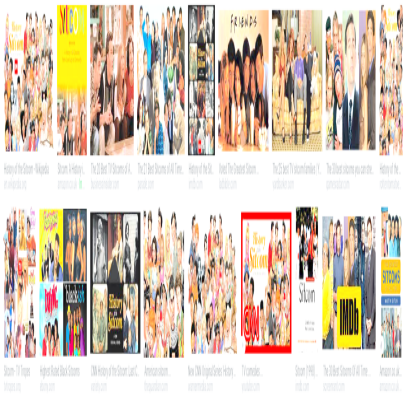

Sitcoms in the city

Description

I wish I could recall when my parents bought our first television set. That moment marked a clear decline in my capacity for sociability, outdoor pursuits, team sports, and homework. I recall rollerskating down our street, visiting friends, adventuring in our apple tree, improvising a bow and arrow set from strips of dowel, and hitting a tennis ball on elastic in the backyard, but all that stopped when we acquired a tv. Then I would come home from school, make up a big glass of milk with Quik chocolate flavouring, grab a bowl of salty peanuts and sit in front of the tv until dinner.

Iâ??m probably exaggerating this *Last Child in the Woods* narrative of personal decline. The bow and arrow pastime was likely inspired by watching the avuncular Richard Greene in re-runs of *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. So we probably had a tv by then.

The director

These thoughts came to mind as I listened to an audio book by one of the people most responsible for the numbing of my adolescent mind, the American sitcom director James Burrows.

I was drawn to his book when I saw a recent interview with Burrows in which he spoke about the vulnerability of the characters in the sitcoms he directed. He is not a writer, but holds scriptwriters in very high esteem, not least for their skill in constructing dialogue.

As an adolescent raised in Melbourne I was aware of the countryâ??s bifurcated cultural allegiances, British versus American: in styles of humour, sentiment, national pride, confidence, morals, scale, budgets, etc. The volume of tv content from America ensured its cultural dominance, with relatively less from the UK, and even less that was Australian.

Sitcoms (situated comedies) are series of 20-30 minute tv shows that incorporate recurring ensembles of characters. As related by Burrows, the average sitcom involves ordinary, relatable characters, albeit with exaggerated traits, involved in distinctive but identifiable circumstances that promote interesting interactions â?? four single women in their fifties live together (*The Golden Girls*), a gay man and straight woman are best friends (*Will and Grace*; *Gimme Gimme Gimme*), a wealthy radio psychiatrist

lives with his father and his carer (*Frasier*), a fashion conscious and irresponsible mother lives with her straight-laced daughter (*Absolutely Fabulous*).

Burrows co-created and directed most episodes of *Cheers* (1982-1993) set in a fictional Boston bar. I was long past adolescence by then, but the sitcom habit persisted. Surprisingly, Burrows pays homage in his book to the distinctly British *Fawlty Towers* (1975-1979) co-written by John Cleese and Connie Booth as providing the inspiration for the *Cheers* bar setting. Cleese appears in an episode of *Cheers*.

US tv producers are aware of British offerings which they seem able to adapt and expand for US audiences. It sometimes seems as though writers of typical US sitcoms insert the occasional British eccentric to contrast the more benign relatability of US characters. US sitcoms tame and sentimentalise eccentricity, malevolence, debauchery, ineptitude or vitriol. They typically resolve their plot lines by affirming the benefits of family and friendship.

The appeal of the sitcom

Sitcoms have wide appeal, lend themselves to family viewing, and advertisers like them. Not only do large audiences maximise exposure to consumer products through advertising, but the sitcom establishes up-beat life-style models that reinforce consumption patterns and seek to raise the aspirations of audiences. Burrows book does not offer critique, but his account makes clear the persistent quest for high viewer numbers, strong returns on investment, and other commercial drivers. Nick Marx and others call it â??sitcom capitalism.â?•

Burrows draws attention to the artifice of sitcom dialogue. A sitcom episode is a recorded stage play with a live audience. Unlike film actors, sitcom actors have to project their voices, mannerisms and gestures as if on stage. But unlike a stage performance, the camera picks up subtle reactions from characters other than those who are speaking. Modern sitcoms deploy up to four cameras recording simultaneously, the movements of which are choreographed to focus on characters and reactions. Though camera positions are planned in advance, the choice of camera shot is refined and resolved in editing later on in the production process.

In reading the Burrows book itâ??s apparent that the over-arching goal of any sitcom production is to amuse the audience, to make them laugh. Scripts and performances get tweaked and optimised to this end, even during the recording. He explains how a half hour show can take 2 hours to record. If the recording takes longer then the director may even bring in a new audience part of the way through to keep audience responses fresh.

Conversational realism

Another skill of the sitcom writer is to convey the appearance of conversational realism, as if more has been said than actually appears in the script. The dialogue also needs to appear spontaneous.

I need hardly state that the way conversation is presented in literature, drama, sitcoms and other narrative forms bears little resemblance to how people actually speak to one another in everyday life. You can find the scripts of many sitcoms online. A twenty two minute episode of Cheers contains about 2,400 words. If this blog post were more amusing then it would be nearly half way to a sitcom script.

Sitcom humour is memorised, rehearsed, directed and delivered as short dialogic episodes within the one show, a bit like an assembly of short blog posts, twitter threads, or text message exchanges. I recall in my student days a fellow college resident who adored *M*A*S*H* (1972-1983). If we didnâ??t get one of his jokes or an obscure reference he would remind us that it was something Hawkeye or Trapper said or would have said.

Most of us learn that it is not possible to sustain a rapid to-and-fro banter with sitcom-style throughlines, twists, punchlines and one-liners, especially if fellow interlocutors donâ??t play along. That to me is one of the remarkable features of sitcom humour â?? the extent to which characters attend to what each other is saying. In everyday life outside of the sitcom universe, profound, difficult, witty, inept, misplaced or faltering statements in everyday conversation mostly go unnoticed, are ignored, dismissed, or otherwise cut short. Not so in the sitcom. Every word counts.

Do the pace and delivery of sitcom character scripts provide models for how people engage in conversation? I like to think that my hours of television viewing can be brought to service as I consider conversation on a path to understanding claims about intelligence and sentience. What do sitcoms teach us about conversation, sentience and urban living?

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