

Resource Review

Satire in Classroom*A Review of* *The Samaritans***The Samaritans***Xeinium Productions Limited*<http://aidforaid.org/about.php>**Reviewed by: Susan Appe***Binghamton University*

Television, film, and popular media have provided educators the opportunity to teach a wide range of concepts and develop critical thinking (Gaynor, 2014). Humor through these mediums is a pedagogic tool that educators can use to overcome conflicts, reduce anxiety and stress in learning, and enrich the learning process (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011; Chory & McCroskey, 1999; Lazzarich, 2012). Several topics in nonprofit management lend themselves to humor, and increasingly practitioners in particular have approached the sector and community work in a satirical manner.¹ The sitcom *The Samaritans* is one such example. The comedy depicts a 28-year-old American who, with two master's degrees and a 6-week internship in Africa under his belt, is sent to Nairobi, Kenya, to work in a dysfunctional nongovernmental organization (NGO), Aid for Aid, in the position of country director after, as we learn in the first scene of the series, the previous director is caught illegally shooting a rhinoceros. The creator of the series, Hussein Kurji, was inspired by the British and American versions of the mockumentary-style show *The Office*, as well as the numerous stories from friends and acquaintances who work in the NGO sector (Dougherty, 2014).

¹Several venues have produced innovative, satirical, humorous takes on the nonprofit sector. For example, the website Nonprofits With Balls (<http://nonprofitwithballs.com/>), whose creator, Vu Le, documents authentic humor in the nonprofit sector, as well as the Radi-Aid Awards (<http://www.rustyradiator.com/>), which shamelessly pokes fun at NGOs working in development aid, by having awards for the best and worst charity ads.

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Situated in nonprofit management curriculum, the satire *The Samaritans* can provide insightful simplification of critical issues in the field. The series highlights the overmanagerial, instrumentalized functions of the sector; pokes fun at the rampant use of jargon and buzzwords that are not defined nor substantiated; and perhaps most important, features power asymmetries found not only in the nonprofit workplace but also within development aid.

The first two episodes of *The Samaritans* highlight the managerial clashes and several red-tape situations that can occur in a nonprofit. For example, the hierarchical decision making of Aid for Aid starts first at its far away headquarters, to then be interpreted by the local NGO managers. As with most satirical works, in the series these NGO managers and their personalities are exaggerated. You have the new white, ex-patriate director with little to no experience, along with the local deputy director who knows much better the context and needs in Kenya, more so than the new director and the faraway headquarters. Additionally, there is the aid worker who assumes the local hairstyle and marries a Kenyan; the program assistant who is in disbelief about the organization's dysfunction; the smart, clever receptionist; and the materialistic, self-absorbed media relations director, among others.

The first episode underlines the use of several buzzwords in the sector; words and terms used incessantly without any real, defined meaning such as *capacity*, *empowerment*, *governance*, *transparency*, and *social accountability*, among others. This is exemplified in the episode with the debut presentation of the NGO's new promotional material that is seemingly unrelated to its mission, which is never disclosed during the first two episodes of the series. The promotional material's sound bites are simply the listing of buzzwords in the background. The second episode focuses on the "BFG" (i.e., the "Big Freakin' Grant") and shows the process of the staff applying to the most important grant in the history of the NGO. However, staff spend most of the episode debating a best suited acronym for the project rather than building a substantive grant proposal, as the new director explains, "Its all about the acronym."

About 43% of Kenyan's live under the poverty line ("Kenya," n.d.) and 60% of residents in Kenya's capital, Nairobi, live in city slums on approximately only 6% of the city's residential land ("Human Waste," 2012). As such, Kenya has received significant development aid from several channels including from the more than 6,500 NGOs working in the country (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, n.d.). Thus, using Kenya as the satire's location is purposeful, as the series seeks to highlight the failures of NGOs and development aid even with all the resources directed to the country in the last several decades.

Prior to watching this sitcom, students need to become familiar with the terminology used in nonprofit organizations and with the governance of and structures in nonprofit organizations. They also need to be knowledgeable of promising practices in the field. Thereafter, discussions about the content of the first two episodes allow educators in nonprofit management courses to focus on the inherent challenges in the field related to poverty reduction and other global public problems while also acknowledging the taken-for-granted assumptions about the nonprofit sector's ability to solve these problems. NGOs working internationally in development aid have been watched more closely in the press and in the academic literature, as scholars cite project management failures, as well as criticize the application of universal management practices across di-

verse development contexts and the emphasis of outcomes over organizational learning (Ika, 2012; Smillie, 1997; Watkins, Swidler, & Hannan, 2012). Indeed, the international development sector—including NGOs—is under scrutiny for its lackluster progress in alleviating global poverty (Hobbes, 2014; Kane, 2013). *The Samaritans* sheds light on these criticisms in a smart, witty way, a way in which students in the classroom can reflect on the material and challenge postulations of the nonprofit sector.

The Samaritans can best be used with other scholarly materials in the classroom to bring critical perspective to managerialism and to contrast the practices depicted in the sitcom with promising and effective practices in nonprofit organizations. For example, the satire shows distant decision-making processes from abroad leading to a misalignment to local priorities and, in the end, the writing of grant proposals without community input and participation. In addition, it does so by showing the unchallenged use of trendy words in the aid sector (and arguably in the nonprofit sector more generally). It also provides an avenue for educators to talk about power and decision making in organizations—again, within development aid and the role of NGOs, as well as within the nonprofit sector more broadly. These power inequalities are related to superiority complexes, privilege, and race; competition among nonprofits; and the exploitation of interns and staff, to name a few examples. Finally, it allows for meaningful discussion about how to develop and implement organizational practices and the challenges faced during implementation. It can also lead to meaningful discussions between theory and practice.

Nonprofit scholars and educators, as well as nonprofit practitioners and students of the profession, should have opportunities to laugh and be reflective about the field. *The Samaritans* is one material of satire that can be introduced to the classroom for dynamic instruction, as satire in the classroom must be relevant, humorous, and perhaps poke fun at those in authority but also must be comprehensible and balanced with other materials for students (Stark, 2003). In the case of nonprofit management curriculum, it can be used to encourage present and future nonprofit managers to challenge assumptions in the sector, acknowledge the dark sides of the sector, and most important, propose alternatives for nonprofits to seriously contribute to social transformation at the local and global scales.

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