

Mike Miller was a TV sitcom writer in the Golden Age of television. I chatted with him at his home in East Quogue, Long Island, New York.

## **TELEVISION WAS SO DIFFERENT IN THOSE DAYS, WAS IT EASIER TO FIND WORK AS A WRITER?**

A very close friend of mine, Ed Simmons, who I had gone to school with- we use to write as kids. When he moved to California his wives cousin was Norman Lear. So they became partners. I was very fortunate to have known Ed Simmons because it wasn't difficult for me to get involved in writing. In fact, Norman, Ed and I for a while shared an apartment in New York City for a while when they came to New York to do The Martha Rae Show. Essentially how I got started was that Eric Greenbaum who produced a show called Mr. Peepers starring Wally Cox, was wondering how long the two writers on that show could write it. They were in their second season and so when I approached him he said if you got any ideas we can use them.

That's kind of opening up a door- that generally doesn't happen that way anymore. So then I went back to Boston and would send him a story line every week. And I use to get checks from the show. I never got a credit because they didn't have to give credits. I sold about two dozen story lines to them. So after that I wrote a complete script for Mr. Peepers. I figured these guys are getting very, very tired of writing so I figured maybe I could just sell one script. At that time David Suskine, who was a major talk show host was being represented by MCA. He decided to break away and opened up his own agency, Talent Associates. From there he had gone on to produce, with his own company, Mr. Peepers, Jamie and a lot of other shows. He also was peoples agents who wrote for his shows. Can you imagine your agent also producing your show your working on? (Laughter). So he was my agent as well.

So after I wrote the Mr. Peepers script I brought it into New York myself, but I didn't get to see David Suskine myself because I didn't know him at that point. So I brought my Mr. Peepers script to New York hoping to sell it after I had written all of these story lines and I left it with the producer of the show. I had planned to be in New York for just one night. The producer said let me read it and I'll get in touch with you in a couple of weeks. So I was just hanging around New York for a day wondering around the streets to see if he's got the script, or maybe even read it. I called David Suskine and I got put right through to him and he said, "where the hell are you? I've been looking for you all over the place. I called every hotel in New York." He said we love your script. Then he said, "Nm,, I want you to tell me the truth, this is a gag, isn't it? Eric Greenbaum and Jim Fritzell (the writers on Mr. Peepers) wrote the script and they told you to put your name on it because it's written exactly the way they write." And so they thought it was a big joke. Eric and Jim came along and said, "No \\'le did not write this script, but this is a good writer- you better get a hold of this guy." So I went back into the studio and we had a little talk. The following day I met with Daivd Suskine in person and he said, "well we got these two guys writing Mr. Peepers, but there's another show that we have and we don't know who the hell should be the head writer on it and you've got good instincts- so you be the head writer."(Laughter) Now that doesn't happen anymore. So he said to come in in two months and you'll be a head writer on our show. So that's the way I began writing for Jamie.

## **SO YOU WERE THE ONLY WRITER FOR JAMIE?**

No. A lot of people were contributing. It wasn't the same deal as Jim and Eric, but I was quite willing to do a show a week and they laughed at me and said one man can't do it. Greenbaum and Fritzell are going crazy trying to do one a week for Mr. Peepers and they need help too.

### **SO HOW MANY WRITERS WERE UNDER YOU?**

There was no one else. There was no staff. It was just freelance stuff. But the freelancers consisted of some of the really big names back then.

### **GENERALLY A SHOW NEEDS TO GET A GOOD SEASON OR SO TO LET PEOPLE SEE WHAT THE CHARACTERS AND THE SHOW ARE ALL ABOUT, SO HOW COULD FREELANCERS BEGIN TO WRITE A SHOW THEY BARELY ARE FAMILIAR WITH?**

In those days it really didn't have any form. The staff had no form to it. There was no staff. I would do a script, bring it in, meet with the producer of the show. I would have a very informal meeting. It wouldn't even be a production meeting. Then I'd come back two or three days later and we'd go into rehearsal. I was constantly there, but there wasn't any bunch of offices where the writers would hang out.

### **SO YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES WERE NOT LIKE HEAD WRITERS TODAY WHERE THEY'D LOOK OVER OTHER ASPECTS OF THE SHOW FOR CONTINUITY.**

No, it was done very, very loosely. But I'm going back to what is still called "The Golden Age of Television" there was no structure of the magnitude that we have now. You know if you take, The Cosby Show, today there are probably one-hundred people working on it. They have their own offices and meetings that they take every two or three minutes- and this group meets with that group, and the scenery is this, and the dialogue is that, and they keep changing it and rehearsing it. There was none of that.

### **WELL WHAT WAS IT LIKE BEING AT ABC WHEN THE NETWORK WAS SO YOUNG AND STRUGGLING?**

Yes, well, ABC did run a bad third behind NBC and CBS. The major problem we had with Jamie, which was an ABC show, was that they canceled it after one year because ABC could not deliver. The big sponsor was Sunsweet and they wanted seventy-four stations across the country, which was the network, and ABC couldn't do it because they weren't strong enough to keep their own affiliates. So the series just fell apart. They could deliver around sixty-three, but the sponsor wanted more. So that was the end of the series.

### **WELL HOW IMPORTANT WAS THE RATINGS BACK THEN?**

I don't think they were very important. They had ratings, but nobody paid much attention to them. It didn't make any difference. Sponsors were just concerned about getting as many markets as possible for their products. And you have to have envision the situation where radio was still an important factor. The two were kind of overlapping. Television is the usurper, it

kind of gradually moved in. The only people who were worried were the motion picture people. They were thinking it was the end of film.

### **WHAT ABOUT RESIDUALS?**

In those days, no. Actually the Writers Guild which came into existence a couple of years after the time we're talking about, was really responsible for everything like residuals and the increases in payments to writers.

### **HOW HAS THE WRITERS GUILD SERVICE CHANGED IN TERMS OF WRITERS?**

When I first started to write you didn't even have to be a member of the Guild. There was no agreement between producers, or the networks, or the individual channels with The Writers Guild. There was a Writers Guild, but it was relatively unimportant. The writers Guild was just a bunch of people getting together talking about their problems- how to do a script, how to peddle it, etc. But they didn't have any sort of minimum agreement or anything else. If anybody had considered a strike by the Writers Guild it would have been laughable. When I first joined it cost under fifteen dollars to join. Now it's in the thousands to join. When you do get residuals now, of course you have to pay a half of one percent back to the Guild. The Guild has an awful lot of money- several million dollar worth of money so in case we go out on strike again we won't starve to death. You can also borrow from them. They have a pension plan, a health plan.

### **WHAT EXACTLY DID YOU DO FOR THE ONE AND A HALF YEARS AS PART OF COMEDY DEVELOPMENT GROUP AT NBC?**

I think it was one of the most remarkable things that happened to television. NBC decided to take a bunch of young writers, many of them were near-bits, they had never written before. You had to have several meetings and show that you had good work. It was relatively easy for me because I had worked on Jamie and made contributions to Mr. Peepers. And another thing was my relationship with Simmons and Lear did me no harm at all.

### **BUT WOULDN'T YOU CONSIDER THIS POSITION A STEP DOWN FROM BEING A HEAD WRITER ON A SHOW TO WORKING WITH NOT ESTABLISHED WRITERS?**

Nobody gave such thoughts back then. I think I made as much money working for NBC as I did for working on Jamie. It would be a come down in a way today, sure, but it wasn't in those days. When I refer to head writer, this is what a head writer is today. I was the only guy writing regularly on the show. Basically that's what I'm saying.

### **SO WHAT WAS THE MAIN ESSENCE OF FORMING THE DEVELOPMENT GROUP, WHAT EXACTLY DID YOU DO?**

The main job was to develop new shows- fundamentally comedy shows.

### **HOW MANY OF YOU WERE WORKING ON THIS?**

There were about ten or twelve of us. The outstanding alumnus of the group was Woody Allen. I worked with Woody, Raul Keys and George Carlin.

### **SO HOW MANY SHOWS WERE YOU RESPONSIBLE FOR COMING UP WITH?**

I don't think we even came up with one show that ever made it into a finished product. We were working with some of the best people in the business- Johnathan Winters we tried to do show for him. Kay Allen was my assignment. I worked with Kay along with a few other writers. Dozens of comedians we worked with- Dom DeLuise.

Again, this was very loosely organized. We would meet once a week. The whole group would meet at NBC and we would just sit around and talk about what we were gonna do next. I tried to develop a show for Kay Allen. None of us could come up with a show that even interested the network. And we never did a pilot script, we just talked to these people. The thing was a marvelous experience for writers. It developed a lot of people as writers. Look at Woody Allen. But after nothing worked out the network didn't want to pay us anymore. But we did work with many comics that made it. At that time we were moving back and forth between the west coast and New York and just around this time in history television began to leave New York and move to L.A. This is just about the crux of my story. I didn't move to L.A. So I stayed in New York and contributed some scripts to The Gleason Show.

### **WELL HOW MUCH INFLUENCE DID THE PERFORMERS HAVE ON THE SCRIPTS IN THOSE DAYS?**

I still think it's true even today. I had a great respect for actors and directors. I think they can enhance the script. If they have a good script they can make it better. If they have a bad script they can make it a little better. I think if you have a very funny comedian you can do almost anything and do funny things with it.

### **SO WOULD YOU SAY THE SCRIPTS WERE PARTIALLY INFLUENCED BY THE ACTORS AND THE WRITERS?**

I would say no. Only because of in defense of writers. I don't think writers got nearly the credit that they should have gotten. And even today it's a major problem. Most people don't know who wrote I Love Lucy, or All in the Family, or RoseAnne. The writers are responsible for character development and dialogue, but people rarely know them- they know Lucy and RoseAnne. I still think writers are getting relatively short-tripped in terms of money and recognition. Of course the money is better because of the Writers Guild, but certainly there aren't too many people who know the writers of well known TV shows.

### **WHAT ABOUT THE SCRIPT ITSELF, DID YOU HAVE TABLE READINGS?**

Yes. You get a first reading with the director introducing every body. It's the same thing as today. That's never changed, it's a tradition.

### **WELL HOW MANY TIMES WOULD YOU SAY SHOWS WERE REWRITTEN?**

The same as today. We had rewrites during rehearsals. The one big difference is in the earlier days and probably up until ten years ago, the writers were much more involved in the rehearsal process than they are now. I can tell you this, Ed Simmons, who won Emmys for The Carol Burnett Show would watch the rehearsals from a remote screen in his office. But he would never go on the floor. The director would handle it all. When I was doing it live and if some one used the wrong name in a script, they had to have a writer pre-sent to change the name in the rest of the script to keep it consistent. Today they can edit it. So the writers were there during rehearsals and when it was being performed.

**YOU'VE DONE FREELANCE ON WELCOME BACK KOTTER AND GIMME A BREAK, HOW HAVE SCRIPTS CHANGED SINCE MR. PEEPERS AND JAMIE?**

I think they're tighter now. Once a script gets final approval these days there are few changes. The only changes would be made in rehearsals. I know that on Gimme A Break if Neal Carter would say I'm not comfortable with this line I think I can say it funnier if you let me say it this way, the director would say o.k., now do it. So that would constitute a change except the writer didn't get involved with it. I can show you scripts and tapes of that show where things I wrote never came out the way I wrote them in the final version. And there are things that I didn't write that were in there. These lines were put in or taken out because of the rehearsal. Other than that the scripts are much tighter today than they use to be. People use to kind of suggest and give a general flow and very often the star would do something.

**HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THIS NEW TREND OF COALITIONS FORMING TO BOYCOTT ADVERTISERS OF RISKE SHOWS?**

I think it's just terrible. It's kind of a censorship. If an advertiser is putting six commercials on one quarter of a football program, nobody is going to form a coalition and tell Chevy not to advertise on that football show next week because the microphone picked up the coach saying, "What the hell did you do Charlie, that was pretty much of a fuck-up." Or if you could lip read a lot of people can easily see what they're saying. I just don't think there should be anything at all to stop any art form whether its television or a Robert Maplethorp sculpture.

**DO YOU FEEL THAT NETWORK CENSORS ARE BEING LAX OR DO YOU FEEL MORE RISKE MATERIAL IS MORE ACCEPTABLE BECAUSE OF THE SIMPLE PROCESS OF PROGRESS AND MOVING AHEAD IN TIME?**

I think the latter is true. The final rule to me is if someone doesn't want to hear it or see it they don't have to look at it. If Joan Collins is gonna say bitch and someone hear it and says I don't want a woman coming over the air waves into my house saying bitch, they can just turn it off. And that is a signal to the advertiser to say maybe we're losing a little business on this show, maybe it's because Joan Collins says bitch. I think the reactions are shown through the number of viewers.

**CERTAINLY FAMILY SHOWS HAVE BEEN A STAPLE OF SITCOMS SINCE DAY ONE, ARE YOU SURPRISED BY THE NUMBER OF FAMILY SITCOMS STILL AROUND AND DOMINATING THE RATINGS?**

No. I'm not surprised. It's fundamental to the American way of life. People are interested in family life. There have always been other types of genres on TV all along, but people relate to the common family. There always seems to be new surges in types of shows. Today there's a lot of reality based shows like Rescue 911, Unsolved Mysteries.

**MANY PEOPLE FEEL THERE IS A GROWING MOMENTUM THAT THE INDUSTRY IS ONCE AGAIN ON THE VERGE OF ACCEPTING MORE FREELANCE SCRIPTS, DO YOU SEE THIS HAPPENING AGAIN?**

Well I don't think it'll be anywhere near the amount of freelance scripts or story lines that were done back then. But the more things change the more they stay the same. If someone in Kansas wanted to sell a script to a series today, it can be done. It cannot be done, however; if he refuses to leave Kansas at least for a time. If you get a good agent certainly they can circulate your material for you, but in order to get that agent you have to meet with them in person. Then once again you have to meet with the producers in person. Once you meet with them hopefully it will open the door for future story lines and scripts. If the producer agrees to meet with you he's already sold on your script, but it also gives you a chance to peddle other ideas once your there. Then you can go back to Kansas. I feel it would benefit every writer for them to live in the L.A. area at least for a little while.