

## DAVID ZUCKERMAN Writing The Half-Hour Comedy

By Constance M. Burge

David Zuckerman is a graduate of the Motion Picture/Television dept at UCLA in California. After two years with a small literary agency, he worked as a comedy development executive for Lorimar-Telepictures. He then went to NBC Television as a Director of Current Comedy Programs where he covered such shows as "A Different World," "Mad About You," "Night Court," and "Wing."

In 1993, he got his first writing job on "Fresh Prince of Bel Air," where he worked for two years. After that he created and produced a half-hour comedy, "The Last Frontier" for FOX Television.

In 1996, he joined "King of the Hill" and worked on the first fifty episodes as a writer/producer. Two years later he left "King of the Hill" to develop and Executive Produce the first two seasons of "Family Guy," which will return to the FOX primetime schedule later this year.

He is currently developing pilots for Studios USA, and recently returned to "King of the Hill" as a consultant. He also created and produced the subversive Internet series "Meet The Millers" for the late, great Icebox.com. Dave has four Emmy nominations and one win (for "King of the Hill").

### **You started out in this business as a Studio Executive. How did you get this job and why would you give it up to become a writer?**

I'd been working for a small literary agency for two years. It was a valuable experience because I learned about contracts and deals, but I realized pretty quickly I was not cut out to be an agent. I was earning like \$350 a week, working ten-hour days with no overtime, and I was too embarrassed to ask for a raise. How the hell would I ever be able to negotiate a deal for anyone if that's the best I could do for myself? Plus, the agency partners did not have a good relationship and put me in the middle of their fights, and who needs that? I mean, that's why I left home, you know? I got my first executive job the old fashioned way—through my sister's roommate's best friend. She was a VP at Lorimar and had been looking for someone to work as her junior exec for months. They weren't offering a lot of money, so I was the perfect candidate.

We were spectacularly unsuccessful at developing sitcoms, and after two years my boss decided I was the problem. Whatever. Fortunately, her boss liked me and found a place for me in the Current Department. I was grateful to have a job, but this was not a good move; at that company, this was where downwardly mobile executives went to watch their careers die.

It turned out to be a blessing for me, because I formed two important relationships. One was with a network Current Programs Executive who oversaw two of the shows on which I was the studio rep. We'd sit together at the tapings every week and found we were in synch creatively. A few years later, after I started writing full time, he moved to HBO Productions and shepherded the development and production of a series I created for FOX.

I also became friendly with the executive producer of a syndicated drama show I was overseeing. I approached this guy about writing an episode, and he generously bought one of my pitches. He thought my first draft was pretty good, and the staff rewrite was fairly light. Although I disagreed with some of the changes, I felt it would be a conflict for me to give notes on their notes, so I bit my tongue and watched from the sidelines as the show was produced. It was directed by another Lorimar executive who was also working on a career transition. I thought the episode turned out pretty well, by the standards of that show. That was my first sale as a writer.

After a year of languishing in Current, I was determined to get my executive career back on track. I heard there was a job opening in the NBC programming department, so I called an old friend of mine from UCLA who was a rising star at the network. She arranged for me to meet with her boss, and after a lengthy interview process, I got an offer.

Unfortunately, Lorimar had just been bought by Warner Bros., which had a strict new policy about not releasing anyone from their contracts. It was crazy, because I was probably the least important executive at the studio. I had to meet with the guy right under the chairman of Warner Bros., and he agreed that the studio could survive without me.

I went to work at NBC in the final days of Brandon Tartikoff's presidency. I had a great boss and wonderful colleagues. I got to work with some of the best writers in television. I tried to keep my notes to a minimum—I looked at all these writers as potential employers and I didn't want to piss them off. I strove to be helpful and supportive without being too intrusive.

Current executives are the hardest working, least appreciated execs at a network. When a show works, it's because of the producers (which is true) but if it fails, it's because of the Current executive (not true). I had to attend filmings every night of the week except Monday. I really wanted to be in Development—those guys were the real hotshots at the network. I tried to get into that department three times, but I was unsuccessful. I finally decided it was time to get serious about making the jump to writing full time.

### **So that's when you decided to be a writer?**

I wanted to be a sitcom writer since I was a little kid. Pretty sad, huh? I think it was those reruns of "The Dick Van Dyke Show." Rob Petrie made comedy writing look really fun, and he got to go home to a hot wife in New Rochelle.

I watched all the classic sitcoms religiously—"Mary Tyler Moore," "All In The Family," "Bob Newhart," and then later "Taxi," "Barney Miller," and "Cheers."

I wrote my first pilot when I was about ten. It was a show about a middle-aged guy who quit his job and moved his family to Portland, Oregon to write novels. It was a pretty hacky concept, but hey, considering I was ten years old and didn't really know where Portland was, it wasn't bad!

### **What steps did you take to make your writing career happen?**

My parents always encouraged my creativity. I got an excellent early education in theater and performing from the American Conservatory Theater's Young Conservatory in San Francisco. The best training I got was from all the TV I watched growing up. I think on a subliminal level I learned to understand that character specific dialogue was more satisfying and funnier than jokes that could be delivered out of context.

When I worked at NBC, I learned an enormous amount about the craft of writing by watching how the producers I worked with rewrote their shows during each production week. I studied the changes they made and tried to figure out why they made the choices they did. It was almost like being on staff, but I didn't get free food.

### **How long did it take?**

I worked as an exec for six years. While I was at NBC, I became friendly with some of the producers on shows I covered. One of them was especially supportive of my ambitions to write. When he got the job as Executive Producer of "Fresh Prince," I asked if he'd read my "Seinfeld"

spec and consider me for a staff job. He gave me my first big break, and I am eternally grateful to him. Because I was an NBC executive (and because I have a great agent) my first staff job was a couple of ranks up from staff writer. I'm fortunate that my transition from executive to writer was pretty much seamless.

### **Successful, too. Your first series, "The Last Frontier" was picked up by FOX. Can you tell me a bit about that experience -- where you got the idea, etc.?**

It was a wonderful experience! I got the idea after visiting a high school buddy of mine who lived in Anchorage. He and two other guys shared this huge house on a hill. It was the supreme bachelor pad, full of toys for boys. They were making tons of money, had dozens of girls running in and out of the place, and I thought, "Yeah, this would be a fun place to spend half an hour a week." To throw in some conflict, I got the idea of having a woman from LA renting a guesthouse from three Alaskan men, and "The Last Frontier" was born.

I pitched the idea to my friend at HBO Productions, and he really sparked to it. This was right after "Friends" had become a monster hit, and the networks were all looking for "Friends" clones. We pitched the show at FOX, and much to everyone's surprise, they bought it. Because I was so green, they brought in a terrific writer with whom I'd worked in my executive days to be the showrunner. With some guidance from him and my friend at the studio, I delivered a pretty solid first draft. FOX was looking to do more "must-see" programming that season so they ordered the pilot.

I was thrilled. I was able to produce the pilot while working at "Fresh Prince." They even let us use their offices for casting. The pilot turned out well, but it all seemed like such a long shot. Miracle of miracles, they ordered the series as a back-up should either of their new higher profile comedies fail.

Unfortunately, both of those other shows failed, and FOX realized they'd made a mistake trying to do NBC-style shows. We produced eight episodes, and I'm really proud of them. Most of the execs at FOX seemed to like the show, but it just didn't fit on their schedule anymore. They ended up burning them off in the summer. It was still a great experience, and thanks to that show, FOX recommended me to the producers of "King of the Hill."

### **What's the most important thing about creating a half-hour sitcom? Characters? Franchise? Laughs?**

All these things are important, but if I had to pick one, I'd say characters. Think about the really successful shows in television history. It's the characters you remember. Audiences watch characters they love. Even prickly characters like Archie Bunker (of "All In The Family") and George Costanza (of "Seinfeld") are lovable in spite of their faults.

An interesting franchise can help, but that's probably more important in drama series. What's the franchise in "Roseanne" or the other successful domestic comedies? The garage in "Taxi" was far less important than the colorful characters that worked there. There are exceptions, of course. "Cheers" had to be set in a bar. "Murphy Brown's" topical, issue-oriented humor needed to play out at a TV news magazine.

As for laughs, a show needs to be funny, certainly. But there are a number of shows, especially some in their later years, which seem a lot funnier than they really are. They succeed because the audience has already fallen in love with the characters.

### **How do you create a series -- once you have an idea?**

I generally think about a particular theme I want to write about, and then try to imagine characters that will allow me to explore that theme. I do a lot of work on the characters. I create detailed bios and psychological profiles for all of them, and then I look for ways they can come into conflict with one another. Once I have this homework done, it's time to pitch the series to the studio. After incorporating their notes, it's off to the network.

Once the network agrees to buy a script, the next step is to come up with a story. By now I usually have an idea of what the story needs to be. There's a bias against premise pilots (that is, pilot stories that set up the series) and that makes it tough. I'm not sure why this bias exists, since countless great shows had premise pilots.

These stories are usually about somebody dying, backing out of a wedding, quitting a job, starting a job, meeting their true love, breaking up with a boyfriend, etc. Basically, your main character goes through a life-changing experience. It's become a cliché, but it works! Even if the story is familiar, your characters are fresh, and their experience will feel fresh and unique.

After the network agrees on the story, I'm off to first draft. I usually spend about a week just staring at my computer screen. I used to panic, but now I know this is just part of my process. I'm percolating. Stephen King, in "Bag of Bones," uses the metaphor of "the boys in the basement," as if there are these little workers moving stuff around in the depths of your mind. I love that. Then, slowly, the pages start to come.

I always hate my first pass and it's a huge struggle not to go back and constantly rewrite myself. It takes tremendous discipline not to rewrite until I get through that first pass. (I know a writing team who will force themselves to finish a first pass the first day! I have no idea if they actually accomplish this, but if so, they're my heroes.) I usually do at least five passes before I like the script enough to show it to anyone other than my wife, who is kind enough to read every single draft and tell me it's not terrible even when I know it is.

It generally takes me three or four weeks to write a draft I'm happy with, and that goes to the studio. Depending on their notes, I usually take about two weeks to polish it up before the network gets it. Sometimes I'll "table" the script before delivering it to the network. This means I'll ask four or five of my friends to come over and help me punch it up.

The idea is to deliver the funniest script possible. Sometimes these "tables" aren't very useful, but even two or three new jokes are worth the cost of buying lunch. (It's hard to get comedy writers to do anything without feeding them.)

From this point on, it's all up to the network. Sometimes they give notes immediately, other times they sit on it for weeks. Sometimes they just hand it upstairs to the triggerman and you get a yes or no very quickly. It can take days or months. I just try to work on something else and not think about it, but each time the phone rings, I think, "This is it!"

### **Where do you find your ideas and how do you keep them fresh?**

I don't know. Sometimes I have to wait a long, long time for them, but eventually they just seem to come, thank God. The less I think about this the better!

### **What's the hardest thing about half-hours?**

Everything! The long hours are tough -- you learn to operate on very little sleep, and you don't see your family as much as you'd like. In terms of the process, it's always tough coming up with a story that's fresh, funny, and bulletproof. I don't know a lot of writers who love the story-breaking

process. That's where 75% of the work in creating an episode gets done. The other difficult thing is to avoid changing stuff that works. A joke that kills on Monday sounds awfully stale by Friday. Sometimes you have to force yourself to trust a joke you know will work.

### **What do you think is absolutely necessary for someone starting out writing half-hours?**

Really want to be a television writer. Love television. Be funny, but be smart. Read half-hour scripts. Study the craft. It's not as easy as it looks. Try to have a life. (I'm still working on that one.)

### **What's a typical week in the life of a half-hour writer/producer?**

Most sitcoms produce three episodes in a row, then take a hiatus week. The writers use these hiatus weeks to work on future scripts, so it's really not a hiatus for them. During a production week, it usually works something like this:

On Monday, the producers and the department heads will meet in the morning and have a production meeting. Sets, props, wardrobes, effects, and other physical production issues are discussed. Then the cast and writing staff come in for a read-thru.

This is the first time anyone's heard the script, and you really get a sense of whether the story is working and if the dialogue is funny. You can sometimes tell which writer wrote which joke by who laughs the loudest. Anticipation can be very high because you've worked so hard on the script -- literally hundreds of man-hours have gone into the writing, and it's all led up to this.

One of my old bosses compared it to waiting for a jury verdict every Monday morning. There are studio and network execs present, and after the reading, they give their verdict, uh, I mean notes. The rest of that day (and often much of that night) is spent rewriting the script.

On Tuesday, the actors rehearse all morning while the writers work on scripts for future episodes. In the afternoon, the writers and producers gather on stage for a run-thru. There're no costumes or lights, and the actors rarely have their lines memorized.

It's a chance for the writers to see the show on its feet. Although studio execs are usually present and give their notes, this run-thru is primarily for the writers. Then the staff goes back to the office and does another rewrite. Again, these can go fairly late into the night.

Wednesday is much the same as Tuesday, but the big event comes in the afternoon: The network run-thru. The network execs come to the stage, and the actors do a more polished version of the show. You hope by this point that the show is working pretty well, but often the executives will ask for big changes. Once again, the staff retires to the writers' room for another rewrite. By the end of this rewrite, the script should be pretty close to what will ultimately be shot.

Thursday is camera-blocking day. The director works with the camera crew and the actors (or more often, their stand-ins) and figures out how the show is going to be shot. During this time, the writers are either working on future scripts or catching up on their sleep! In the afternoon, the producers watch a camera run-thru. At this run-thru, you don't watch the stage, you watch the TV monitors. This gives you a sense of what the show will look like, and if you're getting the shots you need.

Friday is spent pitching alternate lines for jokes you think might bomb in front of the audience and working on future scripts. Some shows do a dress rehearsal in the afternoon. By now the show is

pretty much locked, but there's still time to make minor changes. You eat dinner with the whole crew as the audience is loaded into the stands, and then it's show time!

You generally do two takes of each scene with the audience. This takes a few hours. Then the audience is released and you do "pick-up" shots. Then, if you still have any energy, you go out and celebrate surviving another week. Then you go home and sleep all weekend!

As far as the hours, it varies from show to show. Some factors that can determine your hours include how long the show's been on the air, how prickly the star is, how well that week's script is working, and how happily married the executive producer is. It's always good to have a boss who wants to get home to his family! There are some great shows that have very livable hours, but for the most part, it's very tough to do a quality show without putting in long hours.

**You've also been a part of the creative team (as writer and exec producer) of two wildly successful animated series, "King of the Hill" and the "Family Guy." How were those experiences for you?**

They were very different experiences. "King of the Hill" was a lot of fun. I'd never worked with so many talented, funny writers, and we all had the sense we were doing something special. We even took a research trip together to Austin and San Antonio so that we could write about Texans authentically. I was brand new to animation, and I learned so much from the showrunners. I recently started back on that show as part time consultant, and even though there are a lot of new faces, it was like coming home again.

"Family Guy" was a tremendous opportunity for me, and a major challenge from day one. I'm very proud of my work on that show. We had only three weeks to hire a writing staff and do pre-production before we had to record the first episode, so it felt like we were always playing catch-up. We put together a staff of insanely funny writers and gifted animators, and I loved working with them.

The show's *wunderkind* creator was this talented young genius with a wickedly funny, sometimes downright bizarre sense of humor. He had come up with a collection of breakout characters (performing most of the voices himself) and had fresh, edgy "voice." By that I mean his show had a point of view, style, and rhythm that was exciting and new. The pilot presentation he'd produced was hilarious and loaded with potential, but unfocused and a bit inaccessible. He was an executive producer, but at 24 he'd never even worked in primetime, let alone run a show, so I was brought in to develop the show and work as his partner.

We had a great deal of respect for one another, but as sometimes happens in arranged marriages, we also had very different points of view and were often at odds creatively. Finding compromises was an arduous process and led to some long workdays, but I think the end result was successful because it reflected both our sensibilities. Every job is a learning experience, and difficult situations always provide the most valuable lessons.

**Was the transition from sitcom to animated series an easy or difficult one?**

I had a lot to learn when I joined "King of the Hill." Fortunately, the showrunner was a great believer in all of the writers overseeing the production of each episode they wrote, and it was this hands-on training that prepared me for running "Family Guy."

Writing for "King of the Hill" was not that big an adjustment. The stories and characters are all grounded in reality. The most difficult thing about writing for "King of the Hill" was learning the show's "voice." I was born and raised in California—these characters were like nothing I'd ever seen or heard before.

"Family Guy" required me to really stretch as a writer. I had to learn to think in terms of cartoon-style gags and anti-structured stories. That show's humor was edgier than anything I'd seen on network television, so I got to write some jokes that were sharper and more outrageous than I was used to doing in the past. In that respect, the show was very liberating.

### **Which is more difficult -- writing animated series or sitcoms? Any preference?**

In some ways, writing a live action show is more challenging. On a live action sitcom, you're limited to one or two new sets per episode. On "Family Guy," we had dozens of new sets in every episode.

On a live action show, your budget usually allows a handful of guest stars. In animation, we could have an unlimited number. Unless you're "Friends" or "Will & Grace," it's tough to get a movie star to appear on your live action sitcom.

In animation, a movie star can literally phone in a guest starring role. Storytelling in animation is more free-form; you can do cutaways, flashbacks, and short scenes, and it doesn't feel as jarring as it does in live action. You can also write physical gags that would be difficult or impossible to execute on a stage, but can be drawn precisely the way you envision them. You also have more opportunities to rewrite and re-shoot things that don't work in animation than you do in live action. And you have to think much more visually in animation. Many of the biggest laughs are sight gags.

### **Any trends that you can see in half-hours for the near future...?**

I wish I could spot these things! I think the primetime animation fad has cooled, but maybe "The Oblongs" and the return of "Family Guy" will spark a renaissance. I had hoped "Malcolm In The Middle" would open the door to more one-camera film comedies, but that's happening more slowly than I'd like. I like the sitcoms on FOX -- none of them make my "favorites" list, but at least they look different. They have some style. The other networks seem to be taking fewer chances. The networks still seem to be giving series commitments to big stars, but not many of those deals paid off this season.

### **Why IS comedy so damn hard?**

Well, any kind of writing is hard, but comedy has it's own peculiar challenges. You have to tell a compelling story AND you have to be funny. And you only have 22 minutes. But that works for me, because I have a very short attention span.

### **Any tips for someone just starting out in the business? What would you tell people that you wished someone had said to you?**

Hmmm. I always tell college kids to take six months after they graduate to travel the world. My one regret is that I was so eager to start my career, I missed out on having a youthful adventure. Once you begin your career, you'll never have that kind of freedom again.

After you get back, find a mentor. Try to get a job as a writer's assistant. Be alert and learn as much as you can. Other random pieces of advice: Be nice to people. If you get the reputation for being difficult, it will cost you jobs down the line. People like to work with people they like. Don't underestimate the importance of knowing how to tell a good story. It's good to be funny, but "joke guys" rarely become showrunners.

### **Any thoughts you'd like to share regarding the upcoming writer's strike?**

John Welles and the WGA keep saying a strike isn't inevitable, so I'm trying to be optimistic. I've read the WGA's offer, and it doesn't seem unreasonable. I'm hoping the studios will do the right thing. Everyone suffers during a strike, not only people in the industry. This will be especially true given the downturn in the economy. I'm starting to hear more optimism from others, which is very reassuring.

I'm outraged that some showrunners are producing additional episodes for the networks to stockpile. They claim they're doing it so their crew members can earn extra pre-strike money. All they're doing is giving ammunition to the enemy and potentially prolonging a strike. These guys should be ashamed of themselves. I'm also concerned that the studios control the news media. The public will be getting their information from CNN (Warner Bros.) and the networks, and they can put a negative spin on the WGA's demands. If I'm a steelworker or a ditch digger, it's hard to feel sorry for a bunch of well-paid Hollywood writers. But really, does anyone outside of New York and LA care?

If it comes to a strike, I'll walk the line. Hey, maybe we can be on the same strike team.

**My new tennis shoes are more-than-ready!**

Constance created and Executive Produced the television series "Charmed," and was the Creator/Co-Executive Producer of the nighttime soap, "Savannah," also for the WB network. She is currently serving as a Consulting Producer for "Boston Public" as well as writing television pilots for 20th Century Fox Television. Connie lives in Los Angeles.

(Originally from [www.screentalk.biz/art041.htm](http://www.screentalk.biz/art041.htm))