

## **HICKS SETS SIGHTS ON BIGGER GAME**

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*By Bill Brownstein*

For a brief frightening moment, it looked like Bill Hicks had lost his edge. With a Beatle tune blaring in the background, the comedian began his one-man show at the Centaur with some placid touchy-feely banter and spacey, satellite slides of planet Earth.

Whoa! Hath the comedy world's angry young man gone mellow?

Not quite. It was a classic stand-up setup, in fact. Hicks, the hit of last year's Just for Laughs fest, is back, madder and badder than ever. And funnier, too, it almost goes without saying.

But he has changed. Hicks no longer goes after the little targets like Debbie Gibson or George Michael for small-scale laughs; he goes after the big boys now for large-scale guffaws.

Of course, Hicks is not for all comedy palates. He is abrasive and profane and very nearly over the top. But it's not gratuitous because Hicks has a soul.

And Hicks just may be the closest thing we've got to Lenny Bruce - the late and undisputed champ of social satire - working the comedy hustings this side of the '80s.

There is a method to the madness as Hicks rants and rails against hypocrisy in the wide world of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. Hicks takes risks, tackling popular issues and going against the grain. He punctures the American pride that swelled to epic proportions following the Persian Gulf war:

"A war is when you have two armies fighting," Hicks barks. "The best the Iraqis could do was Scuds - which is kind of like launching a Buick.

"Sure, the Iraqis were said to have had the fourth largest army in the world, but there's a big drop-off after the first three. Put it this way, the Hare Krishnas have the fifth largest army, and they control the airports."

Hicks, an unrepentant chain-smoker, is at his most deliriously nasty defending his favorite vice:

"If you quit smoking, they say you get your sense of smell back. Hey, I live in New York - I don't want my sense of smell back!"

He decries the smugness of non-smokers who think they're immortal:

"Look at Jim Fixx, the health nut. He didn't smoke. He jogged, swam 500 laps a day and ate only tofu. He's dead.

Yul Brynner smoked, drank and had all sorts of women sitting on his cue-ball head. He's dead, too. But at least he lived!"

Hicks butts horns with Christian fundamentalists who urge their flock to be fruitful, yet want those harboring impure sexual thoughts struck down. "Hey, if it weren't for impure sexual thoughts, none of us would be here. What they should really be doing is to put a centrefold in the Bible: Miss Deuteronomy.

But the real beauty of Hicks' shtick is that beyond his hard-edged shell, he has a soft, vulnerable centre - like Lenny Bruce.

And also like the latter, Hicks can laugh at himself:

"I'm sure my mother's breasts are swelling with pride, knowing her son is performing around the country in front of total strangers and doing his (self-fellatio) routine, using his given surname."

Off-stage, Hicks, 29 going on 49, tries to explain his attitude: "I guess I was just born jaded," says the comedian, still wearing black and still smoking - both tobacco and with rage. "The first time my mom told me she loved me, I said: 'Yeah, right, I bet you say that to all the kids.' "

Born in Georgia, raised in Texas and based in New York, Hicks has been performing since he

was 14. "That's when I saw my first Woody Allen movies and read his short stories. So, I pretended I was him at first.

"My friends weren't real impressed. So, a year later, I became myself."

It's paid off. Hicks is in demand on the stand-up as well as the late-night TV talk-show circuit around the continent.

His first comedy album, *Dangerous*, was released last year to rave reviews. His second, *Relentless*, based on his 90-minute Centaur show, is due out in the fall. And a third disc, *Desperate*, is already in the works:

"That will be me on a unicycle, juggling and screaming to people: 'What do you want?' "

Hicks says he's not going soft on pap pop stars like Debbie Gibson or George Michael by no longer attacking them. "There are new villains in the world, new enemies of reason and good taste - like Vanilla Ice and M.C. Hammer," cracks the comedian, who favors the music of Bob Dylan, Beethoven and Lyle Lovett.

Hicks has few regrets about his career direction, apart from the restrictions it places on personal relationships. "It would be nice to be married, but it's hard when you're travelling 265 nights a year. It's going to take a very special woman." Pause. "Or a lot of very average ones."