

Sincerely Louis C.K.—Comedian returns with a stand-up special

By Shuvu Batta
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On April 4, comedian Louis C.K.—forced out of the public eye by the #MeToo campaign—released a new stand-up comedy special, *Sincerely Louis C.K.*, on his website.

The special, the record of a performance at the Warner Theater in Washington, D.C., marks his first widely viewed work since late 2017, when allegations of sexual misconduct by several women comics led to the cancellation of various television and film projects and scheduled public appearances. The Orchard, a subsidiary of Sony, also announced at the time it would not distribute the comic's new film, *I Love You, Daddy*.

Louis Székely, 52, known by his stage name, Louis C.K., was at the height of his success and fame when he faced the sexual misconduct claims. Raised by a single mother in the Boston area, C.K. began his comedy career in the mid-1980s. After working as a comic and writing material for other comedians, C.K. made his first feature film in 2001. His breakthrough, however, into widespread popularity came with his stand-up comedy material in the latter half of that decade.

In August 2005, C.K. starred in a half-hour comedy special on HBO. The following year, also for HBO, he created the sitcom *Lucky Louie*, which ran for one season. In 2007, C.K. released his first hour-long special, *Shameless*, followed by *Chewed Up* and *Hilarious* in the ensuing years.

In 2011, on the popular radio show *Opie and Anthony*, the comedian repeatedly asked former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld whether he was “a lizard who has tasted human flesh.” Elaborating on this theme, C.K. commented that there were still “those people out there who think Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney are actually lizards. Literally, there are people who think they are lizards from outer space that eat human flesh.”

In the midst of the #MeToo campaign, as part of the destruction of many careers and lives, the *New York Times* published an article in November 2017 alleging that C.K. had sexually harassed five women by masturbating in front of them or during a telephone call, after obtaining their consent.

After these allegations surfaced, C.K.'s career went into a tailspin. Among other blows, in addition to the suppression of his film, FX announced it was cutting ties with the comedian, Netflix canceled the release of a stand-up special, and various media appearances were called off as well.

At the time, the WWSW commented that while the comic's behavior had been inappropriate and irresponsible, he was “not a fiend deserving to be liquidated. He appears to suffer from emotional disorders that find expression in his compulsive exhibitionism. There must certainly have been a way to deal with his form of behavioral disorder without ending his career as an actor and comic. Perhaps one of his producers, directors or agents might have done more, or anything, to help Louis C.K. if he or she had not been so fixated on making as much money off the comic's work as possible.”

C.K. asserted in 2018 that the scandal cost him \$35 million in lost income. In essence, he was blacklisted. He spent the next year in Europe, returning to perform stand-up comedy in the US from late 2018 onward and now releasing his special *Sincerely*.

The American media was once in love with C.K., but, as occurs in a particularly unpleasant breakup, the #MeToo campaign turned that emotion into its opposite. Once upon a time, *GQ* hailed C.K. as “The Undisputed King of Comedy” and *Rolling Stone* published a piece headlined “How Louis C.K. Became the Darkest, Funniest Comedian in America.” However, when the comic began to perform once again following his “disgrace,” *GQ* complained that his efforts smacked of “someone who's hoping to wait out the storm of public opinion and carry on as though nothing has happened,” and *Rolling Stone* helpfully responded, “Louis C.K. and Woody Allen Both Gifted the World Something We Didn't Need.”

How much of this is genuine hostility and how much simply the result of intimidation by the #MeToo crusaders is difficult to say, but the generally malicious response of the media to *Sincerely* is telling. In *Rolling Stone*, for example, David Fear first acknowledged that the comedy special was

quite similar to C.K.'s previous work. He then suggested the "rhythms are the same, the cadence is the same, [as well as] the conspiratorial smiles between punchlines," but it somehow "does not feel like before. This feels kind of weird, to be honest." Fear claimed that C.K. exposed himself to "numerous" women, directly causing "personal trauma and/or professional setbacks." The reviewer later wondered out loud whether C.K. should "just disappear and give up on comedy altogether?"

Despite the attacks of the #MeToo campaign and its media followers, however, the majority of responses to *Sincerely* have been positive. On IMDb (Internet Movie Database), for instance, 1,569 users have given the comedy special a weighted average vote of 8.6 out of 10. Live audiences over the past year have enthusiastically received his comedy. In fact, there is no objective reason why C.K. should "give up."

Of course, defending the comic's right to perform and welcoming his relatively unapologetic stance are not the same thing as uncritically endorsing his comedy or his social outlook. Unhappily, the amusing and insightful moments in *Sincerely* are outweighed by a good deal of trivial material, including the sometimes puerile, ongoing effort to "shock." One of the biggest weaknesses of the special is C.K.'s failure to make much sense of his own painful experience, which would almost inevitably involve delving into the cultural and political problems of the day.

The comic opens his new special by admitting he has recently gotten into "global amounts of trouble."

Poking fun at the outrage of his critics, he goes on, "Wait till they see those pictures of me in blackface. That's gonna make it a lot worse. 'Cause there's a lot of those, there's thousands of pictures of me in blackface. I can't stop doing it, I like the way it makes me feel."

He continues, "You know what, I learned a lot. I learned a lot. I learned how to eat alone in a restaurant with people giving me the finger from across the room."

After breaking the ice, so to speak, C.K. goes on to perform his routine, which involves a certain degree of insight and far too much "crowd-pleasing" and gratuitous vulgarity.

He occasionally alludes to, but never critiques the reactionary moralists who have attempted to destroy him and have declared war on freedom of speech and creativity, in favor of words and behavior acceptable to the existing social order.

In one bit, C.K. explains, "I think having two legs is better than having none. That's just my opinion. You're not supposed to say that, because you're always supposed to be very positive about disabled people. But I think that puts pressure on them to be positive. What if they don't want to be? 'Cause the only story we want to hear is about the

amazing disabled people. What about disabled people who aren't amazing, who are just ordinary, with a sweatshirt and some potato chips, thinking 'F---, I wish I had legs'?"

He proceeds to talk about the word "retarded," explaining its evolution into a "bad word," and briefly notes the insincerity of those who pushed for this change, but never did anything to "cure" the problem or alleviate the conditions faced by the mentally handicapped.

Near the end of his performance, C.K. implies that what happened to him at the hands of the #MeToo witch-hunt was ludicrous, but never openly denounces the campaign. A strong supporter of Barack Obama, the comic still belongs to the circles that regularly use him as a punching bag. In an act of extraordinary hypocrisy, the Joe Biden campaign this week very publicly refunded a \$2,800 donation that C.K. made in March. The corporate warmonger Biden, with the blood of tens of thousands of Iraqis, Afghans, Libyans, Syrians, Yemenis and others on his hands, will not accept money from a stand-up comic with exhibitionist tendencies!

C.K. refers to his past misbehavior in *Sincerely*. He points out, reasonably enough, that if you ever ask someone if you may masturbate in front of them "and they say yes, just say, are you sure? That's the first part, and then if they say yes, just don't f----- do it."

"'Cause, look, whatever you're into... 'cause everybody's got their thing. You all have your thing. You're so f----- lucky that I don't know what your thing is. Everybody knows my thing now. Obama knows my thing. ... I don't like being alone. I get lonely. I like company. I'm good at it too. If you're good at juggling you wouldn't do it alone in the dark. You'd gather folks and amaze them."

Sincerely seems to be largely an effort by the comedian to get back into the limelight and move on with his career, which, of course, he has every right to do.

Disappointingly, the special as a whole is relatively empty as a work of art and as social commentary. It fails to say much that is genuinely thought-provoking. C.K. jokes about the absurdity of how certain words are used, about religious belief, about being reviled for his particular sexual kink, but the greater social "absurdities" and irrationality of our time, increasingly glaring and grievous, fail to receive a single reference.

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