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Steve O'Donnell: Making 'em Laugh Late Into The Night

*In filing this month's interview with Steven O'Donnell, subscriber **Raymond Palma** is to be congratulated for displaying one of a writer's most valuable attributes: persistence. It was several months ago when Palma first contacted HS about talking with the head writer at "Late Night with David Letterman," and his perseverance has paid off in this relaxed, down-to-earth chat with a man who surely must feel the pressures of a daily do-or-die deadline. Somehow, though, O'Donnell seems quite calm and matter-of-fact about his role as "squad leader" to a writing staff charged with the task of churning out funny stuff on time, every time, day after day.*

Briefly, how did you get started in the business?

It's sort of hard to say. This is the first TV job I've had; which I think is true for all the other writers that are here now, except for maybe one. Some of that is due to the fact that David Letterman in particular looks for a fresh look or fresh perspective. As for my experience prior to the show, I've done a lot of freelance magazine work and industrial films, TV commercials, I even wrote greeting cards for two years in Cleveland for American Greetings. I guess my break was when David Letterman and the original head writer Merrill Marco looked at a package of material I sent them when the program was just getting started. I had a big portfolio filled with various writing samples that I had done, but they were less interested in that stuff and more interested in the material I had custom-made for them.

How long ago was that?

That was in 1982. I knew Letterman from his short-lived morning show and from a few appearances I'd seen him make on game shows and The Tonight Show, and I thought, "Oooooe, I could do that."

So you didn't come on as head writer initially?

No, I came on as a regular writer. In late 1983 I became head writer. There was actually a head writer after Merrill and before me, Jim Downy, who is now a producer over at Saturday Night Live. Merrill was a head writer a little less than a year, as was Jim. And then I had greatness thrust upon me.

So in less than a year after coming on the show you became head writer?

I guess that would be indicative of the desperation they felt at that point in history.

What was it like here on the Letterman show in the beginning, compared to the way it is now? Any changes in the way you go about putting a show together?

I suppose the writers from the first year might recognize a lot of our daily life as being the same. I mean, it's still true that when we're desperate we'll do an audience piece. There's a lot of not knowing what you're going to do next, both before and even the day of the show. I would say that it's both easier and

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harder. It's easier because we sort of know the game in a way, and we're not absolutely terrified out of our skulls if we haven't got the entire show laid out and scripted in advance. On the other hand, it's harder because we've used up so many ideas and Letterman is very punctilious about not reusing ideas too much. He'll say, "We did that already." And I'll say, "Yeah, but that was back in 1984, why can't we do that again?"

I would say what has also remained true is that the writers who are here (and those who have come and gone) seem to be here because they like the show. They like the spirit of the show, and they like the character of Dave Letterman. I don't think it has so much been a job, per se, for most of them. It's something more special than usual.

What does the head writing position entail?

It's like being a squad leader. I'm a writer like all the other writers. We all write pieces and think of little ideas and big ideas. I, more or less, represent the writers to Dave and to the production staff. And in return, I also represent the production staff and Dave back to the writers. I try to present to Dave what we've been working on and have come up with, and he will alter some of those things, kick in some ideas, or contribute a notion of his own, all of which I'll take back to the writers. It's basically like being a foreman.

You're the liaison between the writers and Dave and the production team.

Liaison, yes. Bailiff. Ombudsman. Yeah, I guess that would be it. I'm an ombudsman. You know, that would be a very good "Hangman" word, ombudsman. I think people would be very confused when they see the letters appearing.

All right, so you're an ombudsman. You're in charge and say, "C'mon, folks, this is what is going on."

I wish I had the authority that you're able

to put into your voice when you say, "Come on, folks." Nooo, there's a lot of sort of pathetic wobbling and cajoling. We're more or less responsible for ourselves. But we do work in groups, pairs and trios. Every possible combination that you can conceive of, we have tried. Sometimes all eight of us work on a piece, and sometimes it's one person and one person alone. And there are shows when all the proceedings have come from Dave. And then we work on materials and things for another night. Sometimes we meet a couple of times a day to figure out what we're doing and toss ideas out. Other times we won't meet at all. The one occasion on which we generally meet every single day is the Top Ten list. That's usually the end of the day right before taping. That's the last thing we do before the cameras start to roll.

Compare your position as head writer on this show, to your counterpart on, say, a sitcom.

I would say that on a sitcom I'd probably have a producer's title as well. I draw up plans for sets, and work with the scenic design people. I'll do a lot of stuff that ranges from casting to picking out music to organizing video tape remote excursions.

So you do the work of a producer, without the title.

Yes. I'm an ombudsman with many hats.

Earlier, you mentioned that you are no longer terrified if the entire show isn't completely scripted. Still, there has to be a certain amount of pressure, trying to invent and execute workable ideas on a daily basis, under very tight deadlines. Do you have a set schedule to help cope with that?

Well, I'll speak in paradoxes again. The good thing is that no day is really the same. The bad thing is that you can't really have any kind of personal life because sometimes you're here until the middle of the evening if not later. I suppose our schedule is less cruel

than Saturday Night Live—they roll in mid-evening and work until early morning. We have something more of an office schedule—start at ten in the morning and work until whenever.

Sometimes we come up with a notion very early, something nice and simple. We send a camera crew to a photo development shop and Dave stands there and comments on all the people's photos as they come to pick them up. So once we come up with that, something that's really not much more than a sentence, then we go out and have big thick steaks for dinner and go home and watch eight hours of television. But if something like that hasn't occurred, we could be figuring and debating and discussing 'til prime time is almost over.

How does each individual staff writer contribute to the show?

It's a little bit like "Hogan's Heroes" or the B-17 crew, where each person has their specialty. But instead of electronics or explosives or languages there are some guys on the show that are very good at weird concepts, like covering Dave with chips and lowering him into a tank of dip. They might not be able to write a joke to save their life. There are other people who are great at gags, at monologue-type jokes. But over the years, since we need everyone everywhere—like rushing from one slit in the parapet to another because we're being besieged by barbarians on all sides—everybody has to do everything. The monologue writers who write the opening remarks will sometimes write full pieces; and people who write the weird concepts occasionally will give Dave a monologue joke. So everybody does everything. In fact, I'm going to abandon the "guys in the fort" image and go for one of a

group of people stacking sand bags against rising flood waters. Everybody goes where they can to do what they can. They still have their natural inclinations and gifts, but it's not highly compartmentalized.

“ Our meetings are like Grand Central Station at rush hour, with lots of swarming and uncertainty . ”

Given that, do the writers have certain titles or positions?

Not really. There are the writers, and there's me. I have resisted over-specific splintering. They're all

writers. We don't have a writer in charge of this, and a writer in charge of that. There's a certain amount of democracy and equality here. Everybody all started at minimum wage and everyone gets their little increments as time goes on. And as far as incentive systems go, if they get a big warm smile from me, I believe that makes it all worth it. Of course, you will have to speak to them about that.

You said you have eight people writing for the show right now?

We've had as many as twelve and we've done it with as few as four. We've had people come and go, leaving for other shows such as "The Simpsons" and "In Living Color," both great shows. By and large, though, it's a fairly stable staff. Most people have been here five or six years, even during periods of turnover.

What sort of deal is outlined in the basic contract?

There are thirteen-week cycles, which I guess is fairly standard for television that's done on a daily basis. We hire somebody and then in thirteen weeks we pick up their contract or we don't. Not picking up the contract amounts to firing them. But that's such an ugly word. Here in the industry we

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MARKETS

SCRIPTS WANTED

Loon Star Film Partners, Inc. has been advertising for low-budget scripts, feature length, "no exploitation." They ask for script and summary (though HS recommends a query letter first) with SASE to 3633 Lavell Dr., Los Angeles, CA 90065.

Also in the market for low-budget feature scripts is Pulse Productions, who express an interest in action-adventure or murder mystery to be filmed in South America. Send synopsis only to Henry Woodman, 4504 Cedros Ave., Sherman Oaks, CA 91403.

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say terminated with extreme prejudice.

You mentioned the varied backgrounds of the staff—and even that many had no prior TV experience. Can you elaborate on that?

Some were in advertising, some were freelance writers like myself. Some were really serious writers—they had written books. Remember books? Let's see, we had one who had an MBA, another who was an attorney. We just hired a guy who has a Ph.d. in math from Harvard who is currently working at Bell Laboratories on a death ray. He's finished that up, and will be joining us in a week or two. No, I'm not sure it's a death ray but it's some sort of highly advanced scientific undertaking.

When you have a production meeting, what is discussed? What can constitute a problem?

Our meetings are something like Grand Central Station at rush hour, with lots of swarming and shoving and uncertainty. And the schedule varies. As I mentioned, we have the Top Ten meeting, but in a way that's more like a reward, or payoff, because those aren't very hard. We know what we're up against, you see. On the other hand, some problems we might encounter would focus on technical considerations, like will the management of Rockefeller Center let us release a hundred birds from the window.

Other problems we might encounter involve our constant striving (not always successfully) for variety. If Dave did a piece using photos on Wednesday, we don't want to use one on Thursday. If we did a prop piece on Tuesday, we can't on Wednesday. There are all kinds of things to keep an eye open for, and it can be exhausting, but that's our job.

Who is responsible from coming up with new segments on the show? Everybody?

Sure, everybody. All the writers. We don't

ask the receptionist to pitch in, but everyone's invited and occasionally the receptionist does and occasionally the producer does. More than occasionally the director does. But by and large it's the writers. Every writer is everywhere. It's a nice staff, a smart staff, and a funny staff.

Most of the monologue is focused on current events. Are writers required to read certain publications each day in order to formulate material?

You have an over-formal idea of the way this show is run, when you say, "required to read." I think they read whatever papers they think might help them. I'm sure if some of the writers came in and didn't read any papers at all, if they just wrote the monologue joke out of the blue, they would not be punished in any way. Sure, they read daily papers and magazines and watch their TV sets (usually the stranger cable stations until about 4 A.M.). The monologue people do tend to have a couple of daily papers spread out in front of them, but that may be just so they look busy, I'm not sure.

Let's talk a moment about the genesis of the Top Ten list, which you described as being relatively easy.

I had the notion to give the Top Ten list a shot a couple of years ago, never thinking it would have such staying power.

You didn't think it would last this long?

No, not really. It may be that they've had some staying power in lieu of a monologue since Dave, unlike Carson or other comics, doesn't do twenty-five jokes when he comes out. He does one, two, or three. So the Top Ten list is one way for him to get ten jokes into a two-minute time period. At least, we hope they're jokes.

What's the process in conceiving the list?

Well, we'll just chat during the day about what a good topic would be. This morning, for instance, I was thinking on my way into work that they're exhuming Zachary Taylor, and I

thought there ought to be something we can do with that. Ten reasons people wanted Zachary Taylor dead. And then we'd just list all his obnoxious personal qualities.

It generally comes from something topical. But again, we try to vary it. We'll have a week of topics that are right from the headlines. They're about whatever member in Congress is in trouble, or whatever bizarre natural phenomenon is going on, like solar flares or lightning striking golf crowds. And then, other times, it's simply pointless. You know, the top ten horrifying secrets of Orville Redenbacher. It's not in the headlines, but it's somewhere in the national consciousness.

And you gather toward the end of the day to put this list together.

Yes, just prior to taping. We sort of slap it together between four and five o'clock. The taping is done between five-thirty and six-thirty. And then we come back upstairs after six-thirty and start to figure out what we'll do for the next day. We keep trying to get ahead, but that's never happened in nine years.

Do you ever store untimely Top Ten lists and pull them out when needed?

We did skip one once, but as a rule we don't. We certainly have canned Top Ten lists at the last minute and never used them again. There was one about what was overheard on flight 5050, which was the plane that sort of went down the runway and then fell into the bay. And about ten minutes before tape time we decided it wasn't such a good idea, that it was in poor taste, and we pulled it.

Since Monday is a repeat day for the show, what does the writing staff do on that day?

That's when we do the videotaped pieces. That's when we go out and visit the world's fattest bellboy, or take a trip to Staten Island.

Some of these pieces are prepared very carefully. We'll do a scripted piece about Dave going camping with a bunch of Boy Scouts and it'll turn out to be pretty absurd.

Do writers get residuals on shows that

are repeated?

Yes. Of course, each time it's repeated the amount goes down. And if the show that's repeated is from several years ago, the more recent writers don't get a dime. But some of the old derelict writers who are now out of luck (just kidding), they get the dime.

Are you and the other writers allowed to write spec scripts for other TV shows or features?

I think as long as they do their rather ill-defined job here, they're allowed. It would be naive to think that anyone, writers in particular, would work years and years without venturing out.

Does David Letterman sit in on writing sessions with the writing team?

Not usually, but sometimes. And then, writers come and go from his office. So it's not round-the-clock contact, but it's off-and-on daily contact. Some writers he'll become good friends with, and others he'll remain colleagues with. But this changes, too. I'll say that the writers see him more than Johnny Carson's writers see him, but perhaps less than toddlers see their moms at home.

The monologue offers a lot of freedom for

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MARKETS

SCRIPTS WANTED

Low-budget seems to be the key phrase in the listings this month. Mark West Productions has advertised for a comedy that fits that description, and would like to see WGA-registered (or copyrighted) material only, along with SASE, of course. Send submissions to 9538 W. Pico Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90035. No personal deliveries.

Got a short screenplay? If it's a mystery-suspense, it might be just what From The Sun Prods. is looking for. They'd like something in the 30-60 minute range. Send script and SASE (or query first) to them at P.O. Box 139, Venice, CA 90294.

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the writer, as opposed to fully-scripted material. Who has the final say in what the monologue will look like?

Dave has the last word, and is the final arbiter. Whatever jokes, guests, or music played— he'll be the one with the final say, which only shows that he has a total interest in the project and wants it to be as good as possible.

Does he do a lot of improvisation, a lot of "winging," when on stage?

Oh, yeah. I'd say there's as much winging as there is prepared material. Yes, I am often surprised with the content. But I think all the other writers understand that. Our function here, and this may be a key point, is not to prepare formal scripts that Dave delivers word for word. Our job is more or less to provide a framework in which Dave can be himself and let his character show through.

So basically you're just writing for a stand-up comedian who is on TV?

A stand-up comedian, yes. But beyond that a character, an attitude, a personality. We give him stuff to work with and work around. And occasionally we'll come up with something that's funny and is a great bit, but has nothing to do with our show. And I suppose that's when they mail it to the Fox network.

Taping a show live must present its share of challenges.

Well, the bad thing is that things foul up and you simply go, "Oh," and you can't go back and correct them. The good thing is that things foul up and you can't go back and correct them.

Meaning once it's gone, it's gone.

Right. It's gone, and so what? You just have to say, "Well, we'll try again tomorrow." I think we'd go insane if we tried to patch up every show, because there are so many foul-ups and so on. Plus, without being coy about

it, I think some of the appeal of the show might be that it's not very anal-retentive. We're not worried if the seams show.

Can people submit material to "Late Night"?

We don't buy freelance stuff. If we're going to use someone's material on the air, we'd have to hire them full-time, and that is a huge commitment. So generally we look for a portfolio of work that suggests this person is going to be a solid contributor for years and years. We want to make sure they don't have a one-joke notion they've been nurturing for months and cracking up the other people at the hardware store with. People send in funny newspaper items, and Dave will do small-town news and dumb ads and that kind of stuff. Most of those we find ourselves, but a good number will come in through the mail. But of course that's different from other script-writing material. We don't use outside scripted material.

So what avenue might a writer take in trying to get a staff position?

Some people approach us through agents, while others are just free spirits operating on their own behalf. I don't have an agent, myself. In this respect the show differs wildly from the conventional standards.

Certainly a good way for writers to begin is to write for local comedians in their towns. This is great practice, and can lead to bigger ventures. Some of those local comedians go places, and if you already write for them, voila! I've met freelancers who have sold jokes to Jay Leno, Joan Rivers, and Rodney Dangerfield. And why? They get some money, a little bit of professional prestige and association, and also the thrill of hearing their material performed.

What kind of samples do you look for in a portfolio?

For "Late Night," I'm only interested in material that appears useful to our show, and has our show in mind. People might send me

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a movie script they've written, or samples of their detective stories, and not only is it more than I can ever read, it does me no good. I'm sure great writers, writers who write novels and so on, couldn't necessarily come in here and write for this show. We're looking for a specific attitude and ability that suits us.

If writers are going to send material to us, it ought to be written for our show. That three-act play that takes place in revolutionary France wouldn't be a good example for me to work with. Again, in my own personal odyssey, they weren't interested in other material I sent, but rather the personal material they could use on the show. ■

SCRIPT DOCTOR, Cont'd. from page 9

marrow of life.

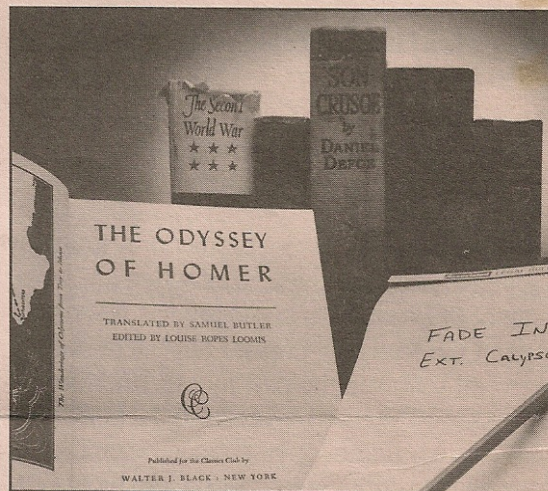
Incorporating values into particular characters does not mean that your characters need to discuss what you believe. Instead, you communicate values through what the character does, through conflict, and through character attitudes. As usual, creating characters is best done through showing, not telling. Express and convey—don't just talk about it.

Linda Seger is a script consultant and noted lecturer. She is the author of "Making a Good Script Great," and "Creating Unforgettable Characters." For information on her consultation services, phone (213) 390-1951. ■

SCRIPTNOTES

Since this month's interview was contributed by a freelancer, it seems an ideal time to remind everyone that The Hollywood Scriptwriter is always open to query letters, particularly concerning interviews with noteworthy writers who live outside the L.A. area. We only ask that prior to sending a query you lay a little groundwork first; in other words, find out if your intended interviewee is willing and available, and then write your letter. We pay upon publication (which, with our SOP of last-minute panic, is usually about two minutes after acceptance) and will work with you to develop some questions and a general focus for your piece.

Next month is our Annual Double Issue, and we'll not only be spotlighting a highly successful screenwriter from the Bay Area, we'll also feature a round-up article on the top "Traveling Seminars" by folks like Richard Walter, Michael Hauge, and others.



Along with that, there'll be book reviews, a videotaped seminar review, and if we can get to it, a software review—and a bunch of other great stuff. Who knows, maybe we'll even throw in a set of ginsu knives... At any rate, you don't want to miss it, so if you're due to renew, do it now!

'Til next month... ■

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