



The Insider: Spectacular Lee Funny

By Michele Greppi

November 2, 2008 8:30 PM

Debra L. Lee can take a joke. And the BET Networks CEO can deliver one, too.

You may or may not agree with The Insider that it's just funny^ô and not in a ha-ha way^ô that of the 25 recipients of the Frank Stanton Award from the Center for Communication, she is only the second woman to have had a chance to prove that they're up to the roasting that goes with the honor. The first woman was Katherine Graham, the steel magnolia who ran the Washington Post Co., and that was waaaaaaaay back in 1987.



GOOD SPORT Debra Lee was feted^ô and roasted^ô by Philippe Dauman, right, and others as this year's recipient of the Frank Stanton Award.

Dudes!!! It's 200-effing-8.

But that's a rant for another time, perhaps one best written for posthumous publication.

The subject today is how uproariously, surgically, knowingly and, yes, elegantly, a two-fer gender barrier was breached last week.

The unspoken question of whether it could be done in the style that has come to be expected when the august Center members gather annually to let down what's left of their hair to make a roasty joke not written by well-compensated professional comedy scribes was first broached by Abbe Raven. Ms. Raven told how she and Ms. Lee became friends because of a story Ms. Lee had told on herself about meeting her big boss with evidence of her new motherhood on the front of her blouse.

The president and CEO of A&E Television Networks kicked off the program by saying, "I have been asked to say this: It is a roast." In other words, no one was going to tiptoe around anything so delicately that the crowd who braved the nasty weather and bought pricey tables would not be entertained.

Enter Viacom President-CEO Philippe Dauman, who immediately made all delicate territory fair game by "confessing" that when he'd been asked to talk about a trailblazing woman of color, he thought: "Wow, I finally get to meet Oprah."

Mr. Dauman's comedy centerpiece was a mock annual review of Ms. Lee, also a Viacom executive, that included her alleged proposal for a guest spot on "Hell Date" for soon-to-be-single-again, but already-involved-if-we-are-to-believe-gossip-pages Viacom Chairman Sumner Redstone as a guest; and a reality show about the capture of Osama bin-Laden ("Tick Frickin' Tock").

MTV Networks Chairman-CEO Judy McGrath deployed a snarky "Dora the Explorer" clip and got in a couple of jabs at GOP veep candidate Sarah Palin, including pointing out that spending \$150,000 on clothes is "just a summer Friday" for Ms. Lee.

Time Warner Chairman Dick Parsons drew a Barack/Barry Obama parallel as he recalled when Phil-eepp Doemann was known as Phil Dowman, and then declared Mr. Redstone so old "he thinks Morse code is new media."

"This is called collateral damage, bro," he said to the ranking Viacom representative in the ballroom of the Pierre.

Mr. Parsons also mused about the possible BET-ization of some stars of Time Warner's sprawling library. Instead of Campbell Brown's "No Bull, No Bias," why not Foxy Brown's "No Justice, No Peace"? Instead of Yosemite Sam, Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck, why not Yo Sam, Notorious B.U.G. and P-Daffy?

Ms. Lee, dressed in soft coral Dior from her top to her toes, mimicked Ms. McGrath not quite rockin' out at a Chicago concert, suggested to Mr. Dauman that his annual review was "gonna be rougher," and described Mr. Parsons as "the man who put the brother in Warner Bros."

She noted that she was being honored a week before the election, "I hope," of the first black president and the end of white male presidents, "because you know what they say." The audience roared as it filled in the blank: "Once you go black, you never go back."

"I, for one, can't wait to see Bill O'Reilly wearing platinum grills," she said. "Mark my words, next season the characters on 'Mad Men' will be switching to menthol." The mockumentary, "DefiniteLee," about her real and so-called life, created "the even Blacker Panthers," "Womandingo" and an appropriately placed tattoo reading "George Wallace can kiss me here."

The glass-ceilinged world as so many folk have known and perpetuated it didn't end, but the ever more considerable cracks in it widened. Ms. Lee took that opportunity to say, "We need new and different faces with different points of view."

And there was one less elephant in the room.



BET honors Debra Lee

Network topper receives Frank Stanton award

By DADE HAYES

October 28, 2008

BET boss Debra Lee was toasted and roasted Tuesday at the Center for Communications' gallows-humored annual luncheon at the Pierre Hotel.

Lee is the 25th winner of the center's Frank Stanton Award, which recognizes standouts in the media biz.

While not as edgy as last week's Matt Lauer roast, the event certainly wasn't done straight. And Lee herself got off some of the best lines.

"When I was first asked to receive this honor, I thought, Oh my God, isn't that the last thing Tom Freston heard before Sumner Redstone asked him to lunch?" Freston did get the Stanton prize in 2006, not long after he was fired as Viacom's chief exec.

Redstone came in for some ribbing from Time Warner chairman Richard Parsons. "We're passing the hat today for the big National Amusements refinancing," he quipped.

Taking off on BET's pickup of "The Wire," Parsons ran through a list of shows that he proposed could make a similar transition. HBO's "Entourage" would become "Posse," "Lord of the Rings" turns into "Lord of the Bling," and so on.

Viacom chief exec Philippe Dauman filled out a mock-performance evaluation for Lee, sending up the HR ritual by filling in her 2008 goals with lines like "capture Osama bin Laden." He added, "Your whole team is counting on that happening so that they get a bonus this year."

Lee acknowledged the grim economy in her acceptance, noting, "If you want to know how bad things got at Lehman Brothers, just ask your server."

On a more serious note, she mentioned joining Katherine Graham as one of two women to earn the award but facetiously highlighted another bit of context for her award. "When Barack Obama gets elected, it's not only going to be the first black president. It's going to be the end of white presidents forever. Because you know what they say, once you go black í "



Side Dish: Viacom CEO goes gangsta

Wednesday, October 29th 2008, 4:00 AM

Black Entertainment Television head Debra Lee had even the most buttoned-up mogul acting all street Tuesday at the Center for Communication roast in her honor. Viacom CEO Philippe Dauman rapped, "Kickin' it old school with a gangsta lean with my peeps is still fresh, mos' def!" Lee herself toasted Barack Obama, quipping: "I hope Obama marks the end of white Presidents in America. Because you know what they say ... once you go black, you never go back!"

Too bad for the Democrats that British billionaire Richard Branson can't vote (or donate) here. "Americans need the world to view them differently," the Virgin Group CEO tells us. "It's an embarrassment to be an American traveling the world. Barack Obama can put that right."

Amy Lumet, the extra-buxom daughter of director Sidney, is still loyal to John McCain, with whom she became close in the '90s while working in his Senate office. Despite tabloid reporters loitering outside her California home to ask her about the candidate, Lumet proudly displays a McCain poster in her window.

They call themselves the Williams Sisters, but our Daily News colleague Dave Candler admits that he and his bandmates are all blokes, last time they checked anyway. On Sunday, they play Arlene's Grocery, and, believe us, they rock as hard as Venus and Serena serve.

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BET's Debra L. Lee roasted

Parsons, Dauman and McGrath get their digs

By Gregg Goldstein

Oct 28, 2008, 05:09 PM ET

NEW YORK -- The gloves were off as Richard Parsons, Philippe Dauman and Judy McGrath delivered raucous roasts of BET Networks CEO Debra L. Lee at the annual Center for Communication Frank Stanton Award Luncheon.

Lee is only the second woman after Katherine Graham to be honored in the award ceremony's 24-year history. After growing up in the segregated South, the exec graduated from Brown and Harvard, going on to lead one of the biggest media networks in the world. But Lee's high-powered colleagues weren't about to let these achievements distract them at the Pierre Hotel Grand Ballroom ceremony Tuesday.

After an intro by A&E Television Networks head Abbe Raven, Viacom CEO Dauman launched a mock employee review of Lee, citing her "great reality programming ... Unfortunately, [Viacom and CBS chairman] Sumner [Redstone] has decided to pass on the 'Hell Date' guest spot you offered him."

A brief video appearance by Dora the Explorer (citing the fun a CEO can have "stepping on the people who were mean to you") was followed with MTV Networks CEO Judy McGrath. As with other panelists, she ribbed Lee about the protesters descending on her Washington DC home last year to criticize BET's programming, comparing Lee to Sarah Palin. "Sarah can see Russia from her house, and Debra can see protesters rushing her house," she said. "So she greenlit 'Hot Ghetto Mess.' She changed the name to 'We Got To Do Better,' which coincidentally is how every woman in this room feels when Sarah Palin opens her mouth."

Lead toaster/roaster and Time Warner chairman Parsons was relatively gentle on Lee, reserving his most vicious jokes for Viacom owner Redstone. "He thinks new media is morse code," joked Parsons. "Before you leave we're passing around the hat for National Amusements' new financing." he added, in a reference to the current financial troubles of Redstone's holding company.

The media-heavy crowd enjoyed a mockumentary short about her life (narrated by Ludacris) which pictured her as the only child of Lena Horne and Harry Belafonte, but it was Lee who got the last word.

"When I was asked to come here, I thought 'Weren't these the last words Tom Freston heard before Sumner Redstone invited him to this lunch?'" she said, alluding to Freston's departure shortly after he received the award two years ago. "And Dick, you're only hear for one reason: to make the Viacom people feel better about our stock price."