This page: Executive producer Lorne Michaels in his *Saturday Night Live* offices—an impressive ability to stay calm while the *Titanic* goes down. Next page: Chris Farley is emblematic of the show's new generation.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ARTHUR COHEN
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Comedy Isn't Funny

Saturday Night Live at twenty—how the show that transformed TV became a grim joke

By Chris Smith

IT'S FRIDAY NIGHT AT *SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE,* AND REHEARSAL LOOKS LIKE IT WILL DRAG INTO MONDAY. WEDGED INTO ONE CORNER OF THE LEGENDARY Studio 8H, where Toscanini made gorgeous music and Dan Aykroyd made cheeseburgers, is the jolly bulk of guest host George Foreman.

Foreman is rehearsing his role as Uncle Joe, a shy wedding guest who is being tormented by Kevin Nealon, playing the wedding reception's smarmy emcee. Nealon goads the reluctant Foreman into making a toast. Nealon wheedles the recalcitrant Foreman into singing a song. Nealon suggests that the annoyed Foreman toss the bouquet. Foreman threatens to slug Nealon. The five-minute sketch isn't par-

ticularly complicated—or particularly funny. Yet after an hour of rehearsal, Nealon is still stumbling over his lines. Then Nealon, in his record ninth season at *SNL,* accidentally steps in front of Foreman, blocking the camera and stalling yet another take. There's a metallic clatter as a stagehand knocks lighting poles to the floor. Five actors, fifteen extras, and four musicians sit silently, waiting for the disembodied voice of Dave Wilson, the show's director for most of its two-decade run, to give them instructions. Potbellied technicians jam chocolate-chip cookies into their mouths. A couple of *SNL* writers, waiting for "Uncle Joe" to finish so they can rehearse their own bit, snicker that the sketch should be renamed "Uncle Slow." Adam Sandler tries to cut the boredom, warbling "sing, sing a song . . ." in his trademark idiot-boy voice. At first, there are a few laughs. When Sandler continues into the third verse of the Carpenters song, and then the fourth, people start inspecting their shoelaces.

Standing in the darkness just beyond the set lights is a glum Janeane Garofalo. As *SNL* tried to rebuild from its disastrous 1993–'94 season, hiring the smart, sarcastic 30-year-old comic actress seemed perfect. Besides being funny—she is widely beloved from HBO's *Larry Sanders Show* and became something of a generational mini-icon in the movie *Reality Bites*—Garofalo added two qualities in short supply at *SNL:* She's hip and she's female.

Right now, though, Garofalo looks like a forlorn child trapped at her parents' dinner party. Barely over five feet tall, her lank hair pulled in three directions by pink and yellow baby-doll barrettes, Garofalo droops under the weight of her oversize plaid shirt-jacket, baggy homegirl jeans, and Doc Martens boots. Garofalo watched *SNL* as a kid (she was in fourth grade when it premiered), and after she signed on last summer, she called it a dream come true. Now her mood is as black as her fingernail polish.

For the first three months of the season, Garofalo's largely been stuck in dull, secondary wife and girlfriend roles. In "Uncle Joe," she's a waitress, with a single line near the end of the sketch, and the scene keeps breaking down before reaching her cue.

Finally, it's time for Garofalo to walk up to Foreman, tray of fake cocktails in hand. "Uncle Joe, just sing a song. Okay? Denise's getting upset," Garofalo says perkily. Two or three more takes and she's done. She dashes off to her dressing room.

Upstairs, in the pink-walled cubicle that belonged to Gilda Radner, Garofalo shakes one Marlboro out of a fresh carton and tries to describe how she's been treated on the show. "It's almost like hazing," she says. "Fraternity hazing. It's hard. It takes its toll on you. But I think you come out much better in the end. If nothing else, this experience has just toughened me up."

That's diplomatic—especially since Garofalo has told friends that *Saturday Night* has been "the most miserable experience of my life." What's gotten her through it?

"Cigarettes and Stoli," she says with a tight smile.

Later, a close friend who visited Garofalo in her hotel room after the Foreman show—the Los Angeles transplant never bothered to get an apartment in New York City—says the smoking and drinking didn't work: "You know how depressed she is? She's in her bed right now, just lying there. She's absolutely destroyed as a person. The show has beaten the shit out of her."

"I COULD NOT TAKE ONE MORE FRIDAY NIGHT," SAYS EX–CAST MEMBER JULIA SWEENEY, BEVY OF GIRLS ON THE PHONE, MAKING SURE THAT STEVE MARTIN GOT THE FLOW

SURE *Saturday Night Live* IS BAD THESE DAYS. EVERYone from Judge Ito ("hasn't been funny in ten years") to original and recently deceased *SNL* writer Michael O'Donoghue ("It couldn't suck worse if it had rubber lips") says so.

None of the outside critics, however, has pinpointed *why*—why the show that two decades ago revolutionized TV comedy continues to fall on its face. Four weeks spent recently at *SNL* offered up a rare portrait of institutional decay—the gargantuan exertion of sweat, blood, fried food, and bluff self-denial that yields, for example, a mind-bendingly awful sketch about space aliens and rectal probes.

Certainly the loss of Dana Carvey, Jon Lovitz, Jan Hooks, and Phil Hartman, after long runs, has hurt. And even with world-class talent, creating 90 minutes of fresh sketch comedy is a daunting challenge.

But there's more ailing *Saturday Night* than any particular personnel defections: The show that once broke all the rules is now obsessed with maintaining its internal pecking order, from where people sit in meetings to how much airtime new cast members deserve.

What's really killing *SNL* is a deep spiritual funk. There's a lumbering heaviness about every part of the show, from an extravagantly expensive set for a *Wizard of Oz* sketch to the self-important attitude that squashes bold personalities to the marathon writing sessions that stumble past dawn. "You feel it as soon as you walk into the writers' room," says a young comedian who rejected an offer to join *Saturday Night.* "It's a depressed, kind of lethargic burnout."

The on-camera talent is more spirited; unfortunately, much of that is expressed as petulance. In the middle of a January show, Sandler and David Spade are in an office one floor above the studio, drinking beer and acting cute for a couple of models. "Don't you have a show to do?" someone asks Spade. "Not this week," he sneers. Fifteen minutes later, Spade appears briefly in a sketch, squinting into the middle distance to read his three lines from a cue card.

"They can't even fake forcing themselves to care," says a longtime *SNL* writer who's saddened by the show's decline. "When you watch the show on TV, that comes through—it really seems taken with itself. And when it's as bad as it can be, and people still act like there's nothing wrong, then it's sort of like a fuck-you to the audience—'We don't have to be good, because we're *Saturday Night Live*!' It's like the post office. 'What are you gonna do, deliver the mail yourself?' "

Internal squabbling and raging egos have always been a part of the *Saturday Night* ethos—"It was a combination of summer

Talent: (facing page, far left) cast member Ellen Cleghorne; (near left) writer and Stuart Smalley creator Al Franken; (this page) a rehearsal earlier this year for an O. J. Simpson sketch—gargantuan amounts of effort are put into preparing each show, to little effect.

"TRYING TO GET IN TO SEE LORNE, OUTSIDE OF LORNE'S OFFICE, WITH THIS ERS ON HIS ANNIVERSARY, EVEN THOUGH HE'S BROKEN UP WITH VICTORIA TENNANT."

camp and concentration camp," remembers Anne Beatts, one of the show's original writers; now it's "a cross between *Love Boat* and *Das Boot,*" says Mike Myers, the *Wayne's World* star who recently left the show.

But as *SNL* lurches toward its twentieth birthday this October, the turmoil is producing far fewer laughs. For every bright spot—like Norm MacDonald on "Weekend Update"—there are a planeload of bombs, like an interminable October sketch in which Chris Farley and Tim Meadows simply screamed at each other. Last week, Garofalo fled *SNL* to make a movie. Writers phone their agents regularly, begging to escape. With ratings down 19 percent from two years ago, and NBC nervously watching the show's weekly budget climb to an all-time high of $1.5 million, executive producer Lorne Michaels still hasn't figured out how to put the *fun* back in *dysfunctional.*

As arrogant as *Saturday Night* can often be, there's something sad about the slow, woozy fall of a treasured pop-culture institution. For *SNL* fans who grew up on the Coneheads, E. Buzz Miller, Buckwheat, and Church Lady, watching the current incarnation of the show is like watching late-period Elvis—embarrassing and poignant.

ALL IS TRANQUIL AND PROSPEROUS IN LORNE MICHAELS'S NINTH-floor office at 30 Rockefeller Plaza. Postcard-size copies of *SNL*'s colorized host photos form a celebrity quilt behind the executive producer's desk—there's Steve Martin! Sharon Stone! Uh . . . Nancy Kerrigan?

An off-white sectional couch and matching overstuffed chairs look expensive but not ostentatious. Elegant black-and-white photos of the current *SNL* cast line the stark white walls; unfortunately, the group has grown so large that the photo of its newest member, Mark McKinney, is propped against a table leg.

The office décor says taste, money, I'm-all-right-Jack serenity. Two floors down, however, a plastic surgeon is ripping hunks of flesh from the movie-star face of Jeff Daniels.

It's past midnight on a Friday in mid-January. In multiplexes across this great land, Daniels is farting and belching his way through Hollywood's No. 1 box-office hit. But he had to come to *Saturday Night Live* to get really dumb. Long gone are the days when Chevy Chase, wearing makeup no more complicated than a pricier necktie, could deftly skewer Gerald Ford. Tonight, Daniels was being fitted for a prosthetic nose and eyebrows, to help him impersonate Liam Neeson. But the mold used to create the prosthetics has stuck to Daniels's skin. A doctor has been trying to chip the gunk from the star's face, but after two hours of Daniels's screams, he's taking a break.

Michaels's face betrays no sign of the ordeal. "The show is in a transitional period," he says wanly. "I think it's better than last year, and not where it will be by next year."

A cold Amstel Light and a basket of popcorn are on the office table in front of him. Fresh popcorn heralds Michaels's every entrance. Whether he's about to arrive at his seventeenth-floor office at NBC, with its breathtaking view of the Empire State Building; the eighth-floor *Saturday Night* studio; this ninth-floor office

This page: Janeane Garofalo was brought in to give the show some Generation X cred, but she's been sadly underused. Next page: (left) cast members Laura Kightlinger and Tim Meadows; (right) old-timer Kevin Nealon.

NEW HIRE JANEANE GAROFALO HAS TOLD FRIENDS THAT SATURDAY NIGHT HAS BEEN THROUGH IT? "CIGARETTES AND STOLI," SHE SAYS. LATER, A FRIEND REPORTS:

overlooking the studio; or his handsome Broadway Video offices a couple of blocks west in the Brill Building, a blond wicker basket of warm kernels precedes him, usually delivered by one of several blonde female assistants in their early twenties. Cast members call these high-strung women the Lornettes. (Nearly four years ago, the 50-year-old Michaels married one of these assistants, his third wife, a woman eighteen years his junior.)

"Ahhh! Just thinking of [the Lornettes] makes me so happy I quit," says Julia Sweeney, who left the cast last spring. "Because I could not take one fucking more Friday night, trying to get in to see Lorne, outside of Lorne's office on the ninth floor, with this bevy of girls, and their latest outfits and their magazines and their fingernail polish, on the phone, making sure that Steve Martin got the flowers on his anniversary, even though he's broken up with Victoria Tennant, and the hilarious note that Lorne wrote to Steve Martin that has to go with the flowers, which *must* be birds-of-paradise! They'd slip in and out of Lorne's office going, 'Shush! Lorne's in a very bad mood today.' "

Though his helpers may be tightly wound, Michaels is unflappable. And he's turned on his "charm beam," as Dana Carvey puts it, for the benefit of a visiting reporter.

"If your angle is going to be that the show is decadent and out of touch," Michaels says wryly, "we have that reduced to a press release to save time."

Michaels's patter is so smooth—his accent, widely imitated by acquaintances, is virtually British, though Michaels grew up in Toronto—that you're almost lulled into believing the peculiar theory he employs to explain the harsh criticism of the show. "I think reviewers hate staying up late," Michaels says. "On every other show, they get a cassette. They view it when they want to. With us, they have to stay up till one o'clock in the morning and then get the story in for Monday. The older ones get cranky."

He doesn't answer questions so much as smother them under a soothing poultice of words. He doesn't get angry. ("Talking to Lorne," says Rosie Shuster, an original *SNL* writer and Michaels's first wife, "is like talking to tundra.") His musings digress so widely that you don't even notice when Michaels slips in the news that he came very close to bringing Carvey back to the cast last summer—a move that would have telegraphed a loss of will for a program traditionally intent on breaking new talent.

Michaels crosses his legs and folds his hands in exactly the way predicted by an intimate of the late William Shawn. Michaels was fascinated by the old *New Yorker* editor, and he gave Shawn an office at Broadway Video, Michaels's production company, when Shawn was pushed out of the magazine in 1987. "I was amazed at how many of Shawn's mannerisms Lorne had," says the colleague of Shawn's. "And they had similar sensibilities: They're both sort of provincial guys with tremendous romantic ideas of sophistication and the city."

According to a longtime friend of Michaels's, the producer's Shawnophilia went beyond shared tastes: "Lorne had this weird idea that when Shawn retired, he'd be asked to run the magazine. He thinks of himself as the fundamental sophisticated New Yorker. It's one of the weird keys to Lorne's real personality."

One of Michaels's greatest talents is creating an aura of glamour about himself and *SNL*. But as the show sank last year, NBC began to wonder whether Michaels was spending too much time cultivating his urbane image. "You could always tell when the

Knicks or the opera were in town," says a recently departed *SNL* star. "That's the only time Lorne made sure the Wednesday-night script read-through started on schedule."

Network executives suggested Michaels increase his "focus" on *SNL* this year, but Michaels stammers when asked what he's doing differently. "Differently? Ahhhhm. Uhhhhmmmm. Just trying to keep people's—ahh, I don't know. Simultaneously sort of pushing people as hard as I can and trying to keep their spirits up."

By all accounts, Michaels is more visible around *SNL* these days—raising the already-therapy-caliber paranoia level. Michaels granted everyone at *SNL* permission to be interviewed for this story, but when I casually say hello to one veteran writer, he lowers his eyes and his voice. "I can't be seen talking to you," he mumbles.

"Lorne wants people to feel insecure," says an ex–cast member. "It's the same techniques cults use—they keep you up for hours, they never let you know that you're okay, and they always make you think that your spot could be taken at any moment by someone else."

Michaels also sends messages through the Brillstein-Grey Company. The powerhouse Hollywood management-and-production team, founded by one of Michaels's closest friends, Bernie Brillstein, handles eight of the fourteen *SNL* cast members as well as its executive producer. The connection makes spinning off movies much easier. "To your face, Lorne always wants to be the hero and Santa Claus. But if you try to do a movie that Lorne's not producing, Brillstein-Grey will let you know he's not happy," says an ex–*SNL* star who's had it happen to him. "Brillstein lets you know you're in the doghouse. Your sketches don't get on, or you get on in the last five minutes of the show.

"Lorne is nonconfrontative," Brillstein confirms. "Sometimes he asks us to talk to people."

Movie politics led to one of *SNL*'s biggest blunders this season. David Spade spent his summer co-starring in a Michaels-produced movie (*Tommy Boy,* which also stars Chris Farley and opens at the end of this month). To reward Spade in *SNL*'s season premiere, Michaels gave a sketch called "Buh-bye" a prime spot in the lineup. In "Buh-bye," Spade and Ellen Cleghorne play airline flight attendants who insult departing passengers. Not only did the sketch flop on the air, but because another "Buh-bye" sketch ran last spring, TV critics had a chance to bludgeon *SNL. Here they go again,* columnists wrote, *trying to flog another marketable catchphrase.* (Michaels, insisting the sketch was funny, pushed for another "Buh-bye" piece several shows later. Only when he learned that Internet chatters judged "Buh-bye" their "most hated" sketch in memory did Michaels take it off the schedule.)

Sarah Jessica Parker got a taste of the mind games when she was an *SNL* guest host in November. *SNL*'s workweek was disorienting enough, Parker says, but she also had to worry about why Michaels was ignoring her. "I'd come into his office, and he'd put his head down and not pay attention," Parker says. "I decided I wouldn't take it personally that he wasn't talking to me. If I had been my normal self, I would have really flipped out, because I would have thought, *He doesn't like me at all.*"

Veterans of *SNL*'s glorious first five years saw Michaels becoming aloof way back then. "Lorne always wanted to be admired—revered, even. Which is different from being famous. Different from being rich. And different from being sexy," says a man who knows Michaels well from those years. "He wants to be a legend, and he would have LEGENDARY tattooed in his underwear if it were possible." Each week, Michaels poses for dozens of photos with the guest host, adding to his enormous collection.

But there's a sadness, too, when the original crew talks about how Michaels has changed, and it isn't just obligatory nostalgia. "There's a real difference between running a kind of rebel outfit and running an institution," says one famous player. "Castro is not one of my main heroes, but I think I would rather have known him in the hills than in the palace."

Michaels waves off such complaints. He has millions in the bank and has survived more SATURDAY NIGHT DEAD headlines than he can count. His confidence seems genuine, and even when he says the show is "fighting for its life," the words sound more like what he's expected to say than like what he believes.

He takes solace in the fact that *SNL* is still the highest-rated show on late-night TV—*Letterman* included—and that the average rating for this season's first thirteen episodes is just a shade under the numbers for the critically acclaimed shows from the late eighties. As expensive as *SNL* has become to produce, NBC is surely making too big a profit from beer and blue-jeans ads to seriously consider dropping the show—though Fox and CBS, sensing an opening, are planning the first direct challenges to *SNL* in the fall.

"I have a contract for another two years," Michaels says. "The expectation is that I'll be here for another two seasons after this one." Then he's interrupted by a knock on his office door; it's one of the Lornettes. The doctor has returned with more anesthetic for Jeff Daniels's tortured face. Michaels politely excuses himself and strides off to comfort tomorrow night's host.

"THE MOST MISERABLE EXPERIENCE OF MY LIFE." WHAT'S GOTTEN HER "YOU KNOW HOW DEPRESSED SHE IS? SHE'S ABSOLUTELY DESTROYED AS A PERSON."

VERY LATE ON A THURSDAY NIGHT, MAY 1994: A punchy, sleep-deprived group of *SNL* writers and performers is fooling around in the seventeenth-floor writers' conference room. Cast member Rob Schneider has an idea for an imitation. He stretches out on a couch and closes his eyes. "This is Lorne sleeping," he says. "Okay, somebody wake me up." A writer tugs his shoulder.

"Uh!" he snorts, snapping to attention. "It wasn't me!"

Laughs all around. "My turn," says a senior writer. He settles onto the couch as sleeping Lorne and then is startled into consciousness. "Uhhhh—it was Jim!"

Even Jim Downey laughs. The producer and head writer of *SNL* for nine years, Downey, 42, joined the writing staff in *SNL*'s second season, in 1976. He left when Michaels quit in 1980, was head writer for the first year and a half of *Late Night With David Letterman,* then returned to *SNL* in 1984, a year before Michaels came back as executive producer. From "!?*Quien es mas macho*?!" to a commercial parody for the "First Citywide Change Bank," Downey has written some of *SNL*'s funniest and most famous sketches. And in April of last year, weary from holding together an increasingly ragged show, Downey had learned that NBC wanted to fire him.

It was one of the few times that Downey, who has day-to-day responsibility for the show, had ever heard from NBC executives. "The network doesn't know who runs the show!" says a recent cast member. "The only way they'd know if Jim wasn't doing a good job is if Lorne told them!"

Downey, a moon-faced man with merry Irish eyes, has the distracted manner of an Ivy League liberal-arts professor (he majored in folklore and mythology at Harvard); when he's had a rare eight hours of sleep, he could pass for Dylan Thomas's younger brother. He claims there's a less sinister corporate explanation: Don Ohlmeyer, the recently installed president of NBC's entertainment division, simply checked the *SNL* staff list and decided to dispatch the most powerful person beneath Michaels. "We had a rough season; they wanted to make a change. It wasn't personal; it was just business," Downey says. "And Lorne said, 'Absolutely not, I forbid it.' " As he speaks Michaels's name for the first time in the interview, Downey unconsciously puts his right hand to his throat and pulls his shirt collar chokingly tight.

An ex–cast member says Downey was in a very different mood at the party after the final show of last season. "I went up to Jim and said, 'Jim, I want to let you know I think you're a genius. You're the funniest person I've ever known.' And he says, 'Well, I'm quitting.' And I go, 'What?' And of course he didn't quit! *Because Lorne and Jim are like an old married couple!* They can't quit!"

Indeed, Downey flew to Burbank in May to discuss his future with NBC executives. Michaels was there—and, Downey says, had already saved Downey's job. Michaels, however, neglected to mention the reprieve to Downey until *after* the writer's tense meeting with the suits.

"Jim is more sensitive than he is spunky," says a friend of Downey's, "and the more he's beaten up, the more he shrinks away."

AS A JANUARY THURSDAY NIGHT SLOUCHES INTO FRIDAY MORNING, Downey is where he's been for nearly all of his adult working life. At 2 A.M., the sky is gray, the way it is in paperback detective novels. But no one in the *Saturday Night Live* writers' room could tell you about the weather. They don't glance out the seventeenth-floor windows or step outside the building. Many will sleep tonight on the couches in their tiny offices, if they sleep at all.

Thursday is rewrite night. Each week, the fourteen-man, three-woman writing staff stays up most of Tuesday night, churning out between 30 and 40 sketches, supplemented by a half-dozen or so written by cast members. Wednesday evening, about 50 people jam into the writers' room, everyone from Lorne Michaels to the network censor to members of the props department, to listen as the sketches are read aloud. Michaels, Downey, and the week's host then adjourn to Michaels's office and select about a dozen finalists.

The choices are often hard to fathom. Michaels frequently rejects pieces that he thinks are over the heads of *SNL*'s teens and frat-boys demographic. His preference is for the broadest likability, not the sharpest bite—amazingly, he's lately been trying to soften the dark humor of Norm MacDonald on "Weekend Update," one of the few new successes on the show.

Starting at about two on Thursday afternoon, the writers reassemble around the eight-foot-long conference table, where they dissect, line by line, each of the lucky sketches. Friday is for rehearsal and for another bleary-eyed whack at rewriting bits that still aren't working.

"I'D COME INTO [LORNE MICHAELS'S] OFFICE, AND HE'D PUT HIS HEAD DOWN AND NOT I WOULDN'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY. IF I HAD BEEN MY NORMAL SELF, I WOULD HAVE REA

This page: Cast member Chris Elliott and guest host George Foreman eke out some humor units. Next page: (left) an *SNL* technician; (right) cast member Adam Sandler gets wacky during a writers' meeting.

This has been, with minor adjustments, the schedule since the show was created in 1975. "Everybody then was on so much coke they didn't notice it was going on until four in the morning," wisecracks new cast member Laura Kightlinger. "We stay up, but we're too lazy to do the drugs."

Suggest that there must be another, less-punishing way to organize the week and you hear self-congratulatory speeches about putting the show on at all. "Look," Downey says, "you get a bunch of Swiss engineers to map out our show, describe to them what's involved, what needs to be written, designed, built, painted, scored, blocked, shot, rehearsed, mounted, and then trimmed, reconfigured, noted, and put back on its feet—they go, 'Okay, you're describing a twelve-day process, maybe ten.' And we go, 'Jeez, that's too bad, 'cause we have to do it in six.' So you just do it, and it involves incredibly long hours for everyone."

In the old days—even as recently as four years ago—this college-all-nighter culture worked because talented writers could rewrite sketches on their own. But since bulwarks such as Robert Smigel, Jack Handey, and Bonnie and Terry Turner began quitting, Downey has been forced to do more repair work during the group rewrite. The Thursday-night session is a brain-numbing test of endurance, punctuated by moments of giddiness and frequent deliveries of mountains of food. Writers drift in and out, languorously. There are seventeen writers on the payroll, but even that's not enough—alumni Andy Breckman, Bob Odenkirk, Smigel, and Handey have been called in regularly to prop up the staff writers, and NBC is leaning on Handey to return full-time.

"PAY ATTENTION," RECENT HOST SARAH JESSICA PARKER SAYS. "I DECIDED LLY FLIPPED OUT, BECAUSE I WOULD HAVE THOUGHT, HE DOESN'T LIKE ME AT ALL."

At the moment, ten writers are perched around the table, but only four speak up regularly: Al Franken, 43, a holdover from the early years; Ian Maxtone-Graham, 35, a preppy triathlete in his third season at *SNL;* Fred Wolf, a skeletal stand-up comic and former *Chevy Chase Show* writer in his thirties whose jokes usually involve Satan or spewing bodily fluids; and Downey. Downey commonly works 80 hours a week. Now his eyes are puffy from a catnap on his office couch, and his graying hair is disheveled to the point where it might as well have been attached in random hunks.

Also staring at the script and tossing in a suggestion every 30 minutes or so are Lewis Morton, 24, and Steve Lookner, 23, both in their second year at *SNL,* and both graduates of the *Harvard Lampoon.* The *Lampoon* has been a bountiful source of *SNL* talent from the start, when Doug Kenney, a founder of the *National Lampoon* and a Michaels consultant early on, paved the way for fellow 'Poonster Downey to get a job at *SNL.* At the other end of the table are two rookie writers who go hours without making a sound: Brian Kelley, 22, and also a 'Poonie, and Margo Meyer, 29. There's also Norm Hiscock, 33, who was, until a year ago, head writer for *Kids in the Hall,* the Canadian sketch-comedy ensemble executive-produced by Michaels. Hiscock smiles gamely at his new colleagues, but as the night drags on, the grin can't disguise his growing bewilderment.

An ex–*SNL* writer who stopped by recently was stupefied. "I see Norm, who ran *Kids in the Hall,* sitting silently for eight hours, not saying a word because it's not worth it to him—he knows these sketches are beyond repair. What a waste!"

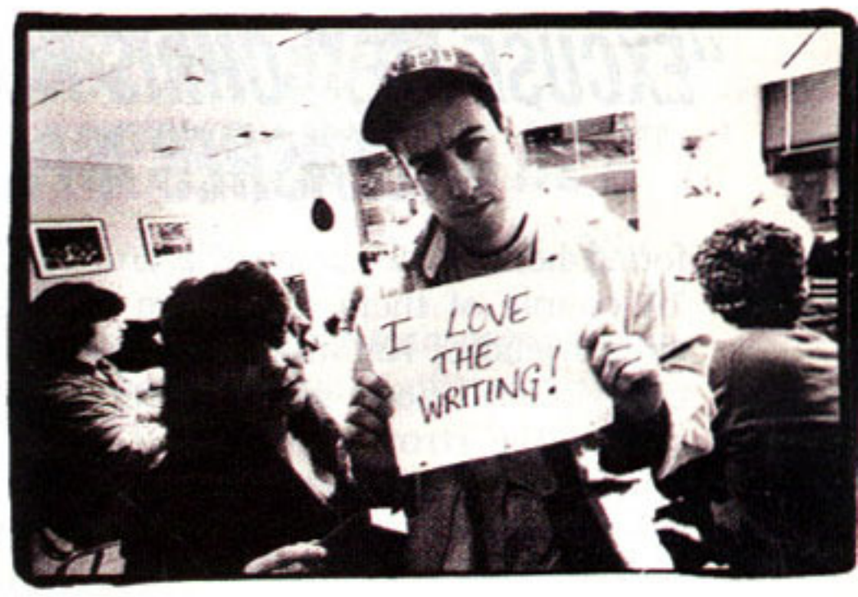
Pale, overwhelmingly male, and raised on comic books, the main writers are very short on experience in the world beyond pop culture. The most productive young writer, David Mandel, 24, still lives at home with his family. Mandel grew up worshiping the show, collecting old *SNL* scripts and memorabilia at bookstores, and memorizing dozens of sketches. He went on to Harvard, where he says he devoted more time to the *Lampoon* than to his academic work.

"There's only one writer who didn't go to Harvard or Yale or Cornell or Brown," Ellen Cleghorne says, overstating the case only slightly. "There's no black writers on the show—this is 1995, and I feel like I'm in a really bad sci-fi movie where all the black people already got killed, and I'm next. I'm not a separatist. I'd like to be able to jam with somebody who's had the same experiences I find funny."

Certain subjects—TV game shows, violent beatings, gay sex—come up again and again. In addition to the recent alien-anal-probe number, there was "Gay Stripper Theater" and a bit where Farley went to a gay bar and caught anal warts from Sandler. "They love the anal sex here," Garofalo says. "That's considered incredibly funny."

Bonnie and Terry Turner, the husband-and-wife writing team from Atlanta who scored big at *SNL* working on "Wayne's World" and Church Lady sketches, watch the show now and marvel at how its interests have shrunk. "They write less about relationships," Bonnie says. "Unless the relationship is between a man and his shoe, rather than actual people."

During the *SNL* season, the writers don't need to have much interaction with the outside world. As the rewrite session drifts on, they bark out requests for food, and an assistant, Lori Jo Hoekstra, phones them in. At ten o'clock, it's ten Quarter Pounders, eight Big Macs, four bacon double cheeseburgers, and heaps of fries; 90 minutes later, there's an equally hefty delivery of ribs and chicken; at 1 A.M., it's spaghetti, lasagna, and salads.



Meanwhile, they make grudging progress on a sketch written by Norm MacDonald. It's a parody of Andy Rooney—not exactly a fresh target. Rooney, played by MacDonald, is cleaning out his desk and finds a bottle of sedatives, empty except for cotton.

"Should I mention cotton more than once?" MacDonald asks, and it's debated for ten minutes. No—just one cotton reference stays in, but now they can't decide whether the pills are for the treatment of "hallucinations," "mood swings," "dementia," or "NRA dementia."

"That's too much," Downey says. "It's his attitude that's funny, the fact that he's ignoring something that's obviously important."

MacDonald: "So I can say, 'I don't know what the pills are for—what I do know is, the bottle is mostly filled with cotton.' "

Franken: "And, 'I give the pills to Lesley Stahl. Then, when Lesley's passed out, I take her to the closet and rape her.' Or, 'That's why you never see Lesley until February.' Or, 'When she passes out, I put her in various positions and take pictures of her.' "

Downey: " 'Here's a picture of Ed Bradley.' "

MacDonald: "What if Rooney rapes Mike Wallace? And then says, 'I guess that makes me bad.' Is it funnier with a black guy? Or two old white guys?"

Franken: "What about, 'I drag Mike into my office and rape

Photograph: left, Norman Ng/Baskin Studio.

him. Right here! I guess that makes me bad.' "

The discussion sputters for another ten minutes. Then the writers lose interest and drift over to the newly arrived food. "C'mon!" Downey says plaintively. "Let's finish this!"

The sketches eventually get tighter and marginally better. Mostly, all this group writing produces a thin comedy mush. "It's now a much more fey, effete, overthought show," says Rosie Shuster, who did her third tour on the writing staff during the late eighties. "The cud is so well chewed before it goes on the air."

"Talent is essential, and hard work is essential, but there isn't any tight correlation between working your ass off and quality," a frustrated Downey says later. "It's so unfair. You're sitting around, and you just have a great idea—like 'Fred Garvin, Male Prostitute' literally took slightly longer to write than it did to read. It was just easy and fun. And you can stay up all night shitting out some other thing phrase by phrase."

THE MOMENTS OF INSPIRATION HAVE BEEN HARDER FOR DOWNEY and everyone else to come by. Lately, the extracurricular action in the writers' room has been more colorful than a lot of the writing.

The show hosted by Sarah Jessica Parker, in November, included a song contrasting love's higher and lower impulses. Michael McKean sang chastely to Parker, plunking an acoustic guitar; then Sandler cranked up his electric guitar to underscore sophomoric lines like "I'm gonna give ya the wood!"

During rewrites of the piece, Kightlinger jokingly suggested to the group that the song be made even more explicit—and found herself the target of a crude barrage. "A couple of them turned on her," says a close friend of Kightlinger's, "with these really vicious, mean sexual things. . . . She's one of the strongest people I know. Very tough to faze. And it made her cry."

Kightlinger, who wrote for *Roseanne* last year, has been reciprocally shocked by the thin skin of her new colleagues. "I've had to pare down my sarcasm big-time," she says, adding that she now feels "really positive" about *SNL*. "In the writers' room at *Roseanne*, you could shit on each other and everybody would laugh. But here, it's like, 'Wait a second—that's a piece I've worked on, dah, dah, dah.' It gets personal in a hurry."

In December, Ian Maxtone-Graham, a self-described anti-smoking zealot, complained about Norm MacDonald's lighting up in the writers' room. MacDonald shrugged it off. So Maxtone-Graham extinguished the cigarette by squirting MacDonald in the face with a water pistol. MacDonald punched Maxtone-Graham in the head, knocking him to the floor.

Tonight, sprawled on a couch a couple of feet from the table, Chris Farley and Adam Sandler alternately listen to the writers debate and cackle at some private joke. Sandler picks up a phone and makes prank calls, talking in a silly elderly woman's voice.

Now it's Farley's turn. Obese, sweating, dressed in a flannel shirt and a white knit skullcap that makes him look like a grunge Muslim, Farley dials. "Excuse me," he says into the phone, "did you hear that? Was it a clap of thunder?" Then he holds the receiver against his butt, unleashes a prodigious fart, and quickly hangs up. The writers laugh louder than they have all night. Except Downey, who's slowly wagging his head.

"Ah, Jim!" Farley exclaims. "That's been a big laugh since sixth grade! Belushi farted, didn't he? Bottom line, farts are funny!"

Downey seems unmoved.

"It'll never happen again," Farley says, but he can't contain a giggle. "It's the goddamn burgers! Lori Jo ordered up about 50 burgers! Jesus!"

"Well, Chris," Downey says, mock solemn. "Look around. All these people are laughing *at* you. Not *with* you. And they're your friends now, because you're the big clown. But they're gonna all go on . . . and you'll still be there, just farting away."

Farley starts kicking his legs like some demented Rockette, farting after each step.

"Someday, Chris," Downey continues, still in his deadpan mode, "your son will be in a library with a friend, and he'll pull down the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*. 'Oh—January to March 1995. Hey, Dad's in this one!' 'What's it for? The 'Fatty Arbuckle incident'—where he had that incident with the girl, and he was tried?' 'No, this is the one where he farts!' "

The rest of the room is tense, silent, and Farley's face is reddening. Downey's joke, more barbed than anything that makes it on the air at *SNL* these days, refers to a 1994 incident where Farley allegedly groped a female extra. ("He never grabbed her in any sexual area, but he was touching her leg," says a witness who was in the limousine with Farley and the woman. "She was being nice about it, saying, 'Can you just stop now?' But she was annoyed. And we're yelling, 'Will you fucking stop it?' Farley's kind of laughing it off. Then he BA'd [bare-assed] some other limo driver.")

"EXCUSE ME," CHRIS FARLEY SAYS INTO THE PHONE, "DID YOU HEAR THAT? WAS IT UNLEASHES A PRODIGIOUS FART, AND QUICKLY HANGS UP. "THAT'S BEEN A

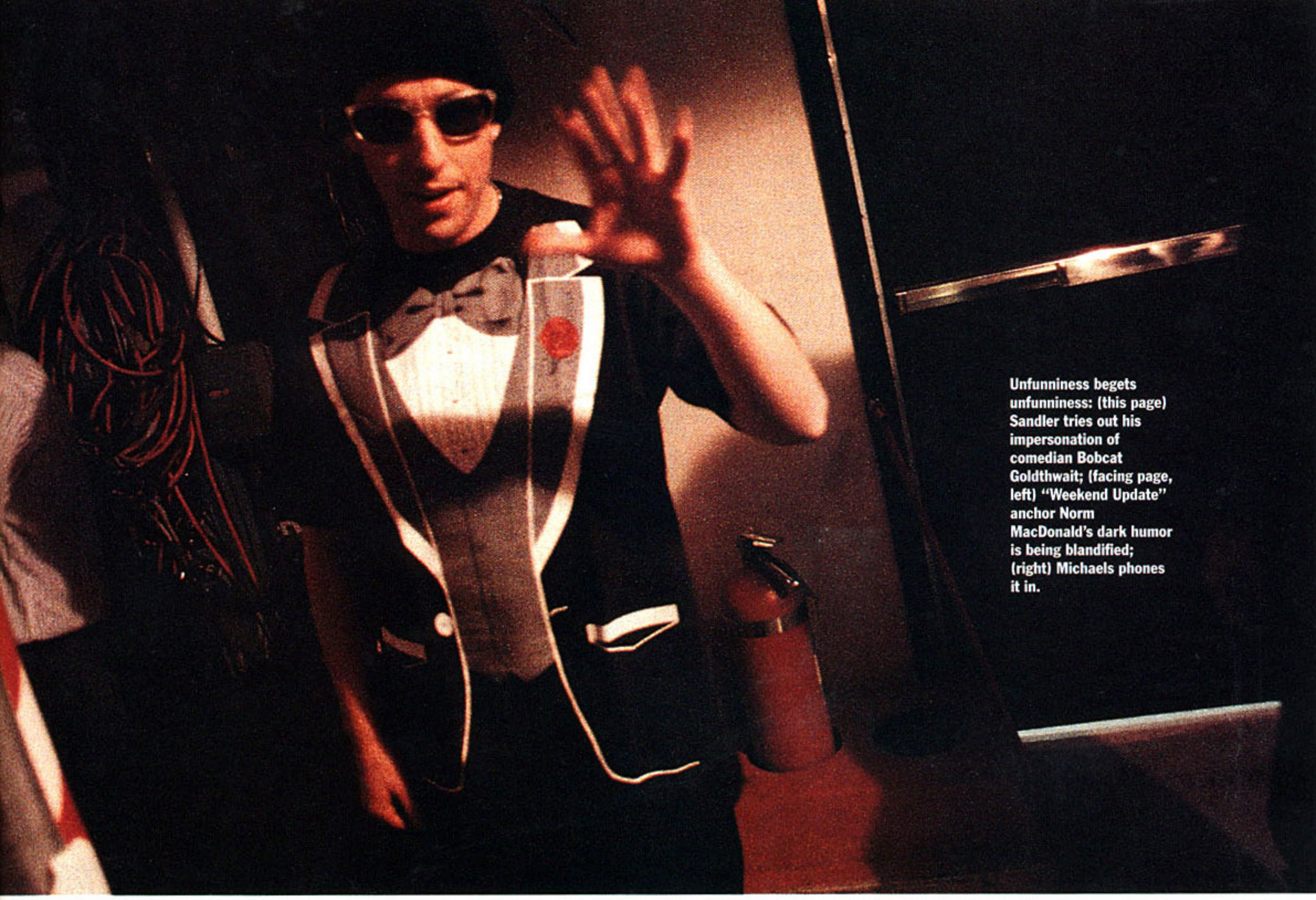
Downey's kidding about the possibility of Farley's being hauled into court (no charges were ever filed, and Farley claims he just told the woman she "looked purty"). But he's serious about shaming Farley into better behavior. And Farley is gasping.

"Daddy was a naughty man," Farley finally says with a shrug. "C'mon—let's all take a break and go down to the Village! Go cattin' around!" He dances crazily, his mammoth belly wobbling. "Me and Adsy [Adam Sandler] are gonna go cattin' around!"

None of the writers move.

Downey clears his throat. "All right. So we were on Andy Rooney . . ."

Farley and Sandler strut out of the room. After a total of about 90 minutes, the Rooney sketch is put aside; there'll be still more tinkering tomorrow. But on Saturday, the sketch gets only weak laughs from the dress-rehearsal audience and is cut from the live show.



Unfunniness begets unfunniness: (this page) Sandler tries out his impersonation of comedian Bobcat Goldthwait; (facing page, left) "Weekend Update" anchor Norm MacDonald's dark humor is being blandified; (right) Michaels phones it in.

A CLAP OF THUNDER?" THEN HE HOLDS THE RECEIVER AGAINST HIS BUTT, BIG LAUGH SINCE SIXTH GRADE!" HE EXCLAIMS. "BELUSHI FARTED, DIDN'T HE?"

Lorne Michaels appears in the *SNL* writers' credits each week, though he hasn't really written a sketch in nineteen years. He has other ways of influencing the writing, however, some of which subtly drive a wedge between the other writers and Downey. "Lorne," says a current writer, "will say, 'You know, there's an enormous desire to make Jim Downey laugh. That's good—Jim Downey's a hard person to make laugh. However, we also need to have pieces that Jim hates on the show—because America likes them.' "

A former key writer, who stays in close touch with the politics at *SNL,* sees all the machinations building to an ugly finish. "I've been in L.A., and all I've been hearing is 'Jim Downey's fucking up.' That's the story all these agents and producers are hearing. But Jim's no different [than he ever was]. He's a very funny guy. But Lorne picked that guy for a reason, and he kept him for a reason: Jim is a guy who will internalize everything, will not fight, will just rationalize to himself—and in his heart, is just dying. But Lorne doesn't care. Jim's gonna take the fall. It's gonna be in the press"—the writer breaks into Lorne's semi-British murmur—" 'Well, Jim, as wonderful as he is, had allowed himself to get a little out of touch, blah, blah, blah.' Oh, it's gonna be beautiful!" (Indeed, a tough New York *Times* piece about the show last September depicted Downey as the primary source of *SNL*'s problems.)

Downey admits he was deeply dispirited last spring when his father died and, three days later, he learned of his apparently imminent firing. But Downey seems more equanimous this time around. Friends say he expects NBC to come after his job again at the end of this season, and that his fate is out of his hands. "Unless the ratings improve or the press buzz turns around, he thinks it's going to be a matter of how much Lorne is willing to push to save him again," says one friend of Downey's. (NBC's Ohlmeyer declined comment.)

"Jim is incredibly important, because he's a truly original comedy thinker," Michaels says. "That's, you know, of great value to me."

Many of the current writers talk tough about quitting if Downey is fired. One of the writers closest to Downey says he'd have quit last year if Downey had been let go—but . . . "That's like saying, 'If I'd been in World War II, I would have been in the French Resistance, man, 'cause that's where all the cool stuff was. As far as collaborating, no way!' And then it comes down to doing it, and it's like, 'Well, you know, I've talked to these Nazis—they have a lot of plans, and this Vichy thing sounds great!' "

BILL MURRAY HAS COME TO BURY AND TO PRAISE MICHAEL O'DONoghue. Easily the nastiest and one of the funniest writers ever to work at *Saturday Night Live,* O'Donoghue died suddenly in November of a cerebral hemorrhage. Four nights later, as the Sarah Jessica Parker show slogs on uptown, a raucous party in O'Donoghue's Chelsea apartment celebrates his life. At the end of *Saturday Night,* Murray appears onstage and politely eulogizes his friend; at about three on Sunday morning, Murray stands on a chair in O'Donoghue's living room and delivers his better material.

"I got along with Michael O'Donoghue," Murray says slowly, "only after he realized that he should be physically afraid of me. Until that time, he was not fair. He was unkind. He was mean. And I finally let him know that I was gonna hurt him. He was kind to me when he knew I was gonna fuckin' hit him." When

the laughter quiets down, Murray continues. "The thing about Michael that was interesting was that he taught you how to hate. He hated the horrible things in life, and the horrible people in life—he hated them *so good.*"

Other close friends tell anecdotes about O'Donoghue. Then Chris Farley peels himself off Duff, the actress and perfume spokeswoman, and takes the floor. "Uh, I didn't really know Michael O'Donoghue," Farley begins, "and I don't really have a story about him, but I'm honored to be here."

Murray, standing nearby, feeds Farley a meaty setup line. "Okay, what *would* you have said to Michael *if* you'd met him?"

Here's Farley's chance to make a roomful of his idols laugh.

The writers' room: Lots of rewriting, lots of arguing, lots of good eatin'.

Instead, he whimpers. "That I loved him," Farley says. "I loved everything he did. I loved him, I loved you guys, and it's why I always wanted to be on the show."

It's a paradigmatic moment: Murray's cockiness devolved to Farley's pleading. "Right now the show doesn't have anybody who is compelling to watch," says one of the best writers from the recent past. Mike Myers bailed out at the end of January—even though he had nowhere to go, since his "Coffee Talk" movie deal had collapsed. The mid-season shuffling continues, with the addition of stand-up (and Sandler pal) Molly Shannon two weeks ago; British comic Morwenna Banks joins on March 25, boosting the cast to fourteen.

Good chemistry is nearly impossible in so big a troupe. "You've got this gigantic split in the cast," Dana Carvey says. "You've got 22-year-olds and 50-year-olds. You've got millionaires, and you've got paupers. You've got people who are famous all over the world, and completely obscure people like Jay . . . uh—see what I mean? I was gonna say Jay North. Jay *Mohr.*"

Michaels, though he goes on at great length about the overstuffed cast's being part of his strategy, admits that a big reason for the logjam is that a complete overhaul is too much work for him. He did it once, changing nearly the entire cast—including Anthony Michael Hall, Terry Sweeney, and Joan Cusack—after the wipeout season of 1985–'86, when *SNL* was on the brink of cancellation. "The, ah, task of replacing an entire cast was very hard," Michaels says. "And I think that maybe the trauma of that had this impact, had this effect on me, the effect that I did not want to ever be in the position of having to replace everyone." Never mind that when he did exert himself and bring in Carvey, Nealon, Jan Hooks, and Phil Hartman, the show rebounded almost instantly.

"After last year," says one exasperated current writer, "all of America was waiting for a brand-new look, like 'Hey, what is this show? Oh, it's *Saturday Night*! Wow, it's changed!' And instead, it's 'Hey, Julia Sweeney and Rob Schneider and Phil Hartman are gone! And wow, it's a black-and-white opening montage! *Wooooohoooo!* Break out the champagne!' " He sighs deeply. "The show's still slipping. You sort of want to say to Lorne and Jim, 'Hey, guys, you're on the *Titanic*!' "

For someone so concerned with nurturing his power, Michaels casts himself as amazingly passive. "When the time is right for people to leave, they generally figure out that that's the time they want to leave," he says, grabbing a handful of popcorn. "I think we'll probably have a smaller group next season. And I think it will become clear by the end of this season the direction that we're going in."

Instead of making difficult decisions and narrowing the cast before the start of this season, Michaels added two recognizable faces—Garofalo and Chris Elliott, famous for his often hilarious, twisted cameos on David Letterman's NBC show—as well as the unknown Kightlinger, and has let the pack battle for scraps of airtime.

On such a rudderless ship, self-interest dominates. Franken, who last summer mounted a relentless and futile campaign to win the "Update" anchorship for himself, continually whines to Downey and Michaels about putting his twelve-step character, Stuart Smalley, on the show.

One Thursday in December, rehearsal is delayed as Sandler uses the studio to videotape a birthday song to Steven Spielberg. Sandler had mentioned Spielberg on the show the week before, in a very funny song; when Spielberg called to praise Sandler on the ditty, Sandler took the opportunity to ingratiate himself further and suggested the birthday greeting. Now several cast members are stewing as they wait for Sandler to clear the stage.

Later, Chris Elliott paces in his smoky dressing room. "You're going to hang around the show for two more weeks?" Elliott asks me. "How can you stand it?"

"YOU'VE GOT THIS GIGANTIC SPLIT IN THE CAST," DANA CARVEY SAYS. "YOU'VE GOT FAMOUS ALL OVER THE WORLD, AND COMPLETELY OBSCURE PEOPLE LIKE

JANEANE GAROFALO WAVERED BEFORE JOINING *Saturday Night.* She'd heard all the horror stories, but her memories of the nights she'd spent laughing at the show won out. "There are people who have a blast here," she says. "Dana Carvey, it looked like he had fun every second he was on the screen. Eddie Murphy, same thing."

Garofalo was one of the few cast members to show up early for work, arriving in September to act in pretaped commercial parodies. She also made the mistake of being honest with interviewers when asked her opinions, telling the New York *Observer* she found *SNL* "unwatchable" last season and, in a Canadian newspaper, describing Sandler's characters as "childish."

Neither was an especially earthshaking insight. But when Sandler arrived, he refused to speak to Garofalo, relenting several weeks later only to berate her. As the cast prepared for its first show of the season, hosted by Steve Martin, Garofalo made the mistake of objecting to a sketch as sexist. That brought down the wrath of Fred Wolf, who'd written the piece. Garofalo tripped over another unwritten *SNL* rule when she conscientiously attempted to memorize lines—so, unlike Farley, Sandler, and Spade, she could actually make eye contact with the other actors in a sketch. During one rehearsal, Garofalo hesitated while trying to recall a phrase and derailed another actor's cue. This enraged Al Franken.

"Al went shithouse," says a witness. " 'Read the fucking cue cards!' And afterward, he goes to Janeane and says, real condescending, 'Um, Janeane, I *appreciate* that you want to memorize your lines. But do everyone a favor—just read the cue cards.' Which is insane! He should be cheering her!"

Two months later, Garofalo chooses her words as if defusing a bomb; she can't say enough how sorry she is that she offended anyone. "That was one of the best things that ever happened to me, getting lambasted. I'd hurt people's feelings. Now it feels like I've got support. And I think they've got a lot of faith in me. I think."

She blows out some cigarette smoke. Just talking about her first months at *SNL* seems to shake her. "It's affected my ego greatly. It's affected me in ways I never anticipated. A lot of it for the good, and a lot of it has made me gun-shy. Definitely gun-shy. It's always like you're kind of wondering, *Okay, who's mad at me today?*" She catches herself being blunt again. "I think the show is better, and I'm not just saying that 'cause I'm here. I truly do. But it doesn't mean I haven't cried—a lot—since I've been here."

It's impossible to work as hard as the cast and writers of *SNL* do and be completely objective, especially when the show is going poorly. But the insularity of the place creates a kind of echo chamber, where they all tell one another the show is funny, and soon they're beyond rationalization and long gone into denial. "I remember after the [November] John Turturro show," a friend of Garofalo's says, "she said, 'Hey, man, I think we got this one; this was a really good show!' I didn't say anything to her, but it wasn't a good show. And I remember thinking, *Oh, no, it's happening to her too! The pods have hatched!*"

Apparently the pods couldn't grab a secure hold on Garofalo. In December, newly re-demoralized, she tried going to Michaels with her complaints, and in the next show Garofalo appeared in half the sketches. But the parts quickly became scarce; when Bob Newhart hosted in February, Garofalo showed up just once in the first hour, in a weak *Baywatch* parody, wearing a bathing suit over fake boobs the size of nuclear warheads.

"There's no word for when you castrate a female," Rosie Shuster says. "But that's the feeling I get watching what's happening to Janeane."

Ask Melanie Hutsell, who was fired from *SNL* last spring after three troubled years, what kind of advice she'd give Garofalo, and she whistles. "That's a tough one. Any advice I would give, I already tried. Just don't let them take your soul away."

THE SHOW DOESN'T END WHEN *Saturday Night Live* leaves the air at 1 A.M. There's one more ritual to play out, one more twenty-year-old gesture. Cast and crew trundle off to a publicity-hungry, eager-to-be-cool restaurant—one week it's Planet Hollywood, the next it's Morton's, then Chaz & Wilson's—for a languid party. "They have the show," Chris Elliott cracks, "so they can have the party."

Tonight, after the David Hyde Pierce show, the low-intensity festivities are at Dolce. A fleet of limousines whisks everyone to the restaurant, only three blocks from Rockefeller Center.

The parties began, twenty years ago, with higher spirits and lower regimentation. "Most of us were living at the office in those days," Michaels says. "We naturally just ended up going out somewhere together." They quickly became the coolest, wildest, most important show-business parties in the city, especially when Belushi and Aykroyd bought a seedy joint near Canal Street that they named the Blues Bar—"no relation," Michaels says archly, "to the House of Blues. We would go to the party for the host and cast, and then we would end up at the Blues Bar—sometimes, more often than not, till the sun came up. But that was then and this is now."

Inside Dolce, the mood is strangely stiff for a late-night bash full of comedians. Cast, writers, crew—everyone sticks to his or her table; there's almost no mingling. Kevin Nealon and his wife have brought a clutch of fellow PETA members and are chattering earnestly about "companion animals." Because the Dolce bar is still open to civilians, and the bar crowd is staring at the famous TV faces, the *Saturday Night* group feels like Party Village at a showbiz theme park. Unaffiliated celebrities don't drop in much anymore. Tonight's visitor is Patti Davis, ex–presidential daughter and –*Playboy* centerfold.

Seated apart from everyone else is Lorne Michaels. At these events he's always as remote as possible—invariably at the back of the room, preferably in a section of the restaurant raised above the rest of the place. A votive candle flickers light onto Michaels's face as he leans forward from the shadows, making him look mysterious.

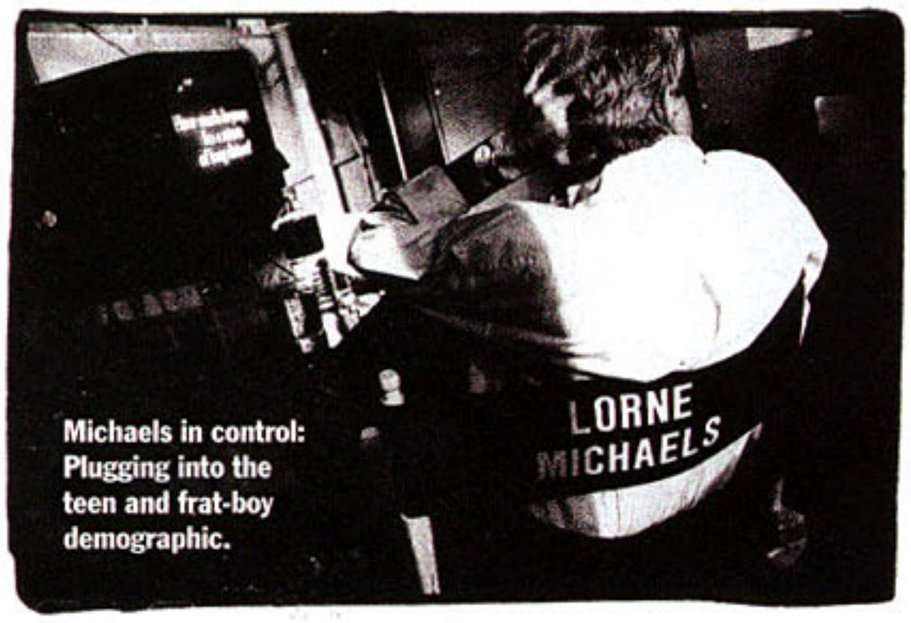
Mostly, though, he looks lonely. Young staff members Marci Klein and Erin Maroney sit on either side of Michaels, their blonde heads tilted up toward him reverentially.

Across the room, Elliott, Hiscock, Garofalo and a college friend, and Mark McKinney are crammed into a banquette. Jim Downey, jocular, the pressure off for a minute, stops by on his way to the men's room. "Ah," he says with a smile, "the malcontents' table!"

Jim Downey (right) leads yet another meeting.

"Jim, you want a drink?" Elliott says.

GOT 22-YEAR-OLDS AND 50-YEAR-OLDS. YOU'VE GOT PEOPLE WHO ARE JAY . . . UH—SEE WHAT I MEAN? I WAS GONNA SAY JAY NORTH. JAY MOHR."



Michaels in control: Plugging into the teen and frat-boy demographic.

"I can't keep up with you—you and your *vodka-and-tonics,*" Downey says, mocking Elliott in his renowned deadpan. "How many have you had?"

"It's my first!" Elliott says, feigning indignation. "I swear! These are my witnesses."

"One?" Downey says, comically overplaying his disbelief. " 'Cause it seems like you've had a fucking million!"

Everyone laughs, then Downey says, "Come over and say hi to my friends from Illinois. They'll say, 'What are you doing slumming with this show?' "

"*Suuuure,*" Elliott teases. "I'll come over, so your friends can go back to Illinois and say, 'Oh! I met Chris Elliott!' "

Elliott puts on a big act of giving in. "Awright, awright. Let me finish my drink, and I'll give your friends a little . . .," he says, making wildly insincere, goofily funny smiley faces.

Downey leaves. Garofalo is shaking with laughter. "That's why you say yes to doing this show, 'cause you think this could be the funnest thing—it *should* be the funnest thing in the world." She shrugs. "Doesn't always work out that way."

THE NEXT TIME GAROFALO GRINS SO BROADLY, SHE'S STANDING AT the very front of the *Saturday Night Live* stage. It's the end of the February 25 show, and it's the last one she'll do this season. In interviews, Garofalo says she's open to rejoining the cast in the fall. But as the credits roll, it's plain to see that Janeane Garofalo is waving good-bye as fast as she can. ■