

Sitcoms? Wrong Name

A critic notes that situations are not funny: It's what the people in those situations say and do that make them funny. **By David Horowitz**

Here's the situation: a couple is lying in bed discussing a dream the man had. Pretty funny, huh?

Not really. Not unless it's Bob Hartley in the classic closing scene in *Newhart*, Bob Newhart's second series. Newhart closed the series by reuniting with his TV wife, Emily (Suzanne Pleshette) from his first series, *The Bob Newhart Show*, telling her about the dream he had about running an inn, the premise for the long-running (1982-90) Newhart series. The ending, which was suggested by Newhart's real-life wife, Virginia, was tabbed as #1 on the TV Land/TV Guide "100 Most Unexpected TV Moments" list, the



Tony Randall (left) with Jack Klugman
in *The Odd Couple*

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basis for a December 2005 special on the TV Land cable channel.

Here's another situation: a conveyor belt is moving fast, items scooting past a worker. Hilarious, right?

Not really. Not unless it's Lucy, trying valiantly to keep up with the candy zipping past her.

That's why there's no such thing as a situation comedy—a sitcom—because situations in and of themselves, are not funny. It's what the people in those situations say and do that's funny. Or not. It's the talent of the writers and actors that make it work. Robin Williams as Mork was a perfect fit, and it would be difficult to name someone else who could have pulled off that role that well.

How about this situation: a group of twenty-somethings are living and working in New York? Wow. Is that hysterical or what?

Not really. Not unless one of the characters is named *Seinfeld*. Or Chandler Bing (*Friends*).

The history of television is littered with the bodies of series whose situations are supposed to be the basis

For every mismatched pair of buddies, there's only one *Odd Couple*

for big laughs. For every mismatched pair of buddies, there's only one *Odd Couple*. Even the show that's credited for saving "sitcoms," *The Cosby Show*, had this classic setup for a comedy: a family. Duh.

Comedies are one of two things: funny or not funny. Most funny comedies succeed, although many don't, for a variety of reasons. Conversely, most unfunny comedies—pardon the oxymoron, it's a matter of taste, I know—don't.

Maybe this is all semantics, that the term "sitcom" is just handy shorthand for media writers, but that begs the question: what kind of "situation" is inherently funny, let alone not funny in and of itself?

How's this for a howler of a situation: an operating room. A killer situation, right? Well, in the case of the CBS series *M*A*S*H*, which ran for 251 episodes over 11 years (1972-1983), yes. However, in the case of *E.R.*, the comedy series that ran a whole 14 episodes on CBS in 1984-1985, no. So, some doctors are clearly more entertaining than others. At least George Clooney survived that experience to go to another *E.R.*, the NBC series on which he appeared in 106 episodes. Some of the other E/R cast members also went

on to do pretty well on the small screen: Mary McDonnell (*Battlestar Galactica*), Jason Alexander (*Seinfeld*), and Elliott Gould (*Friends*), among others.

For me, comedies—successful ones—should be called "witcoms," not sitcoms. A witcom (and I think I was the first to make this word up) is a comedy show that depends on the dialogue, style, look, interaction and appeal of the individual characters—and yes, their reactions to situations—to make us want to watch, and more, to care about them and the show, rather than the situational setup of the show. The show's appeal must come from the characters, what they say, what they do, and how they make us feel about them. A neurotic psychiatrist or two? Funny,



*Bob Newhart (left) with Tom Poston on
The Bob Newhart Show*

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if they're Niles and Frasier Crane (*Frasier*). Otherwise, not much.

By contrast, a "sitcom" depends on the situation to create the laughs. Almost everything is pegged to the

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situation. The characters either like it, hate it, can't do anything about it, don't do anything about it, do something about it and succeed, do something about it and fail, and so on. And while it's also difficult to do well, at least there's the convention—the "situation"—to fall back on if the words aren't working.

But, as noted, situations in and of themselves aren't funny, and even if there's a spark of originality in the situation, pretty soon a one-joke premise is bound to fall flat. It's not the throwing of the pie that's funny, it's the landing.

For instance, after seeing Jethro unable to deal with a ringing doorbell on *Beverly Hillbillies* one too many times (Hear that sound? I bet somebody'll be knocking on the door real soon), it's clear that any humor in THAT situation comes from Jethro being dumb as a bag of hammers, not from the doorbell being rung.

And that's what's at the bottom of my uneasy feeling about comedies based on situations, the literal basis of

"sitcoms." They all seem to pay off the gags the same way every week, because that's all they can do, and that's what the audience wants them to do. Sure, that familiarity is what breeds acceptance, and occasionally good ratings, and that's how we keep score.

Then there are the grownups who are either dumber than or disrespected by their smart-mouth kids. Setting aside the brickbats from the "let's not make fun of parents... ever" groups, there's the fact that it's rarely amusing. Check out the harried dad (Michael Rapaport) on Fox's *The War At Home* if you don't believe me. On the other hand, there's no arguing with the success of Bart Simpson in Fox's longtime hit *The Simpsons*. The epidemic of smart-



Bebe Neuwirth with Kelsey Grammer on *Frazier*

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aleck kids was enough to set off Bernie Mac as he was developing his Fox series, which debuted in 2001 and ran for five years.

As he told *Jet* magazine in a 2001 interview, "The network wanted to do a show with kids talking back,"

he explained. "I told them I'm from a black family, and that's unheard of. In the show, Vanessa has to grow up fast because her mother is on drugs. She has an attitude because she's suddenly in a strange city and she's frustrated. He lets her slide a bit. But, I told the writers he ain't going to let her keep talking to him like that. Something's going to have to give. The police will be out there sooner or later because he's going to slap the ---- out of her. You aren't going to be in a man's house talking to him like that. I know her mama's in rehab, but she's going

to be in the hospital too with a broken jaw if she keeps talking to him like that.”

Enough already with those pesky kids and their manufactured dialogue. I guess I just plain don't like to see people acting weird simply because the situation demands it. I'd rather have screwballs in my living room acting weird because they are weird.

I loved addled driver Reverend Jim and snarky dispatcher Louie DePalma in *Taxi*. I loved Bob's neighbors Larry, his brother Darryl and his other brother Darryl in *Newhart*. I loved Basil Fawly, owner of the delightfully zany hotel on *Fawly Towers*. I loved MTV's animated troublemakers *Beavis & Butthead*. And now I love Deputy Trudy Wiegel of *Reno 911* and, of course, I'm nuts for *The Office's* Dwight Schrutte, Assistant to the Manager of the Dunder- Mifflin paper company in Scranton.

In a business sense, television comedies are no laughing matter. Hip-hop isn't the only world where it's all about the Benjamins (hard cash to those of you not familiar with the slang term for a \$100 bill).

In the April 27/May 4 2007 issue of *Entertainment Weekly*, in her piece about *Ugly Betty*, Gillian Flynn wrote, “And while I'm pleased that our Betty is no longer the object of total ridicule that she was at the season's start, it's still not funny when she runs into walls... A comedy should make people laugh because of sharp dialogue and clever situations.”

Right. And a comedy should also, ideally in the minds of its producers, run for at least 100 episodes to hit the syndication jackpot. Whether it makes me laugh is irrelevant, as long as it makes enough people laugh for at least 100 half-hours.

The lack of creative premises is becoming even more critical for the networks. In his *New York Times* op-ed piece on May 14, *New York Sun* writer David Blum wrote, “Going forward, the real problem for the networks will be finding fresh ideas for comedies from the junk heap of pitches and pilots. Even a good *Friends* episode starts to wear thin after the 50th viewing, I happen to know. It speaks to the scarcity of the next-big-things that ABC actually produced a pilot based on a handful of 30-second Geico ‘Cavemen’ commercials, despite the lack of a coherent narrative, recognizable stars or even a logical concept.”

If Blum is right, some television comedy producers—in what can only be termed an alarming move—have now seemingly migrated from copying classic situations to eliminating them. Sigh.

In choosing comedies for the fall launch of the 2007-08 season, the networks had the usual outstanding array of concepts from which to choose. How to pick between these offerings, as outlined in *Television Week* (April 30, 2007)?

1 A comedy about two people who meet at a funeral and can't seem to stay away from each other

2 When a successful Wall Street guy dies and Hell is too full to accept him, he is assigned to “Hell on earth,” where he is stripped of all the luxuries he once enjoyed

3 A 10-year-old boy tries to navigate life in his high-achieving, overstressed family with the help of his crazy grandfather

4 A down-on-his-luck guy befriends a

man who uses a wheelchair and moves into his group home for the disabled

5 The absurd and surrealistic adventures of two high-powered soda salesmen on a never-ending business trip

6 Two brothers who differ politically are forced to live together after one suffers and accident that leaves him using a wheelchair

None of the above made the cut. Here are some of the situations in which the networks have placed their bets for the fall or midseason, taken from their websites.

ABC

Cavemen

Over the last hundred thousand years, mankind has evolved from primitive creatures to sophisticated beings, except for a small minority who unfortunately didn't evolve physically at all. Now three sophisticated cavemen (who already have a fan base from their popular GEICO commercials) are living in modern-day Atlanta, where they are at odds with contemporary society as they struggle to overcome their physical appearance and the accompanying stereotypes.



Cavemen stars *Bill English, Nick Kroll and Sam Huntington*

ABC/Bob D'Amico

Cashmere Mafia

From the creator and executive producer of *Sex and the City* and the writer of "Working Girl" comes a comedic drama focusing on four dynamic women, friends since their days at business school together, who support each other through rocky marriages, ridiculous dates, parenting challenges, professional rivalries and the hunt for the perfect apartment. Mixing the sass and wit of the film "The Devil Wears Prada" with insight of the novel *I Don't Know How She Does It*, this nuanced dramedy taps into the thoroughly modern, but eminently relatable dilemmas of today's working women who valiantly struggle to "have it all."

Miss Guided

You can run and you can hide but you can never escape... who you were in high school. Becky Freeley thought she had left her teenage self behind when she returned to her old school to work as the guidance counselor. But when her gorgeous former nemesis joins the faculty, Becky's cover is blown. From producer Ashton Kutcher and Emmy Award-winning director Todd Holland (*Malcolm in the Middle, The Larry Sanders Show*) comes a show about second chances.

NBC

Chuck

Chuck Bartowski is just your average computer-whiz-next-door. He spends his days working for Buy-More with his band of nerdy cohorts, longing to find a woman who can appreciate him. But when an old

friend, who happens to be a CIA agent, sends Chuck a mysterious encoded email, the world's greatest spy secrets are embedded into his brain.

He never asked to become the government's most powerful weapon, but the fate of the country suddenly lies in his unlikely hands. Hopefully, this won't take away from his video game time! International terrorist plots, sexy spies and cold pizza – it's all in a day's work for our trusty hero...Chuck.

CBS

The Big Bang Theory

Meet two brainiacs with a lot to learn. Leonard and Sheldon can tell their quarks from their quantum physics, but have no clue how women add up. Leave it to that pretty new neighbor, just off a messy breakup, to teach them a thing or two in *The Big Bang Theory*.

FOX

Back To You

In the '90s, the local TV news scene in Pittsburgh was dominated by one team: Chuck Darling (Kelsey Grammer) and Kelly Carr (Patricia Heaton). They had that elusive quality all news teams need: chemistry ... at least on-screen. Off-screen, Chuck was a bit of a self-centered womanizer, Kelly a bit of an uptight know-it-all. So when Chuck got the call to move up to a larger market,

no tears were shed.

But after an embarrassing on-air tirade ended up on the Internet, Chuck found himself on the downswing career-wise. He even questioned whether his lifestyle of chasing women and living in hotels was as exciting as it used to be. So when he got the call to return to Pittsburgh, to reunite with Kelly and try to take the newscast back to No. 1, it was an offer he couldn't refuse.

(There's also, you guessed it, "an overstressed news director, an affable, endlessly inappropriate sports anchor, and perennially put-upon field reporter who always seems to get left out in the snow.")

On the page, there's no way of telling which of these "situations" will lead to the next *Everybody Loves Raymond* or *Seinfeld*, but I didn't spot a cranky father-in-law—or a wheelchair—in the bunch.

And while any list of the worst sitcoms—situations designed for laughs—is by nature subjective, here's one person's nomination for the absolute number one position: the 1990 British series, *Heil Honey, I'm Home*. The situation? Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun find themselves living next door to a Jewish couple. Hilarity ensues.

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