

Flow Position Paper
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B%#\$@*s Get Things Done!

If Judd Apatow gets huge kudos for gracing the world with Busy Philipps and crowning Catherine Keener a "sexy grandma," he's also helped push immature guy comedy through the roof. If you don't think Steve Carell is funny in *The Forty Year Old Virgin*, that's your prerogative, though I'd say you are missing out. Still, the sensitive, immature, clever and not-afraid-to-make-you-laugh-by-showing-his-ding-dong male character type that Apatow has popularized seems to be taking over, and, in this context, *30 Rock* is a huge relief.

Female comedians have a long history of thriving on television, but not on the big screen. The movies offer us Jerry Lewis and Groucho; TV offers us Lucille Ball and Carol Burnett. Notwithstanding Burnett's success in variety programming—a remarkable achievement, when you consider that her predecessors were Sid Caesar and Milton Berle, and that few comics since then have been able to pull off this TV format—women have specifically dominated in domestic/workplace sitcoms: *Roseanne*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Murphy Brown*, etc.

The popular wisdom is that the sitcom is dying or dead. What has happened? 1) Reality shows are cheaper, and the big money goes towards a few prestigious scripted shows on premium cable (*The Wire*) and network (procedurals, *House*). 2) Family sitcoms are declining, although "guy coms," (as Tim Havens so aptly puts it: <http://flowtv.org/?p=857>) such as *2 ½ Men* persevere. 3) Niche programming continues to grow, and demographics are subdivided into ever smaller units, but there is still only one channel devoted specifically to comedy, Comedy Central, which is (mis)conceptualized as targeting a young male demographic (<http://flowtv.org/?p=322>). 4) In general, men outnumber women in the comedy business, and there is a lingering prejudice that women, especially powerful and/or feminist women, are not funny.

Nonetheless, the sitcom endures. In fact, the teen sitcom is the Disney Channel's bread and butter, and *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody*, *That's So Raven*, and *Hannah Montana* are in constant rotation. (Nick's *iCarly* is somewhat refreshing by comparison. See Ethan Thompson, <http://flowtv.org/?s=30+rock&x=0&y=0>) Further, let's not forget the lessons that Derek Kompare has taught us: the rerun is alive and well. Fewer new sitcoms may premiere each season, and most crash and burn quickly, but try channel surfing without hitting

an old episode of *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *Seinfeld*, or *Frasier*. So, if the sitcom is, on one level, in decline, it is really a specific kind of sitcom that is on the way out: the adult, female centered sitcom. The conventional *New Adventures of Old Christine* is practically the only thing going right now in the old-school mode.

BUT, there is *30 Rock*! And this brings us back to point #4. Lucille Ball and Roseanne Barr were smart businesswomen who knew how to write, perform, and produce. If you are a woman in TV comedy, and you don't do all three of these things, you are at a huge disadvantage. And you can't complain, or, if you do complain about inequities in the business, you can't specifically mention that the problem is "sexism." It is sometimes irksome that Tina Fey resists the feminist label and the suggestion that her gender is relevant to her accomplishments, but I can understand why she is reluctant to use explicitly feminist language. When she and Amy Poehler were made the first female team to host *SNL's* newscast, they were vocal that the issue was that they were funny, not that they were women. Ditto when Fey became head *SNL* writer. This was totally legitimate, insofar as they did get those jobs because they were funny. You wouldn't expect either to publicly announce that she had found great success on *SNL*, even though the writer's room had been historically completely male dominated and the world of stand-up and improv from which *SNL* draws its writing and performing talent is male-dominated and rather sexist. To make "feminist" comments would be career suicide. Tina Fey can't say the F word. But she can be it and do it on her show.

A. Vesey and K. Lambert have already written a great essay about *30 Rock* (<http://flowtv.org/?p=1537>), and I won't repeat all of their insights here. But, in brief, *30 Rock* interests me first of all because the writing and timing are brilliant; it is extremely funny, and its comic insights are often implicitly (sometimes more explicitly) inflected with feminism. In a world of size zero girl stars, and where CNN (yes, CNN) recently ran a story about women over forty who are *nonetheless* hot, *30 Rock* is about an adult woman who eats, wears non-branded clothes, and is kind of relieved by a relationship that doesn't entail too much sex, because she's busy and tired. (An uninteresting variant of this persona exists widely on TV, the wife who plays straight-man to the funny-fat-guy on you-name-it sitcom.) When Liz Lemon mentions that she really should get a 401(k), the implication is not that she's immature but that her professionalism is confined to doing her job really well; she doesn't have time to figure

out the other, extraneous details of what being an adult is supposed to entail, such as the meaning of "business casual" (forced to wear a "feminine" suit, she notes that it would be a completely appropriate work outfit—if she were president of the Philippines) or the importance of understanding the ins and outs of retirement funds.

30 *Rock* keeps winning Emmys, but I have concerns for its future. The show constantly mocks product integration—while doing it—and makes fun of corporate pressure on TV content. The G.E. suits behind the scenes on the fictional show don't understand "funny"; they just understand microwaves. Lemon caves all the time on the show—she wins a "followship" award for her ability to fall in line and listen to orders. At the same time, since we watch the *real* funny bits behind the scenes, not the Gaybraham Lincoln sketches Lemon writes, there's always a feeling that Tina Fey is beating the system. Except that the real life NBC suits seem to have told her to slow things down in season 2, and guest appearances by Jerry Seinfeld and David Schwimmer, stunts to bring up ratings, were miserable failures. It's funny for Lemon to be praised for her followship, but I worry about Fey being forced to cave into the same pressures satirized on the show.