CHAPTER 2

"A MARRIAGE OF SPECTACLE AND INTIMACY"

Modeling the Ideal Television Performer

> With bloodshot eyes, I watch this ogre night after night, bored but nevertheless fascinated by its potentialities. How long can I survive on radio against this new monster?
>
> **—Groucho Marx[1]**

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, as television was gradually becoming the dominant form of domestic entertainment in the United States, broadcast networks, sponsors, advertising agencies, talent unions, talent agencies, and the audience actively renegotiated the meaning and functions of broadcast stardom. Working from the premise that TV can be as good as the talent it presents, the trade press debated what qualities and experience a television star should possess.[2] Although a brief flurry of discussion on the potential advantages of the legitimate stage actor's crossover to the nascent medium occurred in 1947–1948, eventually commentators assumed that the stage comic (trained in vaudeville, burlesque, and night clubs) would be best suited to television work. This was primarily because of the trained comedian's ability to maintain the intensive schedule of television, his or her penchant for improvisation in live work, and, of course, the broadcast experience that many had acquired on radio. Most important, however, stage comics could maximize the

visual immediacy of television. The National Director of TV Programming at NBC, Norman Blackburn, was quoted in *Variety* in early 1949: "Performers with stage and vaudeville background have taken to TV like a duck to water; they usually have a quick study, know what to do with their hands, and realize that a bit of sight business conveys much more meaning than the spoken word."[3] Talent agencies also were cognizant of the importance of the vaudeville comic and by 1948 were "shifting vaude specialists into the radio departments on the theory that it was more important to know the visual angle than to know broadcasting."[4]

To most critics, the predominance of comedians and lack of high-profile dramatic performers on television in the late 1940s signaled declining expectations for the medium as a "starmaker," whereas to many industry insiders it was only a matter of time until broadcasting would be able to create national comedic and dramatic stars of its own. What would eventually result, though, was that comics such as Milton Berle (whom critics routinely recognized as the medium's only true star from 1948 to 1949) would come to represent the particular aesthetic and commercial nature of television to such a degree as to redefine expectations for television's "star system." Comedy would prevail and television would continue to borrow and recast stars, genres, and performance styles from other entertainment industries.[5] And, for network television's first few years, the medium's stars would largely be hosts of variety programs. The influences of Broadway, nightclub revues, and vaudeville were vital to the delineation of effective performance models for television as they all utilized liveness, direct audience engagement, broad physicality, fast pacing, verbal dexterity, and common, deeply rooted cultural and historical references. Television reimagined many traditional forms of popular culture, adapting them to suit its particular needs and strengths. This process reveals not only the history of specific models of television performers and performance styles but also the development of genres, narrative strategies, production techniques, and economic relationships that, in one form or another, continue in television to this day.

Many had predicted that it would be the performers who could emphasize the visual nature of television who would end up being the medium's new stars. During 1946–1947, discussion in the trade papers focused on the potential that television presented for people in legitimate theater. Because live television required similar acting techniques and could be blocked according to a proscenium style, it was commonly thought to be akin to theater. The Broadway producer John Golden was quoted as

saying, "Radio has been getting away with murder. All you've had to do on radio was to read. But reading isn't acting. Acting in television will be like that in the theater, an actor creating a role every night, developing it." He was also quick to add that television "is a blood-brother of the theater, closer to it, more akin than films or radio. It's as good as legit; it's the same creative art."[6] Lawrence Langner, co-director of the Theatre Guild, also perceived a similar link between the two entertainment media when he said that television acting "requires study, adequate rehearsal and as much thought and care as in a Broadway play."[7] Although the live anthology dramas of the mid-1950s would prove Golden and Langner to be right in many ways, in general, the norms of television performance would turn out to be quite different.

Although some theater producers hoped that television would be a well-paid, productive, and culturally significant outlet for their talent, some Hollywood producers looked at the new medium with disdain. The Motion Picture Producers Association (MPPA) enacted a ban on video appearances for their contract players during the first few years of the 1950s. But, as *Time* reported in the fall of 1953 (when the official ban was supposedly over), "most term contracts at the big cinema studios still forbid TV appearances, except for special walk-ons to plug a new picture."[8] Moreover, performers themselves were fairly hesitant about performing on the nascent medium. The broadcast industry tried to lure top name talent by increasing television fees and salaries by 250 to 500 percent during 1947.[9] Although many Broadway and nightclub performers flocked to broadcasting as a result, television would have to prove itself as a legitimate "starmaker" before most Hollywood stars would agree to appear on it in anything more than short guest appearances.[10]

In part because of the reluctance of Hollywood stars and the desire for format continuity on behalf of sponsors, the talent lineup for early television would contain many familiar radio names. It also included a number of vaudevillians who failed on radio and in film but eventually found success in television. Yet, as the managing director of the Roxy theater, A. J. Balaban, warned, "New talent and new faces, splendid though they might be, will still have many bitter lessons to learn in serving up the public's entertainment. While they're floundering, the experienced old-timers will swing easily into action and take a firm grip upon the affection of the new video audience."[11]

"When Vaudeville Died, Television was the Box that They Put it In"

He was a radio comic
and she, the girl of his choice
when she asked what he'd like for his birthday
he said in his radio voice
get me a coaxial cable
is that too much to ask?
I've been working over a hot mike for years
and now it's become such a task.
My rating is dropping by daily
what does Hooper want from me?
I haven't had a call from Paley
and it's so lonesome at NBC
so get me a coaxial cable
come on, be a good little girl
I'd like to televise my stuff myself
before it's done better by Berle

—**Eddie Cantor**[12]

One of the obvious types of performers expected to do well in television was the radio comic who also had experience in nightclubs, vaudeville, or on Broadway. Their particular combination of competencies, along with their familiarity among broadcast audiences, made these comics obvious candidates for television stardom. They also were being lured over to television during a time when resources and audiences were being drawn away from radio and toward the new medium. Because of the rise of television programming, competition from quiz and dramatic programs on radio, as well as complaints about the staid nature of gag comedy, many well-known radio comedians saw their ratings plummet in the late 1940s, which led them to ask Cantor's question, "What does Hooper want from me?" At times, it would seem that Hooper (or at least the audience measured by Hooper) wanted fresh talent and formats. As George Rosen reported in a 1949 front page story in *Variety*, "The era when a Jack Benny, Edgar Bergen or Bing Crosby was assured of a loyal following and an automatic top Hooper simply because they were a Benny, Bergen, or Crosby, no longer exists."[13] Nevertheless, sponsors and network heads were mindful of continuity and consistency in their approach to the impending arrival of television. They remained committed to bringing established radio talent to television.

Many radio comics, by contrast, remained wary of the new medium and worried about how they might fare if they chose to appear on it. They wanted to make the jump, but the transition appeared far from smooth. At the time, Norman Blackburn stated publicly that he believed "top name talent avoided TV for three reasons—one, they were waiting for it to grow up—two, they didn't need it—three, they were afraid of it."[14] What seemed to frighten radio comedians most was television's visual nature and its voracious appetite for material. It was assumed that radio work was far easier than television work because television required an incredible amount of stamina, memorization, and rehearsal from its talent. Unlike radio, where actors could read directly from scripts during broadcasts, television performers had to memorize scripts as well as act with their entire bodies not just their voices. Blackburn, in fact, went so far as to warn radio performers that if they chose to enter into television they would find that "no more is it possible to walk into the studio in street clothes or loafer jackets, give the script a fast reading, and then hurry over to the nearest pub to have a couple of quick ones before strolling leisurely back to look at the script cuts . . . [TV] entails hours of hard work and study."[15]

If the labor involved in television didn't bring about anxiety in the radio comic, its dependence on visual humor probably did. Although they most likely had prior stage experience, many had become used to the performance styles they had honed on radio. For these comics, performing on television would involve a return to old, perhaps rusty, techniques. As Bob Hope humorously remarked in 1947, "The advent of television will work profound changes in the field of radio comedy with performers finding it necessary to develop their humor from the visual rather than the aural branches of wit . . . Comedians will have available many of the old props that used to help punch a line. Fortunately, I still retain the electric bow tie that kept my act moving at Loews Pitkin."[16] Others had a different sort of anxiety regarding television's visuality: they worried about their attractiveness, fearing that audiences would perhaps finally notice their age, or some unattractive feature they longed to hide. A poem in a July 1947 issue of *Variety* gleefully addressed this issue outright: "We'll see, as well as hear, the gags: Benny's bald spot and Allen's bags [. . .]"[17]

In his book on radio comedy, Arthur Frank Wertheim argues that Fred Allen's failure in television can be at least partially explained by his physical imperfections, as television highlighted his baggy eyes, protruding

jowls, and tendency to perspire. Wertheim also notes that Allen's ill health had affected his productivity and that his social satire just did not fit with the conservative attitudes of the 1950s.[18] Allen, along with Crosby, Jack Benny, Edgar Bergen, Groucho Marx, Eddie Cantor, and Burns, didn't enter into television until the 1950–1951 season.[19] Even though he had the top-ranked radio program on the air in 1946–1947, by 1949 Allen's ratings had dropped so low (mainly because of competition from ABC's *Name That Tune* with Bert Parks) that he left radio altogether in 1949. Allen initially appeared on NBC as one of the hosts of *The Colgate Comedy Hour* (1950–1955) and, after disparaging the format for years on his radio program, as a regular panelist on the quiz show *What's My Line* (1950–1967, CBS). By 1952 he was the host of two other quiz shows, *Two for the Money* (1952–1953, NBC; 1953–1957, CBS) and *Judge For Yourself* (1953–1954, NBC), as well as a rotating host (with Hope and Jerry Lester) of *Sound-Off Time* (1951–1952, NBC).

But Allen never acquired a significant following on television. In a 1950 review of one of his first video performances, Jack Gould wrote that Allen seemed bored and that he let his "disdain for the medium" carry through his entire performance, leading the reviewer to remark that he "did not seem to be trying very hard, which is not the trouper's way of showing loyalty to an audience that wants and expects to be entertained."[20] The media critic for the *Hollywood Citizen-News*, Robert C. Ruark, wrote that "it is easy to understand why Fred has made no real impact in the TV field, for his humor has always been off-center, and never embraced the pratfall or spitting-on people, hurling ice-cream or paint pots techniques that seem to be so popular these days."[21] Others noted that audiences were not very accepting of his attempts early on to bring the characters of *Allen's Alley* to television (he first tried to do it through puppets on *Colgate Comedy Hour* and then, briefly, with members of the original cast), perhaps because their representations were so different from what radio listeners had been imagining in their own minds all those years listening to radio. Then, when he moved into giveaways, Allen seemed ill-suited for the format, as it gave him little room to ad-lib or show off his verbal dexterity. His performances led Pat Weaver to remark later that "it broke my heart to watch him on TV."[22] Not surprisingly, Allen was one of the most outspoken critics of television and the lengths a comedian would have had to go to succeed in it. In an interview with *Life* in 1949, Allen complained:

Fig. 2.1 Fred Allen. Library of American Broadcasting.

> The screen isn't the only small thing in television. Smallness seems to be the outstanding characteristic of the whole medium right now. It has small minds, small talents, small budgets. In fact you can take anything connected with television, and you'll find it so small that you can hide it in a flea's navel and still have enough room beside it for the heart of a network vice president.[23]

Fig. 2.2 All of the characters in *Allen's Alley* are on display in this 1948 ad for Ford.

Even before he started in the field, Allen believed that television would be an uphill battle for him and others like him, stating that, "we all have a great problem— Benny, Hope, all of us. We don't know how to duplicate our success in radio. ... We don't know what will be funny or even whether our looks will be acceptable."[24] Yet many of the great radio comics *did* succeed in television. Some even blossomed. In reviewing NBC's

Fig. 2.3 Bob Hope's early television appearances were well received by critics. Library of American Broadcasting.

Star-Spangled Revue, Bob Hope's television debut, Gould wrote: "Bob himself was in rare form and a far cry from the talkative and repetitive Hope of radio renown. Given the freedom of movement, which is pure elixir to the comedian who for many years has been hobbled to a radio microphone, he had all the bounce and energy of a tot turned loose from a play pen."[25] Burns and Allen, Eddie Cantor, and Jack Benny also were praised by critics for their ability to bring the best of the verbal and the visual together in one package for television.

Essential to any performer's success in television was the ability to work with and highlight the medium's defining characteristics. William Boddy points out that television provided "a unique synthesis of the immediacy

of the live theatrical performance, the space-conquering powers of radio, and the visual strategies of the motion picture."[26] And, as many television historians have noted, early discussions of the medium usually posited immediacy, liveness, and intimacy as the attributes that made television such a compelling visual medium. A widely held belief among industry insiders at this time was that vaudeville comedians were the performers whose talents could best exploit these "unique" characteristics. In fact, as early as 1936, entertainment reporters, such as Carroll Nye of the *Los Angeles Times*, were predicting that television would "bring back the vaudevillians who were shunted into obscurity with the advent of the talkies."[27]

Obviously, one of the main reasons television was assumed to be more intimate than film or stage was because of its position in the home or in smaller communal environments. Although radio also had provided such intimacy in regards to reception, television's visuality made it an even more tangible and powerful presence in home life. Popular rhetoric of the period described the experience of television as one that brought the world into the home and was often termed by the popular press as "home theater" or "family theater." However, the anxieties of consumer and social critics surrounding the deleterious impact television had on children and the more general fears of surveillance associated with the sets' placement in the private sphere provided the dark side of the technology's intimacy. Despite such worries, broadcasters understood that television's pertinence and influence with audiences would bode well for advertisers. Vaudeville's presentational mode, in particular, underscored the viewer's familiar relationship with television. On stage, a vaudeville performer courted his or her audience with direct address, colloquialisms, familiar ethnic tropes, and references to local habits, knowledge, politics, or places.[28] He or she would alter an act to fit a particular audience's interest, ethnic makeup, or responses to particular jokes. Audience interaction was essential to a comedian's performance and construction of character identity. When these performers moved into radio, producers quickly learned that they performed best when in front of a studio audience.[29] This was doubly true for the vaude acts that performed on television. Leo Bogart claimed that this use of the presentational mode to create a sense of intimacy with the audience when combined with star power led to a program's success: "the quality of direct and intimate contact . . . is carefully nurtured by skilled performers. This very illusion of personal communication with a glamorous, famous personality gives the broadcast media much of their appeal."[30] This strategy would cross over to television's early use of vaudeville performers in variety

or variety/sit-com blends. *The Burns and Allen Show* (1950–1958, CBS) and *The Jack Benny Program* (1950–1964, CBS; 1964–1965, NBC) utilized the presentational mode as they brought situational context to their narratives both in radio and in television. Still, television insiders recognized that the vaudeville performance style could not be adopted wholesale from the stage. The inventor Lee De Forest predicted that "acting in television will assume a completely new method, different from that of the stage or radio. Since all of the audience is literally in the front row, there will be no necessity for throwing voices and emotions to the back of the theater, and the acting can become natural and unexaggerated."[31]

Television would not, as De Forest expected, require a complete rewriting of prior performance style. In fact, the industry desired its performers to utilize many stage techniques—both legitimate and vaudeville styles—in order to flaunt the visuality of the new medium. Even as William Eddy pointed out, "Vaudeville and night-club acts will generally require less readjustment for television than the straight stage and radio productions," he also recognized that the broad nature of such performance still had to be toned down and cautioned that "exaggerated action, together with other types of overplaying, will appear doubly distasteful when observed from the fireside seat in the familiar atmosphere of the home."[32] Thomas Hutchinson, one of the first to teach a class in television production at New York University, argued that the close-up in television would cause vaudevillians to be under such "minute scrutiny" they would be forced to relearn particular stage techniques. Because vaudevillians would no longer "need to project to the last row of the gallery," they would have to assume subtler gestures, expressions, and tones. Hutchinson, also a former television producer, recounts one of his own experiences with an audition in an effort to illustrate the problems that can arise when vaudeville acts don't alter their style for the domestic viewer:

> One team with an international reputation was suggested as television program material . . . they were both so used to projecting their material, to putting their personalities across the foot lights, that their television personality was far from what it had been in the theater. We saw them "work." We saw "the wheels go round." They strove so hard to put the act "over" that they were totally unsuited for the new medium.[33]

According to such criticism, the vaudevillian would need to accentuate some characteristics of the performance style while reigning in others. Most important, the brashness of vaudeville performance had to be

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According to such criticism, the vaudevillian would need to accentuate some characteristics of the performance style while reigning in others. Most important, the brashness of vaudeville performance had to be

tempered while the presentational mode of address was emphasized. Once these adjustments were instituted within the vaudevillian persona and "overplaying" and "distastefulness" were contained, the performers' penchant for visual humor, physical play, and intimate address would enable them to capture both the novelty of intimacy and the visuality that television was said to embody.

Beyond the characteristic of intimacy, however, the vaude performer was also considered to be well suited to the immediacy and spontaneity of the medium. In the early years, networks preferred live programming over filmed because it differentiated their product from that of Hollywood and underscored the necessity of network connection for affiliates. With regard to the latter, networks made their programs and their stars limited commodities by transmitting their fare live to their affiliate chain only at specific times.[34] Regarding the former, television's theatricality encapsulated the live and unpredictable potentialities of the medium's aesthetic nature. (As a result, another genre that dominated prime time in early television besides the variety show was anthology drama.) One of the elements of live television work that made it both taxing and exciting was that, unlike film actors who performed according to the boundaries and timing of the continuity script, television performers—whether dramatic or comedic—were expected to perform without retakes or breaks and with very little rehearsal time. This had the effect of not only recreating the theatrical experience for home viewers but also keeping them in a state of expectation, feeling as though anything could happen—good or bad—at any moment while they were watching the program. Certainly, this effect underscored the sense of immediacy or liveness of the moment, but also created spontaneity for the medium. Ad-libbing was one way in which performers played on this sense of spontaneity. It also had the added benefit of being a handy tool to cover mistakes or forgotten lines. George Burns acknowledged that "The main point is that people think your show is 'live'—that's your big selling job on TV. There's always the possibility of someone flubbing a line or getting a laugh when least expected. That's what gives our type of show an extra bang and keeps the audience keyed up."[35] Commentators assumed that vaudeville or stage comedians were not only the best ad-libbers but could handle all the other pressures of live television—and, in fact, use those pressures to his advantage—better than anyone else. Those in the industry believed that taxing work on the vaudeville or nightclub circuit was more than adequate preparation for the demands of television.

The variety programs, which were more popular with sponsors than were dramas, were staged in proscenium style, broadcast in front of a studio audience, and replicated much of the feel of a traditional vaudeville show. Producers wished to achieve a sense of transportation for their audience, to allow them to participate in a public entertainment event yet within the safety and familiarity of their own home. This view from the home was a privileged one, not only in its privacy but also in the fact that close-ups, framed views of the acts, and shots of the audience provided viewers with "the best seats in the house." Edward Stasheff notes that the variety format's intimate and theatrical presentation played a significant role in the genre's popularity. He writes that variety programs "possibly owe their success not only to their high-powered talent, but to the feeling they give the home viewer of having a front row seat among the members of a theater audience at a Broadway show. That's a good feeling to have in Hinterland, Iowa, or Suburbia, New Jersey."[36]

Yet the relationships between a performer, the studio audience, and home viewers were rather tricky, and they had to be experimented with before producers and comics found the right balance between creating intimacy and replicating the shared theatrical experience. Early on, networks and agencies planned on using large movie palaces and theater spaces, which could seat one thousand to two thousand people.[37] Although most comics genuinely wanted to do their shows in front of a live audience, this size audience seemed too large to some. They feared that it might cause them to "disconnect" from their television audiences and would likely "kill the very factor that has been most responsible for TVs rapid rise—its intimacy."[38] Cantor, one of the most outspoken critics of the move toward larger theaters, suggested that "the presence of large, enthusiastic, beyond-the-footlights crowds too frequently causes talent to lose sight of the fact that TV is basically home entertainment," adding, "Why should you jeopardize the show for 20,000,000 viewers for the benefit of 1,000 or so in the studio?"[39] Although Milton Berle insisted that his show originate from NBC's studio 6B, which would only accommodate 150 spectators, he, too, had to adjust to the presence of a camera and the implied presence of a home audience. A *Variety* reviewer recognized *Texaco Star Theatre*'s privileging of the studio audience in one episode saying that he

> [had] the feeling that all of the performers, particularly Berle, were working for the benefit of the lens audience rather than the live

> audience. That's a difficult thing to analyze and it won't be attempted, but in the past the feeling has been that the cameras were giving home-viewers a sneak look at shows stage for those in attendance. This show sponsored a reverse thought.[40]

Later, Gould and others would praise Berle for his singular talent for creating an intimate, spontaneous, and natural bond with the home viewer, while not losing the attention or enthusiastic response of the studio audience. Other comics would learn from Berle and come to find their own way to negotiate their two audiences with varying degrees of success.[41]

Besides learning how to play to two very different audiences, vaudeville comics had to tweak other aspects of their performance style in order to survive on the new medium. Very early experimental variety programs provided networks, producers, and talent with the opportunity to try out various strategies to better translate the genre from stage to television.[42] One such program was Standard Brands's variety show *Hour Glass*, which began airing on NBC in May 1946. The first few episodes consisted of comedy sketches, musical numbers, dance acts, and, on one occasion, a film of South American dancing. These early episodes were considered flops, with many critics finding little or nothing to praise about the show. One *Variety* reviewer complained that the producers didn't seem to know what to do with their talent as "the stars were apparently just set out in front of the camera and told to do their stuff."[43] *Hour Glass*'s producer Edward Sobol (who had worked as a vaudeville stage manager and director prior to coming to television) found it difficult to properly capture the physicality of many of the routines because of the limitations of television production facilities—the stages were too small, the cameras didn't capture enough detail, and the lighting was severe—saying that since "[vaudeville] acts are accustomed to the freedom of movement allowed by the stage or night club, it is difficult to restrict them to the television playing areas."[44] Moreover, the comedians' pacing seemed off for the "inherent intimate aspects of television," so Sobol recommended that they should not only quicken their pace, but "should be limited to three minutes [of airtime] a piece."[45] By November of that year, *Hour Glass* had worked out many of its kinks, and producers had added a radio star, Edgar Bergen, as the program's host.[46] Reviews were much improved this time around, with *Variety* noting that since it was "the first time any of the top 15 Hooperated radio stars was featured in a video production," the show "proved, if anything, that a good radio comedian is equally good on

television even without the aid of script...if other radio and screen stars follow his lead now, television might get that needed stimulus."[47] Judine Mayerle argues that the *Hour Glass* provided the model for the variety shows that followed and showed that "with a few alterations, a simple vaudeville format could be tailor-made for the screen."[48] As Mayerle's research reveals, NBC developed other variety programs from 1946 to 1947 to experiment with various techniques and material. In addition, during that same time, John Royal and production chief Warren Wade came up with a unique way to deal with the challenge of training and developing on screen talent. In many ways, their plan mimicked an old-fashioned vaudeville circuit as it depended on local stations casting and training their own talent for their own repertory groups. They would then have each repertory group travel from station to station performing their one "episode" or "play." Local stations would benefit from having a range of talent and programming, as performers and crew gained invaluable experience perfecting their act or craft.[49]

By 1948, as television was exiting its experimental stage and entering into full commercial operation, one variety program became a national phenomenon and solidified the viability of the televised variety format—*Texaco Star Theatre* (1948–1952, NBC). At the time of its premiere, NBC had seven stations as a part of its network in New York, Washington, Philadelphia, Schenectady, Baltimore, Boston, and Chicago. The network would add Los Angeles to its roster as well by the end of the year and David Sarnoff was estimating that there were more than three hundred thousand television sets in use in the United States.[50] Even though NBC had already aired vaudeville type programs, Texaco took out an ad on the front page of *Variety* on May 19, 1948, announcing: "A ghost out of the past and a show biz potential of the future—vaudeville and television—will be mated June 6 when *Texaco Star Theatre* stars a series of vaude programs."[51] (This mating of vaudeville and video at that point led to the use of a new term in the industry: vaudeo.) Berle, the program's host, quickly became known as an exemplary variety performer who was able to sustain an extremely high level of energy during a taxing production schedule. Those who watched Berle perform and those who worked with him frequently commented on his frenetic energy and ability to go without sleep. The writer Edwin James noted that "Berle, who cannot abide idleness gets into almost every act. He sings with singers, dances with dancers, tells jokes with other comedians, and tumbles with acrobats. An ordinary mortal would collapse in the midst of such frenzy.

It only stimulates Berle."[52] His performance style embodied the characteristics of immediacy, spontaneity, intimacy; was often credited with selling "a million television sets;" and it was described by critics as a "whirling dervish,"[53] an "inexhaustible package marked explosive,"[54] and "a dozen or more men rolled into one."[55] He had, quite literally, come to represent the television medium in the late 1940s and early 1950s and, consequently, the mythology of his initial popularity with audiences rivaled that of radio's *Amos 'n Andy*. Not surprisingly, *Variety* listed him as the highlight of television programming in 1948–1949, calling him (as many would) "Mr. Television." *Variety* explained that "When, single-handedly, you can drive the taxis off the streets of New York between 8 and 9 on a Tuesday night; reconstruct neighborhood patterns so that stores shut down Tuesday nights instead of Wednesdays, and inject a showmanship into programming so that video could compete favorably with the more established show biz media—then you rate the accolade of 'Mr. Television' of 1949."[56] Bob Considine of *The New York Journal-American* went so far as to claim that "TV gets better every day. Yet we wonder if its bright future will see it produce a figure quite as overpowering as Milton Berle. He made television, just as surely as Chaplin and Pickford made the movie industry."[57] Berle's aggressive emphasis on the physical aspects of comedy, his slick vaudeville routines, expressive gestures, and quick tongue enabled him to succeed in an industry that was looking to highlight its visuality and immediacy.

In many ways, Berle also was television's consummate intertextual performer, as he not only followed the vaudeo star's familiar path from stage to radio to film to television, but also was a poacher of some of the best comic material from all of those entertainment forms. A highly successful vaudeville and nightclub performer throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Berle had difficulty manipulating his persona to fit the needs of other entertainment forms. He seemed to be at his best when performing unrestrained in a visual environment in front of an audience. "Berle's success on television is a curious byproduct of repeated flops in both radio and movies," reported *Time* in 1951. "The flops hurt deeply and worried him about his appeal to a mass audience. But they forced him into well-paid jobs in nightclubs, where live audiences kept his talents supple. Meanwhile, more successful comedians were falling into the lazier habit of peering at scripts through spectacles."[58]

Berle, like a number of television stars who would follow, was heavily involved in the production of his own program, having a say in every detail

Fig. 2.4 Milton Berle was described by one critic as an "inexhaustible package marked 'explosive.'" Library of American Broadcasting.

including the lighting, choreography, and costumes. Consequently, he sustained considerable authority over his own image (at least, how it was presented within the text of the program because his sponsor, Texaco, also

would make a considerable contribution to the refinement of the Berle persona as would NBC). During *Texaco Star Theatre*'s first year Berle was even the show's sole writer, culling from his vast joke file that contained hundreds of thousands of jokes, not all of them belonging to him.[59] Virtually every major comedian of the period complained that Berle had stolen material from them at one point or another in their careers. Hope told *Time* that "When you see Berle, you're seeing the best things of anybody who has ever been on Broadway. . . . I want to get into television before he uses up all my material."[60] Fred Allen joked that "[Berle's] a parrot with skin on."[61] Replying to those who accused him of stealing, Berle always asserted his belief that jokes are public property. This appropriation of material from other radio, vaudeville, and film stars resonated with the way that television recycled performers and genres from other entertainment media, ultimately underscoring its intertextuality.

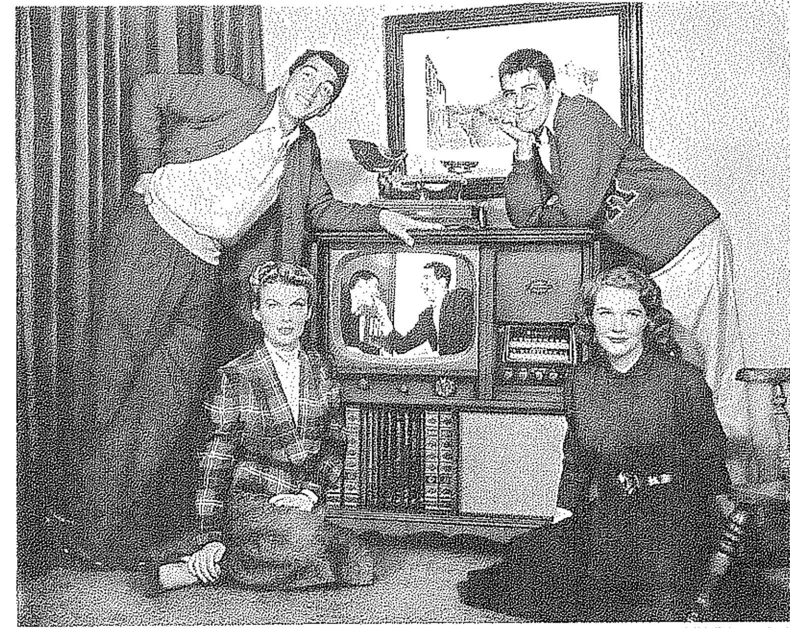
Pat Weaver, the Variety Format, and Comedy Stars at NBC

Although *Texaco Star Theatre* and Berle proved vaudeo to be a successful genre for television, there were still aspects of the format that needed to be expanded on in order to keep it interesting over the long term. NBC was invested in being a leader in comedy during this period and put into effect a number of different comedy development plans beginning in 1949, which resulted from the hiring of Sylvester "Pat" Weaver as vice president in charge of television.

Not long after he took his new post, Weaver was speaking publicly about his drive to beat out CBS in the field of comedy and his desire to collect a roster of comedy "giants" and provide them with "great prestige and presentation" that would marry "spectacle and intimacy" as well as "continuity and freshness."[62] NBC had lost viewers and sponsors along with stars to CBS in the talent raid and Weaver was looking to bring back NBC's former first-place status with stars and high-quality comedy programs.[63] He also saw comedies as gateway programs that could attract a mass audience and then act as a lead-in to more serious fare. (Weaver worked to have the 8 P.M. programming slot become known as "comedy hour" on NBC, often placing dramas or prestige programs in the 9 P.M. time slot.) The model for his comedy programming and development plan would be the *Colgate Comedy Hour*, a big-budget variety program produced by the network and then sold to a single sponsor—Colgate. The program alternated big-name hosts such as Bob Hope, Eddie Cantor,

Fig. 2.5 A young Pat Weaver. Library of American Broadcasting.

Abbott and Costello, Donald O'Connor, and Martin and Lewis and was scheduled for Saturdays at 8 P.M. (a time that Weaver wanted to become known as "comedy hour" all nights of the week on NBC). The concept of a rotating lineup of comics was intended to prevent their overexposure with audiences and their exhaustion from a weekly production schedule as well as prevent their writers from running through material too quickly.[64] Shows were built around the star that would be hosting that night. For example, the premiere episode of the program, which was handled like a Hollywood opening night with cameras showing a red carpet, searchlights, and celebrities entering the theater before the show began, showcased Cantor in many of his most beloved and familiar routines



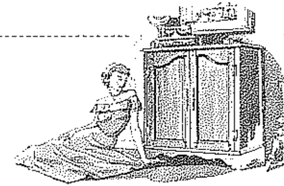


Fig. 2.6 Magnavox asks viewers to "Join the Stars" (like Martin and Lewis) with their Big-Picture TV.

—including his songs "Banjo Eyes" and "He's Making Eyes at Me," which he sang in blackface. Moreover, programs would have separate production units (everything from producers to orchestras) for each star, so that Cantor would be working with a completely different set of people than, say, Bob Hope. Although one of the most expensive television programs ever aired up to that point, *Colgate Comedy Hour* proved to be a hit, cutting the ratings of its competition (*Toast of the Town*) in half on its

first night on the air.[65] It also was a first step in Weaver's plan to get creative control out of the hands of advertising agencies and sponsors and into those of networks and talent agencies as it revealed the benefits of network production to both producers and sponsors. By year's end, Weaver was not only rotating comics on the program, he was also rotating advertisers.[66]

Two other programs resulted from Weaver's comedy plan in 1950, *All Star Revue* and *Your Show of Shows*. *All Star Revue* (which would later be renamed *Four-Star Revue*) was similar in concept to *Colgate Comedy Hour*, as it used a number of well-established comedy stars (Ed Wynn, Danny Thomas, Jack Carson, and Jimmy Durante) to host the variety program on a rotating basis, but it did not do well in the ratings as it was never a match for its competition—*Arthur Godfrey and Friends* on CBS. *Your Show of Shows* developed out of *Admiral Broadway Revue*, a program produced by Max Liebman and starring Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca, which was pulled off the air after nineteen weeks by its sponsor, despite the fact that it had won its time slot and was a hit with the critics.[67] *Your Show of Shows* was initially packaged as a part of Weaver's *Saturday Night Revue*—a two-and-a-half hour programming extravaganza that also included an hour-long variety program hosted by Jack Carter.[68] *Your Show of Shows* was always described as being more Broadway revue than vaudeville show and was touted as a sophisticated and lavish production. Caesar performed sketches, developing characters, dialects, movie satires, and a style of pantomime that he became famous for, most often in tandem with Coca. Interspersed between the segments that featured Coca and Caesar were orchestral and dance numbers, sometimes including opera or ballet pieces. It was, in many ways, the very smart, challenging, and yet entertaining program that Weaver had envisioned as a start to his "Operation Frontal Lobes" plan to slowly indoctrinate audiences to appreciate more "high" culture material. It also provided a new blueprint for production of comedy programs, as all the talent—including writers—remained the same (and retained full creative control) each week. It proved that individual writers would not simply run out of material if part of their job was to construct long-term sketches and characters for the comedians, not just one-off gags.

Weaver's plan resulted in NBC being the leader in comedy by the 1950–1951 season as *Texaco Star Theatre*, *Your Show of Shows*, and *The Colgate Comedy Hour* were all in the top five rated programs of the year. Over at CBS, however, Bill Paley did retain a small, but powerful, cadre of

Fig. 2.7 Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca. Library of American Broadcasting.

comedy stars and program hosts such as Jack Benny, Burns and Allen, Molly Goldberg, Ed Sullivan, and Arthur Godfrey, whereas Dumont had acquired Jackie Gleason for *Cavalcade of Stars*. (ABC had just begun to invest in comedy and was still relying heavily on films, music programs, wrestling, roller derbies, and a few action programs to make up their prime-time lineup.) It seems that both Paley and Weaver were correct in their assumption that comedy stars—former radio and stage performers alike—would be the key to their networks' early success with audiences. Those stars also would help them construct a network identity as they eventually became markers of a distinctive house style the longer they were associated with a particular network. Reporting in the spring of 1950

that CBS was continuing its emphasis on stars (a plan the publication had dubbed "Paley's Comet" six months prior), *Variety* quoted Paley as saying that a "network is as good as its comedy line-up."[69] Both CBS and NBC began to take out ads positioning themselves as one version or another of "network of the stars" or the "choice of America's most popular stars."[70] But there was more than just familiarity at work in the presold celebrity of many of the comedic performers that worked on television during these early years. Audiences also responded to them for specific cultural and socio-political reasons. Their on- and off-stage personas resonated with cultural memories as well as with values, norms, and meanings that were being negotiated at a time of great social change, which is why a number of them became more than just big-name performers; they became iconic. In order to more fully explicate the meaning of their personas and their popularity, the following chapter will focus less on the industrial drives that led to the rise of the vaudeo star in the late 1940s and early 1950s and focus more on the cultural ones.

new world of 1950s consumerism, they had to make a break with the past."[54] In the case of television, the industry and its audience were ready to break with vaudeo, as the format's references to prior traditions of ethnic masculinity and immigrant life were no longer culturally relevant to viewers now eager to embrace the "good life" promised in suburbia.

CHAPTER 4
"TV IS A KILLER!"
The Collapse of the Vaudeo Star and Television's Talent Crisis

By the early 1950s, the broadcasting industry had begun the process of overhauling many of its production and business practices. Radio was fast becoming more about the musical tastes of local markets and less about the national presentation of narrative. In 1952, the FCC lifted its four-year freeze on licenses, and as a result new television stations proliferated in areas outside of the Northeast, significantly altering the demographic makeup of the television audience. During that same year, the television industry established its censorship manual, the Television Code; NBC and CBS invested heavily in the construction of studios in Los Angeles; telefilm became a viable option; coaxial cable enabled coast-to-coast simultaneous transmission; the cost of television production was rising to unforeseen heights; and the television, film, and radio unions engaged in a very public battle over the representation of television actors.

One result of these tumultuous years of transition in the early 1950s was that the vaudeo star and variety format began to decline in popularity. As mentioned in Chapter 2, critics were expressing concern about the long-term viability of the vaudeo star as early as 1949. "Television programming is beginning to look like a Palace bill of 20 years ago. What are we going to do when these name stars pass their peak or feel it's time to retire?" asked *Variety* in an article reporting on what it had dubbed "the new talent crisis."[1] The vaudeo performers' age as well what

some perceived as stale material and comedic styles became issues early on as commentators recognized the limited utility of the vaudeville aesthetic. Industry surveys and studies seemed to show that audiences, too, were tiring of the formats and faces that dominated network television during its first few years. In 1949, *Variety* claimed that vaudeo stars were already beginning to bore audiences: "Bearing out the old maxim that familiarity breeds contempt, the first qualitative study yet made on television viewer reaction to TV performers and programs has confirmed the belief that a too-familiar face, no matter how entertaining at first, may become irritating through constant viewing."[2] The paper also argued that television could no longer rely on its unique qualities to attract audiences because "[Video] has grown in such gargantuan proportions that the novelty appeal has already disappeared for hundreds of thousands of lookers. Just seeing objects animate in one's living room no longer is unusual. The values have asserted themselves."[3] Hollywood producer Hal Roach blamed a dearth of industrial initiative for television's failure to produce new stars. He argued that television could not keep poaching its talent to fill its 280 hours a week of programming. "If Hollywood won't give you TV broadcasters its stars, you'll have to go out and find stars for yourself. After all, where do you think all of the Hollywood stars originally came from?" asked Roach. "They weren't born in the studios."[4]

In the early years of the 1950s it was obvious to most that the television industry needed to revamp many of its early narrative and economic assumptions. Although vaudeo was intrinsic to television's initial dissemination, it became increasingly clear that it could only temporarily sate television's voracious appetite for programming. Moreover, as talent costs skyrocketed and audience demographics began to shift, sponsors and viewers began to lose interest in the vaudeo format altogether. One immediate answer to the problem was to increase production of amateur hours, as they were cheap to produce and provided an opportunity to try out new television talent. CBS executives, however, interested in a long-term solution, set their sights on the suburban sitcom, believing the format's emphasis on narrative and reliance on a regular cast (rather than expensive, high-profile guest stars) would standardize costs and attract a lucrative and loyal viewership.

The broadcast historians who have studied the larger shifts in production and narrative strategies of the early to mid-1950s have not considered the impact that stardom had in the industry's move from live, single-sponsored variety programs to telefilmed, independently produced, suburban sitcoms. In the following pages, we'll see that the issues central to the talent crisis were seminal agents of the variety-to-sitcom transition and that they were essential factors in increased network control of programming and the eventual evisceration of the single sponsor.

The Collapse of the Vaudeo Star

Beginning in 1951, the popular and industry press alike began to report on the toll that television work exacted from variety stars. Most top-name variety talent were under such stress from "TV's exacting demands" in terms of scheduling and live performance that they ended up in the hospital with nervous exhaustion and physical distress (including ulcers and heart attacks).[5] In 1952 *Variety* compiled a "TV Casualty List" that included such stars as Milton Berle, Jack Benny, George Jessel, Red Skelton, Eddie Cantor, Fred Allen, Red Buttons, Ed Sullivan, Dean Martin, Jerry Lewis, and Jackie Gleason, all of whom suffered such maladies.[6] "When I collapsed from the strain and overwork of being jolly for almost seven years, I found myself in excellent company," wrote Berle in an article entitled "TV Is a Killer!" He continued, "Hospital beds nowadays swarm with human wrecks from the TV wars—comics who sign up for 13 weeks with options, only to get a 24-hour virus with ulcers."[7] Max Liebman, a writer for *Your Show of Shows,* expressed an even harsher attitude toward the work that the medium required: "I am dead certain that TV is the toughest, back-breakingest, ulcer-breedingest entertainment medium in existence—a fascinating monster that devours material, tortures talent, sears souls and paralyzes the participant."[8]

Live television did take quite a bit out of its talent—writers, producers, directors, and performers alike. Vaudeo required at least an hour of new scripted and memorized material each week. Although radio performers were prepared for the weekly production cycle of television, they had little experience in memorizing lines and being conscious of their physical movements for the camera. Ex-vaudevillians were used to physical displays of humor and performing night after night, but on the vaudeville circuit they would repeat their same acts to new audiences. In television, production staffs were aware that once an act or joke had been used one week, it could not be used again—at least for a while.[9] Cantor, who suffered a heart attack in 1952 during his run on television, recognized two years earlier that television would bring him a significant amount of stress. He went into the medium because it offered him the same excitement and

anxieties that he had experienced on stage during the opening nights of his "Ziegfeld Follies." Yet Cantor noted that television demanded more from him than stagework did: "Once we opened in the 'Follies' we had nothing to worry about for a year. Now we do a show and start right in worrying all over again about the next one. If that doesn't take something out of you, nothing does."[10] Edgar Bergen, who had witnessed the collapse of many of his friends and colleagues, admitted that he was afraid to work on television because of the way video was "destroying talent." Bergen believed that "Networks and agencies have done practically nothing to protect comics from becoming tele casualties and hurting their value in radio."[11]

One answer to the dilemma posed by television's intense demands on its labor was to cut the number of on-air hours for each program. Starting in late 1951, comics pushed for alterations to their programming schedules. Most of them pressured the networks into allowing them to perform for a half hour every other week. In fact, *Variety* reported that the movement for this type of scheduling was particularly tenacious, "For once [comics] are in complete accord . . . they're practically ganging up on the networks to force a showdown for the [1952–1953] season."[12] Comedians who were exhausted by weekly hour schedules were joined by performers such as Danny Thomas and Jimmy Durante, who were each contracted to do only one hour-long program every month. Even though Pat Weaver thought he had headed off such a problem by rotating comics and contracting stars to appear no more than every other week on the networks, comics still complained. They believed that an hour-long show was simply too taxing on a single performer and demanded that NBC allow them to each do a half hour show every other week.[13]

Television stars found that television work also prevented them from working in other media. Berle, Godfrey, and Phil Silvers complained loudly and publicly about the stress they experienced from trying to work in television, radio, and stage simultaneously and eventually all chose to stick exclusively to television.[14] Unlike their years in radio, when a star could moonlight rather easily in films or on stage, television required complete dedication and commitment. On realizing this, top name talent would often demand more money from the networks in order to make up the pay they were losing by not participating in other entertainment media. Martin and Lewis as well as Donald O'Connor were forced to cancel their turns as hosts of *Colgate Comedy Hour* during the 1952–1953 season on the advice of their doctors. They found they could not do television and film

Fig. 4.1 Jackie Gleason on the cover of *Look*. June 1, 1954.

work at the same time and, unlike other television stars such as Berle, chose to focus solely on their careers in Hollywood.

Gleason and Caesar seemed to be prime examples of the dire consequences of television variety's arduous work as the press intensely focused on their resulting physical and psychological vulnerabilities. During their initial years on television, both performers had been perceived as affable, skillful comedians enmeshed in the working-class nostalgia of early television comedy. They were strong men with large personalities, but as

Fig. 4.2 Jackie Gleason. Library of American Broadcasting.

they became more well known to audiences, press articles on the pathos that plagued their comedy began to appear in rather large numbers. Gleason was most often described as excessive in his eating, drinking, and

womanizing.[15] His perceived inability to control these aspects of his life were seen as consequences of both his professional perfectionism and the grinding drive of television work. These dysfunctions and excesses, in other words, were renegotiated into an extension of the vaudevillian rags-to-riches story. Television, it would seem from these press accounts, in reviving vaudeville had also revived the immigrant work ethic. Now, however, this carried serious ramifications for the physical and psychological welfare of its labor. Although it was well known that even Berle and Benny were hospitalized during this time for exhaustion, it was Gleason and Caesar who were seen to have taken the worst of the psychological toll. *Life* profiled Gleason in 1955: "Every comedian has found the wear and tear of producing a weekly TV show almost more than the human physique can stand. . . . Gleason's rehearsals are even more agonized than most as he seeks unceasingly to add the last speck of polish."[16] His peculiar combination of perfectionism and excess was, it seemed, the primary source of his psychological unrest. Gleason stated publicly that he never wanted to enter into psychoanalysis to get at his problems, for reasons which were obliquely attributed to his strict adherence to Catholicism and his stoic working-class ethics. "I didn't need a psychiatrist to tell me that one of the things that gives me insatiable hunger and causes me to pile on blubber is to be under constant stress and strain," Gleason told an interviewer, "Whenever there is strain or insecurity involved—and television manufactures those things incessantly—you find yourself turning to the icebox the way a breast-fed baby turns to his mama."[17]

Unlike Gleason, Caesar actively promoted the use of mental health care. Perhaps envisioned as a part of his Jewish cultural heritage, Caesar's foray into psychoanalysis was widely touted as a sound deterrent to the dysfunctions inherent to a television career. In his *Look* article, "What Psychoanalysis Did for Me," Caesar discussed the difficulties he had as a result of the success of his NBC *Your Show of Shows*:

> On stage, I could hide behind the characters and inanimate objects I created. Off stage, with my real personality bared for all to see, I was a mess. It was difficult for me to establish a normal, healthy relationship with anyone. I couldn't believe that anyone could like me for myself. I thought people were around me because they wanted something from me.[18]

Although Caesar told the press that psychoanalysis had helped him resolve his difficulties with the disjuncture between his public and private identities, he and Gleason both continued to struggle with such issues

throughout the 1950s. According to reports, they seemed to be victims of a medium that took a traditional form of entertainment (vaudeville) and accelerated its pace to an unhealthy level. The rhetoric of the American work ethic that was part of immigrant nostalgia appeared to turn in on itself at this point in the descriptions of the backstage lives of performers such as Caesar and Gleason. The vaudeo stars' intense labor was no longer the reason for their success; rather, it was the reason for their demise. It also was apparent in the mid-1950s that the age of the vaudeo star had become a factor in both their deteriorating health and in the decline of the format itself.

The networks believed that they could ease some of the tension between them and their talent by building studios in Los Angeles. In doing so, they could provide talent with a more hospitable climate, larger studio space, and close proximity to Hollywood. CBS and NBC both began construction of immense studios in Hollywood in 1951 with an eye towards interpenetration between broadcasting and film industries. Both networks were cognizant of the impact these studios would have in attracting and retaining stars.[19] In his 1992 autobiography, former NBC president Pat Weaver reflected that a driving reason behind the move to Los Angeles was the talent: "We weren't likely to attract the stars we wanted if they would have to fly to New York to work for us, especially if by that time they could stay at home and work for CBS."[20] George Rosen pointed out that moving top network comics out West would take care of a number of talent issues with which the industry was struggling in the early 1950s:

> Shift of the comics to Hollywood will ease network tension in relation to the studio space situation, for the rehearsal time required in these full-hour extravaganzas has created a serious bottleneck and shunting of other shows to empty lofts and even remote areas of New York. Thus, the TV situation will parallel that of radio some years back, when the lure of films, climate, and general living conditions gave Hollywood No. 1 ranking on top AM-originating programs.[21]

Yet a few comics chose to stay in New York.[22] As a result, NBC's comic lineup was split (albeit unevenly) between the two coasts as Cantor, Hope, Martin and Lewis, Durante, Thomas, Jack Carson, Ed Wynn, and Skelton moved their broadcasting productions to Los Angeles, while Berle and Caesar remained in New York.[23]

Although live television was still the industry's preferred format for comedy shows during this time, the advent of telefilm would eventually provide a respite for television talent. During the years in which vaudeo stars were collapsing from exhaustion, the broadcast industry was recognizing the many ways in which its dependency on top-name variety talent and the live format was putting pressure on the industrial structures that had carried over from radio. It was becoming obvious that the system was no longer working as talent complained about conditions, sponsors and ad agencies balked at rising production costs, networks garnered more control over production and talent, and audiences and critics called for new formats and faces. Networks promised changes to temper the unrest, but inevitably they would have to admit that the system needed a major overhaul. One of the first areas in which all the major issues at stake in the industry's transitional years came to a head was around the rising cost of talent and the financial and creative power that many top stars were wielding in the industry.

High Talent Costs and Star Censorship

The trade press during the early 1950s was replete with articles decrying the high cost of star salaries. At the time when CBS and NBC were battling for the top stars in television and had signed Hope, Berle, and Benny to almost lifelong contracts, sponsors fretted about the exorbitant budgets required to secure top-name talent, as well as the control that networks were exerting through their relationships with such performers. In a speech to the radio-television production session of the 1951 American Association of Advertising Agencies, TV director of the William Morris Agency, Wallace S. Jordan, stated, "Stars welcome the long-term network contracts for the security they provide, while agencies and sponsors don't sign the talent for such long-term deals."[24] Pointing out that the control of time and programs on video was interlocked with the control of talent, Jordan acknowledged "the apparent unwillingness of agencies and bankrollers to take a chance on new and untried tele talent" and suggested that sponsors and agencies should earmark a large part of their TV budgets for developing relatively new performers. Although some sponsors have tried new faces, Jordan said, they generally don't give them enough support, and the result is often a "13-week turkey."[25] Rosen also criticized the networks for investing so much into so few. He argued that the networks would be well advised to put a larger percentage of their money toward program development:

> The fancy-priced jockeying between the two major television networks over the past couple of weeks for top personalities, reminiscent of the "golden era" in radio, is causing widespread alarm within the industry. It's the prevailing feeling that the networks, notably NBC and CBS, by perpetuating an evil that is sending talent costs spiraling to new highs, have learned little from the hues and cries when radio was in full bloom; instead of investing coin in experimenting with new program ideas and formulas to keep a medium alive, they are channeling their energies and bankrolls toward a handful of personalities.[26]

Talent agents and stars defended themselves by arguing that the rise in salaries was an inherent consequence of the requisite demands of television work. "A Morris agency exec says that high talent costs are a result of the performers not having time to work in any other entertainment medium and caused by competition between shows," reported *Variety* in 1951.[27] Live television tended to require more out of its talent than any other medium. Performers were constantly reminding networks of this and threatening to quit if they were not adequately rewarded for their efforts.[28]

Sponsors had been cautiously eyeing the rising rates of television performers from the start of vaudeo's development. *Texaco Star Theatre* was an early leader in the salary hikes game. *Advertising Age* estimated that the program's talent-production cost for 1948 averaged about $9,500 a week and that by September 1950, the cost was up to $35,500. (In comparison, the 1950 weekly talent-production costs—not including time charges—totaled $15,000 for *Godfrey and Friends* and only $7,500 for *The Goldbergs*.[29]) Adding the $20,000 charge for network airtime brought Texaco's total cost to approximately $65,000 a week.[30] In March 1951, NBC penned a thirty-year contract with Berle wherein he would work for twenty of those years and be paid a stipend of $50,000 a year for ten years after he retired.[31] A 1953 NBC accounting memo to David Sarnoff revealed that the network had committed $6.2 million, or 52 percent of its talent budget to six performers—Berle, Durante, Phil Harris, Dinah Shore, Caesar, and Bob Hope.[32] J.H.S. Ellis, president of Kudner, the advertising agency producing *Texaco,* was the first to decry publicly the rising cost of television production, although he was no longer paying Berle his salary. Other agency executives soon joined in, claiming that if television continued on this path it would "price itself right out of existence."[33] In April 1952, Colgate and Procter & Gamble, two of the biggest advertisers on television, publicly questioned whether their

multimillion-dollar television budgets (Colgate was spending $6 million annually for its *Comedy Hour* on NBC) were actually paying off for them.[34]

Responding to agency and sponsor concern over rising production costs in the summer of 1951, the fourth-ranked Dumont network tried to seduce Texaco away from NBC with an offer to absorb up to $750,000 of the program's production costs. This maneuver was the first of its kind and hinted at the upcoming shift from sponsor to network control and financing of production. In the end, NBC was forced to match Dumont's bid and, in addition, the network guaranteed Texaco a "long-range exclusive franchise on Tuesday night at 8 period," which was considered "extremely important because of the growing scarcity of Class A time availabilities in TV."[35]

In 1951 high-profile guest stars on variety programs were averaging between $2,000 and $5,000 an episode, and national television stars were costing as much as $200,000 a year.[36] By the following year, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists garnered a 12.5 percent rate hike in minimum pay scales for actors contracted to any of the four networks.[37] Agents, unions, and performers were acting on television's reliance on stars to attract audiences, and they knew that competition among the networks could lead to perpetual raises. Another reason for the rise in guest-appearance rates was the general acceptance of the medium by the Hollywood community. *Variety* reported late in 1949: "Video is no longer being shunned by the film colony on the double score of being an 'amateur' medium and a box-office threat." But, it added that although "Major studios have not about-faced to the point where they will permit valuable film star properties to do video shows," top freelance film talent rushed into television production.[38] Lured by relatively high fees during the immediate post-Paramount decree years when film work was less lucrative and plentiful than it had been in years past, some film stars made small forays into television, first with guest spots and later with regular roles. Christine Becker's research identifies the 1953–1954 season as the real turning point for top Hollywood stars appearing on television.[39] By then the relationship between the broadcast and film industries was becoming more synergistic; studios had begun to allow contracted players to appear on television; the medium was gaining more and more respect; and former film actors like Lucille Ball and Robert Montgomery proved that one could actually revitalize a career through television. "What does profit a cinema star to go into television?" asked *Time* in 1953. "TV pay has finally reached movie levels, and its multimillion audience is an

attraction in a time of waning movie attendance. Best of all, it offers jobs during the dog days of Hollywood employment."[40] Joan Crawford claimed to be swayed by the quality of telefilm and said, "I find [television] extremely attractive, because it pays for itself and then becomes an annuity for my children. How else can you save money these days?"[41] Still, some film stars harbored reservations about the medium. Humphrey Bogart, who would eventually begin to make guest appearances in the mid-1950s, said, "I got a helluva good racket of my own. . . . I don't have the time and I don't trust the medium yet. . . . You watch that stuff some time. . . . Instead of being five foot eleven, you're four foot three. I'll wait until they get straightened out."[42]

The 1951 merger of ABC and United Paramount Theatres also promised to bring more Hollywood talent to television. In an interview with *Sponsor*, Leonard H. Goldenson, president of ABC-Paramount, promised that the merger would strengthen ABC's talent lineup. He pointed to the appointment of Robert M. Weitman, former director of Manhattan's Paramount Theatre, to the position of vice president in charge of program and talent development as a major factor in the predicted influx of major stars to the network.[43] As a result of such growing interpenetration between film and television, by 1954, when spectaculars were on the rise, talent and production costs for a one-time program would be as high as $250,000 when it carried names such as Judy Garland, Danny Kaye, or Bing Crosby.[44]

Although the rising cost of talent benefited performers, it was detrimental to sponsors in regards to their control over television production. The cost-benefit ratio of producing a television program had risen to a point that many significant sponsors were forced out of the medium. In fact, some believed that these sponsors should return to radio, as prices for advertising in that medium had begun to plummet. In May 1952, Rosen proclaimed that, "a new thinking is beginning to take hold in the advertising agencies. They're now telling their clients to 'stick with radio.' There are mounting fears that television is becoming a 'lost industry'—that unless something drastic is done, and done soon, the TV medium will price itself out of the advertising dollar field."[45] Yet radio was undergoing its own fallout from sponsors as it dropped many formerly successful network radio stars in order to produce cheaper programs such as quiz and give-away programs or to move into local advertising. Rosen continued, "The network radio jitters are becoming intensified. The outlook for next fall, executives concede, was never more bleak. The anticipated cancellation of major personalities has borne fruit, leaving wide-open

gaps in cream time segments."[46] Because of pricing concerns as well as a significant fall in ratings, Chesterfield dropped Crosby, Heinz dropped Ozzie and Harriet Nelson, Philip Morris dropped Cantor, and Pet Milk dropped *Fibber McGee and Molly* in order to pick up Ralph Edwards's *Truth or Consequences* (saving them $3,000 per week).[47] This led to a general consensus among advertising agencies and sponsors that the financial and creative control of most popular prime-time network programming in both radio and television was gradually becoming the domain of the networks themselves. As a result, they were anxious to stop pouring money into such programs and to begin to find alternatives. *Variety* had predicted this move as early as mid-1949: "Most agencies with radio experience figure it's time to let the networks package the high-budgeted shows with the top-name stars. Then, if the stars do take over eventually, they will gain control only of the shows built by the webs. Such agencies, for their part, plan to concentrate on programs without name talent."[48] By the end of 1952, networks, agencies, and sponsors had accepted the inevitability of this trend. Yet, sponsors had unrealistic expectations for the type of ratings no-name talent could bring them. "While sponsors are calling for new comics, they're loath to hazard bankrolling an untried talent, due to big nuts their shows carry [*sic*]. They want 'ready made' ratings which only a name can bring."[49]

Another issue that piggybacked onto the struggle among networks, sponsors, agencies, and talent over wages was the amount of control that stars could exert over program content. Many stars were acting as producers of their own shows. Although they had to answer to agencies, sponsors, and networks, they were allowed a fair amount of authority over their program content. This was problematic for the sponsor, in particular, who wished to avoid controversy and to provide the most hospitable environment possible for the product. The high salaries that most of these stars received fueled the conflict between talent and the powers that drove the economic functions of the medium. Stars viewed their salaries as a confirmation of their centrality to the project of broadcasting while sponsors, agencies, and networks believed that those same high wages purchased the star and his/her autonomy.

Godfrey, who was acutely aware of the amount of money that he brought in to CBS, proved to be particularly troublesome in the area of content control. In one instance in 1950 Godfrey swore on the air. Consequently, two Midwestern affiliates refused to carry *Arthur Godfrey and His Friends*, and critics and politicians used Godfrey as an example of the

moral debauchery of television. CBS tried to appease critics, affiliates, and the FCC by promising that this would not happen again, but it also had to admit that controlling Godfrey was extremely difficult, especially since so much of his program was ad-libbed.[50] Soon after the Godfrey debacle, FCC Chairman Wayne Coy stated in a speech at the Oklahoma State Radio Conference that, "When a comedian gets so big that his network can no longer handle him, then we have a case of the tail wagging the dog."[51]

Lynn Spigel argues that during the early 1950s, when government officials were focusing much attention on television content, vaudeo bore much of the brunt of the censorship debates.[52] Concerned about the bawdy antics, ethnic jokes, and sexual asides of vaudeo comedians, these politicians pointed to the format's New York sensibility as the root source of its offensiveness.[53] In *Television Program Production*, Carroll O'Meara contended that,

> What many entertainers fail to realize, actually, is that the areas containing the bistros, night spots, and bright lights are only a segment of America. And yet, somehow, they insist on broadcasting to the entire nation comic and other material which is definitely not acceptable in the average American home. . . . Our nation consists of 160 million citizens, most of whom live in small towns, go to church on Sunday, attempt to bring up their children decently, and do not regard burlesque as the ultimate in theatre.[54]

The public calls for censorship by public officials and cultural critics made sponsors nervous. Out of fear of losing their consumer base, they were forced to reconsider many of the basic tenets of vaudeo humor. A 1951 article in *Sponsor* claimed that television carried with it a greater risk of offending viewers than radio or film and recommended that sponsors censor problematic program content:

> Advertisers are by now pretty well briefed, or they ought to be, as to the everyday hazards lurking in racial jokes, dialects, characterizations, and superiority-inferiority situations. The pictorial factor in TV increases the danger. . . . So long as the sponsor's goal is universal good will for his products and services he cannot indulge in heavy-handed kidding and race-trait burlesque and then be surprised if Italians or Mexicans, or Irish, or Jews pass him by at the retail firing line.[55]

The ethnic and brash urban personalities that made vaudeo such a success in the late 1940s were now considered inappropriate for the increasingly national, middle-class audience. As a result, critics and politicians singled out the vaudeo star as an example of the tastelessness of network broadcasting. Many vaudeo producers responded by altering the structure and sensibility of their programs by introducing sitcom plots, erasing ethnic references, and making their programs more family-friendly overall. However, these changes would not ultimately save the vaudeo comedians who built early television. By 1953, Dick Powell, president of the Television Writers of America, was claiming that the "death of video comedy stars is being caused by censorship. . . . If Will Rogers were alive today, he would probably go back to rope-twirling."[56]

Beyond issues of sexual and ethnic content, sponsors also tended to shy away from anything that smacked of political controversy. This made them especially vulnerable to organizations such as the one that published the anticommunist publication *Red Channels*, which listed writers, producers, and actors in broadcasting accused of being communists and asked consumers to initiate letter-writing campaigns to have these individuals fired. This campaign was successful in pushing a number of actors off the air, including Philip Loeb and Jean Muir, who were fired from their programs as a result of their names being published in *Red Channels*. This made the relationship among sponsors, networks, and talent all the more tense. It also made the search for new talent more difficult. In an article, "How to Keep Reds off the Air—Sanely," *Sponsor* complained, "Now, at a time when many believe [radio] must be more competitive, more experimental, more gutsy, than ever before, it is being asked to quietly accept the authority of a censorious blacklister. TV, just emerging as a major medium, is also asked to stifle itself just when it needs new talent."[57]

Still, concerns about political leanings did not prevent stars from exerting control over content even when it came to a program's commercial messages. Cantor, who had long been associated with a number of charitable organizations, agreed to promote Paper-Mate pens on his Colgate-sponsored program in exchange for Paper-Mate's contribution to one of his charities. After approaching Colgate with the idea and being rebuffed, Cantor took it on himself to mention Paper-Mate's name during his live program. However, NBC was able to mute Cantor's promotion as it was about to be transmitted. Another example of this is when Crosby angered General Electric. He went against the sponsor's wishes and featured a "strip-tease tassel tosser" on his family program.[58] These incidents

led *Advertising Age* in 1954 to call for producers and sponsors to usurp the defiant power of television talent, using extremely blunt language to do so:

> Probably the greatest lesson from these experiences is to remember that talent must be thought of not as "people," but as chattels with prices on their foreheads, like any other machine working for a manufacturer. They must be amortized over a period of time and from the actuaries comes the table of depreciation. The minute a sponsor lets talent decide all problems in the area of good taste and ethical behavior, he may be letting himself in for trouble.[59]

The discourses surrounding the high price of and increasing creative control by network broadcasting talent were often coupled with discourses on the availability of new television talent. The variety show in particular was often blamed for reifying the vaudevillian headliner and locking out untried comedians. In an article on veteran video comics, George Rosen asked, "What chance has the newcomer, either to survive in the competitive sweepstakes, or to get the opportunity to plant his roots in TV?"[60] A subsequent article in *Variety* claimed, "The major problem in variety talent-buying is the difficulty in getting fresh acts. Once an act has been exhibited at a set figure, price becomes established and it depends on subsequent impact whether it can rise into the upper brackets."[61] Competition between variety programs was apparently a game of topping each other with the biggest names—both in terms of the hosts, as well as guest stars. An unknown act was of little value in this environment. However, some people in the industry argued that with time, television would foster a new generation of comic headliners as "the big black tube [would] become the little red schoolhouse of show business."[62] Although the next generation of talent may have learned from the vaudeo veterans, they had little chance of appearing on their shows. Therefore, if new talent was to develop, it had to find a home in a format that wasn't so reliant on top names to squelch competition.

The increasing cost of top-name talent forced the industry to reconsider its economic and programming structures. If sponsors were to survive financially, they had to produce cheaper programs and leave high-ranked prime-time variety production to the networks or to engage in participation sponsorship. In this way, Weaver was ahead of his time as he first began to give production control to the network and diffuse sponsor investment in comedy programs by rotating sponsors in 1950 with *Colgate Comedy Hour*. By the fall of 1951, all the programs that Weaver

considered essential to NBC's position in the ratings were produced by NBC and had multiple sponsorship.[63] As for the other networks, by March 1953, Rosen reported that a revolt was "fomenting among sponsors and agencies over the high cost of television" and many in the industry were seriously considering alternate week sponsorship.[64] Another answer to the rising costs of production as well as the power of vaudeo stars and the dearth of new talent appeared to lie in the production of amateur programs, quiz shows, and sitcoms.

Repackaging the Variety Format

The troubles that surrounded vaudeo stars contributed to a revamping of the variety format. The format was either altered to suit the needs of an amateur program or to include longer sitcom style sketches, thereby fostering little-known performers and lessening the focus on any single vaudeo personality. In addition, presenting genres that differ (however slightly) from the top-name vaudeo programs would appeal to audiences and critics who longed for heterogeneity in programming. Many in the trade press feared that television would have nothing else to offer besides variety shows, anthology dramas, quiz shows, and soap operas:

> Television in the short span of 18 months has practically gone through what it took radio 25 years to exhaust. . . All the tried-and-true formats that have been radio staples for years have been converted into TV—drama, variety, audience participation, etc. Material that had a life-long guarantee in vaudeo and other show biz media has been drained, leaving the TV cupboard threadbare. Result is, everybody is asking, "Where do we go from here?"[65]

The amateur format was certainly not new to broadcasting, as it had been utilized in radio decades earlier. However, it was an alternative to expensive productions such as *Texaco Star Theatre*. "Public desire for variety programs over radio and television has brought about a revival of amateur talent programs unrivaled since the depression days of the early thirties," reported *Variety* in 1950. "[T]he networks have gone out on an amateur talent binge."[66] Citing financial concerns as well as pressures to develop new talent, CBS was especially intent on reviving the amateur format. Most of the network's programs, such as *By Popular Demand* (1950), *The Show Goes On* (1950–1952), and *Prize Performance* (1950) were headed by regular hosts but contained no real stars. The one amateur

program that did depend on a big name was *Talent Scouts,* which centered on the personality of Godfrey. NBC also had an amateur lineup with *Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour* and the short-lived *Lights, Camera, and Action* (1950). These shows certainly brought new talent to the air, but the mark these performers made on the television industry was usually insignificant and short-lived. The most successful amateur hour in terms of presenting talent with any lasting impact was *Talent Scouts*, which introduced performers such as Julius La Rosa, Shari Lewis, June Valli, and the McGuire Sisters.

The variety format was also used in a series of development programs at NBC from 1951 to 1955. These programs utilized talent familiar to only local affiliates as well as formerly unknown performers in various test settings. Soon after CBS's talent raid, NBC vice president John Royal challenged network affiliates to ferret out local talent for the national network in meetings held in 1948:

> There are 178 NBC stations throughout the country and they're all going to be NBC talent scouts, for among the 148,000,000 people in the U.S. that are potential stars it's up to NBC to find them. . . . They can be anywhere and everywhere. Just as baseball has its planned scouting and minor league training . . . just as the film companies are now making a concerted search for talent—it's equally important for NBC.[67]

As discussed in Chapter 2, Royal, along with Warren Wade, did groom local talent through experimenting with an affiliate performance circuit, but it wasn't until a few years later that the finding and training of new talent became a more serious priority at NBC. During fall of 1951, NBC rented out a Broadway theater for a vaudeville-style amateur revue that would serve as a training ground for new talent and material.[68] Designed by NBC president Weaver as an opportunity to test performers' appeal to a live audience (who paid a small admission price to attend performances), "NBC Theatre" was also used occasionally by such established stars as Bob Hope and Jimmy Durante, who wanted to see how their material would play with an audience prior to their on-air appearances.[69] The production was a part of a larger plan outlined by Weaver in a November 1951 memo that began with a description of Weaver's goal: "The broad concept of the comedy development plan is based upon the fact that: (a) comedy is not only desirable, but essential to television programming and that (b) there is virtually no place today where young comedians, comedy writers and directors have an opportunity to develop."[70] The memo announced the

hiring of writer/producer Joe Bigelow who would work as a talent scout for the network, looking for unknowns as well as convincing successful comedians—such as Jack Paar—to enter into television. He also was to work with comedians who proved to be only middling on television, but still seemed to have potential (the memo points to Henny Youngman, Bert Lahr, and Red Buttons among others). The network would provide other options for new and developing talent including: performing as a warmup act for a studio audience before a television show; performing on *NBC-Tryouts,* a two-hour Saturday afternoon amateur program that would be broadcast from three different cites—New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles; or an opportunity to perform at NBC Theatre.

The following winter, NBC initiated another phase of its comedy development plan with a series of forty-five-minute audition "showcases" held on alternate Thursdays in a large studio.[71] Most of the individuals who performed had never worked as a headlining act but had perhaps appeared in small clubs or vaudeville houses. Talent was allowed rehearsal time in the studio and was sometimes helped out with their material by network staff writers. By the following year, the director of the program, Bill Gargan, had found at least fifteen comics to appear on a broadcast version of the showcases that would air Sunday nights on WNBT. Because, according to Gargan, "the important thing about developing new comics is the need for exhibition," only one comic and a singer were spotlighted each week.[72]

In 1955 Weaver began the third phase of the comedy plan. After performing in clubs and local theaters, select comedians would be showcased in a local show on KRCA called *Komedy Kapers.*[73] The most prominent names who went on to work for the network after their appearance on *Kapers* were Jonathan Winters, George Gobel, Kaye Ballard, Pat Carroll, Mort Saul, and Shecky Greene.[74] One November 9, 1955, memo from Fred Wile, director of the development program, to NBC's general program executive for the Pacific division, reiterated the goals of the program: "Our strategy is to achieve this development [of comedy stars and writers] by means of showcasing and providing exposure under battle conditions to comics, already established but not yet all the way "there"—to young comics, to test ideas for spots and vehicles in vignette form. . . . IF we develop one Gobel or one future Oppenheimer or Josefsberg or Mankiewitz, there will be enough credit for everyone—to say nothing of satisfaction."[75] But many advertisers would have disagreed that one new face was enough, particularly because television seemed to be able to go

through them so quickly. A 1955 issue of *Tide*, a magazine for the advertising and sales industry, polled five thousand "leaders in advertising, public relations, sales and related fields" on the subject of the shelf-life of television stardom.[76] Most of them responded that an increase in "viewer fatigue" and "fickleness" when it came to television performers was becoming a real problem for television—one that was unlikely to go away. Whereas 80 percent of the panel agreed that George Gobel was television's "hottest comedy find," they also predicted that the star would not survive more than two years as a viewer attraction. Interestingly, 63 percent of them thought that the variety format "most severely limits a stars life," believing the sitcom far more conducive to helping performers retain their popularity.[77]

Although amateur and other alternatives contributed an element of difference to the variety format and enabled sponsors and networks to exploit the format's popularity without the expense of stars, producers of traditional vaudeo programs such as *Your Show of Shows* and *Texaco Star Theatre* were adding characters and story lines in order to deemphasize vaudeo's urban sensibility and reliance on guest stars. Additionally, especially pertinent after the establishment of the 1952 Television Code, such preplanned storylines promised producers more control over vaudeo's questionable content.

Texaco was the first to undergo such a transformation, incorporating regular storylines and eliminating much of Berle's direct address to the audience. The veteran radio writer Goodman Ace was hired to help reconstruct the program to include more plot. New cast members were brought in to play Berle's agent, secretary, and stagehand. In one memorable episode guest starring Gertrude Berg, Berle's act was spliced together with the narrative comedy of *The Goldbergs* as Molly Goldberg was scripted to be a matchmaker for Berle and his secretary. Berle was able to utilize his on-stage persona as the lengthy sitcom sketch was written as to take place in Berle's off-stage life. In enabling Berle to retain his persona, the new "backstage" narrative of the program retained characteristics of *Texaco's* original format while simultaneously trying to reap the benefits of the episodic narrative. Despite such alterations, however, Texaco dropped Berle's program at the end of the 1952–1953 season, and the show continued in its revised format through 1954 as the *Buick-Berle Show*. George Burns explained why Berle's show dropped in ratings even after it instituted a new family-friendly format: "After five years, Milton's audience had seen everything in his closet. He tried to change, but then he

wasn't Milton. I mean after you've seen a man wearing a dress and a wig, with two blacked-out front teeth, standing in a tank of water, getting hit in the face with a powder puff while a wind machine blows whipped cream all over the stage—four times—everything else is a little anticlimactic."[78] A 1952 *Variety* review of the revamped show contended that Berle's program was simply no longer funny:

> Somewhere along about the middle of the "Texaco Star Theatre" premiere last Tuesday night (September 16), a befuddled Milton Berle commented, "Whatever became of the Berle show?" It was one of the most apt cracks on the program. For somewhere along the line in the widely-touted attempt to inject some adrenalin into the slipping Texaco stanza, they forgot to make Berle funny. . . . The result was an entirely different but somewhat incongruous Berle—a Berle who for practically a full hour found himself playing straight man. . . . If the intent was to throw the old Berle out the window and substitute a restrained, sympathetic fall guy for the others, it succeeded.[79]

The sitcom-within-a-variety-show strategy had been used successfully in Benny's radio and television programs as well as CBS's popular *Burns and Allen Show*, which had begun its run in 1950. Both Burns and Allen played themselves on the show, yet it was Burns who played omniscient narrator and host, able to cross the diegetic "fourth wall" from vaudeville stage to sitcom set. Although the characters that Burns and Allen played were obviously an act rather than a direct representation of their "authentic" personalities, their program was constructed in such a manner as to give the audience the impression that it was getting a glimpse of the couple's domestic life. *Burns and Allen's* self-referentiality, blend of reality and fiction, and complicated wordplay made it the most well-crafted model of television's blend of sitcom and variety formats.

Your Show of Shows was initially conceived as a series of sketches highlighting Caesar and Coca's comic skills, which was broken up by monologues and production numbers. But in 1953, the show jumped on the sitcom bandwagon and incorporated fewer, but longer, sketches and made sure to place at least one of these sketches in a domestic setting. After its first successful year on CBS, *The Jackie Gleason Show* (1952–1959) found itself straddling formats as well. The first half-hour of the program was filled with production numbers by the June Taylor dancers, Gleason's monologue, and sketches based on characters that Gleason had made famous on *Cavalcade of Stars* (1949–1952, Dumont) a few years earlier.

Fig. 4.3 Gleason and his *Honeymooners* co-star Art Carney.

One sketch, "The Honeymooners," which appeared to be the favorite of Gleason's audience, eventually took over the entire second half-hour of the program. By 1955, the show would temporarily dispense with its variety format, transforming itself into a half-hour telefilmed sitcom now titled *The Honeymooners*. During the program's final season, *The Honeymooners* returned to its former status as a sketch within the show's hour variety format.

The expansion of sketches and the hiring of additional cast members and writers dispersed creative input and audience attention across a number of individuals. The vaudeo star was no longer the sole point of audience identification and producers sustained greater authority over program content and the scripting of commercial messages. Recurring characters and settings helped standardize production practices and enable the program to rely on plot and character to attract an audience, rather than being completely dependent on the personality of a sole vaudeo comic. In addition, expensive Hollywood guest stars were no longer a key component of a program's success. The introduction of telefilm would further standardize these programs and take much of the strain off of its talent.

The variety-sitcom blend was a precursor to the domestic comedy that came to dominate network schedules by the mid- to late 1950s. CBS, always looking for a way to topple NBC from its number one ranking, was the first to invest in this type of format. "With NBC having cornered most of the top-name comedians for its Wednesday and Sunday night television shows, CBS is turning to situation comedy as its answer to the NBC talent line-up," began a front-page article in a February 1951 edition of *Variety*.[80] As a result seven new half-hour domestic comedies appeared on the network's schedule in the fall of 1952 including *Our Miss Brooks*, *Life with Luigi*, and *My Friend Irma*.[81] The proliferation of comedies of this ilk led *Variety* to proclaim, "That television is on an 'Everybody Loves Lucy' kick is evidenced from the 1952–1953 programming rosters. In contrast to the handful of situation comedies circuiting the video channels last season, they're now all over the spectrum."[82]

Spigel argues that situation comedies such as *I Love Lucy* (1951–1957, CBS) and *I Married Joan* (1952–1955, NBC) were a result of a cultural negotiation of past and present values. She writes, "These programs allowed people to enjoy the rowdy, ethnic, and often sexually suggestive antics of variety show clowns by packaging their outlandishness in middle-class codes of respectability."[83] Ironically, many of the "new" stars of these programs were not, as the industry had promised, unique to television. Lucille Ball was a former film actress and radio comedian. Her talents were not honed on the vaudeville circuit like many of television's earliest stars, but her performance style did incorporate the physical humor and sight-gags of the vaudeville aesthetic. Television would develop a number of stars of its own, but would still remain dependent on other entertainment industries for the majority of its talent.

The 1951–1952 season proved to be a major turning point for the television industry and had significant implications for the form and functions of television stardom. In his analysis of the combined Trendex-American Research Bureau's ratings at the end of the 1951–1952 season, Rosen drew five major conclusions: (1) the "Milton Berle Era of TV leadership" had come to an end; (2) the sitcom formula as expressed in CBS shows such as *I Love Lucy* was the next big trend in programming; (3) NBC's multimillion dollar investment in "top comedy personalities and rotating comedy programming" appeared to be misguided; (4) Godfrey was still a valuable television commodity; and (5) the decline of the *Red Skelton Show* "invites speculation as to the wisdom of negotiating [talent] pacts extending of many years."[84] In retrospect, Rosen's analysis was spot on. The industry was changing and the norms of comedy performance and genre were about to go through a significant alteration. However, there were consistencies that would carry through, at the very least, the next few seasons, including the role of the television comedian as product salesperson and, often, the embodiment of a network's commercial imperatives. Godfrey, who outlasted the trials of the 1951–1952 season, was the ultimate television performer in both respects. In the following chapter, his career and its relationship to the larger discourses of commercialism and authenticity that surrounded broadcast stars will be discussed in greater detail.

CHAPTER 5

OUR MAN GODFREY

Product Pitching and the Meaning of Authenticity

Obviously, a television performer had to have considerable talent and a great rapport with his audience in order to survive on television. But he also had to have the ability, and motivation, to sell. A performer's career could end rather quickly if he or she did not move enough product. (Sid Caesar was a notable exception to this rule, as he refused to present products or ads in *Your Show of Shows*.) As Hal Davis, the promotion vice president of Kenyon and Eckhardt advertising, warned in 1954, "People will buy products pushed by personalities they like," and stars who "refused to deliver commercials won't be around long."[1] It was generally understood that a television star's image had to be consistent with the image of the sponsor's product in order to successfully initiate viewer identification with and desire to purchase a specific brand. In addition, a star had to exude an honesty or "naturalness" that would engender trust in the audience. George Burns acknowledged the dual responsibility a star had when acting as a product spokesperson: "[Gracie and I] don't try to kid people, but we never forget we're supposed to sell Carnation milk. We make every effort to do it as honestly as possible. If we don't sell the product, we don't have a show."[2]

Career longevity was not a concern during the immediate postwar era for Arthur Godfrey, who was consistently cited by radio and television advertisers as one of their favorite "pitchmen."[3] This was because, in his role as a talk and variety show host, Godfrey had an unprecedented hold