

Mayhem and Disaster in Studio 6B

A TV veteran describes his first day on his first TV job, as a production manager for the Milton Berle show: He flooded the set! by Alvin Cooperman

I was in a state of shock. My decision to leave the Shuberts was finally sinking in. Lee and J.J. Shubert were the only people I had ever worked for. Since I was 16 years old. I was treated like a son. The fact that I worked seven days a week and 10 to 14 hours a day didn't bother me. I loved the theater. I was married, and had a three-year-old daughter. In 1951, having worked for 12 years, a salary of \$100 a week wasn't bad, but I felt trapped. Mr. Lee warned Rodgers and Hammerstein not to hire me. I "managed" the Booth Theater, but was not allowed to become a member of the manager's union and I needed to escape.

A friend, Edgar Rosenberg, told me I could get a job as a producer at NBC Television. He set up a meeting for me with Robert Sarnoff, and he hired me. I didn't expect it, but Sarnoff was impressed with my background in the theater.

When I told Mr. Lee he went berserk.

I had never seen him like this before. In his high shrill voice he screamed at me, calling me a "God damn idiot." He insisted that I stay, and nobody ever said "no" to him. All I could think of was being free to pursue my goal of producing and writing. My aunt Gladys who worked in the accounting department for the Shuberts, and who brought me to the company, was furious. How could I do it? John Shubert, J.J.'s son, talked to me. Mr. J.J. for whom I started as an office boy, and then became his assistant talked to me. But I had made up my mind. Mr. Lee then had one of his lawyers meet with me. Milton Weinberger, told me that if I left I'd be a damn fool, since I was in Mr. Lee's will for \$25,000.00 and that I was next in line to replace Elias Weinstock, head of the booking office.

I listened, but I left.

The following Monday as I headed to 30 Rockefeller Plaza to meet with Hugh Graham, head of production for the NBC television network, I felt like I



The author (left) with Milton Berle in 1951

had been kicked in the stomach. I didn't know a camera from a microphone. What if they fire me? I met Edgar on the sixth floor of the RCA Building and walked past the studios down the long hall to the end of it. On the left, there were the offices for the production managers. They were really cubicles. In a real office I met Hugh Graham. He was a big, affable Irishman, who was impressed that I had come into television from the theater. He didn't care that I didn't know a camera from a microphone.

NBC's number one rated show was *The Texaco Star Theater*, Tuesday night at 8:00 p.m. and starred the man who was known as Uncle Miltie, Milton

Berle. It was televised live from Studio 6B down the hall from the production managers' offices, in front of an audience of about 200 people. Berle, his manager Irving Grey, his agents, the William Morris Company, and Mike Kirk and the other ad agency guys for Texaco from Kudner, ran the show. NBC wanted someone to centralize the control of the production and keep the show on budget. It had been an impossible task, and I didn't know what I was in for when Graham cheerfully announced to me that I was being assigned to this show.

Fear overtook me as they lead me to a cubicle that would be my office. Edgar promised to show me the ropes. They

walked me to Studio 6B to see where they laughingly said 'the mayhem' took place every Tuesday night. It was small and empty, and I could not imagine what I was in for.

That first day was a blur. When I took the subway home to Flushing, I began to think about what I had done. What would I say to my parents? What would I say to Evelyn, my wife?

When I got home, I was greeted by Evelyn, and my parents who had come over from Brooklyn to share in the good news. Our neighbors and best friends Fred and Ray Feldman and their same-age-as-Karen son Phillip were down at our apartment to join in the congrats. When I told them that I had been assigned to supervise the Milton Berle Show, everybody jumped for joy. My father, who always exaggerated my little successes, announced that I was the producer of the Berle Show. I couldn't dissuade him. The \$200.00 a week thrilled my wife. My daughter Karen was awake, as she always seemed to be, joined in the celebration of she-knew-not-what. My sister called to congratulate me. My in-laws called to congratulate me.

Television was the thing. Tuesday night at eight o'clock was when all of the United States watched the *Texaco Star Theater*. If you had a television set it was Milton Berle's night to rule.

Their exhilaration did not melt the fear that consumed me. I was scheduled to meet Milton Berle on Sunday at the first rehearsal. I broke into a sweat as I realized that Sunday was two days before the actual live television program. How could it be done? One hour with a live orchestra and guest stars, and singing and dancing, and Uncle Miltie in his crazy makeup and costumes. How

could it be done? My father told me not to worry, I'd be a great producer.

"But Pop," I mumbled. "I'm not the producer. I'm the production manager, and I don't know anything about television."

"You'll be a great producer!" he said, ignoring me. "You'll be great!"

My mother, who instinctively realized my father's tendency to exaggerate, chimed in, "Don't worry, son. Everything will turn out for the best."

After one week of orientation at NBC with the production manager's group I was about to meet the man.

On Sunday at ten of three in the afternoon I got out of the subway at 42nd Street and walked along Broadway to the building where the Nola Rehearsal Studios were. Second floor. Marked "Berle Rehearsal in Studio One." I walked up and taking a deep breath went in. There were a lot of people in the room, in small groups, talking to each other. No one came over to introduce themselves to me as I stood motionless, looking around to see if I could find Milton. He wasn't there.

I inched my way towards the closest person and extended my hand, "Hello, I'm Alvin Cooperman."

"Hi, I'm Ben Grierfer." He said nicely. "I'm with William Morris. What do you do?"

"I'm the NBC production manager."

A woman standing with Ben Grierfer chimed in, "Oh, am I glad to meet you. I'm Roz Berle, Milton's sister. I'm the costume supervisor and I have to talk to you about 'money.' We need more money this season for Milton's costumes. They'll be more outrageous, if that's possible." She turned to the third person in the group and said, "This is

Sal Anthony, he's the costume designer. Isn't that right, Sal?"

Everybody was waiting for Milton and his writers. The show was to open the new season on Tuesday night and this was Sunday at three-fifteen and there was no script yet. Bob MacKichan, the set designer tried to calm my obvious concern when he told me that he had done the show for the last three years, and it was always like this.

"You'll get used to it, Al." He said. "If you don't, you'll get a heart attack and die, just to get out of doing it." He laughed.

"Alvin." I corrected him.

A tall, elegant gentleman walked over to me, having been whispered my name by Roz, and introduced himself. He was Arthur Knorr, the director. He was famous before Berle, having staged the shows at Radio City Music Hall.

"When you get a chance, I'd like to talk to you about some problems we had last season in Studio 6B." He then said, "Get to know everyone first. Milton will be here momentarily with the script for Tuesday. Then we'll talk."

"Okay." I said softly.

With a little more confidence I walked further into the room, introducing myself. I saw Sid Stone talking to two of the Texaco men.

Then the door slammed open and Milton Berle, followed by two short, plump guys, and a taller fat guy, came quickly across the Nola studio floor. He was blowing cigar smoke as he moved to a large table against the wall. "Okay folks. Next season starts right now."

The two short guys turned out to be Buddy Arnold and Hal Collins, the two key writers. They were each carrying a pile of scripts, which they plopped

on the table. Marco, the taller fat guy brought Milton a towel, which he threw around his neck. Along with the towel, Milton had a whistle on a chain around his neck. He wore a suede jacket. And the ever-present lit cigar in his mouth.

Milton puffed on his cigar. "I hope you're better than the idiot we had last season, kid."

Everybody in the room surged to the table, greeting Milton and grabbing a script. Ben Griefer looked back to me and motioned to come and get one. I did.

The silence in the room was broken with laughter as everyone read the script. I did too. How in the world are we going to get this on a stage by Tuesday? Not funny.

Finally Milton spoke.

"Who are you?" he asked, pointing to me.

"I'm Alvin Cooperman, the NBC production manager."

Milton puffed on his cigar, "I hope you're better than the idiot we had last season, kid."

I dissolved into the crowd of script-readers.

The next person he addressed was Ben. "Who can we get for the opening show, Ben? What stars, what acts?"

Ben replied immediately and firmly, "We've got The Beatrice Kraft Dancers. A wonderful act. That's set . . . if it's okay with you Milton?"

Milton blew a cigar smoke ring into the air and grinned, "They're okay, Ben. But let's talk about a singer or dancer with a name. We need a name. A big name. Who've you got?"

At this moment Bob McKichan tapped me on the shoulder, "I need to

talk to you. There's a slight problem in the script."

The whole script seemed to me to be a problem. A one hour show on the air next Tuesday!

Arthur Knorr was busy with Milton and Ben discussing casting, so Bob and I stepped outside the studio to talk.

Bob scratched his head, "We've got to look at the studio to find out how to handle the sketch. It's all about water."

I didn't know what he was talking about. I nodded.

"Let's tell Knorr we're going over to the studio now. I don't know how to design the shower stalls until we find out which side of the studio has the water outlets."

I nodded. I read the script and knew that the sketch was about Milton taking a shower and turning into a midget. I now learned that there was a production problem.

McKichan and I walked over to the RCA Building and took the elevator to the 6th floor. We entered the studio, which was empty. A couple of NBC pages were sitting in the audience section and left when they saw us. On the stage a lone electrician sat reading a newspaper.

"Hi Sam," Bob shouted. He then introduced me to Sam Adler, the studio's stagehand electrician.

Sam shouted back, "It's only Sunday. What're you doing here?"

We were now on the stage. Bob looked around. "I need to know where the water faucets are. We've got a water sketch."

"Water? You couldn't have water. There's no faucet." Sam pointed to the

floor. "Master control's on five."

My first show. Why is this happening? With all my theatrical experience I couldn't think of a solution. I didn't even understand the problem.

Another person then appeared from the stage entrance.

"Sorry, Bob." He said. "I was late to Nola and they said you were here."

"Jack, this is Alvin Cooperman, the new production manager. Alvin, this is Jack Miller the *Texaco Star*

Theater prop man."

He shook my hand.

"We've got a serious problem, Jack." Bob rubbed his chin. "There are no water facilities in the studio."

"Then how do we do the shower sketch?" Jack asked.

"What do you think, Alvin?" Bob asked.

"I don't know." I said softly.

Sam suggested we drop the sketch, to which McKichan roared with laughter. You don't change Milton's sketch. If there's a change, Milton will make it.

Jack Miller suddenly pumped his fist. "I've got it."

"Yeah?" Bob said.

"Here's what we do. Come with me." And as we left the studio, following Miller through the backstage entrance, he kept talking. "We get a hose and run it from the shower stalls that you design, Bob, out through the stage entrance. Down the hall past the pages' desk and Milton's dressing room. Take the hose past the elevator bank and around to the men's room." We followed Miller into the men's room. He continued, "We hook the hose up to the faucet, and voila! That's it."

You don't change Milton's sketch. If there's a change, Milton will make it.

"What's it?" I mumbled.

"Now you've got a hose hooked up to a faucet. The hose is also hooked up to the shower stalls. Got it?"

"How do we control the flow of water into the studio?" I asked.

"I stand in the hall outside the stage entrance. The stage manager, Sandy Wolin, is inside the studio at the stage entrance, looking out at me. I am controlling the flow of water. Sandy cues me according to the script. 'Water on,' and I let up on my grip of the hose. 'Water off,' and I tighten my grip on the hose. Simple."

It sure sounded simple. McKichan reflected for a moment, "Good idea, Jack. That's what we'll do. You're responsible for getting a hose that will run from the men's room to the stage through the stage entrance."

"No problem." Jack said.

No problem. I was going with the flow, and I had no idea what was happening to the show or to me.

"I've got a whole show to design." Bob said. "I better get going." He left me standing with Jack Miller and Sam Adler. "I'll go over the designs and floor plans with you tomorrow morning in your office, Al, so you can approve them."

"Alvin." I said softly, as McKichan dashed out towards the elevators.

It was after seven on Sunday. I left Jack and Sam and walked to my cubicle down the hall. I reread the script and did a breakdown on a yellow pad. I looked at a sample budget. Cameramen? Audio? TD? I decided to go home. I'll have Edgar walk me through this tomorrow.

I arrived at my cubicle Monday morning about seven. Nobody was there.

Where the hell was Edgar Rosenberg?

He got me into this mess. If he didn't plan to come in today why didn't he tell me? As I was excoriating Edgar in my mind, someone came into the cubicle and sat down at the next desk.

He was a wiry-looking man, and looked at least ten years older than me. He turned to me and introduced himself. He smoked. "I'm Ben Tomkins, you must be Alvin Cooperman. Hughie told me you were joining us. From the theater. I love the theater. Welcome."

"Nice to meet you, Ben." He blew smoke in my face. I coughed and he put his cigarette out in a large ashtray on his desk. "I need some help with this budget form."

He immediately pulled his chair over towards me, "What do you want to know?"

Everything. But I didn't say that. I said, "I need some help with cost estimates for the television technicians, which I have no experience with."

"Simple." He said, as he leaned to his desk, opened a drawer and pulled out a tech salary guide. "This will help you, Alvin, to begin with. Hughie should have given you a copy."

Hughie gave me nothing. Looking back I now realize that this was the earliest of days in the world of television, and everybody in it was struggling to get a handle on whatever area they were responsible for.

By the time I had figured out some of the estimates on the budget form, from what I knew was in the script and from guesswork about numbers of hours, Bob McKichan came rushing into my cubicle with an armful of floor plans and designs for the show.

He explained that he was going directly to the NBC carpenter shop on Tenth Avenue and 28th Street so that

the sets could be built and shipped to Studio 6B in the RCA Building tomorrow morning. He told me that the first set sent to the studio would be the sketch. That arrives at 5:00 a.m. so that Hank Frisch, the Lighting Director and his assistants could light it by 7:00 a.m. when Milton and his entourage arrived.

"What about the rest of show?" I asked.

"Everything else arrives whenever Milton finishes rehearsing the sketch. That usually is about noon. But don't worry about it. I've got it all under control. What I'm still concerned about is the hose from the men's room to the stage solution. I hope it works."

I thought, "This is my first show, it better work."

"Here's a set of drawings for you. I'll give you an estimate in a couple of hours. I'll call you from the shop." He dashed out. He popped back in. "Oh, and don't forget the miniature show opening. It's stored with Ken Jackson." He rushed out again. I couldn't blame him. This was Monday at about nine o'clock in the morning and tomorrow morning at this time Milton will be rehearsing the sketch. "Water on, water off," I thought. Will it work? It better, or its over for me.

I spent about an hour going over the floor plans and elevations so that I'd be able to understand the cost estimates that McKichan would call in. What I began to realize was that I was given no budget figure. It was about ten-thirty when I walked into Hugh Graham's office.

"How you doin', buddy?" Hughie greeted me.

"I've got some questions about the budget."

"Shoot." He said.

"What is it? The budget?"

"You don't have to worry about the above-the-line. Berle and the agency is responsible for that. All you have to concern yourself with is the below-the-line. Give me your estimates for camera, audio, sets, lighting, stagehands, technicians etcetera, etcetera, and I'll give you the add-on charge for the studio. It's simple. Edgar can walk you through it."

I responded quickly and angrily, "Edgar isn't in today, he worked on Saturday."

"Who told you that?"

"One of the secretaries."

"Bullshit. Edgar is supposed to be here, he's supposed to help you. Where the hell is he?"

"Phone call for you Alvin," Ben shouted.

It was McKichan with the estimates for sets and times for delivery to the RCA Building. I spent the rest of the day filling in estimate numbers on the printed budget form. Below-the-line only. New terminology. I wondered what the actual NBC budget figure, if any, was allotted to "above-the-line"? I wondered who approved the "above-the-line," which included cast, writers, director, AD's, stage managers, other "creative" disciplines, and Milton. Nobody, probably. Certainly "nobody" here at NBC, for fear of antagonizing their number one asset. I had the creeping feeling that was why they hired me. To control the above-the-line. Fat chance. I'm not going to last long here.

It was around five o'clock when I brought my estimates into Graham. He threw the papers into his in-box and said, "Come on, I'll buy you a drink at Hurley's."

"Don't you want to go over them?" I asked.

"What difference does it make? What you don't know is that NBC just made a thirty-year exclusive deal with Berle. You know what we're paying him?"

I knew from his expression that the amount would be unbelievable. "What?"

"The unbelievably huge sum of two-hundred thousand dollars a year!" He accented every word of the number.

"Wow."

He continued, "The show's on tomorrow and even if the estimates are high, we're going to pay them. When you get into it, you'll be able to catch this stuff on Sunday when you get the scripts."

"Yeah," I said. "And then what?"

He got up and put his jacket on. "Then YOU will talk to Milton and his gang of thieves." He laughed, "Come on, let's get a drink."

I shook my head. "I've got to go home and get some sleep. I have to be in the studio by five tomorrow morning."

"I forgot that." He laughed. "You'll get the hang of it."

He walked out ahead of me and left. I went to my desk and sat back. Ben was gone. I have to do this every week?

The following morning I went to my office down the hall from the studio to leave my briefcase there. On the way I ran into Ken Jackson, who was opening the door to the property room. He reminded me to have the miniature show opening picked up. It was about a quarter to five. Hank Frisch, whom I had met briefly on Sunday was already there. A coffee

urn and a tray of Danish and bagels looked inviting. I asked if I could partake, and Hank said, "Go to it."

His electricians arrived by five, as did Sam Adler. At about five-o-five, the set for the sketch was brought in by the stage crew, who began to set it up for Hank and his guys to light.

The studio was a box-like stage, with a raked section of seats for about 200 in the studio audience. There was 40 feet between the audience and the stage, where three RCA cameras silently lay in wait. On the stage-left section of the space between the audience and the stage was the area where Alan Roth and his "orchestra" would play. Stage right had a large glass window as part of the stage wall, behind which was the audio booth. Stage left is where Sam and a couple of electricians sat and followed the lighting cues given by Hank from the video booth on the seventh floor behind the audience. The stage had a low ceiling that just accommodated the pipes for hanging the lights, which were reached by ladders. The back wall was used for the old-fashioned roll-drops. The "proscenium," such as it was, had two curtains that opened and closed from the left and the right by stagehands and pullcords.

I drank some coffee and nibbled on a bagel for what seemed like an eternity. I had seen shows being lit, so I paid little attention to it. What concerned me was the set for the sketch. The two shower stalls each had basins to catch the water from the showerheads. The basins were about 18 inches deep. I wondered if that was deep enough. The roll drop was put up – a painting of the back wall of a large bathroom. The painted flats to make up the other two sides of the bathroom were quickly

lashed into place. Then the rest of the set pieces and props were put in place. Sink, toilet, etcetera.

I heard a shrill whistle which made everyone straighten up and look to the studio doors. It was Uncle Miltie, in his suede jacket, towel and cigar, followed by Marco, his brother Jack and Hal Collins, the sketch writer.

"Wake up, everybody, the King is here." Milton said modestly, as he walked right into the set for the sketch.

I stood next to him as he carefully examined the set and its contents.

"Where's Bob McKichan?" He asked me.

"He's at the shop supervising the rest of the sets."

"What do you think?" He asked me.

"Looks like a bathroom to me."

"Amateur night, kid. Amateur night. But I suppose it's too late to do anything about it."

It sure was too late. For me. I'm a dead duck, and this guy is nuttier than a fruitcake. "What's wrong?" I dared to ask.

He looked at me as if I were nuttier than a fruitcake, and walked away to look at the shower stalls.

Jack Miller had come in with what seemed like miles of green hose. He was hooking them up to the shower heads. Milton stopped him. "You'll do that later, we're not going to rehearse using the water. What are you, an idiot?"

Miller took the one hose off and without responding just started to roll it up. I thought that not rehearsing the "water on," "water off" part of the sketch was a bad idea. How would we know whether it worked or not?

When the cast for the sketch arrived, Milton starting rehearsing. Arthur Knorr and the TD walked around with their scripts and plotted the camera shots. At about ten o'clock the cameramen and boom operator arrived. The lighting continue. Knorr and Bob "Moose" Daniels, the TD, went up the audience stairs to the video booth.

Bob McKichan arrived about then. "How'd the hose bit work, Alvin?"

"We never rehearse with props. When we go on the air we all pray."

"Milton won't rehearse with the water."

"Then how do we know it will work?" He turned to Sandy Wolin, the stage manager. "You've got to rehearse with the hose hooked up so we'll know whether it'll work or not."

Sandy shrugged and looked at Berle as if to say, "Talk to him."

Jack Miller came over and whispered to McKichan.

McKichan whispered to me, "You've got to tell Arthur Knorr that the water sketch must be rehearsed. He'll talk to Milton."

I bounded up the stairs to the control room and confronted Arthur with the problem.

"Alvin, my boy," Arthur said putting his hand on my shoulder. "You will learn that we fly by the seat of our video pants with Milton. We never rehearse with props. When we go on the air we all pray. The audience always thinks that what went wrong was planned that way. Milton is a clever chap. Don't worry yet. This is only the first show."

Milton was always "on." Rehearsing for him was showing his guests and the dancers how much he knew about

everything. And he knew a lot about everything. He'd be especially lovey-dovey to the girls in the company. He wanted to be known as a "Casanova." He showed off to them all, and to his Mother Sandra, who sat pridefully in the second row of the empty audience section. She was always there during rehearsal, and during the show, and never said anything. Anything that I knew of. Occasionally during this first show Tuesday, Mike Kirk and Irving Grey would come in and look around and then walk out. Milton's girlfriend Ruth Cosgrove would come in late in the afternoon and sit with Milton's Mother.

I tried to absorb everything as the day flew swiftly by. At seven-thirty in the evening, several NBC pages let the audience in from the seventh floor next to the control room while Milton was still rehearsing the musical second-act, which was written by Buddy Arnold.

It was about ten minutes before eight and the audience was already seated when the second act musical number finished rehearsing. Jack Miller and a couple of stagehands then helped hook up the hose and drag it out the stage door, down the hall, around past the elevator bank and into the men's room where the other end was hooked up.

Jack reported to me and to Sandy Wolin that the hose was ready to work and that he would control "water on," "water off." I double-checked this with Sandy, who was overwhelmed with cues. He said he thought it would work. I wasn't too sure now.

I was then asked to go into Milton's dressing room, which looked like a scene from a Marx Brothers film. It was jammed with everyone connected with the program. Milton was putting on

lipstick and makeup while Sal Anthony and his sister helped him on with an outrageous Mardi Gras type of costume. Arthur Knorr told us calmly that the show was two minutes long. I nervously announced that it was now only three minutes to air. Milton said, putting the last touches of mascara on, "Cut the last dance number in the second act and we'll pick it up. Guaranteed."

Alan Roth said, "I got it." And pushed his way out to give the band members the note.

Sandy Wolin popped his head in. "Thirty seconds, folks."

Everybody scampered. Arthur and the video crew flew upstairs past the audience. The audio group went into their booth on stage right. I didn't know where to go as Milton flew out of his dressing room onto the stage behind the curtain. Sal Anthony motioned for me to join him. We went on to the stage and joined some stagehands with our backs hugging the stage-right wall, in front of the glass window. When the curtain opened we'd be safely hidden there.

I was looking at the small monitor that Milton was looking at. *The Texaco Star Theater* music accompanied a cardboard box-like miniature theater curtain going up with the help of a stagehand, and the screen dissolving to the actual stage curtain, in front of which the four Texaco men sang "We are the men from Texaco. . ."

I couldn't believe it. But then, they'd been doing it for several years. When they finished, Milton parted the curtains and let himself out onto what would be "the apron" in a theater. From behind the curtain we heard the audience screaming with laughter as Milton milked every line of his monologue.

Sandy was telling everyone that the sketch was next, following Sid Stone's Texaco pitch on the apron.

Milton finished his monologue and the applause of the audience came through the curtains. His sister Roz and Sal Anthony were ready to take off his monologue costume, and makeup, and to dress him for the sketch. Everything was happening so quickly I was mesmerized. None of this was rehearsed. Sandy was listening to Sid Stone and watching the monitor. He cued Milton and the midget actor, "Ten seconds." He then shouted down the back exit to Jack Miller who was standing there to be ready to follow the cues of 'water on,' 'water off'.

I gulped as the musical intro to the sketch played, and the curtain opened. I saw the center camera's red light go on as Roz and Sal and I and the stagehands plastered ourselves against the stage right wall. The sketch was on. I was concentrating so hard on whether the water-on, water-off would work that I didn't hear any of the dialogue. Only the roar of the audience.

And I prayed that Jack Miller would follow the cues.

Then it came. Milton in one shower for a long time, and the laugh being Milton turning into a midget, who was in the other stall.

I strained to see Sandy standing near the backstage exit and giving hand-cues to Jack Miller. "Water on." The water came on. He then cued Jack Miller "water off," and the water went off. These cues occurred about six times, and to my total delight and surprise they worked on cue. When the sketch was over the curtains closed and Milton, as he always did following the sketch, went out on to the apron to the

thunderous applause of the audience.

On the stage we all were horrified to see water pouring over the sides of the 18-inch basins that had held the water throughout the sketch, and onto the stage. I remembered Sam Adler's admonition about Master Control being on the floor below. Suppose we cut the Network off the air? I was helpless because the Beatrice Kraft Dancers were behind the curtain ready to be announced by Milton. Almost as one, we all grabbed newspapers and rags and backstage brooms and mops to try to wipe up the flooded stage.

The Kraft Dancers were a Siamese trio that slithered around as they danced, that was their style. So when the curtains opened they really slithered around, as we were all on camera in the background mopping up.

Arthur Knorr was right. The audience thought this was all part of Uncle Miltie's madness. The show was an enormous success.

When the show was over, we all met in Milton's dressing room.

Milton was furious. "How the fuck did we let the water spill all over the stage?" He screamed.

I knew I'd be fired, but Jack Miller confessed. "I dropped the hose when the sketch was over, Milton, and I guess we didn't figure on my having to run to the men's room to turn off the faucet."

Milton screamed at Bob McKichan. "How could you design such a disaster?"

He screamed at me. "This could be your last show, kid. You're from the theater. You should know how to work these props and effects." The blood rushed from my head. Last show?

He screamed at Arthur Knorr.

Knorr was cool. "Milton, I've always

told you that you must rehearse with props or special effects. Things like this will happen when you don't."

Milton then laughed knowingly, "At least the audience loved it."

Everybody went home. One by one they left. Milton and Ruth were almost the last to leave. That's when Jack Miller helped me mark the sets and props for the night crew. Red tags for stuff that was to be stored in Ken Jackson's bins. Green tags for those sets and props going back to the NBC shop, and yellow tags for props going back to vendors from whom we rented. We finished about eleven o'clock.

When I got home about twelve thirty, Evelyn had waited up for me and raved about the show. She told me that Ray and Fred and the Super who watched the show in our apartment loved it. Karen was running around. We were one of the few tenants in the building who had a television set. Evelyn wanted to know why I didn't get a screen credit. I said, "I work for NBC, not for the *Texaco Star Theater*." She didn't understand. I was just happy to still be employed.

Evelyn then asked me about the new job in television. "I've never seen you so tense as you've been this week."

"That's because I don't know what I'm doing, Evelyn."

"You only just started." She tried to help.

"I hope I didn't make a big mistake by jumping into television."

"You'll see. You'll see." She said.

My first week of the Milton Berle show was over and I had a lot to think about.

I had Wednesday off, but after sleeping like a drugged person till about

noon, I went into the office. There was a message on my desk to see Hugh Graham.

I walked into Hugh's office not knowing what to expect. I was prepared to take a bullet through the heart.

"Good show, Coop," Graham greeted me. "Loved the water all over the stage bit. Funny, funny, funny. Fortunately master control on the fifth floor wasn't affected."

He then said, "Jack Miller was fired this morning. Milton's manager Irving Grey called. It could've been you, Alvin, but Milton likes the idea of having someone from the theater on the show. He'll burn your ass every week, but you and he will get along real good. It'll take time, but you did good."

I was a celebrity in the office because the water disaster was what everyone was talking about. After all, I came from the theater.

After his auspicious beginning with Milton Berle, Alvin Cooperman became an award-winning television and theatrical producer, writer and director. His awards include the Emmy, Christopher and Peabody. In the past half-century he has been president of Madison Square Garden Productions, vice-president of special programs for NBC-TV and executive director of the Shubert Organization.