

**Andrew Clark:** OK, welcome everybody. *(applause)* Got a little introduction here. Born in 1952 in Berkeley, California, Jim Downey attended Harvard University, where he studied Russian and worked as the editor of the *Harvard Lampoon*. After he traveled Eastern Europe, Downey returned and submitted a writing sample to a show called *Saturday Night Live*. It didn't take him long to make an impact. Downey worked closely with such comedians as Bill Murray, with whom he shared an office, Dan Aykroyd, John Belushi, Gilda Radner and Laraine Newman. Over the next four decades, Downey worked with and wrote for every star the show has produced, including Eddie Murphy, Dana Carvey, Chris Farley, Norm Macdonald, Phil Hartman, Will Ferrell, Fred Armisen, Bill Hader, Amy Poehler, Kenan Thompson and dozens of others. Called by Lorne Michaels "the best political humorist alive," Downey has been responsible for nearly every political-centered piece during *Saturday Night Live's* run, starting with Jimmy Carter in the seventies and ending six administrations later with Barack Obama.

The power of Downey's political comedy extends beyond merely swaying public opinion. More impressively, his comedy has influenced the actual political landscape. *The New York Times* says of Downey, "When he has taken aim at the presidential debates, he has consistently defined the candidates before they can define themselves." Downey has also coined legendary malapropisms, including the non-word "strategery," out of the mouth of former president George W. Bush. In 2013, after working at *SNL* off and on for thirty-three of its thirty-eight seasons, only taking a few years off to write for *Late Night with David Letterman* in 1982 and after being temporarily fired in 1998, Downey retired from the show, and today he

currently lives in rural central New York state, pursuing his lifetime goal of (being a) harmless eccentric. So please, it's a great honor for me to welcome—I should also mention he's the creator of David Letterman's "Top Ten," which we'll talk about a bit later—please welcome everybody, Jim Downey. *(applause)* Thanks, Jim. Now, when we were talking a little bit—thanks for being here...

**Jim Downey:** Thank you for having me.

**AC:** We were talking a little bit last night about a word that I want to bring up, something that I think you mentioned Seth Meyers coined, but a word you love...

**JD:** I'm trying to popularize it.

**AC:** That word is "clapter."

**JD:** Yeah, "clapter," which I think Seth really ought to get copyrighted fast, I missed the boat on "strategery," it's too late now for me, but "clapter" is that response you get when you've said something very politically appealing or congenial to the audience's politics anyway, but that isn't particularly funny, but you get whoops and a mini-ovation. These days, the best place to hear it is a Bill Maher monologue. I'm not saying Bill Maher's not funny. I know him a little bit. But a lot of what he gets is kind of easy, suck-up audience stuff that just gets a "Yeah! Whoop! Whoop!" *(laughter)* My point about "clapter," because Andrew had asked me what my pet peeve is, is that laughter is an involuntary reflex, and if you're getting the other stuff, the "clapter," it's generally because what you just did wasn't funny enough to actually make them laugh. *(laughter)* But they do want to show that, "Hey, we're on the same

side, yeah!" And also, it always tends to come with people who like to pat themselves on the back for being outrageous and saying dangerous things. "Yeah, that's right, you heard me, I'm for a woman's right to choose!" *(laughter)* "Yeah! I don't care who I say it to! Hollywood, New York, doesn't matter!" And I'm for a woman's right to choose as well, it's just that I don't think I deserve an ovation... *(applause, laughter)* Yeah, exactly! Thank you, yeah! So that's where I take my stand. You wanna blacklist me, go right ahead. *(laughter)*

But it's that kind of stuff that really... I just hate the sanctimony and the implied self-congratulation of that, and it is something you see a lot now. And I do think that a lot of comics, especially with regard to political stuff, but it also bleeds into the culture, it's just signaling to the audience that "I'm just like you," and also giving the audience... throwing out some names, or groups of people that everyone in the audience can agree they're smarter than. People love to hear that. So that was just something I'd like to get out there in the vocabulary, so I'm counting on you Canadians to carry the torch on "claptrap." And also whooping. As you have your own careers, as much as you can do it without making the audience hate you, try to discourage whooping if you can.

**AC:** Great. Now, we've got a couple of sketches, political sketches to start off with. Do we have someone ready to cue those up? Great.

**JD:** I brought a bunch of them, and I just thought I should bring a few things, maybe, if people want to see them.

**AC:** Yeah. We're gonna see the first two political sketches, the (Mitt) Romney and "The Undecided Voter." It'd be great to talk about how your political stuff has so much of an ability to boil something down to the hidden truth, or the thing that nobody's talking about, but also put things in a very personal, human... there's always a relationship in the political stuff. It's not just policy jokes and wonks. So let's take a look at a couple of these sketches, and then we can talk a little bit about how you get there with that stuff. And we should hit the lights, too. We won't be able to see them, I'm afraid, but they will.

**JD:** Well, I'm familiar.

**AC:** I think you've heard them before.

*(Video begins.)*

**Jay Pharaoh:** I'm Barack Obama, and I approve this message... but I'm not real proud of it. *(laughter)*

**Bill Hader:** I don't think Mitt Romney understands what he's done to people's lives by closing this plant. I don't think he even cares.

**Announcer:** Mitt Romney and Bain Capital made millions for themselves, and then closed this steel plant.

**BH:** Not long after I lost my job, my wife went in for major heart surgery. Mitt Romney stopped by the hospital room to tell us we no longer had health insurance. As he was talking, we could see he had a really bad cold. He was coughing and

sneezing and everything. I said to him, "My wife is sick. Would you mind covering your mouth if you're gonna be doing that?"

**Announcer:** Mitt Romney didn't even have the decency to cover his mouth while sneezing. *(laughter)*

**BH:** I mean, come on. My wife just had heart surgery. Now she's gonna get your cold too? Can't you use a tissue?

*(On-screen graphic: "What a dick!" [The Nation, 7/12/11]) (laughter)*

**Kenan Thompson:** After Bain Capital shut down the mill, I was out of work for a year.

**Announcer:** Mitt Romney and Bain Capital bought the textile mill where Raymond had worked for eighteen years, then shut it down.

**KT:** It was really hard on my family. Finally, I got a job at a piano factory, at half my old salary. Then Bain bought that company, and I got laid off again. Next, I worked as a trucker, but then Bain came along and bought the trucking company, and I lost that job too. *(laughter)* I then got hired part-time at an Orange Julius, until Bain acquired that franchise and shut it down. Not the whole company, you understand, but just that one store. *(laughter)* At this point, I said to myself, "What the hell is going on here?" *(laughter)* Finally, I got a job at a shoeshine stand under an assumed name, working just for tips. But Bain somehow found out, bought the business, and moved it to China. That's when I knew: this is not a coincidence.

**Announcer:** Each time Raymond McCoy got a new job, Mitt Romney and Bain Capital would buy the company, apparently for the sole purpose of laying him off.

*(laughter)*

**BH:** When Mitt Romney was there in the hospital room with us, he kept insisting on shaking our hands, to show there are no hard feelings and all that. Then I noticed he had this cold sore.

**Announcer:** Mitt Romney probably gave Dan's wife herpes. *(laughter)*

**BH:** I wonder: does he ever think about other people? That's just so inconsiderate.

**Second announcer:** Obama for America is responsible for the content of this advertisement.

*(Video ends.)*

**JD:** Is the other one coming up?

**AC:** Should be, yeah. Is it playing?

**JD:** You might have to hit "play" again, it's scored, I think. In the meantime, um... OK.

*(Video begins.)*

**Announcer:** This election will determine the future of our country. And this election will be determined by the Undecided Voter.

**Cecily Strong:** It seems that more than 96% of voters have already made up their minds about this election. Well, I guess some of us are just a little bit harder to

please. We're not impressed by political spin or thirty-second soundbites. Before you get our votes, you're gonna have to answer some questions.

*(Sound cuts out.)*

**JD:** In some cases, the more the audience knows about something, the less sense it makes to them, so it's a way of rewarding the least informed people in the audience, because they're totally happy to laugh, because they don't know something the smarter people know. I'm sure you could do a piece, a very funny piece, premised on Barack Obama being a drunk, but it would make no sense to anyone who knows anything about him, because he's not. But sometimes you see things in political comedy, and I don't want to get into names here, but I remember there was a relatively well-known standup who used to do this thing, and I saw him do it in his act one time, and he's a wonderful performer, a great performer, but he was doing this thing where he's like, "You can't get a fuckin' cup of coffee anymore, have you noticed that? You go to a fuckin' Dunkin' Donuts, you can't get a fuckin' cup of coffee! It's fuckin' Dunkin' Donuts, you can't buy fuckin' coffee! You get rapucino, frappuccino, sipacino, mochachino, you can't get a fuckin' cup of coffee!" And I'm going, "I was just at Dunkin' Donuts about three hours ago, and I swear to god I got a cup of coffee." *(laughter)* "I know it was Dunkin' Donuts, and I know it was a cup of coffee. What the fuck are you talking about?" *(laughter)*

But it was all energy stuff. And you can make a lot of things work just on attitude and energy that are sort of familiar with the audience, and they go, "Hey, that's right." It's always better if... it's not that it has to be smart, and if you start

with that notion that, "I do intelligent comedy, or think comedy," it's that you're doing something that's funny that's not stupid. That's enough. Ideally, what you're trying to do should be, in the first instance, funny, and then everything else takes care of itself, usually.

**AC:** You mentioned performance. Have you ever noticed any differences between the way a performer approaches working and writing a sketch versus a writer?

**JD:** I think that writers are probably more focused on originality, like I was just saying. Writers are more focused on originality than performers, partly because performers never necessarily see what they're doing as being like anything else. "It's me doing it," so by definition it's different from someone else doing even the same idea. I remember when I was the head writer and producer at *Saturday Night Live* when Mike Myers came, and I remember when he started doing "Wayne's World," there was some internal dissension within the show where it was like, "Why are we doing this? It's like Bill and Ted." I'm going, "Well, no, I don't think so." Obviously, if you're gonna reduce it to the core premise, two kind of dumb stoner guys, you could say Bill and Ted was like the McKenzie Brothers, in a way. There's a way of reducing any idea to... you can boil it down so that everything's like everything else. And then at the other extreme, you could do the same kind of thing to death as long as it's a different performer. But I thought what Mike was doing was actually quite different and distinct, and I was glad that we did it, because it was the most popular thing on the show, and justifiably so for a couple of years there. So a pure writer will maybe obsess over originality and miss some great things. Performers maybe, at least on a



show like ours, maybe have a tendency to do the same basic bit a few too many times, where a writer would say, "OK, we've done eight of these. Enough, finally."

In terms of the way they approach ideas, this is a really crude generality, but writers tend to think of ordinary people in strange situations. That's really a crude generalization. Performers (think of) eccentric people in... what did I say? I should know this by now. Writers will do ordinary people in strange situations, performers will do strange people in ordinary situations. When performers have characters, it's often the writer's reaction to their idea for a piece to say, "OK, blind date, complaint department," things like that, and (writers) are like, "Really? Can't we come up..." And often, a performer's take on a writer's idea is that there's not a lot to do there, if you're actually the person out there on stage. It's a funny idea, interesting to think about, a very worthy and original premise... this may be a bad analogy, but I always compared it to the music of Steely Dan, which their fans say, "Oh, it's so original and different and cutting-edge, it's like jazz," and I would always go, "But it's not pleasant to listen to." (*laughter*) Some people love it, and fans would sort of defend it on that basis. It is a balance, and I will say this: in terms of performing versus writing, and by the way anyone who writes is also, whether they understand it or not, they're also performers, because if you're writing for performance and not just for print, when you have ideas and you communicate them to other writers, and you say, "Is this funny, does this do anything for you," you're kind of performing it. And I think the best way to write performance pieces is to perform them, perform them, perform them, then write down the best version of... you find what the core of it is as you do it a lot, as opposed to going right to, in my case paper, but in your case you

have a laptop or something, and then putting down words on paper, and then fixing it. I would say that in the contest between performing and writing, I think it's true that the best written piece can't get through the filter of a performance that's not right, but a good performer can lift mediocre material. I've seen it happen all the time. I've seen both those things happen. I've seen a brilliant piece that was a great piece of writing just hadn't found the right performer to present it, and I've seen people do amazingly well with stuff that was pretty thin on the page.

**AC:** Speaking of great writing and performing, you worked with Norm Macdonald on "Weekend Update," probably during one of its most interesting and funny times.

**JD:** Well... *we* certainly thought *we* were...you guys, at least for Canadian pride, I'm sure you get Norm Macdonald, right? He's one of my favorite performers I've ever worked with. I've known a number of really courageous performers, but no one's more courageous than Norm, in a good way. Not arrogant, not "I don't give a fuck what the audience thinks, this is funny, I'm doing it," but not minding silence if something was really funny. I was the one who recruited him to do "Update" on the show. You guys were probably three or four years old when he did "Update," from about '94 through '97. Is that about right? OK. So you couldn't have seen it the first time around, and I don't know if it has much of a life on the internet or not, but we had sort of a notion. We wanted to do this really stripped-down kind of news thing where the focus was entirely on just the ideas and the writing, and Norm had this great straight line. His brother is actually a big CBC news guy, I met his brother, I can't think of his name...

**AC:** Neil. Neil Macdonald.

**JD:** Neil. And Norm had that look, like if you watched our segment with the sound off, and in fact as I learned from cab drivers who, when we were fired, I remember talking to a cab driver one time, and he said, “Oh, I loved that, I loved the Norm Macdonald Update!” And he had no idea it was a joke. He was just like, “That’s how I get my news.” (*laughter*) And if you watched it with the sound off, there was nothing about the physicality of it or his look—he looked like a news guy. The fact that Neil Macdonald was one of the big guys up here in Canada I think kind of proves my point. We would just do kind of odd, dry stuff that sometimes didn’t get much of a response from the audience, but Norm was a guy who would always, given the choice of something that was kind of easy or lazy or familiar, but that worked really well, and something that was a really smart joke that just got nothing from the audience, it wasn’t even a close call. We used to do the segment at dress, and we’d do probably like nineteen or twenty jokes, stories, of which we’d be looking to keep like fourteen. We never had big arguments or anything. It was pretty clear what we were gonna do. And it was usually the stuff that, once we heard it, we liked it on paper, but we’d hear it on his feet, and it got some laughs, but Norm, if you ever have a chance to see any of these things, and NBC has done its best to suppress them, they’ve taken them out of the repeats and everything, the thing that used to drive the NBC people nuts was that he would do a story, and then just kind of hang there and stare. What we were saying was, “This was a joke. What you just heard was a joke. Whether you necessarily get it right now, but think about it on the way home, it’ll come to you.” We wanted to give them time, whereas almost every other comic

in that position would do the save move of going immediately to the next thing, because they don't want to hear silence. You can hear silence. It's something that the human ear can hear. Norm was always willing to do that, and then I would get calls from my friends the next day, like, "God bless you guys for doing that one story." And they would not even particularly notice that it didn't get anything.

I should think of an example or two while I'm on this subject, of something that didn't exactly... We used to do, now again this is a very topical thing and before your time, but when Norm took over the "Update" segment, the network had come in and said... Kevin Nealon, who I love, a great, dry comic, one of my favorites, had been doing it, and I think it was mostly the writing that wasn't really there. The guy who'd been on top of that segment for the show was sort of shutting other people out of it, and then he retired, so the network said, "You've gotta replace Nealon." There were a lot of different people who wanted the thing, and Norm was my candidate. And so we were able to sort of get Norm in as sort of a dark horse guy. It so happened that the summer before Norm took over the thing, O.J. Simpson allegedly murdered his wife and her lover. The trial lasted a year, so we just did basic variation on how guilty he was, which no one else was doing, because they were afraid, they thought it was awkward, and then the next year was the civil trial, where he was sued for wrongful death, and then, I'm trying to remember, we did "Update" for three and a half years, so the first year was about the criminal trial, the second year about the civil trial. Then there was nothing, no O.J. news, so we sort of left it alone, and meanwhile the guy who was the head of the network was O.J.'s best friend, and he was constantly complaining. "What the fuck is the O.J. stuff? Do you

have to do it every fucking week?" *(laughter)* And I just imagined O.J. calling him and going, "Hey Don, what the hell, man? Again?" *(laughter)*

We just loved doing O.J. jokes. I remember one we did, and it would always start out with the same photo of O.J., so that by about the end of the first season, the audience would laugh because the picture would come up, and Norm says, "Speaking to reporters in London this weekend, O.J. Simpson was asked why he wasn't spending the first Mother's Day since his wife's death with his children. A testy O.J. replied, 'Idiots, I didn't spend Mother's Day with my kids because I killed their mother!'" *(laughter)* It was stuff like that, where some people go, "Whoa!" and some people just love it, and we were in the latter camp. I just kept hearing things relayed to me, like "I'm getting a lot of stuff about the O.J. joke, do you have to do one every week?" There was always something coming up that you could hang it on. There's another one I remember fondly, the one about, "Responding to rumors that he was high on drugs the night of the murders, an angry O.J. told reporters today, 'That's completely untrue, and a simple test of any of my blood found at the crime scene will prove...'" *(laughter)* So we did the first year about the criminal trial, the third year about the civil trial. Then the third year, there was nothing, so we kind of left it alone. Then the fourth season, the first half of the year there was just nothing about O.J., and then suddenly O.J. was back in the news. He was in a restaurant in L.A., long after the acquittal, and some other patrons objected, and so the restaurant said, "Sir, do you mind eating in the back," or not coming back or something. So O.J. sued and got like a gift certificate and a hundred bucks or something, so we did a story about, in addition, the restaurant must now set up "Murderer" and "Non-

Murderer” sections. So the next morning, Don Ohlmeyer called, and Norm and I were fired. But it was fun. *(laughter, applause)*

But it had sort of run its course. We’d sort of made our point. But the thing I will always love about Norm is, and I still get strange phone calls from him from time to time, but if he likes something, he’s not afraid of the silence or an adverse reaction. I’m not saying that that should be someone’s goal. It’s a matter of being willing to put up with silence. It would be easy enough to get silence if that’s all you wanted. I remember one time, and very few people here will remember Andy Rooney, does that ring much of a bell? Andy Rooney was this guy who was on *60 Minutes*. He was like the delightful curmudgeon. One of the things he used to do was read mail. He’d do it like two or three times a year. It was like his “I took the week off” segment. And he would go, “I get mail. One viewer writes, ‘Why does he wear that bowtie?’” or that kind of stuff. So Norm did Andy Rooney one time on “Update,” it was, “And now here’s a few minutes with Andy Rooney,” and basically he does the standard thing that if you’ve watched a lot of Andy Rooney you’ve seen at least once, where he has a stack of letters and it’s like, “I get mail, lots of mail. Here’s one from Kansas City, Missouri. Here’s another one from Los Angeles. This one’s from some place called Charleston, South Carolina. Here’s one from Columbus, Ohio.” Basically all he did was read postmarks for the segment. And he did like two and a half minutes. I thought it was just the coolest thing I’d ever seen on television. I remember that summer, this was before the O.J. thing, actually it was a couple days after, but I was called up to L.A. for one of the very few meetings I had with network brass, and one of the network guys was going, because they’d asked who was gonna

do "Update," and I said, "Well, my personal choice would be Norm Macdonald," and they're going, "Are you crazy?" This one network guy, to the table, said, "OK, I kid you not, I kid you not. He did a thing on 'Update,' did you see that, where, I swear to God, he was doing Andy Rooney, and he just reads envelopes! I kid you not!" And I was like, "Yeah, I thought that was one of the greatest things that's ever been on the show." And he's like, "Are you out of your fucking mind?" And I go, "Wow, you and I, we don't even intersect, our senses of what's funny." Because usually with anyone, in the Venn diagram of the thing, there's a little overlap.

I remember another one, God, this was so great, that we later did on the show, and I got a couple jokes into it, I think. It was Norm's thing he did in his standup about a guy's first night in prison. He says, "They tell you about where to get your mail, and the procedure for taking a shower and visitors and stuff, but the one thing they don't tell you about is the, uh, *anal rape*." (*laughter*) And then he's talking about confronting the guy, and he's saying, "You're in the, uh..." My Norm Macdonald isn't that sharp, but he's confronting the guy in the cafeteria, and he says, "I'm in the, uh, the cafeteria thing there, you know, and I say, 'Hey, hey yeah, you, what the hell was that about last night?'" (*laughter*) "God, don't you understand that no means no?" (*laughter*) "Wow, you got a lotta growing up to do!" (*laughter*) "That's all I'm gonna say, you got a lotta growing up to do! How could you think I'd enjoy that?" (*laughter*) But I remember having a fight with the Standards people about that. It was totally worth it.

**AC:** Let's take a question. I think there might be one out there. Anybody have a question yet?

**JD:** So I've explained everything. OK. *(laughter)*

**AC:** Kevin.

**Audience member:** If you do a character on *SNL*, do they get to keep your character?

**JD:** I guess in theory. That's an interesting question, because that's where you're trying to tease out what's writing and what's performing. Definitely, the show owns your writing. I've created a thing, I guess with Chris Walken and Al Franken, called "The Continental," which is a guy talking to the camera and going, "Welcome to my apartment," and the camera was always running away from him. And I noticed that after I was fired, along with Norm, they continued to do that piece, because I guess Walken would come back to host, and he'd want to do it, or they would want to do the thing. Neither Franken nor I was there, not that I would've done anything about it anyway. As writers, we don't have any right to the material. They paid us, they own it, they can do anything they want with it. Performing is different. Mike Myers walked in with "Wayne's World." He doesn't owe us a damn thing for that. Now whether they had to license those characters to Paramount when they did the movies, I'm not sure, but I know that I don't think anyone could stop Mike Myers from doing it in any venue he wants. Certainly, it's an embarrassing lawsuit for the network to get into. So I would say that performers with characters, Marty Short has



done Ed Grimley in lots of venues, *SCTV*, our show, and I don't think anyone ever thought they had a right to approve it or stop it. *(to audience)* Yep.

**Audience member:** What's your favorite thing you've ever written that never got produced?

**JD:** Hmm. I'm trying to think of something that I've... there are things that I've wanted to write that I never... I guess I'll have two answers. The first one that comes to mind is, I've always wanted to do, I kind of have a weird obsession with Aaron Sorkin *(laughs)*, because he writes that very aggressively witty and kind of "sweaty," we would call it, everyone's always being so fucking witty all the time. And I wanted to do like an HBO series written and produced by Aaron Sorkin about Neanderthals, hunter-gatherers, but who are incredibly witty *(laughter)*, but speaking in caveman language. They're hunting mastodons or something, and the leader had had a previous relationship with a woman in the clan, but they have to work together, and they're setting traps for the saber-tooth tigers and stuff, and there's a lot of that taut, sexually-charged banter, only without using articles like "and" and "the." But I guess part of it was that that would be a really difficult piece to write, and I just don't have the energy anymore.

Another thing I remember we tried to do, and I think we took a couple shots at this, so I guess this qualifies, a bunch of us, me and Franken and Jack Handey and Robert Smigel, wrote a piece, we do those commercial parodies, and this one was written originally in 1987 or something, what is that, twenty-six years ago? And it was for a new car called the DWI. And it was built just for driving drunk. I don't even

remember any of the jokes, but it was just one of those things where it had all of these features, but I remember the one thing was gigantic car keys. *(laughter)* That was one of the jokes, and the network, I've never seen them so adamant about not letting us do something. I just thought, "Why this?" We're not endorsing drunk driving, we're making fun of people who drive drunk. And they just said, "Absolutely not. We cannot be in the position of getting a letter from some mother who lost a child to a drunk driver." They just hate stuff like that. So that was one.

There's another one, I recently tried again when Marty Short came back. This is, unless you're a certain age or you're interested in fifties cinema, this might *(sound cuts out)*. Anyway, sometime, I'll briefly tell you this story, and then go rent those movies and you'll laugh. This was done in the fifties. The guy who played the emperor Caligula figures in both these stories. So the filmmakers decided to do Caligula as just the most screaming, over-the-top gay character. It was a time when gay people were invisible in cinema, but this was like a *La Cage aux Folles* kind of thing, way, way cranked over the top. The actor who played him was this guy Jay Robinson, and *The Robe* is about the robe Christ wore at his crucifixion, and a Roman centurion played by Richard Burton in the movie keeps the robe, and a girl is brought back to life who's been beaten to death. Anyway, the emperor Caligula wants the robe because he wants immortality. The way he was directed, he has this creepy kind of *(adopting nasally, creepy voice)* "Bring me the one they call Jesus!" *(laughter)* And as a little kid I remember watching this and going, "Why is he talking that way, Daddy?" And he goes, "I'll explain when you're older, son."

But anyway, if you're a certain age, like Marty Short and I used to talk about this, and I was doing a thing on *30 Rock*, and I brought him up with Alec Baldwin, who's old enough, and I was saying, "What was the name of that guy?" And he goes, "Oh, Jay Robinson." He totally knew it. So I wrote a piece for Marty, and it was the making of *The Robe*. It was something I'd always wanted to do, and Marty is the person born to play that. The basic idea was, they're shooting the scene, and "The emperor Caligula comes in and he wants that robe, so Richard, he thinks you know where it is, so OK, and action!" And Marty comes in like (*in same voice*), "Where is the one they call the Nazarene? I would see this man!" And there's a cut, "Jay, I want to do it again, and this time, could you do it a little more effeminate?" (*laughter*) It's like, "Really? I kind of thought that was kind of effeminate, wasn't it?" "Yeah, but I mean, really kind of..." "OK." So then he goes (*even more effeminate*), "Bring me the one they call Jesus!" "Um, it's still coming off kind of butch." (*laughter*) And they're like, "Are you...Is there...I mean..." And they make him do it again and again and crank it up, and they finally get so it's like, "Jay, are you doing anything with your wrists? Could you make them limper?" And he's like, "I'm trying to keep them as limp as I can. I'm not consciously stiffening them. I thought they were pretty limp." Anyway, so that was a scene I always wanted to do, because the last people who will get it will be dead soon (*laughter*), and I wanted to get it out there on its feet, but I suppose that will never happen.

**AC:** Can you talk a little bit about the differences between writing for the Letterman show and *Saturday Night Live*, say? They're both late-night comedy, but fairly different.

**JD:** Yeah, I was Letterman's head writer for the first two years, in '82 and '83, and we just loved working for Dave, because he was a lot like Norm. He had his own things he didn't want to do, but he was a big supporter of odd stuff. In those days, again he's very different as a performer now, but in those days, the only kind of stuff he didn't want to do was stuff that he thought he couldn't play, that he couldn't perform. But he had no problem with strange-idea stuff. It was a great place... a lot of it could've been almost print material, because there wasn't much in the performance we would do, goofy things, and then Dave would sort of present them.

I remember George Meyer had this idea that was a very George Meyer idea, which was running stuff over with a steam roller. So we would just go out on the street and ask people questions, just get people on the street and (ask them), "What would you like to eat right now if you could have anything?" And they'd go, "Well, I'd love a nice steak and a Caesar salad, and a nice bottle of wine," and then we'd tape Dave going, "What would you like to see run over with a steam roller?" And we'd cut them together, and then you'd just cut to a steam roller running over a steak dinner. *(laughter)* Or weirder things too. But we'd just have montages of different things being run over by a steam roller. A lot of them are things that would explode in interesting ways. You don't see stuff like that on TV enough. *(laughter)*

So I would say the big difference (is that) at Letterman, it was mostly about ideas, which was one of the reasons why the original writing staff, it's the kind of show that eats up ideas at a ferocious rate, so as a writer there you're doing four shows a week, and you can sort of feel after a season or season and a half, maybe

two, "I probably thought of all the good ideas I'm likely to think of for this format." Writing for performance, say at *Saturday Night Live*, it's an easier thing to do over the long haul, and there are lots more different directions you can go.

**AC:** There are also breaks too, right?

**JD:** Well, Letterman could be long hours too, and not so many breaks. That was the trade-off. I was telling Andrew last night (*sound cuts out*), and then we had the summers off, whereas the west coast writing staff was almost completely opposite. It was very regular hours, people would come in around ten, and everyone was gone by like 5:30, except they were only off like six weeks a year or something. And so what happened after a lot of writers had come through *Saturday Night Live* went out to like *The Simpsons*, say, which was a show almost entirely written by people who had written on *Saturday Night Live* and Letterman, those guys have the worst of everything. They work pretty long hours, they start early and go pretty late, and they work fifty weeks a year. And I know that's what most people do, but for show business, one of the reasons it wasn't that good, I mean television comedy got an awful lot better, I think starting in the seventies, but then it started to accelerate, and I think that from the late eighties to about ten years ago, I think there was a kind of golden age where all this stuff that would've been unimaginable when I was like your age suddenly... I think *Saturday Night Live*, it's almost like science. Something is created, and then it doesn't need to be reinvented. Other people come along and build on that, so that eighteenth-century scientists would look back on Isaac Newton and say like, "God no, he did great stuff, we couldn't have done what he did without

him, but he's not anywhere near state of the art now." And nineteenth-century scientists about eighteenth-century, and so on, so that every stage, it should be moving forward. I have a son who's twenty-two, and he introduced me to Tim and Eric. I don't even really know how computers work, to be honest with you, but he showed me some of it, and I thought it was just amazing, just really hilarious stuff, and really eccentric. It helps that online, you can find a community of people who get your stuff, unless no one gets your stuff except you. You can be discovered that way. But Tim and Eric is a little weirder than, say, I'm trying to think of something that's a close analogue, but the only thing I can come up with, is the way that *South Park* is a little weirder than *The Simpsons*.

**AC:** Jim Downey! (*applause*)