

Is Saturday Night Live dead?

Ratings high, but it's lost sparkle

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Toronto Star special

NEW YORK — Four years ago, seven young unknown actors were given \$750 a week and the break of their lives, a chance to perform their irreverent brand of comedy on network TV — late at night (after the censors went to bed) and live from New York.

"When we first began there was nothing like it on the air and we had a kind of crusade feeling," says Saturday Night Live producer Lorne Michaels, almost wistfully. "It was a feeling of us against them, against the network, against the conventional wisdom of TV at the time. The intent was more pure. We were incredibly naive."

Sitting in his newly redecorated office at NBC headquarters, Michaels, who comes from Toronto, looked worse for the wear — pale and haggard from two days without sleep and nearly five years as patriarch of The Not Ready For Prime Time Players.

Shorter hair

His hair shorter than in the early days, his jeans and tennis shoes replaced by slacks and soft, leather loafers, Michaels is no longer the counterculture creator of an outlaw TV show. At 34, he's the founder of a budding show business dynasty.

Saturday Night Live (on channel 2 at 11:30 p.m.) is also seen in prime time now — Wednesday night on tape (channel 2 at 9:30 p.m.). The players are movie stars and recording artists. They have managers, agents, publicists, personal secretaries and limousines. Several are millionaires; the rest may soon be.

"They're all on their way to becoming the highest-paid performers in the movie business by next year," said Sean Daniels, vice-president of production at Universal Studios where millions have been laid out for Saturday Night Live talent — John Belushi in *Animal House*, Belushi and Toronto's Dan Aykroyd in 1941 and *The Blues Brothers* movie, Bill Murray in *Meatballs* and *Where The Buffalo Roam*.

Though Belushi was paid a "nominal" sum for his role in *Animal House* (Universal's biggest grosser last year), according to a number of sources, he and Aykroyd since have turned down as much as \$1.25 million to star in another picture.

Bill Murray reportedly joined the millionaire ranks with his role in the Canadian-made movie *Meatballs*. He received "a bunch of points" (percentage points of the profits) in the movie, which cost \$1.5 million to make and so far has grossed nearly \$40 million at the box office (about \$20 million in film rentals), according to Ivan Reitman, the 32-year-old producer-director of *Meatballs* and co-producer of *Animal House*.

"They've become the Beatles of comedy," boasted Bernie Brillstein, the manager of Aykroyd, Belushi, Gilda Radner and Michaels.

The Beatles, of course, broke up when the egos and ambitions of the individual members became too much for the group.

Is Saturday Night Live dead?

That depends on how you monitor the vital signs. "The season premiere (hosted by Steve Martin) was our highest-rated ever," said Michaels.

In fact, Saturday Night Live is the highest rated weekly late-night program in TV history, having forged what has been called "the best demographic in television" — an audience dominated by 18 to 34-year-olds, the movie-going and record-buying public. According to an NBC spokesman, the network currently charges sponsors \$120,000 a minute of commercial time.

The prime-time version, *The Best of Saturday Night Live*, is an even bigger

financial bonanza: \$130-\$140,000 per commercial minute and no production costs to speak of. According to one network source, however, NBC's decision to put a "Best of" program on the air simultaneously indicates that "there's a feeling the show won't be around much longer, so they're trying to make as much (money) out of it as they can while they can."

Another line of thinking holds that Belushi's and Aykroyd's presence on the reruns will help to lessen the impact of their absence from the new shows. The pair was featured as the Blues Brothers on the prime-time premiere, which aired Oct. 24. They were seen again that week (Oct. 27) when the third late-night show of this season had a repeat from the 1978 season, generally regarded as Saturday Night Live's creative high point. Many observers believe that the show has been going downhill since then.

Even Michaels doesn't deny that some of the show's former spirit has flown. "Back then, nothing mattered in anyone's life as much as the show," he said. "You could work for 16 or 17 hours, then go back to someone's house and talk for two or three more hours, and out of that would come another idea for the show."

"The fact that we were an underdog and didn't have much money only gave the show more meaning. There was no sense of decadence, no lack of purpose. It was never hard to motivate people to work or want to be here."

Things have changed around Studio 8H. During a recent afternoon of rehearsal, security was so tight that a reporter had to be accompanied everywhere, including to the locked restroom door, by an NBC publicist.

"You can watch, but please don't approach the performers," the publicist instructed. "They don't do interviews anymore per se."

Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi weren't there, of course, having left the show for good with one year remaining on their five-year contracts.

Gilda Radner was seen briefly in a hallway, but later she could not be located. "She's not in her dressing room; maybe she's in her office on the 14th floor."

Big break

Radner, who got her big break in Toronto, has filmed a version of her recent one-woman Broadway show (the movie is produced by Michaels and directed by Mike Nichols). She has a comedy album about to be released by Warner Bros. Records and has signed to star in her first movie, *First Family*, from Warner Bros. Studios.

Laraine Newman strode quickly across the set once. "Laraine's been a little upright lately," a spokesman said. Newman is set to star opposite Dudley Moore in the movie *Wholly Moses*. Since the film production will run concurrent with Saturday Night Live, she'll be commuting from set to set.

Bill Murray was glimpsed through a partially closed door, watching an episode of *Buck Rogers In The 25th Century*. He will be commuting, too, from the set of *Caddy Shack* (his fourth movie in rapid succession) in which he stars with Chevy Chase.

Garrett Morris was not there. He's appearing in an off-Broadway play and recording a music-comedy album.

Jane Curtin was on her way to the studio from Eugene, Ore., where she's filming *How To Beat The High Cost Of Living*, her first starring role. She flies in on Thursday and leaves again Sunday.

"No one but Lorne Michaels could have kept that group of people together this long," said Dick Ebersol, a former NBC vice-president who created the show with Michaels. "In my mind,

Lorne Michaels is Saturday Night Live."

When plans for Saturday Night Live were announced at an NBC affiliates meeting in the spring of 1975, Ebersol and Michaels didn't know what they were getting into. They were still surprised that the network had said yes to their idea — a late-night variety format featuring rock 'n' roll and satire, changing hosts and a cast of regulars who were unknown and mostly inexperienced in TV.

Since the show was to be wholly owned by the network, there wasn't a lot of money in it for the two men. "But we jumped in hook, line and sinker because we were intrigued by the idea that this big company was going to let two kids from the TV generation do whatever they wanted about a show for the TV generation," Ebersol said.

Gilda Radner was hired first and without an audition, Ebersol said. Perhaps because he was the only one of the players who had an agent at the time, Chevy Chase signed on only for a year (the rest signed five-year contracts).

Garrett Morris, too, was hired as a writer; Laraine Newman auditioned in a hospital room where Ebersol lay ill and Jane Curtin was chosen over a number of qualified candidates.

Horrendous tales

"There was a lot of holding back on Belushi," Ebersol continued. "Everyone in the group wanted him but we'd heard horrendous tales of him being a discipline problem. I said that I'd take responsibility."

Dan Aykroyd was hired at the last minute as a writer-performer but wasn't around much during the first few months because he was living in Toronto and only came to New York on the day of the show.

Saturday Night Live debuted in the fall of 1975, ratings-wise a very bad season for NBC. Talent notwithstanding, the timing and six-month on-air guarantee saved it from an early death.

"Thought the show didn't get a 30 share of the audience (considered survival in TV) until midway through its second season, according to Ebersol "it quickly became the darling of the media."

"It was somewhere around the end of the first season before any of us looked up and realized we were a hit," Michaels recalled.

Chase's defection to Hollywood at the end of Saturday Night Live's first season "devastated" Michaels. But it gave the rest of the repertory company, including newly added Bill Murray, room to grow. Ratings climbed during the second season and potential guests and sponsors began lining up. So did the movie and record companies.

During the third season, Belushi starred in *Animal House*, in a role written specifically for him. The movie grossed more than \$100 million.

"Last season (the fourth) was the hardest for me," said Michaels. "Partly because of the success of *Animal House*, the Blues Brothers record and the show itself it got to the point where all they had to do was walk out on the stage and there would be applause."

"Suddenly the very things we set out to change were creeping in, not creeping in, taking over — a value system that says go with the hit. I was at fault last year, I bowed to the success; it overwhelmed me."

With all contracts up at the end of this season, it seems likely that Saturday Night Live won't return next year. Michaels didn't deny that possibility, but he asserted "My job is to uphold the quality of the show for as long as possible."

Why would he stay with all his proteges gone on to bigger things? "Because I need the aggravation."



The Not Ready For Prime Time Players: From left, Laraine Newman, John Belushi, Jane Curtin, Gilda Radner, Garrett Morris, Danny Aykroyd and Chevy Chase. Belushi, Aykroyd and Chase have now left the show.