'Drunk History' reboot introduces Frances Perkins to a new audience | Opinion

With funny deviations from history, the show shines a bright light on a bright,

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"Drunk History," an educational comedy TV series (based on the "Funny or Die" web series of the same name created by Derek Waters in 2007) recently re-debuted as a three-part web series on Comedy Central's YouTube channel.

The premise? Exactly as it sounds. An inebriated narrator humorously retells an event from history, while guest actors act out the story and lip sync the dialogue.

The result is a comedic, somewhat educational show that combines slurred speech and slapstick moments with elements of truth from history.

The reboot version recently **featured Maine's very own trailblazer Frances Perkins,** the first woman to hold a U.S. Cabinet position, played by actress Mae Whitman and narrated by actress and comedian Lisa Gilroy. As executive director of the Frances Perkins Center, an organization dedicated to shining a light on the enduring legacy of Frances Perkins (one that is often overlooked by history books), it was imperative, of course, that I watch it.

My takeaway? The complete silliness that is Gilroy's vodka-induced anecdotes, played out by a bumbling Franklin D. Roosevelt (Chris Parnell) and an overly zealous Perkins, educate a new audience in an unconventional way — but educates them nevertheless.

The webisode showcases how Perkins, when considering FDR's job offer for the position of U.S. secretary of labor, accepted only after the president agreed to her list of demands that were radical for the time, including: establishing a minimum wage ("You can't pay people with a piece of string cheese and a cotton ball anymore!" Gilroy narrates); Social Security ("Old people shouldn't be slogging and bogging and hogging all day long"); the abolition of child labor ("Are you out of your mind?!"); and a 40-hour work week ("Have you ever heard of: 'it's five-o'-clock somewhere?'").

Incredibly, as suggested in the skit, Perkins not only got this ambitious legislation drafted, but also passed and enacted, thus changing the course of history forever. Similarly, it offers insight into the "boys club" that was the U.S. Cabinet at the time, highlighting how Perkins was not welcomed by some of her male colleagues.

Indeed, as suggested in the Comedy Central webisode, there was an attempt to impeach Perkins. (It does not go into further detail about the matter, which was an attempt by a congressional investigative committee to punish her for refusing to deport a union leader who had been accused of being a communist by his opponents — charges that ultimately failed.)

In the skit's version of events, Perkins is depicted as bold and confident, and though she was — any woman to fulfill such an ambitious agenda at the time in a male-dominated field would have to be — she differs considerably from Whitman's and Gilroy's sassy portrayal ("I'm Frances Perkins. You might not have heard of me, but I don't [expletive] care!")

In truth, Perkins was careful to play by the "rules" of the time, to get what she wanted done. She avoided speaking unless spoken to during Cabinet meetings so as not to risk alienating her male colleagues, and adopted a "work uniform" of simple, dark clothes and a tricorn hat to appear serious but not threatening. This ultimately earned her the nickname "Ma Perkins," which she detested.

Despite these obvious and comedic deviations from history (and the many stories left untold), "Drunk History" shines a light on the life and ongoing legacy of Perkins, in a manner that demands viewers' attention. In an age when many people, especially younger people, may not unfortunately have the time or patience to read at length about Perkins, it offers a unique way to pique their interest.

My hope is that this sketch will serve as a stepping stone, an invitation to learn more about this remarkable woman who we honor at the Frances Perkins National Monument in Newcastle. I hope viewers will also discover the tragic event that set her tireless advocacy of workers' rights in motion: witnessing young women jump to their deaths during the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911. Or how, during World War II, she creatively leveraged her Labor Department position to create the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to aid those fleeing Nazi persecution.

You may not have heard of her until now, but I hope you'll take the time to learn more. She is, after all, as Gilroy ends in her monologue: "Frances Perrr-errr ('ruff 'ruff) – erkins."

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