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Cabaret artist Patti Basler (left) had to cancel all her shows and produced coronavirus YouTube videos instead. Cartoonist Max Spring (right) had nothing to draw when the crisis began. Photos: Tibor Nad / Andreas Blatter



Humour during the coronavirus crisis

When satire suddenly toed the line

COVID-19 is no laughing matter – as Switzerland’s satirists and cartoonists acknowledged this spring. But humour will always shine through eventually, even in the grimmest of circumstances, says cartoonist Max Spring.

MARC LETTAU

It was striking how quickly the mood changed among Switzerland’s comedians and cartoonists. In place of biting satire, the nation’s wits supported government guidance. “Avoid contact with other people. Stay at home. Wash your hands.” The ever cheeky cabaret artist Patti Basler reacted to the new situation by shooting a series of funny but educational coronavirus YouTube videos. “Never before have we satirists toed the government line as much as we did then,” reflected Swiss comedy doyen Viktor Giacobbo. Instead of poking fun, our comics complied like everyone else. Had the virus affected their sense of humour?

We quizzed Max Spring about this. What did the Berne cartoonist draw when the crisis began to unfold?

“I didn’t draw a single thing. It was like Armageddon. The situation was escalating every day. The existential threat seemed to be everywhere. It was no joke,” he told us. And there was simply no appetite for coronavirus cartoons among the newspapers. Instead of drawing, Spring hung on every word uttered by Federal Councillor Alain Berset and his coronavirus guru Daniel Koch. “I too was very happy about their uncompromising approach.”

It takes time for humour to find a voice, Spring believes. “A subject that is taboo one week can take on a life of its own the next. Humour needs the right moment.” The cartoonist is now free to chronicle the consequences of the pandemic, tongue firmly in cheek. Yet one thing remains off limits, he says: “Making fun of those who are

really suffering.” Humour will not miraculously make things better, so what is the point of it? Spring mentions climate change by way of an example, an even bigger disaster in his view. “We shouldn’t laugh about climate change, but we need to laugh despite climate change,” he explains. “We all have to keep smiling and laughing somehow.” But doesn’t the cartoonist risk becoming some sort of macabre court jester? No, he counters. “I don’t walk into my studio just to be witty. It is a job like any other – but I need a canvas to express myself. Maybe I am doing a little to help us confront these difficult issues.”



"Nothing will ever be the same" is the title of Max Spring's latest cartoon for "Swiss Review".