

# THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING WOMEN OF SATURDAY NIGHT

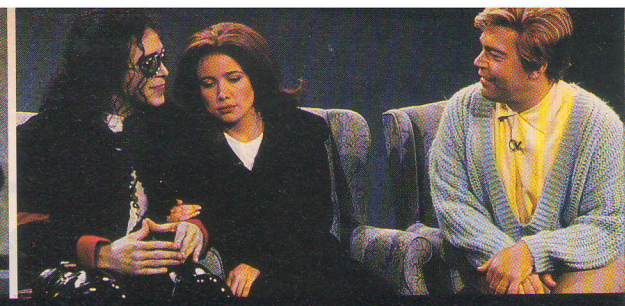
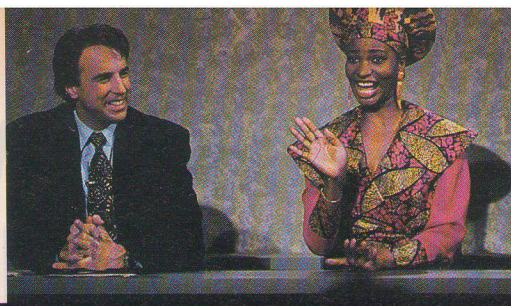
**LIVE** They don't get air time, they're not taken seriously, and they're mad as hell. But they're not going to take it anymore **By Tom O'Neill**

TWO DAYS AFTER SHE WAS FIRED FROM 'Saturday Night Live,' Sarah Silverman, a 23-year-old stand-up comic from New Hampshire, sits in an East Village cafe, as anonymous now as she was one year ago when executive producer Lorne Michaels plucked her from New York's comedy circuit to be on his show. Dressed entirely in black, her dark hair framing her chiseled features, pinched now, the waifish comedienne seems at least to embody something of the bohemian spirit the show once set out to capture. As her laundry tumbles in a dryer two blocks from here, next to the walk-up apartment she shares with a roommate, Silverman clutches a page of notes hastily prepared for this meeting. "They don't know half the s--- we can do," she says of herself and her three female colleagues at the show (two of whom will also leave in less than congenial circumstances within days). "God, they overlook so much talent!"

Hired in the fall of '93 to beef up the number of the show's women writers (from one to two — out of *eighteen*) and to be a sometimes featured performer, Silverman was dismissed via a conference call from her agent and her manager; not a word of explanation was offered by *SNL*. Michaels, she was told, was unreachable in Paris.

Illustrations by Philip Burke





Female troubles (from left): Nora Dunn in 1991; Ellen Cleghorne with Kevin Nealon in 1991; Janeane Garofalo with Tim Meadows and Al Franken this season

## “A GUY WRITING A SKETCH IS GOING TO BE MORE ORIENTED TO MEN. IT DIDN'T OCCUR TO THEM TO GIVE WOMEN CERTAIN ROLES.” — JULIA LOUIS-DREYFUS

“I guess firing me is really gonna help the show,” says Silverman lightly, “but I’m over it, you know? There’s nothing I can do, so I’m not going to dwell on it.”

But talk of her return to a comedy club later this evening has a deflating effect. Her 11 o’clock gig will be tough — “Drunk New Yorkers: ‘Show me you’re funny!’” — and suddenly the façade of self-preserving cool drops like so many bad jokes at a Shriners’ convention. “They didn’t even give me the chance to fail,” she says, her voice cracking. “The point is, I would not have! I mean, *man*, I had plans for that show.”

Like Silverman, Melanie Hutsell (a three-year vet who made her mark with over-the-top impersonations of Jan Brady and Tori Spelling) got the ax, while Julia Sweeney (the androgynous Pat) quit after the last show of the season. Which leaves Ellen Cleghorne (the Afrocentric Queen Shenequa) the sole female survivor of yet another *Saturday Night* massacre. When asked how she managed to avoid the gender-specific pink slips, Cleghorne answers dryly: “Maybe it’s ‘cause I have a kid. That’s what somebody told me.”

As *Saturday Night Live* enters its historic 20th season, accompanied, no doubt, by great waves of hoopla fanned by the puffed-up peacock network (a commemorative book has already been released by Houghton Mifflin, and a prime-time special is in the works for the New Year), a closer look behind the scenes reveals a place that hasn’t always been, shall we say, hospitable to women. With few exceptions, the former and current female cast members and staff contacted for this piece describe *SNL* as an institution that for two decades has systematically disregarded women, giving them less air time than men, relegating them to secondary roles and generally treating them, well, not unlike the way Wayne and Garth see themselves in the presence of greatness — as unworthy.

“It was bad there,” says Julia Louis-Dreyfus of her three seasons on the show. “*Pret-ty bad*.”

“It’s not a good place for women,” offers Beth Cahill, a comedienne who was fired in 1992 after just one season because, she was told, Michaels thought the show’s extensive cast credits ran too long. “They crush your spirit.”

Sweeney thinks she got out in time. “I left when I did because I didn’t want to become bitter,” she says of her decision to quit after four seasons. “That’s how all those women who leave *SNL* are, you know? And I didn’t want to be, so I thought: Better leave now. *Run!* Don’t walk!”

Even Victoria Jackson, who had steadfastly refused to criticize the place she called home for six years, has revised her opinion. The morning after viewing ABC’s short-lived *She TV* (written and produced by, among others, two exiled *SNL* women), she’s riled up. “I was totally wrong,” says Jackson. “I was underused. *All* the women were underused. The women who complained were right! *SNL* is a boy’s club.”

“It was a dark, male place,” says the predecessor of them all, original cast member Jane Curtin. “There was an overall feeling among the men that women were basically just not funny.”

And apparently that opinion holds today, as much a tradition at this tradition-encrusted establishment as the tired format it refuses to give up. Even though an obvious attempt to help correct the situation was made this summer when it was announced that hot comedienne-actress Janeane Garofalo (a standout from *The Ben Stiller Show*, *The Larry Sanders Show* and *Reality Bites*) had been hired, nothing much has come from it. Judging by the early episodes, Garofalo hasn’t been spotlighted to take advantage of her obvious talents.

“You only have to watch the show over the last 20 years,” says Nora Dunn, whose 1990 boycott of an episode hosted by Andrew Dice Clay drew attention to the show’s anachronistic treatment of women. “Women never got much air time. It’s not because we weren’t talented. It’s because we were women.”

“THE WOMEN ALWAYS GOT short shrift on *SNL*,” says Michael O’Donoghue, one of the show’s founding fathers, a writer and performer who appeared in the very first sketch of the very first broadcast. “Frankly,” he adds, “I think Lorne was frightened of strong women.... He never favored their humor that much.”

Reveled in his day for being as big a misogynist as his



FROM LEFT: EDIE BASKIN; NORMAN NG FOR EDIE BASKIN; COURTESY OF NBC



The Not Ready for Prime Time Players (clockwise from top left): Julia Sweeney, Phil Hartman and Jan Hooks as the Clintons last year; Julia Louis-Dreyfus and Eddie Murphy in 1983; Sweeney as gender-bender Pat in 1993; Gilda Radner as Roseanne Roseannadonna and Jane Curtin on "Weekend Update" in 1978

**"IT WAS A DARK, MALE PLACE. THERE WAS AN OVERALL FEELING AMONG THE MEN THAT WOMEN WERE BASICALLY JUST NOT FUNNY." — JANE CURTIN**

friend John Belushi (O'Donoghue was quoted in the 1986 book *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of 'Saturday Night Live'* as saying, "It does help when writing humor to have a big hunk of meat between the legs"), O'Donoghue has changed his tune in his twilight years. "Of course I didn't believe that," he admits. "Women have the potential to be as funny as men, but it's not encouraged by society, is it? Women laugh, men lose their hard-on: 'Are you laughing at this, honey?'"

While *SNL* never exactly pretended to be a bastion of feminism (especially with Belushi's daily demands that the female writers be fired), in its early days the show featured women much more prominently than today. Indeed, the cast was most equitably divided during its first five years, when it comprised three women (Curtin, Laraine Newman and the late Gilda Radner) and four men (Belushi, Chevy Chase, Dan Aykroyd and Garrett Morris — Bill Murray replaced Chase after the first season). There were also more women writers (three out of fifteen) then than at any time since.

One of those writers, Anne Beatts, says she was happy just to be getting equal pay back then. "We did feel a responsibility to make sure they had more to do on the show than just say, 'Mr. Jones will see you now,'" admits Beatts. "At the time I had a certain degree

of resentment: 'Why don't the girls get a better deal here? This isn't fair, and we're going to make them pay attention to us.' But ultimately, at the end of the line, there was a degree of justice — and I'm not saying this just to be sucky to Lorne — but it was true. He *did* have an appreciation of the female-oriented aspects of our culture."

Laraine Newman also defends the show and says that she considered Michaels to be "a champion of women's material." She first worked with him on a Lily Tomlin special when she was 22 and recalls that the word about him "was that he was a producer who had a feel for women's humor that was unique, especially in 1974."

But for Jane Curtin it was a very different situation, marked by the simple inability of the men to accept the women as funny. "I'd never experienced it before," says Curtin, from her home in Los Angeles. "I found it mind-boggling. Every time they saw a woman being funny on the show they were extremely complimentary but sort of awestruck at the same time, thinking it was some kind of mistake."

Had Michaels listened to O'Donoghue, who recommended hiring stronger women writers, Curtin and her cronies might have fared better. "We wanted Fran Lebowitz," confides O'Donoghue, referring to the caustic New York humorist who has been called a modern-day Dorothy Parker, "but Lorne wouldn't permit it.... There



All the night moves (from left): Victoria Jackson does her thing in 1989; Sarah Silverman with Kevin Nealon last year; Melanie Hutsell does *Tori* in 1993.

**"I LEFT WHEN I DID BECAUSE I DIDN'T WANT TO BECOME BITTER. SO I THOUGHT: 'BETTER LEAVE NOW. RUN! DON'T WALK!' " — JULIA SWEENEY**

were funny women out there. They just didn't end up on that show."

"Don't believe them when they tell you, 'We don't have more women who are up to our incredibly high standards because we can't find them,'" warns former *SNL* writer Pam Norris. "I can't tell you how many times I was taken aside and told, 'Boy, we would just love to hire more women, but you're the only good one.' To which I'd respond, 'Well, how many were there five minutes before you met me? None?!'"

While a few women have occupied high-powered production positions, the writing staff has always been composed largely of men.

Thus, most of the skits would be about male characters or have a male point of view. Not that they haven't tried to write for the women — they have, say some, when prodded or begged. For example, when Raisa Gorbachev and Nancy Reagan were at each other's throat in the mid-'80s — "And it was on the front page of every paper!" says Dunn — she demanded that they write a sketch in which she and Jan Hooks would play the feuding first ladies. But, says the still-dumbfounded Dunn, "they didn't see anything funny about it."

Another woman, a former cast member who requests anonymity, recalls an *SNL* meeting during which one of the male writers said, "If there's nothing going on in the world for women, how can we possibly write about them?"

"It didn't occur to them to give women certain roles," recalls Louis-Dreyfus. "In a way, I can understand that a guy writing a sketch is going to be more oriented to men."

Sure, it can be argued that recently there have been a lot of skits about female characters; unfortunately, they don't feature actresses. "I tune in occasionally, and I see things that are funny, but I don't see any women," remarks Dunn. "I see sketches with boys dressed as women."

MELANIE HUTSELL HAS COME TO SAY GOODBYE. APPEARING SMALLER and more vulnerable than she does on television, she sits in her pub-

licist's New York office beside a stack of videos of her best performances, culled from three seasons on the show. The next morning she'll leave on a cross-country road trip to a new start in Los Angeles.

Fired a few days before Silverman and in much the same manner, Hutsell has reconciled herself to her new situation after going through the usual rounds of "devastation, anger and depression. Now I want to focus on the future," she says, "and myself."

The Tennessee native was 23 when Michaels hired her and her best friend, Beth Cahill, away from a feminist theater company in Chicago to join the cast.

The year was '91, and the producer was roundly lauded by the media for reaching an all-time high in the number of female performers — 6 out of 18.

Hutsell, for her part, was elated. "It felt like, 'Wow!'" she says. "They're making a big change here. Six women! But in the course of three years, one is left. That says a lot."

After scoring a quick hit with a recurring sketch about loopy sorority sisters that she co-authored and appeared in with Cahill and cast mate Siobhan Fallon, Hutsell got her first dose of *SNL*'s male favoritism when Cahill and Fallon were the only two cast members not invited back for the next season.

Hutsell was devastated. "They were my pals," she says, "and we were just starting to develop as a team." Citing the successful groupings of Aykroyd and Belushi, Murphy and Piscopo and, more recently, Adam Sandler, David Spade and Chris Farley, Hutsell felt undermined. "They're tight," she says of the men, "and you see that on TV."

The audience enjoys that the most, being able to see their chemistry and those relationships. That's what Siobhan and Beth and I had going. We had that bond, and then it was gone. I don't know why they're afraid to have three strong women working together." Then she asks, "Is it fear?"

Cahill returned to her small theater company in Chicago, which, she says, "is cutting edge and funny — what *SNL* should be." Supporting herself as a fashion designer by day, the 31-year-old feels, like so many other women, that [Continued on page 109]



FROM LEFT: AL LEVINE/NBC(2); NORMAN NG FOR EDIE BASKIN

## Women of 'Saturday Night Live'

Continued from page 102

the show never gave her a chance. "I always did the little things they wanted me to do," says Cahill, "like the Girlfriend, the Date. Sometimes I hated it because I'd have, like, one line — 'OK, Daddy!' — and then I'd be off, and it would be two guys." But her worst memory is of the low expectations they placed on women. "They'd look at you," she says, "and want so hard for you not to be funny."

Hutsell, her videos cradled in one arm, pauses on her way out of the office. "Obviously it comes from the top and filters down, but I'll never understand it," she says, shaking her head. "The people at the top are highly intelligent people. If you look at the [old] shows, they were cutting edge, political. Now men and women aren't given equal opportunity? That's total regression. It doesn't make any sense to me."

TELL IT TO ELLEN CLEGHORNE, WHO IS HIT, SHE says, with the "double whammy" of being

placement of women's material at the end of the broadcast. "You consistently watch your piece being put seventh out of eight [sketches], or eighth out of eight, and you say, 'I guess that's the space they've allocated for the women's pieces.'"

"I try to desensitize myself," continues Cleghorne, catching her breath, "but it hurts so much. I can't cry anymore — I don't have any more tears."

When asked if she's ever talked to Michaels or producer/head writer Jim Downey about her unhappiness, she says yes. "But there are no results. It's kind of a waste of time."

On the first episode of the new season, the writers gave Cleghorne a break from the angry-black-woman roles: In a sketch showcasing Michael McKean and host Steve Martin, she played a hooker.

CONFRONTING THE MALE-DOMINATED Hierarchy has always been only for the bravest of heart. "Some people did," recalls one cast member, who had too much pride to do so herself, "but it didn't really do any good."

smiling and going, "Thanks, OK, thanks, bye." And I'd shut the door and go, "What just happened?!"

Louis-Dreyfus, who was under producer Dick Ebersol's regime in the early '80s (Michaels left the show from '80 to '85), reports it was no better then. "Oh, sure," she says, when asked if she complained, "all the time. It was not received. Nobody cared. Strange, huh?"

WHEN MANY ASSOCIATED WITH 'SNL' HAVE questioned why women don't get as much air time as men, the most common response has been: You have to write your own material, and many of the women don't. Yet even the men who don't write, like Chris Farley — and Phil Hartman before him — wind up with more air time than the women who compose their own skits. Hartman, one of the show's most heavily used actors (he left after last season, his eighth), was on the writing staff his first few years at *SNL* but stopped writing because, he said in an interview a few years ago, "it just got to be too much." Farley has called himself a "hor-

**"I TRY TO DESENSITIZE MYSELF, BUT IT HURTS SO MUCH. I CAN'T CRY ANYMORE — I DON'T HAVE ANY MORE TEARS." — ELLEN CLEGHORNE**

black and a woman on a white man's show. "You don't know how out of touch they are!" exclaims the fearless comedienne of the men who write for her. "They're all Ivy League except maybe one. Every time they give me something, I have to be the 'angry black woman.' I say: 'Why does my color have to enter into this f---ing conversation? I'm a woman. I can't even see my color unless I put my hand in front of my face!'"

Speaking from an L.A. hotel room, the morning after a *Tonight Show* appearance, Cleghorne is packing to go back to New York for the new season and is hardly reticent about discussing her apprehensions. "I have to truly believe in my talent," says the Brooklyn-born stand-up, who was raised in the projects, "even though my confidence gets shaken every single week. I'm good, you know? If I can just not think about who's jerkin' me this week and why I don't even have a line in this sketch — I have a f---ing walk-on: 'Excuse me? I'm not an extra!' I say it all the time, and that gives them ammunition."

Cleghorne, who is described by her female colleagues — sometimes with envy — as the toughest woman on the show, stood up to the writers another time about the

Michaels, according to many, is aloof and unapproachable. Silverman says the most she ever talked to him was the day she interviewed for the job. Curtin says that despite knowing him for 20 years and openly crediting him with her success, she doesn't really have a relationship with him. "It's difficult to talk to Lorne," she says. "He's not your 'get down' kind of guy."

Sweeney believes her fear of confrontation "is the reason I died on *SNL*. I rely on people seeing what I do and liking it," she explains. "I absolutely cannot function in an environment where I have to promote myself. There's no way I could go in and say: 'This sketch is good, goddammit! You've got to put me on the show!' I would quit and be an accountant before I would ever say that."

Engaging in self-promotion probably wouldn't have helped. Victoria Jackson, who says that she confronted Michaels at least four times in her six seasons on the show, claims the producer was adept at backing out of corners. "I'd go in crying and heartbroken," she recalls, and say: "Lorne, I just can't get used. What should I do? Should I bring food to the writers?" I don't know what he'd say," she continues, "but I would leave his office five minutes later,

ribble writer" and says his contributions are limited to staying up late with his friends who write "and trying to help out a little."

The women who write for themselves don't feel their work receives the same consideration as the men's anyway. "Ninety percent of the time," says Hutsell, "I was up all night on Tuesdays, like everybody else, creating something new and putting it on the table. It would go well, and then they just wouldn't use it."

Cleghorne writes a lot of her own material, including recurring characters like Queen Shenequa and Zoraida the obnoxious NBC page, but says the easiest way to participate on the show is to write for the "stars, like Chris [Farley] and Adam [Sandler], because Lorne loves them."

Even having a woman host doesn't improve their chances of getting more air time; if anything, it deflates them because the host then gets all the female roles. In last year's show with Nancy Kerrigan, Sweeney had one line, Hutsell had three, Silverman had two, and the lucky Cleghorne appeared in her own sketch — at the end of the show.

Many of the women of *SNL* admit that their lack of writing skills is a disadvantage, but they didn't realize just how much of one until

they arrived at the show. (Somebody must have warned Bonnie Hunt, the talented David Letterman protégé: According to sources, she turned down Michaels' offer last year to join the cast when he refused to allow her to bring her own writers.) The only way to get around the problem is to hook up with a writer — preferably one of the female scribes — who will become an ally.

Sweeney, for instance, attributes much of her early success on the show to her partnership with a writer named Christine Zander, whom, she says, Michaels teamed her with after Dunn left. "It was like an arranged marriage," says Sweeney nostalgically of the collaboration that produced, among other things, Pat, the character that made her famous. "Christine helped me shape my funny stories into something they could accept," continues Sweeney. "Once I didn't have that, I floundered." (Zander quit three years later.) She recalls coming back from Saks one day and telling Zander a silly story about trying to buy a bra that eventually evolved into a hilarious sketch. "Last year," she says, "I didn't have anyone to do that with. I'd come in and tell [writer] Lewis Morton — who is 23 and just graduated from Harvard — the same kind of story, and he'd just look at me like I was Grandma Moses."

Jackson, by her own admission, couldn't write sketches but would compose "Weekend Update" commentaries. In six seasons on the show, she did twelve of her own "Updates," while only one sketch she wrote made it on the air. But finding a writer proved elusive, if not downright dangerous, in the competitive atmosphere that permeated *SNL*. According to Jackson, when she approached Dunn and Hooks to ask if she could write with them, the women slammed the door in her face. "Jan and Nora fought like cats and dogs when they weren't ganging up on Victoria," says a woman who worked at the show then. Adds Jackson: "I thought they were going to kill me. Seriously. I told Lorne, 'I think they're going to hit me with a car or poison my coffee.'" (Jan Hooks did not respond to repeated requests for an interview.)

ANOTHER POINT OF CONTENTION AMONG THE WOMEN OF 'SNL' IS a perceived double standard in hiring: Men have to be funny, they say, while women have to be funny, young and pretty.

Silverman tells the tale of a thirtysomething comedienne who auditioned for the show last year. After she left the room, Downey told the others he liked her and wanted to see her again.

"Well, she was kind of old, don't you think?" Michaels responded. "I dunno, maybe 31," Downey guessed. "Try 35!" cut in Erin Maroney, Michaels' 25-year-old assistant. The performer wasn't hired, despite the fact, notes Silverman, that a week earlier, 47-year-old Michael McKean had been signed.

This year's new female additions, Janeane Garofalo and Laura Kightlinger, are 30 and 29, respectively. On the men's side, besides McKean, who joined at midseason last year, are Chris Elliott, 34; Norm MacDonald, 31 (upgraded from writer to performer); and Jay Mohr, a virtual baby at 24 (also upgraded).

"Women in comedy are under a whole different set of standards than men," says Garofalo, who cut her teeth as the only woman cast member of the critically praised but short-lived *Ben Stiller Show*. "TV wants the women young and attractive *and* funny. But they don't put that stipulation on men. The result is, men seem to be funnier because they don't have to be anything else."

Like Cleghorne, the diminutive Garofalo has a reputation for toughness that precedes her. The comedy veteran, who knew all too well the dark history of her gender at *SNL* (she had visited the place "a million times" and knew almost everyone in the cast),

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went into her big meeting with Michaels and Downey with a clear agenda to extract promises from the two men regarding “changes in the content of what gets on the air and how much the women participate.” But, she admits, “I was so intimidated that I never really got a straight answer from anyone about anything.”

Still, just weeks before starting rehearsals, Garofalo sounds excited, if not exactly realistic. “The talent is all there,” she says of *SNL*. “There’s just some kind of dysfunction that screws everything up. I would like the behind-the-scenes bulls--- that everyone warned me about to dissipate, and then see what happens.”

THE PROBLEMS THE WOMEN HAVE AT ‘SNL’ aren’t confined to air time and hiring policies. Last year’s alleged incident of sexual harassment involving a male cast member and a female extra didn’t exactly boost the women’s morale at the workplace.

Though Lorne Michaels denies the incident happened, most of the female cast members are convinced it did and say that it reinforced their feeling of being in a hostile environment. Having been preceded by other episodes of varying degrees of sexual misconduct on the part of some of the men, the harassment claim

hardly came as a surprise to the women.

“I knew something was going to happen sooner or later,” says one, who claims that she witnessed another cast member masturbating during a late-night meeting. “I took this as an emblem of just how much of a fraternity *SNL* had become,” she adds. “The fact that he could start masturbating in front of me during a rewrite session, like it wasn’t anything weird to do, just shows how comfortable the men feel there as opposed to how the women feel.”

But the men’s reaction to the harassment was far more upsetting to the women than the initial incident. Rather than raise the men’s consciousness or at least put them on warning, it became fodder for offstage humor. “Every time I brushed against a guy,” reports a disgusted female employee, “he’d say: ‘Oh, no! She’s going to charge me with sexual harassment!’”

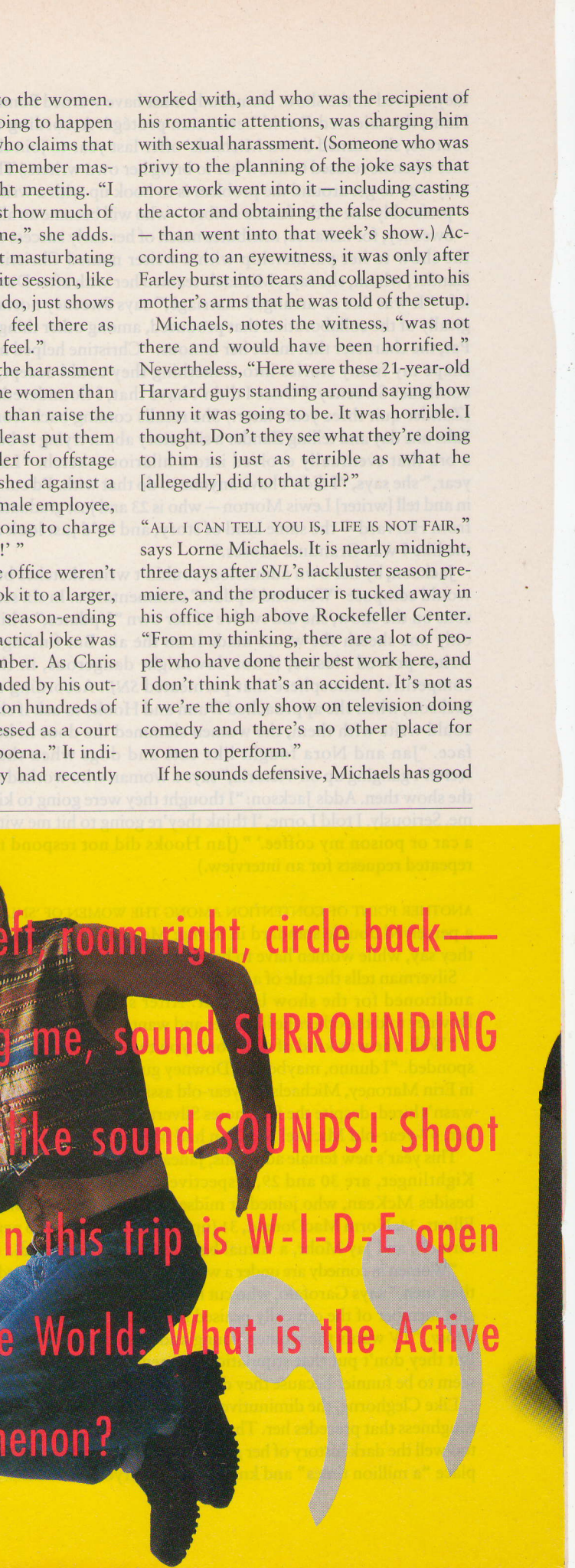
As if the jokes around the office weren’t enough, some of the men took it to a larger, more public stage. At the season-ending wrap party, an elaborate practical joke was played on a male cast member. As Chris Farley sat at a table, surrounded by his out-of-town family (not to mention hundreds of other revelers), an actor dressed as a court officer handed him a “subpoena.” It indicated that a woman Farley had recently

worked with, and who was the recipient of his romantic attentions, was charging him with sexual harassment. (Someone who was privy to the planning of the joke says that more work went into it — including casting the actor and obtaining the false documents — than went into that week’s show.) According to an eyewitness, it was only after Farley burst into tears and collapsed into his mother’s arms that he was told of the setup.

Michaels, notes the witness, “was not there and would have been horrified.” Nevertheless, “Here were these 21-year-old Harvard guys standing around saying how funny it was going to be. It was horrible. I thought, Don’t they see what they’re doing to him is just as terrible as what he [allegedly] did to that girl?”

“ALL I CAN TELL YOU IS, LIFE IS NOT FAIR,” says Lorne Michaels. It is nearly midnight, three days after *SNL*’s lackluster season premiere, and the producer is tucked away in his office high above Rockefeller Center. “From my thinking, there are a lot of people who have done their best work here, and I don’t think that’s an accident. It’s not as if we’re the only show on television doing comedy and there’s no other place for women to perform.”

If he sounds defensive, Michaels has good

A man in a patterned vest and sunglasses is running on a yellow background. Large, stylized quotation marks are scattered around him. The text is overlaid on the image in a red, sans-serif font.

Check that SOUND—I move left, roam right, circle back—it follows me! Sound stalking me, sound SURROUNDING me, still SOUNDING right—like sound SOUNDS! Shoot forward, jump back—I mean this trip is W-I-D-E open (think light years). I ask the World: What is the Active Ingredient driving this phenomenon?

reason: The opener received a critical lashing (the *New York Post's* scathing review was headlined 'SATURDAY NIGHT' DIVE — OH, NO! IT'S EVEN WORSE THAN BEFORE). As the all-night writing session gets under way just beyond his office walls, the 49-year-old producer seems, by turns, exasperated and disappointed by some of the female cast members' remarks.

His comments, ranging from "I'm sorry if Jane [Curtin] feels she was underused" to "I would support Nora [Dunn] in her opinion" to "You're talking about something that is entirely subjective," show an admirable knack for evading the issue. Yet when confronted with hard facts, like the ratio of women to men in the cast and on the writing staff, he does an about-face: "I certainly support the idea that there are not enough women on *Saturday Night* and that there are not enough women writing comedy for the women who are on *Saturday Night*. I'm 100 percent behind it."

Well, why not hire more? "I'm continuing to hire people based on my belief in their talent," he says. The obvious follow-up — "So you don't see any talented women out there?" — is left unanswered.

As for the subject of sexual harassment, Michaels insists there never was an incident. "It was a bad joke that went around

among the writers," he says. "It would be indiscreet of me to talk about it, because it didn't actually happen."

Can Michaels come up with an example of *SNL* giving precedence to a woman? He thinks for a moment, then hits on one — from 18 years ago when Jane Curtin received the "Weekend Update" anchor position after Chevy Chase quit. "You could see how Bill Murray might have been considered, or how there might have been somebody else." (In fact, Dan Aykroyd joined her briefly as co-anchor.) "There must have been a moment," Michaels concludes, "when we weren't conspiring to oppress women."

"YOU'VE GOT TO TAKE THE PHILOSOPHY THAT any woman takes," says Julia Sweeney, who could be speaking on behalf of all the women of *SNL*. "Because we're culturally disadvantaged, we take what we can and leave."

In other words, no matter how bad things got, it's hard to find a woman who regrets the experience of having been at *SNL* and the golden opportunities afforded afterward.

Sure, Julia Louis-Dreyfus recalls her time there as "difficult, harrowing and not even that much fun" because of the male favoritism, but she adds, "That's OK because it taught me about what those experiences are like — and they're rampant in this business."

"I don't regret it for a minute," says Jane Curtin. "I'm just happy that I came to the conclusions I came to early in the show so I could make my sentence a little more palatable."

Julia Sweeney has put enough distance between herself and the show to draw a proper perspective. "It's like bad-mouthing your rich uncle who sent you through college," she says. "Maybe he's a dick and he never listened to you and treated other people better than you, but f---, he put you through college."

Still, she admits that a guest appearance on *Mad About You* last spring was an eye-opener after four years on *SNL*. "I was unprepared for the difference," she says. "I just wasn't used to having anyone listen to me, let alone think that what I said was funny."

A female longtime cast member — yet another insisting on the blue dot of anonymity — puts it perhaps most succinctly: "Of all the reasons I left — not getting my sketches on, having my stuff always cut or being put at the end of the show, or guys harassing women and thinking it's funny — the real reason was the way I was looked at when I walked into a room there. It was like, 'What do you want?' I never got that anywhere else." ■

*Tom O'Neill wrote about the daytime talk-show wars in the January issue of 'US.'*

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