

Behind Prime-Time Comedy

By Larkin Warren '79



The NBC production studio where "The Cosby Show" is put together isn't in the glamorous Rockefeller Center building where Bryant Gumbel and David Letterman spend their time. It's in a big, blank-looking building way out in Brooklyn, in a neighborhood that looks like a setting out of "Hill Street Blues." When you enter the building, you go past the smiling but watchful eyes of several uniformed security guards and walk down a flight of stairs to what can best be described as Cosby Command Central. It's deceptively quiet down here, but if you listen carefully, you can almost hear the engine humming. Here, in an office inside the office—at the heart of the engine—is where Marcia Lee Peterson Carsey '66, parks her Reeboks.

There's little evidence that this office belongs to the co-producer of television's hottest show. No big executive desk, no fancy leather chairs. There's a large television set and VCR, a table with a telephone and a pile of scripts on top, a couple of straight-backed chairs. There's a couch, a coffee table with a bowl of fruit and a small travel alarm clock in the middle. A pair of black leather Reeboks sit abandoned under the coffee table. On the wall is a plaque that reads: National Education Association Award for the Advancement of Learning through Broadcasting, to Carsey-Werner Productions for the Cosby Show, 1986.

When Marcy Carsey entered her senior year at UNH, she was still busily adding to the list of activities that would go under her yearbook picture: student senate, university band, freshman camp staff, dorm counselor and president of Randall Hall (then a girl's dorm), active in theater productions, and a member of Mortar Board, the women's honor society.

"It was a very happy time to be an English major and to be hanging around Paul Arts—we didn't get as much pressure for technical specialization as students

Marcy Peterson Carsey '66, executive producer of "The Cosby Show" is "one of those fortunates who ended up having fun doing their work...with terrific people."

do now," remembers Carsey. "I knew then that I was good at writing, acting, communications, all of it. Plus I loved it so much. But towards the end I had absolutely no idea what I was going to do next. I started to panic, to think, well, OK, maybe I should just stay here and go to graduate school. Fortunately," and here Carsey starts to laugh, "a very smart person helped me see that decision for what it would've been—very bad, and born out of sheer desperation!"

Carsey's smart person was English Professor Phil Nicoloff. "I loved his classes, he was energetic and entertaining, and I responded to that. He made me think. So I respected his opinion. He had come to see me in a play and I guess I was pretty good. Later when I sought his advice about graduate school, he said it would be better for me to just get out there in the world and DO it! Next thing I knew, diploma in hand, I was off to New York."

Carsey's first job was as an NBC page, giving studio tours and answering questions for tourists. She quickly became a program aide and, in two years, a production assistant for Johnny Carson's "Tonight Show."

"I grew up loving television and there I was, up to my neck in it. I didn't care what the job was—I would've swept the floors if they'd let me!" It was on the Carson show that she met husband-to-be John

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Carsey, then an associate producer and now an independent writer/producer. When the Carseys moved to Los Angeles, she went to ABC as a program executive specializing in comedy. Steady promotions brought her, in 1978, to a position as senior vice-president of all ABC comedy and variety programs. She was then the highest ranking woman in network television, and a good argument could be made that her arrival in the executive ranks coincided with what some call a second Golden Age of television comedy, rivaling the old “I Love Lucy” and Bob Hope shows that Carsey herself had grown up with.

“We had such great shows to work with. We had ‘Barney Miller’ and ‘Soap’—‘Soap’ was the first series I ever bought! And we had ‘Happy Days’ and ‘Taxi’ and ‘Mork and Mindy.’ Golly, I can still remember seeing Robin Williams do his alien act that first time on ‘Happy Days.’ I thought, uh-oh, this person is very special, what can we find for him to do?” Carsey was instrumental in getting ‘Mork and Mindy’ off the ground.

As for being The First or The Only ranking woman executive in television then, Carsey says now, “Oh, it fascinated other folks a lot more than it did me.”

Carsey left the network to form an independent production company, with Tom Werner—the other half of Carsey-Werner. Early in 1984, when “The Cosby Show” began to be a reality, there was still the matter of a Los Angeles to New York commute. “We knew that we wanted to do this show with Bill Cosby, we all knew from day one how special it would be. But he wouldn’t come West. It was clear that if we wanted to do this with him—and we did, oh, boy, did we—we had to either uproot our families, or we had to get creative about commuting. Tom is married with children, so am I; these roles are important to who we are. So I made bargains with myself and so did Tom.”

The bargains, it’s clear, are the reasons for the Reeboks on the floor of the office, and the steady ticking of the alarm clock. Every other week, Carsey leaves Los Angeles and flies into New York late Sunday night (having spent the weekend with her husband and children). She arrives, she says, “sleepy but alive” at the Brooklyn studios early Monday. Production work goes on Monday and Tuesday, with dress rehearsal Wednesday and taping on Thursday. Late Thursday night or early Friday, Carsey flies west again. The next week, it’s Tom Werner’s turn. They each make eleven trips, and Carsey’s family also spends August in New York, while the first shows of each season are put together. “I’m still a New Englander at heart,” she sighs, “and I’d love to persuade them to move back East—but so far, no luck.”

When asked what exactly a producer does, Carsey laughs and throws up her hands. “Agh! Everything!... Or some days it just seems that way. In television, the producer is usually in on a show from the beginning; finds or thinks of the idea, sells it to the network, arranges to get it all put together and paid for within the budget she gets, hires the director, actors, writers. And once it’s up and going, the producer sticks around to see that it stays up and going.”

It’s clear she loves her work. “I’m one of those fortunates who ended up having fun doing their work, with terrific people. And in between I hang out with my family, and that’s fun, too.”

Carsey says there is no ‘magic formula,’ for success. “There’s just your drive, your eagerness, your humor, your willingness to take risks, look foolish, jump into something. You swim around for awhile, do your best and learn to define what you want for yourself.”

She says that technical skill is only a small part of what’s important in the entertainment industry. “Training can’t hurt, internships can’t hurt. They might get you in the door. But some things can’t be taught: good judgment, good instincts, common sense. The ability to read a script or look at a tape or an actor and be able to tell the ordinary from the extraordinary—some people, no matter how much training they’ve had or how bright they are in other ways, don’t have that and never will. It’s like being tone deaf. Others do have it, but don’t have the confidence to recognize it in themselves.”

Marcy Carsey sees a liberal arts education as an opportunity to “begin the exploration. You read, listen, argue, think, ‘try on’ different ways of being. You learn to take risks. For example, I was one of the ones with the instincts, I think, but no confidence. That’s where Phil Nicoloff’s role as teacher was so important—he encouraged me to think about my options in a new way. He said ‘take what you’ve learned and trust your instincts,’ and I did.”

Carsey grimaces, remembering that sometimes her instincts have led to big mistakes. “Too numerous and embarrassing to mention. But who among us is infallible? One thing you’ve got to know in this business—in this world—is that you’re going to make mistakes. But if you’re frozen, if you’re afraid of mistakes, you’ll never get anywhere. You have to say ‘well, I’m right more than I’m wrong’, plow your way through the mistakes and just keep on moving!” ☆

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