

RTS

In the dramatic arts, tragedy gets top billing, and comedy is an amusing sideshow. The snob in all of us shares Joseph Addison's prejudice that "a perfect tragedy is the noblest production of human nature", and we allow tragedy all manner of plot privileges that would seem merely tasteless in modern comedy. In a tragedy it's honourable for the victim to be blind, crippled, savagely beaten, but don't even think of going there with comedy.

While it is usually not a good idea to be wantonly nasty for the sake of a laugh, there is a double standard here that goes unexamined.

It's simply an *idée fixe* that tragedy is universal, whereas jokes are private and elitist, benefiting a privileged minority and potentially cruel to all other minorities.

The task of avant-garde comedy, therefore, is to dismantle the double standard. A fine example of this is *Strangers with Candy*, a Comedy Central series that began its second season last week (Comedy Central: Mondays at 10pm ET/PT). To understand the programme, one must first understand its star, the oddball comedian Amy Sedaris. "I can't do anything serious to save my life," she said in a telephone interview. "If I had to say something like 'I love you' or 'I lost the baby', forget it, I'd just [crack up]."

Sedaris' essayist brother, David, wrote of collaborating on a play with his sister: "By the time I've started writing something, Amy will have decided that the character is blind, or paralysed from the waist down."

She admits to being deeply fascinated by physical infirmities: "I have

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The funny side to tragedies



Back to school: Amy Sedaris as Jerri Blank in 'Strangers with Candy' in which she plays a 47-year-old former drug addict

a lot of books on skin disorders, medical books with photos of people with distorted bodies, faces blown off – I can't take my eyes off that stuff."

Sedaris' character on *Strangers* is Jerri Blank, a 47-year-old who is starting her freshman year of high school all over again because she has been a teenage runaway and drug addict for 32 years. But unlike, say, a middle-aged Grateful Dead fan who might have led a similar life, Jerri has no coolness to show for it. For all her adventures, she looks and talks like a tackily dressed, suburban Avon-and-Tupperware refugee.

What no one understands about Sedaris is why she chooses to hide her

Mediterranean good looks (the family is half-Greek, a frequent subject of brother David's essays) under Vesuvial globs of stage makeup. She is clear about the reason: "There's enough pretty people on TV." To play Jerri, she wears her beloved "Fatty Suit", which she bought long ago. "I had always wanted a fatty suit," she says, in the same way that other young girls might have dreamed of a pony. When she had enough money, she had the suit custom-made, and initially wore it for her own amusement. "I like to experiment with body types. Sometimes I like to be one of those people who are big on the bottom and small on the top."

In *Strangers*, Jerri's

stepmother is always on the sauce, and her father is catatonic – they're killing him off in the next season, undoubtedly in some tasteless fashion. Jerri herself is always on the make – at one point attempting to seduce a fellow student whom she later discovers is the son she gave up for adoption. When the two realise their blood relation, they embrace; then Jerri says worriedly: "Can't we still make out?"

Experimentation aside, a programme can't be funny if it's completely Martian. Luckily, there's plenty of recognisable high school situations here, but with a knife-twist. Some teachers may have contempt for their students or live vicariously through them, but in the world of *Strangers*, the teachers don't even attempt to hide it. When Jerri timidly approaches a teacher to ask whether she can try out for the debating team, the teacher (played by deadpan artist Stephen Colbert) tries to shoo her away; he is busy making tempura at his desk. When she distracts him into overcooking his food, he snaps at her with a cryptic metaphor: "You can't un-fry things, Jerri."

When it is discovered that Jerri is a violin prodigy, her teacher imprisons her in his home and makes her practise till she is bloody: "I'm the only one who can help you realise my dreams of yours," he says.

The British comic Jennifer Saunders has said in interviews that when she first pitched the idea for *Absolutely Fabulous* to BBC executives, they were not terribly keen, saying that "drunk women aren't funny". But, of course, they are. If you agree, you might enjoy *Strangers*. Otherwise, you have been warned.