

# Joke candidates

Boston comics explain how to 'do' Bay State presidential aspirants

BY JAMES V. HARRIGAN

**IT'S TOO EARLY** to predict how far Mitt Romney will go in his bid for the White House, but what does it say about the sixth major presidential candidate in three decades from the Bay State that he is so daunting to professional impressionists?

"He's tough," says Steve Sweeney, 58, widely considered the dean of Boston stand-up comedians. Sweeney is working on an impression of Illinois Sen. Barack Obama but has no intention of adding Romney to a repertoire that includes Michael Dukakis, Jesse Jackson, and Ted Kennedy. (The sticky part about doing Obama, he says, is that "it references a guy who nobody remembers. Think of David Brinkley; that's Obama's rhythm.")

"Certain people you'll never see impressions of" Sweeney says, because they have no easily caricatured physical features, and the former governor is one of them. "If you went to Hollywood, to central casting, and said 'Get me a presidential candidate,' Romney would beat out anyone. With that beautiful head of hair, he could walk right onto the set of *The West Wing*."

Another comedian reluctant to take on Romney is Weymouth native and WEEI-AM personality Graig Murphy, 24, whose stable of impressions includes Ted Kennedy, Christy Mihos, and Deval Patrick. "The more normal a voice is, the harder it is to do," he says. "Tune into the middle of an interview with Romney; it takes a while before you know who it is." (Actually, it probably only takes as long as it does for the former governor to work in an "Aw, shucks," "Gee whiz," or "Holy moley," interjections that roll from the tongue of no other politician.)

Seth Meyers, the 33-year-old New Hampshire native beginning his seventh season on NBC's *Saturday Night Live*, is confident that there are "a couple of good Mitt Romneys in the [show's] cast," but as of early September no one had been assigned the role.

Boston City Councilor John Tobin, a friend of Meyers's and founder of the Boston Comedy Festival, isn't so sure there is one. "Most comedians aren't known for their [good] looks. To impersonate Mitt Romney, you'd have to be 6 feet tall, wear a \$2,500

suit, and have perfect hair," says Tobin, who is admittedly not a Romney supporter. "That's the thing with impersonations. If they don't look like the person, it doesn't work for me." That's why he applauds Keenan Thompson, the only African-American in the *SNL* cast, who shed 60 pounds in order to look more like Obama.

**THE LAST PRESIDENTIAL** candidate from Massachusetts, US Sen. John Kerry, could also be described as a candidate out of central casting, but he seemed to give comedians more to hold onto. Meyers portrayed the Democratic nominee 15 times on *Saturday Night Live* between 2002 and 2006. "It was a little tricky," he says. "Gravitas is one of his main selling points, and gravitas is a hard thing to sort of blow up, but I found a way to do it."

One memorable example took place in a Florida hotel room, with Meyers-as-Kerry on the telephone ordering room service in a stilted stentorian voice: "So, in conclusion, let me restate my position. I would like to order one B.L.T. and one Caesar salad, with two place settings and a third napkin. I'm John Kerry, and I approved that order."

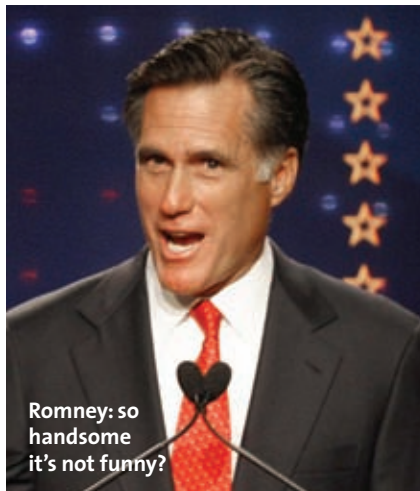
Meyers had fun playing the Massachusetts senator and says he was "crushed" by Kerry's loss. "I would love to say it was because I thought he would be better for the country," he says. "But on a really selfish level, I just wanted to get invited to the White House."

Meyers has since been promoted to head writer on *SNL* and will likely make only occasional appearances as dark horse candidates such as former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee. "Now," he says wistfully, "I fear the only way I'm going to get into the White House is on one of those tours."

Tobin suspects his friend's regrets are rooted more in the pecuniary. "It was a huge financial hit," he says. "Think of the corporate money he lost out on by Kerry not winning that race." Last year Meyers did Kerry at the Discus Dental Extravaganza in Las Vegas, which bills itself as "the largest corporate sponsored continuing education event in dentistry," but



Kerry: heavy on the gravitas



Romney: so handsome it's not funny?

lisp and hangdog expression. (In what may turn out to be an example of art imitating life, Franken is now running for the US Senate from Minnesota.)

But judging by the number of impressionists who do Ted Kennedy, the 1980 presidential candidate may be the easiest target of all. Between 1979 and 1997, five *Saturday Night Live* cast members (including Will Ferrell, Phil Hartman, and Bill Murray) did the senior senator a total of 14 times.

invitations like that aren't as plentiful as they were in 2004.

Meyers laughs when asked if other cast members competed with him to portray the junior senator during the 2004 primaries. "Nobody thought Kerry was the guy," he says. But after his win in the Iowa caucuses (and Howard Dean's infamous scream), "I had a feeling like my horse had come in."

The comedian met the candidate and his wife, Teresa, on several occasions and admits that Kerry "was absolutely the guy I wanted to win. But when you want to satirize somebody, you can't be perceived as outwardly campaigning for them." When Democratic Party leaders suggested that he appear on the same stage as the nominee, he says, "it became a little creepy."

But there were, apparently, no hard feelings. After the election, Meyers "ran into one of the Kerry girls" and "didn't get the feeling that I have to walk the other way if I see [her father] on the street."

**JON LOVITZ, WHO** portrayed Michael Dukakis during the 1988 presidential campaign, is another *SNL* cast member with nothing to fear from the subject of his impression. Lovitz—who during a debate skit with Dana Carvey as George H. W. Bush, famously uttered, "I can't believe I'm losing to this guy"—struck a chord with the Democratic nominee.

"They were my sentiments exactly," Dukakis told me when I interviewed him three years ago for the *Boston Globe*. "I didn't know how I was losing to that guy. I'm still having trouble figuring it out." He might not have won the election, Dukakis says, but NBC thought that the skit "was so terrific they ran it as part of their 25th anniversary of *Saturday Night Live*."

Four years later, another Greek-American from Massachusetts, Paul Tsongas, sought the presidency and was parodied on *SNL* by Al Franken, who emphasized the late senator's

Locally, John Tobin demurs when told that he does a pretty good Ted Kennedy himself. It's Sweeney, he insists, who "does it perfectly. I could listen to his Kennedy for hours."

Sweeney calls the senator "larger than life" and thinks there are two Ted Kennedys: "There's the quiet Ted, and then there's this bellowing guy, the senator you can't understand. He's got the oddest accent. When I lived in LA, they thought we all talked like that, but I don't know anyone who talks like that, even other Kennedys."

## Quimby is an 'over-the-top' take on Ted Kennedy.

You have to be into the Boston comedy scene to be familiar with Sweeney's take on the senior senator, but the Kennedy impression with which Americans may be most familiar is Dan Castellanata's "Mayor Joe Quimby" on *The Simpsons*.

Tobin calls Quimby "a total, over-the-top exaggeration" of Kennedy. Jeremy Leahy, a producer at WZLX who contributes his impressions of Ted Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, and the two presidents Bush to the *Karlsn & McKenzie* morning show, sees the mayor of the mythical Springfield as more of a "caricature" than an impression. And Murphy, who admits that he uses Castellanata's Quimby "as a reference point," is careful not to go too far. If you start doing a Ted Kennedy, he says, don't find yourself doing a Mayor Quimby instead.

The senator himself might have benefited from that advice. Or maybe it's just that some impressions become so well known that even the person being imitated starts to do them. Last summer, when 14 Springfields across the country produced 5-minute videos in a competition to host the premiere of *The Simpsons Movie*, Kennedy parodied the parody of himself and invited Mayor Quimby and the entire Simpson family to join him after the premiere for some "chow-dah." **CW**