

HARVARD

GAZINE

Jim Downey cradles
Al Franken on the set of
"Saturday Night Live."

HOW HARVARD CHANGED COMEDY

Over the past twenty
years, a generation
of jokesters from
Cambridge has
rewritten the script
of American
humor.

*punched
up*

A scholarly survey by
JOSHUA S PREVEN

THE HISTORY OF

Harvard University has long been considered one of the world's most prestigious institutions of higher education. But few (other than football fans) have ever thought of it as a funny place. This sketch aims simply to set the record straight.

The first documented attempt by Harvard graduates to make a joke was in 1701, when James Pierpont and Samuel Russell (both A.B. 1681) helped found Yale. A success in its own day, that attempt has continued to amuse Cantabs for centuries, making Yale not only the first but also the longest running joke in Ivy League history.

Ben Franklin must be given credit for the first joke at Harvard's expense. In 1722 he referred to the College as a place "where for want of suitable Genius, they learn little more than how to carry themselves handsomely and enter a Room genteely (which might as well be acquired at a Dancing-school); and from whence they return after abundance of trouble and charges, as great Blockheads as ever, only more proud and self-conceited." Of course Franklin's quip should be regarded with some suspicion, as it comes from a man who, despite lesser achievements, never made it to Harvard himself.

As for "wild and crazy" stunts, early Harvardians were surprisingly uninspired—with the important exception of George Curwin (A.B. 1701), who is said to have "sat up all night over punch and cards." Only four pranks from the period merit reference: In 1820 disgruntled freshmen heaved cannon balls down the stairway of Mass Hall at 1 A.M., which, according to one report, "forcibly interfered with or accelerated the downward progress of a proctor who was on his way to the pump." In 1880 local police arrested the Phi Beta Kappa Society on charges of drunken disorderliness. In 1885 William Randolph Hearst, of the class of 1886, was expelled for having inscribed the name and portrait of each of his professors on the interior of chamber pots, festively wrapped and delivered to the recipient's home on Christmas Day. And in 1817 the faculty established Harvard Law School.

Some experts view the Harvard Charter of 1650 (responsible for the structure of governance by a Corporation and Board of Overseers) as a work of considerable comic achievement. They argue that the charter—which stipulates that the "President,

Fellowes, & Schollers . . . shall be exempted from all civill offices, militarie exercises, or services . . . and shall be free from all Country taxes or rates whatsoever"—is without exception the most glorified tax shelter of the early modern era. Never, they claim, has there been such an efficient attempt to dodge taxes, civil service, and the draft all in one document.

This should not obscure the fact that the Corporation was a deeply serious body, steadfast in the face of undergraduate atrocities. President Increase Mather's action against the student crimes of 1693 is an inspiring example. His words continue to ring true: "The Corporation having been informed that the Custom taken up in the Colledge . . . for the Commencers to have Plumb-Cake is dishonourable to the Colledge, not gratefull to Wise men, and chargeable to the Parents of Commencers; do therefore put an End to that Custom, and do hereby order that no Commencer or other Schollar shall have any Such Cakes in their Studies or Chambers, and that if any Schollar shall offend therein, the Cakes shall be taken from him."

The tradition of wisdom and eloquence evident in Mather's Plum-Cake Address fortunately continued. Only fourteen years after the address, Tutor Remington delivered his legendary Admonition of 1707, warning the seniors to "Beware of Drinking and Card Playing. These make the Colledge stink." This was followed by the Hat Protocols of 1735, ordering that "no freshman shall wear his hat in the College yard except . . . he hath both hands full." Mather's legacy of eloquence then passed to Charles Francis Adams (A.B. 1825), whose reflections upon his own experience at Harvard still garner praise for their astonishing pith: "Nothing came back to me that I valued."

Adams's motif of valuelessness naturally calls to mind the establishment in 1844 of the Hasty Pudding Theatricals—Harvard's first *institution* of humor. A century and a half later, Hasty Pudding continues to thrive, rising above such petty theatrical conventions as plot and acting. Each year thousands descend upon Cambridge to drink in the Pudding's great spirit—and some even stay for the show. Since the Woman of the Year award began in 1951, Hasty Pudding has hosted over forty of



F HUMOR AT HARVARD

the world's most glamorous and talented female stars, including Meryl Streep (1980), Lauren Bacall (1967), and Mamie Eisenhower (1953). It has also produced stars of its own. The "professional" time commitment of the Pudding often lures students from the graduate school track into successful acting careers, both because it tempts them with fame and because it ruins their academics.

Like the Pudding, *The Harvard Lampoon* (founded in 1876) constitutes a fascinating sociological experiment, matching an abundance of wealth and prestige with an apparent paucity of intellect or good taste. In the history of publishing, the *Lampoon* distinguished itself as the first magazine entirely devoted to the promotion of its own bad reputation. Never before has a periodical so openly seemed to say: "Hey you! I'm acting like an idiot! Look at what an idiot I am! Don't you think I'm an idiot?! Ha! Ha! Hahahahahaha . . .!" But scholars agree that the framers of our Constitution, in guaranteeing the freedom of the press, had no way of anticipating the *Lampoon* and should not be blamed for its subsequent harm to society.

The twentieth century has witnessed bold innovations in the pursuit of humor at Harvard. A breakthrough in 1945 at the Institute for Advanced Eugenics, for instance, altered irrevocably the face of Harvard comedy. Two graduates accidentally combined in a human subject the gene for chronic upbeatness with the gene for relentless grinning. Less than a week later, a capella made its debut in Sanders Theatre. Since then, this tenacious strain of music-comedy has reproduced at an alarming rate, giving rise to no fewer than six thriving groups. Today, as a result, Harvard suffers

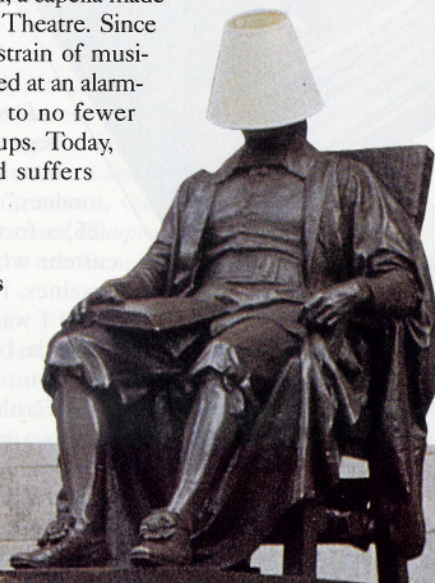
from a humor surplus that not even the Radcliffe Pitches' dreary influence can reduce.

Recent years have seen the development of two improvisation troupes—On Thin Ice and The Immediate Gratification Players—that constitute Harvard's most thrilling form of humor. No other genre of comedy can match improv's sheer excitement: the sense that, at any moment, things can (and almost certainly will) go wrong; the dread of awkward pauses; the mild nausea that creeps into the gut as a performer gropes blindly for the next word; the maternal pangs. For the ambitious actor, improv is a rite of passage. Nowhere else can one soar to such glorious heights and bomb with such fiery splendor. Perhaps because of its inherent thrill, improv ranks as the most prestigious type of Harvard comedy. On Thin Ice, in particular, has established itself as a breeding ground for Hollywood, producing each year a staggering percent of L.A.'s most learned restaurant staff.

Stand-up comedy found its place at Harvard with the development, in the last four years, of certain amateur competitions. Increasingly popular, these contests offer students a chance both to poke fun at human folly and to demonstrate it; to revel in the commonality of life experience and, at the same time, to dash all hopes of ever getting another date. Stand-up contests also give the undergraduate an opportunity to share amusing vignettes while those in the audience talk quietly among themselves.

Finally, what does the future have in store for Harvard comedy? Most scholars predict that, like a toothache, humor at Harvard will persist and grow and possibly ruin the weekend. But Jill Smyth, Longmann professor of gratuitous banter, foresees monumental change, and it is with her stirring vision that I would like to close. "I imagine a day," she writes, "when, like the Porcellian Club or the sociology department, humor at Harvard will make us laugh." □

The College's
first benefactor.



Joshua S Preven '91 is studying Renaissance literature at Trinity College, Cambridge, on a Fulbright Scholarship. His satiric "God Created Harvard" appeared in the July-August 1991 issue (page 70). He plans to attend Harvard Law School in the fall of 1993.

PHOTOGRAPH BY FLINT BORN





Comic Sutra

In a castle near Tommy's Lunch, a handful of humorists dreamed up "one of the ten worst business ideas of 1969." But the revolution they began reshaped the world of comedy, and by now almost everyone is in on the joke.

by CRAIG LAMBERT

It seems like an exceedingly obscure event for one that virtually transformed popular culture, but in retrospect the vote at the Lampoon Castle on Sunday, December 12, 1965, launched a revolution in American comedy. The balloting followed an intense political struggle that lasted hours and climaxed with the election—by one vote—of Walker Lewis '67 as *Lampoon* president. This outcome gave birth to a comic cornucopia that in the next two decades spilled forth *National Lampoon* magazine, "Saturday Night Live," *National Lampoon's Animal House* and *Vacation* movies, "Late Night With David Letterman," *Spy* magazine, "The Simpsons," and the comic stance that informs many of today's TV and film comedies. "That [election] was the key moment, the beginning of the change," says Rob Hoffman '69, M.B.A. '72, one of *National Lampoon's* founders. "Harvard and the *Lampoon* have directly transformed American humor over the last 25 years. The Harvard impact on television, movies, and magazines is unbelievable. There's practically a Harvard Mafia out there."

The import of Lewis's ascendance was that under his leadership, the *Lampoon* first went "wide," finding a national audience that laughed at its jokes. There was, in fact, a vast appetite for *Lampoonish* wryness and mammoth profits to be made by pushing past Cambridge's boundaries to amuse the rest of the United States. Before Lewis, the Castle's long and rich tradition had largely been one of insular hilarity.

Founded in 1876, the *Lampoon* had few, if any, peers as a college humor magazine. Part of its edge was talent, part was



sheer resources. "The biggest difference between the *Lampoon* and other college humor magazines is that the *Lampoon* has money," says Conan O'Brien '85, a former *Lampoon* president and current writer for "The Simpsons." "At other meet in the cafeteria at seven, and I want everyone to bring three ideas. . . ." But we have the Castle, built by [William Randolph] Hearst.

The importance of the *Lampoon* Castle can hardly be overstated. Built in 1909, the edifice is a glorious architectural mutant for which the adjective *unique* seems an understatement. Its architect, Edmund March Wheelwright, of the class of 1876, was one of the *Lampoon's* founders and modeled the building on Dutch styles from the later sixteenth century. The Castle's furnishings include seven thousand Delft tiles, antiques, and strange rarities. The Great Hall, in the English mode, is the scene on Thursday nights of black-tie dinner parties. Says Los Angeles television writer David Sacks '84, "The *Lampoon* was the first place where I took my sense of humor seriously. It was basically an eclectic society of weirdos walking around in slightly distressed tuxedos and accumulating an excessive amount of garbage twice a month."

The Castle is both a magazine office and a clubhouse for its

members, who often make it the core of their college experience. "Basically, I majored in *Lampoon*," says Michael Frith '63, executive vice president and creative director of Jim Henson Productions. "Every now and then I'd venture forth for a class." Inside the building, conversations are funny and competitive, with one-upmanship the prevailing ethos. "It's somewhere between a social thing and a preprofessional comedy workshop," says Kurt Andersen '76, editor in chief of *Spy* magazine. "In a way the magazine is a pretext for people to spend time riffing with each other and figuring out what's funny and what's not. You have a group who, in competition and collaboration, are developing a comic sensibility."

O'Brien says that the *Lampoon* "is a mean, rough place, a very snotty place. You're young and there's a certain arrogance about being original and experimental. People are very quick to let you know that something is old, hack-y, or has been done before. There's a rarefied sense of what's good and bad, and a need to outdo the other person." The magazine's first female president, Lisa Henson '82, now a motion picture executive with Warner Brothers, calls its members "very tough critics. I'd even say it's a cutthroat atmosphere. If you read the common book at the *Lampoon*, you'll see plenty of very direct, very personal insults, things that more or less question your right to exist."

But the payoffs for suffering the zings and arrows come in both laughs and comic skills. "That repartee is dialogue," says Sacks. "If you can hold your own in these fast-paced, quick-witted exchanges over a period of years, it gets into your blood and you are able to replicate it on the printed page." As the entertainment industry's demand for comedy writing has jumped in recent years, such skill has become the raw material of careers. "The *Harvard Lampoon* used to be something people did before they went to Wall Street," says Henry Beard '67, another *National Lampoon* founder and author of a score of humor books. "Now it's the world's greatest comedy training course."

And its influence ripples outward. When "Roseanne" co-star John Goodman guest-hosted "Saturday Night Live," he asked O'Brien, then a writer on the show: "Conan, what's a Narthex?" (*Narthex* is the title that the *Lampoon* gives one of its officers.) Goodman, it turned out, was a comedy buff who subscribed to the *Harvard Lampoon*; he remembered O'Brien's name and the title from its masthead.

If the Harvard comedy Mafia has a godfather, it is "Saturday Night Live" producer and head writer James Downey '74 (see cover), who says: "There's an enormous Harvard presence in show business in general and comedy in particular. It's a big change." He estimates that of the roughly four hundred people who make a living writing television comedy, about forty—a staggering 10 percent—graduated from one college: Harvard. "Years ago, very few people considered this a career," Downey says. "Today, ten times as many people want

to write comedy. It's a great way to make a living if you can get a job."

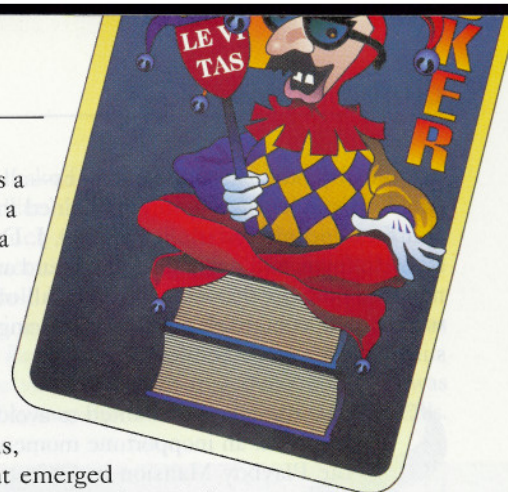
And the possibility of getting a job, of creating YUX 4 BUX, as a Beverly Hills vanity plate proclaims, was the option that emerged from the watershed election of 1965. "It was very unusual for a business board man to be president," says Beard. But Walker Lewis had savvy, contacts, and the entrepreneurial skill that brought the magazine into an entirely new arena. "When I joined the *Lampoon* in 1959, the circulation was as close to zero as you could get and still have a magazine going," says Frith. But by the late 1960s Lampy was wealthy and nationally famous, a transformation built on a new approach to an old standby: magazine parodies.

The *Lampoon* and its onetime president Robert Benchley '12 are credited with inventing the magazine parody. In 1912 the magazine published a burlesque of the old *Life*, the progenitor of a long line of parodies that ranged from *The New Yorker* to *Popular Mechanics* to a 1950 send-up of *Punch*. All were funny and ambitious but lacked four-color pages and had only local circulation.

Then in 1961, *Mademoiselle*, hoping to bolster newsstand sales during its July doldrums, became the first magazine to request its own parody. In a two-way competition for the hand of *Mademoiselle*, the *Lampoon* outclassed the *Yale Record* and won satiric rights; *Mademoiselle* published the spoof with marked success and the era of nationally marketed parodies began. The *Lampoon* produced two more *Mademoiselle* travesties in 1962 and 1963, the latter actually an *Esquire* takeoff that ran within *Mademoiselle*.

The turning point came in 1966, when Lewis spearheaded arrangements for a *Playboy* parody; for the first time, the *Lampoon* produced a nationally distributed magazine under its own auspices. A *Time* spoof in 1965 had sold well, and "if *Time* could sell, what was next? The obvious answer was *Playboy*: a zillion circulation, and a very central publication," Beard recalls. "We financed the parody with a bank book we found slipped down in back of a drawer. It had a \$3,000 balance that turned into \$195,000."

"There had been lots of *Playboy*



parodies by other humor magazines—all of them crummy,” says Lewis. But a new group that joined the *Lampoon* at about that time included Mark Stumpf ’69, J. Dudley Fishburn ’68, Rob Hoffman, and notably, Henry Beard and Douglas C. Kenney ’68, perhaps the most gifted of all of Harvard’s comedy writers. The cohort felt equal to producing a magazine parody surpassing any done before.

Since the *Lampoon* wanted to avoid the possibility of a lawsuit at an inopportune moment, Lewis traveled to the Playboy Mansion in Chicago to announce that plans were afoot for a parody. “They threatened to sue us,” says Lewis, now president of the U.S. division of Avon Products in New York. “I told them, ‘Great! We can’t wait—it’ll be immediate publicity.’” When examples of the *Lampoon*’s first-rate illustrations reached *Playboy* editor and publisher Hugh M. Hefner, however, things changed suddenly. “Hef went nuts,” says Lewis. “He immediately realized that the parody would be great P.R. He invited us over, stopped the lawsuit, and became our enthusiastic supporter.”

Lewis contacted the magazine distributor who handled *Playboy*. He “loved the idea so much that he put up half the financing,” Lewis recalls. And Lewis lined up two wealthy backers to guarantee the printing bill. An undergraduate then comping for the *Lampoon* had a girlfriend who had appeared in *Playboy*; she introduced the satirists to some New York models who posed for pictorials. “The ads sold out in a week,”

says Hoffman. “The next thing you knew, we were printing 550,000 copies of a four-color magazine that was distributed everywhere.” The parody appeared on Labor Day weekend, 1966, and “flew off the newsstands,” says Beard. It sold out in a few days’ time.

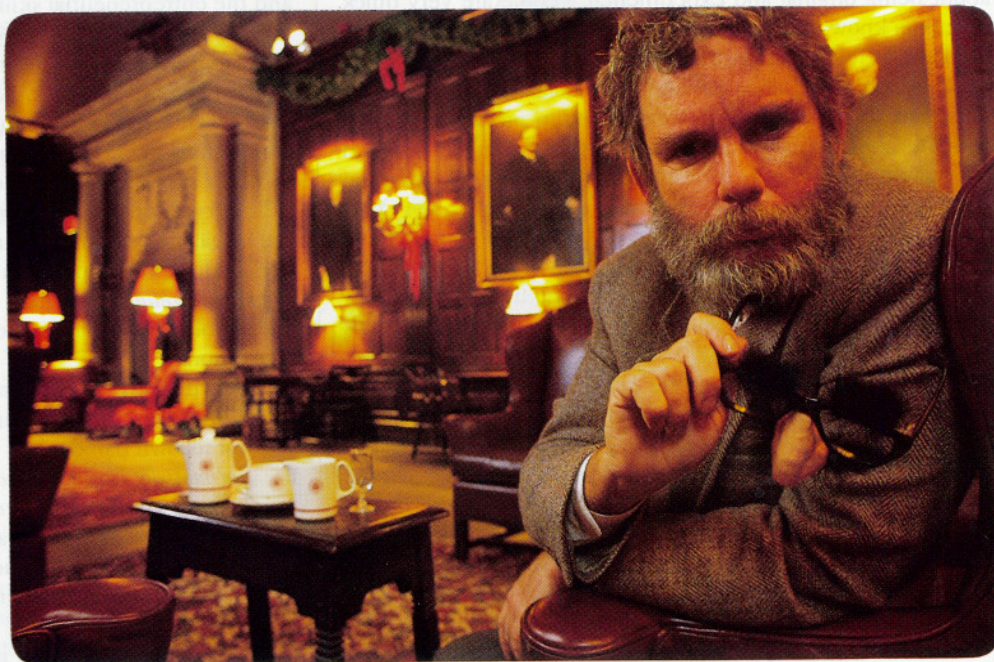
The cloudburst of cash that rained on the magazine financed the repair and restoration of the Castle, which had descended into a state of advanced decrepitude in the decades since its opening. “The building was a black hole,” says Beard. “Everywhere you looked there was something that needed a \$15,000 repair.” After a year spent renovating the Castle, some of its occupants began talking about starting a national humor magazine, tentatively called the *New York Lampoon*. “There was no career path for humorists then,” says Hoffman. “The New York book publishing world and *The New Yorker* were the best you could hope for. There were no humor magazines.” (At least there were none targeted at adults; *Mad*, of course, was still serving its pubescent audience.)

But seedlings were sprouting. Beard reflects that the June 1969 “Meaningful Confrontation Number” of the *Harvard*

Lampoon was in some ways the prototype for the *National Lampoon*: “It was a collection of items each of which was a parody in itself. It was a Rosetta Stone for things to come.”

THE NATIONAL LAMPOON

The concept of a national humor magazine was probably, in Beard’s estimate, “one of the ten worst business ideas of 1969, up there with starting a steel mill or a shipping line with American crews. But we had youth and stupidity going for us.” Reserve military duty (Beard) and faked epilepsy (Kenney) spared two of *National Lampoon*’s founders from the draft. “Both of us had escaped being killed in Vietnam,” says Beard.



The patriarch: *National Lampoon* co-founder Henry Beard. “Henry is the best humorous list writer of the twentieth century,” says another *NatLamp* founder, Rob Hoffman.

“You were willing to take chances because if you failed, at least you weren’t coming home in a body bag.”

Beard and Kenney had established a commercial track record. They had collaborated on *Bored of the Rings*, a 1969 book spoofing J.R.R. Tolkien that eventually sold 750,000 copies and is now in its 32d printing. The same week that *Bored* came out, another product with the Beard-Kenney magic hit the newsstands: a second *Lampoon* parody of *Time*, whose cover depicted a naked female and asked, “Does SEX Sell Magazines?” The answer was a vociferous yes; the *Lampoon* earned \$200,000 and used most of it to start an endowment that has since grown into the millions.

In June of 1969, Beard, Kenney, and Hoffman cut a deal to publish the *National Lampoon* with Twenty First Century Communications of New York, publishers of *Weight Watchers Magazine*. The *Harvard Lampoon* licensed the *Lampoon* name to the new entity in exchange for a percentage of the latter’s circulation revenues (not profits), meaning that the college magazine would be paid even if the *National Lampoon* ran in the red. That September Beard and Kenney moved into a

New York duplex apartment on East 83d Street and started rounding up talent. A legendary Castle figure, George W.S. Trow '65, another former *Lampoon* president who had been living in New York and writing for *The New Yorker*, provided introductions. Frith and Christopher B. Cerf '63—"a rock-'n'-roller with a Deerfield background," in Trow's words—were former *Lampoon* stars who knew Beard and Kenney and came aboard as contributing editors. Of Trow's contacts, the most important was Michael O'Donoghue, a brilliant satirist with the blackest of black senses of humor. "We were beating the bushes for anyone who could write funny," says Beard. "But for every one who could, 55 could not."

In April 1970 the first issue of *National Lampoon* appeared; its cover displayed a sultry female model and the legend, "Sexy Cover Issue." It lashed out at David and Julie Eisenhower, *Playboy*, Dr. Seuss, pornography, Norman Rockwell, the Harris Poll, and the *Kama Sutra*. O'Donoghue says that "in 1970 the world was divided into hippies and straight people; we could stand in the center and pelt both of them with rocks."

New York comedy writer Sean Kelly, who became an important editor at the *National Lampoon*, observes that "almost invariably the people who create or perform comedy are outsiders: orphans, the blind, the lame, the halt, the weird. The *National Lampoon* was all outsiders, tearing into middle-class American values out of sour grapes." The creators' innovation and genius helped earn their wide editorial freedom. "We were the young Turks and no one fucked with us; we could put in whatever we wanted," says O'Donoghue. "It was a great creative situation and it just blossomed." In the process the magazine trashed taboos that were probably as old as the Republic. "There was a great door that said Thou Shalt Not," says Beard. "We touched it, and it fell off its hinges."

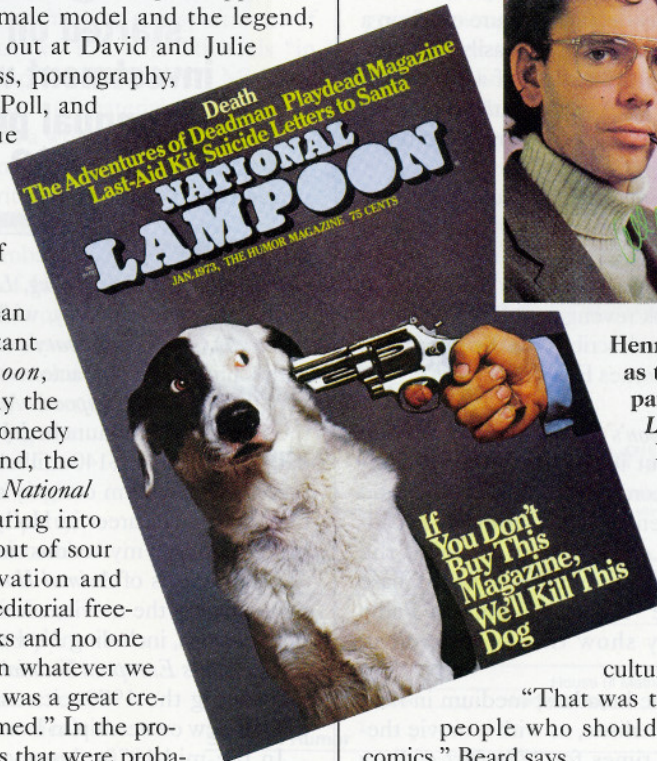
Los Angeles screenwriter Chris Miller, another prolific *National Lampoon* contributor, recalls that the magazine "was put out by a bunch of very sharp, intelligent, emotionally retarded guys." Novelist Emily Prager, who worked for the magazine, adds, "*National Lampoon* people had a real horror of sincerity. It was against the humor code. It meant you'd lose your edge."

Many on the staff shared a mordant Irish-Catholic brand of cynicism. As a group, they were "extremely mean guys, very acerbic in conversation," says longtime *New Yorker* writer and book author Ian Frazier '73. Cerf describes the *National Lampoon* as "an extraordinarily competitive place, even more so than the *Harvard Lampoon*. A lot of people ended up hating each other, not speaking to each other." O'Donoghue says, "The old *National Lampoon* people were very good. They were the 'A' team, much more than the 'Saturday Night Live' group who came later. There was a lot of verbal showing off. If you slipped once on the tightrope, you'd be hurled to your death."

Some of the battles concerned proper satiric targets. "We'd have these politically correct fights with each other," says

Kelly. "Is it OK to make fun of Buckminster Fuller?" "No, we like Buckminster Fuller." "Still, he's an asshole." "Yes, but he's our asshole." In such clashes, the comic impulse almost always prevailed over the party line, and the magazine did indeed spoof the book *I Seem to Be a Verb*, by R. Buckminster Fuller '17. Appearing after Fuller's death, the parody was called *I Seem to Be a Past Participle*.

Businesswise, the venture got off to a shaky start. "It was terrifying; we didn't know what we were doing," Beard recalls.



Henry Beard and Doug Kenney as they appeared in "Poonbeat," a parody of itself the *National Lampoon* published in the December 1973 issue. At left, that year's January issue.

"We spent the first few months stumbling around in the dark and breaking things." One mistake was hiring a counter-cultural art studio for design and layout.

"That was the wrong direction—they were people who should have been doing underground comics," Beard says.

The magazine's look changed instantly when Michael Gross became art director in November 1970; it took on a slick, professional style, and the parodies became near-perfect replicas of the originals they mocked. "Suddenly you said, 'God, that's it!'" Beard recalls. Cerf explains that "you want to use people who *actually draw* what you are parodying—technical illustrators, for example—not people who draw parodies. When a parody looks just like the real thing, it works."

Salaries were low, and for the senior editors, the workload was horrendous. "For five and a half years I worked twelve- to fourteen-hour days, seven days a week, with no vacations, no weekends off, and no exceptions," says Beard. "I'd write from 7:30 or 8:00 A.M. until noon, then be in the office until 8:00 P.M. It helps to be 24 years old."

Fortunately, "Doug and Henry's talents were complementary," says Hoffman. "Doug was very mercurial and thought in multimedia terms; he had machine-gun, rapid-fire creativity. But Doug never made deadlines; for the first three years it took us five weeks to put out a monthly magazine. Henry was more stable, more methodical." In Beard's words, "Doug had great talent as a producer and director; he should have been head of a movie company. I was designed to be a magazine editor."

In Kelly's analysis, "what made the *National Lampoon* work

was the fact that Congress banned cigarette ads from television in 1970. That and the pop music boom; tobacco, booze, and record-company advertising rolled in for the first few years. The only jokes we were ever discouraged from making were cancer jokes." Demographic trends also helped; the magazine's natural audience burgeoned through the early 1970s. "The baby boom was peaking. In 1975 there were more white boys in college than in any other year in U.S. history," says Kelly. "This was a reader who was in on the joke. The 1964 high-school yearbook parody was *his* yearbook; *Animal House* was *his* college."

In 1974 the magazine published the most famous of its special issues, known as the *1964 High School Yearbook* parody. Written by Kenney and *National Lampoon* editor P.J. O'Rourke, the volume is a hilarious, stunningly detailed picture of life in a hopelessly typical American high school. Its queasily nostalgic flavor evokes both the humor and the pathos of adolescence and clearly foreshadows Kenney's later work on the 1978 film *Animal House*, a college fraternity comedy that became a megahit.

"The *Yearbook* was a critical document because it shifted humor from the married, suburban context to the adolescent context. It was humor for non-adults, or anti-adults," says actress Kathryn Walker, A.M. '79, who lived with Kenney during the latter part of his life. "It took revenge on the adult world and its oppressive boredom." Trow describes the *Yearbook* as "a generative document. Out of that comes Fox Television."

As the *National Lampoon's* circulation and revenue grew, it branched out into other media. It produced a comedy record called *Radio Dinner* and in January 1973 opened a smash-hit off-Broadway revue called *Lemmings* that ridiculed the 1969 Woodstock concert. *Lemmings* cast members Chevy Chase and John Belushi later joined the "National Lampoon Radio Hour," a weekly radio comedy show that premiered in November 1973.

The "Radio Hour" exploited the broadcast medium in richly creative ways. It could be minimalistic, as with a movie theater announcement listing show times for "The Best of Ryan O'Neal, at 2:02, 2:04, 2:06, 2:08..." The game show "Catch It and You Keep It" allowed contestants to take home any prizes they could physically catch; it used sound effects like a Tappan range falling from four stories, or a 26-ton brick house obliterating a contestant.

The *National Lampoon's* publisher, Twenty First Century Communication's Matty Simmons, never seemed to grasp the fact that "his assets left the building every day at 5 P.M.," in Beard's paraphrase of a remark once made about *The New Yorker*. Simmons opined that "guys like John Belushi are a dime a dozen," oblivious to the fact that comedy writers recognized Belushi as, in O'Donoghue's words, "the rarest coin we have on this earth." Beard adds that "guys like Belushi are not only a trillion dollars a dozen, but there aren't a dozen of them."

Simmons's human assets, however, were performing splendidly. *National Lampoon's* circulation climbed from 445,000 in 1972 to 724,000 in 1973 to 830,000 in 1974, and the November 1974 issue sold more than a million copies. Amazingly, 90 percent of the sales were newsstand purchases at full price, not subscriptions. By 1974 the magazine that had started on a \$169,000 investment was making an annual pretax profit of \$3 million. But the three founders—Beard, Kenney, and Hoffman—were about to depart. After protracted negotiations in

1974, they consummated a provision of their original deal that forced Simmons to buy out their interests for \$7.5 million. After five years of trailblazing humor, the three young Harvard men became millionaires in their mid-twenties.

Hoffman had already earned his M.B.A. and returned home to Texas to work in his family's Coca-Cola bottling and distribution business, of which he is now president. Beard turned to writing humorous books, which include a series of tongue-

**By 1974 the
magazine that had
started on a \$169,000
investment was making an
annual pretax profit
of \$3 million.**

cheek dictionaries: *Sailing, Latin for All Occasions, French for Cats*, and most recently, with Christopher Cerf, *The Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook*. Kenney collaborated with Chris Miller and actor-writer Harold Ramis on the screenplay for *National Lampoon's Animal House*. Made for \$3 million, the movie, which launched John Belushi's film career, has to date grossed over \$140 million at the box office, making it the most profitable film comedy of all time. Kenney went on to a brief, meteoric career in Hollywood that ended suddenly with his death under mysterious circumstances in Hawaii in 1980.

As producers of *Animal House*, the *National Lampoon* earned millions from the movie, and it produced several more successful comedies, including *National Lampoon's Vacation* and *National Lampoon's European Vacation*. The magazine declined editorially during the 1980s; it suspended publication this spring, though new ownership in Los Angeles intends to revive it.

In the mid-1970s, however, the *National Lampoon* media empire was on a roll. Gilda Radner, Bill Murray, Brian Doyle-Murray, and Harold Ramis, players from the Chicago-based comedy group Second City, joined the "Radio Hour." In 1974 Belushi, Radner, Bill Murray, and Ramis were among the actors in *The National Lampoon Show*, a revue of comic sketches rooted in the magazine's iconoclastic sensibility. In the audience one night was a young Canadian television producer, Lorne Michaels, who was in New York casting an unnamed new NBC television program that came to be called "Saturday Night Live."

SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE

"If you look at the cast of the 'National Lampoon Radio Hour,' you'll see that it *was* 'Saturday Night Live,'" says O'Donoghue. "Lorne Michaels just put it on TV." O'Donoghue is in a position to know, since he produced the former and has written and performed for the latter. Hoffman agrees that "when Lorne Michaels started 'Saturday Night Live,' he raided us, and because they [the cast] were upset with Matty, they left."

James Downey, the show's current producer and head writer, recalls that while growing up he never liked Milton Berle,

Jackie Gleason, George Burns, or Jack Benny. But "there was another type of comedy," he says. "Ernie Kovacs did it, and the British—like 'Monty Python'—did it. When someone played the record *Beyond the Fringe*, it was like a revelation."

Despite "Saturday Night"'s reputation for challenging the frontiers of taste, Downey says that "I never thought we set out to be outrageous." Rather, he calls the show "a new type of comedy in contrast to conventional prime-time sitcoms." (The original "Saturday Night" cast was in fact known as the Not Ready for Prime Time Players.) "Prime time is a very conservative, closed, controlled thought system," says Downey. "We like to think that's what we aren't."

Downey joined "Saturday Night" in its second season (1976-77). He was staying in New York at the apartment of Kenney, who recommended Downey to Lorne Michaels "in part," Downey thinks, "to free up his extra room." Michaels asked Downey to submit five pages of material that could be used on the show and hired him as a writer a week later.

By then Al Franken '73 (see cover) had already been a member of the "Saturday Night" writing staff for a year. Because Franken has done substantial on-air performing on the show, he is probably the most recognizably famous of Harvard's comedy creators. He is also one of the few who never joined the *Lam-poon*. "I was very alienated from the *Lam-poon* and the Hasty Pudding when I was at Harvard," he says, recalling one invitation to a black-tie party at the Castle: "I didn't go in black tie; I thought they were kidding. Then at the party, people tried to make me feel uncomfortable."

But Franken didn't need the *Lam-poon*; along with his writing and performing partner, Tom Davis, he had been doing a two-man stand-up act ever since they began performing comical bits as part of the chapel announcements at the Blake School in Minneapolis. During college Franken and Davis did stand-up gigs at The Improvisation in New York. "Jay Leno worked for an auto leasing company and used to drive down to the city in Bentleys and Rolls-Royces; we bombed down in a '62 Buick convertible," Franken says. "The pay was in food, which actually came in very handy. We used to make a big show of letting Bud, the owner, know how hungry we were."

After college, Franken moved to Los Angeles with Davis and spent a year scrounging out a living in comedy clubs and at college gigs. Their break came when their agent sent some Franken and Davis material to Lorne Michaels; he hired them and they were on staff for the first day of preproduction for "Saturday Night."

The show's first years were heady ones. "Saturday Night Live" quickly

found an audience that looked forward to its 11:30 P.M. "cold opening" and another dose of its innovative, experimental sketch comedy. The cast included "intimidating personalities—guys like Belushi, Ackroyd, Bill Murray—who were so scarily funny that they would sometimes awe the writers," says Downey. "I remember being in a room where Murray was just fooling around and convulsing everyone. The cast created a lot of the comedy of the show, often in collaboration with the writers."

On the current "Saturday Night," "the writers are considered fully equal partners with the cast—as much deserving of credit, and even holding similar power," says Downey. "Lorne instills this respect for the writers; it was unheard of before this show. On Hollywood sitcoms, if a star's agent feels the star isn't getting enough to do, the star could walk off the show and hold up production; if a writer did that, his desk would be emptied in half an hour. I knew people who wrote for TV shows and never met the star; their stuff was rewritten without consultation, and they'd watch the show to see what survived."

According to Downey, "everything on our show is some mixture of writing and performance; some things are close to pure

Critics have complained that the process favors Harvard applicants.

Standard Application for Staff Writing Position, Form 2B ("Saturday Night Live," "Late Night")

National
Broadcasting
Company, Inc.

NBC is an equal opportunity employer and gives equal consideration to all applicants without regard to race, color, religion, national origin, age, sex, disability, veteran status, or sexual preference.

Personal Data

Last name _____ First _____ Middle _____
Present address _____ Zip _____ Telephone _____

Education

Name of college attended _____ House (if Mather, explain below) _____
Lam-poon _____ Crimson _____ Hasty Pudding _____

Sense of Humor

Choose the terms below that best describe your sense of humor.
droll _____ sardonic _____ elfin / puckish _____ ribald _____ waggish _____ Shavian _____

Dinner Jacket

Choose the terms below that best describe your dinner jacket.
single-breasted _____ double-breasted _____ shawl collar _____ full-peak lapel _____

Drinks With John Marquand

As a condition of employment, would you be willing to have occasional drinks with John Marquand?
Yes _____ No _____

Essay

In his poem "Man From Emmanuel," David T. W. McCord '21, L.H.D. '56, addresses his subject in the following apostrophe: "Is that you, John Harvard?" / I said to his statue. / "Aye—that's me," said John, / "and after you're gone." Discuss. _____

Applicant Statement and Release

I hereby authorize NBC to contact any individual (e.g., house master, freshman proctor) in a position to verify the above, and I understand that if hired, I will be required to pass a swimming test.

Signature _____ Date _____

Do not write in space below. For office use only.

A. Brtsh Isls _____ Dutch / Hgnt _____ Othr _____ B. Epscln _____ Othr _____
C. J Prss _____ Andvr Shp _____ Othr _____
D. Interview Comments: first-rate / top-drawer _____ we can do better _____ what an awful little person _____

—James Downey '74, producer and head writer, "Saturday Night Live."



Funny genes: identical twins Mark O'Donnell '76 and Steve O'Donnell '76 bask in the glow of a mushroom cloud in Steve's office at "Late Night With David Letterman."

performance, some close to pure writing. We once did a piece called 'Sodom Chamber of Commerce,' which was a discussion of why the city of Sodom had a negative image. Somebody had done a survey: 'What do people from outlying areas think of when they think of Sodom? Our libraries? Our museums? Our municipal transportation? No!—they think of . . . *sodomy*.'

"That's a pure writer's piece—all the performers get to do is wear Chaldean helmets," Downey continues. "In 1978, when it appeared on 'Saturday Night,' no other show on television would have done it. Carol Burnett would have wanted to know, 'What character do I get to play in this piece?' Here, writers and actors work together as equals, but if one has to be in control, it had better be the writer."

In practice, creating a sketch script "does not involve that much writing," says Downey. "The actual process involves playing with an idea, performing on your feet, and depending on how many people are working on it, choosing the best things for each moment. I don't mind collaboration because you get a good idea of what will work when it's acted out. That's especially important because this show is about performing—you don't have to worry about a piece translating on the set, since it was performed as you created it. The page is almost a record of the performance, the writing down of the last two hours of thinking on your feet."

Franken says that "my model as a comedy writer is the hockey player Phil Esposito. He used to get a lot of garbage goals by just hanging around the net; there's a lot of chances there, and he'd put them in. I have every idea in my head I've

ever had; I listen to everything everyone is saying, and I'll find a way to put it in."

The "Saturday Night" engine begins on Monday when the writers (the staff has been as large as eighteen) get together and talk about ideas for the upcoming Saturday show. ("The worst thing is a polite but unenthusiastic response," says Downey.) On Tuesday the writing process focuses on the more

Franken's "model as a comedy writer is the hockey player Phil Esposito. He used to get a lot of garbage goals by just hanging around the net."

promising ideas. At Wednesday noon, the cast sits around a large table, reads through the script aloud, and gives feedback; camera and audio people, the design department, and the week's guest host sit in. On Wednesday night the writers select the bits for the show, and on Thursday they rewrite them in groups. "Generally everything is overwritten and too long,"

says Downey. "Leaner is better for performance." Friday there is more rewriting, plus blocking and rehearsal, in the studio. On Saturday there's a run-through during the day, an evening dress rehearsal, and the live televised performance at 11:30 P.M.

Making all this happen every week requires murderous hours from the writers; Conan O'Brien, who wrote for the show the past four seasons, often stayed up until 2 or 3 A.M. on Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday nights, and all-nighters were not uncommon. "It's a very hard job," he says. "You don't get a lot of sleep." Sunday is supposedly a day off, but "you could have *killed* [gotten big laughs] the week before, and on Monday they want to know, 'What's your idea?' It's the greatest job in the world when you have a good idea. With all the resources there and a lot of funny people around, there's a giant machine built toward fulfilling your vision. When you *don't* have an idea, it's an incredible hell."

O'Brien tells of once getting stuck trying to think of something for scheduled guest host Roseanne Barr: "I stayed up all night Tuesday agonizing over my idea, sweating a lot. I felt like quitting the show; it took forever to write a page. I fell asleep on the floor of my office. But at the read-through on Wednesday, my sketch went over well and I thought, 'What a great job.'" Despite the pressure, Franken keeps it in perspective: "The worst thing that can happen is that people won't be entertained. There are tougher jobs: being a doctor, being James Baker. . . ."

Despite its rigors, over the years a steady stream of Harvard alumni have written for "Saturday Night Live," including Patricia Marx '75, Mark O'Donnell '76, George Meyer '78, Max Pross '79, Tom Gammill '79, John Bowman '80, M.B.A. '85, Shannon Gaughan '81, Pamela Norris '81, Jon Vitti '81, Greg Daniels '85, Andrew Robin '90 and currently, Daniel McGrath '86. Mark O'Donnell's twin brother, Steve O'Donnell '76, head writer for "Late Night With David Letterman," says that "the *National Lampoon* and 'Saturday Night Live' were the big waves, the two big punches in terms of breakthroughs. It suddenly seemed like, yes, there was comic life after college. Once Downey got established at 'Saturday Night,' the frontier was open, and prairie schooners of *Lampoon* types were trundling toward Pike's Peak."

LATE NIGHT WITH DAVID LETTERMAN

"You see *Lampoon*-style humor in its purest form on 'Letterman,'" says David Sacks. "Statistically it has had the highest proportion of *Lampoon* talent of any TV show." Steve O'Donnell, who has written for "Late Night" since 1982, says that "a solid one third of the 'Late Night' writers have been *Lampoon* people. They're like Dave Letterman, smart and from outside of Hollywood. They aren't steeped in show-biz juice of some kind; they might have a somewhat fresher perspective." Downey, who was a Letterman writer in the show's first year (1982-83), says, "the 'Late Night' sensibility is very much a *Harvard Lampoon* sensibility. It's a silly, abstract show, more writing- and idea-oriented than 'Saturday Night Live.' David Letterman is not an actor. 'Late Night' is about having an attitude."

That attitude, according to O'Donnell, involves "a jaded kind of excessive knowledge of media and popular culture—it's so familiar that it breeds contempt and disdain. The national mood may have just gotten more sarcastic, or moved toward a writer-oriented sense of humor. As the public got more

Top Ten Really Funny Things You Can Do at Harvard

10. Giggle uncontrollably every time your professor uses the word *syllabus*.
9. Collect enough dining-hall trays to make yourself a swell stegosaurus outfit.
8. Tell a museum guard you swear you saw the glass flowers moving.
7. Tell a museum guard you swear you saw *him* moving.
6. Tell them in your application essay that you want to grow in knowledge and wisdom; then once you get in, don't.
5. Step between two enormous townies in a Somerville bar; identify yourself as a Harvard student, and point out how "droll" you find their accents.
4. Read the poetry in the *Advocate*.
3. Handcuff yourself to the podium at Commencement; refuse to leave until Food Services gives you their great recipe for fish pizzola.
2. Befriend a geeky thirteen-year-old freshman who has invented a disintegration ray; rule the world by turn of century.
1. Write in blue book, "I don't have the right answers because I'm here to learn the right *questions*—which, by the way, you have asked on this exam. Good work."

—Steve O'Donnell '76, head writer, "Late Night With David Letterman"

media-savvy and more gorged with pop culture, the *Lampoon*-type attitude may have become widespread enough so that writers who spoke in that voice would be congenially received."

Letterman's style is flexible; his material ranges from put-down/zinger gags to soft "anticomedy" based on weird or strange premises. "Dave's not a perfectionist. His motto is 'It's only television,'" says Jeff Martin '82, a writer for "The Simpsons" who spent six years on the "Late Night" staff. "Part of the fun there was the looseness, the amateur-hour quality. I did enjoy writing something and being able to see it in front of America 24 hours later."

But the relentless deadlines of four shows a week also impose a challenge. "The problem with variety shows is that it's endless," says Los Angeles comedy writer Sandy Frank '76, J.D. '81, a "Late Night" writer for four years. "In a sitcom you write 22 shows a year, but on Letterman, there's not even an end to the season. It's like treading water. One minute you could be treading water the best anybody has ever treaded water, and the next minute you're drowning—there's always *tomorrow's* show."

Perhaps as a consequence, the work atmosphere in the crowded 'Late Night' offices is "more businesslike than you might imagine," says Joe Toplyn '75, M.B.A. '79, who wrote for the show from 1983 to 1990. "It's not ['Dick Van Dyke Show' actors] Rose Marie and Morey Amsterdam shouting at each

other. But the process has to be fun or it won't be fun when it's performed on the show."

Part of the fun includes looking for the comic possibilities in "new toys—things like a radio-controlled car or a baseball glove with a special gel in the pocket"—that publicists send to the show, Toplyn says. Another part is meeting guests like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Phoebe Cates, Rosanna Arquette, or model Elle Macpherson. "You'd see the writers trooping down to have their Polaroids taken with them," Toplyn recalls with a grin.

But the real reward comes in the creation, according to current 'Late Night' writer Steve Young '87: "The performance of something funny is almost like gravy. The great majority of things that you work on here aren't used, for whatever reason. Of the opening remarks that I write, maybe Dave will use one in 25." Letterman himself reviews all material for the show, and one of a writer's rewards is seeing "a piece of paper you turned in with a check mark next to an item," says Young.

Three main waves of *Lampoon* grads have populated the "Late Night" staff, which generally includes about eight writers. The first cohort included Downey, Meyer, and the team of

**Frank's "Late Night" job
turned out to be "more fun
and better paying than
corporate law."**

Pross and Gammill. The second group—Toplyn, Frank, Martin, and Kevin Curran '79—joined in 1983; most stayed through the late 1980s. Both writing cohorts included the tireless O'Donnell, who as head writer has helped hire many of the staff, including current third-wave writers Young and Ken Keeler '83, Ph.D. '91. "I've never had any prejudice against, or favoritism toward, *Lampoon* guys," O'Donnell says.

Several of the "Late Night"ers took indirect routes into comedy. Toplyn was a junior executive at Columbia Pictures in New York when Downey told him that several "Late Night" writers were leaving for "The New Show." Toplyn wrote five pages of material and sent it to Letterman. The personal interview with the show's star reversed normal job-interview protocol: "I brought a Lacoste shirt, Levi cords, and running shoes to work in a sports bag," Toplyn says. "That way, I could change out of my suit and tie before I met Letterman at NBC."

At around the same time, Sandy Frank was getting bored with his work as a corporate lawyer; his firm happened to occupy the same Rockefeller Center building as NBC. Frank would occasionally have dinner with Downey, who encouraged him to try out for the "Late Night" staff. "I had seen the show only three times, so I rented a VCR, taped it for a month, and then watched it without trying to write anything until I knew how the show worked," says Frank. He submitted some material and while on vacation got the call to come in and meet Letterman. Frank's "Late Night" job proved to be "more fun and

better paying than corporate law. I satisfy any nostalgia I have by watching 'L.A. Law' and 'People's Court,'" he says. "When I gave my law firm two weeks' notice, some of the partners who had never heard me say a single funny thing—could have been more surprised if I'd said I was going to be a basketball player."

In general, "the Harvard comedy people have a good bat average, and therefore a good reputation," says Conan O'Brien. While the *Lampoon* connection may help to make contact to get a head writer like Downey or O'Donnell to read material, the fact remains that "you have to be able to write, or they'll get rid of you," O'Brien says. *Lampoon* alums have indeed found work as well as hired other progeny of Lampy's Castle. "A high school friend came to visit and said he'd heard I was a *waiter*," O'Donnell muses. "He was disappointed to find that I didn't have that kind of power."

SPY MAGAZINE

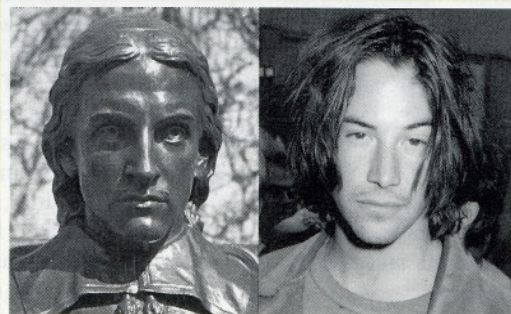
"The first favorite magazine for many of us was *Mad*," says editor Kurt Andersen. Unlike *Mad*, though, *Spy*—with its razor-sharp ridicule—reaches few readers under 25 years of age. "It's about grown-up lives," Andersen says. "It has a skepticism about it, and a contrariness: we're anti-Conventional Wisdom, whether from the Left or the Right. The sensibility is New York and reflects a New Yorker's view of the world. In *Spy* we are interested in celebrating the virtuous than in exposing the hypocritical and vainglorious." Hoffman calls *Spy* "an extreme example of erudite humor. There's no slapstick in *Spy*."

The magazine, which takes its name from a fictional gazette in the 1940 film *The Philadelphia Story*, eschews fictional humor; rather, it specializes in exposés, investigative pieces, and straight reporting with fangs. But some of *Spy*'s regular features—such as "Separated at Birth?" (see below), which matches photos of celebrity look-alikes—are pure frivolity. The articles often build on exhaustive, detailed research into documents or published material. "The thing that one likes about the 'Harper's Index' has informed us: a fascination with tell-tale curiosities," says Andersen.

Some of *Spy*'s columns, such as those on *The New York Times* and the film industry, consist largely of media-insider gossip.

Separated at Birth?

(Courtesy of *Spy* magazine.)



**John Harvard,
inanimate object**

**Keanu Reeves, barely
animate sex object**



*Spying from the roof: Jim Collins, Susan Morrison, and editor in chief Kurt Andersen atop the Manhattan building where *Spy* magazine originates.*

with a markedly catty tone. "It's looking beyond the press release, stripping away the gauze and smoke that the rest of the media create," says Susan Morrison '82, *Spy*'s executive editor, adding—with some understatement—"there's no puffery involved." O'Donoghue bluntly states, "I like *Spy*: it's mean and bitchy. I like to see blood on the floor."

The humor emerges from wit, irreverence, anecdote—and from *Spy*'s famous epithets. In its pages one encounters "short-fingered vulgarian" Donald Trump, "former black person" Michael Jackson, "unbearable Play-Doh-faced homunculus/action toy" Sylvester Stallone, and "steely political footnote" Geraldine Ferraro. "In the eighties there was a renaissance of greed and profligacy. We had Donald Trumps, Al Sharptons, and Gary Harts aplenty," says Andersen. "These are ripe subjects for a magazine such as ours."

After college Andersen worked as a writer for Gene Shalit of NBC's "Today" show and became part of a "free-floating group of former *National Lampoon* editors"—including Cerf, Trow, and non-*NatLamp* author George Plimpton '48—who put out one-shot parodies such as the *Off the Wall Street Journal* and the *Not the New York Times*, the latter published during a strike at the real *Times* in 1978. He left NBC and joined *Time* magazine as a staff writer. Andersen says that in the mid-1980s, he and fellow *Time* staffer E. Graydon Carter found that "we didn't have a favorite magazine that expressed our take on the world, as *National Lampoon* and *Rolling Stone* had once done. We shared a sensibility with 'Saturday Night Live' and 'Late Night'; those shows had transformed TV, but there was nothing

similar in a magazine format. The *National Lampoon* had devolved into sophomoric tit jokes and toilet humor."

Andersen and Carter joined forces with venture capitalist Thomas Phillips '77 and set about raising \$1.5 million to start *Spy*; they sold thirty investment units averaging \$50,000 each to "28 rich people and my mother," says Andersen. Phillips became *Spy*'s publisher (he departed last year), and the magazine hit the newsstands in 1986, finding 25,000 readers in its first year. Circulation rapidly took off and this year reached nearly 200,000; the magazine also has a long-term book contract with Doubleday and has produced a TV special and a pilot for an NBC series called "*Spy* TV Pranks" ("If 'Candid Camera' was Neanderthal Man, this is Civilized Man," says Andersen). In 1991 Charles Saatchi, a founder of British advertising giant Saatchi & Saatchi, and a French partner acquired the *Spy* enterprise.

On Tuesdays, seven or eight *Spy* editors—a group that includes Jim Collins '80—convene in the conference room with sandwiches for a two-and-a-half-hour lunch and brainstorming session. "It's a group of people with electricity," says Morrison. "We bring in things that have struck us as interesting over the week."

Despite *Spy*'s bare-knuckles approach, the magazine has never been sued for libel—a testament to its assiduous research and fact checking—and its editors are able to walk the streets of New York *sans* bodyguards. On one occasion a woman writer whom *Spy* had profiled in a "more or less friendly fashion" poured ice down the front of Andersen's shirt. But

far more typical is Andersen's attendance at a Broadway show whose audience included "a cavalcade of *Spy* subjects," he says. "Probably only one of them knew me."

Spy's pages are rife with pseudonymous bylines and unidentified sources, operating necessities in the journalistic waters through which *Spy* swims. "I challenge anyone to do a satirical magazine that wouldn't be accused of being mean-spirited: it's like complaining that Szechuan food is too hot," Andersen says. "The American norm is 'Have a Nice Day.' But to call a spade a spade and a scumbag a scumbag is a good thing. Sometimes a harsh satirical attack is justified. If you worry too much about conventions of taste and niceness, you become toothless and denatured. We go to a wide audience and inevitably some people will be offended. It's not like poetry, where the number of people who write it and the number who appreciate it are the same."

One *Spy* contributor, Mark O'Donnell, does write poetry, as well as plays, stories, humorous essays, and television comedy. He also draws cartoons (see below) and may be the most versatile and least categorizable of Harvard's comedy talents. As a playwright, O'Donnell has received a Guggenheim grant; as a television writer, he has created skits for "Saturday Night Live"; as a humorist, he has published articles and cartoons in magazines ranging from *The New Yorker* to *Newsweek*. O'Donnell also teaches a course in sketch writing at the New School for Social Research; next January Alfred Knopf will publish a new collection of his comic short stories, *Vertigo Park*.

"My ambitions were always to be funny in a literary sense—my models were Benchley, Perelman, Thurber," O'Donnell says. "On the page you have more complete control. It's your name and your vision. In television things get homogenized or reworked; the more unique stuff is less likely to go to read-through." As an example, he recalls working for a cable TV show on the Comedy Channel: "At first it was, 'You can write, act, direct. The sky's the limit!' They brought it down to sea level very quickly. It turned into, 'Everything has to be one minute long and plug the latest movie. Do anything you want so long as it ends with a clip from *Blitzen*.' Or, 'Our budget doesn't allow for props, but please stay away from verbal humor.'" Another disappointment was the 1984 CBS series "The Comedy Zone," which was supposed to showcase comic

playwrights. "I knew there was trouble when one of the producers said his favorite show was 'The Muppets.' Everything had to be as cute as 'The Muppets,'" O'Donnell recalls.

O'Donnell's quirky avant-garde humor flies over some heads and seems to sideswipe or pass beneath others. "Many people think my writing is far out or incomprehensible," he says. "They say things like 'that's too Harvard.'" But O'Donnell is anything but solipsistic. He sets a high priority on connecting with his audience: "Imagine a 'Twilight Zone'-type bargain," he says. "Take a comic and pay him a lot of money to tell jokes secretly, alone in a room. Then offer him the alternative of having an audience and being constantly published and produced, but making a living in some other way. I'd choose the second option."

Others besides O'Donnell relish the page: the tradition of literary wit is, if not robust, at least alive. George Trow published a collection of stories called *Bullies* (1979) and *The City and the Mist*, a 1984 novel; he continues to write humorous pieces for *The New Yorker* and screenplays for the Merchant-Ivory film group. Ian Frazier also contributes to *The New Yorker* and has published three books, including *Great Plains*.

"What I do is a byway," says Frazier. "Literary humor is something like a very expensive gourmet specialty item. The advantage of print is that you don't have other people limiting what you do. When you see a movie, the first thing you see is the director that made the movie, but when you read a book, you see the man or woman who wrote it. In movies, it's like a line from *The Producers* that Zero Mostel says to Gene Wilder, 'Remind me, Bloom, the next time I produce a play: no author.'"

NO AUTEUR

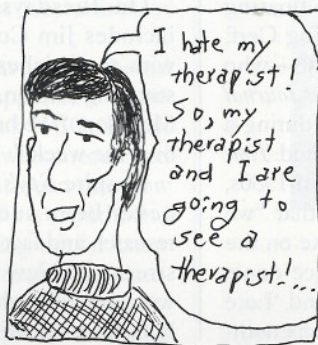
"Movies are for the birds," says Michael Reiss '81, a co-executive producer and writer of "The Simpsons." "We [at "The Simpsons"] give the public at least six hours of good comedy a year. I don't think there are six hours of good movie comedy a year." If Reiss is correct, the batting average of "The Simpsons," which produces 24 half-hour episodes annually, far surpasses that of the Hollywood film studios that in an average year might release four hundred two-hour movies, a large fraction of them comedies.

But in the feature film business, everyone's batting average is low. Getting a Hollywood movie produced is one of the true

DUMB COMIC



SMART COMIC



HARVARD COMIC



O'Donnell

longshots in American commerce. A feature film is a shockingly expensive and fairly unpredictable enterprise, and as a result only a minuscule percentage of new screenplays ever reach production.

The long odds apply even to a writer with the credentials and fame of Al Franken, who has seen two features shelved. One, a collaboration with Downey and Tom Davis, was a send-up of 1984 titled 1985; the other, done with *Rain Man* writer Ron Bass, was a seriocomic story called *Significant Other*, about a marriage involving an alcoholic spouse. Franken and Davis also wrote *One More Saturday Night*, a comedy on dating that *was* filmed, then essentially killed by Columbia Pictures, which gave it only a perfunctory release.

In the years after *Animal House*'s explosive success, "almost all the writers at 'Saturday Night Live' were approached about getting into movies," says Downey. "But the film industry does not accord the same respect to writers that this show does. Almost no movies are made, and the ones that *are* made happen for the strangest of reasons."

In 1986 Mark O'Donnell sold a feature film script called *Spitting Image*, about a rock star impersonator; predictably, it was never produced. "You get leery of Hollywood. It's like being paid to have a baby they're going to take out and kill," he says. "When 'Hollywood calls,' it's like hearing that Casanova wants to take you on a date. You think, 'This *could* lead to something, but...'"

"Roseanne" writer-producer Rob Ulin '84 wrote seven screenplays, one after the other, all of them commissioned by studios. "I was making a very nice living, getting paid more for each one because I was building heat," says Ulin. (In film-industry argot having "heat" means being "hot.") "But after a while it starts to feel kind of ridiculous, being at home, writing these scripts, and none of them gets made. Some came close, but the odds are so enormously against you in that game. You end up with nothing to show for your work. I told my agent I wanted to get into TV." In 1990, Ulin moved to television with the comedy series "Dinosaurs."

Even those screenwriters like Peter Seaman '74—co-writer of the innovative 1988 hit *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*—who eventually see their work produced, must relinquish creative control to producers and directors. Seaman quotes writer John Gregory Dunne to the effect that "aspiring to be a screenwriter is like aspiring to be a co-pilot."

But a producer-director of film comedies, like Reginald Hudlin '83, can maintain a fair degree of creative control, especially if, like Hudlin, the filmmaker has a successful track record. In partnership with his brother Warrington, Hudlin made the 1989 film *House Party*, a black-oriented teen rap-music comedy. Budgeted at \$2.5 million, the movie has thus far grossed \$39 million. Hudlin has now graduated to bigger stars and bigger budgets; he recently directed the new Eddie Murphy comedy, *Boomerang*.

When a film comedy gets everything working for it—as with *Roger Rabbit*, which Steven Spielberg's Amblin' Entertainment produced—the financial and creative rewards are immense. "As a genre, comedies do better than anything else in the feature line," says Seaman. A key reason may be that unlike television, feature films play before live theater audiences. "People like to laugh together. It makes all the difference in the world," Seaman says.

"Carnac, the Magnificent"

ED McMAHON: I hold in my hand a series of envelopes that have been kept sealed in a mayonnaise jar on Neil Rudenstine's front porch since twelve o'clock today. No one knows their contents. Yet Carnac, in his infinite and borderline-divine wisdom, will furnish us with the answers...

10,000 MEN OF HARVARD

Who showed up for the party at Wellesley Saturday night?

A NOBEL PRIZE, A TERM IN CONGRESS, AND A SEAT ON THE NEW YORK STOCK EXCHANGE

What does everyone else at your 25th reunion have?

THE HEAD OF THE CHARLES

What did Cromwell use as a bowling ball?

LAMPOON, ADVOCATE, CRIMSON

Name two student publications and the color of embarrassment.

A DIPLOMA FROM COLUMBIA

What do you get if you flunk Harvard's Quantitative Reasoning Requirement?

CANADAY

How much tuna does the National Tuna Association suggest you eat?

OCS-ACL

How does a Princeton graduate spell *oscillate*?

ELSIE, TOMMY, AND BARTLEY

Who makes a profit when the dining halls serve moussaka?

HOLYOKE CENTER

What did Robin say when Batman showed him the middle of a tree?

PLYMOUTH, DEREK, YALE

Name a rock, a Bok, and a lock.

—Patric Verrone '81, former writer, "The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson"

THE TONIGHT SHOW

The California license plate reads FLA LAW, a joke that nicely conflates its owner's previous career as a Florida lawyer with his current one as a television and film writer. After two years of legal practice in Ft. Myers, Florida, *Lampoon* alum Patric Verrone '81 had a shot at writing comedy in L.A. and took it. "One of my law partners said that he once had a chance to pitch for the Detroit Tigers and had always regretted not doing it, so if I wanted to try this, to go ahead," Verrone recalls.

After six months writing for the "The Late Show Starring Joan Rivers," Verrone submitted material to "The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson" and was called in to meet the show's star. "Carson's office at NBC was sort of a bunker. It was underground, with no windows. It might even have had a secret exit," says Verrone. "The room was lined with mirrors... he was wearing a tennis outfit... I can't really describe the

room because I was so transfixed by the man. I told him I'd been a lawyer. He said his career was mostly dealing with lawyers and writers."

Verrone joined the "Tonight Show" staff in 1987 and stayed until 1990, writing monologue material in the mornings and desk spots (for example, Carnac—see box, page 35), in the afternoons. Before the show taped at 5:30 P.M., Verrone could peek at Carson's cue cards and see which of his jokes made it into the monologue.

"Each Monday morning we'd drive out to Malibu to meet with the big guy [Carson] at his house and talk about that week's material. He has a huge tennis complex with an indoor pavilion overlooking the court, and a \$250,000 stereo system. Sometimes Johnny would be sitting in front of a TV monitor watching his hands as he did magic tricks. He'd hold court, telling us stories from the early days of TV about people like Pinky Lee and [mentalist Joseph] Dunninger," Verrone recalls. "Johnny's a TV-aholic. He'd say, 'Hey, did you see that Bolivian beauty pageant last night?' 'No, Johnny, *we* don't have three satellite dishes at our house.'"

Verrone is currently writing screenplays and recently wrote, produced, acted in, and directed an award-winning twenty-minute film spoofing the PBS series "The Civil War." The film's executive producer, Maiya Williams '84, is Verrone's wife and a fellow *Lampoon* alum. *The Civil War: The Lost Episode* draws upon much of the *Lampoon*-trained talent in southern California.

Though legal education is not a prerequisite to working for Johnny Carson, one of Verrone's predecessors on the "Tonight Show" staff, Pat McCormick, followed Harvard College with one year of Harvard Law School before leaving to try a two-man comedy act at Greenwich Village clubs in the late 1950s. When McCormick's partner quit show business, McCormick moved to Chicago and worked in advertising sales. He got a break when a young, wildly inventive comedian named Jonathan Winters came to town and found that McCormick shared his brand of zaniness. "Winters said that if he ever got a TV show, he'd hire me. I

didn't think twice about it," says McCormick. "Not long after that he called me; he was subbing for Jack Paar on the old 'Tonight Show.'"

McCormick became Winters's head writer and did six TV specials with him in 1964. Over the years he went on to write for Lucille Ball, Jack Benny, Groucho Marx, Carol Burnett, Jackie Gleason, Bill Cosby, Steve Martin, and many others.

"One time I went to Vegas, and five comedians whose acts I had written were playing at the same time!" he says.

McCormick spent eleven years with Carson as a "Tonight Show" writer and also performed in skits as the Easter Bunny, Cupid, and the New Year's baby—roles that received a comical head start from his six-foot-six physique. One of McCormick's most memorable jokes came on the day a big earthquake hit Los Angeles in 1971. His opening line for Carson's monologue that evening: "Tonight's 'God is Dead' rally has been canceled." Today McCormick continues to write all forms of comedy and also works as a motivational speaker, carrying the message "Loosen Up!"

Over the last thirty years, "Tonight Show" writers have been almost exclusively male and white. A far younger and more diverse group staffs the weekly sketch-comedy series "In Living Color," which resembles a multicultural "Saturday Night Live." Becky Hartman '85, who wrote for the second and third seasons of "In Living Color," observes that, even there, "some people still had a bias that a woman can't be funny."

Hartman, who was not a *Lampoon* type but a *Crim-*

son sportswriter, reflects on the change from college to professional comedy: "After writing all that fiction and jokes in bluebooks, it's nice to get paid for doing it. Of course, in bluebooks, you didn't have to rewrite."

Her "In Living Color" colleague Steve Tompkins '87 *was* a *Lampoon* type. "I came out to L.A. immediately after college and tried to break into comedy without using any *Lampoon* connections," Tompkins says. "I figured I could do that. I was woefully wrong." He describes his first Los Angeles apartment:



"Married . . . we killed 'em": comedy writers Pat McCormick and Maiya Williams cut up in front of two cut-outs of themselves.



"Professional wild man" Pat McCormick relaxes with a sculpture and a cigar.

"I had two pieces of furniture—a Yellow Pages for me to sit on and a White Pages for my guest."

Radio and cable-television work led to Tompkins's job at "In Living Color," which he joined three months after its February 1990 debut. Like most staff writing jobs, the hours are long and the pressure unrelenting. "People used to ask me why I wore my veins on the outside of my body," Tompkins says. But the pleasure of bouncing joke ideas off a group of funny people is a major compensation. "At any time while someone is pitching an idea, there's always someone laughing," says Tompkins. "And it's safe to say that it's the person pitching."

THE SIMPSONS

The prime-time animated cartoon series "The Simpsons" premiered at Christmas 1989. Shortly thereafter, Al Jean '81 was vacationing at the Epcot Center in Orlando, Florida. Along with his partner Michael Reiss '81, Jean had become one of the show's first two staff writers. Jean says that one day in Florida, when he wore a windbreaker with the "Simpsons" logo, "people were coming up to me saying,



"That show was really funny." There were near riots over my jacket."

That incident may have been the first sign that "The Simpsons" would take off. It has become the top-rated show on the Fox network and the most-watched show in its time slot. But in 1989, "nobody knew this show would be a smash," says Jean. Reiss recalls that, when he was hired, he didn't tell anyone about it "because it seemed embarrassing that I was writing for a cartoon."

By now it is clear that no one connected with "The Simpsons" has anything to be embarrassed about. The show has won both viewers and acclaim for its wit, bite, and freshness. "The Simpsons" is really smart-alecky," says Downey, with collegial respect. "You'll never see a 'Simpsons' episode, for example, where Bart learns a lesson on how AIDS is transmitted." The show's sassy humor originates with its writers, and six of the nine staff members hail from the *Harvard Lampoon*. Reiss, Jean, and George Meyer are writer-producers for the show and work closely with staff writers Jeff Martin, Jon Vitti, and Conan O'Brien.

Reiss and Jean work as a two-man team, which can be "more balanced than an individual writer," says Reiss. "Two people together are more than twice as efficient as two individuals working in isolation," Jean adds. "When you're doing comedy, the question is always, 'Will it get a laugh?' Often you think a joke is a winner and instead it sucks the air out of the room." And "for every joke in the script, eight more were pitched," says Reiss.

The writing team of Max Pross and Tom Gammill develops TV comedies for Castle Rock Entertainment in Los Angeles. Pross explains that "television is more of a writer's medium than film. In TV the writers are intimately involved with the production—it's more like theater." And viewing television when you know the writers behind a show is even more fun: "Watching 'The Simpsons,' you can tell a Mike Reiss joke or a George Meyer joke," says Gammill.

The "Simpsons" writers work hard to keep the joke quality high. "The show is very dense because we can design things in every frame—background elements like a sign advertising Gum for Less, or a boys' clothing store called Wee Monsieur—we put in these details for people with VCRs," says Jean. "Sometimes we sit for an hour trying to come up with a funny name for a fake movie." Reiss tells how once they "had to make up a stupid name for a cleaning product. Every one we tried, the legal department said, 'No, there is such a product.'"

Normally a hit television show will quickly spawn imitators, but "The Simpsons" has not, largely because of the difficulty of producing an animated series. In the past year Reiss and Jean have had only one week off, and forty of the year's 52 weeks are sixty- to seventy-hour work weeks. Most comedy series have a two- to three-month hiatus between seasons, but "The Simpsons" works year-round. "It's a man-killer," says Meyer. "You become accustomed to walking around in a dazed state that reminds me of North Korean brainwashing victims."

Jean calls the last several years "a big blur of work,"

On the 20th Century Fox lot in Los Angeles, some animated writers: Michael Reiss, Jon Vitti, Jeff Martin, Al Jean, and George Meyer of "The Simpsons" set a record for golf-cart cramming by writers for a half-hour comedy series.

and Reiss says, "This is not a great way to live, to be working this hard. There doesn't seem to be a middle ground—you can't have one of those forty-hour-a-week comedy jobs. You sit around stockpiling money you're not spending. A lot of us are talking about retiring at forty."

THE SITCOMS

Many comedy-series writers receive involuntary retirements via cancellations: each year the networks drop most new sitcoms. "There's no stability whatsoever," says Rob LaZebnik '84, a writer and supervising producer on the sitcom "Empty Nest." "You could find yourself unemployed overnight." When the work is there, however, the rewards are ample; the Writers Guild minimum payment for a half-hour script is \$13,000, and senior writer-producers in sitcoms can earn \$1 million to \$2 million per year.

But breaking into this lucrative, all-consuming field is extremely difficult, and a writer's first network credit is by far the most difficult one to attain. "You have to be here in L.A.—so much is timing and luck," says LaZebnik. "Very often you send in a script and they want to see you the next day. People will blink and feel they've missed the boat."

The *Lampoon* connection helps, and several Castle comics have reached prime time via the cable comedy show "Not Necessarily the News," whose producer found a wellspring of talent in Cambridge. Two who went that route were LaZebnik and Sacks, who worked together for two years on "Empty Nest." "Not Necessarily the News," says LaZebnik, "be-

"People ask, 'Why is TV so bad?' Well, for one thing, it's very, very difficult to do."

came a stepping stone from the *Lampoon* to doing sitcoms. I stepped out of the Castle and into the same bunch of guys." Harvard writers and producers staff many of today's situation comedies; a few examples are Susan Fales '84 of "A Different World," Kevin Curran and Stacie Lipp '89 of "Married... With Children," Nell Scovell '82 of "Coach," and Pamela Norris '81 of "Designing Women."

LaZebnik likens sitcom writing to working at "a repertory company with incredibly harsh deadlines. It's trying to stay ahead of this rolling boulder of work that doesn't stop." He says that "a lot of people underestimate how hard it is to write sitcoms—it's 90 percent craft, and a very rigorous craft. After you've done seventy episodes, the challenge becomes finding new things that haven't been done. People ask, 'Why is TV so bad?' Well, for one thing, it's very, very difficult to do."

The creative rewards take different forms. During a trip to Jerusalem, Sacks watched an "Empty Nest" episode that he had written broadcast with Arabic subtitles. And Sacks and



Woman behind the women: "Designing Women" executive producer Pamela Norris.

Below: For its second season, the palette of "In Living Color" included Crimson—writers Steve Tompkins, John Bowman, and Becky Hartman.



LaZebnik once wrote a touching script that took viewers through a day in the pediatric office of the show's central character, played by Richard Mulligan. In each scene, Mulligan saw a different patient: first a newborn baby, then a young boy, then a somewhat older boy, and finally a teenage male about to leave for college. "You realized at the end that the patients were all the same kid, seen at different stages of childhood, and that Richard was remembering scenes in his life," says LaZebnik. Mulligan won an Emmy award for his performance in the episode.

While that script might illustrate the potential of a comedy series, oftentimes "sitcoms don't make you laugh so much as smile. They make you feel good. At least once in the show everybody hugs," says Verrone. He calls such series not *comedies* but *warmedies*, citing examples such as "Full House," "Perfect Strangers," and "Family Matters." Downey says that most sitcoms communicate "phony warmth, a caricature of reality. They're heavily formulaic; you see the same plot—like the adopted girl who finds her birth mother—making the rounds. Commercials have to follow 'golden moments': on 'The Cosby Show' they hug, on 'Family Ties' they pick up the baby. Comedy should only be smart; it shouldn't have any responsibility to be warm. You have drama for that."

"Roc" writer Maiya Williams, who has written for sitcoms such as "Going Places" and "Amen," observes that "the network and the production company are usually less concerned with how funny a joke is and more interested in how it makes a character look; they want no negative traits." Verrone, however, points out that "Norman Lear made his career from unsavory people. This is an age of very soft television. Shows are not joke-driven, they are character-driven. The networks want characters either who are young, attractive children or who appeal to people who think like children. You rarely find a hard joke—one with an edge—in sitcoms. There's no such thing as

a 'soft' stand-up comedian, but stand-ups are people who make you *laugh*, not smile."

Williams says that "what Hollywood likes to do is pigeon-hole you. Since I'm black, I've gotten many black shows, although it's not something I've aimed for. I dislike the idea that a black writer can only write for black shows, or a woman writer can only write for women's shows, but white males can write for anything. If there is a black show, it's probably a good idea to have someone who knows how black people would talk or what they would be having for dinner. But unfortunately, people will probably think of me as a 'black writer' until I create a show of my own."

Another talented couple who met at the *Lampoon*, Andy Borowitz '80 and his wife Susan Stevenson Borowitz '81, have created a show—one, in fact, with black leads: "Fresh Prince of Bel Air." In so doing, the Borowitzes pulled off one of the television industry's major coups. As a generation of Harvard-trained writers begins creating their own series, they may bring a taste of *Lampoon* humor to prime time. The

Borowitzes have developed a new NBC series, "Out All

Night"; Pross and Gammill's "Great Scott" is on the fall schedule; Frank, Curran, and John Bowman have pilots that may win network slots in the coming year.

"When I got here in 1980, people kept looking at me as if I had a bad haircut; they wanted to know why I didn't go to New York and do something legitimate, instead of coming to Los Angeles and being sold into white slavery," says Andy Borowitz. "But I wanted to get into prime-time TV." Susan Borowitz says, "The best way to improve as a writer is to do TV, where every week you see what plays and what doesn't. You get the same opening night fever every Friday when the show tapes."

THE REFRACTORY LENS

The tradition of an "issue dinner" is a venerable one for humor magazines: *Punch* had them; they are an institution at the *Harvard Lampoon*; the *National Lampoon* had one or two a month; and even the long lunches at *Spy* fulfill the form. The idea is for editors to meet over food and generate concepts for the forthcoming issue; desirably, the atmosphere combines playfulness, purpose, and a good deal of laughter. The setting of a meal carries a subtext of relaxation, leisure, and conviviality, an ambience conducive to the free flow of jest.

"Freedom of mind is more important than refinement of mind," says Steve O'Donnell, describing the conditions for comic creation. "It doesn't help to worry about bombing—you have to let go of that anxiety because it blocks your creativity," says Al Franken. Another felicitous condition for most comic endeavors is the presence of other funny people.

At "Saturday Night Live," Franken at least partially fulfills his original fantasy about professional comedy: "It was always exciting, and you were laughing all the time." Mark O'Donnell's description of the "Saturday Night" staff could easily apply to the *Harvard Lampoon*, the *National Lampoon*, or most TV comedy shows: "A bunch of funny people hanging around, shooting the breeze and devising things."

Williams confesses, "I do like sitting with a group of people, pitching jokes,



Kevin Curran and Stacie Lipp of that hymn to domestic tiffs, "Married . . . With Children."

Right: In a screening room near the set of "Empty Nest," colleagues thrash out a plot point: writer David Sacks, key cast member Dreyfus, and writer Rob LaZebnik.



laughing all day, and getting paid for it." Pross says that "our friends with nine-to-five jobs come home after work and want to be with their friends and hang out, which is what we're doing for a living."

The group around the table, wherever it gathers and however diverse its members, probably shares an outlook or two. "Do you despair that the world is full of hypocrisy, or do you take some kind of *glee* in it?" asks Mark O'Donnell. "Most of the people I know who are funny are both playful and observant. Are they 'off-center'? Yes, if you mean that they're standing enough to the side to see what's actually happening in some arena of behavior that the people in the arena can't, or don't, see themselves." Downey reflects that the "stuff that works best deals with concerns a lot of people share, especially if they share them at approximately the same time. It could be something everybody has thought but nobody has expressed."

True enough, especially in a medium like television that reaches millions of separate psyches. But ironically, creators like Downey typically work with a target audience of a few friends. "Some comedy writers have a desperation I don't like, a hunger for approval in the form of getting a laugh," says George Meyer of "The Simpsons." "I'm much happier getting a laugh from six of my friends than from something that may go over with millions of people. My friends are much more discriminating." Beard says that "you write for yourself and for the best people you've ever read who do the same thing you do. If you were to ask someone like George Trow or Michael O'Donoghue to make a list of people who *really* know what's funny, it wouldn't be more than twelve names long."

LaZebnik says that "you sometimes wonder if anything is worth these hours, working so much and concentrating so hard. On show night, though, there's nothing like hearing an audience laugh at your joke." Mark O'Donnell says that "the harder people laugh, the deeper you've gone into addressing their fears and dissatisfactions." Laughter, for him, confirms the fact of communication: "You know you've made a point, your mind has connected with someone else's mind. It's a communion with other souls, and it's sublime. Sort of like a Vulcan mind meld."

"For me, the idea is paramount," says Meyer. "Most people laugh harder if they see something funny in the context of a character they like in a setting they recognize. But I would laugh just as hard at a really funny line I found on a scrap of paper in the gutter as I would if it were delivered by the finest actor." A few years ago, while living in Boulder, Colorado, Meyer circulated some of the funniest and most offbeat scraps of paper ever printed, in the form of a photocopied newsletter for a few hundred friends, including many professional comedy writers. It was titled *Army Man: America's Only Magazine*. Meyer produced just three issues of *Army Man*, but its legend still looms large for its eccentric jokes, such as, "My friend from Michigan says if you pushed all the Great Lakes together, they'd be as big as the Mediterranean. I say, why bother?"

Mark O'Donnell points out that the words *levity*, *levitate*, and *alleviate* share a common root: the Latin *levis*, meaning "light." Laughter, he says, "is like flying; it means that life is good at this moment even if the other circumstances aren't. That

seems a really good use of a human life: to create this flying sensation. People put down comedy, but it's easy to bum people out and much more difficult to uplift them." He adds that "comedy isn't nonsense—it's *sense*. If it were nonsense, when you'd make a joke people would just stare at you. Comedy people get great pleasure from hitting the nail on the head, and the audience does too."

Since that seminal *Lampoon* election of 1965, Harvard comics have hit a few nails on the head, invented some new hammers, and even bruised a few thumbs. Ironically, forces they set in motion may now be overtaking the type of humor that spawned them: literary wit, printed on pages and bound in a magazine. "If I suffer from a disease, I suffer from nostalgia, sort of like someone living in the last city that has trolley cars," says Beard. "But I'm happy to be the last man to be able to ride a trolley car. I don't have to go to Hollywood, though I have a huge respect for that world. I would rather be the last person in books than the first person in TV and movies. I'm a turning point, the last of the old people, one of the last Benchleys. Doug [Kenney] was the first of the others."

The fact that so many of the others are making careers in TV and film has had repercussions in Lampy's Castle. "One thing that depresses me is knowing that people on the *Harvard Lampoon* now know all about show business—agents, pilots, syndication," says Downey. "I tell them that they should be writing for print, for the same reason that a young actor should be working on the stage. It's almost like finding that your kids know all about sex before they are emotionally ready for it."

Furthermore, "there is not a glut of people who are good," says O'Donoghue. "It's kind of like the 'laugh factory' now; comedy has become another profession that fathers expect their sons to go into: doctor, lawyer, comedian. Rather than a form of rebellion, it's a path you can take to success." Trow says "the initial impulse behind all this was anarchic. It opposed something that wasn't fair and wasn't working. Now it's become a veneer of anarchy over very conventional values."

Downey believes "there should always be another test for a joke beyond, 'Did it get laughs?' We get some writers who come from the stand-up clubs who are addicted to the laugh. Their ultimate argument is 'it killed,' it got big laughs. I say yes, but is that the kind of laugh you want to get? Certain things would get huge laughs but they're cheap, they're easy appeals to the lowest common denominator."

O'Donoghue recalls once trying to explain to former "Saturday Night Live" cast member Joe Piscopo "why the laughs he was getting were not the kind of laughs he wanted. It was impossible to explain this to a person like Joe Piscopo; you have a better chance of teaching a cat to operate heavy machinery."

"I once wrote that laughter is the lowest form of humor. Humor is the icing to get you to eat the cake—the cake is ideas, things to think about. It's easy to get people to laugh," says O'Donoghue. "But getting people to think is very hard." □

Craig A. Lambert '69, Ph.D. '78, who once toured as a professional comic, is an associate editor of this magazine. His profile of comedy writer Douglas C. Kenney '68 will appear in a forthcoming issue.

