

# America's Judge

The creator of "Beavis and Butthead" turns his wit on multicultural liberalism.

By A.G. Gancarski

WHATEVER THE TYPICAL background might be for an animator and film director, odds are Mike Judge's isn't it. The Ecuadorian-born auteur's searingly satirical insights about contemporary America are all the more remarkable for his life's journey, a winding road that took him from a physics degree at University of California, San Diego to a stint as an engineer then bar-band musician before he taught himself animation using library books. His rise from such improbable origins is even more notable given the intense resistance to his work, from grandstanding U.S. senators and his corporate patrons at Fox.

Despite critical acclaim and commercial success, Judge has opted to live outside of paparazzi circles. The down-to-earth 45-year-old maintains a residence in Austin, Texas, where he conducts himself as a regular guy. A 2006 *Esquire* interview revealed a stoic, deliberately unassuming type who watches hunting instructional videos, walks around his neighborhood twice a day, frequents his local Starbucks, and "like[s] the suburbs." Like David Lynch, the famously Reaganophilic director of dark comedies such as "Blue Velvet" and "Twin Peaks," Mike Judge has a fundamentally localist, conservative bent imparted on the slant, increasingly in spite of the agendas of the corporate monoliths that release his work.

When MTV introduced "Beavis and Butthead" to its lineup in 1993, it immediately stood out from any other cartoon marketed on a mass level. Its crude figures and equally crude plots typified a

nihilist desolation particular to the strip mall and subdivision universe. The protagonists—slow-witted adolescent scions of worn-out single mothers with no clue how to teach these halfwits how to be men—were the natural products of their unnatural habitat.

This was the first show of any sort to address directly such suburbanite childhoods without sentimentality or a misplaced desire to impart moral lessons. A central premise involved the hapless duo's attempts to "score" with "sluts," who were clearly younger versions of their own mothers. Deprived of masculine role models, except for a mouth-breather named Todd, a twentysomething neighborhood thug, Beavis and Butthead were hopeless figures: futureless metalhead high schoolers, divested of any sense of their own histories, ignorant to the core. To compensate for their environmental and genetic handicaps, they did what a generation of throw-away teens did: watched toxic amounts of television. Especially music videos.

Here was incredible humor laden with tragic subtext. Rendering commentary on Black Box and Ugly Kid Joe videos was the closest either got to critical thinking, which suggested that in spite of the obvious, MTV-friendly humor of the show, there was pathos at the heart of "Beavis and Butthead." They were failed by parents, teachers, the community at large. They never had a chance. So they became passive recipients of pop culture—a trope that has recurred in Judge's work throughout the years.

"King of the Hill," Judge's subsequent project, finds an antecedent in Judge's own experience. "I had a paper route that was sort of in a blue-collar neighborhood with lots of Texas transplants, so early on I had these kinds of characters around me," he recalled in a 2006 interview. "[A]fter Beavis and Butthead, I had done a panel cartoon; I just had this image of just four guys with beers standing out in front of the fence, kind of like I used to see when I'd look out my kitchen window, and I just drew them all saying, 'Yep, yep, yep.'"

The early episodes of "King of the Hill" bore considerable resemblance to Judge's first show, down to lead character Hank's voice recycling the previous show's Mr. Anderson. Simple animation and defiantly two-dimensional characterizations made the first few years seem more redneck than recent seasons: Hank's lament about his son—"That boy's not right!"—hasn't surfaced nearly as much in later episodes. Both Hank and his hometown of Arlen have become more "citized."

Like Judge's first show, "King of the Hill" directly addresses the eroded state of American masculinity. Hank's oft-mentioned "narrow urethra" and his eternally complicated relationships with his son and late father, along with the failings of Hank's neighbors and lifelong friends—the cuckold Dale Gribble, the son of a gay rodeo cowboy; the eternally jilted Army barber Bill Dauterive; the mumble-mouthed skirtchaser Boomhauer—flesh out the program's critique of the declining status of the white male in contemporary America. It is no accident that the

representative native American—John Redcorn, the biological father of Dale’s teenage son—is the show’s primary exponent of male virility. Likewise, it is uncoincidental that Arlen’s elite is comprised increasingly of southeast Asian immigrants. White people have been superseded, boiled down into the melting pot. There is no “white skin privilege” for these “inconsequential bottom dwellers,” as they are called in one episode. The white guys on “King of the Hill” are flawed, ordinary men imbued with sadness—Hank most of all.

Hank exemplifies the Mike Judge everyman, rooted in duty to God, country, and family, to his job, his beloved Arlen, and his Dallas Cowboys. Hank embodies the Texan code: he is a localist of the highest order. He wants the world to stay as it was in his sepia-tinged memory, where Tom Landry is still coaching the Cowboys, where Reagan is still president, and it is always morning in America. But he knows, deep down, it’s all lost.

Understanding Hank Hill’s traditionalism is key to appreciating the points Judge has made in his two most recent films, the settings of which make Arlen look idyllic.

His 1999 “Office Space” offered a blistering satire of the corporate world in the era of Clintonian “rightsizing.” The protagonist, a thirtyish cubicle drone named Peter Gibbons, labors without distinction at a company called Initech, where he is condescended to by his sleazy, Porsche-driving yuppie boss. His personal life is no better: his golddigger girlfriend is as faithful as a feral cat. He works weekends, consumed by constant demands to do scut work like “put new cover sheets on the TPS reports.”

As Initech restructures and Gibbons’s layoff looms, his girlfriend takes him to a hypnotherapist, who has a heart attack and keels over. The death is treated in the fashion of many of Judge’s minor character deaths, as seemingly incidental.

Post hypnotism, though, Gibbons is liberated from the stresses that plagued him when he was a company man. For a while, his story breezes along like “The Secret of My Success.” But as so often happens to Judge characters when things go well, Gibbons’s newfound confidence metastasizes into a catastrophic hubris when he launches an ill-fated embezzlement scheme with his jettisoned coworkers.

“Office Space” depicts a world far removed from Arlen, Texas, where Hank Hill is able to devote himself unironically to selling “propane and propane accessories.” Nonetheless, it is identifiably part of Judge’s narrative universe, containing allusions to prior projects. Gibbons, for instance, lives in the Morningwood Apartments—“morning wood” being a central concern of the libidinous Beavis and Butthead.

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The final scene depicts an at-ease Gibbons, beatifically working with his red-neck neighbor, who would not have been out of place on either of Judge’s animated series, reconstructing the Initech building that was burned down by a disgruntled coworker. The redemption in hard, honest work is an ending Hank Hill would have appreciated.

Judge’s most recent movie, 2006’s “Idiocracy,” represents a marked departure in setting and narrative technique, even as the film recapitulates many of the director’s earlier themes.

The central character, Private Joe Bowers, is yet another Judge everyman—“the most average soldier in the Army.” He is picked, along with a prostitute, to serve as part of a military experiment. The subjects are deposited into coffin-like pods for a deep freeze, with

the intention of retrieving them in a year. But as it turns out, the base is decommissioned, a Fuddrucker’s is built on the grounds, and the experiment is forgotten—until the Great Garbage Avalanche of 2505 liberates Bowers and the street-walker from their pods into a dystopian mess still called America. Bowers turns out to be the smartest man in the world.

And what a world it is. As the narrator asserts, “the English language had deteriorated into a hybrid of hillbilly, valley girl, inner-city slang and various grunts.” The culture has likewise deteriorated, becoming ridiculously coarsened and entirely familiar. Beavis and Butthead would thrive.

A ubiquitous Gatorade ripoff called “Brawndo” abounds, dual-purposed for water fountains and crop irrigation, while the name of the aforementioned Fuddrucker’s has morphed into a certain

scatological variant. Along those lines, Starbucks has addressed its spate of store closings by offering Frappuccinos topped with “happy endings.” H&R Block likewise has found ways to impart a Triple X ethos into the 1040 form.

The morally bankrupt, subliterate, and subhuman 26th-century society sees law degrees doled out to slackjaws at Costco and justice meted out on the WWE-like “Monday Night Rehab.” The modest Methodist churches attended by Christian stoics like Hank Hill? Gone forever, along with the quiet faith contained within and the spiritual quandaries that it addresses. Judge’s point is unmistakable. This is where we’re headed. And it may not take centuries to get there.

Like all of Judge’s work, “Idiocracy”

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# Arts & Letters

## FILM

[Happy-Go-Lucky]

### Unbearable Lightness

By Steve Sailer

“HAPPY-GO-LUCKY,” five-time Oscar nominee Mike Leigh’s “quirky” and “off-beat” comedy about a young London schoolteacher who is, yes, happy-go-lucky, has enjoyed the most unanimous critical acclaim of any film this year. All 31 “Top Critics” on the Rotten Tomatoes website have given “Happy-Go-Lucky” their personal thumbs up. Indeed, star Sally Hawkins has a shot at an Oscar nomination because Academy members like to vote for obscure British actresses in low-budget movies nobody has seen, such as Imelda Staunton’s Best Actress nod for Leigh’s last film, “Vera Drake.”

Leigh, a Best Director nominee for 1996’s “Secrets and Lies,” prides himself on improvising slice-of-life left-wing movies about the English working class, which this Royal Academy of the Dramatic Arts graduate knows all about because his physician father had proletarian patients.

Since he doesn’t work from a script, investors are cautious about investing in Leigh’s vague ideas. “My tragedy as a filmmaker now,” he declaims, “is that there is a very limited ceiling on the amount of money anyone will give me to make a film.” So the British National Lottery obligingly kicked in some of “Happy-Go-Lucky’s” budget.

Lotteries are notoriously a tax on stupidity; evidently, they are also a subsidy for vapidity because “Happy-Go-Lucky” is the worst movie by a prominent director since M. Night Shyamalan’s allergy allegory “The Happening.” Leigh’s film is smug, boring, plotless, and pointless, the perfect embodiment of the Obama Era of liberal self-congratulation.

To Leigh, Hawkins’s character, Poppy, is as adorable as the two Audrey’s: Tatou in “Amélie” and Hepburn in “Breakfast at Tiffany’s.” To me, Hawkins is insufferable. Imagine a “Star Wars” prequel in which a female Jar-Jar Binks hogs the screen for the entire two hours. Poppy smirks, snickers, and sniggers, mugging like Jim Varney in those old “Hey Vern” movies, an overgrown class clown laughing relentlessly at her own jokes, which are never, ever funny.

There’s nothing more excruciating than watching people onscreen laugh, especially when they crack themselves up. What’s really amusing is seeing characters mortified with embarrassment. In general, happy people aren’t very funny and funny people aren’t very happy.

And how exactly did Poppy, a North Londoner, acquire her quasi-Australian accent? Her youngest sister, a drunken law student, talks like Sid Vicious, but Poppy sounds like the Crocodile Hunter. In a male actor, a working-class Australian accent sounds manly yet affable—that’s why the U.S.-born Mel Gibson normally plays his American roles with an unexplained hint of Down Under in his voice—but in a woman it just sounds tomboyish and goofy.

Most of Leigh’s movies have been about the oppression of the proletariat, but by 2008 their values are apparently ascendant in London. Any character who thinks about the future—such as

Poppy’s one married, home-owning sister—is scorned as a buzz-kill.

Most people in “Happy-Go-Lucky” have pleasant government jobs. Judging from this movie, the British welfare state exists mostly so people with soft college degrees can have some place to hang out while making plans about which pub or disco to go to after work.

The only plot device consists of Poppy’s weekly driving lessons with a tightly wound little fundamentalist Christian with bad teeth, played by Eddie Marsan. I initially assumed these two equally unattractive single people would wind up settling for each other, but when he insists she lock the car doors when two black youths walk by, he demonstrates—in Leigh’s mental universe—that he is morally unworthy of her and probably a dangerous psycho to boot.

Instead, Leigh hooks her up with a school social worker, who is played by a ludicrously handsome young actor who looks like one of those towering Olympic swimming medalists with massively masculine jawlines molded by years of Human Growth Hormone abuse.

One vignette of this momentum-free movie unwittingly exemplifies the female cluelessness that has made Britain’s schools a dystopia of juvenile male thuggishness. When one of her students starts punching other boys, does Poppy punish him? No, she signs the bully up for counseling, which consists of three adults—the headmistress, Poppy, and her future boyfriend—sitting around praising the little lout and asking him what’s the *real* reason he hits people. Actual answer: it’s fun. ■

Rated R for language.