

# CONSTANT COMEDY

**A Memoir**



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**How I Started  
Comedy Central  
and Lost My Sense of Humor**

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**ART BELL**



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Published by:

ULYSSES PRESS

P.O. Box 3440

Berkeley, CA 94703

[www.ulyssespress.com](http://www.ulyssespress.com)

ISBN 978-1-64604-089-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020936436

Printed in the United States

Editor: Jane Rosenman

Proofreaders: Renee Rutledge, Elizabeth Lotito

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This book is a memoir. In telling these stories, I relied primarily on my recollections rather than documentary evidence. Since the bulk of this takes place thirty years ago, my less-than-perfect memory may have led to inaccuracies or misrepresentations. There are a few places where I made changes for the sake of good storytelling, but mostly I wrote things the way I remember them. Some names have been changed and most of the dialogue has been re-created and possibly embellished from the bits and pieces I remember. Most of the humorous remarks attributed to others is mine, and what they really said was probably a lot funnier than what I wrote.

For Carrie



*Everything is funny, as long as it's happening  
to somebody else.*

— Will Rogers

*Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall  
into an open sewer and die.*

— Mel Brooks





## PROLOGUE

# How Do You Get to the Russian Tea Room?\*

On a summer day in 1995, I walked into the Russian Tea Room, one of Manhattan's most famous restaurants, located on Fifty-Seventh Street near Carnegie Hall. I'd walked over from my office at Comedy Central, where I was the executive vice president of Marketing. Comedy Central had been around for six years. It was starting to get a big audience, starting to make a name for itself in the comedy world, and on the verge of making money. There were hundreds of people working at the channel. But I still felt that it was ultimately my responsibility to make Comedy Central successful, since I was the one who started it.

The Russian Tea Room had been a favorite of artists, actors, and people who worked in show business since the 1920s. Tourists who could afford it came to watch the rich and famous, hoping that a Hollywood star would drop by. I was there to meet a hero of mine, a stand-up comedian I'd first seen on television thirty years earlier when I was ten years old.

\* A guy pulls up to a New York City cop and says, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" The cop says, "Practice, practice, practice."



There were lots of funny people in my family, and from an early age I wanted to be funny, too. I thought of it as a required skill, as important as reading or hitting a baseball. I found that by making kids laugh at school, I could be part of the crowd, get invited to parties, and get noticed by girls. It also helped me avoid getting beat up on the playground and bullied in gym. Being funny was a path to survival and reproduction.

Comedy was an obsession for me in grade school. I listened to the comedy albums of Bill Cosby and tried to mimic his storytelling. I studied Marx Brothers scripts and marveled at their verbal acrobatics and comic timing. I read *The Essential Lenny Bruce* and felt Bruce's pain through his comedy. I read Woody Allen's *Without Feathers* and discovered the art of writing comedic short stories. I studied Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" and started writing my own satire. I subscribed to *Mad* magazine and *National Lampoon* and collected back issues. I started an underground satirical newspaper. When I got my driver's license, a friend and I drove home from school every day and ate lunch in front of the television, so we could watch *Get Smart*.

Television comedy provided a window on the larger comedy landscape. From the time I was eight years old I loved watching the stand-up comedians on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. One of my favorites was Richard Pryor. He was twenty-four years old when he first appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, looking uncomfortable in his black suit, white shirt, and skinny black tie. His suit clung too tightly to his slight frame as he described growing up black

in Peoria. Richard talked about being bullied on the playground. First, he impersonated the bully: “After school...I’m a bite off your foot.” Then he did his reaction—mortal fear. Richard’s eyes went wide and darted right and left. His shoulders hunched in anticipation of being hit and he forced his mouth into a half smile that was both supplicating and frightened. My brothers and I had our own playground challenges, mostly about lunch money, and we could relate.

And there was Jackie Vernon. His routine was to describe his life in a continuous slide show. He held a clicker that imitated the sound of a slide changing. There were no actual pictures, only his descriptions of them. “I went on safari in Africa,” he’d say. “It didn’t go too well. I’d like to show you some slides.” Click. “Here we are starting off on our safari.” Click. “Here we are just before we hit the quicksand.” Click. “Here’s a waist-up shot.” Click. “Here’s some hats and ropes and things.”

But my favorite was Alan King. He’d show up on the stage dressed in his suit and tie and holding a cigar. His face would be screwed up a little, his mouth in a sour frown, as if he found merely *talking* about his life to be a burden. His whole approach to the audience would be, “Can you believe what I have to put up with?” His eyebrows would rise, his lips would purse. He would wave around his cigar, stabbing for emphasis, gesturing grandly. His material was basic Borscht Belt stuff: wives, partners, in-laws, the everyday indignities of life.

“I remember the day I got married. Such a wonderful ceremony! My bride, beautiful in her wedding gown, stood next to me crying tears of joy. In Jewish weddings it’s traditional for the groom to end the ceremony by stomping on a wine glass—this is

supposed to drive off the evil spirits. I broke the glass, but when I looked up...*my mother-in-law was still there.*”

• • •

The Russian Tea Room’s maître d’ greeted me, informed me that I was the first in my party to arrive, and escorted me to a table set for three. I opened my menu and did a quick search for something that could be eaten with a knife and fork without making a mess. Something dry, without any sauce that might land on my favorite and most expensive red paisley tie. I was a sloppy eater, and more than once when I’d dropped a forkful on my lap at dinner, my wife had asked, “Do you eat like that at business lunches? It can’t be good for business.”

When I looked up from my menu, there was Nancy Geller, the producer of a series we were running on Comedy Central called *Inside the Comedy Mind*. She greeted me with a smile and a kiss. Nancy, tall with long blond hair and a big smile, stood next to the host of *Inside the Comedy Mind*. He held an unlit cigar in his mouth, but it didn’t stop him from smiling. I stood up as we shook hands. “I’m Alan King,” he said. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Alan sat on the banquette; Nancy and I sat on the chairs facing him. I settled myself and looked across the table. There he was, bathed in the low amber light of the restaurant, framed against the plush red velour of the banquette, and smiling regally at me, his presence warming the room.

People at the tables nearby turned to look, whispering and pointing. “Of course it’s him,” they said. “Look at his hair, his eyes.” He said nothing for a moment while he scanned the room. He nodded to a middle-aged woman sitting nearby. She put her fork down and walked over.

“Oh, Mr. King, I’m so thrilled to see you here. I’ve been a fan since I was a little girl. My father thought you were the funniest man alive. That’s what he’d say. He’d say, ‘Tessie,’—that’s me, I’m Tessie—‘Tessie, Alan King is the funniest man alive.’ He’d laugh so hard tears would come to his eyes.”

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Alan said, smiling up at her. “I’m so glad you came over today.” He pulled a fountain pen and an index card from his pocket and wrote, “To Tessie, All the Best, Alan King.” Tessie took the card, thanked him, and scurried back to her table to share her adventure with her husband.

“Nancy said you wanted to meet me,” Alan said. “And she told me you’re a big-shot network executive at Comedy Central, so I said to her, ‘Sure, why not, maybe he won’t cancel my show.’”

“I love *Inside the Comedy Mind*, Mr. King—”

“Call me Alan!”

“I love your show, Alan, and I hope it stays on forever.”

Nancy put her hand on my arm. “Art, you’re so nice! I told Alan you’re the only one at the network who knows what they’re doing.” This was Nancy buttering me up, thinking that I could somehow get his show renewed.

“Nothing’s been decided as far as I know. But I’m not in Programming anymore, I’m the marketing guy, so...”

“Come on, Art,” Nancy said, “everyone knows you run things over there.”

I turned to Alan and said, “Nancy likes to make me feel important.”

“She does the same thing to me,” he said, “always with the compliments and the big laughs at my jokes.”

Nancy beamed. She put one of her hands on his and the other on mine. “I’m so glad I could finally introduce you two, because I love you both.”

We ordered lunch and chatted about Comedy Central and some of the comedians Alan had interviewed on his show. He told us how he “discovered” Barbra Streisand when she was a teenager singing in some dive club in Greenwich Village (“She was just a skinny kid, but man, when she opened her mouth to sing, everyone in the place practically fell over!”).

When I asked him what he thought of an older Borscht Belt comic who was attempting a comeback, Alan said, “Him? I haven’t said two words to that creep in forty years. Not since we had a fistfight.”

“You hit him?”

“One night after a show we were doing, I walked into the alley for a smoke. There he was beating up his girlfriend. I walked over and told him to knock it off, but he says, ‘Mind your own fucking business’ and goes to hit her again. I grabbed his arm and spun him around. That’s when I punched him in the nose.” Alan smiled at the memory. “He cried like a baby. I helped the girl to her feet and told her, ‘Sweetheart, you’re too good for this bum, find somebody else.’ He never forgave me.”

We talked all through lunch about the comedians and performers Alan knew and loved. At one point he said to me, “You really know your comedy, don’t you? You’re a real student

of comedy. It's good to know somebody at that channel has some respect for the past."

Alan King was right. I did know my comedy.

Nancy said, "Alan, did you know Art started the channel? Art, tell Alan about how you started Comedy Central."

Before I could answer, somebody came up to the table and put his hand on Alan's shoulder. He was an older gentleman, dark skinned, very handsome, and somewhat familiar. "Jesus, Harry, what are you doing here?" Alan said. "Meet my friends Nancy and Art. Guys, this is Harry." It was Harry Belafonte, the world-famous singer and actor.

"Sit down, Harry," Alan said. "Art was just about to tell us how he started Comedy Central."

## CHAPTER 1

# Pitching Comedy

I never thought I would have a career in the television business; or, more precisely, I was convinced it was nearly impossible, in the same category as becoming an astronaut or a rock star. Despite my interest in comedy throughout my childhood, my parents believed strongly that I shouldn't try to make a career in entertainment because: 1) Why throw my life away on something as frivolous as entertainment when I clearly had the brains and the drive to become a doctor (note: to become a doctor was the pinnacle of achievement for first-generation American Jews because it afforded both wealth and the admiration of the community in a way that no other career could; while this had become a caricature by the time I went to college, it was still pretty much dogma); and 2) There was no guarantee of success. What guaranteed success? Accounting, law, medicine. "Get your CPA so you can have something to fall back on," my mother said, and my father agreed. He'd hired me to work in his accounting office while I was in high school, so I knew enough about accounting to not want to fall back, forward, or sideways on it.



College offered an alternative that I hadn't even heard of let alone considered—economics. When I enrolled in Introductory Microeconomics in the first semester of my freshman year, I had no intention of taking another economics class after that. Three weeks into that class, I studied hard for the first exam, so I was surprised when my professor handed it back with an F on it. Having failed my first test ever, I realized that this economics stuff was harder than I'd thought, and if I was going to learn it, I'd have to change my approach. By the end of the first semester, I'd decided to major in economics. When I told my father, he said that economists were useless and reiterated that accounting was a better bet.

At the end of my sophomore year, I'd taken a bunch of economics courses and was hungry for more. I had been eager to learn about something called econometrics (a more quantitative approach to economics that involved statistics and was the basis of economic forecasting models), but as it turned out, it wouldn't be offered my junior year because the professor who taught it would be on sabbatical. Further, if I wanted to take econometrics at Swarthmore, I had to be enrolled in the "honors" track, which consisted of seminars instead of classes. That pissed me off. The classroom system had served me well since kindergarten and I wasn't looking for a change, so I signed up for some other courses and grudgingly gave up on econometrics.

A few days later I got a note from the economics department saying, "Congratulations on being accepted into the Honors Economics Program." Thinking there must be some mistake, I marched off to see the head of the department. There'd been no mistake. Apparently, I was being drafted into the honors program.

After hearing this, I stewed in my dorm for a few hours. I *didn't* want honors; I *did* want econometrics. I decided it was time to address both problems head on and find a solution. I went to the library and found the econometrics textbook *Principles of Econometrics*, written by Dr. Jan Kmenta, who, according to the information in the introduction, was Professor of Economics at The University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Noting this I returned to my dorm, collected as much change as I could find in my room (including my roommate's drawers, thank you very much) and parked myself in the pay phone booth down the hall.

I dialed, deposited an impossible amount of change, then waited.

"University of Michigan, Admissions, Miss Dellman speaking. How can I help?"

"Hi, I'm a sophomore at Swarthmore College. Can I ask you something? Do you have a professor there named Jan Kmenta?"

"Um, yes, Professor Kmenta is in the economics department."

"Does he teach undergraduates?"

"Yes."

"Great. I'd like to transfer to your school next semester. Can you tell me how to do that?" There was a very long pause. "Who is this?" Miss Dellman asked.

After a few minutes of conversation during which I told Miss Dellman about myself and my grades and that I was deadly serious, she said, "Well, yes, I suppose you can transfer here. You'll need to fill out the paperwork, though."

I had taken my education into my own hands. Nobody was going to kick me into honors against my will. I'd found a way out. Everyone—my professors, my friends, my parents—thought

I was crazy doing what I did, but I didn't feel crazy. I did what I had to do—change everything. It was like changing the television channel. Instead of watching a show until the end, I cut into something else to see if it was better. And I felt the jolt of being alive, in control by being slightly out of control.

I spent the next year at University of Michigan and did, in fact, study with Jan Kmenta. He was a terrific professor and a charismatic man who had made a daring escape as a seventeen-year-old from his home country of Czechoslovakia during the Second World War, a story he'd told during one of our classes. His accent was almost unnoticeable except for the mispronunciation of a few key terms, including reciprocal which came out "reh-ci-PROC-al." Nobody dared correct him.

During one meeting with him in his office, he asked me what I intended to do after I graduated.

"I think my parents wanted me to become a doctor," I said.

Kmenta nodded thoughtfully, then said, "Doctors don't always have such interesting lives. I'm an economist. I get to travel all over and talk to very smart people about important problems—and solutions. Maybe you should become an economist." It was the first time I even considered it. But I admired Kmenta and took his advice to heart.

My year at University of Michigan was exactly what I needed in order to feel that I was in charge of my education and my life. But by the spring I was ready to return to Swarthmore. I graduated in 1978 with a degree in economics and was hired right out of school by a consulting firm in Washington, D.C., where I worked for three years on various projects for the Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Energy. My education had

paid off, and as Kmenta had promised, I got to work with very smart people devising solutions to tough problems, and I found the work fascinating and gratifying. Then one day, I was sitting at my desk reading a copy of *Coal Weekly* when I realized this was not my life's work. I still wondered what it would be like to work in the movie or television business. I decided to quit consulting and go back to business school, hoping that an MBA from Wharton was just the credential I needed to land an exciting job in entertainment.

On my first day at the Wharton School, there was a barbecue on the quad for new students. I sat on the low brick wall watching the smoke rise from the grills and observing rather than participating. A young woman walked up to me. "Mind if I sit down?" She held out her hand and said, "I'm Emily."

She was young and attractive, and I assumed she was a fellow student. "Hi, Emily. I'm Art. Where you from?" I asked.

"Nowhere," she said. "I mean, I live here. I work for Wharton in administration. I oversee Student Affairs."

"We're not free to have affairs on our own? This place is stricter than I thought."

Emily smiled. "Very funny. No, it's about student life, clubs, extracurricular activities, stuff like that."

"Is there an Entertainment Business club?"

"Um, I don't think so. You could start one."

"Thanks, but not my style."

"A lot of the students here who are interested in performing arts end up doing the Wharton Follies." Emily went on to explain the Wharton Follies was an annual musical comedy review written and performed by students. "It's very popular. You should check

it out if you're interested." She scribbled a name on a piece of paper.

I auditioned for the Wharton Follies and joined the cast. Several of the students were quite accomplished, including the director (who'd previously acted in and directed several off-Broadway plays), the choreographer (oh no, I was going to have to dance!), and the musical director (and sing!). And there were a bunch of veterans of the Harvard Hasty Pudding Show, the granddaddy of all student-performed satirical shows, and these guys were seriously funny.

The Follies wasn't my first theater experience. In college I wrote and performed comedy skits, and I'd been Motel the tailor in the school production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. I got to sing "Miracle of Miracles," which I pulled off with the help of a very patient voice coach and a lot of wide-eyed enthusiasm in my delivery. I enjoyed being onstage, and I had loads of fun doing the Follies my first year.

The second year I was chosen to be head writer, based on the fact that I got a lot of laughs the previous year. Plus, I volunteered. The first thing I did was to put up a notice on the activities board inviting anyone interested in writing for the Follies to a meeting. Twenty people showed up at the meeting. I spoke for a few minutes about the process. Everyone there was welcome to submit skits and songs making fun of the school, professors, or job hunting, and then I would put them together into a cohesive show that I would write myself.

A woman raised her hand. "Can you give us some tips on writing comedy?" she asked.

I froze. What did I know about comedy? “Sure,” I said, and proceeded to talk about what I thought made a good comedy skit, funny song, and target for satire. I gave examples from *I Love Lucy*, the Marx Brothers, and *Get Smart*, describing funny scenes that were well constructed and had a beginning, middle, and end.

When I finished, the woman said, “Gee, you’ve thought a lot about this, haven’t you?” And I realized I had.

One of the pieces I wrote was called “Video Resume.” The idea was that when video became more generally available, job seekers would no longer use printed resumes but instead make videos highlighting their career histories and accomplishments. I enlisted the help of the Wharton visual aids guy, who had experience in film and video. I directed everything, and we all laughed as we were performing for the camera, but when he came back with the edited version, it wasn’t funny. “It’s edited wrong,” I told him, and we went back to the editing room, where I re-edited for several hours until it all finally worked.

As I sat editing the vignettes in “Video Resume,” I thought, Wouldn’t it be fun to be able to watch the funniest scenes from movies and television? Just the classic funny scenes rather than the whole show or movie? Maybe it could be a show...or a television channel...devoted to great comedy. The more I thought about it over the next few weeks, the more I liked the idea. During the previous three years, more than a half-dozen new cable channels were started, including all sports (ESPN), all news (CNN), and all music (MTV). Why not an all-comedy channel?

That spring, armed with my MBA in finance, I was one of only a handful of people who graduated without a job offer. I was holding out for something in entertainment, but not many

entertainment companies were recruiting at Wharton. I finally got hired at the beginning of the summer—as a financial analyst at CBS Television Stations. It paid me roughly half of what I'd been making as a consultant in Washington, D.C., before starting graduate school.

But, at the age of twenty-seven, I was in show business. Sort of.

I moved from Philadelphia to New York and took an apartment on Twenty-Ninth and Park, an area of Manhattan known for two things: furniture stores and prostitutes. It was comforting to know that a coffee table and some rentable companionship were right outside my door. CBS was located at Fifty-Second Street and Sixth Avenue, a short subway ride away.

Working at CBS Television Stations, I quickly learned, was like working at any other large corporate company. I was almost completely removed from the production of television and spent most of my time churning out spreadsheets that reported on assorted financial measures of how profitable my division was. The short answer: *extremely* profitable. But the executives liked to see that in black and white and read the detailed reports in order to better manage the business, or so I was told. I felt good about my contribution to the overall effort until I learned that a lot of my financial analysis and reporting was hardly used. After working there for about a year, I suggested to my boss that one of the reports I'd been preparing was not useful to anyone. I knew this because I had asked a lot of the people who received it. When I asked if maybe I should spend time on something else, my boss was horrified. I slunk back to my office, wondering how I was going to make my first foray into television more personally

and professionally rewarding. So far, working at this giant corporation was not what I'd pictured.

In December 1983, a few months past my first anniversary at the job, I got a call from a former CBS colleague who'd recently been hired by HBO. "This place is great," he said, "and they need someone who knows how to do economic modeling. Interested?" Two weeks and several interviews later I was hired as a marketing analyst by HBO.

Working at HBO was a completely different experience. CBS was a huge corporation fighting for a slightly bigger share of the network television pie. (At that time, there were only three networks: CBS, ABC, and NBC. Cable television was not yet considered a serious competitive threat.) Working there was like working at the post office, although the pace seemed slower.

On the other hand, HBO was a small, relatively new company crammed into a couple of floors in the Time & Life Building across from Radio City Music Hall. It was started in 1976 with the idea of providing first-run movies to cable subscribers for a monthly subscription fee. In 1978 they began to deliver the service via satellite so they could go national. As long as a local cable system had a satellite dish, they could offer HBO to their cable subscribers. HBO was an almost-immediate success.

My new job was to develop a methodology to forecast how many people would subscribe to HBO over the next ten years. Even though I had a degree in economics and had worked on forecasting models of all sorts after I graduated from college, I knew this wouldn't be easy. I taped Casey Stengel's famous quote to the wall next to my desk: "Never make predictions, especially



about the future.” But that was my job in its entirety: to make predictions about the future.

At the time I was hired, HBO had been monstrously successful, with millions of new customers signing up every month. As soon as I got there I could feel the adrenaline. HBO was like a football player who’d just run eighty yards for the winning touchdown, strutting, dancing, high fiving, and celebrating. When I arrived, the mission of the company was clear: “We are going to change television.” I believed it, and I was as excited by this as everyone else.

After a couple of years forecasting subscriber growth, I was transferred to the New Business Development department. My boss, Linda Frankenbach, and her team were developing and test launching a new cable television channel. Research had shown that one of the reasons people didn’t subscribe to HBO was that the movies had too much sex, violence, and bad language, and many viewers didn’t want objectionable content coming into their homes. Armed with this information, HBO designed a new cable channel called Festival.

Festival was a lot like HBO: there would be recent Hollywood movies shown without commercials, and viewers would pay a monthly subscription fee. But Festival would only show movies suitable for the entire family or movies that had the offensive content edited out. Festival was intended to be a “clean” HBO.

During the Festival test phase, the team traveled around the country talking to hundreds of television viewers about their TV viewing habits (favorite shows, how much they watched each week, what they liked to watch, and so on). Through this research, we were trying to learn how to program, market, and

sell Festival. I not only heard a lot about how people watched television, I found that by listening closely during these interviews I got a firsthand look at how these people thought, felt, and lived their lives. And I discovered that their lives were hard.

*“My husband died in an accident at work four years ago, so I work and take care of the kids. Television is my escape.”*

*“I have a son who’s in a wheelchair and he’s got a lot of problems. I love him, but he’s a handful. He’s fifteen now, and he loves watching cartoons.”*

*“My wife, God bless her soul, she passed away last summer right after I got laid off from the factory, so I haven’t got much in my life but the television. Sports and news mostly, and I’m embarrassed to admit I watch Days of Our Lives. Yessir, almost every day.”*

Another thing that came up talking to these viewers about television was how much they liked comedy. We asked people in focus groups whether they would watch a movie channel that had less sex, violence, and bad language, and most agreed that it sounded like a worthwhile idea.

Ever since the idea had first occurred to me while writing and performing the Wharton Follies, I kept thinking about how great an all-comedy television channel would be. New cable channels were launching all the time and I expected someone would announce an all-comedy channel any minute, but nobody did. I’d run the idea by a couple of my friends, including the possibility of using comedy clips from movies and television. They all agreed it was a cool idea, but nobody knew how to get it started. I watched as more and more cable channels with single-subject formats were launched in the 1980s. The Discovery Channel showed documentaries. The Entertainment and Sports

Programming Network (soon to be known as ESPN) was riveting audiences by broadcasting second-tier sporting events, like college volleyball and lacrosse. And MTV—music television, all music all the time—was changing the cultural landscape.

The time seemed right for another reason: live stand-up comedy was suddenly everywhere. The club scene was raging in cities across the country; clubs were packed with patrons willing to pay the cover charge *and* a two-drink minimum to watch headliners as well as up-and-coming comedians. Comedy clubs, previously a big-city phenomenon, began opening in cities and towns across America. Even small-town bars had comedy nights. Clubs featured open-mike nights, where anyone could get up and try out their act in front of a live audience (at their peril). A feature article in *Rolling Stone* magazine on the comedy club explosion noted that in 1988 there were 300 comedy clubs in the country compared to a handful in the early 1970s. In the same article, the comedian Richard Belzer put it this way: “Comedy’s kind of taken the place of rock & roll. Kids in the fifties wanted to strap on a guitar and be Elvis; now they want to be Jay Leno or Eddie Murphy or Steve Martin or Robin Williams.”

Television took advantage of the live comedy boom, in no small part because it was relatively inexpensive to produce. In 1982 A&E launched *A&E’s An Evening at the Improv*, originally taped live at the Improv comedy club in Los Angeles, and the show stayed on the air, capturing the acts of hundreds and hundreds of comedians, many of whom went on to become stars. There seemed to be an endless supply of new comedians clamoring to get their careers supercharged by television. While a few minutes on NBC’s *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* was

still coveted as *the* career-building television appearance for new comics, HBO was now offering breaking talent an opportunity to showcase their material in its Annual Young Comedians Special. HBO was helping to make comedy careers. And HBO was also having great success programming one-hour stand-up comedy specials with top comedians like Robin Williams, Sam Kinison, and Whoopi Goldberg, whose acts were presented uncensored and without commercial interruption. Comedy was suddenly everywhere.

Why *not* a comedy channel?

I decided to meet with Bridget Potter, HBO's head of Original Programming, to run the idea by her. I phoned her assistant and said I was a director of New Business Development working on Festival and other new channel ideas (that part wasn't really true) and I had a programming idea. She put me on hold for a minute, then said that Bridget would see me the next day in her office at ten o'clock.

The following day I arrived promptly and her assistant waved me in. Bridget, standing in front of her desk with her arms crossed, invited me to take a seat and start my pitch. She listened to me for about thirty seconds, long enough to understand that I was suggesting that HBO launch an all-comedy channel, before cutting me off.

"Arthur, Arthur, it can't be done," she said as I sat on a couch in her office. Bridget knew me as Art; nobody called me Arthur except my mother. "There's so much comedy on television all over the dial, why would anyone need a twenty-four-hour-a-day comedy channel?" She pranced around the office operatically, grandly waving her arms as if she were about to be hoisted aloft

by an invisible wire before bursting into song. “HBO became famous by putting great comedians on television, uncensored! And when we put a comedian on HBO, we made their career. Whoopi.” She left off Goldberg, because who else would it be? “Billy.” Crystal. “Robin.” Williams.

Bridget Potter had risen to the top of the HBO programming team because she was opinionated and, I assumed, some kind of genius. Blond, British, bombastic, and wearing oversized glasses, Bridget lectured me enthusiastically. Her voice was loud and grating, and every now and then her long-buried London accent seeped through. “There’s too much comedy out there already, Arthur,” she continued. She didn’t so much win me over to her point of view as bludgeon me with repetition. “What comedians would be on the channel? Nobody good. Robin? No. Billy? No. Whoopi? Absolutely not. Their management would *just die* before they’d let them appear on a comedy channel. And there’s no way you could *consider* making a comedy channel without A-list talent.”

And then, all of a sudden, Bridget became quiet and walked toward the couch. Softly, calmly, almost soothingly, she said, “Arthur, you’re not a programmer. You know nothing about comedy and very little about television. There are probably two dozen channels out there already. Do you really think that people want more?”

With that, she returned to her desk. She picked up her pink message slips and began to flip through them. Without looking up, she said, “Thanks for coming by, Arthur.”

“Thank you, Bridget,” I said and hurried out. I thanked her assistant, walked to the elevator and thought about where things

stood. It was 1987. I had been at HBO for three years, and I was thirty-two years old. It had been five years since I left business school and almost six years since this comedy channel idea began bouncing around in my brain.

Bridget had left no doubt in my mind that she hated the idea, and if I couldn't convince Bridget Potter, any hope of getting HBO to start my comedy channel had just died in her office. But even as I returned to my desk rattled and chastened, I knew she was wrong.