

Do Germans have a sense of humour?



Many expats living in Germany find the country's annual carnival celebrations baffling. Some of the costumes seem obvious enough, but they just can't quite get a handle on the humour. In her regular Expatica column, Cultural Clues, Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich answers a reader's letter about what makes Germans laugh.

JJ wrote:

Hilly, after watching the carnival processions on TV, I am more baffled than ever before. What's up?

Dear JJ,

Every person, every language and every culture has a sense of humour.

How it is expressed differs, of course. So, yes, Germans not only have a sense of humour; Germans also have a sense of time as to when to use it.

Let me expand. Other than between colleagues with a trusted relationship, humour is not so present in day-to-day life in the office. During lunch ? yes, during a formal meeting ? maybe not.

The American Chamber of Commerce in Frankfurt issued a study based on polling US expats working in the area around Frankfurt. Appropriately enough, the title of the survey was: "All work no play!"

So when do they play?

Carnival, for sure, is that time of the year where off-the-wall costumes and easy interaction between strangers is facilitated by the generous consumption of alcohol.

But the sense of humour is a different one. The so-called "Butredner" dressed up in funny costumes address political topics and problems in society in a rhyming verse which delivers one pun after the other. It is underscored by an orchestra in the background.

Although it looks amusing, the undertone can be more serious.

My personal observation is that slapstick is a very popular form of humour in Germany. Let's refer to it as "the Benny Hill type" of humour. Of course, a more sophisticated humour, which involves juggling of language and assumptions, does exist.

Many stand-up comedians and entertainers remain on the fringes unless of course their name is Harald Schmidt, who reached cult status for his Jay Lenno-like late TV evening shows.

For me a master of his trade in Germany is the unrivalled Victor von Bulow, also known as Lorient. His cartoons, sketches and full feature films show human behaviour in a subtle and very funny way by using understatement and by displaying a fine tuned feeling for the absurd.

But we all know that humour is something one cannot argue about. If you prefer the comics of "Werner", who boozes and farts as if his life depends on it during his cruising on his motorcycle, than may the laughs be with you.

And lest we forget: All people smile in the same language!

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Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich is managing partner of CONSULTus. Her website is www.Consultus.net. She reserves the right to decide which questions she considers relevant for her column. She will, however, not answer any questions dealing with tax or legal matters.