

# The Half-Hour Blues

A veteran comedy writer bemoans the decline of the half-hour sitcom. **By Earl Pomerantz**

**T**hey talked about *The Jack Benny Show* and *Sergeant Bilko*. They talked about *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *The Andy Griffith Show*. They talked about *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *All in the Family*. They talked about *The Cosby Show*, *Cheers* and, more recently, *Seinfeld*. And then, on the issue of half-hour television comedies, they stopped talking.

Today, they talk about *American Idol*, *The Apprentice* and those two rich girls slumming in the country. In the current season, the number of half-hour comedies dropped by a third, and judging by ratings, there's little enthusiasm for the ones currently on the air, especially the newer ones. All of which raises this question. To quote the Fred Willard character from *A Mighty Wind*:

"Wha' hoppin'?"

Format extinction is nothing new for television. It comes with the territory. Half-hour dramas are long gone, as are the 90-minute versions. The western bit the dust. So did the Prime Time soap. Variety shows once ruled the airwaves – Ed Sullivan ran for two decades, *Laugh-in* dazzled for years. Not anymore. The thought then

arises, if these once-popular formats can be banished to videonic oblivion, why not the half-hour comedy? It's just another format, isn't it?

Maybe the sitcom should be banished. Maybe it ran out of steam. Maybe hotter formats left it looking irrelevant and old. Or maybe, as one executive was quoted as saying, today's writers just aren't funny. (How that happened, I have no idea.)

Once before, in the Eighties, the sitcom lay on its deathbed. Then *The Cosby Show* came along and it jumped up and danced around. Sitcom lovers rejoiced. But would the recovery be permanent? Or was it merely a temporary aberration, a comic genius forcing air into a punctured tire?

I know a little about *The Cosby Show* phenomenon. I was its first Executive Producer and experienced things from the inside. I heard the mighty Cos say, "I want people to watch our show and say, 'How did they get into our house?'" Cosby wanted his sitcom to be a mirror, where viewers could laugh – as the family gathered around the toilet for the funeral of pet goldfish – not merely at the Huxtables, but at themselves.

New life for the sitcom was provided by applying a strategy that Cosby, and

all great comedians, regularly employ in their stand-up routines. The essence of this strategy: observed reality. “Did you ever notice...?” Noticing is their starting point. The comedian then recounts what he’s noticed, and, identifying with its illuminating truth, the audience laughs, often explosively, in a communal response to situation’s absurdity. Call it the “I never thought of that but now that you mention it, you’re right!” response. As a result of focusing his well-honed powers of observation onto the reality of the middle class American family, *Cosby* delivered a hilarious “must-see” situation comedy. And saved the genre.

### **All successful comedy has an underlying unifier: it touches the audience on a human level.**

Is there only one way to be funny? Of course, not. There are many. Joke comedy, physical comedy, farce comedy, sex comedy, satirical comedy, silly comedy, race comedy (delivered, of course, by the race in question) and probably others. But all successful comedy has an underlying unifier: it touches the audience on a human level.

Okay. Give the audience situations it can identify with and the sitcom will revitalize and prosper. Fine. But what if you stop doing that? What happens when you abandon the “Did you ever notice...?” starting point in favor of a sitcomical starting point, where situations, behavior and dialogue mirror not reality but conventions found exclusively in sitcoms? In short, what if the reference point for your comedy becomes television instead of life?

How can this happen? Some writers

may follow this path out of habit, or because it’s easier – to write and to sell. Then there’s the Youth Factor. Young writers can deliver a show populated by characters their own age featuring age-specific situations, but when they venture beyond that, they have nothing from their experience on which to draw. It’s a dilemma. Old writers have at some point in their lives been young, but young writers have never been old. What’re ya gonna do?

One answer is to replace the gaps in your life experience with information gleaned from watching television. This strategy leads to the show’s characters behaving not as they would in everyday life but as the writer has observed them behaving in earlier half hours. From this, there develops a “sitcom reality,” where characters speak and behave as they would in sitcoms, but nowhere else.

A character viciously insults another character; the insulted character continues on without reacting. That’s sitcom reality. In life, the insulter is likely to receive a punch in the nose. There are dozens of examples of “sitcom reality” – the “setup, joke, setup, joke” writing construction, the obligatory punchline when a character leaves a room, the misunderstanding only someone truly troubled in the brain would ever misunderstand. Ultimately, the endless repetition of these counterfeit rhythms turns the genre into comedy Kabuki – the viewer, aware of these ritual maneuvers, sits there waiting for them to happen.

Some writers prefer a more truthful rendering, but since manufactured reality dominates the airwaves, efforts at “writing from life” are reacted to

as stilted and, somehow, wrong. This reaction is reminiscent of a scene from Steve Martin's *L.A. Story*. Steve's messing around in bed with Sarah Jessica Parker and he says to her, "Your breasts feel funny." To which Sarah Jessica Parker replies, "That's because they're real."

For these reasons and at least one other, half-hour comedy has developed hardening of the arteries. Freshness and surprises have surrendered to ritualized monotony. Understandably, the audience has turned away, choosing cable, where the mandate is "something different," and reality shows where resolutions are ostensibly less foreseeable. Even the network's hour shows offer more surprises, not to mention adult storytelling and challenging content. It's almost as if networks think that hour shows are for adults and comedies are for children.

Speaking of networks – and here comes my other reason – ever since they were legally allowed ownership of the shows they run, their "hands-on" participation in their development has been greater and more wide-ranging. It's not an exaggeration – since I was there and I counted them – that 17 executives – production company, studio and network – can be found participating in a "notes sessions" on a comedy pilot run-through. In these "notes sessions", the creator of the show submits to a gathering where these however-many-there-are executives offer hurriedly devised suggestions – often contradictory – for fixing the perceived problems in the script, only these people own the

show, so they're not really suggestions.

Not being writers, and not having given the script nearly the time and consideration the creator of the show has accorded it, executives' suggestions are often rudimentary and "by-the-book." They usually involve making characters more likable, the protagonist more proactive, and the clarification of the "story arc." The latter inevitably results in a story arc so clarifyingly familiar that any uniqueness the project may have once had – the quality that may have generated the network's enthusiasm in the first place – has been thoroughly eradicated.

There's no question that television executives are smart people. But it seems to me they're applying a not-so-smart strategy when facing the precipitous decline in half-hour viewership.



Bill Cosby and Phylicia Rashad, as his wife Clair, in *The Cosby Show*

Somewhere in their research, they must have discovered that an important reason audiences are abandoning half hours is because of their predictability; yet the bulk of their suggestions result in the shows they're developing becoming more predictable. Why would they do that? Why would they think that's helpful? And why would they overrule the show's creator when the most successful shows – *Cheers*, *Seinfeld*, *Everyone Loves Raymond* – have been successful primarily because of that creator's unique and single-minded vision? I'd be surprised to discover that any successful situation comedy was ever created by a committee. Especially a committee of non-writers. Smart people should be sensitive to that fact. Yet their actions suggest otherwise.

As a consequence of writer limitations – in many cases self-imposed – and questionable network direction, television has developed a conspiracy of worseness. Comedies

get worse by staying the same, and audiences, sensing “business as usual,” abandon them in droves. It doesn't have to be that way. Passionate writers with fresh ideas or fresh ways of presenting familiar ideas can regenerate the format and rescue it before it succumbs.

People like to laugh, just not at stuff they've already laughed at a few hundred times. Cable, with its relaxed parameters, offers comedy alternatives. But half hours are expensive, and networks remain the only venue that can afford to produce them. And they'll continue to try, visions of syndication windfalls will see to that. My hope is that, somehow, the collaborators in the process — creative and executive — will find a way to respect each other's contributions, honor the boundaries and work together, each at the top of his/her ability, to deliver what, in the final analysis, all of them so passionately desire:

A comedy worth talking about.

---

In addition to having served as executive producer of *The Cosby Show*, Earl Pomerantz is a television comedy writer whose credits include *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Cheers*. He has won two Emmy awards, a Writers' Guild award, a Humanitas Prize and a Cable Ace award.