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A red banner for Netflix. On the left, the word 'NETFLIX' is written in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. Below it, in smaller white text, it says 'Instantly watch *Limitless* today!'. In the center, there is a small portrait of a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a suit and tie. To the right of the portrait, the text 'Instantly watch movies' is written in white, bold, sans-serif font. Further right, there is a blue button with white text that says 'Click here >'. In the top right corner of the banner, there is a small 'AdChoices' logo.

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‘Long Story Short’: Colin Quinn’s 75-Minute History of the World

Comedian Colin Quinn has been around a long time.

How long?

This long:

Yikes.

Quinn has come a long way since 1990, but unlike some of the comedians he came up with, like Jon Stewart and Ben Stiller, his career has been a series of, shall we say, lateral moves.

Sure, he was the “Weekend Update” guy on *Saturday Night Live* for five years, but his movie career never quite took off ([A Night at the Roxbury](#), anyone?).

He took up stand-up comedy after he quit drinking and needed something to take up his sudden surfeit of sober free time. Nearly thirty years on, Quinn remains a workhorse, and is sometimes called “the comedian’s comedian” (which some comics and fans consider a dubious designation, a backhanded compliment that’s synonymous with “too brilliant to ever make it big”).

It’s [the Colin Quinn of Tough Crowd](#) (2002-2004) I’m most familiar with: the fast-talking, working-class Brooklyn autodidact whose dry quips sometimes flew over the heads of the audience, not to mention the fellow comics who debated current affairs with him in the midnight hour.

Come on: if Lincoln could opine to Douglas and those assembled that “there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together,” then surely we can use

the elevated word “debate” here, too (EXTREME language and content warning):

So I brought a lot of enthusiasm to Quinn’s latest production,”[Long Story Short](#).” He’d workshopped the material for a long time in clubs, then took the 75-minute one-man show about the history of the world off-Broadway. It seems stupid to talk about a performer who started out in 1984 as “getting his big break” in 2010, but that’s sort of what happened when Jerry Seinfeld signed on as producer/director: with that big name attached to the production, “Long Story Short” [made it to Broadway](#).

HBO turned “Long Story Short” into a special, which was nominated for an Emmy. When it came out on DVD a few weeks ago, it topped my to-watch list.

Over the course of the show, Quinn takes viewers on a whirlwind [“1066 and All That”](#) tour of world history, from Antigone to Snooki.

(Before you say to yourself, “Oh! You mean like, he’s the cool teacher we never had?”, Quinn’s anticipated that reaction; he gets around to spoofing every Hollywood “hip white teacher helps underprivileged black kids succeed” movie in one of the show’s funniest bits.)

Most stand-up comedians are terrible students, as [Quinn himself](#) has noted, but he must have absorbed a few lessons while he was throwing spitballs behind the nuns’ backs. He opens the show by declaring that “human nature doesn’t change,” which is a very Catholic concept. And he told one interviewer that the show’s material about the Silk Road and the historical acrimony between the French and the English was “[just general knowledge](#),” which was true if you went to Catholic school when we did, but not so much anymore

The Colin Quinn of *Tough Crowd*, who relished talking about race and ethnicity, is the same one on the Broadway stage, if in exceedingly cleaned up form. He traces familiar Italian hand gestures back to ancient Rome, and explains the differences between the Mayans, Incas, and Aztecs based on the particular drugs they used.

Quinn explains that the way Jews, Christians, and Muslims pray reveals a lot about them, with Muslims crouched over as if “they know there’s gonna be an explosion.”

The show isn’t punchline driven, which may throw some viewers off. I guess Quinn was trying to be “above” that, but for what it’s worth, the occasional old-fashioned, just plain *jokes* got the biggest laughs (“the average Greek child was watching 40 hours of plays a week”).

Other stellar bits saw Quinn veering off topic, like a cringe-inducingly accurate reenactment of the last time you visited a relative in the hospital (“See that other family? They stole my chair!”) and the real reason restaurants invented the “early bird special.”

As the show wraps up, Quinn tries to get semi-serious, musing that all empires end and perhaps America has had its day. Don’t worry: he doesn’t descend into Michael Moore-like vitriol, but he makes a point that few people were willing to hear when they needed to most – around ten years ago. That is, that “exporting democracy” sounds like a great idea to us, but for millions (maybe billions) around the world, “democracy” is synonymous with Britney Spears and crack. (One encounters [the phrase “whiskey, democracy, sexy”](#) far less often in the conservative blogosphere these days...)

You’d almost think Quinn and Seinfeld might have read Mark Steyn:

Speaking of Seinfeld: yeah, I'm a philistine — I don't really understand how you "direct" a one-man show, but whatever Seinfeld did to get Quinn to stop mumbling and talking so fast, he should be congratulated.

Quinn doesn't act like a typical comedian. He doesn't pull stupid faces or mug for the camera. In fact, he seemed pretty tense for the first half of "Long Story Short." Having seen video of other versions of the same material, like this:

I now wonder if Quinn was told that for the sake of the HBO taping, he should look "up" (at the camera) instead of "out" at the audience. The result is that the HBO special is stiffer than I'd been prepared for – Quinn is looking up and out at nobody, and seems almost afraid to blink. Quinn sounded great but looked extremely uncomfortable – the contrast was jarring.

The opening and closing music and graphics were a bit cheesy. The shifting stage backgrounds depicting

pyramids, maps, and other predictable images made me feel like I was seated in the orientation center at the Hoover Dam or some other historical site instead of “at” a Broadway show.

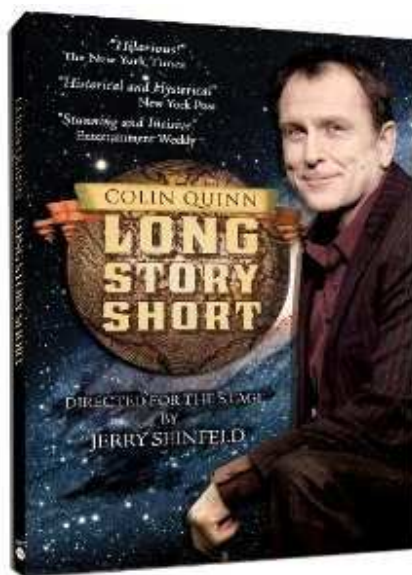
Since there’s nothing much to see, *per se*, maybe you should listen to the show instead of watch it. I’m almost certain that would improve the “Long Story Short” experience for pretty much everyone.

Because this production is worth seeking out. There are genuine laughs, and plenty of cool facts that will have you running to Google and Amazon.

“[Long Story Short](#)“ isn’t political in a partisan sense, so you don’t have to brace yourself for the usual insults and idiocies that make it so difficult to enjoy any piece of entertainment made in the last twenty years.

Along with a lot of belated recognition, Colin Quinn’s gotten a book deal out of this recent run of success – [a mid-six figure deal](#), in fact.

Maybe Colin Quinn will finally lose that accursed “comedian’s comedian” label. Now, if he’d only use his newfound clout to pitch a second coming of the late lamented *Tough Crowd*. If Obama wins a second term, a lot of us could really use something to look forward to every night.



Categories: [Humor](#)

Posted at 1:00 am on January 10th, 2012 by *Kathy Shaidle*

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8 Comments, 6 Threads, 1 Trackbacks

1. 1. Fred Belot

A lot of fun, Kathy, thanks.

January 10, 2012 - 8:36 am [Link to this Comment](#) | [Reply](#)



2. 2. Samash Iyam

That's some funny stuff. It funny how comedy can disarm people and get them to not only listen but be persuaded by political points that would otherwise simply make them angry.

Robert Wuhl had an HBO special called "Assume the Position" that went even further along this Sowell-like road. In the special, you can clearly see the young people in the "class" being won over by his argument because of the clarity, humor and persuasiveness. Blind siding people in this manner is probably the only way to get people to change their minds on political issues.

Sure, seeing a comic show isn't going to change one's stance on gay marriage and other issues but the point is that if such a satiric look at the Left's talking points could come to suffuse our culture, something might change and a more centrist Saturday Night Live would be welcome.

We need more Gutfelds and Wuhls who may have their own "sides" but are not simply agenda driven morons who repeat moral stances as if they were born in a stereotype factory like the OWS crowd or those depraved women on The View.

January 10, 2012 - 9:53 am [Link to this Comment](#) | [Reply](#)



3. 3. ari

is it safe for kids? teens? ones who've seen cbs- which means a lot implied?

b/c i think my kids would think it was HI-LAR-I-OUS even if I didn't get the jokes. (they're getting a better education than me)

January 10, 2012 - 10:47 am [Link to this Comment](#) | [Reply](#)



4. [Will Collier](#)

What? No reference to the timeless "Sing Along With Colin" segments from "Remote Control"?!? Blasphemy!

January 10, 2012 - 11:41 am [Link to this Comment](#) | [Reply](#)



5. [Kathy Shaidle](#)

Ari,

This sounds dumb but I don't have kids and your question wasn't top of mind while I was watching. I don't remember hearing any cursing, though.

January 10, 2012 - 12:17 pm [Link to this Comment](#) | [Reply](#)



Samash Iyam

You're joking right? There is massive cursing. If you're not joking, watch the videos.

January 10, 2012 - 1:21 pm [Link to this Comment](#) | [Reply](#)



6. [Kathy Shaidle](#)

Samash, I'm Catholic not Protestant so I'm not calibrated to count swears in TV shows. So, if you say so...

January 10, 2012 - 4:06 pm [Link to this Comment](#) | [Reply](#)



Samash Iyam

You don't watch the videos you present to us to watch? I am Catholic as well and I'm fairly sure that somewhere in my old Catechism book you're playing with Purgatory. Although you may get a pass for not actually watching the massive swearing. Plus every bleeped curse is like a Hail Mary or Our Father.

January 10, 2012 - 5:52 pm [Link to this Comment](#) | [Reply](#)



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