

# What's So Funny?

A veteran television comedy writer reveals how he learned his trade. | **By Earl Pomerantz**

I never studied comedy formally, but I studied it informally all my life. From the earliest age, I noticed funny things. Like the waiter in a restaurant our family frequented. Because he brought out the orders on a tray balanced on his right shoulder, his head was permanently tilted to the left. Even without the tray, his head remained frozen at a forty-five degree angle. He'd be taking our order, and his head would be "over there." It's like he was thinking, "The tray'll be back; why bother straightening my head?" More likely, it was a work-related condition, like carpal tunnel, only in his neck. Whatever the reason, it was funny, and I caught it. These observational skills seemed to set me apart. It's like there was this comedy dog whistle and I was one of lucky ones who could hear it.

Sometimes my comedy sense got me in trouble. An example from high school: It's 1962; I'm in tenth grade history class. Our teacher was a dark-haired fellow who came close to having an actor's good looks but not close enough, so he wound up a teacher. Mr. Not-Quite-An-Actor was a very serious fellow. And we're talking about my hometown of Toronto, in Canada, where everybody's serious, so "very serious" means extremely serious.

Our class is discussing the population problem and how in some countries, like

China, there are too many people and in other countries, like Canada, there are too few. A student suggests, as a solution, transporting ten million Chinese people to Canada. To that, Mr. Not-Quite-An-Actor replies, "If we brought ten million Chinese people to Canada, it would change the complexion of the entire country."

He says that seriously. For him, "change the complexion" refers to the "essential nature" of the country. I hear it the other way, and laugh real loud. An explosive, honking "Ha!" No other person in the class laughs. Next thing I know, I'm on my way to the principal's office.

Real life was a goldmine for observed comedy. But the greatest influence on me, by far, was television. Mine was the first television generation; "the box" was the Baby Boomers' iPod. There were other influences, of course. Early radio offered lessons in timing – the silence-filled pauses in radio comedies were often the shows' funniest moments. In movies, Danny Kaye's "The Court Jester" left me awestruck by its ability to draw laughter from a wide range of comic techniques – verbal comedy, physical comedy, hilarious plot twists and tongue-twisty songs. Herb Gardner's Broadway comedy of social rebellion, "A Thousand Clowns," memorably proved you could

be smart and funny at the same time. Although I was not a great reader, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, with its pitch-perfect reproduction of wartime insanity, and the dark surreality in the stories of Bruce Jay Friedman demonstrated the hilarious possibilities of comedy on the edge. But, with a grateful acknowledgement to other influences, hands down, television was the greatest teacher of all.

(Parenthetically—hence, the brackets—I remember having a “Wizard of Oz”-like experience when I went from watching this Saturday night comedy about a single woman who's gonna make it after all to becoming a member of the writing staff of that very same show. When that occurred it felt like, after years of television watching, I had suddenly gotten up, stepped through the screen, and was now happily situated on the other side.)

## **The favored comedies of my youth molded my taste, style and judgment for the rest of my creative life.**

As a kid, I watched everything; admittedly “everything” was a lot less than it is today. There were three American channels, plus a Canadian channel, which generally featured the news, French-Canadian sitcoms and documentaries on the migratory habits of the Canada goose, so I didn't watch much of that. Though I was an indiscriminating viewer — primarily because I loved television but also because it was usually too cold to go outside — I still had my favorites. Those were the comedies. It would be no overstatement to assert that the favored comedies of my youth molded my taste, style and judgment for the rest of my creative life.

As if more evidence of my televising

geekdom were required, I retain in my possession a collection of TV Guide preview issues going back to 1957, all of them in sequence, except I'm missing four. That's still a lot of issues. I will draw on their listings to contrast examples of the comedies I admired with others I watched but enjoyed less. My preference has always been for comedy in which believable characters responded to identifiable situations rather than shows featuring contrived storylines and a barrage of jokes. Joke writing is not my forte. I can write them when I'm in a room full of joke writers and the testosterone's flowing, but it's not my natural way to write.

I have, on occasion, been criticized and penalized financially for not writing jokes. Unfair, yet understandable. Jokes are the meat and potatoes of comedy;

it's what most people, including professionals, consider comedy to be. Some writers have shown, however, that you can get laughs from

non-joke-style comedy. The style may be more dangerous, because it takes a little more work from the audience than jokes, which simply rain down on you, but the rewards can be huge. It's also, at least to me, more gratifying, because the audience, with their participation, is in there with you.

In the fifties, my favorite comedy was *Sergeant Bilko*. The show had different titles but that's how I remember it. *Bilko* was centered on a motor-pool platoon headed by Lifer (portrayed by Phil Silvers) who spent his time ignoring army work in favor of coming up with a never-ending series of “get rich quick” schemes, none of which ultimately succeeded. The stories were deeply rooted in the characters of

the show, and even when the scriptwriters “went big,” meaning beyond the realm of everyday experience, as in the episode where, through an administrative snafu, they inducted a monkey into the army, the issue was handled with such step-by-step credibility you could believe – and this is what made it so funny – that this incredible situation

could actually occur. Around the same time *Bilko* was on the air, another offering was *The Milton Berle Show*, where a man dressed in outrageous costumes and was

weekly whacked in the face with a giant power puff. Both shows were enormously popular, but only *Bilko* hit the spot.

The sixties brought *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, a true-to-life comedy showing us the domestic and working world of the head writer on a network variety show. The series pilot revolved around the mother’s concern that her son was ill, her evidence being that the boy refused to eat his cupcake. The story resonated; it felt identifiably real, though being comedy people, the writers hedged their bets by injecting the funny word “cupcake”, which has two “k” sounds in it and everyone knows “k” words are funny. It wasn’t he “refused to eat his hot dog.” In the show’s work arena, though a lot of corny jokes were flying around – totally appropriate to the comedy-writing venue – the stories always felt as if they’d been taken from a writer’s actual experience. In one story, the head writer is retained to develop a nightclub act for the talent-deprived nephew of a dangerous gangster. The episode was hilarious, but more importantly, you got the powerful feeling

that at some point in history, a similar situation had actually taken place. While *The Dick Van Dyke Show* was on the air, the competition included a talking horse, a Martian, a show about identical cousins, and the prime-time adventures of a dangerously near-sighted cartoon character named Mr. McGoo.

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The seventies offered the aforementioned single woman who’s gonna make it after all, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, the program I stepped through the television screen to write for. By this time, most comedies were rooted in some level of reality, but the “Mary” show’s roots ran deeper, while others relied on “break-out” characters and calculating catch phrases like “Dynamite!” The problems of the single working woman and her neurotic pal Rhoda, played by Valerie Harper, felt achingly real and again, to me, funnier because of it. When considering some fattening item, Rhoda wonders whether to eat it or “apply it directed to my thighs,” a substantial segment of the audience knew exactly what she meant. You never heard a joke like that before.

Throughout the decades of my unofficial comedy apprenticeship, my passion, as mentioned, remained for honest comedy and I was indelibly influenced by the shows that displayed it. But if any program inspired me to consider a career in comedy, it was a show

that for 23 years delivered to my attention three or four comedians a week, *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

For me, *The Ed Sullivan Show* was “school.” Ironically, the show also meant school, because it was broadcast Sunday nights and, though you were caught up in the entertainment, you could feel Monday approaching like a runaway train. There was no avoiding the inevitable. It was *Ed Sullivan*, bedtime, school.

For my family, Sundays at eight, there was nothing else on the air. I heard about *The Steve Allen Show*, I heard about *Maverick*—the competition at the time—but I never saw them. In our house, there were two choices. You could watch Ed Sullivan or you could go to bed. Such were the days of the one-television household.

In its day, *The Ed Sullivan Show* was by far the most important entertainment program on television. Getting on meant not only access to a vast national audience, but the ultimate seal of approval. “Doing” *Sullivan* meant you were made. You also had it made. Advertisements for local appearances trumpeted, “Direct from *The Ed Sullivan Show*,” even when you hadn’t appeared on it for years.

*Ed Sullivan* was a variety show in the truest sense of the word. It presented every type of act imaginable. Singers, from Elvis to opera, dancers, from tap to ballet, scenes from current Broadway shows, magicians, jugglers, acrobats, bicyclists, plate spinners, animal acts, the greatest performers from around the world. And, of course, my favorites, the people I’d sit patiently waiting for, the comedians.

Ed Sullivan, who introduced the acts, was not funny at all. In fact, he was kind of scary. Sullivan was a syndicated entertainment columnist and had no

performing ability whatsoever. He did have an inordinately stiff body, whose parts, including his stone-chiseled face, seemed incapable of making a natural, non-jerky movement. But Sullivan was the man who approved the acts. At this, he was an expert.

As with all the acts, the selected comedians were the best around. So every Sunday night, the audience was treated to performances by the funniest comedians from every conceivable genre. They were magnificent. Especially to a student of comedy.

Where to start. The older comedians. The incongruous Englishman, “Mr. Pastry,” whose purportedly solemn “Passing-Out Ceremony” involved this dignified fellow, in white tie and tails, leaping manically around on chairs. There was the homespun Sam Levenson who told stories about “Mama.” When he dropped a cooked chicken on the floor in front of “the company,” she instructed him to return the dropped chicken to the kitchen and come back with the “other” chicken. There were the specifically ethnic comedians, like the shiny-bald Myron Cohen, who told the story of Mrs. Shapiro and Mrs. Schwartz: when Mrs. Schwartz braggingly proclaims, “I’ve been to Europe three times,” to which Mrs. Shapiro coolly replies, “That’s nothing, I was born there.” There was the Danish comedian Victor Borge who admits, “When I first came to this country, there was this point after I’d been here a short time when I’d forgotten all my Danish but hadn’t learned any English.” And there was the yodel-voiced Pat Buttram who reported about a couple, “He was so bow-legged and she was so knock-kneed that when they walked down the street they spelled “Ox.”

Later, a new crop of comedians arrived.

Educated people. People who knew about Schopenhauer. People who had been in psychoanalysis. People who'd engaged in sex, or at least badly wanted to. The new comedy centered on relationships, questioning our institutions, the slights and irritations of everyday life. I can't relate their material as easily, because their performances were more extended scenes than individual jokes. A couple, played by Ann Meara, Irish, and Jerry Stiller, Jewish, meet and discover they grew up on the same street, but due to their differing ethnic affiliations, they have no common experiences whatsoever. Shelly Berman, playing an increasingly harried caller wishing to report a man about to jump from a building across the street from his office, is repeatedly placed on "Hold." Bob Newhart portrayed a skeptical recipient of a phone call from Sir Walter Raleigh explaining how to use his exciting new discovery: tobacco. (Holding an imaginary phone to his ear) "You shred it up...and put it in a piece of paper...roll it up...don't tell me, Walt,

don't tell me, you stick it in your ear, right?"

I can't possibly do justice to the hundreds of wonderful comedians who taught and entertained me those Sunday nights: the Jackie Masons; the Jackie Vernons; the Jackie Kahanes—and those are just the Jackies. My initial viewing of Abbott and Costello's "Who's On First" nearly caused my mother to call the paramedics because my uncontrollable laughter had made it scarily difficult for me to breathe. I was dying, but I didn't care. It was the funniest thing I'd ever seen.

Could I have been thinking, "Wouldn't it be great if I could make people laugh like that?" Or maybe just one person. A colleague of mine once said he went into comedy because he wanted to make his mother laugh, and to me, this is hardly an alien concept. My mother had a pretty tough life. Lightening her load, that would have been great.

I knew she liked comedy. I saw her watching *Ed Sullivan*.

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A frequent contributor to *Television Quarterly*, Earl Pomerantz was executive producer of *The Cosby Show*. His comedy-writing 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.