

Obituaries

JACK WINTER, COMEDY SCREENWRITER 1942-2006; The funny man who was responsible for some of the best lines in such television staples as The Dick Van Dyke Show and The Odd Couple, learned his most valuable lesson from Bill Cosby

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VICTORIA -- As a television writer, Jack Winter sent Fonzie to a psychiatrist; got Felix and Oscar to make up after squabbling; helped the Monkees escape romantic entanglements.

Mr. Winter's credits include some of the most successful situation comedies in television history. He wrote episodes of The Dick Van Dyke Show, The Mary Tyler Moore Show, and The Odd Couple, as well as the Happy Days spinoff Laverne and Shirley.

Years later, he settled in Saanich, B.C., but for a time he also enjoyed lucrative work as a movie script doctor, helping to make a success of the 1988 Tom Hanks comedy, Big.

Mr. Winter was born in New York City to the violinist Paul Winter and the former Margaret Klein, a model, painter and buyer for a department store. His father was so excited on his birth that he ran twice around the outside of the hospital.

The elder Mr. Winter had been a child prodigy who at age 23 in 1937 became the youngest member of the NBC Symphony Orchestra, under the conductor Arturo Toscanini. He performed in live radio broadcasts, as well as for studio audiences in the early days of television. He often brought his son to the studio.

In his memoir, Jack Winter includes an account of hanging around the set of Your Show of Shows with Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca, where he recalled an atmosphere like a "comedy circus." The boy eavesdropped on conversations, as though auditing a course in comedy writing. His experiences with the show's wisecracking writers, including Neil Simon, Mel Brooks and Woody Allen, prepared him for a quick recovery when he once accidentally interrupted his parents' lovemaking. "I quickly sized up the situation," he wrote, "then leaned on my elbow against the doorjamb and said, very matter-of-factly, 'Can I have a raise in my allowance?'"

At Harvard, he majored in philosophy and minored in the National Lampoon, the student-produced humour magazine. Mr. Winter was editor-in-chief when the fashion magazine Mademoiselle hired the Lampoon staff in 1961 to produce a parody to run in place of the July edition, a notoriously poor seller. The production of the parody caught the fancy of The New York Times, which dispatched a reporter to follow the writers, models and photographers for a day, including a shoot involving a wrestler. One of the spreads was headlined: Clothes to be Caught Dead In.

For his part, Mr. Winter was unimpressed by the fashions selected by the magazine's regular editors. "Frankly, the colours on these clothes are too bold and bright," he told the Times. "I thought clothes were meant to flatter a woman, not distract from her face."

The parody was a newsstand sensation, owing perhaps to a striking cover image of a comely model with a fly on her nose. Mr. Winter said a double press run — 1.3 million issues — sold out within a week. A fake advertisement for a fat-removing cream solicited 5,000 responses.

Among those on the Lampoon staff with him were Christopher Cerf, who would win Grammys and Emmys for songwriting, and John Berendt, author of the best-selling book Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil.

Mr. Winter notes in his memoir he was the second-youngest member of Harvard '62. The youngest was Theodore Kaczynski, who went on to earn notoriety — and a life sentence — as the Unabomber.

After graduation, Mr. Winter travelled to Miami Beach, Fla., to join the writing staff for a show starring Jackie Gleason, the singing funny man with a notorious reputation for mistreating employees. He did not stay long.

Soon after, Mr. Winter was writing for The Tonight Show on a night when guest host Bill Cosby was to interview a frog puppet named Kermit. The Muppets not yet well-known to a national audience, Mr. Cosby instructed the show's writers to dress his amphibious guest in a trench coat as though he were a James Bond spy.

During the live taping, the host asked the frog if he had a licence to kill. "No, but I have a learner's permit to hurt," Kermit replied.

The studio audience's raucous laughter segued into a standing ovation. The salute inspired the producer to end the segment a minute early by cutting to commercial.

Mr. Winter was distraught. "How could you do that? You cut out the ending."

Mr. Cosby then gave him some advice he never forgot in a long career of writing. "Kid, if you get a laugh like that, it is an ending — because you'll never be able to top it."

The first full script Mr. Winter prepared as a sit-com writer won a coveted Writers Guild of America award. In an Dick Van Dyke Show episode titled, You Ought to Be in Pictures, the eponymous show's star, playing a television comedy writer named Rob Petrie, is directed to kiss a voluptuous Italian starlet for a low-budget foreign film.

Bumbling and stammering, he makes sure to first get his hovering wife's permission with a plaintive, "M-May I?"

The prize allowed Mr. Winter the luxury of writing a stage play in New York, from where he would dash to Hollywood to crank out a television script whenever funds ran low.

In 1967, he wrote five episodes of The Monkees, a series about the madcap adventures of four musicians whose naivety constantly put them at odds with both star-struck female fans and men in suits with less than idealistic motives. In one episode (Monkee Mayor), Mr. Winter had Michael Nesmith run for political office.

He followed with contributions to Love, American Style and an episode of The Mary Tyler Moore Show in which an ambitious consultant upsets the staff at WJM-TV.

For The Odd Couple, Mr. Winter wrote a line in which uncouth sportswriter Oscar Madison, played by Jack Klugman, defends his use of a condiment on salad. "I like ketchup," he says. "It's like tomato wine." Mr. Winter also directed several episodes of the hit series.

Not all his assignments were as successful. He wrote for the forgettable Getting Together, a 1971 Bobby Sherman vehicle owing more than a little to The Partridge Family, which was inspired in turn by the real-life Cowsill singing family. The 1976 series Sirota's Court received favourable notice from the Times but lasted only two seasons.

The audiences were larger for his scripts for Happy Days and Laverne and Shirley.

A rare movie credit included citation as special adviser on Big. Mr. Winter earned \$5,000 per day as a script doctor, high-paying work which he found "too irregular, too artistically unsatisfying, and much too stressful."

Mr. Winter dated the actresses Diane Keaton and Joyce Jillson, whose modest Broadway and Hollywood career was superseded by her success as a syndicated astrologer. He also once had a blind date with Candice Bergen, although he thought her too humourless to call for a second date. His friends thought him crazy.

More long lasting was his relationship with retired basketball great Earl (The Pearl) Monroe, with whom he played a weekly game of tennis.

Though not a braggart by nature, Mr. Winter could be induced to tell the story about the time he defeated tennis champion Pete Sampras. Mr. Winter was writing an article for Sports Illustrated and only managed a narrow victory through a series of fortunate circumstances. Also a factor was that his opponent was aged 9 at the time.

Mr. Winter spent many thousands of hours labouring over a stage play, which was never produced. To augment his income, he imported and sold antique Turkish tapestries known as kilim. He sold many to his

friends in show business. The actress and writer, Carrie Fisher, once referred to him on television as “my friend, Jack Winter, a writer and rug dealer.”

“Since she was known for having a substance-abuse problem,” Mr. Winter wrote, “viewers thought she’d said ‘writer and drug dealer.’ Several people who knew me didn’t know about my rug business, but they knew that I never earned any money from the play — and they couldn’t help wondering.”

In 2001, Mr. Winter married a Sudanese woman he had met at the airport in Kathmandu several years earlier. She had been a student at the University of Victoria and they decided to settle in the British Columbia capital. He sold his Manhattan apartment and bought a leafy property in suburban Saanich, which included a pond which he stocked with frogs, a boyhood passion. By then, Mr. Winter was all but immobilized by chronic back pain that spinal fusions and surgeries failed to ease.

Though horizontal, he wrote and self-published a comic memoir, *The Answer to Everything*, which he sold online for \$13 U.S.

Mr. Winter wrote occasionally for magazines. He was responsible for the celebrated comic essay, *How I Met My Wife*, published by *The New Yorker* in 1994. “I was furling my wieldy umbrella for the coat check when I saw her standing alone in a corner,” he wrote. “She was a descript person, a woman in a state of total array. Her hair was kempt, her clothing shevelled, and she moved in a gainly way. I wanted desperately to meet her, but I knew I’d have to make bones about it since I was travelling cognito.”

Jack Winter was born on Feb. 9, 1942, in New York. He died on Dec. 29, 2006, at Royal Jubilee Hospital in Victoria. He was 64. He leaves his wife, Ekram Fadlemola, known as Moon. He also leaves sisters Elizabeth Wolpaw, of Delmar, N.Y., and Sat Tara Kaur Khalsa, of Boulder, Colo.

Illustration

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