

Saturday Night

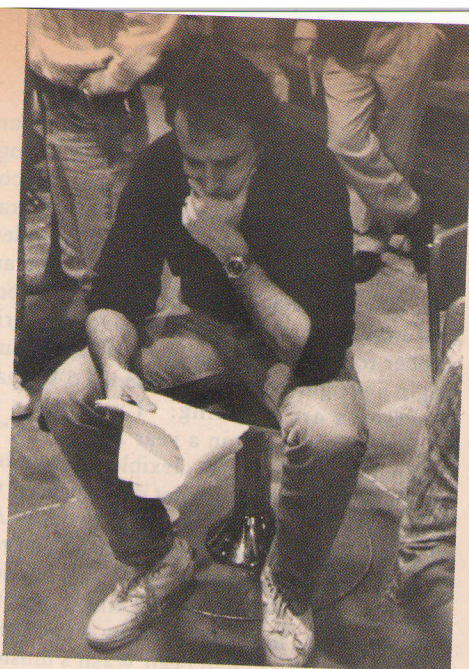
FEVER

Behind the scenes of 'Saturday Night Live,' new cast members struggle to make a name for themselves, old ones fight not to be forgotten, and everyone lives with the ghosts of glories past • By Tom O'Neill

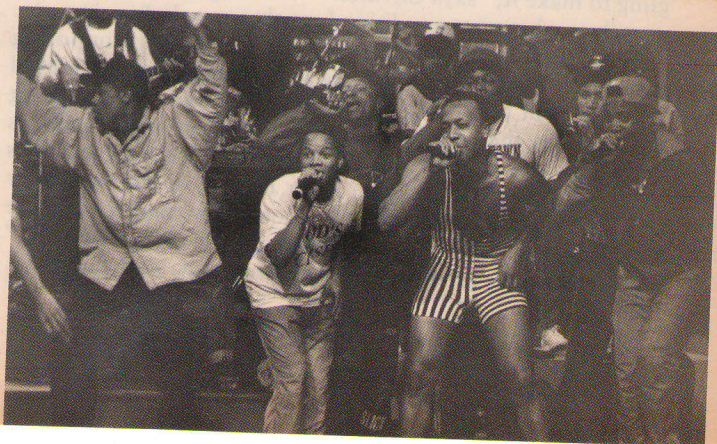
"LET'S GO!" BARKS LORNE MICHAELS FROM the stage of *Saturday Night Live*. "L.A. Law is waiting for this! They're holding their breath at *Cheers*." ■ It is Thursday, one hour shy of prime time, and as tradition at

this tradition-encrusted institution dictates, executive producer Michaels is directing the promos that will air later tonight. ■ Next to him — but looking like he's on another planet — is Hammer, this week's host. The rapper-cum-entertainment conglomerate positively shimmers in gold sharkskin, a smattering of diamonds ricocheting bullets of light over the bemused faces of the crew. Nearby, a life-size rubber model of Eddie Murphy's Gumby smirks down on it all. ■ A voice wafts through the studio. "Could Hammer plant himself a little more?" calls out veteran director Dave Wilson. ■ Hammer, who has shimmied and shuffled through today's rehearsal as if a hip-hop orchestra were lodged beneath his fade hairdo, chills. Michaels turns to his host, "Is 'Hi, I'm Hammer' all right?" "It's a little square, you know," Hammer replies to TV's leading arbitrator of hip, "[But] it's all right." ■ Immediately, Warren Hutcherson, 28, a rookie writer and the first black ever hired just to write, is onstage with fresh lines and — in a near fatal misstep — a directorial suggestion for his boss. The next morning he catches hell from a production assistant for breaking an SNL taboo: "Lorne, and Lorne alone, handles the promos — that's why he's up there!" The chastened Hutcherson, who has cut some street slang into the Ivy League-entwined writing of SNL, shrugs, "He didn't take my advice anyway." ■ With the Hammer episode pulling in the highest ratings since a 1984 return visit by Eddie Murphy, Michaels will no doubt continue to abide his own counsel. As NBC's dinosaur of a show winds toward the finish of its seventeenth season — and the most successful in years — the man who single-handedly revolutionized television in the Seventies says SNL is better than ever. Completely distrustful of the rating systems





Live from New York, it's (this page, clockwise from top left): Kevin Nealon pondering this week's script; Dana Carvey (left) flashing and David Spade staring; Chris Rock, promoting peace; new cast member Ellen Cleghorne being touched up by 'SNL' makeup artist Jennifer Aspinall; guest-host Hammer and his troupe performing; and Phil Hartman running lines in a sound booth. (Opposite, top) Julia Sweeney and Mike Myers rehearsing as Tim Meadows and Chris Farley look on; Chris Farley and Phil Hartman getting it right for director Dave Wilson (bottom, left to right).



in 1975 ("I thought, Who knows these people? I never knew anybody with a Nielsen box."), Michaels embraces them today.

There's a good reason for that. Citing *SNL*'s season-to-date ratings of 8.2 with a twenty-three-percent share, he translates: "That means one in four people watching television at that time of night is watching us" — an average of 11.5 million viewers per show. That, he's quick to note, "is a point and a half above where we were in '76."

Ah, 1976. The year Americans stayed home to watch *SNL*.

"I used to do Rosanne Rosannadana for my family when I was a kid." — Beth Cabill, new featured performer.

"I can't help but think, Oh my gosh, Jane Curtin was in this dressing room!" — Siobhan Fallon, cast member.

"In high school, I would tape my eyebrow up before I went to bed and hope it would stay that way." — cast member Chris Farley on trying to look like John Belushi.

"The early days? It's hard to remember them." — Al Franken, coproducer, writer, performer, survivor.

LINING THE CORRIDORS LEADING TO NBC'S FAMED STUDIO 8H are framed photographs of the original Not Ready for Prime Time Players in the sketches that made them famous. From the Coneheads and the Bees to Belushi's Samurai Warrior and Chase's stumbling Gerald Ford, they're all here, tempting passersby to lean close and look for cracks in the images.

Not since Ernie Kovacs or *Your Show of Shows* had television had the impact on culture that *SNL* did. Aimed at a generation of baby-boomers suckled on the sitcoms of the Sixties but weaned on the harsher realities of the Seventies, *SNL* bristled with inside drug references, sexual frankness and barbed political satire. "Everything we did, by definition, was being done for the first time," says founding writer James Downey, "Or at least the first time this audience saw it." For five tumultuous years the boundaries of television were redrawn and the fortunes of NBC redistributed, while the rocky ascent to stardom by the players twisted, turned and, for one named Belushi, came crashing down.

Then in 1980, Michaels and whatever remained of the original company called it quits. When he was lured back in 1985, "to restore the franchise," as instructed by NBC head Brandon Tartikoff, the franchise was all but disemboweled. It took Michaels, (who never watched while he was away — "too painful") until 1987 to make the show "good again." Not soon enough for many viewers.

"A lot of people left," says Downey, who was named producer in 1987, "and they're not coming back."

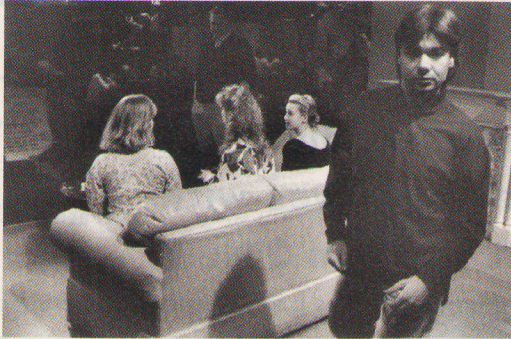
What people don't remember about the so-called golden years is that much of what was done then, as now, simply didn't work. Ask *SNL* loyalists and they stubbornly forget the sketches that fizzled and the characters that appeared once and never again.

"We could never live up to the old *SNL*, so we don't even try," says "Deep Thoughts" creator, writer Jack Handey. "Things become much funnier through the fog of history."

IT'S MIDNIGHT AT ROCKEFELLER CENTER, WHERE TUESDAY'S all-night writing session is under way. But Michaels confesses he

won't see the dawn from the seventeenth floor, as was the custom. "I'm older now, I'll probably leave by 3:00."

The Canadian national who, as a twenty-nine-year-old, marched into NBC's offices in 1975 and declared that no one over thirty would work on his show, is now forty-six. But graying hair hasn't made him complacent. "I worry every week about the show being good," frets Michaels. "I'm just as worried about this week's show as I was about the Elliot Gould show we were doing in 1975."



This fall he reran, for the first time in their entirety, two classic *SNL* episodes. He hadn't seen the Paul Simon-hosted show since 1976: "I went, 'Oh, God! This is so hard to look at.' I didn't think it was good. It seemed exactly right then, but I can't connect to it anymore." And with an aplomb that is stunning in its offhandedness, he adds, "I think the writing is way better now."

Better than Chevy's "Updates"? Belushi's Kissinger? Aykroyd's "Bass-O-Matic"? *Mr. Bill*?

"Here's my theory," offers Dana Carvey, perhaps the best known — and for that reason, the most likely to leave — *SNL* player: "Ted Turner and the whole twenty-four-hour television thing has made our show come back and be more important. News items become part of the collective consciousness so fast now and we're the first show able to parody them, besides Carson and Letterman, who do a few monologue jokes."

As if to illustrate his point, the comedian listens intently when informed of the collapse of the president in Japan that morning. Less than seventy hours later, Carvey's George Bush is booting all over himself in the show's opening.

"DAAAVE?" CARVEY SINGS OUT TO DIRECTOR DAVE WILSON from the stage, "As you and I both know, there's gonna be a huge laugh here so we might wanna go wide." Carvey, after breaking up the historically stoic techies while rehearsing a sketch called "The Receptionist," is imagining the response tomorrow night. "The crew can relax," Carvey continues, projecting his ovation, "take a coffee break. . . ."

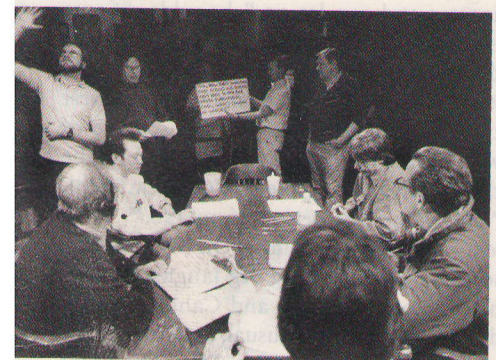
Behind Carvey, chewing a pencil and praying the old pros are right, is the title character and creator of the sketch, David Spade. The boyish-looking stand-up who joined *SNL* last season has fared well as an impressionist (Michael J. Fox and Tom Petty are his signatures) and as an "Update" correspondent but has yet to really break out on the show. "The Receptionist" is Spade's shot at the rapidly shrinking *SNL* spotlight.

High ratings aren't the only numbers drawing attention these days. With two more feature players added last fall, the *SNL* roster has hit an all-time high of eighteen performers. The opening credits seem to last longer than most sketches.

Calling last year's departures of regulars Dennis Miller and Jan Hooks "unexpected," Michaels says *SNL* is in "transi-



Week Daze (this page, from top): Dana Carvey, David Spade and technician Jan Switkes; setting up a scene; the cast rehearsing; Victoria Jackson and Chris Farley buss wardrobe woman Tina. (Opposite, left) Melanie Hutsell, Siobhan Fallon, Beth Cahill and Mike Myers; Lorne Michaels and Hammer.



tion." Downey thinks his boss is protecting himself from "traumatic episodes of the cast picking up and leaving in toto" which, in past years, has forced the foisting of unfamiliar faces on the public all at once. "Lorne never wants to be in that position again," concurs coproducer and writer Robert Smigel, "It's just too dangerous."

Kevin Nealon ("Subliminal Man," "Weekend Update") appreciates the influx of new talent but misses the casts of seven because more time was "spent together fleshing out ideas. Now," he says, "you don't even see people for a whole week."

"It's a big cast this year," moans Chris Rock (Nat X, "Chillin'"), who, despite being elevated to the repertory cast in September, has seen less air time this year. "Really, *really* big."

"It's kinda overwhelming," sighs Victoria Jackson in her helium-high voice. "When I started in '86, he [Michaels] didn't hire seventeen people, only, like, six." Looking for a bright side, Jackson, who has a sitcom development deal with Fox-TV, says, "It makes your job a little easier, I suppose." She reconsiders. "No, not easier, 'cause you're trying to get in the show."

If the writing is better, as Michaels contends, that might be because there's a lot more of it. Unless you're in the rep cast of eight, no one is writing specifically for you, and for newcomers like Spade, writing for yourself is practically the only way to get camera time. By all accounts, the new army of performers is churning it out at an unprecedented rate — turning

Monday night's pitch meetings into marathon events.

"There's a tremendous amount of competition," admits Franken, a writer-coproducer-performer whose past glories include authorship of the classic Julia Child bloodletting sketch. "Our first priority is to get every official cast member on. With this many people, it's hard to take care of everybody."

"If you get lazy," says writer-performer Tim Meadows, "you'll be forgotten." And according to another staffer, "People are scared, they don't know what to expect. No one's come in and said, 'Don't worry, your job's not threatened because of this.'"

If SNL legend holds true, however, they can relax. Michaels is notoriously averse to firing people — a Christ-like trait in a business of Pontius Pilates. Confirms Downey, "Almost everyone who leaves the show, leaves voluntarily."

By way of explanation for the large numbers, Michaels says that last summer's annual talent search — which as often as not has left him empty-handed — turned up four remarkable performers, all women. Were they hired because of their gender? "Yep, definitely," says Michaels. "The thing that made the show in the first five years was the women. Enough had been written about Belushi, Aykroyd and Chase, but Gilda, Jane and Laraine [Newman] were just as much a part of that show."

"AND YOU AARRE—?"

In a savvy move, conscious or not, David Spade has incorporated the all-important catch phrase into his sketch. Hammer, playing himself encountering Spade's receptionist at Dick Clark Productions, squirms. "And he would know you *becaaaause—?*" Spade continues, twisting the knife. The running gag is Spade's refusal to recognize stars — no matter how famous — which forces celebrities into the ego-reducing position of having to identify themselves.

His sketch follows classic SNL formula almost to the letter: Besides having a catch phrase, it mocks show business convention, assigns a pivotal role to the host or musical guest, and it's — here's the magic word — *repeatable*.

As of Friday's rehearsal, "The Receptionist" is scheduled right before "Update." Nothing's guaranteed, however, until it makes it through Saturday's prebroadcast dress rehearsal. In fact, about a half hour of material is cut from every show by Michaels and Downey, who carefully monitor audience response. When the rehearsal ends (about 10:00 p.m.), the curtains to Michaels's office are drawn and the cutting and rearranging begins. When the cast and crew arrive for the pre-air meeting, the first thing they look at is the bulletin board listing the cuts. Featured player Siobhan Fallon calls her parents after every meeting to tell them how long to watch for her before they can go to bed. Recalling this year's Michael Jordan season opener, Julia Sweeney (who plays gender-bender Pat) says: "All three sketches I was in were cut, and everyone I knew was watching. I spent the entire show in my dressing room sobbing."

"It's my little idea," says Spade of "The Receptionist" sketch, "The one thing I want to be known for. I'm not saying it's a *big* Church Lady or *big* Copying Machine Guy, but just something I want to do, even if it's for one show."

For Rob Schneider, the Copy Machine Guy (an office worker named Rich who annoys colleagues by repeatedly mangling their names) catapulted him from a highly regarded writer and

sometime performer to nothing less than an overnight phenomenon. "I had *no idea!*" exclaims the twenty-eight-year-old. "Disc jockeys were doing it the next day!"

Schneider is protective of "the Richmeister" refusing to bring him back without a strong premise. "Lorne is really good about not making you drag a character out unless there's a concept behind it," he explains. "Otherwise you kill it."

Julia Sweeney, whose androgynous Pat is one of the more bizarre recurring characters, is perhaps too aware of that danger. She'll do Pat only a few more times and then never again. "I can't tell you how much I hate doing characters when they're in their death throes," she says. Success was, aptly, double-edged for Sweeney, who couldn't enjoy the fruits of her labor because the elaborate makeup and padding hid not only her gender but her identity as well.

Kevin Nealon encountered similar identity-confusion when, as the bodybuilding, Schwarzenegger-spoofing character Franz, he was introduced to George Bush. Appearing at a President's Council of Physical Fitness function (incidentally, at Schwarzenegger's invitation), Nealon met Bush in the weight-lifting booth. "I started ranting at him," laughs Nealon, adapting Franz's Arnoldeque elocution, "'Georgy, porgy, puddin' n' pie. If you deened't have de pie you vouldn't have de love handles!'" Apparently, the chief executive was not familiar with the character. "He kinda backed away," recalls Nealon, "like he thought I was part of the Special Olympics booth." (Bush is, however, well acquainted with Dana Carvey's best-known impression. Carvey received a handwritten missive after a particularly biting sendup. "Dear Dana," it read, "Give me a break. Love, George.")

The president probably isn't threatened by *SNL*'s two newest cast members — yet. Just a few months ago Melanie Hutsell, 23, waited tables while her friend, Beth Cahill, 28, worked as a seamstress by day. Nights were spent performing in a small Chicago theater company (one of their last shows was *Tippy: Portrait of a Virgin, an Afterschool Special Gone Bad*). Now ensconced in a Rockefeller Center dressing room, the two may make their national TV debut this Saturday with a sketch entitled "Oh-My-God!" Along with coauthor Siobhan Fallon, they play tightly wound sorority sisters who screech, "Oh my God!" at the slightest provocation.

As of Friday, the sketch is slated for the very end of dress — the least secure spot. "If it's cut," says Hutsell, toeing the *SNL* party line, "you have to let it roll off your back. It doesn't mean it's not funny, it could be a technical problem." And if it makes it? *Oh my God!*

Victoria Jackson, who "likes the new women even though they make it more competitive," gave them plum parts anyway as the "two new blondes" trying to usurp her place as the "old blonde" in an *All About Eve* parody she wrote. However, it didn't make it past pitch. "'Oh Victoria!'" Jackson mimics the staff's response, "'You're unique! No one can replace you!' I'm like, 'Oh yeah, right.'" The comedienne rolls her eyes. "They said it would make the audience not like the new girls if I insinuate they're taking my place. I'm like, 'Sorry. It was just an idea.'"

With the start of this season, a milestone was quietly marked at *SNL*. Jackson, Hartman, Nealon and Carvey have been performing longer than anyone before them, surpassing even Radner, Newman and Curtin's five years. Echoing the sentiments of her new colleagues, Jackson marvels, "We used to talk about how excited we were that we had a line on the

show. Now we talk about our houses." If her pilot is picked up, Jackson will leave *SNL*. "I love it here," she says softly, "but I don't want to wear out my welcome."

Carvey, whose foray into films has been less than noteworthy, has more TV and movies deals in development. His contract ends, not coincidentally, on election night this fall. While unwilling to say which path he'll take on the momentous evening, the mischievous comedian offers a not-too-subtle hint by adapting his alter ego's voice: "The night of the election could be very symmetrical, very neat and tidy if we both go out together."

Kevin Nealon, having filled the "Update" anchor's chair abandoned by Dennis Miller, is staying put. "It's like a whole new show for me now," says a not-so-subliminal Nealon. "Five years of writing and trying to come up with characters runs its course. This gives me a whole new attitude about the show."

The man of a million accents, dialects and faces, Phil Hartman, says he's in for the duration. "I don't see the show so much as a steppingstone, as an end in itself," says the self-described Mr. Potato Head. "The only thing I really have going for me is my versatility, and this is a venue that will use that to the nth degree."

"People who can stay here over time have developed a certain resiliency of character and can let go," he adds. "Some have been here a few years and done good work but just have not been able to handle the brutality of the process."

Rock, who at twenty-five, is one of the youngest and fastest rising of the crop, still struggles to figure out the scheme of things at *SNL*. "The weird thing is, the shorter you're on on the show, *that's* success; the longer, it looks like you're stuck." Still, Rock is staying put. "This is the best period of my life."

With fewer than twenty minutes remaining, "Oh-My-God!" is trimmed from the show — despite getting big laughs in dress rehearsal. Just a "time problem," Hutsell and Cahill are told. Indeed, Carvey padded his Bush opening, as usual, and either "The Receptionist" or "Oh-My-God!" had to be cut. Disappointment cracks through the makeup of the young actresses.

"The Receptionist" is the final sketch of the night. Seconds before air, Michaels, who has been behind the scenes for most of show, steps onstage and whispers to Spade. The sketch runs smoothly, receiving the knowing laughs that were the least Spade hoped for. As the lights dim and the crew scrambles to set up the closing shot, Hartman can be seen wrapping Spade in a bearhug. Rock and Schneider wait just offstage to congratulate him, too.

Moments later, on an elevator that must have ferried some pretty bruised egos, Beth Cahill shrinks into a corner and smiles gallantly. "That's showbiz!" she says, wincing at her own cliché.

When the door opens a crowd is waiting behind velvet ropes. They don't recognize Cahill, but cheer anyway. Standing among them, laughing, is Melanie Hutsell. Rob Schneider and fellow performer Adam Sandler emerge from another elevator and whisk the two women off to a cast party at the Hard Rock Cafe.

Two weeks later "Oh-My-God!" runs early in the show and is well received.

It's past midnight in the corridors of Rockefeller Center, and Lorne Michaels, who didn't think he would get through his first year at *SNL*, ponders the future of his creation. "My expectation," he finally concludes, "is that *Saturday Night Live* will be here longer than NBC."

Tom O'Neill, a New York-based freelance writer, covered 'Northern Exposure' for 'US' in January.