
On Writing

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Dave took the found and environmental humor from Steve Allen and did it better than anybody. I wanted to rip off the other half of Steve Allen. He would have people like Larry Nye come on and play characters.

What you are dealing with is fundamental human emotion. And if you have a scene that is not about emotion but only about business or plot, you're in trouble.

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On Writing

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A Note from the Editor

Late night comedy and daytime episodics. One may wonder what the two might have in common. Actually, quite a bit. Aside from the obvious fact that both are not in primetime, they are both daily shows, (called “strip shows”), both credit writers collectively rather than individually, and they both have their roots in radio. Daytime grew out of the 15-minute daily serials, and late night is a cousin of the morning talk shows which had hosts, guests, and their own studio orchestras.

Herb Sargent, no stranger to late night comedy (*Broadway Open House*, *Steve Allen*, *Johnny Carson*), observes, “Late night comedy and daytime episodic drama have something else in common that is invaluable to the writer: Both are demanding and unrelenting taskmasters. They require a frequency and quality of writing which allows few lapses, lags, gaps, or ‘I’ll finish it tomorrow’ excuses. A writer can truly benefit from the experience.”

Arlene Hellerman



Bill Bell



Claire Labine

October, 1996 and June, 1997

ON WRITING: Can you, Claire and Bill, talk through the steps involved from idea to finished show?

BELL: First of all, you have to structure your show. You have to decide what you're going to put in the show, and what characters you're going to use—

LABINE: Over the long term.

BELL: See, I've never worked with the long term. I haven't for 12 years. The network, God bless them, doesn't know what I'm doing until they get the finished script.

LABINE: Good for you.

ON WRITING: How far ahead do your stories get planned?

BELL: I make them up as I go along.

LABINE: This is the sound of two hands clapping.

BELL: It's not as though I don't know what I'm going to do tomorrow. But with some characters I don't know, and I find story as I go along.

LABINE: Bill doesn't do it the way it's usually done. In the traditional way—not in the traditional way at all—in the contemporary way, writers submit long story documents to the network that are purportedly the story for a year on a show. From those long story documents, outline writers structure weekly outlines, sometimes with a hell of a lot

of help from the executive producer, the producers, and the network executives: an outline a day for each show. These outlines are overseen by the senior writing team and by the head writer, and then distributed to script writers, who write the dialogue. Then there is another person called an editor who edits the scripts for continuity and tone.

BELL: I've never had an editor.

LABINE: No, I haven't either. And I never will.

ON WRITING: How do you each work?

LABINE: Well, now Bill's going to tell you what he does.

BELL: Three days a week, I'll have long conference calls with my co-head writer, Kay Alden, who is in Chicago, Trent Jones, who is in upper New York, and Jerry Birn, who joins me in my office at TV City. Together we'll shape six shows, scene by scene. I believe in very detailed outlines, ours run 20 to 25 pages—with significant dialogue. Obviously, that doesn't mean the actual script writing process is merely a mechanical one. Although it's very well structured, it still requires the talents of excellent dialogue writers. Then Kay will get the scripts back at her place and will edit as I'm involved with other facets of the show.

LABINE: Kay is really a shared consciousness for you, right? You obviously trust her to edit the scripts in a way that will reflect exactly what you wanted in them.

BELL: Absolutely. But we've been working—

LABINE: You've been working together for so long.

BELL: Twenty-four years. Kay knows exactly what we need. I don't see the script again until it's being taped. But I need this kind of creative freedom. I couldn't work any other way. Let's not forget, though, that I've been doing daytime continuously for over 40 years; two shows daily for over 16 of those years.

LABINE: Let me interject something here. I've got to put this in context. In my opinion, there is a real reason why *The Young and the Restless* has been at the top of the heap so consistently year after year, rating book after rating book. And that's because it's in the hands of a master who is a storyteller to start with and who knows the craft inside and out. So given that, I've always profoundly felt that the best way to be trained in this craft, in this form, is to start by writing scripts. You assume a certain degree of facility with dialogue and a certain dramatic sense on the part of a writer who wants to get into this business. You've got to have an ear for dialogue, you've got to understand what conflict is, and you have to have a feel for basic dramatic structure within a scene that has already been structured for you. But the way you learn the pace and the flow of

it is as a script writer. And I think one of the things that they're doing is taking people without dramatic training and suddenly trying to make them outline writers. And that's the next step, you know?

BELL: Sure. Absolutely.

ON WRITING: I should also say here that *The Young and the Restless* has been the number one show for how long?

LABINE: Forever.

BELL: In our tenth year.

LABINE: This is an unparalleled situation in the history of this form. Nobody's ever done that.

BELL: You have to demand an awful lot of yourself. Because when you do that, then at least you're in a position to defend what you've done if that becomes a factor.

LABINE: Oh, that's so right.

BELL: It's the most exciting thing in the world, though, to write, create something and see it come to life every day. That is one of the most euphoric things that can happen to a writer.

LABINE: It sure is. It's the immediate feedback. And then there's the joy of writing for the resident company of actors whom you get to know so well, and whose talent you get to know so well, and who are really the ultimate collaborators in shaping the character and the way the story goes. How many times have you looked at an actor and realized, "Oh, that's where the story's going. That's what it's going to be about."

Back just for a minute to the subject of long story documents. I have written them; I do write them. And I write them saying, “Guys, I’m giving you this because I know you need it to feel secure. Don’t count on anything.” Because if the thing’s any good, the only part of it that’s going to play the way it’s written is probably the first five pages. After that it’s going to have a life of its own if it’s a decent story. I don’t know how it’s going to come out. I mean, I know how it *says* it’s going to come out, but I can guarantee that’s not how it’s going to come out—if it’s working.

BELL: That’s very true.

LABINE: Paul [Avila Mayer] and I essentially wrote *Ryan’s Hope* after the first six weeks of the show. We had a year’s story predicated on the fact that Frank Ryan died. ABC threw out the original projected story because they wanted Frank Ryan to live. So consequently, we really were without story practically from the beginning of *Ryan’s Hope*, and it was wonderful, because the characters told the story.

BELL: Claire, what if you had said no to them?

LABINE: Actually, Bill, I’ll tell you, we had fallen in love with the character, too. It was nothing that was imposed upon us.

BELL: It wasn’t a power play or anything.

LABINE: It *was* a power play on their part, but the fact of the matter was, they were right. Part of the reason they fell in love with him was because we fell in

love with him. We were writing all these flashbacks—they were backstory incidents that explained why the family was so upset and what their hopes had been for this person who was lying in a coma in the hospital. And by the time we had done three or four weeks of that, we thought, “Oh my God, he’s too wonderful to kill.” That was the point at which they said to us, “You can’t kill him, the audience loves him.”

BELL: Sure.

LABINE: If it had been the wrong move, and if it had been just a power play, we probably would have been off the air in 13 weeks.

BELL: Or they would have given in to you.

LABINE: Or they would have given in to us. We had a very troubled relationship with the network after we sold the show to them. We were hired and fired and quit and returned four times in something like 18 months. At the very end they said, “Would you come back?” I thought there was not too much chance to save it, and everybody told me not to do it. But if it was going off the air, I wanted it to go off the air looking like itself.

BELL: Good for you.

LABINE: And we actually had a wonderful time in the last 18 months of it. We really had fun.

ON WRITING: What kind of things do you go for when you’re writing for daytime?

BELL: I want to have impact on the audience. I'd also like to have balance, conflict, and romance. I'd like to have—

LABINE: A few laughs.

BELL: But the key word is impact. I want to make sure that they feel that they have spent that hour very well.

LABINE: That there has been a big emotional reward for watching.

ON WRITING: What are the differences between daytime writing versus primetime television or film?

LABINE: The difference between daytime, primetime episodic, and film is simply that we have the luxury of time to play those scenes that I think are ultimately the most valuable: the emotional scenes involving relationships that really let the audience identify with these people. What you are dealing with is fundamental human emotion. And if you have a scene that is not about emotion but only about business or plot, you're in trouble. You need a few of them. But by God, the real scenes are the scenes between two characters in which something real and emotional is at stake for them.

ON WRITING: Does every scene have to have that kind of emotion?

LABINE: It helps. That's what we try for.

BELL: Well, you have different kinds of scenes. Not every scene will have that. But certainly you want something important enough to create some conflict within the framework of each show. You want a diversity of scenes.

ON WRITING: Are there writer-producer hyphenates in daytime?

BELL: I am.

LABINE: Agnes [Nixon] is, in essence.

ON WRITING: So on most shows, it's the producers who cast?

LABINE: Now.

BELL: Yes.

LABINE: In the old days, no. Irna Phillips, for whom Bill started—no one would have dared question Irna about casting. No one would dare question Bill about casting. No one messed with Paul and me about casting on *Ryan's Hope*.

ON WRITING: What was your experience on *General Hospital*?

LABINE: Actually, we were consulted. Wendy Riche, the executive producer on *General Hospital*, was absolutely marvelous to us in terms of—that's not the royal "we", I was working with Matt Labine and Eleanor Mancusi. And Wendy was terrific. I mean, she certainly initiated all of it but we were consulted before, after, and during. But I was working for *her*. She was the executive producer.

ON WRITING: So, if it's not a Bill Bell show, if it's not a Claire Labine show, then the writers work for the executive producer?

LABINE: You bet.

ON WRITING: But, Bill, you don't work that way.

BELL: No, I've never worked that way. Even going back to when I worked with Irna there were no producers who controlled the show. It's the writers'

medium. Without the words, without the script, you don't have anything. There's just no getting around it. You can have the best producer in the world, but unless you've got the scripts and characters, you're not going to make it.

LABINE: When it's working right, when it's functioning so that you're not getting messed with, this is for a writer.

BELL: I've been executive producer, I guess, for about 12 or 14 years. But I consider my most important job to be head writer.

LABINE: And you are executive producer in the sense of implementing your writing, right?

BELL: Well, of having control.

LABINE: Exactly.

BELL: And making sure every creative facet is fulfilled. But in all those years I haven't had any network interference. Interference is probably not a good word.

LABINE: Yes, it is. It's a perfect word. And if we don't make any other point in this interview, this is what has to be underscored. This is what it is about. Bill's show is written in the sense of *written*, not manufactured. And everybody's running around saying, "Oh, disaster, we're losing the audience. What's happened to the form?" They say the shows aren't as good as they used to be. Damn right. Because what we have are these made-up, pasted-up situations where everybody's scrambling. Now, to be the devil's advocate for the networks, there is so much

more money involved than there ever was when we were first in the business. I think it's very hard for them now to take a deep breath and make an act of faith about young people coming up. They're betting literally millions of dollars on the hope that this person will be able to deliver. They're all very insecure and their jobs are riding on it. So, you can see why there's a degree of nervousness when you're dealing with somebody who isn't Bill Bell.

ON WRITING: Have soaps changed over the years?

BELL: Well, first of all, they're hours now, which is something I resisted.

LABINE: Me too, Bill.

BELL: When I was doing *Days of Our Lives* and they said we were going to go an hour, everyone was excited. I was the one that stopped it. I said: You go an hour, you're going without me.

ON WRITING: Why?

BELL: Because I thought the half-hour was such a perfect form.

LABINE: Me too.

BELL: They had to wait until I left the show before they went to the hour, because I absolutely wouldn't do it. Then we put *The Young and the Restless* on the air, but after about eight years, CBS wanted to go an hour—I got a lot of pressure, and I resisted. The stories I could tell you about that.

LABINE: I remember.

BELL: But in any event, finally I said, "Look, if you want to announce it, you do that. But just know that I may not be ready and I may not go along with this

when the time comes.” The next day, Lee [Phillip Bell] and I got home from Lake Geneva and there was a case of ‘64 Dom Perignon and a massive floral arrangement. Finally, in November, I said, “Look, guys, I’m just not going to do it.” At that point they said all the affiliates were excited that their number one show was going to go an hour. They said, “Bill, we are committed to the affiliates. The ship is going to sail in eight weeks, with or without you.” I’ll never forget that line. When I told Kay [Alden], she cried for two days.

LABINE: I bet she did.

BELL: She was just sick about it. And I wasn’t exactly thrilled. But we did it. We were the first place show when we went an hour. You want to know what happened? It took us four years to regain that position. Four years.

ON WRITING: What changed?

BELL: The change was that we didn’t know how to do the hour.

LABINE: It’s a different structure.

BELL: I must say though, compounding the problem, once we went to the hour we had four leading men who exercised their out—because it was written into their contract. I lost [John] McCook, I lost [David] Hasselhoff, and a few others who escape me at this moment. That certainly factored into my concern.

LABINE: Of course it did.

BELL: Want to know something? I didn’t have a man left that had any balls. Then we cast someone—it was only supposed to be a two-month story, and the guy was going to be killed. He

came on the air, and, holy Christ—I was in Chicago so I wasn’t a part of the casting. I called and said, “Who the hell is this guy? He’s terrific.” It was Eric Braeden. That was the turning point, because I had someone to build around. He was a terrific actor and a terrific character. And he really grew into the role.

LABINE: This is another good example of what we were talking about earlier, in terms of responding to what you see, and the story goes from there.

BELL: Absolutely. And that works both ways. Sometimes you find someone you have every hope in and you plan for, and it just doesn’t connect.

LABINE: That’s right. We’ve all had that happen. The difference in structure between a half-hour and an hour in my experience is primarily that if you try to tell more than about two-and-a-half stories in a half-hour, you get into trouble because it gets fragmented. Do you agree with that, Bill?

BELL: Absolutely.

LABINE: The trick is giving viewers some manifestation of the same story every day, so that they are not disappointed. You make them wait, perhaps, for big developments in the story. But you keep the story alive and in their consciousness. If you do too much in a half-hour and start writing too many parts—I think the worst thing that ever happened to the serial form was the Gloria Monty film approach.

ON WRITING: What is that?

LABINE: Well, when Gloria Monty came on *General Hospital* in the early '80s, she essentially took what everybody had been doing, which were longer scenes, and broke them up into a much more cinematic form.

BELL: She did a lot more remote stuff too. And she had two exceptional characters, Luke and Laura.

LABINE: Yes, she did. Absolutely. Extraordinary performers with a lot of charisma.

BELL: I don't want to take anything away from her, because she did just exquisite work.

LABINE: She did great work, but I don't think it helped the form. When she was doing it, it was one thing. But when everybody else started doing it, it became—

BELL: When everyone copied it.

LABINE: When everyone copied it, it became so goddamned destructive. I think serial is a lot closer to theater than it is to film. You start a scene, you build a scene, you pay off the scene. And within the framework of a half-hour, if you're telling two stories, the structure I used to love was one story in the first act, the third act, and the fifth act. And a little hook at the end of the first act to take you into the second act, which was a different story. But you'd blend them at the end of the first act and get into the second, then blend back into the third, then blend into the fourth—which was the second story again. In other words, it was A-B-A-B-A in a five-act structure.

BELL: That was the half-hour?

LABINE: Yeah. That was what we used to do. And sometimes, if we were telling three stories in a day, we'd do A-B-C in the third act, but usually in a structure in which we could blend one and two into this third act. It was either in Ryan's bar or some communal meeting place, and then do A-B-C, and then A-B in the fourth and fifth acts. I can draw that for you if it's not making sense.

ON WRITING: So how many acts?

LABINE: We used to use five. And I think you use a four-act structure in *The Bold and the Beautiful*, right?

BELL: No, five-act.

LABINE: I like the five myself.

BELL: I do, too.

ON WRITING: How many are in an hour?

LABINE: Six.

BELL: No, we do eight acts in an hour.

LABINE: You do eight?

BELL: And then we cut them in half. In terms of the number of units, we'll almost invariably have in the 20s. About 25 units on *Y&R* these days. When you get up in the upper 20s, sometimes it gets to be a little too much. But you may do it for pacing or for whatever.

ON WRITING: What's a unit?

LABINE: A segment. A story segment within the structure of the show.

BELL: Some are very short.

ON WRITING: So within the hour there are 25 different scenes?

BELL: Right.

LABINE: I never wanted to write an hour. *General Hospital* was the only hour I've ever written. One of the reasons I did that was to find out if I could do it, and I had a ball learning what worked and what didn't. We did it with fewer scenes than most people do. We used to do 16 to 18 units on *General Hospital*. Sometimes 18 to 20. But 18 was about where we would keep it. So there are different ways of going at it. And it just depends, again, on the kind of story you're telling—what Bill was saying earlier, the kind of story, the kind of scenes you're writing that day.

BELL: On *Y&R* I like to have about four different scenes as part of the prologue, and obviously we choose characters we know are going to interest the audience and provide impact. In other words, we put our best foot forward.

LABINE: And promise them, stick with this hour and these are the people that you're going to see during the course of the day.

ON WRITING: Do you do every story every day?

BELL: Oh, no. We tell so many stories. We've got about 28 people under contract, plus about seven or eight other people who are non-contract.

LABINE: You tell four or five stories, don't you?

BELL: Yeah.

ON WRITING: A day?

LABINE: No. Simultaneously. What do you do, about three a day, Bill?

BELL: Gosh, I never look at it that way.

LABINE: No, I don't either. So it's hard to say.

BELL: Yeah, some are sort of satellite stories that will touch around the edges of other stories, but nonetheless have a life of their own as they move on.

LABINE: When it's working well, you will have a group of characters in a scene. And what you're really seeing are a couple of stories at once even though the scene is about one thing. It's called crossover, and it's keeping the threads of the other stories connected to your central—that's why families are so helpful in this form. Because you have two members of a family, you have say a son and a daughter, each involved in a story. But you can tell those stories simultaneously through the parents. Or through one sibling's interaction with the other. It's very hard to talk about this, it's easier to do it.

BELL: Absolutely.

ON WRITING: With the Luke and Laura thing on *General Hospital*, was there a problem that nobody was related anymore?

BELL: But there were people related on *General Hospital*. Didn't they have the Quartermaines?

LABINE: We kind of got the Quartermaines back to being a core family. But our struggle going in with *General Hospital* was there were all of these beloved characters left over from various stories. Nobody was related to anybody except the beloved, awful Quartermaines. We played out a couple

of interesting medical stories within the context of the hospital. But it sure does help if you've got the leading family in Genoa City to be the center of things.

ON WRITING: Have the stories changed over the years? Is it still fundamentally about romance and love?

BELL: Even romance and love have changed over the years, so the stories have changed. The pace of the show has changed, the whole demeanor, the whole outlook. We couldn't do today what we did many years ago. No one would watch us. It was a slower paced show, it was more within the home. It was effective for that time, but today so many things are different—most notably the pace, and the sensuality and sexuality you can bring to story without being flagrant. There's just a whole different approach and depth that we can bring to it that we didn't bring back then.

LABINE: Production values, too.

BELL: Plus the physical element. We have far more, and better, sets. We are able to do remotes. We can bring so much more dimension to it.

ON WRITING: Is subtext important in the writing? Or does the dialogue have to be very clear?

BELL: Oh, no, you want to write between the lines. If you're going to blueprint everything the show is really going to sound like—I don't know what analogy to use, but you don't want to blueprint every aspect of every relationship or of every scene. Because you want the audience to think. That's what draws them back day after day.

LABINE: Sure.

BELL: Wondering, how is it going to go from here, what did she mean by that, or whatever.

LABINE: It's not dead on, and it shouldn't be dead on, ever.

BELL: We're trying to do things that interest people, that people can relate to and become involved with. It's not very complex. Essentially we're doing basics.

LABINE: It's pity and terror. It's passion. It's all of the things that the Greeks were concerned about, we're concerned about, too. It's fathers and mothers and sons and daughters and frustrated love and a window into the human condition. And when we are true, when we're taking a good look at it, what you've got is a lot of the things that every human being cares about. That's what you go for.

BELL: And there's escapism, too.

ON WRITING: What do you mean?

LABINE: Well, just a fantasy life. I love things coming out the way you wish they would in real life. I love making characters suffer and strive and work for what they get, but I love them to get it in the end.

ON WRITING: But do they?

LABINE: Usually on something I'm involved with they do.

ON WRITING: Bill, do your characters get what they want?

BELL: Not always. Because that's the way life is. And not only that, but if they—

LABINE: If they get what they want then, of course, you have to start over again and take it away from them.

BELL: I was just coming to that. They're at a plateau and you can't then quickly superimpose other trauma because you'll be overdoing it; that would be overkill. So you're going to have to keep them on sort of a back burner awhile.

LABINE: Right. The actors so hate it when that happens. When they get in one of those valleys between stories where they're waiting for the next tragedy to occur.

ON WRITING: And things are just going well for them?

LABINE: Things are going well for them.

ON WRITING: And that makes them miserable?

LABINE: The desperate curse on television is to finally get happily married. Oh, my God, something's got to happen fast.

BELL: For a writer—and I'm sure you feel this, too, Claire—I can never forget on *Y&R* when we married Chris and Snapper about ten months after we went on the air. Everything built so beautifully to that, and then suddenly there's that big let down.

LABINE: Oh, yes. Now what?

BELL: The audience is euphoric because they wanted this marriage. Then you say, "Jesus, what am I going to do with it? Where does it go?" Of course it worked out very well. But for a few days there I wondered what the hell we were going to do.

ON WRITING: What happened to them after they got married and were happy?

LABINE: He didn't let them stay happy very long. They got into trouble.

BELL: The marriage was solid. I wasn't going to shake up a marriage the audience wanted very much. But Snapper was an intern, and Chris was one of four sisters. So she got involved with her sister's problems, and Snapper was at the hospital where girls were flirting with him. So there was a lot of interest there regardless. But that relationship was untouchable.

ON WRITING: So you had to create other problems?

LABINE: Yes, that's right.

BELL: But everything doesn't have to be a problem per se. A lot of the things an audience can relate to don't have to involve trauma.

ON WRITING: Like what?

LABINE: The birth of a child, just to take an obvious thing—all of the things that happen to you in real life.

BELL: Just things in a relationship. The point is, you don't always need heavy trauma to satisfy an audience. Romance is the most important of all.

ON WRITING: What is your background, Claire?

LABINE: I was a dialogue writer on a show called *Where the Heart Is*. They offered me the head writership at one point and I said, "No, thank you, I'm not out of my mind. I love writing these scripts." I was writing three half-hour

scripts a week for them, and sometimes more than that when they were in trouble.

ON WRITING: When you say scripts, you're talking about the dialogue?

LABINE: Yes. They would give me the outlines, and I would dialogue the outlines. Then they hired another dialogue writer named Paul Mayer. And for the first time ever, the other dialogue writer called me up and said, "Let's talk, tell me about this. How do you do it? What do you do?" We became great friends. Then they offered me the head writership again. And I said, "I'm not going to do this by myself, but I'd be delighted to do it with Paul." And he became my writing partner. We wrote *Where the Heart Is* off the air. In fact they canceled *Where the Heart Is* to put on a new show called *The Young and the Restless*.

BELL: I wasn't going to say it.

LABINE: We went off the air with something like a 23 rating. I can't remember what it was. I was so broken-hearted. Bill, I didn't wish you ill. But I was really broken-hearted.

BELL: Well, let me tell you a story about that. Kay Alden—this is before I met her—was so upset that *Where the Heart Is* went off that she wrote the network and said she was so damned upset, she wouldn't ever watch *The Young and the Restless*.

LABINE: No kidding, please thank her for me. So, I didn't want to work for CBS anymore. We went around to

ABC, and they picked up *Ryan's Hope*. Then the second year it won a bunch of Emmys.

BELL: Claire, all during that time if we were both up for Emmys you won every damn time. One year I was up for *Days* and *Y&R*—

LABINE: Oh, I remember that.

BELL: And you were up, and you got it. We had two out of three, and you still won from us. Which is terrific. So you see, you made an impression.

ON WRITING: Bill, you began your career writing with the pioneer of this form, is that right?

LABINE: That's right.

BELL: Yes.

LABINE: She sort of made up the form.

BELL: Irna Phillips goes back to radio. She did many shows in radio before television. *Guiding Light*, which she created was, I believe, the first television serial.

LABINE: They took it from radio, didn't they, Bill?

BELL: Yeah.

ON WRITING: How did you begin working with Irna?

BELL: Let me just put it to you this way. When I was about eight years old, for half a year I came home from school for lunch. And when I got home, my Mom always had the radio on, and there was *Life Can Be Beautiful* and *The Romance of Helen Trent* and *Our Gal Sunday*. Then there was another show called *Guiding Light*. And this was the only show where they said, "Created by Irna Phillips." I heard that

name everyday for six months. Okay, let's dissolve to about 13 years later. I was working as a comedy writer at WBBM in Chicago and one day I heard a name that I hadn't thought of since I was eight years old. Someone mentioned that Irna Phillips lived in Chicago. Serials made an impression on me even though I hadn't been close to them for all that time. So I called Irna's apartment. I identified myself to her secretary, Rose Cooperman, and I said, "Does she have an opening? I would love to try out and see if I could work for her." Rose said, "As a matter of fact, she does right now." Well, by the time I got there it turned out that the guy who was leaving decided to stay. But about two years later I was in the advertising business, and I ran into a gal who happened to be Irna's niece. She mentioned working with Bill Bell, and Irna remembered me. She remembered me because my wife was a very well known woman in Chicago, and Irna was certainly aware of her. So she wanted to see me one day. I went over there and we talked for awhile. Then she gave me an outline. I wrote it up and she offered me a job. I started at \$75 a week, I think.

ON WRITING: And this was 40 years ago?

BELL: Actually, 41. Irna would write out the outline. And it was kind of a full outline, so it really helped me. But we would sit down right from the beginning and she would block the show. More and more I got involved in the blocking process. And, as they say, the rest is history. But if it hadn't been

for hearing the serials when I was a kid, the name Irna Phillips wouldn't have meant anything to me. Talk about how fate can intervene.

LABINE: I'll say.

BELL: I wouldn't have known that name. And I don't know what I'd be doing today. It worries me what I might be doing.

ON WRITING: So, you are sort of the keeper of the flame, in a sense.

BELL: Now mind you, I brought a lot of myself to what I do. I certainly learned a lot from Irna, but more importantly, once you take over a show you bring another dimension, which is your own dimension.

LABINE: It's a little like Freud and Jung.

ON WRITING: So, Bill, you essentially have no peers in this field.

LABINE: It's true. I mean, there are two overwhelming presences on the current scene.

BELL: And she's talking to them.

LABINE: No, no, no. There's Bill and there's Agnes [Nixon]. They represent the tradition, but *The Young and the Restless* represents a health and a standard to which the industry aspires. The consistency, the craft, and the steadiness with which that show is done is what all the rest of the shows need to do.

ON WRITING: And to bring it full circle, that has a lot to do with that they let him do it.

LABINE: That they let him do it. They leave him alone to do it. I mean, he gets to write. Bill gets to write in the way that writers think about writing. Not manufacture or paste up. ■

William Bell

Daytime Series

The Bold And The Beautiful, 1987–present (co-creator with Lee Phillip Bell, head writer and executive producer 1987–94)

The Young And The Restless, 1973–present (co-creator with Lee Phillip Bell, head writer, executive producer)

Days of Our Lives, 1966–77 (head writer)

Our Private World, 1965

Another World, 1964 (co-creator with Irna Phillips)

As the World Turns, 1957–66

The Guiding Light, 1956

William Bell is the winner of eight Emmy Awards. He is a recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Emmy Award for Daytime Television from the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.

Claire Labine

Daytime Series

One Life to Live, 1997–present (co-head writer)

General Hospital, 1993–95 (head writer)

Ryan's Hope, 1975–83, 1987–89 (co-creator with Paul Avila Mayer)

Love of Life, 1973–75

Where the Heart Is, 1970–73

Movies of the Week

For Love Alone, 1994 (CBS)

Danielle Steel's Star, 1993 (NBC)

She Woke Up, 1991 (ABC)

The Bride in Black, 1990 (ABC)

Claire Labine is the winner of nine Emmy Awards.

drawing by Robert Vitale from the original photograph by Alan Singer/CBS



Rob Burnett

Robert Smigel

drawing by Robert Vitale from the original photograph by © Scott C. Schulman



May, 1996 and June, 1997

ON WRITING: You both worked as head writers on late night talk shows—Rob Burnett as head writer on *Late Night with David Letterman* before becoming executive producer on the *Late Show*, and Robert Smigel as head writer on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* when the show first began. Rob Burnett, you were thrown into that job on a show that already had a personality—

BURNETT: Right. I can answer this question already. Robert Smigel is the one with the talent, because he had to start something fresh. I just picked up what was going on and ran it into the ground.

SMIGEL: Now, please. I think the show is as good as ever. Though it seems as if the competition with Dave [Letterman] and Jay [Leno] affects everything, like the stakes have gotten so crazily high that it sometimes becomes this energy contest.

BURNETT: I think it's starting to shift now, though. Dave and I have always felt that is not the kind of show we want to do.

SMIGEL: That's great.

ON WRITING: What kind of show?

BURNETT: Well, Rob's exactly right. It becomes this thing where—

SMIGEL: It's like a stunt show.

BURNETT: Yeah, it's a circus. You say, "We're on a tightrope." After you do that for a week, you say, "All right, I'm going to have an elephant on my shoulders on the tightrope." Then it's, "That's not enough, so give me clowns. I need clowns and the elephant on the tightrope." So it gets ridiculous.

SMIGEL: Well, it seems natural. I mean, when you moved to the Ed Sullivan Theater at CBS, it was a brand new environment. You were right on the street level and there was so much new stuff to do, so it was all exciting and interesting. You could order a pizza and it would just come *so much* faster than at NBC. It was crazy energy—much more than the old show ever had. So it is sort of an adjustment to calm things down.

BURNETT: It's funny because some of the pressure, I think, also comes from the theater. You know, it's different doing a show in a theater from doing it in 6-A.

ON WRITING: What's 6-A?

BURNETT: Studio 6-A in Rockefeller Center at NBC.

SMIGEL: That's where Conan [O'Brien] does his show.

BURNETT: Which is where we did the *Late Night* show.

SMIGEL: It's more intimate.

BURNETT: Yeah, you know what it is? The silences—and God knows we have them—they're deeper and heavier at the Ed Sullivan Theater. At 6-A, it's like a small room.

SMIGEL: I think it mostly seems that way to you, to the viewer it just—

BURNETT: I think you're right.

SMIGEL: If it doesn't look like it's bothering the host, then it's fine, I think.

BURNETT: I completely agree with that. I'm very impressed with the *Conan* show. I can tell you that right now. I'll go out on a limb and say it right here on the tape.

SMIGEL: This is being taped?

BURNETT: Yeah, the court stenographer couldn't get a sitter. Anyway, the *Conan* show reminds me in some sense of the show we used to do at 12:30. And I mean that in the best of ways. It's not similar, it's just the kind of stuff I wish we could do more of now.

SMIGEL: You can, you can.

BURNETT: We can't, no. But it seems whenever I turn it on there's always something pretty entertaining going on there. Sometimes intentionally.

SMIGEL: The ratio of intentionally good to unintentionally good is higher than ever, I'm happy to say. In the early days, Jim Pitt, who was our music booker, defined the unintentional stuff as "compel-o-vision," and we all felt better about it. For instance when

Eartha Kitt came on and chilled Conan, we rationalized, "Hey, it was compelling, so it was good." I never really thought the show was as bad as people made it out to be in the beginning. But I came to realize that we had maybe three or four sort of car crashes—train wrecks—a week. But when those moments would happen—Conan and Andy [Richter] were still getting acquainted at the beginning, so when they would have a really awkward exchange or something, I'd be in the studio where you could hear every laugh, and it was all kind of warmed-over. Then later I'd watch reruns of it and I'd say, "Oh, I see, that's really noticeable and disturbing, what just happened." All the decent stuff after that doesn't really matter because that really just jumps out at you.

BURNETT: I have a similar experience when I watch old *Late Night* shows on the *E!* network.

SMIGEL: Oh, really?

BURNETT: Well it's funny, because these things evolve show by show, year after year. I go back and look at some of the old shows, and they're amazing. For instance we do these little cold openings that are now maybe 10 or 20 seconds. They're a quick exchange or a visual gag before the opening rolls. I remember seeing one on the old show that was five minutes long. It was called *Bill Wendell's New York* and it was like a one-act play. I mean, it just went on and on and on.

SMIGEL: Did it get a laugh?

BURNETT: Well, a couple here and there. But it's very odd because the pace was so different. When you look back at a lot of those shows, there's so much that was so slow. But they were fine and beautiful.

SMIGEL: And those shows compared to what you guys do now are like what *The Steve Allen Show* was in the '50s compared to what Dave did in the 80s. I went to The Museum of Television and Radio with Conan and watched tapes of *The Steve Allen Show*. I brought him in to see what we could do. I didn't want to rip off the part of Steve Allen that Dave very openly says he ripped off. Dave took the found and environmental humor from Steve Allen and did it better than anybody. And I didn't want to go near it. I wanted to rip off the other half of Steve Allen. He would have people like Louis Nye come on and play characters. I wanted to have Louis Nye. No, but I wanted that kind of performance sketch comedy brought to a talk show. Conan liked that idea—he was also from a sketch comedy background—but he watched these shows and was amazed how slow the pace was.

BURNETT: Sometimes now we're burdened by a need to appeal to a certain audience, though it's not as if we've completely sold out. Some of it, too, is actually the difference in Dave's age. He's now 50, and it gets a little harder to put on the Velcro suit.

SMIGEL: The physical stuff. The only thing I would think would be harder to get away with at 11:30 is the humor of

the disappointment. You know, the kind of thing where it's funny because it's bad.

BURNETT: It doesn't work. That's exactly it.

SMIGEL: But that's only one little part of what Dave does.

BURNETT: You're right. But here's the perfect joke. I can't remember who wrote it, one of the writers when we were on *Late Night*. I think it was a viewer mail letter. It was something like, "Dave, what do you do on the weekends?" And Dave says, "Well, in fact I had a meeting just this Saturday I remember as if it were yesterday..." Dissolve to all these guys sitting at a table and a big banner that says: The Silent Fake Beard Club. And it's all these guys sitting around with big fake beards and not saying anything. They're just sitting silently, silently. Then someone takes a gavel, bangs it on the table, and says, "Meeting adjourned." And then everyone says: "okay, great, good job, thanks a lot, nice going." I thought this was such a funny joke, and I knew at the time it was never in a million years going to get anything from an audience. But we put it on anyway. It's the perfect comedy writer joke. And there's an element of the population—a very small element—that will laugh.

SMIGEL: Really? I'd think people would get that.

BURNETT: They didn't get it.

SMIGEL: It didn't get laughs?

BURNETT: It got nothing. It just baffled them.

SMIGEL: It's so funny.

BURNETT: It was hilarious. And that's the kind of thing that would be a little harder to do here.

SMIGEL: But you could put the weirder stuff like that on at 12:15 or something, right?

BURNETT: *All* of that is a little bit harder at 11:30 than it was at 12:30. And it's harder with the big Ed Sullivan Theater to do that level of stuff sometimes.

SMIGEL: I thought the compilation show of the remotes was one of the funniest things I've seen on TV in a couple of years. Honestly. It was just brilliant bit after brilliant bit. I guess I hadn't seen a lot of them.

BURNETT: Hold on. Let's just stop for a second so the transcriber can get all of that.

SMIGEL: The Rupert thing is a genius bit.

ON WRITING: The Rupert thing?

SMIGEL: Where Rupert goes on the street with an ear piece and bugs people by repeating whatever Dave says to him on walkie-talkie.

BURNETT: It was Jon Beckerman's idea, he's as good a writer as I've ever come across. There was a lot of stuff on the old show that depended upon Dave being anonymous. Like *Mr. Curious*, for example.

SMIGEL: I loved *Mr. Curious*.

BURNETT: Dave would walk up to strangers on the street who were carrying bags and ask them what was inside. People would get suspicious and go nuts. Of course, we can't do that

anymore because now it's not just a guy on the street, it's *Dave Letterman*. Back then, no one knew who he was.

SMIGEL: Except young comedy writers.

BURNETT: So now there are a million pieces like that we can't do. This Rupert piece was brilliantly functional. It answered the question: How can we have Dave interact with people without them knowing it's Dave? The last time we had luck with that was when Dave worked a McDonald's drive-thru. It was similar, because—

SMIGEL: Yeah, because you can't really see him.

BURNETT: You can't see him, and you can't recognize his voice. His voice sounds deeper than you would think when you talk to him on the phone. So people didn't know who was talking, and he'd get a very natural reaction. The Rupert idea was perfect. And the thing that's most interesting about it is—I wish you could see Dave do that piece. It is unbelievable to watch.

SMIGEL: You see him do it from the car?

BURNETT: Yeah. If you sit in the van with him and watch him do this Rupert piece, it will amaze you. I tell you, this thing taps into the very core of Dave's talents. Because he just starts talking, and he just goes and goes. I just sit in the van and eat sandwiches. And the stuff is so brilliant and wonderful. Dave instantaneously creates another world with these characters—

SMIGEL: Right.

BURNETT: “I’m Jimmy, and I’m from Brazil, my wife won the lottery, and we’ve got to go to dinner.” And I’m looking at Dave and wondering, “How are you thinking of all this stuff so quickly?” I remember one of the first times he did it, we were in an outdoor cafe called The Boulevard up on Broadway and 87th Street. Rupert comes in, there’s a couple sitting nearby, and Dave starts saying, “Hello, you melon ranchers.” He starts calling everyone melon ranchers, and screaming, “I want to buy these melon ranchers some drinks!” In the course of the afternoon there’ll be like a thousand of these incredibly unique and colorful phrases. I, by the way, in the course of that same afternoon, can eat up to three sandwiches.

SMIGEL: That’s also a talent.

ON WRITING: You have both worked under a lot of pressure. When *Conan* first started you guys were under a microscope, and there was a lot of criticism.

SMIGEL: It wasn’t as bad as *The Dana Carvey Show*, I tell you.

ON WRITING: What about that?

SMIGEL: Well, I had no idea how much more scrutiny we’d get being on prime time. The early *Conan* show was, by comparison, much less successful in terms of the overall creative package. I got more positive feedback from *The Dana Carvey Show* than anything I’d ever been involved with. But it was a real struggle because it was on primetime. There’s just a lot more at stake, and I guess the network

wasn’t doing well at the time. We had some bad reviews the first week, then we had a really good second show and the reviews turned around. Even *The New York Times* switched and said we were putting out the best sketch show. With *Conan* we were just about completely trashed, but we weren’t canceled. It’s an education, the difference. *Conan* was on at 12:30 where we could still hide a little, despite all the early scrutiny. I know NBC had big doubts about the show but they were still supportive. They told us they loved a lot of the comedy and could see how much potential Conan had. In late night, you still get some time. Even Rick Dees got two years. On the other hand, maybe it would have been too embarrassing to cancel us right away. This was when Jay was running a distant second.

ON WRITING: Jay Leno?

SMIGEL: Yeah. NBC was being criticized for that choice. It just felt like they had to give us our shot.

BURNETT: How is that Leno situation going now? Has that turned around at all?

SMIGEL: I heard some babbling about how they had to rewrite the end of some movie... don’t worry about it.

BURNETT: I find you can’t get yourself so wrapped up that you start picking up the paper and reading that someone liked this or didn’t like that, especially when you’re doing shows five nights a week. These shows are so—you get so busy, you don’t really have much time to react to critics.

SMIGEL: Do you guys really have to worry about being number one? Is it that important that you have to worry about it?

BURNETT: It shouldn't be.

SMIGEL: You guys know how funny your show is.

BURNETT: I think we do what we do, and they do what they do. It's a very different sensibility. I don't watch it much, but when I see the *Tonight Show* it's so different from what we do that I can't even draw comparisons. It's like we're building cars, and they're building boats.

SMIGEL: I think all these shows are beginning to look like cars somehow.

BURNETT: In terms of the press and ratings, you can really start to drive yourself nuts. In the end, all you can do is be true to your sensibility. Otherwise, you have nothing.

SMIGEL: Absolutely. It's much better to be able to say sincerely this is really, really funny. And you guys—I guess I have a different perspective now that I've been in danger of being canceled on the last two things I worked on—but it's just so great that you get to do it.

BURNETT: That is the nicest thing about it.

SMIGEL: You get to do it in this beautiful theater, there's no chance of it being canceled. Not even remotely.

BURNETT: Cut to spinning headline: Letterman Canceled!

SMIGEL: Jeff Foxworthy picked up by CBS late night. Says, "I can handle two projects."

ON WRITING: Rob Burnett, what do you do as executive producer now? Do you work with the head writer?

BURNETT: Being executive producer for me is not terribly different than being the head writer, except now I'm dating Elle Macpherson. In the past, this has always been a non-writing job. It was looking after the overall production, focusing primarily on booking guests. But I still have a writer's contract and the bulk of my day is still involved with the writing. In addition, I do have some other responsibilities: dealing with the network, making sure of promos, approving guests, and a million little things. Frankly, it's difficult. I usually get home about midnight or one o'clock in the morning. And I have a two-year-old daughter. Last time I checked she was two years old.

ON WRITING: Robert Smigel, did you run your shows that way, too?

SMIGEL: No, on the *Conan* show, I had Jeff Ross to do all the things that Rob is burdened with right now. I had a producer's credit because I had a good agent. Though I did have a lot to do.

BURNETT: You produced all the comedy.

SMIGEL: Well, that's really part of what a head writer does.

BURNETT: I had a producer credit when I was head writer also. I think a head writer on these shows is a producer, because you have an enormous impact on the production.

SMIGEL: I guess so. I wanted that credit because I felt I was creating a lot of the format. For example, the part of the show where Conan talks to the guest, that was me—that was my idea. Anyway, they gave me the credit, so I took it. But I didn't have to deal with the booking and most of the network stuff. Jeff Ross handled that.

BURNETT: See, I'm sort of lucky because the truth is, this show's been on the air for 15 years and it runs itself. Everyone knows what they're doing. The talent department here is fantastic, as is the production staff, the crew, and the writers.

SMIGEL: Some writer once said producing is punishment you get for being a good writer. And that's kind of true.

BURNETT: Or, in my case, becoming a producer was the result of being Dave's nephew.

SMIGEL: That's funny, I'm also Dave's nephew. Hmm. But I really am much happier when I can just write my own stuff, like I do with these cartoons.

BURNETT: Your SNL cartoons are really inspired. "The Ambiguously Gay Duo" cracks me up every time I see it. I mean, don't we all know a superhero like that?

SMIGEL: Or we *think* we do. But I didn't even like being the head writer at *Conan* once we got it off the ground. It

was fun working to establish the comedy, to set the mold—and then chip away at it until it worked. But I really didn't love having to sift through everybody else's stuff.

BURNETT: I find it mind-numbingly difficult. It can be a very un-fun job, being a head writer of shows like these.

SMIGEL: It inhibits your own writing. And the guys who've taken my place have the same complaint. It's like there's almost no time to make up funny stuff.

BURNETT: I agree completely. It's interesting because the writers hand stuff in, and at that point they're often done with it. But that's only half the trip. It's got to go from being on the page, to being made ready for air. That process is difficult and arduous, and sometimes thankless. At other times it can be quite satisfying.

SMIGEL: It was a war to just make the *Conan* show stay on the air and be successful, so it was satisfying in that way. But a lot of my best ideas were conceived before the show was in production, like *In the Year 2000*. Once the show got running I would usually come up with funny things by accident, somebody would pitch something and it would give me an idea for something else. I wouldn't have time to just think of something on my own.

BURNETT: That's a lot of what being a head writer is on these shows. It's taking ideas and trying to twist and turn them. It can be very satisfying, especially if you have a good writing staff. If you're around smart, funny people,

and they're coming up with a lot of smart, funny material, and if you can help make it a little better and not botch it up too badly, then I think it can be pretty satisfying.

SMIGEL: The most exciting part for me was trying to set a philosophy and seeing these talented writers carrying it out and improving on it.

BURNETT: That "actual items" piece is a great piece.

SMIGEL: Louis C.K. wrote that.

BURNETT: Louis C.K. worked here. Hey, Louis, why didn't you write that for us? I would've taken that in a second.

SMIGEL: You actually weren't head writer when Louis was there.

BURNETT: That's right, I wasn't.

ON WRITING: What is the "actual items" piece?

SMIGEL: It's actually kind of a parody of Letterman's "small town news" piece and its various rip-offs. Instead of taking *real* funny advertisements, we create absurdly bad ones and *pretend* they're real. Like, "The Mattress King says: 'I haven't spoken to my son in two years!'" The "actual items" piece exemplified what I wanted for the show, which was to make everything up. It's sort of the way you guys took the talk show and showed the seams. We take your show but make up fake seams. Making stuff up was what we felt would distinguish us from you guys. Originally, I felt we could never do a remote because that's what Dave does; he does it best. I'd seen Pat Sajak or even Dennis Miller try to do that

stuff, and it didn't work for them. So I said, "Let's not even try, please? Unless we script it, like a sketch." But after a while we started letting Andy [Richter] do remotes, and I felt it was okay because he put his personality into them. It was as much about Andy as it was about the people he interacted with. After a while, we said, "Conan would be good at this, too, we've got to let him do it." I wish we could have just completely had our own look forever. But we learned the most important thing was to give Conan—who's an incredibly funny guy—every opportunity to be funny.

BURNETT: I think the *Late Night with Conan* endeavor is pretty impressive. Starting up any talk show now is so difficult because it's hard not to be influenced by Dave. But you guys had to start one with the same title and in the same studio.

SMIGEL: I know. We fought desperately not to call it *Late Night*.

BURNETT: I know you did. And I know you got a lot of bad press at first, which I thought was unwarranted. Right from the very first image of that show, which was the cold opening of Conan coming to work, being super happy—right from that, you knew this was not the Chevy Chase show, this was not the Pat Sajak show. This was the real deal. And you knew it would go through some growing pains, just like Dave went through growing pains. When Dave went on the air, we just crept on the air in the middle of the night. No one was even watching. Now all of a sudden this is big business. And

for the kind of show you guys are doing, I don't think that it was helpful to have that kind of scrutiny.

SMIGEL: I really wasn't prepared for the scrutiny. All I cared about at first was, I just wanted to make it as different as possible. We would put on things that were just so weird and alienating at times. We had one character, Doug, who was Conan's TV neighbor. He stood behind a fence and would interrupt interviews and insult the guests, like: "Hey, Conan, who you got on?" Conan would say, "I'm here with Gore Vidal, Doug." Doug would say, "Who-va-who?" And, "Oh, Gore Vidal! Love your shampoo." This is in the middle of an interview. We would think, this is great, it's performance comedy, it's post-modern, hooray for us. But meanwhile it upset the guests and inhibited Conan's interviewing development because he'd have to be playing sketches during interviews. Now, Conan was all for this "let's create our own world" idea. He's a comedy writer, and he came up with a lot of great stuff for the show. But he realized quicker than I did that this was inhibiting his development as a host. I was aware that the show was never going to work unless people liked Conan, so we had to scale back. But I'll probably be prouder of that show than anything I'll ever work on, because of the challenge. We didn't copy Dave, as everyone else was doing; we sort of invented our own version of a talk show.

BURNETT: Which is a pretty nice thing to have done.

ON WRITING: In what ways are people copying Dave? How did Dave reinvent this?

BURNETT: Before Dave, no one wore suits. All talk show hosts were naked. They would come out with no clothes.

SMIGEL: And Ed McMahon was the sidekick on every show.

BURNETT: That's right. And now Dave wears clothes, and suddenly everyone's wearing clothes. It's embarrassing, frankly. Okay, Steve Allen wore clothes first and then Dave wore the clothes.

SMIGEL: We didn't steal that. Conan did the first year nude.

BURNETT: I think Dave embodied the anti-talk show. Johnny Carson's show was very straightforward and easy: here are some jokes, here are some guests.

SMIGEL: Not self-conscious, just funny. And the Johnny Carson show was great at that.

BURNETT: The best. But what Dave did was to redefine the format in a lot of ways. And once that redefinition occurs I think it's very hard to find another way to redefine it for a while.

SMIGEL: It was ironic. I mean, it was the irony humor that was sort of emerging in the '70s with people like Steve Martin and Andy Kaufman—people who were doing comedy about comedy. And they were really the hottest, coolest people. Dave was starting to do that for talk shows. It was a talk show about a talk show.

BURNETT: The other thing Dave started, I think, was that before him talk shows were *talk* shows. Dave's show is

a *comedy* show. There's a real focus on comedy. The Carson show had funny comedy, but it was first and foremost a talk show.

SMIGEL: Right. But the comedy was more: Now it's time for the comedy. Whereas Dave's show was a comedy that happened to be a talk show. And all the rituals that are charming on *The Tonight Show* were sort of parodied, like when Dave threw to Paul, and Paul would say something weird. All of that was anti-talk show. It made perfect sense in that era to do that.

BURNETT: It was showing the seams. Dave started showing all the seams.

ON WRITING: How much of a good show depends on the interviews? How much work has to go into those interviews to make the show funny?

SMIGEL: Well, the host spends time with the segment producers, going through the guests.

BURNETT: It's heartbreaking when you have a strong show comically—we've had this experience, and I'm sure you've had it, where you come out and you're just flying, the pieces are killing, and then all of a sudden a guest comes out and takes a nap.

SMIGEL: You can't rerun it.

BURNETT: That just breaks your heart. And then there are other people who can have the opposite effect. You get Tom Hanks on the show, or Steve Martin, Bill Murray, or Marty Short, and they can take a mediocre show and turn it into something great.

SMIGEL: You try to stack your best comedy for shows where—

BURNETT: I wish I had the luxury to do that.

SMIGEL: We always wanted to stack the comedy for Fridays especially, because we always got better ratings on that night.

BURNETT: Oh, I thought you were going to say that you stack the comedy to coincide with the good guests.

SMIGEL: For the guests? Well, some. We did that when Dave was on.

BURNETT: That's right.

SMIGEL: That was the only guest that's ever made a difference in our ratings. Man, did we pack that show with comedy.

BURNETT: I remember that, because I was with Dave. We're sitting in the dressing room and both watching this show. We hadn't seen it for awhile, and we're saying, "God, these guys do a lot of comedy." Ever since then, I have to do seven acts of comedy in every show. Thanks a lot, pal.

SMIGEL: Yeah, we had a cold opening, a special joke in the monologue, then a desk piece, then a quick video bumper, then we had that streaker guy on.

BURNETT: Oh, yeah. Joe Hobel?

SMIGEL: Joe Hobel, yeah.

ON WRITING: Can you talk about your backgrounds?

BURNETT: This is my background: I graduated from college, I worked for a newspaper for a year, and then I came here as an intern. And when Dave told me I could write jokes for him, I was the luckiest man alive. And I continue to be the luckiest man alive.

ON WRITING: And you?

SMIGEL: I was in Chicago writing and performing in a comedy group, and Al Franken and Tom Davis saw our show. Then I got hired by *Saturday Night Live*. Eight years later, I finally ditched that for *Conan*.

BURNETT: You're from Chicago, right?

SMIGEL: No. I lived in Chicago for three years. Long enough to revive the word "da" for generations to enjoy.

ON WRITING: You're referring to the *Saturday Night Live* sketch?

SMIGEL: Exactly. Da Bulls, da Bears.

BURNETT: Do people come up to you on the street and—

SMIGEL: Nobody recognizes me.

BURNETT: Well, that's too bad. Let's go down to the street, and I'll yell, "Da Bears!"

SMIGEL: Thanks, I'd like that. Hey, he's "da Bears!" See that *Bring In Da Funk* sign? That wouldn't exist.

BURNETT: You're right.

SMIGEL: It would be "the."

BURNETT: You're right. You're absolutely right.

SMIGEL: The coolest thing I ever got to do is, every time the Bulls win the championship, George Wendt and I perform in Grant Park in Chicago. A hundred thousand fans gather for the celebration, the Bulls get their trophy, and George and I get to stand in front of these fans and sing some derisive song about the other teams.

BURNETT: That's amazing. I could safely tell you I could never do that. Never in a million years.

ON WRITING: Why?

BURNETT: Because I wouldn't be able to speak.

ON WRITING: You mean perform?

BURNETT: Yeah. I can barely speak now.

SMIGEL: I'm very shy, so I love getting to be a jerk on stage. It's a great release.

ON WRITING: Speaking of showing the seams, I need an ending. Give me an ending.

SMIGEL: You need an ending?

ON WRITING: The hardest thing is endings.

BURNETT: Should we take our shirts off? That would be an ending. Let's switch jobs. Suddenly Dave's winning again.

SMIGEL: Dave's winning, *The Dana Carvey Show* is back on the air. And it's a hit! Oh well, there's your ending.

BURNETT: Did I mention that I once ate three sandwiches? ■

Rob Burnett

Late Night

Late Show with David Letterman
(executive producer 1996–present,
head writer 1993–1996)
Late Night With David Letterman (head
writer 1992–1993, writer 1988–1992)

Specials

*Late Show with David Letterman Video
Special III*, 1997
*Late Show with David Letterman Video
Special II*, 1996
The 67th Annual Academy Awards,
1995
*Late Show with David Letterman Video
Special I*, 1994

Series

The Bonnie Hunt Show, 1995
(co-creator with Bonnie Hunt)

Rob Burnett is currently in pre-
production on *Ed*, a half-hour pilot for
CBS which he co-created with Jon
Beckerman.

He has been nominated for 12 Emmys
and has not won any.

Robert Smigel

Variety

The Dana Carvey Show, 1996
(executive producer, writer)
Saturday Night Live, 1985–93
(writer, co-producer)

Late Night

Late Night With Conan O'Brien, 1993–95
(producer, head writer)

Specials

A Comedy Salute to Michael Jordan,
1991
The 40th Annual Emmy Awards, 1988
Superman's 50th Anniversary, 1988

Pilot

Lookwell, 1991

For the past year, Robert Smigel has
been writing and producing the
Saturday TV Fun House series of
animated shorts for *Saturday Night
Live*.

He has been a featured performer on
Saturday Night Live, *Late Night with
Conan O'Brien*, and *The Dana Carvey
Show*. He continues to perform on *Late
Night with Conan O'Brien*.

Robert Smigel has won one more
Emmy than Rob Burnett.