

BETTY AND HELEN

By Matthew Surrence

For those of us in the Boomers and older group who couldn't tell Spidey from Speidi, a funny thing happened in the media forum this spring. Two gals pushing ninety have taken center stage.

First came the culmination of the successful Facebook campaign to get Betty White to host "Saturday Night Live." This outpouring of semi-ironic grandma chic resulted in White's instant-classic Dusty Muffin sketch, sure to take its place alongside – or maybe just beneath – Alec Baldwin's Schwetty Balls. This merely topped off a year of sparkling appearances, beginning with White's Edwina Haskell routine in *The Proposal* and including her mud-splashed tracksuit tackle in the Super Bowl Snickers commercial.

Snickers – could there be a more fitting product for Betty White to sell? In a career that began more than seventy years ago (her first professional job, on an experimental TV show, came in 1939, three months after graduating from Beverly Hills High School), she has induced countless snickers with her patented devilish angel routine that, in 1952, won White the first of her six Emmys, for her work on the sitcom "Life with Elizabeth." Her trademark character reached soufflé perfection in the sweet-tart Sue Ann Nivens, a fluffy, powdered-sugar-with-a-dash-of-vinegar concoction fresh from the magic bakery that was "The Mary Tyler Moore Show."

Whether chopping down Murray or buttering up Lou, Sue Ann never dropped her confectioner's grin, especially in that immortal moment when she kneed the oven door shut, dishing up an all-time physical comedy classic. Although in "The Golden Girls" White took and beautifully played the part of Rose, which could be considered the Georgette role, she has since reclaimed her taffeta-with-needles persona, sprinkled with the perfect comic timing that makes the flavors come together in the way we love.

Not a lot of love was shown last week for fellow octo-non-mom Helen Thomas. (Both Thomas and White are widows of fellow members of their professions, Thomas of AP White House correspondent Douglas Cornell, White of "Password" host Allen Ludden. Neither Thomas nor White had children; White is stepmother to Ludden's four children.)

Just about everybody has piled onto Thomas, a veteran, previously venerated reporter, for saying the Israelis should "get the hell out of Palestine." Even Amy Goodman of "Democracy Now!" was – rightly, in my view – moved to ask Thomas's defender, former Sen. James Abourezk, why, when she said the Israelis should go home, Thomas didn't say they should go home to their part of Israel, instead of to countries in Europe where Jews were exterminated.

It was funny on Friday's "Real Time with Bill Maher" when the host wandered off topic to observe that both Helen Thomas and Danny Thomas are of Lebanese descent, which led him to ponder the popularity of the name Thomas among Lebanese Americans – at least the two of whom Maher seems to be aware. But most comments were at the same level as the ubiquitous pictures of Thomas that make her look like the hag disguise of the wicked queen in *Snow White*.

Meryl Streep, future winner of the Nobel Prize for Acting (well there should be, just so she could win it!), said that one reason people disliked and disbelieved Lindy Chamberlain – the Australian woman whose baby disappeared and whom Streep played in *A Cry in the Dark* – was because the downward slant of Chamberlain’s eyebrows made her look sneaky. Thomas said something about Israel that could be construed as anti-Semitic! Look at how ugly she is! Of course we hate her!

Returning to the notion of wickedness, it seems that the actual iconic bad-woman costume the media has measured Thomas for is the pointy black hat and long black cloak of Elphaba, the Wicked Witch of the West in *Wicked*, the novel by Gregory Maguire and the musical by Stephen Schwartz (music and lyrics) and Winnie Holzman (book). Elphaba is green and ugly and misunderstood and oppressed as she fights against an authoritarian regime that tortures, performs evil medical experiments on, and kills the weak and defenseless, mostly animals. Hey – it’s Oz. Pure fantasy, right?

The yin to Elphaba’s yang is Glinda the Good, a role tailored for and originally embodied by the great musical-comedy star Kristin Chenoweth, a one-woman Fourth of July whose sugar-and-spice razzle-dazzle is very much in the style of Betty White, along with spectacular singing and dancing and a personality so sunny it would be blinding were it not for the leavening shade of narcissistic comedy and charm. Wouldn’t the two of them be wonderful, teaming up as mother and daughter or aunt and niece, maybe on “Glee,” if the current Facebook campaign to get White on that show is as successful as the “SNL” one?

As one of her songs goes, Glinda is “Popular,” and so is Betty White, because they are essentially blondes, and I’m not just talking hair color. We’re shallow, we human beings, and that’s what we like, maybe even a little too much – even if, or even because, like Glinda, they may like themselves a little too much, too. (Maybe they know something?)

Not Elphaba, who loves justice and others more than herself, and who is not willing to compromise her integrity. Right – she’s no fun, so naturally she’s hated, and like Thomas, made to go away.

I suppose we can take some comfort knowing that a person with the temerity to express an opinion about Israel to which some people took offense has been drummed out of the White House press corps with a rat-a-tat-tat that has resounded throughout the media. I’m sure the reporters who are still there, tossing their softballs in return for access, have never harbored any thought nor made any comment, on or off camera, to which any supporter of Israel might object.

Helen Thomas’s commitment to journalistic integrity – meaning doing the work we need done so we can be informed citizens – is so singular among the White House press corps that she was banished to the back row for presidential press conferences and ignored for years during the Bush administration (which, like making Nixon’s enemies list, should be considered a badge of honor). She is clearly a person so anathema to the American mainstream that she has said Pat Nixon was one of her favorite first ladies, she liked Gerald Ford, and she thought George H.W. Bush was nice.

But Thomas had to go because, like Elphaba, she doesn't sugarcoat her opposition to an unjust status quo, in this case, the Israeli oppression of Palestinians. Her age has been pointed to as the culprit, but it's not clear whether the problem is that she's so old she's out of it or so old she's unafraid to tell the truth. Either way, it doesn't play. To compound the error, Thomas doesn't fit the model mold of, say, the not-so-dewy Arianna Huffington, whose golden girl looks and Eva Gabor purr give her substantial pundit cover.

Betty White bubble-wraps her tiny stinger in Glinda-like fluff, and we love her for it. Helen Thomas unwraps ungainly, unvarnished, unsparing truths, like Elphaba, and we hate her for it.

I hope that in their nineties, Betty White is still tickling us like Glinda and Helen Thomas is still telling us like Elphaba – assuming that, in the manner of her verdant counterpart, she can manage to escape through a trap door and find a way to return.

It truly would be a happy ending if it turns out that, just like Elphaba, Helen Thomas doesn't really melt away after all.