

Hollywood Etc.: Time to pull the plug on 'Saturday Night Live'

by Lee Grant

For years, it was a beacon - piercing society's sacred cows, a dangerous late-night TV party, pungent, startling, hilarious.

Now, flapping around like a speared fish gulping for air, it's decaying into another withering program that has outlived its time. "Saturday Night Live" should die.

No longer is it must viewing, no longer is it buzzed about the next day or Monday at the office. What folks are probably chattering about is "The Office."

For budgetary reasons, NBC asked Lorne Michaels, the show's creator, to trim the cast to 11 regulars and no featured players. This for a venture that thrived on fresh blood - a Phil Hartman or a Chris Kattan injecting new life and energy.

THE BEGINNING - The original cast of 'Saturday Night Live' included (from left): Laraine Newman, John Belushi, Jane Curtin, Gilda Radner, Dan Aykroyd, Garrett Morris and Chevy Chase. CNS Photo courtesy of NBC.

"It's also a victim of the times," said Tom Shales, the Pulitzer Prize-winning TV columnist of The Washington Post, who co-authored the authoritative "Live From New York: An Uncensored History of Saturday Night Live."

"With the war on, it's tough to be funny like in the Reagan years or the Clinton years, to laugh at things. It's absolutely impossible for any show to maintain the level 'SNL' had for 30 years. That's a long time on the cutting edge. It's imitated so much now - 'The Daily Show With Jon Stewart,' 'The Colbert Report.' It's not alone in the world."

"SNL" was a pioneer, emerging in the mid-'70s as an antidote to what TV had become - bland and predictable, hovered over by censors and network honchos protecting their jobs.

Submerge wistfully into the 26-hour, 33-minute DVD boxed set, "Saturday Night Live - The Complete First Season, 1975-1976," and there's John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd, Jane Curtin, Garrett Morris, Laraine Newman and Gilda Radner, a brilliant ensemble supported by go-for-the-throat writers like Michael O'Donoghue and Michaels himself.

Any of those 24 vintage programs are more scintillating than what "SNL" has become this season.

Long gone are Chris Farley's intense motivational speaker who "lived in a van down by the river," Will Ferrell and Alec Baldwin's boozy bar guys saluting late colleague "Bill Brasky" ("Bill Brasky once breast fed a flamingo!"), Adam Sandler's Opera Man; Mike Myers' "Wayne's World"; Eddie Murphy's "Mr. Robinson's Neighborhood."

There's little skewing of politicians (the Bush sketches are lame), or surprises - Barbra Streisand popping up for a Myers fahklempt Linda Richman sketch; Jimmy Fallon, as a perfect Mick Jagger, looking into a mirror, on the other side the real Mick Jagger.

Now there's depressingly anonymous Bill Hader, Jason Sudeikis (he's saddled with impersonating Bush), Will Forte and Kristen Wiig. The gifted Kenan Thompson, Fred Armisen, Amy Poehler and Maya Rudolph (how many times can she re-create that shrill Donatella Versace impression?) are weakened by unimaginative ideas and writing.

"Of the regulars, there's no one who stands out strikingly from the crowd, impish and spirited and versatile, the way, say, a Will Ferrell did," said Shales.

"Darrell Hammond, a great impressionist, continues to amaze with his on-target Bill Clinton, but he's done it seemingly dozens of times. All the surrounding blandness puts a heavy burden on Poehler, the show's Great Blond Hope and its single most valuable performer, if partly by default."

Add to that pained hosts like "Lost" actor Matthew Fox and musical guests like The Shins (as fine as the indie band is, woefully disappointing on the show).

Poehler seems to be drowning on the signature "Weekend Update" (launched the first season with Chevy Chase), hurt by the departure of brainy partner Tina Fey (she's moved to her own show, NBC's "30 Rock"). Seth Meyers, who replaced Fey in the co-anchor chair, is humorless, delivering flat jokes, waiting for laughs with a blank stare at the camera.

The women, in general, are poorly utilized (Wiig's excitable Target employee an exception). Not too many years ago, female cast members were at the front - Molly Shannon and her Mary Katherine Gallagher, the klutzy, plaid-clad Catholic schoolgirl; Cheri Oteri, her retail employee working the return desk telling customers snippily to "simmah down nah!" (translation: "simmer down now!"); and Ana Gasteyer and her middle-school music teacher Bobbie Moughan-Culp (opposite Ferrell) screeching oldies rock at a student assembly.

Of his classic, unctuous Nick the Lounge Singer and his nerdy Todd, former "SNL" cast member Bill Murray once told me, "On the street, people start singing 'Star Wars' (Star Wars, nothing but Star Wars) to me. Husband and wife teams come up and ask for noogies or want me to pull my pants way up and play Todd right in the middle of Sixth Avenue and 59th Street."

Who in the current cast will have, years later, that kind of recognition? Armisen, who does a disarming Prince, displayed early potential but is lost now as more of a background player. Thompson, the show's lone African-American, is young and raw and floundering, tapped predictably by the writers for takes on Star Jones, Oprah and Bill Cosby.

The show should be nailing James Blunt's noxious tune, "You're Beautiful"; Jimmy Kimmel's insipid late-night talk show; "Ugly Betty"; the film "300." It needs to get Britney Spears as a special guest now like it did once with Monica Lewinsky.

There have been occasional decent moments this season (Jake Gyllenhaal in drag warbling "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going" was memorable). There was Hugh Laurie in the "SNL" house, his talent rising above weak material. Surprisingly, Indianapolis Colts quarterback Peyton Manning was a delight, self-effacing and a good sport.

Is Michaels himself losing touch, getting older (he's 62), spending time on other TV and motion picture projects? Can you still be cool and edgy in your 60s, like you were at 30? "You can," Michaels said in a 2004 interview, "but not if you want to be 31."

Shales believes Michaels' age is not a factor. "He surrounds himself with young people so he stays in touch and is hip to any kind of comedy that's good. Nevertheless, the show has lost a lot of luster - it needs some sparkling new performers to knock people off their feet."

Years ago, after he received the Jack Benny Memorial Award for Excellence in Entertainment voted on by the UCLA student body, I asked Belushi this: "Why do young people like you so much?" Said he, "Because I relate to them."

Does any current "SNL" cast member have that kid of relationship with fans? Not likely.

Then a student asked Belushi, who'd moved on to Hollywood and the movies, whether he'd ever return to

"SNL." Said the Blues Brother, "It was time for it to end. You guys go to school for four years and that ends. One has to get into new areas, break into new fields."

For "Saturday Night Live," it's time to end, leaving a path open for fresh imagination, creativity, revolution. Murray's film critic character from a couple of decades ago would say it this way: "Go on get outta here, you knuckleheads ..."

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