



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

The Hollywood reporter

The Boston Globe

Despite recent ethics scandals (or maybe because of them) the entertainment industry continues to find the news business irresistibly amusing

By Don Aucoin, Globe Staff, 4/14/2004

At first, writer-producer Lawrence O'Donnell thought his idea for a story set at a cable television news network had the makings of a semidramatic film. Then he looked closer and saw comic gold.

O'Donnell, a Dorchester native and veteran of NBC's "The West Wing," says he's now scripting the material as a half-hour comedy for HBO, complete with "really funny bursts of egotism and failure and embarrassment and fortunes rising and falling on the weirdest things, and ratings driving people nuts" -- some of the things that define our media-saturated age.

"It's a great environment that the audience now completely understands," O'Donnell says.

Armed with that knowledge, Hollywood is turning once again to the news business in search of laughs, drama, or just a story to tell. While O'Donnell hopes to finish a pilot for his show by late summer, no fewer than four other new sitcoms about journalists are already competing for prime time this fall on the broadcast networks. Meanwhile, two very different media movies are slated for release this year: "Anchorman," a spoof of local TV news starring Will Ferrell, and "Country of My Skull," a drama about reporters in South Africa. A play based on the downfall of former Washington Post reporter Janet Cooke recently wrapped up a six-week run at the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven. Even "The Ring," a 2002 horror film, featured a journalist as the lead character.

If popular culture is part funhouse mirror, part Rorschach blot, what are we to make of this surge of interest in journalists? Partly, it is that the character of a reporter has always made a handy proxy for audiences, who can see the action through the journalist's eyes. But it also seems to stem from the current celebritization of a trade that was once considered home to ink-stained wretches.

Reporters and columnists increasingly project their personalities on TV interview and opinion shows, catching the attention and kindling the imaginations of scriptwriters who are desperately scratching around for ideas. CBS is considering a comedy pilot about Washington Post sports columnist Tony Kornheiser starring Jason Alexander. Given that Kornheiser cohosts an ESPN opinion show, "Pardon the Interruption," he already has a TV persona that scriptwriters and viewers alike can draw upon.

Also, paradoxical and even perverse though it may seem, HollywoodReporter.com columnist Martin Grove argues that the celebrity aura around the media has been enhanced rather than undercut by the plagiarism and fabrication controversy involving former New York Times reporter Jayson Blair and by the release last year of "Shattered Glass," a film about the fabrications of magazine writer Stephen Glass.

"People have an awareness of these colorful characters whose careers in journalism are suddenly front-page news themselves," says Grove. "It makes the character of the journalist something the audience is interested in. What it suggests to Hollywood storytellers is that journalists lead exciting lives." He adds dryly: "We do know that's not the case."

Still, TV producers seem to have concluded that, at a minimum, journalists lead *amusing* lives. ABC is considering three media-related sitcoms for its fall schedule: a sitcom featuring Jennifer Love Hewitt as a TV

sports reporter, a comedy starring pop singer Jessica Simpson as a singer-turned-reporter on a "20/20"-like news-magazine show, and a comedy based on the experiences of Time magazine reporter Joel Stein that will star Colin Hanks. "There might be something in the ether with writers and producers," remarks Stephanie Leifer, head of comedy development at ABC.

The three ABC sitcom pilots are workplace comedies, unlike, say, CBS's "Everybody Loves Raymond," whose title character is a sports columnist who's rarely shown on the job. While programs such as "Murphy Brown" and "Lou Grant" are exceptions, most shows with media settings or journalists as characters -- "Sex and the City," "Less Than Perfect," "Suddenly Susan," "Eight Simple Rules," "Dave's World," "NewsRadio" -- have tended to emphasize their interaction with other characters rather than the unfunny nitty-gritty of journalism.

Leifer says that while the network "didn't really set out to do a lot of shows about journalism," sitcom creators on the hunt for colorful settings may consider the news business "more exciting than other workplaces." In any case, notes O'Donnell, "comedy is completely character-driven. The setting for comedy is really just whatever gets that particular comedy writer going. 'The Mary Tyler Moore Show' was a great show, but it's possible the people who wrote that show could have set it in a law firm and it could have been just as funny."

Still, Hollywood has been drawn to the newsroom time and again, and since pop culture invariably bends to the whims of its audience, film and TV depictions of journalists often reflect social change and public attitudes.

In the 1940s, with war correspondents braving shot and shell to file dispatches, Hollywood depicted the journalist as an intrepid and valiant figure in such films as "Foreign Correspondent" (1940) and "The Story of GI Joe" (1945), a dramatization of the career of Ernie Pyle. A more equivocal portrait emerged in the 1950s: On the one hand, there was "Deadline -- USA" (1952), starring Humphrey Bogart as a tenacious newspaper editor battling corruption; on the other, there were such films as "Ace in the Hole" (1951), a Billy Wilder film about a reporter who cynically exploits a mine collapse, and "Sweet Smell of Success" (1957), with Burt Lancaster as malignant and all-powerful New York columnist J. J. Hunsecker.

"There's always been this double-edged image of the journalist," notes Richard Ness, author of "From Headline Hunter to Superman: A Journalism Filmography." "You've got the journalist as deceptive or underhanded; they sort of cheat each other. But they're also upholders of truth: They're fighting an even more corrupt system. Politicians and the like are even worse."

That certainly seemed true during the Watergate years of the 1970s. In that decade, with the country again benignly disposed toward the news business for helping expose the Nixon administration's misdeeds, such films as "All the President's Men" (1976) and "The China Syndrome" (1979) and the TV show "Lou Grant" (1977-1982) depicted reporters as truth-seekers who exposed coverups, pursued malefactors, and generally challenged the establishment.

Now, however, journalists often are the establishment -- and as such, prove tempting targets for satirists. "Dick," a 1999 film comedy about the Watergate scandal as seen by a pair of teenage girls, portrayed Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, the heroes of "All the President's Men," as a pair of bumbler. Further sport will be made of the media on July 9, when DreamWorks releases "Anchorman," a comedy starring Will Ferrell as a vain, blow-dried '70s anchor. (Ferrell's comic gifts notwithstanding, he will be hard-pressed to match the definitive portrait of a vain, blow-dried '70s anchor: that of Ted Knight as Ted Baxter on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show.")

It's not all fun and games. Inevitably, with the recent blows to the media's public image, the figure of the fallen journalist has also inspired somber depictions by dramatists. The Long Wharf Theatre recently presented Tracey Scott Wilson's "The Story," a play based on the career of Cooke, a Washington Post reporter who was forced to return her Pulitzer Prize in 1981 when it was discovered she had fabricated her prize-winning story

about an 8-year-old heroin addict. "Shattered Glass" was released last year to critical acclaim but did not fare well at the box office, and neither did "Veronica Guerin," a film, also released last year, about an Irish journalist slain by drug dealers. Even so, filmmakers remain unable to resist the subject. This fall, in director John Boorman's "Country of My Skull," Samuel L. Jackson will star as a Washington Post reporter who falls in love with an Afrikaner radio reporter (played by Juliette Binoche) as they cover testimony from victims of apartheid before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.

Even a partial list of media-related films is long. There are the seriocomic films such as "The Front Page" (1931 and 1974), "His Girl Friday" (1940), "Broadcast News" (1987), and "The Paper" (1994). And there are the serious dramas -- some with decidedly mixed views of journalism -- such as "Citizen Kane" (1941), "Network" (1976), "Absence of Malice" (1981), "The Year of Living Dangerously" (1982), "The Killing Fields" (1984), "The Mean Season" (1985), and "The Insider" (1999).

Jeanine Basinger, head of the film studies department at Wesleyan University, says reporters crop up again and again in movies because "newspaper people are going where the action is. It's a character who's mobile. They go out, and stories can happen." Not that they're always portrayed in a heroic vein: Quite the contrary. Basinger notes there is a deep tradition in the movies of "the venal newsmen" who is "a source of power that can do harm."

Now that faith in the media has corroded along with faith in other institutions, the news business is probably in for more rough treatment. "It's a curious thing: We guard freedom of the press, we revere it and respect it," says Basinger. "But it's hard to get the public to identify with the process" of newsgathering.

That hasn't stopped the TV industry from trying to get the public to identify with the newsgatherers, with two dozen TV shows featuring journalists. In the 1950s and early '60s, such TV shows as "The Crusader" and "Target: The Corruptors" depicted reporters as battling on behalf of the downtrodden. And of course "Superman," in both the film and TV incarnations, portrayed a certain cape-wearing fellow who was always on the side of truth, justice, and the American way. "Just as a matter of plot construction, to have a central character as a reporter gives you a tremendous amount of flexibility for topics and stories you have to get into," says Alex McNeil, author of "Total Television." "You don't have to observe the legal technicalities that cops in the post-Miranda world do. They can float around."

In the 1970s, "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" achieved television immortality with its depiction of the behind-the-scenes banter at a Minneapolis TV station. But in recent years, in an ominous sign for the new crop of shows, media-related programs have met a speedy death on television, even with big-name talents such as Dick Wolf and Aaron Sorkin, creators of "Law & Order" and "The West Wing," behind them. Wolf's "Deadline," which featured Oliver Platt as a hard-charging newspaper columnist, expired on NBC after a handful of episodes, and Sorkin's deft, witty "Sports Night," a sitcom about a show similar to ESPN's "SportsCenter," was unable to win enough of an audience to stay on ABC.

"Television has tried doing the news a lot more times than it's succeeded doing the news," says Robert Thompson, director of Syracuse University's Center for the Study of Popular Television. "For every 'Mary Tyler Moore Show' there was a 'Capital News.' "

Of course the latter show, which was set at a newspaper and ran for only a few episodes in 1990, was a drama. And to hear O'Donnell tell it, audiences are far more willing to laugh at journalists than they are to shed tears for them.

"For me, it's nothing but comedy," O'Donnell asserts. "If you try to treat journalism seriously, a drama, it's completely hopeless."

"There's been one successful dramatization of journalism, 'All the President's Men,' written by William Goldman," he adds. "And if you said to William Goldman, 'Write me 22 of those,' I guarantee you they would be terrible. That's television's curse: It's not content to do something well once."

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