

“Trump is a genius, a deep thinker. You can’t judge people by what they tweet”

Roseanne Barr

Actress, comedian and controversialist

THE
MAGAZINE
INTERVIEW
CHRISSE
ILEY



The sitcom *Roseanne* ran from 1988 to 1997. It was a TV staple depicting the working-class trials and tribulations of the Conner family, with Roseanne Barr as the fiercely funny, larger-than-life matriarch at its heart. It won Emmys and Globes, becoming the most watched show in America and leaving a global footprint. When it was revived last year, it was a critical and commercial hit: people still loved Roseanne.

And then it all went horribly wrong. Last May, in the middle of the night, Barr posted a tweet that would ruin her career and see her labelled a racist. The tweet read: “Muslim brotherhood & planet of the apes had a baby=vj”. VJ was a reference to Valerie Jarrett, an African-American former adviser in the Obama administration. Barr’s bosses at ABC called her tweet “abhorrent, repugnant and inconsistent with our values”. The network immediately fired her and cancelled her eponymous show. Within 48 hours they had forced her to give up all rights to the series, even though it was based on her own life. The following month, the network decided to introduce a spin-off called *The Conners* — essentially Roseanne without Roseanne. It’s been a difficult time.

I meet Barr at her office-cum-studio in El Segundo, California, and she tells me about that tweet. “I was in an inebriated condition,” she begins. “I’d gone to bed at 11pm, sent the tweet at 2am. I was on Ambien [a sleeping pill]. It was a very stupid thing. I was dreaming and I woke up and thought this is a really great thing that I’ll tweet. I was appalled I was not allowed to explain it.”

Later, she did try to explain it via a series of rambling follow-up tweets and video posts, in which she claimed she did not know Jarrett was black (“I thought the bitch was white! Goddammit!”) and that her intention was not to be racist, but to address what she sees as the anti-semitic implications of the Obama regime

having cosied up to Iran, a nation that calls for the eradication of Israel (Barr is Jewish).

“I should have written it backwards,” she sighs. “It came out dyslexic. It should have been, ‘Valerie Jarrett’s ties to the Muslim Brotherhood have now allowed Iran’s government to remain, as in the movie *Planet of the Apes*,” she tells me, referring to a long-held conspiracy that Jarrett, who was born to African-American parents living in Iran, is Muslim. And *Planet of the Apes* because...well, as she put it in another tweet: “Rod Serling wrote *Planet of the Apes*. It was about anti-semitism. That is what my tweet referred to — the anti-semitism of the Iran deal.”

Her explanation has proved unsatisfactory to many. Serling’s daughter responded by pointing out the script for *Planet of the Apes* was adapted from Pierre Boulle’s novel and was not about anti-semitism. But Barr is still keen to talk her way out of it. “Americans know next to nothing about the Iran deal, the Obama administration and what they did to put Israel and the Jewish people in an existential crisis around the world,” she says.

Of the tweet itself, she adds: “I wished I hadn’t done it and I don’t take Ambien no more. It made me think in an impaired way and I’d also had a couple of beers.” Not everyone buys that excuse either. Shortly afterwards, Sanofi, the manufacturer of Ambien, issued a statement: “While all pharmaceutical treatments have side effects, racism is not a known side effect of any Sanofi medication.” Ouch.

Barr was raised in Salt Lake City, Utah, the only Jewish person at her Mormon school. It was a harsh upbringing. She has described being psychologically abused by her parents and molested by her father — though she later rescinded the paternal accusation. Aged 16, she was hit by a car. She spent eight months in hospital, requiring skin grafts and plastic surgery, while also suffering from insomnia, amnesia and auditory hallucinations. At 17, she got pregnant and gave the baby up for adoption. ➤➤➤



CONTOUR



SQUEEZED MIDDLE
Barr and John Goodman head the struggling Conner family in the first series of *Roseanne*, 1989

She has previously said of her home town: “You weren’t supposed to think there. First of all it was frowned upon to be a girl, and second of all to be a fat, dark-haired girl who had no waist, and third to be a loud-mouthed, short, fat, dark girl.” These days, she’s not fat, she has a waist, looks trim and has blonde hair. She’s looking young for 66. Her various surgeries have been well documented, but it’s not about that. I was expecting her to be harsh and combative, but she’s quite warm; there’s something ebullient in her spirit. Her two sons, Buck and Jake, work with her at the studio. Jake makes me a cup of coffee and complains that his mother has started smoking — he doesn’t like the smell.

Her entire career has been built on provocation. In the early 1970s she married Bill Pentland, a hotel clerk. They moved to Denver, lived in a trailer park and had three kids. As a child, she’d learnt that the only way to survive was to be tough and funny. She started performing at local comedy clubs, but times were tough and she resorted to prostitution to support her children. Her humour gained her a cult following, particularly with local feminists and lesbians. Eventually she got her break on *The Tonight Show*, where her jokes offended the audience until they gasped with laughter.

A few days after her divorce from Pentland in 1990, she married Tom Arnold. She describes that period as the worst time of her life and “a horrible dysfunctional relationship”. They posed for *Vanity Fair* naked while mud wrestling. Perhaps a metaphor. In 1995, she married Ben Thomas, had her youngest son, Buck, and then divorced in 2002. She has been with her current boyfriend, Johnny Argent, since 2003. They met through a writing competition she hosted on her website.

“He’s a good one,” she says. “He’s a hippie — vegetarian and all that. I am too mostly. He’s not crazy about me smoking,” she says, lighting up.

After the fallout from the tweet, Barr went back to her mother’s in Utah. “I had a complete nervous breakdown,” she says. She couldn’t get out of bed? “Right.” Or speak? “Right. I couldn’t think either. They gave me 48 hours to sign away the rights to my show or I’d be sued, because I ruined the season. They cancelled the show before one sponsor pulled out, which is unheard of. They wanted to get rid of me.”

It doesn’t take long for her to move on from attempting to justify the tweet to blaming her dismissal on a range of conspiracies. She believes that ABC and the wider

liberal media came down on her so forcefully because she is an outspoken Trump fan. Part of her love for him, she explains, is because he supports Israel, but she also thinks he’s a “genius”. “He’s a real deep thinker.” That’s not how he comes across, I say. “Well, that’s his Trump puppet. He’s got a Trump puppet and he’s somewhere else. I’ve met him several times. And don’t forget you can’t judge anyone for how they tweet on Twitter.” Indeed.

Her politics have always been provocative. In 2011, Barr spoke in support of protesters at Occupy Wall Street events, then ran for candidacy in the 2012 presidential election — first with the Green Party and later with the Peace and Freedom Party. She caused controversy along the way with her transphobic slurs against a rival nominee; she famously hated George W Bush and now — equally famously — loves Trump.

Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, a friend for 20 years, says: “Roseanne was perceived to be a pro-Trump person, and now we live in the Divided States of America, that automatically means she has to be a racist. Her show was ethnically and politically diverse. Half the people in it like Trump, half the people hate Trump, and that’s real America. Other sitcoms, they’re all liberal or they’re all conservative. This show had different political strands and they still cancelled it. ABC should have said, ‘You’ve done something that seems very offensive. We’re going to dock your pay for a month and donate it to an African-American educational charity.’ Which she did anyway. Instead, they moved to destroy her. Her show, it bears her name, it’s based on her life.”

For her part, Barr feels that despite being the most opinionated woman on TV, she is no longer entitled to some opinions. “My show had the most progressive storylines ever on TV,” she says. The series, for example, included a gender-fluid grandson who wore skirts, and a daughter who donated eggs for cash and acted as a surrogate. “If you say one positive thing about President Trump, the new progressives will destroy the most progressive show on TV. I knew it was going to happen. They tried to kill me the first day I went back to work.”

Barr alleges that it was a call from Michelle Obama to the president of the ABC network that resulted in her dismissal. “She said, ‘This tweet is unforgivable.’ That’s what I was told and I tend to believe it because the woman who fired me is now working with the Obamas at Netflix,” she says, referring to the Obamas having their own production deal for a show with the streaming service.

In the new series of *The Conners*, Roseanne’s character has died of an overdose by using other people’s prescriptions to get drugs. “They think because they killed me it’s OK to use me, use the memory of me. Still mention me. It’s still my show, but they stole it. They are going to do it to other comics. I’m just the first,” she says. ABC, she claims, told her: “If I do one more thing they don’t like, they’ll remove my reruns for ever. And I said, ‘Could you define what the one more thing is?’ and they won’t. It’s a total Stalinist censorship. I’m known for free speech and also bringing free speech into a family context with the conversations I had on my show. They don’t want none of that no more. They only want pliable servants. I’m not that. I’m not a slave.”

She continues: “They hate powerful women and they hate powerful, deplorable women and I do consider myself deplorable. Deplorable is the greatest thing that Hillary ever called us, because it empowered a revolution — we are deplorable to her kind. Of course, all working-class people are deplorable to her, because it was working-class people that elected Trump.”

“If you’re not f***able, it’s no good. I tried to sleep my way to the top but there were no takers”

It’s not only her support for Trump that she believes is problematic, she also buys into the idea of an anti-semitic, mainstream liberal conspiracy: “They wanted to take a Jew down. They wanted to take down a Zionist because they think that Zionists are the problem with everything in the world, and a lot of people in this country think like them.”

While she was having her nervous breakdown, Rabbi Boteach suggested they do a podcast together. “He said, ‘We can’t let them destroy you because you’re the strongest voice for American Jews in Israel.’ It woke me up. I had my fight back.”

Although Barr doesn’t sound particularly contrite when we speak, Boteach insists she has been. “She said that she wanted to engage in penance,” he says. “She made a mistake. She took full responsibility. She shouldn’t have written that tweet, but she was judged very harshly. Her whole life was dismantled. She said, ‘It breaks my heart that people think I’m racist, I’ve African-American children in my family.’ She was sobbing.”

Today, Barr is emphatic she has never been a racist. “Jew haters are calling Jews racist,” she says. “Let’s be real. Does racist mean [being] silenced by the left? They want to throw it around so much. Of course I’ve apologised, because this was an insensitive comment, but really its damage was in the way it was perceived. I can’t be responsible for the way people perceive things. People have always done this to me. They don’t get me. I have a lot of fans. First of all, the only people who called me in Hollywood were black people. White people in Hollywood don’t know about racism. Let them say, ‘Roseanne called black people monkeys.’ Let them do it if that’s the spin they want. I had a nervous breakdown because of how I was mentally abused. It was really freaky. They lined up to abuse me and kick me in the teeth.”

“I don’t just like to make people laugh. I like to piss them off and make them think too,” she continues. “I’m a provocateur. I knew they were trying to censor comics ever since Obama... It’s like the PC police. It’s about mind control. Everyone in America is under mind control from television except for my show — that’s why they got rid of it.”

Does she think she’ll ever have another show? “No, I’m totally done.”



GETTY, SPLASH, LANDMARK MEDIA

What about her political career? Controversies don’t seem to have done the incumbent of the White House much harm. Does she think she’ll ever be President Barr? “People are saying that too. Part of why I love Trump is that he took so many of my ideas.” She and the president are both in favour of gun control and America First. “Nobody owns good ideas. People are always stealing my ideas. Everything on television is some kind of theft from me. They don’t credit women my age here. If you’re not f***able, it’s no good. Not that I ever was. I’m one of the few women who’s made it on talent in Hollywood. I tried to sleep my way to the top, but there were no takers. I would have, but that wasn’t open to me.”

She is not a fan of the #MeToo movement. “My friend Mike Tyson the boxer [and convicted rapist] called it #YouToo. It’s a witch hunt.” How does she feel about women who claim to have been abused 20 years previously but said nothing then? “That’s because they’re hos. If you didn’t say no, just stayed there to get along, you’re a ho. Men are hos too. There’s a total ho mentality. What am I going to get for trading sexual favours? Not that I’ve got anything against hos. Not real hos.”

These days, she loves growing things at her home in Hawaii, cooking soups and selling them in the shop (carrot and ginger is a favourite). “My life is so peaceful. I’m not angry any more. I use my anger to write. I don’t let it bleed into my real life.”

She says becoming a grandmother has softened her. “I really do love children and young people. It opens up a whole new wrinkle in your brain and you have a longer view of the world. And they’re what you leave behind.” She is now reunited with the daughter she gave up for adoption and is very close to all her other offspring.

Yet despite claiming to be mellow, she appears to be drawn to other controversial figures. As well as Tyson, there’s Mel Gibson. “I was talking to [him] about a movie based on the Torah. I would love to write that with Mel. He’s a very good director.”

Surprisingly, she does not believe him to be anti-semitic, despite his drunken rant about “the Jews” on the Pacific Coast Highway in 2006. “He’s a very layered structure of a human being. He’s unstoppable.”

We talk about the effects that anti-depressants have had on her. “They dull your rage. And Prozac makes you numb, but sometimes you need that to get through the trauma. This trauma, I’ve faced it head-on, and I haven’t done that before. I didn’t face it alone. My mom took really good care of me for three months until I got back on my feet. We’ve been on good terms for about 20 years now, but this time she was just wonderful. I realise that’s what I wanted my whole life, but I never felt I got it.”

Was that because she has previously pushed people away? “Yeah. I left men unless I needed them and I needed to change that.”

She has already spent almost a year in purdah. The last time she radically offended, it took years. In 1990, during a nationally aired baseball game, she grabbed her crotch and spat during the playing of *The Star-Spangled Banner*. She was called “disgraceful” by George H W Bush, then the president. “That’s when I pissed off the right and now I’ve pissed off the left. It took 15 years, but they got over it.”

Did she ever want to be liked? A really long pause. “Well, yeah, I’m human but I didn’t want to be liked by the wrong people. I wanted to be liked by the right people and noticed by the wrong people.” ■

Roseanne and the Rabbi, a talk show about the Torah, will air daily on Jewish Life TV



LEADING MEN
Barr with her three former husbands. From top: Bill Pentland, Tom Arnold and Ben Thomas

GOOD AS HIS WORD
Barr met Johnny Argent, her “hippie” partner, through a writing competition on her website



PAYING PENANCE
Preparing for the discussion evening *Is America a Forgiving Nation?* in Beverly Hills, with her friend Rabbi Shmuley Boteach