One Bowl of Ramen and Three Dumplings with Hannibal Buress

BY RACHEL SYME

PORTRAIT BY ELIZABETH RENSTROM

I st the age of newborn and all-consuming instant everything, we all have one comedy icon, the clip we have bookmarked for when the rule-bending melodrama mists in and we need an injection of joy straight into our bloodstream. Here’s my prescription: a black suit, a GIF of Hannibal Buress dancing down the rampway at Grand Central Station in a suit and tie, doing a Jerry Seinfeld-esque moment with his arms and a wobbly shuffle of his feet. Even though the clip lasts only a few seconds, Buress’s duff, jerry-stroet (which comes from a scene in Board City, where the gang tries to get to a destination wedding) has brought me near endless delight. This has

much to do with the element of surprise: Buress’s character, a typically restrained dentist named Lincolns—Board City’s one and only straight man—is a dead ringer for the goofball hero. (Abbi and Ilana are always turned up in ten, Buress keeps it simple in a constantly three; seeing him cut loose is so rare it’s like a shock when it happens. Some of the most generous comedy comes out of deep restraint. Buress knows this—he keeps so much to himself that when he finally does give something more, it feels exquisite.)

I felt this same slow-burning generosity when I met Buress for lunch at Ramen Yushien in Williamsburg, where he lives, on a recent grey afternoon. On the kind of day that zaps you of your life force just by walking around in it, both Buress and I arrived at the ramen place chilly and low-energy. But then, the break. We sat down, and my recorder immediately stopped working. That sickly pall of “uh huh, this is a nightmare” breaks across my face. Buress, sensing the panic, did the kind thing. He laughed. And when Buress laughs, he does it with more than a little raucousness. No, he does it with his whole face and a full-throated cackle. We were going to be OK.

However, as I learned throughout our lunch, the clunks I felt hanging over Buress extended a

hit beyond just a touch of seasonless-effulgent dis

scious. On the one hand, he has reached a point in his life, and as his career, where things are getting better than ever. On February 13, the day after his 35th birthday, Netflix released Comedy Central, Buress’s new hour-long stand-up spe

cial. For a reviewer, Netflix is the new Big Dream: thousands of comedy fans streaming in glorious union, all within reach of their phones and bags of Doritos. As far as stand-up goes, Buress, who started out in his native Chicago, has reached the upper echelon—the only thing he has left to do is play Madison Square Garden (a goal he intends to achieve, by the way).

Then, there’s his television work. He is one of the best of both worlds—a show full of best-parts—and he shows up every scene of the absurd. He’s the funny black kid who will put anything up with. Last year, he debuted Why? with Hannibal Buress, his own

show on Comedy Central, a major victory after a lot of previous television development deals had not panned out. He is also making the transition to film; in December, he killed in Daddy’s Home, and he appeared in the action flick Rundown of machine guns, which was wide release January. And he has more IMDB credits coming. He has a role in the Beyoncé film, starring Sharay Johnson and Zoe Saldana, but he told me he doesn’t take his shit off. He travels everywhere with a DJ and a serious poop of friends and mutuals, packs his bags across the country, and occasionally uses “an Uber for jets” to get from place to place should he miss a flight (which he once did, “I’m like, two out of every five flights I am scheduled for,” he told me). When we met, he had just come back from Tokyo, where he played a last-minute show that sold out in less than a day.

And yet, there’s always the other hand. As Buress filled with his chippiness and tried to spin shite dumplings (“Man, I’m really struggling with these. Might have to call in a fuck,”), I asked him how he handled the stress on the show. He’s been doing a lot of big developments—and was surprised when he admitted to feeling less happy than he had been in a while. “I think I was the happiest right before my special (Live from Chicago) came out,” he said, a bit wistfully. “I just remember being so good at it. I did this podcast called Champs with Neal Borman and Mossie Kehler, and I just remember being so good. I don’t think I was as good at it when I did that. I think I have fewer responsibilities, a lighter time.”

What he didn’t mention is this: when Buress seems so keen on moving past it, that is March 2015, when Live to Chicago came out, when seven months B.C. Before Buress. If you haven’t heard about the conversation between Hannibal Buress and Bill Cosby (and have been living in a cave, in which case, yay, OK), here is it: in late October 2014, grisy footage of a joke Buress had been telling on the mad about Cosby’s history of sexual assault hit YouTube. The bit began with Buress chatting Cosby for telling young black men how to behave when he has no real mentor to do so. “Yeah, you just rape women, Bill Cosby.” You leave hue and grisy “Bill Cosby rape. It’s not funny.” That shit has more results than “Hannibal Buress.” The internet circulated the footage in a fury until cable news picked it up, which then prompted the story tipped into actual world-results. Women began coming forward. Cosby lost an NBC show, and Cosby Show versus disappeared from cable.

Almost overnight Buress became the face of comic vigilante justice, a role he never asked to play. Almost overnight Buress became the face of comic vigilante justice, a role he never asked to play. He certainly has more Google results now. When I asked him about googling himself, he scrolled through his phone and clicked one of the results, an article claiming he has a secret vigilante agenda. “I don’t go for the Young Leaders in Chicago last month,” he said, referring to a performance for the Jewish United Fund’s Young Leaders Culture (and here is one of those goofy conspiracy stories that thinks I’m some secret agent)

All the conspiracy theories that sprung up in the wake of the Cosby affair still amuse and shock Buress. “People think I’m an IVP show because of that,” he said. “But that would be impossible. The TV deal was inked in July 2014 and that came out in October. But after that, I almost didn’t want to do my show anymore.”

Buress pressed ahead despite his reservations with Why?, a hilarious showcase that was part main-street interviews, part funny story—but admitted that his heart wasn’t fully in the eight episodes he made. He decided against returning for a second season. “It was uneven,” he informed me of the show. “I was having angst. It was just having this weird mixed emotions a little bit.”

This is the catch-22 of having a bit go viral in the era of cold stand-up. The way the business is set up, it only has room for a handful of stars at any given time. There are the working comedians you’ve heard of—Arman Aub, Amy Schumer, Louis CK, Chris Rock—and then there is everybody else. It’s a professional field of boxers and granders, showing showtime and getting on podcasts and trying to fill a room and get on a stage until they break big. Buress, because of his intensely stare stand-up tactic, was already on the brink before any of the headlines happened. It’s understandable how the attention duress但他 still was not moving on. As with his gleeful little gig in Central Circuit, he keeps finding new ways to harness the electric power of aces tv. He’s tough in his embrace of the medium, and occasionally shows off. “I think I have fewer responsibilities, a lighter time.”

Of course, Buress still stirs the strange turn his life took in 2014, and likely will for a while. He knows it has become famous. His Netflix set includes a bit in which he talks about how dastardly he is a stranger. He punctuates this riff with “Did Cosby see you?”

His other new material, which contains his trademark mixture of social observations and absurd revisions, becomes more on his fear about aging and moving past his hard-pouncing days. “I’ll die, but when I’m (still) going out 3 or 4 days every week when I’m old at the same time. His main concerns of his new act now is that he is starting to detect the “I don’t know why I look so particularly sexy in this special.” He said “Watch me get older and sweeter.”

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