



'Not Ready for Prime Time Players' carry on ten-year tradition

It seems like only yesterday that the "Not Ready for Prime Time Players" first made us laugh at the subtle inanities of American lifestyle.

But it has been more than 10 years since *Saturday Night Live* first appeared on television and began to establish its reputation among NBC censors as a troublemaker.

You name it, and the comics on SNL undoubtedly satirized it. Nothing was sacred. And they succeeded because they found creative, new ways to make fun of things we all could identify and relate to.

Within a short time, the show had acquired a sizeable and loyal weekly audience. And the love affair lasted for a year or two. Unfortunately, when the movie makers of America discovered the box office potential of people like Chevy Chase and John Belushi, the "Not Ready for Prime Time Players" decided they were ready for the big screen.

The show was doomed. By the time the exodus of the original stars was over, many fans who watched the show religiously had turned their backs. Consequently, the producers of SNL were left with a dilemma. They could either pull out the plug on the show or try to find people with enough talent to pump new life into it.

The producers opted for the latter, and it has been a struggle ever since.

They have given countless aspiring comedians the chance to repeat what the original cast achieved. But no combination has been able to recapture the magic. In theatrical terms, the chemistry has not been right.

As one of the most righteous fans of the old show, I must admit that I, too, have had trouble getting as excited about the SNL sequels as I did about the original. But on one of my less-mischievous recent Saturday nights, I made a concerted effort to watch an entire episode of the new show.

I found that the show is not nearly as shallow, silly or desperate as I expected. In fact, quite the contrary is true. Apparently, for the past couple of years, the show's ratings have been just high enough to keep it on the air. Furthermore, the producers have seen fit to maintain essentially the same cast of players. What this combination of factors has done is give the new performers time to carve their individual niches on the show and develop their talent within that framework. Now, the show has become what it was years ago, in the waning months before the infamous exodus: a showcase for some extremely gifted performers.

Granted, the episode I watched turned out to be a rerun of this season's best skits, sort of a greatest hits collection. But think back six or seven years — even the original players didn't have the audience in tears with every sketch. They bombed every now and then, too. So it should be no surprise when the new cast resorts to dressing up younger brother Jim Belushi in a ballet tutu and having him do his rendition of "Flashdancing." Even the original cast went after that kind of cheap laugh once in a while.

But, by and large, that is the approach SNL has taken over the years. And, by and large, that is what has worked and continues to work on the show today — parody. Even if the skeptical, hard-core fans of Dan Ackroyd and Gilda Radner won't admit it, most of the new sketches have the same originality and surprise element that were trademarks of the old show.

•Joe Piscopo, best known for his impression of Frank Sinatra crooning modern rock'n'roll tunes, gave a hilarious portrayal of Abraham Lincoln as a loud-mouthed troublemaker in the theater where he was shot. Sure enough, Old Abe picks a fight with one of his fellow theater-goers and gets shot.

And the SNL writers still manage to make meaningful statements through their comedy. The Abe Lincoln sketch was presented in the context of one of those documentaries that propose to reveal "new" evidence on an old crime.

•Eddie Murphy gave a depiction of "Our Gang" child star Buckwheat as a popular modern-day entertainer who is gunned down in the identical manner as President Reagan was shot. In this skit, Piscopo portrayed ABC news commentator Ted Koppel covering the Buckwheat shooting with the same sensationalistic tendencies for which broadcast media have become notorious. And the sketch ended with an unexpected and creative twist, as the man accused of shooting Buckwheat was gunned down in court, à la Jack Ruby.

These and other equally entertaining skits have led me to conclude that SNL has come full circle in the past decade.

Just as the first cast had to do, the new cast has had to win over its fans. Maybe the new cast has not been able to attract as sizeable an audience as the original cast did. But maybe that is impossible, considering the skepticism with which we old-time fans scrutinize the new show.

Well, if no one else is willing to say it, I will: The new *Saturday Night Live* is every bit as good as the original show ever was. What's disappointing is that in completing the same cycle as the old show, the new show seems poised for another exodus of stars.

One of the show's biggest drawing cards, multi-talented Eddie Murphy, is leaving the show after this season for what surely will be greener pastures. According to *Rolling Stone*, Murphy leaves SNL with bitter memories of the show's lukewarm popularity.

With Murphy abandoning ship, it can't be terribly much longer before other super-talents like Joe Piscopo follow Murphy's lead. Eventually, the show's producers will find themselves in the same predicament as they were a few years ago.

Will the producers again try to rebuild the same show around new talent? Can they pull it off for a third time? Is *Saturday Night Live* destined to be nothing more than a warehouse for future movie stars? Stay tuned.

— Scott Williams