you have more of their attention because you're famous," he says, "But at the same time, you have to work harder to get their *real attention*." They're looking at him, but they're not *paying attention*. "So you gotta work harder for that attention," he says. "I think guys get so famous they don't

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Editors' Pick //

Palais Stéphanie

Good Hair won a special jury prize at the Sundance Film Festival, a major forum for spotting up-and-coming talent along with provocative films from established actors and filmmakers. But before Sundance, there was Cannes. In 1949, the Palais des Festivals et des Congrès, now the site of the Palais Stéphanie hotel, was built to host the French film festival. Located at the center of La Croisette, steps from the beach, the Palais Stéphanie reopened this fall after a \$55 million renovation that pays homage to the site's glamorous past, right down to the lobby Palme d'Or sculpture and dramatic photos of film stars in the rooms. In season, don't miss Le Panorama Rooftop Bar, where you can order a cocktail while gazing out over the Bay of Cannes, the Lérins Islands and the Esterel Mountains.



(Chris Rock from page 63) want to work for people's attention anymore."

That said, he thinks *Good Hair* works because of the relative scale of the story. "The reason I like the movie is because the movie is bigger than me," he says. "Most of the movies I'm in, *I'm the movie*." He acknowledges having the right skills for the format. "Documentary takes advantage of things I can kinda do." That said, he's noncommittal about doing another one. "It could be a one-off," he says, citing his professional hero. "Woody Allen made *Zelig*," he says. "*Zelig* is great, but there's never been a movie he has that's remotely like that." For now, Rock is content to keep writing down ideas for jokes, maybe get an hour together by next year. "But I definitely won't tour again until Obama runs for reelection," he says. "I can't even say *tour* to my kids right now—they will punch me in the face."

Listening to Rock carefully consider his future, avoiding any grand pronouncements and weighing his family's concerns, it occurs to me that while Rock is known for saying outrageous things, he doesn't trade in outrage.

In a culture that is constantly taking sides and jumping to conclusions, Rock's approach is truly therapeutic. I mean, this is a guy who famously joked about OJ: "I'm not saying he should've killed her, but I *understand*." *Chris Rock refused to judge OJ*. "I'm not going to condemn OJ for being a murderer," he explains, right before cracking himself up. "At the same time, I'm not going to jump on this weird bandwagon of 'He didn't do it!'" Chris Rock might be the only man in America who approached OJ as, you know, an actual human being as opposed to a symbol. I ask him if he considers himself to be a fair person: "Let me put it this way, man: Unless there are children involved, there are always two sides of the story. You still have to give the horrible people the courtesy of going, 'Can you explain to me why you did that?'" //

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