

The following is excerpted from

“UP FRONTS & PERSONAL”

A Full-Length Comedy

By Ken Levine

The process of getting a TV show on a network schedule is examined as one studio attempts to place two sitcoms on the Fall line-up. How far will everybody have to go, what compromises must they make, which ethics will they have to abandon? And yes, it's a comedy. Really. It is.

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UPFRONTS & PERSONAL

A Comedy by

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SYNOPSIS -- The process of getting a TV show on a network schedule is examined as one studio attempts to place two sitcoms on the Fall line-up. How far will everybody have to go, what compromises must they make, which ethics will they have to abandon? And yes, it's a comedy. Really. It is.

ACT 1

SCENE 1

Good morning. It is 9 A.M. Late May. We are in a large suite in a ritzy New York hotel. STAGE RIGHT is the entrance. STAGE LEFT is the door to the bedroom. A laptop computer sits on the desk. A tray of danish is visible. The wet bar is stocked. A large window affords us a view of...another building. Yes it's a suite but not the best one. On an easel sits a large board with multicolored plastic strips arranged in columns. This is the "big board".

ANDY TORKEL enters from the hallway. ANDY is in his late 30's, corporate, dressed in a suit. HE looks around, shakes HIS head in disgust, and quickly dials room service.

ANDY

Yes, good morning. A tray of danishes was delivered to Suite 610, Worldview Television. And there are no bear claws... How could you be out of them? It's 9:00... No, I don't want a poppy seed jelly cruller. What the hell is that even? Please find us some bear claws... Where? This is New York. There have to be nineteen stores that sell real bear claws... Thank you.

HE hangs up. DONALD FOSTER enters and crosses to the bar. DONALD is in his 50's, at one time boyish but not any more. Maybe it's the gray hair, maybe it's the gut, or perhaps it's the one-too-many cocktails.

HE is wearing boxer shorts (with his belly hanging over) and a T-shirt; cigar in one hand, drink in the other. A word to describe HIM would be "bluster".

DONALD

Let the business day begin!

ANDY

(a little startled)

Oh. Donald.

DONALD

Where are the bear claws, Andy? I'm going to drink scotch with cinnamon twists for Chrissakes?

ANDY

They're coming.

(noticing Donald is in his underwear)

You slept in the company suite?

DONALD

Well Jesus, I run the television division of a major studio. I couldn't let anyone see a thousand dollar hooker coming out of my room, could I?

ANDY

Oh. But it's okay for someone to see her coming out of the company suite?

DONALD

Sure. We can always say she was with you.

ANDY

Donald, I'm happily married.

DONALD

Oh hell, take one for the team once in awhile. Why do you think I need a Vice President in Charge of Development?

ANDY

Very funny. A thousand dollars? Was she really worth a thousand dollars?

DONALD

Hell no, but she once did Ryan Gosling. You're paying for the "me and Gosling both had the same chick" kind of thing. For an extra two hundred she'll tell you you were better.

ANDY

Well, I'm afraid that doesn't impress me. Jack Nicholson and I have slept with the same woman. Unfortunately, it's my wife.

DONALD

Really? Can she get Laker tickets?

ANDY crosses to the big board, wanting desperately to change the subject.

ANDY

So what do you think? One or both of our shows on the ABN fall schedule?

DONALD
Neither.

ANDY
(chuckling)
Yeah, right.

DONALD
No, I'm serious.

ANDY
Donald, the network owns the studio and we're the studio. I'd say that gives us a pretty good leg up.

DONALD
Yeah, but Walter hates me. And he's just the kind of vindictive asshole to pick up a show from another studio like Paramount or Warners just to get me fired.
(then)
Jack Nicholson, huh?

ANDY
(sorry he ever brought it up)
It was one time only, and a long long time ago. Five, six years.

DONALD
You've been married for eight.

ANDY
(pressing on)
Let's look at the situation. "One of Each" should get renewed. The demos are good when you twist them around and it has strong writer/producers in Gary & Beth. And Matthew Reid's pilot is very out-of-the-box, just the kind of new show they're looking for. On merit alone they both deserve to get on.

DONALD
As if merit meant anything. It's just a numbers game now. You know that. Dramas and reality shows are in. Comedies are out. There used to be six or eight slots open for comedies. Now there's maybe two...with ten shows vying for them. It's a tough time for comedy writers. And Kelsey Grammer.

ANDY
Well if we strike out we're really screwed.

DONALD
No. I'm really screwed. This is my last hurrah. A goose egg this week and I move from TV president to night manager of the Sizzler's.

ANDY

Well, you don't appear concerned.

DONALD

(in his underwear remember)

Of course not. You know me. Appearance is everything. Besides, I'm not dead yet. And I got a call into Walter about getting together tonight.

ANDY

Well, there you go. I'm sure a fine dinner, Cuban cigar and a blowjob and we'll be right on the schedule.

DONALD

That was in the old days, my friend. Today it's all corporate, bottom-line, synergy.

ANDY

Come on. Business is business. What's really different?

DONALD

Now I have to give the blowjobs myself.

There's a KNOCK on the door.

ANDY

Yes?

MATTHEW (O.S.)

Uh..it's Matthew Reid.

DONALD

(under his breath)

Aw Christ.

ANDY

What, you don't like Matthew? He's a good kid. And so talented. What's your problem with him?

DONALD

Nothing. He's fine. A little cheerful but fine. Television is this exciting wondrous world to him. I can do about five minutes.

ANDY opens the door.

ANDY

Welcome to New York.

MATTHEW REID enters. HE is in his late 20's, Generation X trying to go legit. Short hair, earring, goatee, designer T-shirt and sportsjacket.

MATTHEW

Thank you. I can't believe I'm here. The "Apple", dude. This is just so awesome!

DONALD

(sotto)

Help me.

ANDY

You just get in?

MATTHEW

Yeah. Took the red eye. Slept the whole way. Usually I can't sleep on a plane but those seats in First Class -- sweet!!

DONALD

Yeah. What's more *awesome* than big chairs?

MATTHEW

I know!

DONALD

It's just one of the many awesome things about the Upfronts.

MATTHEW

Yeah, about that -- why do they call this the "Up Fronts"?

DONALD

Simple. The networks announce their new Fall schedules then the advertisers buy commercial time "up front". Spending billions on nothing more than blind faith. It's like if you put an Off-track betting window in a mental institution.

MATTHEW

Well, I appreciate your letting me be here for this.

DONALD

It's not a studio perk. The networks like to have the writers available if they have any stupid questions.

(chuckling)

Andy, remember, Bob Milstein?

ANDY

(chuckling too.)

Priceless.

MATTHEW

What?

DONALD

Walter was screening Millstein's pilot and said, "I want to see more close ups!" And Bob said, "Then move your chair up."

(MORE)

DONALD (CONT'D)

(suddenly somber)

Bob's writing for the Disney Channel now. We'll never hear from him again.

MATTHEW

So I guess we do it New York because that's where the money is, right?

DONALD

No, it's 'cause that's where their wives aren't.

MATTHEW

(crossing to the window)

Gotcha...let's check out the view.

(he sees it, disappointed)

Oh.

ANDY

We usually have a higher suite but apparently Queen Latifah is in town and she has dogs, and the dogs need to see the sky for some reason we haven't been told so...well, here we are.

DONALD

Feel free to take a dump on the carpet. Fuck 'em.

MATTHEW

Well, there's always the Empire State Building.

ANDY

First time in New York?

MATTHEW

Are you kidding? Never been out of So-Cal. This is totally unreal. Three years ago I'm working at Kinkos writing scripts at night. And now here I am with my own TV show.

DONALD takes a big gulp of HIS drink. There's a KNOCK at the door. As ANDY crosses to answer:

ANDY

Come on. It's refreshing. You know what happens to writers after a couple of years.

ANDY opens the door. GARY NOGLE and BETH HELLER enter. Both are in their 40's. GARY is wiry, always a little revved. BETH is taller than GARY, attractive, bright, and seemingly very much in command. GARY is schlepping a large heavy garment bag.

GARY

I mean it, Beth. I can't do this anymore. I walked by that idiot in front of the hotel, y'know, the one wearing the big Beefeaters costume and I thought to myself: "Oh my God, I envy that man. I wish I had his job." A Beefeater, Beth! With the hat, and the stick, and the little tights, and...that's when you know it's time to get out.

BETH

So why did you come?

GARY

Why do you think? I had to. If we're going to get our damn show renewed they've got to see I'm committed to the fucking thing one hundred percent.

DONALD

That's what you want -- Talented and trapped.

Ad lib greetings, then:

GARY

My room isn't ready yet. Right away I know I'm back in New York. No bellboys to take my bag, the Beefeater couldn't leave his post -- like there's a Beefeater's code or something. And then some woman's dog pisses on my shoe.

BETH

Is Queen Latifa staying here?

GARY

I go up to the ghoul at the front desk only to learn that the last vacant room has just been given away. To who? Who else is checking in at 8:30 in the goddamn morning?

MATTHEW slinks over to the coffee cart.
GARY spots HIM out of the corner of HIS eye.

GARY (CONTINUED) (CONT'D)

Oh Christ! Doogie Howser got my room?

BETH

(anticipating)

It's a conspiracy.

GARY

It's a conspiracy.

BETH

No, really it is.

GARY

No, really it ... Hey, stop that!

ANDY

(to Beth)

Where's your luggage?

GARY

At her hotel, which she has already checked into because she is not staying at this hotel with us rabble. She's at the Four Seasons.

BETH

I happen to like the Four Seasons.

GARY

Of course you do. It's the official hotel of entitled Jewish women. Walk through that lobby. There's not a single one of ya that doesn't have the same nose.

BETH laughs

BETH

That's right, darling. An entire hotel full of women who are too good for you.

GARY

Sure, rub it in. You know that's the only kind I like.

DONALD

How'd you like to screw a girl who's screwed Russell Crowe?

ANDY

Donald!

DONALD

I didn't say Jack Nicholson.

GARY

Who do you mean? Claudia?

DONALD

What, you know her?

GARY

Yeah. Cost me a thousand dollars. No...wait -- twelve hundred.

BETH

Nicholson. Boy, does that take me back.

ANDY

You slept with Jack Nicholson?

BETH

Around five years ago. He just has this knack for finding women who are in relationships with really bad lovers.

ANDY
 (under his breath)
 Oh God.

DONALD
 (loving this)
 Imagine that.

MATTHEW
 Can you get Laker tickets?

GARY
 Who haven't you slept with?

BETH
 Only you.

SHE gives HIM a consolation peck on the cheek. ANDY again wants to drop the subject. HE crosses to the computer

ANDY
 Let's see if there are any new schedules.

DONALD
 Go to "Rumor-monger dot com". They're the most accurate.

ANDY
 Yep. They've got a new one posted.

DONALD
 Where do we stand?

MATTHEW
 Wait a minute. A blogger knows things before a studio president?

BETH
 It's how he found out about his enlarged prostate.

ANDY
 (scanning)
 Good news. "Who Wants to be Houdini?" appears to be dead. Along with the Sela Ward family drama.

DONALD
 How many times has that broad been up to the plate?

ANDY
 So that's two more open slots.

DONALD
 Who wants the honor?

ANDY

Go ahead. You take it.

DONALD

Alrightee.

DONALD peels the two plastic strips that represent the Houdini and Sela Ward shows off the board and crosses to the window. HE opens it then flings one of the strips out the window.

DONALD (CONTINUED) (CONT'D)

Get out of this one, Houdini.

(he flings the other strip)

Sela, see you on the Oxygen Channel!

MATTHEW

Man, you guys are brutal.

DONALD

Yeah, well...what else have we got to do? Matty, we fly 3,000 miles to sit in this room and wait. Maybe the network will summon us for a meeting. Oh boy! Our lives, our futures, financial security, everything -- all rests in what shows get on the schedule and those decisions are made by three or four network presidents who together have the brains of a squirrel. So after a few years of that it makes you a tad...peevish.

GARY

Gee, if only you had spoken at my graduation.

MATTHEW

Then I guess the answer is to just get out of this room. Anyone want to walk around New York?

GARY

(chuckling)

Yeah...right.

MATTHEW

Beth? It's a beautiful spring day.

BETH

I'd love to. Really. But I'm meeting up with Eric. He's flying in from Boston.

GARY

Sex before sightseeing.

MATTHEW

Eric Granger?

GARY

That's right. She's banging the star of our show.

MATTHEW

Really?

BETH

Yes, but before you think any less of me, I was banging him even before the show.

GARY

I think less of him for that.

SHE smacks HIM.

DONALD

How does he compare with Nicholson?

ANDY

Will you get off that?!

MATTHEW

(to Beth)

Don't you find it awkward? I mean, aren't there some instances when it's a...conflict of interests?

BETH

The awkward part is having a boyfriend and a partner. But that's pretty much the premise of the show.

MATTHEW

"One of Each". Right.

GARY

Cute title, huh? I wanted to center the show around the partner and call it "Fucked!".

DONALD

I like that. One word title with an F.
"Friends"..."Frasier"..."Fucked".

MATTHEW

Well, I'm gonna go check out New York. Is the Circle Line Tour worth taking?

GARY

Oh yeah. And tell 'em you're from Mayberry. You get a discount.

BETH smacks HIM.

GARY (CONTINUED) (CONT'D)
(feigning innocence)

What?

Before MATTHEW can leave the phone rings. ANDY answers it.

ANDY
Worldview Television....Walter, hi.

EVERYONE perks up. An excited DONALD reaches for the phone. MATTHEW decides not to go just yet.

ANDY (CONTINUED) (CONT'D)
Yeah. He's right here. Hold on.

DONALD
(snatching the phone)
How are things at ABN? When are you locking in the new schedule?...Thursday? Gotcha. Let me guess -- all reality shows every night. Oh hey, I got one. "Donner Party Island". You get ten people, put 'em on Catalina with no food and every week they have to vote someone off then eat them.... You're welcome. So how we lookin' for tonight?... Super!...well, I was thinking a nice New York dinner -- La Cirque, 21, or there's this place called "Frisky Kittens". Totally nude and they serve nachos... Great.
(to Andy)
"Frisky Kittens".

ANDY
Yeah, whenever I'm looking for fine dining I always consult the "Screw Magazine Restaurant Guide".

DONALD
(on phone, to Walter)
Fine. Whenever you're done just swing by the suite. Listen, while I got you, any previews for tomorrow's meetings?...Uh huh...uh huh...really?... I don't agree but okay...

GARY
What? What?

DONALD
(on phone)
What else?... yeah...okay... right... well we'll see what we can do. See you tonight.
(hangs up.)
Asshole!

GARY
So what's the story?

DONALD
He has a problem with Eric's character. He's not testing as well as the others. Says you need to rethink some things.

GARY

Oh come on. Testing is bullshit! You've seen the focus groups. Thirty idiots named "Timmy". It's like handing a monkey a gun. And I have to change my show because of them?

DONALD

Yes.

BETH

What do you think Walter is asking for? A drastic overhaul?

DONALD

My sense? No. Find a story arc that downplays him a little.

GARY

In one day?

DONALD

Why do you think I pay you guys?

GARY

Cause you like looking at Beth's tits.

DONALD

That still doesn't explain why I pay you.

(to Beth)

Sorry, just had to say that.

BETH

Hey, for what they cost me you can touch 'em.

GARY reaches over. SHE smacks HIS hand.

MATTHEW

Did he say anything about my show?

DONALD

Likes it but feels it plays a little slow. Suggested we make a few cuts.

MATTHEW

But...how do we do that? It's all done.

ANDY

(crossing to bedroom)

I'll call the video lab.

DONALD

Thanks.

MATTHEW

But if we cut anything else we could really ruin the whole thing. And then it would never get on.

GARY

God, it is so inspiring to hear someone with such passion and integrity...unless this is really about not wanting to miss the Circle Line tour.

MATTHEW

Hey dude, what is your problem?!

GARY

Me? Nothing. I'm fine.

MATTHEW

Then shut the fuck up.

BETH

Gary, come on. You've made enough friends. Let's go back to my room and figure out what to do with Eric.

GARY

Yeah. Whatever.

(to Matthew)

Y'know, you've got a problem dealing with people.

DONALD

Thanks, Beth.

BETH

We've been partners for fifteen years. I know when he needs a "time out".

THEY start to leave. GARY stops.

GARY

Wait.

(HE crosses to Matthew)

I know my outlook may be a tad "dark" --

BETH

He's known as the "Human Eclipse".

GARY

But once upon a time there were forty westerns on the air. And now -- none.

BETH

"Deadwood".

GARY

Shut up. It was canceled. I'm making a point. Sitcoms could be the next westerns. They're going away. This may be the last chance for our "Bonanza".

THEY exit, leaving MATTHEW to ponder this industry HE'S just entering.

LIGHTS GO DOWN.

END OF SAMPLE

SAMPLE