

... A Live Studio Audience

When I was eight years old my mother carted my sister and myself off to participate in the taping of a children's television show called the "Grab Bag." My mother was overly concerned with her appearance, both physical and reputation, as such, we were dragged off to all manner of things we had no real interest in simply because doing so made her look good to others. This time she garnered eight tickets for friends and family for participation in the local TV show hosted by Jim Allen. I really had no interest in any of it at all, so when it came time to volunteer to play one of the games I did not raise my hand in the frantic waving designed to get picked - the only one who did not. Evidently I thought keeping my hands in my pockets would both signal my intention and seamlessly blend me into the background of screaming kids, but since I was the only one not raising my hand I was a stand out, a lone wolf, an easy target for being selected. As I recall I completed the first simple task and was sure that was it, but to my chagrin I ended up being selected as the grand prize contestant as well.

A small black bag, the "grab bag," filled with various items was brought over to me, with all eyes fixated on me and the bag - not comfortable for me at all. I was to reach into the bag and identify an item before pulling it out. Of the ten items in the bag, I needed to identify 6 and I would win the grand prize - lots of toys donated by people who wanted kids watching the show to demand their parents buy said toys for them because I was seen excitedly holding the booty of potential fun on TV. I identified six in a row and won the pile of stuff, as well as the attention of the group as the show ended - not comfortable for me. The event would have disappeared out of my mind were it not for one thing. The entire drive home from Hollywood was a berating from my mother for not saying a proper thank you at the end of the show. Twenty minutes in the backseat listening to "why didn't you say thank you" over and over again? What possible answer could I have given that would have shut her up? Evidently my mother was in the green room (the waiting room) with the other mothers, but her focus was our performance, did we sit up straight, were we drooling too much, was our hair in order. The fact that I had forgotten to say thank you for being chosen, when I clearly didn't want to be chosen in the first place, was too much for her, the humiliation far too much to take, hence the verbal wrath on the way home. My mother was overly concerned about her appearance by proxy as well.

I raise this point as that set the tone for my absolute distaste for live television tapings. I vowed to never return to another live show taping again. This wasn't too hard for me, while I lived in Los Angeles I did not have a lot of friends or family in live TV. I didn't really know anyone from out of town who would visit and demand to be taken to a live taping of the Tonight Show or some other nationally seen TV program either. So, as long as no one mislead me, I would happily spend the rest of my life avoiding another live taping. Notice I said mislead me, for it was a misleading, a distortion, a lie that would have me spending nearly five hours at the television taping of a truly unmemorable Situation Comedy. The excruciating five hour ordeal did provide me with

some remarkable insight into the world created by television broadcasts and how people see themselves, insight that sticks with me even today.

A live television taping is anything but fun, as people sit and watch a show acted out and pieced together a little at a time. There is a whole lot of stopping and starting, and the process isn't really a coherent form if you really study it. The form one sees on TV is an edited form, not the taped live form. Talk shows and a handful of other shows are live tapings, but the Sitcom is more like a watching taping of little vignettes which will be made funny later on by highly skilled editors, music people and directors. The live audience laughter is largely contingent on knowing the show, the live taping of the very first show ever done isn't going to be very funny to those in attendance because people are not anticipating funny, as they don't know the characters or have a connection to them. Back when we all sat around and watched the radio for entertainment, program creators found they could engage the home audience more effectively if they could have an audience in the broadcast studio, so the "live studio audience" was born. TV broadcasters feel that if people at home don't know where to laugh they won't laugh, and no laughter means sponsor's products might not sell, so the live audience is there to both engage the performers and tell people at home where and how much to laugh. The great writer Larry Gelbart once said that his show "MASH" was conceived and shot without a live studio audience, but network executives became concerned that the home viewer would not know where to laugh, so the laughs of old radio show recordings were added to the final show at the appropriate times to help the viewer know when it was appropriate to chuckle and when it was appropriate to laugh out loud. As Larry so drolly pointed out, "dead people were laughing at my lines."

I was thirty years old when it happened. My sister's fitness trainer gave her tickets to a "screening" and she asked me to go with her, she said it was to see "Blue Sky," a film with Jessica Lange. Now, a screening of a movie is not a TV show taping. At the time I went to a lot of screenings, all were free, some had a delectable catered spread available and most were in nice theaters filled by invitees - a nice way to see a movie at the time. This one happened to be on the Universal Studios lot. My sister and I drove over to the studio and I mindlessly drove to the usual entrance used for screenings. The gateman said we were at the wrong gate, we needed to go around to another entrance - I should have headed for home right at that moment. We drove to the right location, parked, then took a long hike to the area indicated. My first clue I was duped was the huge line of folks waiting to see something I was clearly not the demographic for, "Martin" was the hot show of the day and while looking at the throngs of people waiting for Martin's zany antics, I thought, "wait a minute, this isn't a screening, I've never been to one that has us standing in line like cattle!" Panic set in.

The line for our event was far smaller. As we stood there I began to swear, piss *and* moan, as it all became clear. But what I couldn't figure out was where did the "Blue Sky" thing come into play? We waited for the trainer to arrive, surely he'd be able to sort it out, but he was nowhere to be seen. It was this fact that forced my hand, as my sister,

being a certified product of our mother, was concerned about leaving. Leaving without seeing the trainer would not have been the upstanding thing to do, even though it was the absolute *right* thing to do, after all we're talking about me breaking a solemn vow. So as the line filled with a misfits from god knows where began to file inside, I swallowed my pride and awaited my fate.

We were led into the gallery above the set. This studio had the audience much higher than the stage, so getting into the action wasn't really possible, this was more like observing a surgeon do open gallbladder surgery from nose bleed section of an operating theater. There was still no sign of the trainer, who was now quickly falling to the bottom of my least favorite people list. Once I sat down and the doors locked closed and I looked around the room, said trainer was ensconced at the bottom of my list. Why were these people here? These people, usually recruited by some college kind handing out tickets at the local 7-11, had nothing better to do then this? Near as I could tell no one had any idea what the show was or who was in it - turns out no one even remotely known was in it (nor would they ever become known). None of the audience seemed to be friends or family of the performers, and there was no incentive to be there; no money, no gifts, no food - nothing. "Why do this," was my main thought, other then "the trainer dies at midnight" that accompanied my visions of stabbing him to death in front of a live studio audience.

Prior to each taping of a situational comedy a funny man, or women, is brought out to warm up the audience. The last thing any one with the show wants is an audience of people who have just lost there job. Since the tickets are handed out to anyone with a hand, the warm up guy is actually quite imporant. The warm up "act" is responsible for getting everyone in the audience to lighten up and forget about their lost job, their troubles, or the fact that they are sitting in this torture chamber with others they don't know receiving zero remuneration so that clueless people watching the show at home will actually know when to laugh. Our warm up act was a veteran of the effort, I know this not because I had seen him before a show taping, but because the person who announced his purpose told us so. His act wasn't so much of an act but a kind of hybrid of audience engagement and inane commentary designed to avoid offending, be funny, but not be funnier then the actual show we were there to see, and unify the audience. God forbid he be really funny and everyone think he was the act, or worse, funnier then the show. At the time David Letterman's "stupid human tricks" was a popular gag on his show, a show taped in front of a live audience. I recall one such effort in which a human, at least I think he was human, stopped an electric house fan from spinning with his tongue. I remember thinking, as I'm sure many did, "why?" The "how" was a far less pressing question, as the how was obvious, he simply stuck out his tongue and pushed it against a guardless high speed, razor sharp fan blade and stopped it from spinning. The why was less clear as, I can't see Sir Hilary's answer, "because it's there" being the reason for attempting this in the first place. Our warm up act decided to do his own, scaled down version of the 'stupid human tricks' with us in the hopes that it would lighten up the mood and ready everyone for the show.

People gladly raised their hands when offered the opportunity to demonstrate their trick for the rest of us. Now, this was not going to be on the actual show but this was for remuneration. A giant box of junk was brought out and a glorious piece was to be handed out each participants efforts. I correct myself, it was not junk, junk implies it has some value to a man of the trade, this was crap, plain unadulterated crap. There is a closet at every major studio that houses the giveaways from shows and movies that no audience ever cared about, this box was from the closet that contained stuff from shows and movies that even the people involved never care about. And so our comedic friend made his way around the room with his box, a microphone and a smile. A man told a joke, and receive a mug that had couple of initials on it, he was happy. Another man stood up and demonstrated his ability to sound like a pigeon. Yes a pigeon. He received a key chain of unknown origin and he was excited. No sign of the trainer. Then a blond, 40ish woman in a rather dirty pink crushed velour warm up suit frantically waved her hand. Thankfully she was recognized or her hand may have fallen off. She seemed to be with her sister, as the person she was with looked a bit like her. The comedian made his way through the audience and approached her. "What is your trick, what can you do," he said as he engaged the room and her at the same time? She placed her hand on the microphone, pulled it toward her mouth as all people do, and said, "I can take out my teeth."

I paused for a moment, remember my mother was overly concerned about appearance. The wrath this woman would gotten in the car ride home from my mother, on the outfit alone, would have resulted in God himself stepping in to stop the bloodshed, but to say she could, or would, remove her teeth in front a "live studio audience" was something my mother would have no trouble convincing God to chime in on. Sometimes there are moments when you have no frame of reference for what you are experiencing, this went well past that kind of moment. Our host was taken aback, but being the professional he paused and asked her to speak again, as if he didn't hear her but I heard her and I was trying not to listen. Again she repeated, without hesitation, that she would remove her teeth evidently because she could, and because he had simply asked for people who could do a trick - this was her trick. Now, I'm a city person, an educated man, the child of *my* mother, a know it all, but in that moment I learned something new. I learned that apparently there are places where the removal of one's teeth is a considered a trick. And without any ado at all, she removed her teeth. My teeth came out too, as my jaw hit the floor upon seeing this unprecedented event. The audience laughed a bit, was aghast a bit, and the woman was gleeful as she received a fluorescent pink plastic, one-size-fits-all visor with the name of completely unknown show stenciled across the brim.

Turns out the show was called "Blue Skies," plural, which lasted the sum total of eight episodes. No one laughed at anything, so I expect they had to insert dead people laughing to tell the folks at home where to laugh. The trainer never showed, it seems he wasn't really interested in helping the home viewer enjoy the show's comedy by cueing them to laugh at the correct times, he was interested in furthering his career by

schmoozing with his client who was a lead, yet it seems, as is often the case, that night his career came second to a very hot blond.

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