

Saturday Night Live

Culture and Parody Since 1975

Saturday Night Live is more than a television show. Since its premiere in 1975, it has served as a trendsetter in American humor and had a remarkable effect on American mores, manners, music, and politics. It can't be said that there never has been anything like it in TV history because one of its bold strokes was reviving a format as old as TV itself- in fact, older: the variety show, with music and comedy sketches intermixed. Though the basic format wasn't entirely new, the content was, and so were the show's attitude and approach and collective mindset. It was revolutionary.

The people who own and run commercial television networks don't put a show on the air because they imagine it will break bravely with tradition or set grand new aesthetic standards or stretch the boundaries of the medium - or for any reason other than to make money. *SNL* wasn't created because the NBC executives yearned to introduce something new into the American mainstream. It simply came to be because Johnny Carson wanted the networks to stop airing reruns of his *Tonight Show* on weekends. One day in 1974, Carson told NBC to yank them altogether; he wanted to air his *Tonight Show* reruns on weeknights to give himself more time off. NBC brass had the choice of returning the weekend time to local stations - and

thereby kissing a chunk of ad revenue good-bye - or trying to fill the time slot with other programming. And so the word went forth - develop a new late night show for Saturday.

Many ideas were circulated but all those were trashed when a brilliant and ambitious young writer from Canada born Lorne Lipowitz was named executive producer of the new show. His vision would turn TV on its head and prevail for decades to come, even during a few years when he himself was in absentia.

The man the network took a chance on - Lorne Michaels - just barely thirty - gave NBC much, much more than it bargained for, probably more than it wanted: an adventurous "live" topical satire series that, had execs and advertisers known of its form and content in advance, might never have seen the light of day.

NBC's *Saturday Night*, as it was originally called, would be the television generation's own TV show - its first. It was unlike anything else then on the air, and it would be years before rivals would even try to imitate it. From the ground up, it was built to be new, unusual, arresting, surprising, and attractive to baby boomers, the largest generation in American history.

In the decades to come, the success of *SNL* sparked a renaissance in topical, satirical, and political humor both on TV and off; launched the careers of innumerable new talents and hugely expanded the parameters of what was

"acceptable" material on the air, bringing it much closer to the realities of everyday American life.

And it made a nation laugh - laugh, even when it hurt.

The story of *Saturday Night Live* is the story of the people who made it work- producers, directors, writers, actors, comics and musicians. They and the show weathered many a storm along the way: the tragic premature death of cast members, drug abuse among the performers and writers, temper tantrums, office romances, and, a near-fatal stumble when, five years into the run, someone under qualified took over as producer for a few years.

There have been cast members who drank too much, snorted coke too much, freebassed too much. A writer recalls walking into an office and finding three members of one of world's most famous rock bands shooting heroin into their veins before a show. One brilliant but insecure member of a recent cast slashed himself with razor blades during bouts of severe depression .Two of the brightest comedy stars died of drug abuse and others have come perilously close. There have been eight premature deaths of cast members; Chris Farley and John Belushi (drug overdoses), Gilda Radner(ovarian cancer), Danitra Vance(breast cancer), Michael O'Donoghue(cerebral hemorrhage), Phil Hartman(murdered by his wife), Charles Rocket(suicide by box cutter to the throat), and Tom Davis(throat and neck

cancer). Talent may itself be a form of neurosis; it often comes with troubles attached.

Among Michael's nemeses over the years have been network censors, network executives who hated the show, hosts who panicked at the last minute and wanted to bolt, and an uncountable number of protests from special interest groups offended by this sketch or that portrayal or a news item on *Weekend Update*.

However, with the arrival of *SNL*, the TV generation, for at least ninety minutes a week, could see television not just as a window on the past or a display case for the fading fantasy figures of their fathers and mothers, but as a mirror - a warped fun-house mirror perhaps, but a mirror just the same; one reflecting their own sensibilities, values, and philosophies. Television, which had shown them the world, had heretofore neglected to show them themselves.

Some think that *SNL* was better back in the show's "Golden Age" - the first five seasons. But as a genre, sketch comedy shows are by their very nature very uneven. Within a single episode, there are typically one or two or more hilarious sketches, a few jokes or moments that warrant a chuckle, and portions of the show that signal that its bedtime.

The fact that *SNL* is uneven should not detract from its unique and significant contribution to American culture. For over four decades, the show has been a

cornerstone of popular culture with its endless supply of recurring characters, catchphrases, and memorable comedic and musical moments . At the same time, through satire, parody and a fake newscast, *SNL* has provided a running commentary on American culture, politics and society.

SO - how does this all happen? Here is the grueling and intense process it takes to put together one episode of *Saturday Night Live*.

Monday - writers and cast members meet to pitch jokes and toss around story ideas. Meanwhile, producer Lorne Michaels, the writers and cast meet with the host and figure out his or her abilities. They then decide which of the pitch ideas are best, and which play to the host's strengths.

Tuesday is a writing day. Writers will usually pull all-nighters to get sketches done. When the show first began, writing sessions were notoriously mixed with heavy drug use. Today, this is not a factor.

Wednesday is when everyone gathers to read through sketches. Every Wednesday afternoon, everyone gathers in the writer's room to read the week's possible sketches. *SNL* is completely scripted. The demands of doing a ninety-minute TV show are such that an improvisational approach really wouldn't work. Sets, costumes and lighting all have to be set. The only time a performer might improvise is when something goes wrong. A perfect example of this is the sketch " Mr. Ed

Dies". At midnight on Saturday morning - the day of the show - one of the writers saw a newspaper headline that said, "Mr. Ed is Dead". He called Lorne Michaels at 2 A.M., pitching his idea of having Bill Murray interview the grieving widow - Mrs. Ed - on the show that night - 9 hours away! Lorne said, "Sure if you can get a horse". He did - dress rehearsal went perfectly with Gilda Radner doing the voice of Mrs. Ed (they rubbed molasses on the lips of the horse to make it appear like it was talking) - but the horse went off script and bolted during the live broadcast - the director yelled " follow that horse" to the cameraman and Gilda ad-libbed " Oh, I'm so upset, I think I'm just going to throw myself out the window!" The resulting chaos was even funnier than the original script.

On Thursday, sets start getting built. Cast and crew prepare for rehearsals - wigs and costumes and props are made and assembled

Friday is marked by rehearsals and rewrites. It's just one day before the live show, and things are frantic and chaotic. Sketches are rehearsed and rewritten over and over and over again One cast member has been quoted as saying, "What we read on Wednesday has nothing to do with what we do on Saturday". Scripts are reviewed by the network censors.

Saturday. This is the day of the show, and yet there still is a lot to be done. Last minutes adjustments to sets, lighting, costumes, and wigs are made. Even on the day of the show, changes continue to get made to the script.

At 8 pm, a crowd sits to watch a dress rehearsal. This gives time for any last minutes changes to be made, and any sketches that don't get laughs will get cut before the final show at 11:30 pm. The dress typically has an extra twenty to thirty minutes available to cut. As Lorne Michaels has said, " We don't go on because we're ready. We go on because it's 11:30". On one Saturday night, as the show opened, it still had seven minutes that had to be cut and they did it on the fly, the writers rewriting and editing in the control room right next to the director who was calling cues. There is sense of potential panic all through the show but as one actor remarked "When it's firing on all cylinders, it's like music'.

SNL drew audiences to the small screen with bold expectations: to put the week's news in understandable context, to deflate the puffed-up establishment types. Not just to speak truth to power, but to speak to youth, period. The NBC airways, controlled at the time by GE, a company rich in defense contracts, were given over on Saturday nights to the anti-establishment voice.

Sometimes the sketches were juvenile, sometimes they fell flat and ran too long. Sometimes they were delightfully silly. But sometimes they delivered memorable rebukes or social commentary like Richard Pryor's word association game about racism, which terrified the network and required a seven-second delay. It involves a Human Resource interviewer (Chevy Chase) giving a word association test to a job applicant for a janitorial position. (Pryor). The test starts off with word pairs one

would expect on such a test. Chase says "fast" and Pryor says "slow". Chase says "hot" and Pryor says "cold". But the test takes an unexpected turn when Chase begins to spout a series of racial epithets like "Tarbaby", "Colored", "Jungle Bunny", until he gets to the word "Nigger". Pryor throws back white slurs like "Redneck". "Cracker", and "Honky". The sketch delivers a powerful statement on institutionalized racism.

Another priceless sketch was "Black Jeopardy" with Tom Hanks playing a "Make America Great Again" white guy who somehow found himself on an episode of "Black Jeopardy". As he slowly answers more and more questions correctly, the black contestants in the sketch warm up to him more and more and vice versa. It's a statement about how much Americans really have in common and it's a powerful one because it doesn't shy away from the obvious difference: race.

And then there was "Actress Round Table". This sketch predates the "Weinstein Era", but it injects a healthy dose of humor into many of the real issues that women now have more space to talk about: how they are treated in male-dominated industries, pay gaps, the lack of roles for women. And finally," Mister Robinson's Neighborhood" - Eddie Murphy's grimy version of Mr. Rogers - how to answer a door in the hood , how to deal with eviction notices - and, the importance of disco shoes.

One of the times that *SNL* was more reactionary was in regards to the lack of diversity on the program. After a lot of media and public backlash, they handled it the best way they knew how- through comedy in the form of the Kerry Washington/Michelle Obama skit. In the first sketch of the night, a White House aide approached the president and his wife and announced that Oprah Winfrey was there to see them. Washington, who was playing Michelle, got up, exited and then the following voice-over was played.

"The producers of SNL would like to apologize to Kerry Washington for the number of black women she will be asked to play. We make these requests because Ms. Washington is an actress of considerable range and talent - and also because SNL does not currently have a black woman in the cast. Mostly the latter. We agree this is not an ideal situation and look forward to rectifying it in the near future, unless, of course, we fall in love with another white guy first"

The joke repeated itself once more, with Washington changing again to represent Beyonce. As she got dressed for her new role, the president invited six Matthew McConaugheys - all white male cast members - into the Oval Office. And then The Reverend Al Sharpton stepped into the scene and announced , " What have we learned from this sketch! As usual, nothing ! "

In 2017, SNL poked fun with a commercial for "Levi Wokes", advertising nondiscriminatory jeans: genderless, sizeless, in equality minded "greg" (not brown but not not brown), with no pockets because not everyone has hands.

From Gilda Radner to Jane Curtin to Julia Louis-Dreyfus to Tina Fey, Amy Poehler and Kate McKinnon, SNL has launched the careers of many important woman performers. Things have improved since the days when John Belushi said that " women just aren't funny!" The show has work to do in terms of achieving full equality but in season forty-three, there were five non-white cast members, the first black co-head writer and eight non-white hosts. It still has never had a full-time Asian cast member but its willingness to grow to meet the world around it has always been part of its charm.

There are a few more important sketches that warrant noting as regards to the show's relevance in the culture of the U.S. One of the most memorable was the show's *Tribute to 9/11 First Responders*. Standing with members of the New York Fire Department and Police Department, along with the Fire and Police commissioners, Mayor Rudy Giuliani reminds us that on September 11, it was the heroism of these brave men and women that saved more than 25,000 lives. "Our hearts are broken, adds Giuliani, "but they are beating and they are beating stronger than ever. New Yorkers are unified. We will not yield to terrorism." Cut to Paul Simon, who sings "The Boxer" as the camera pans over the faces of the brave men and women. At the end, Lorne Michaels joins them onstage and thanks

everyone for being there. Giuliani calls *Saturday Night Live* "one of the great New York City institutions and that's why it is important for you to do your show tonight". "Can we be funny", Michaels asks. "Why start now?" Giuliani replies, "Live From New York! It's Saturday Night !"

And, we can't forget *The Delicious Dish*. The hosts of a take-off on an fictitious NPR show welcome their guest Pete Schweddy (Alec Baldwin), the owner of a bakery who has brought along a few of his best-selling treats - Schweddy Balls. Most of what follows would be bleeped by the Quest Club censors. To honor the sketch's place in America's popular culture, Ben and Jerry's named a new flavor of ice cream "Schweddy Balls" which contained fudge-covered rum balls. According to the company, the ice cream became their fastest-selling limited-edition flavor. The ice cream was also subject to criticism and boycotts by the One Million Moms group over the "vulgar" name.

Now, political parody and satire. For forty-four plus years, SNL has transformed the inner workings of politics into something that many Americans find relatable, humorous, and engaging. Ever since the 2016 election, the show is boasting the highest ratings in years as Americans tune in to see the week's news play out in comedic form. And with the rollercoaster that is the news today, there's always plenty of great material.

When SNL premiered in October, 1975, President Gerald Ford had been president for a little over a year. Chevy Chase's portrayal of him had nothing to do with his politics or the policies of his administration. Chase's Ford was essentially a klutz who had the tendency to fall down - a lot. Ironically, the real Ford was athletic - though he did take a few tumbles in public like the time he fell down the stairs of Air Force One. Fortunately, Ford had a sense of humor - he even made a filmed cameo appearance.

Although Dan Akyroyd did a great impression of Jimmy Carter. the writers had a tough time coming up with a solid take on a President who shared their values but who wasn't getting a lot done in Washington.

Since Chase took his first tumble over the presidential podium, SNL has been at the forefront of American political satire. Studio 8H is a national stage for the weekly public skewering of the American political system - its two major parties, its major players and the media's role in the political process. In a 2011 article in *Politico*, Lorne Michaels explained that the fact that SNL debuted just after Watergate had a significant effect on the show's content and the audience they were trying to reach. "We'd just lived through all that, and because of that and Vietnam, politics was something everyone knew and talked about. I think we defined ourselves as a generation that way. I think we were playing to an audience that was really under 30. We didn't expect anyone else to know the music or to get the jokes".

Considering how far to the right his conservative politics moved the country,, President Ronald Reagan got off relatively easy during his eight years in office. because the show shifted away from edgy political humor during Dick Ebersole's tenure as producer(1981-1985). The undisputed highlight during the Reagan era was a sketch entitled "Masterbrain" which is widely regarded as one of the show's best political sketches. The picture it paints of Reagan as a brilliant strategist is the exact opposite of how he was portrayed in previous sketches - a doddering old fool who has no idea of what's going on.

Dana Carvey's impersonation of George H. W. Bush was more popular than the president himself, especially after he reneged on his 1988 campaign promise of "no new taxes" The Clinton years provided the writers with a wealth of material due to a series of personal scandals that plagued his presidency from Whitewater to Paula Jones to Monica Lewinski, who appeared on the show in May, 1999. When the Lewinski scandal was at its peak during the 1997-98 season, the ratings climbed. Lewinski's appearance on the show followed a special SNL featuring clips from the best sketches and *Weekend Update* jokes of the Clinton years and should be enough to silence those on the right who complain about the left-wing media and SNL liberal bias.

Since George W. Bush entered the White House in 2000 through the reelection of Barack Obama in 2012 and Donald Trump's win in 2016, politics have remained high on SNL's comedy agenda. In 2000, it all started with the first of three parodies

of the Bush-Gore debates in which Bush can't answer any of the questions posed to him (his response to one question is to "pass"). Gore doesn't come off much better as he drones on and on about the "locked box") In fact, Gores staff actually had him watch the tapes of the SNL depiction of him to try to get him to "loosen up".

SNL's engagement in the political process deepened in the 2008 presidential election. Both the Republicans and the Democrats provided the writers with plenty of material to skewer the candidates, their respective campaigns, the debates, and the election itself. Senator John McCain's selection of Sarah Palin as his running mate was like manna from heaven. This point is very evident in Tina Fey's second appearance as Palin, a parody of her disastrous interview with CBS anchor, Katie Couric. When it came to the question about the bank bailout, Fey actually used Palin's long, rambling answer verbatim. The highlight of the season (which gave SNL a huge jump in the ratings) was the real Sarah Palin's appearance on the show. Over on the Democratic side, SNL was accused of playing favorites in a parody of the CNN Univision Democratic debate in which the audience and the news anchors fawn all over Obama and are rude to Clinton.

Conservative critics of SNL no doubt believe that the show went easy on President Obama because it agreed with his policy or appreciated his youth and relative hipness. More likely: Obama's calm demeanor(no drama Obama) and lack of a substantive scandal made it hard for SNL to find the funny in 44. As one writer put it, " this dog won't hunt."

With its witty and satirical depictions of presidential politics, the 2016 season of SNL thoroughly captured the essence of the election and the show saw record-shattering viewing figures. A skit featuring Melissa McCarthy impersonating White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer on his first day was viewed by nearly 11 million viewers. In 2017, 2018 and 2019, SNL continued to define presidential politics through its pervasive take on Trump and his administration. While the content is satirical, Alec Baldwin's grandiose hand gesture, orange tan, comb-over hair and harsh words certainly do not portray the President in a flattering light. In fact, such skits present Trump as a stumbling fool who knows little about civic society, much less how to run the entire nation. Trump is Trump - his personality and his impact on our culture is so oversized that it's not a push to think that this has manifested itself in the show.

Finding a balance between humor and politics is crucial to SNL's success. Has SNL crossed the line? On a personal note, I have observed that the jabs and depictions seem to be meaner and sharper in recent years - possibly that is a reflection of our times where it often appears that facts don't matter and rude, crude and downright offensive behavior is celebrated.

It is important to remember that the show's objective is to attract an audience, rather than serve as a medium to accurately report political happenings. The show easily enters into political territory due to its ability to hide behind the veil of

comedy. A big complaint on the part of some viewers is that SNL's coverage is biased or one-sided. The writers seem to be mostly liberal, and the writing reflects that. But Weekend Update isn't actually news; it's comedy, and therefore has every right to be one-sided. We shouldn't be going to SNL for news - although it seems that a lot of people do. Back in 2014 a study by The Brookings Institute showed that many Americans tended to trust The Daily Show more than actual journalists. Is that a good thing? Should comedy play such a pivotal role in the way people perceive the government's decisions? Does it sometimes detract from the gravity of what's happening? Maybe. But while some Americans continue to find comedy more trustworthy than news media, and while comedy shows continue to put effort into news coverage, that's the way things will likely remain.

Some of the sketches I've highlighted previously shed light on the attitudes surrounding some of society's current dilemmas - often issues like feminism or racism. It's important not to conflate every issue we have as a society with politics. By doing so, we risk watering down the more widespread impact these issues have. SNL deals with American culture, and, unfortunately, American culture does have some uncomfortable truths. As Michaels notes, "If a culture doesn't allow you to laugh at the leaders or at things that your eyes and ears tell you are actually happening, that's not good".

One of the fundamental aspects of the show has always been grounded in the right to free speech, as protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

Yet, once again, the sketch comedy show is under fire, with threats from Trump to be taken off the air completely. But to censor SNL would ultimately lead to the censorship of other forms of media, directly contradicting the First Amendment.. For as long as there has been politics, there has been political satire .The comic playwright Aristophanes was ridiculing Athenian leaders more than 2,000 years ago in Greece. Politics and satire - it seems as though one can't function without the other - like checks and balances.

Now, more than ever, we need shows like SNL to make us laugh and help draw attention to the shortcomings of our world. The value of satirical shows like SNL lies primarily in their right to freedom of speech, to express opinions and to bring inefficiencies to light through humor.

In closing, I am very grateful to Ron Menze who suggested this topic. After spending countless hours in research and watching a whole lot of SNL sketches, I was reminded of how good it is to laugh, and, most of all, how incredibly fortunate I am - and, indeed , all of us - to live in a country where the media - print and visual - plus playwrights, novelists, comedians, etc., are able to fully express themselves in so many ways, where journalists do not get jailed or even murdered for reporting the truth, and where shows like *Saturday Night Live* can survive and thrive.

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