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PART 3: UP-CLOSE
AND PERSONAL
CHAPTER 7

Comedy and Corned Beef: The Genesis of the Sitcom Writing Room

by David Isaacs

There are three things all Jews worship, God, Chinese food and wall to wall carpeting.

—Woody Allen (born Allen Stewart Konigsberg)

For over forty years I maintained my mundane, by Hollywood standards, lifestyle as a writer of Network Half-hour Comedies. Half-hour being a bit of a misnomer because the scripted content of a broadcast network sitcom these days is only about twenty-one minutes, down from about twenty-four minutes when I started working professionally back in the mid-’70s. That three-minute gap makes the challenge of telling a satisfying comic tale all the more complex. I’m sure the Networks would be more than happy to shave a few more minutes off if we could find an acceptable way to serve their audience a story without a resolution. None of this is meant as a budding senior citizen’s cynical complaint. I’d gladly take on the hard work again, if for no other reason than the chance to sit around a long table spread with an all-day feast of deli and/or Chinese food, trading jokes, sports gossip, socio-political commentary and random sex talk with some of the funniest men and women you could ever meet. It’s a blessing to love your work as much as I did. The money was good too, but that’s not my subject this time out.

No doubt the entertainment industry has changed drastically in my lifetime. From the business plan that dictates how content is created, produced and distributed to the many platforms we now use to access our entertainment,
there is little of practical consequence that remains from “the golden days.” (My age obligates me to use that phrase to describe the time before Reality TV.) The one function that still flourishes is the Sitcom Writing Room. Just as practiced as far back as Radio comedies, every weekday morning a group of writers gather round a big table in a large room about ten in the morning to spend, on the average, ten hours in a constant ongoing tumult of conversation, preparing story and script for the stage and camera. Actually, very little of that all day gabfest makes it into the finished script. The large ratio of trivial chatter to final useful product will be explained later in the chapter, but suffice it to say the process itself has changed very little. Well, save for the variety of the cuisine, which for health concerns alone, has moved away from the heavy nitrate and sodium blockbuster bombs of pastrami and corned beef that killed plenty of writers in mid-joke.

A glimpse into the obvious—

Comedy is by its very nature a communal experience. The desired result of the creative effort is a response of laughter from another individual. More than one person laughing is even better. To again demonstrate my age, I’m one of the very few that still believes in the sitcom laugh track. Not so much the canned laughter that some series still indiscriminately dub in, but the real laughter of a live audience enjoying a filming of Cheers, Everybody Loves Raymond, Seinfeld or Friends. I’ve always felt the audience response allows the person watching the show at home to feel like part of the live experience. It’s also why I believe the four series just mentioned, along with others of earlier years like The Mary Tyler Moore Show, All in the Family, Taxi and I Love Lucy, all truly, reliably funny, are much more popular in syndication than other past fare, both comedic and dramatic. Call me old fashioned but I enjoy hearing laughter more than sensing it. Or maybe I’m just lonely.

The creating of comedy in volume, in other words, cranking out twenty-one minutes each week for a full season, even a short-lived season, requires a similar kind of community. To paraphrase an overused comparison, if I craft a joke in the forest and no one laughs, is it funny? Or if a bear only seems amused does it count? There is no way to know with absolute certainty if you play in a vacuum. That is probably why you see so many teams writing comedy. Confirmation of your ability to be funny is proof positive sitting right in front of you. God knows I needed another person around all the time. There are a
few comedic Mozarts, blessed with once in a lifetime comedic chops, who are exceptions to the need to team up. My long time writing partner, Ken Levine, and I had the honor of working on a short-lived sitcom with the late, great Larry Gelbart, who in his venerable career completed the Comedy Writing Hat Trick. That is, great success in TV, Films and Theatre. (*Show of Shows, MASH, Tootsie, A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum.*) On his own Larry Gelbart could turn out literally reams of the funniest, almost lyrical dialogue that read like a gift from the Comedy Gods, and pushing the comedic Mozart comparison a bit farther, there were no corrections on the page. That is not hyperbole. Larry wrote in long hand on a legal pad and there were no corrections, i.e., cross outs, new lines on the margins . . . corrections. For a young writer like myself it was inspiring and diminishing all at once. Knowing work could be that good and just flow, but also facing the awareness that I could never reach that comedic level, let alone by myself. It's tough and maddening being just a Salieri. Then again, and this is not to brag, I made much better money than a jealous court composer and they fed me.

To switch the music referencing to a different groove, I like to think that the Sitcom Room, and I may be doing a bit of romanticizing here, is akin to an all-night jam session of fine jazz musicians. Comedy is a bit like jazz in the sense that there is a line of melody or theme that allows improvisation. For instance, Miles Davis and ensemble take a standard like “My Funny Valentine” and use their particular instruments to dig into the melody, adding texture, shading and irony, ultimately interpreting it a whole different way. Creating comedy, to stretch yet again, is similar in form. We take an old evergreen, for example, “Donald Trump,” and lay out the all too familiar “melody,” that is, monumental egotist, serial husband, bad orange comb over, et cetera, and just riff on the elements. Now The Donald is a subject that is almost too easy, but in the hands of some experienced comic minds the Trump song could go on endlessly . . . as it seems to do in real life.

The collaborative nature of the contemporary Sitcom Room had its origins in Radio to be sure, but in irreverence and combative spirit I believe it derives from the late night post-gig gatherings of primarily Jewish comics in the ’40s and ’50s. Meeting at legendary Manhattan delis like the Carnegie or Stage or, at the time popular but now extinct “cafeterias” like Kelloggs on 49th Street and “drugstores” like Hansen’s on 51st Street, struggling comics, Rodney Dangerfield (born Jacob Cohen), Alan King (born Irwin Alan Kniberg) and Lenny Bruce (born Leonard Schnieder), to name a few who achieved notoriety, nursed coffee and deli till the wee hours, trading stories, riffing on “melodies”
and fine tuning their comic voice. Oh, to be a fly on the food in those gatherings, which were natural extensions of the intense verbal combat of the shtetls that these young tummlers came from in Lower Manhattan, the Bronx and Brooklyn. In today's culture that honing of comic chops on street corners, in run-down nightclubs and around a deli table would be called putting in “The Ten Thousand Hours.” The craft of comedy requires that amount of dedication and more. The all night joke session is also the closest thing that we have to an ongoing tradition.

I am as Jewish as a matzo ball or kosher salami.
—Jackie Mason (born Yakov Moshe Maza)

In his 1984 film, *Broadway Danny Rose*, Woody Allen brought the late night comic's table to life. The movie opens on six comedians, all of them real life veterans of mid-century standup (Sandy Baron, Morty Gunty, Will Jordan, Jackie Gayle, Howard Storm and Corbett Monica) in session at the Carnegie Deli, cracking wise and talking over each other as they introduce the saga of Danny Rose, a small-time Broadway booking agent. The scene is a wonderful re-creation of the mad, rapid-fire competition and uncensored commentary that was part of those gatherings, and is definitely still alive in any contemporary Sitcom Room. The atmosphere, not to mention the culture, is also decidedly Jewish.

That is not to say that comedy is or was exclusively the realm of Jews. No doubt we have been disproportionately represented professionally, and I imagine if there were some kind of equivalent Comedy Hall of Fame there would probably be a Mezuzah up on the main entrance and deli sandwiches named after celebrities in the basement restaurant. However, a great deal of the psychology of funny has to do with the notion of being the outsider, or in modern parlance, the outlier. Not to the manor (or manner) born and more than a bit angry about it. Certainly there has never been a cultural monopoly on that feeling. Now more than ever it's the common ground that breeds the comic point of view for all those who perceive themselves out of the mainstream.

Not to go all Freud here, but anger is at the heart of comedy, which incidentally is a hell of a healthy device to work out personal frustrations, like not being invited to the main party. (Personally I'd like to start a national dialogue on the alternative therapy of comedy for gun “enthusiasts” . . . but in the end, and being me, I'd just rather say something biting at their expense and not get involved.) So it's clearly not just Jewish territory. Still it's pretty safe to say that
there is no ethnicity, religion, race, or interest group that has a history of being labeled, or identifies more as the outsider then the Jewish people. Depending on what part of the globe we are talking about it’s a tight race for top outcast group, but the Jews have History of the Western World cred that goes back before Moses. Granted we are finally back in Israel, but having an ethnic and religious homeland for nearly seventy years cannot just undo thousands of years of packing quickly.

As a secular Jew there are three places I acutely feel my Jewishness: (1) Shul. When I am there for a bar mitzvah or memorial or a quick drive up during the High Holidays; (2) In any of the coastal Newports—Rhode Island, Southern California, Virginia, take your choice; (3) When I am eating lunch in a Sitcom Room. The first two for obvious and contrasting reasons, but the third for its atmosphere of camaraderie, irreverence and non-stop criticism of nearly everything including the food, which I again mention, is usually free of charge. A kvetch-fest if ever there was one to the point that even WASP, Afro-American, Latino and Asian writers leave the room still complaining in a whining East Coast accent. The influence is unmistakably there.

There are a group of us who even combine Shul with the Sitcom Room. Every Passover my writing partner and his family hold a “Comedy Seder.” Around a long table, as has been the custom for several millennia, we re-tell the story of the Exodus. However, we do change the details a bit to fit TV writers. The ten plagues become the ten dumb Network notes, e.g., “I love the title, but do they all have to be Friends?” or “The script has lots of oatmeal, but no raisins.” I’ll take boils and locusts any day over trying to interpret that unique brand of obtuse criticism.

To write comedy, to view from the outside looking in and express your dismay and anger at the absurdity of life, no matter your race, ethnicity or heritage is to have a little Jewishness in you. Not to go all Jung here, but I like to think that is our contribution to the collective unconscious.

As a child my family’s menu consisted of two choices: Take it or leave it.

—Buddy Hackett (born Leonard Hacker)

The unwritten code of the original Comics Table and subsequently the Sitcom Room is the freedom, not to mention the sanctity, of the creative space. Civility and political correctness are checked at the door. As someone once said about
a novice or non-pro sitting in at the table for the first time, only the brave and reckless need enter. Thick skin is a requirement because sacred beliefs will be stepped on and cracks in personal armor are always fair game. Let me provide a personal example.

I live with male pattern baldness. For some men, like say Jason Straham or a Patrick Stewart, who both have skulls that are not too round or too oval but just right, it can be an image enhancer. For me it is something I’ve gradually grown to accept as less important than my impending death, which looms ever larger, encouraging me to finish this chapter. A few years ago when I was still working regularly in the Room, my mother-in law, a dear woman who has always been one of my biggest boosters, off-handedly suggested that I should get a hairpiece to create a suddenly younger and less self-conscious me. In her words, “they make them look a lot more natural now.” Now, I’m no less vain than the next cue ball, but my answer to her idea was less resentful than incredulous. “Do you know where I go to work everyday? Do you know the kind of less than gentle, encouraging folks I work with? Do you know what would happen if I left work bald one day and showed up the next with a full head of hair? It would be like sticking a steak in front of a pack of hungry, bi-polar jackals.” Her sobering answer was “Why do you care about them?” It was at that moment it dawned on me that even though I possessed zero bravado I had developed an uncanny sense of self-preservation working and trading zingers with those relentless “jackals.” Realizing I must walk through life hairless, vulnerable and ready to be the butt of a joke went a long way to making me comfortable in my own skin. Dying is still on the table.

**Mass Production is craftsmanship with the drudgery taken out of it.**
—Henry Ford (born Henry Ford)

Irony duly noted that the above quote is from one of America’s most noted and virulent anti-Semites (but he made a hell of a car . . . once). Then again, I couldn't help but notice that it neatly sums up the process of the typical Sitcom Room. Artistry aside, it is the production line of comedy. To manufacture a full sitcom season or an abbreviated one is an enormous undertaking that, as I mentioned before, has a high ratio of energy and raw material to finished episode.

In reading about the late night gatherings of the young and hungry comics of the ’40s and ’50s, I often wonder how much wonderful material was generated just in conversation, but never used on stage. Those jam sessions
must have been wildly loud and uncensored, but unfortunately material that wasn't appropriate in mid-century nightclubs had no function. At the same time, the chance to just let go provides a creative energy to feed the entertainment machine. So enough Detroit, but the analogy is an apt one.

So a Sitcom Room runs like a figurative production line (I can't help myself, it just makes it all sound more enterprising) with upwards of a dozen people turning out episodes that generate from a simple story idea to an outline to several drafts of a script. Many of the finest comedy writers we have typically learn their craft in this atmosphere. Case in point—the staff of the early 1950s Show of Shows. Arguably the greatest collection of young comedy writers in one place, the room included Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, Larry Gelbart, Neil Simon and Woody Allen, among others who went on to transcendent success. I think anyone who knows comedy would agree that it was a Room for the Ages.

Typically, and the broadcast year has become more fluid, a writing staff gathers in early summer to begin plotting a season's worth of stories and churning out drafts. The work pace picks up from there into production, going faster and faster as each week goes by and deadline inevitably catches up to preparation. The hours become longer and longer, and weekends can become workdays as well. All of that creative labor is usually relative to the series itself. A successful show will usually work more normal hours, while a show that is struggling to find it's theme, not to mention its audience, will put in whatever time is needed to break through to a series narrative that's succeeding. An eighty-hour workweek multiplied across several months is not unheard of or unexpected. But then all TV writers are obsessed with how many hours we work. It will come up in any writer-to-writer conversation. Putting in the hours is a badge of honor and something to at least be proud of after you've ruined your marriage and health just to end up with a canceled series. As an old Hollywood saying goes, “The money is great, but you spend it at Cedars Sinai.”

The focus of each Sitcom Room workday is on the story and script. The story has to make narrative sense, the jokes have to come from the attitudes of the characters and they have to be funny. To concentrate on any or all of those factors and to stay on subject for ten hours straight would slowly wear down any momentum. The big lunch only adds to the general mid-day malaise. The working antidote for lost energy is constant conversation, digression in any direction, along with the unwritten rule of having the freedom to say anything, no matter how politically incorrect, and make a damn fool of yourself. For most young writers it's an acquired skill, but creatively speaking, a necessary, even vital risk. To revisit the music analogy, it's how you learn to keep
your instrument in tune. The sense of openness and feeling of trust among the
players is what keeps the work moving forward. Add one outsider to the mix,
especially one of the series actors who many times are the butt of the humor, or
any person who takes personal offence to the conversation, and the chemistry
changes immediately. It’s a very delicate balance.

Back in the late 1990s a female assistant working in the Friends writing
room brought a lawsuit against Warner Brothers for sexual harassment (Lyle
vs. Warner Brothers Television Productions). In short, she claimed that the gen-
eral atmosphere and conversation of the writing staff, a few men in particular,
was offensive and created a workplace that was untenable for her. I wasn’t there,
but my guess is that a lot of folks, male or female, young or old would agree
with her charge and the suit itself. The general talk often turns to sex, which
can get pretty raunchy, and truth be told that’s an understatement. Yet it is part
of the process that leads to the finished product. Go back to those late night
tables of the ’40s and ’50s. Little of the social and sexual candor that was tossed
around each night ever made its way in front of the microphone or to early
TV (and if it was it was sanitized for the times), but working off and releasing
what was churning in your gut was the real playtime. If suddenly there were an
arbitrary set of rules of table decorum then it follows those rules would result
in a bunch of cautious comics second-guessing their every word. The idea of a
special dispensation for allowing inappropriate, even lewd speech in a particu-
lar line of work is against conventional norms and the need to bring civility and
accountability to the workplace, but it is as true now as it was in the ’50s. The
steam of consciousness has to flow to ultimately deliver the goods.

The face of the TV industry has changed along with the business, con-
tent, technology, and delivery, and all for the better. The big table that sits in the
middle of the room includes “outsiders” of all races and ethnicities and thank-
fully they are beginning to turn out series comedies that better reflect our still
emerging mixed culture. The comedy itself may be more ironic and specific
than the broader, not always so “good old days.” However the best of it has that
irreverence and touch of anarchy that we all relate to and cherish because it
pokes at the infuriating dysfunction and absurdity of our mutual existence. I
believe that inspiration to just let go and push the envelope started decades ago
around a table in the back corner of the Carnegie Deli with a bunch of Shtlel
Jews. That’s my legend and I’m sticking to it.
Works Cited


