The Five-Hour Sitcom Episode

Every summer for the past few years, my youngest brother Cliff has fled the heat of New York City for a week to frolic in the cooler temperatures of Los Angeles, where he sublets an apartment in Century City. In both locales, he resides in a towering, modern apartment building with a panoramic view of the metropolis below. But rather than merge with a current of pedestrians in mid-town Manhattan when he steps outside, in L.A. he encounters virtually no one as he walks from the lobby of his Century City rental to the building's detached, squat parking garage, where he beeps open his rented luxury convertible and heads to Santa Monica for a run along the beach, or to Beverly Hills for breakfast at Nate 'N Al's, a famed hangout for actors and comedians old enough to have worked the Borscht Belt.

Cliff's taste in restaurants matches his taste in television shows; he prefers 60s and 70s sitcoms to almost anything else, although he is open to new offerings. And he has had a lifelong fascination with television stars and production. If life were fair, he would have become a producer, director, or writer for a major TV studio; instead, he makes a decent living in the cell tower business, while settling for occasional tickets to a TV show with a studio audience. Which is one of the things Cliff enjoys most when he's in Los Angeles. So, when I flew down there to spend a couple days with him in August 2016, he scored a couple tickets for us to attend the filming of a new CBS sitcom, *Man With a Plan*, starring Matt LeBlanc, who played Joey on *Friends*, the wildly successful NBC sitcom of the 1990s.

The show was then in its first season, and we were going to be in the audience for the third episode, scheduled to air two months later. We were told to arrive at the Studio City studio at 4 p.m. I figured we would get out of

there in time to have dinner before most restaurants closed. But it would be 9 p.m. before we were released—a five-hour period during which we could have binge-watched the entire previous season if there had been a previous season. Each of the ten scenes required at least two takes (some three or four), and after about two hours, I felt as if I were suffering from Stockholm syndrome, sympathizing with my captors whose mission was to make this show a success, and I needed to do my part.

Most of that time we were focused not by the show itself, but on a "Warmup," a nameless stand-up comedian who stood at the front of the audience section and whose job it was to keep the laughs coming when the cameras were rolling. Wielding a long-stemmed microphone like a magician's wand, he was in his 30s, casually dressed, and bore some resemblance to Jason Alexander, who played George on *Seinfeld*. Funny and fast on his feet, he knew how to work a crowd. And he was buzzing with energy as if he had been drinking Red Bull since 9 a.m. His job was not so much to keep us entertained as to ensure that we laughed loudly at each joke in the script. About that he was not subtle. He explained that a live audience was crucial to the show's success, that the actors would feed off our reactions, and that if it seemed that a line was intended to be funny, it was our duty to laugh. So, there it was, the true price of admission—pretending to love the show even if it stunk. I was determined not to go along; my laugh is sacred and cannot be bought. And so, I waited, rather skeptically and grumpily, to be entertained.

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For a person who grew up on 1970s sitcoms, attending this taping was both nostalgic and eye-opening. Nostalgic because, from what I know about modern-day television, this new show seemed to be a throwback to the

traditional family sitcoms of my youth: mother and father (both white, attractive, and faithful) living in a spacious and well-furnished suburban home, trying to juggle the demands of their jobs while raising three young kids with the goal of ensuring their happiness and success. Eye-opening because it threw into sharp focus how the traditional sitcom has been replaced by cable comedies like *Veep*, a frenetically paced political satire laced with profanity and containing multiple subplots.

I am largely indifferent to the world of Hollywood. But for Cliff, the visit to the CBS Studios in Studios City, known to those in show business as the Radford Lot, was like a pilgrimage to Mecca. Although he is too young to have seen shows from the 60s and 70s when they first aired, Cliff is infatuated with programs like *Gilligan's Island*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, *All in the Family*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and *Rhoda*. In fact, if they had conventions for MTM fans like they do for Trekkies, Cliff would be able to re-create entire scenes from memory and know exactly when Mary Richards would toss her hat in the air during the opening credits.

When we first arrived at the studio, we were met by a pleasant but humorless woman with a clipboard. We had offered to walk to Stage 14, but Ms. Clipboard sternly advised that we couldn't just "wander" the lot on our own. Cliff, who knew more about the studio's history than anyone we would encounter for the next five hours, readily understood the need for an escort, informing his naïve companion that the studio does not give tours to the general public. But he had read about the landmarks on the lot, including a large plaque on Stage 2 for the one-time studio owner, Mary Tyler Moore, and the building called "The Lagoon," built on the sunken plot of land where they filmed *Gilligan's Island*. So, he served as my tour guide as we were driven to

our destination in a golf cart by a teenager in a bright red blazer, who seemed to be enjoying his job as much as Fred Sanford enjoyed running a junk yard.

We were among the first to be seated in the studio audience, which eventually numbered about 200. There were seven rows that stretched in front of six separate sets (two additional sets were hidden from our view). These sets were initially obscured by a series of tall black curtains hanging from movable racks. Overhead was a row of four large monitors, which would depict each shot as it would be seen by a television audience, through the lens of just one of the four moveable studio cameras. Behind us was a row of glass-enclosed sound booths, where other crew members were playing with their panels of dials and levers. The front row was reserved for VIPS, including a young boy named Henry who received several rounds of applause for being the older brother of one of the child actors in the show. Not being VIPs, we were directed to a couple of seats in the back row.

Before taping began, we were directed to the television monitors to watch the "pilot" episode of the show. This was a way of introducing us to the "situation" of the situation comedy. In *Man With a Plan*, LeBlanc plays Adam Burns, a building contractor with a pickup truck and a desire to be seen by his kids as "Mr. Fun Guy." Liza Snyder plays Andi Burns, who had been at home raising her three young children—daughters Kate and Emme, who appear to be 10 and 5, respectively, and a son, Teddy, who appears to be about 8. Andi is now going back to work full-time as a laboratory technician. Since she is chained to her work station eight hours a day, and Adam has a flexible schedule, he is the parent who must chauffer the kids and take the lead in overseeing their school and after-school activities. Along with these responsibilities, he must now become the main disciplinarian, which, of course, complicates his preferred parental role.

One of Adam's first challenges is as a kindergarten classroom parent, for which he has volunteered under duress; the teacher, Ms. Rodriguez, had threatened to not teach daughter Emme how to read if he turns her down. Also in the cast are two parents of Emmie's classmates: Lowell, a meek stay-at-home dad who looks to Adam as a role model of masculinity; and Marie, a stay-at-home mom whose forte is dodging classroom responsibilities in a way that Adam clearly envies. By Episode 3, which were about to see, another character has been introduced: Adam's older brother Don (Kevin Nealon of Saturday Night Live fame) who is in business with Adam, and, as a parent of teenage kids, has accumulated quite a bit of "fool-me-once" experience.

After the pilot was shown, the black curtains were wheeled away to reveal six sets: the Burns's living room; their attached kitchen; their backyard; a pickup truck; a kindergarten classroom; and an adjacent school hallway. Scene 1 will feature Adam in the living room blowing up several balloons. As Andi comes downstairs in her robe to find out why he is not yet in bed, Adam laments that he needs to inflate 100 balloons to fulfill his classroom parent duties. The scene reaches its peak when Andi retrieves a hand air pump and asks Adam why he hasn't been using it; Adam says he thought it was some type of a feminine product. (Big laugh.) Although the scene looks flawless to me, director James Burrows is not satisfied, so there will be another run-through. (Burrows is a sitcom veteran, having directed many episodes of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Rhoda*, *Laverne and Shirley*, and the *Bob Newhart Show*; he also co-created *Cheers*. Cliff immediately recognized him and nearly jumped out of his seat to get an autograph.)

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In the periods between filming of the scenes, Warmup would work the crowd. He was from the Don Rickles School of Comedy; he would scan the audience for people whose appearance might suggest a stereotype, and he'd be off to the races. One of his first targets is an older fellow named Dave (his sweater as well as his grey hair somehow marked him for ridicule). Dave lets on that he had come with his wife, who, he said, was sitting directly behind him. This provides an opening for Warmup to comment on the inevitable consequences of long-term marriage. (Laughter, mostly from the younger audience members.) Later in the evening, Warmup prompts some audience members to leave their seats and join him along the railing separating the audience from the stage. Once in his force field, they are cajoled into asking another audience member (selected by Warmup) for a date. Or they agree to take the mic and lip sync a Taylor Swift or Katy Perry song. Those who came as a group are persuaded to line up along the railing and line dance to kitschy songs like Cha-Cha Slide and YMCA.

As is often the case, I am struck by how many people are willing—even eager—to appear in the limelight in front of a group of strangers. Whenever I am in any kind of audience and it becomes apparent that some of us will be asked to participate, I immediately wish to disappear. I begin to think of clever excuses to offer if I am called on, while adjusting my facial expression and body language to send the message, "No Soliciting." Now, sitting with my arms crossed, I notice a few others in the audience with similar posture. But most are receptive, and it doesn't take much to get them to rise from their seats, jostle across the knees of their row-mates, and move quickly down to the railing.

This is all part of the psychological game of keeping us primed to laugh every time a scene is repeated. The dialogue is virtually the same each time,

but occasionally a joke is tweaked or a new one substituted in. Sometimes the new punchline is funnier than the original one; sometimes not. It is as if the writers could not decide and were willing to go with the one that received the biggest laugh. But more often than not, the jokes are not altered at all. To my surprise, I find myself laughing as hard at the good jokes the second time around. Have I succumbed to peer pressure? Or am I hoping that a louder laugh track will mean no more re-takes of the scene?

The presence of the monitors and the force of habit make it difficult to keep one's eyes on the set. (For some scenes, one has to rely entirely on the monitors because some sets are to the side of risers, hidden from view.) But the theater view is far more interesting that the screen view because you can see the actors interacting at the same time, rather than one after another as the cameras switch back and forth. In this way the production feels more like a play with a series of short acts than a TV show, and you feel like you are in a theater rather than a studio. Still, after about two hours, the pace seems to have slowed. Some scenes require three takes or more. The child actors, when they are not on screen (which is more often than not), amuse themselves on a play set in the Burns's backyard. Audience members have no such diversions. Instead, we are treated like children in another way.

At about 7 p.m., the studio staff, recognizing that laughter needs to be fueled by more than jokes, begins to distribute Halloween-sized bits of chocolate candy—M&Ms, Peanut M&Ms, Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, Snickers bars. There will also be dinner, we are told, but first the candy bars, because sugar is at the top of the comedy food pyramid. Whether or not a parallel is intended, I imagine that this is how Adam Burns would serve dinner to his kids—dessert first. A half-hour later, our dinner arrives: half-sandwiches with a side-dish of sugary Rice Krispy treats, along with six-

ounce bottles of water (to minimize bathroom trips, I surmise). We wolf it all down quickly so that the wrappers can be collected minutes later to prevent unwanted crinkling sounds before the next scene is filmed.

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By now, I have lost track of the scenes. But this next one will be memorable because it will require about ten takes, and it will show that even a veteran actor like Nealon can be stymied by a prop. In the scene, at the Burns's kitchen table, Adam (LeBlanc) and Don (Nealon) are studying some construction plans when Adam decides he'd like to bring something fun into Emme's kindergarten classroom. Don has an idea: He gets up from the table, picks up a nearby shopping bag, and pulls out a toy steering wheel affixed to a plastic dashboard stand. The toy is a manifestation of an earlier joke about Adam's role as captain of the family ship. But as Don places the dashboard on the table, the steering wheel is facing the wrong direction. He tries it again and again, with the same inverted result, despite having tried alternately turning the shopping back around and rotating the toy before placing it inside the bag. He just cannot figure out how to get it right, and LeBlanc can no longer keep a straight face even before the next take begins—a textbook example of "breaking character." I'm reminded of those classic sketches on *The Carol Burnett Show* when Harvey Korman and Tim Conway couldn't' get through their lines because they are cracking up together. But, unlike on *Carol Burnett*, these amusing diversions will remain outtakes. After a few more takes, Nealon finally gets it right, and the audience cheers wildly when the toy steering wheel ends up in the right position. It occurs to me that when the show airs, the television audience will think that the prop itself is the subject of the thunderous laughter, not the triumph of man over machine that took about 20 minutes.

Thinking of *Carol Burnett* brought to mind another difference between television shows then and now. The 1970s sitcoms and variety shows also were produced when the subject matter for comedy was American culture, not television culture itself. From what little I've seen, many of today's network sitcoms are eager to comment on the latest bit of popular culture or to mine the most recent news events before a competing show does. My guess is that even the most successful of today's shows will not have a future in reruns because they will become dated quickly. Whereas the best 1970s sitcoms are still being shown in major media markets more than 40 years after they first aired. But maybe I'm just trying to convince myself that I'm not missing anything by shunning cable television or prime-time network TV. Maybe I'm trying to justify those hundreds of hours I spent watching sitcoms in the 70s because *those* were the best in the history of the genre. Or maybe I am fueling my sense of superiority by thinking that the TV shows of my youth were far better than those of Generation X's or the Millennium generation. After all, what did our parents' generation think of shows like *The Brady Bunch* and *Gilligan's Island*? They came of age when *I Love Lucy* was the first sitcom to be filmed before a studio audience, and when Jackie Gleason could infuse bus driver Ralph Kramden with an array of expressions in a single scene in *The Honeymooners* to make the black-and-white show seem neon-infused. We are all snobs of our own era, I suppose. I can appreciate the comic talent of Matt LeBlanc, but he'll never measure up to Carol O'Connor or Bob Newhart in my old timer's book.

(September 2016)

Postscript

Man with A Plan has now made it through its fourth season, having aired 61 episodes since Cliff and I watched Episode 3 of the first season being filmed. Cliff tells me he watches the show from time to time and it is still pretty funny. I watched maybe one or two new episodes in late 2016 and then stopped, not so much because the show wasn't amusing but because I was enticed by other cable comedies that seemed more creative and edgy, and I have limited time to watch television. So, when *Veep* took a two-year hiatus in 2017, Jill and I began watching *Episodes*, a trans-Atlantic comedy about writing for a comedy show that isn't nearly as funny as the interactions of the writers and actors for the show. (Echoes of the *Dick Van Dyke Show*, illustrating that there are no truly original ideas for television comedies anymore.) Ironically, the show features LeBlanc, playing himself as a crude, fearful of being over-the-hill TV star, who ends up corrupting a charming and witty British couple who have come to L.A. to adapt their successful comedy about a boarding school into an American TV show. Playing a cad with a heart, LeBlanc is much funnier in this series than he was in *Friends* or early episodes of *Man With a Plan*.

After watching all five seasons of *Episodes* on Netflix (years after it first aired), Jill turned me onto *Fleabag*, an edgy British comedy created and written by and starring Phoebe Waller-Bridge, who plays an insecure and sex-obsessed but entirely loveable Millennial. Earlier this year, we also watched all episodes of *The Kominsky Method*, a late-in-life bromance between an acting instructor played by Michael Douglas and his recently widowed agent played by Alan Arkin. Years behind the curve, we started watching *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Larry David's wickedly funny attack on political correctness and fads that liberals seem particularly drawn to. Never having watched *Seinfeld*, I first became aware of L.D. through his spot-on

impersonation of Bernie Sanders on Saturday Night Live. Now, I find myself laughing uncontrollably at least once during each episode—usually those scenes where Yiddishkeit goes overboard. Much of the humor comes from the fact that L.D. plays himself as if he were total asshole who could have almost anything he desires (including much younger, beautiful women), but his fixation on trivial annoyances and his holding of grudges (epitomized by his opening a "spite store" to drive out of business a coffee shop owner he thinks has mistreated him) results in his being screwed at the end of each episode. Echoes of Ralph Kramden and Archie Bunker, also deeply flawed characters who never seemed to be able to get ahead, although L.D. starts out way ahead and seems to keep sliding backwards.

I suppose my enjoyment of shows like *Episodes*, *Fleabag*, and *Curb Your* demonstrates that I've made the transition from shows about American culture to shows about television itself (or television personalities), and that I've finally adapted to the world of meta-entertainment. But I will still take comfort now and then in watching an old episode of *All in The Family*, having the first six seasons on DVDs (no streaming of that one). One foot in the past and one in the present, is how I seem to move these days.

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