

The American Comedy Archives Interview

LARRY GELBART

Interviewed March 10, 2005

By Bill Dana and Jenni Matz

In Los Angeles, CA

Biographical Information:

Larry Gelbart (b. February 25, 1928 in Chicago, Illinois, USA) is a comedy writer with over 60 years of credits.

He began as a writer for Danny Thomas, who hired him as a writer on *Maxwell House Coffee Time* when he was just 16, and shortly after wrote for Ed Gardner on *Duffy's Tavern* and the *Joan Davis Show*. After serving in the Army where he wrote for the Armed Forces Radio Service, Gelbart worked on a variety of radio shows (1946-52) for such stars as Jack Carson, Jack Paar, Eddie Cantor, and Bob Hope.

In the 1950s he began writing for the new television medium. His credits from the early years include *The Red Buttons Show*, *The Pat Boone Chevy Showroom*, and in 1953 he joined the writing staff of Sid Caesar's *Caesar's Hour*, with writing partners Mel Tolkin, Neil Simon, and Mel Brooks. Throughout the 1950s Gelbart continued to write alongside other gifted comedy writers and performers such as Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, Red Buttons, Carl Reiner, Neil Simon, and Art Carney.

Gelbart co-authored the long-running Broadway farce *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* with Burt Shevelove in 1962, and produce a film *The Wrong Box*, shot in the U.K. In 1972 he returned to the United States to produce, write, and occasionally direct the first 97 episodes of the TV series *M*A*S*H*. He left the show in 1976 to do other projects. Among these were the screenplays to *Oh, God!* and *Movie Movie*, and in 1982 co-wrote the Oscar-nominated screenplay for *Tootsie*. Gelbart's other Broadway credits include *City of Angels* and the Iran-contra satire *Mastergate.: A Play on Words*. Gelbart wrote his memoirs, *Laughing Matters*, in 1997.

Gelbart received Emmy award nominations for *Caesar's Hour* (1955, 1956, and 1957), *Sid Caesar's Chevy Show* (1958), *The Danny Kaye Show* (1963) and in 1972, 1964, 1975 for *M*A*S*H*, which also garnered him a Writer's Guild Award (1972). For *City of Angels*, he received the Drama Desk Award (1989), the NY Drama Critics Circle award, the Edgar Allen Poe Award (all in 1990). He received the Lee Strasberg Award for Lifetime achievement in 1990.

[pre-interview banter]

GELBART: **Milton [Berle]** had a great joke one night. Milton ad-libbed a great joke. **Jack Carter** was living in Encino-- Anyway. It was the {Passover} Seder, and Jack's son Michael - who was very young then - got up, and said "why is this night different from all other nights?" And Milton said, "because we're in the valley."

(laughter- short break for microphone adjustment)

GELBART: Who do I talk to?

Matz: You can talk to either one of us.

GELBART: All right.

Dana: Just forget everyone else here.

GELBART: Who else? Who else is here?

{Gelbart sits back down}

Dana: Our anniversary is your birth date, February 28th.

GELBART: 25th.

Dana: Oh, we got to change our anniversary.

GELBART: IMDB had it the 24th. I couldn't get it to change it. I'm 77, if I'm a day.

Dana: So you're a palindrome. No matter how you look at it, you're 77.

GELBART: There's no getting away from it.

__: Is that a plane?

GELBART: Yeah, there will be planes, as we're in the Santa Monica airport path or whatever, but I'll keep talking unless it's clear that - right? Can anybody hear me? Am I on?

Dana: All right. Are we rolling? I think we've wasted enough time. Hello again.

GELBART: Hello.

DANA: Hello Larry. The whole premise of this thing, this is archives. Emerson College, you remember Gene Wood? When I was Dana and Wood? We graduated there. So this is for students.

GELBART: Well you have to, but why do I?

DANA: Yeah, that's right. Somewhere in the middle of this interview I'll come up with an answer, a real peppy response.

GELBART: Are the students interested in comedy?

DANA: Yes, that's right. So the focus of this thing is Larry Gelbart, on comedy. We slate this as act one. Oy, gevalt! As I said before, Jenni Matz is going to do the thing, courtesy of these nodules on my left vocal cord.

MATZ: Well, we'd like to start at the beginning.

GELBART: Right.

MATZ: Now, you've said before that you grew up in a house that had a lot of laughter. Your mother, you've described as having a very caustic wit, which was a common thing in Jewish households.

GELBART: Sometimes it's just caustic and no wit. But we had a lot of laughter.

MATZ: I'm wondering if you can remember the first time you noticed the power of laughter to make a dark situation a little brighter.

GELBART: My mother was beating the hell out of me one day when I was about six years old, and I remember very clearly saying "Ma, I'm not made out of rubber". And she said, "I wish your father had used one".

DANA: (laughter)

GELBART: Does that answer your question?

MATZ: Yeah, it does. Did that have some kind of impact on you?

GELBART: Well, the pounding did certainly, but I could see that even in what was a very dark moment for me, it was possible to appreciate something funny -- Mind you, I don't think it registered at that early age, but I think it got lodged in my hardware, you know? Hard-drive. And my hardware.

MATZ: Bill and I have been talking a lot about using humor as a defense mechanism.

GELBART: Absolutely. Humor, it's a sword and a shield, you know.

DANA: When you say sword, one of the analogies that we've been using is, people say, how do you learn to be funny? I say that's like, if you have a sword, if you're given the gift of wit, you can sharpen it. But without irony, ain't nothing going to happen.

GELBART: I don't think you can learn to be funny, as most people would agree, but you can grow up in an environment where humor is used in that way, as an offense and a defense. I think a good example of that is, way back in the stone age, when I was on *Caesar's Hour*, I had a conversation with **Neil Simon** about that age old question, where do jokes come from? Some people think they come from jail. It's hard for me to think of a bunch of rapists and kidnappers sitting down having a pitching session, coming up with the joke of the day. So, Doc-- Neil, made up a joke. It wasn't three or four days before someone came up and told it to him. The joke was - and it's very - I think this ties into what we're talking about, about humor as a weapon. The joke was these two Jews in front of a firing squad. About to be executed. The one Jewish guy says "Fuck Hitler!" and the other Jewish guy says "Shhh!" Does that make the point?

DANA: We could get in trouble, right? Yeah. That's right.

GELBART: That's right.

DANA: The survival aspect, I'm sure in all nationalities, ethnicities, but as a Jew, you learn it real, real easy.

GELBART: I think you do. But when you see dramatized versions of it, *Schindler's List*, other pictures like that, or you see documentaries, and you see just what life was like in those extreme last moments, it's hard to think that anybody could have cracked a joke at that time. But I guess they did.

MATZ: Is it maybe necessary to?

GELBART: Yeah, to deny what it is. Or, somebody also said that comedy is victory. I think it is, in a way. It certainly would have been in that sense.

DANA: Skipping ahead, and we'll go back, but what prompts me when you're talking about survival humor, is *M*A*S*H*. What was that whole thing, when you're under fire?

GELBART: Well, *M*A*S*H* was, in a sense, I don't think I'm stretching it, those people were in a ghetto in a sense. They were cut off from their families, they were cut off from what they knew to be civilization, huddled together far from home, displaced, doing something they didn't want to do. As doctors they weren't prepared to operate on basically healthy people who just happened to be insulted by a piece of metal, you know? So, that was the series, but in real life it was exactly the same. The series we know came from a movie which came from a book. And that book is full of reminiscences about doctors in Korea behaving insanely to stop themselves from going insane.

DANA: It's an interesting thing, because it follows so closely on World War II. Most of us who were in World War II, you didn't want to hear about it -- the attention that your humor brought was the reality for the Korean War for an awful lot of people.

GELBART: Yeah. *M*A*S*H* came at a peculiar time. We were able to write about a war that was 20-some years old, the Korean War, while there was a current war going on. So you could see at once how there was a universality and a timelessness about war. I think part of its popularity was the fact that those uniforms aren't too far from the uniforms people are wearing today, so it doesn't go out of style.

MATZ: I'd like it if you could expand a little on how a lot of comedy emerges and evolves from a place of sadness. You described once *M*A*S*H* as trying to give pain *style*, in the writing of it? Could you expand on that?

GELBART: Over the years I've looked for different reasons for why I think it worked. I have hundreds of reasons for why I think it shouldn't have. I think it goes back to the **comedy is victory idea**. If you can comment with wit about the pain you're in, then you've somehow won. I mean, the next step might be dying, but for that moment you haven't let it beat you.

MATZ: The pen is the sword.

GELBART: The pen is the sword. The sword is also the sword, that's the real problem. And a cigar is a cigar, I know.

DANA: Going to fall on my pen.

GELBART: (laughter) Don't move, I've got a --

DANA: I jumped ahead, skipping some delicious years, especially since you had the experience of radio.

That kind of radio is something that the Emerson students and others watching this would be interested in.

GELBART: I was lucky. First of all, I was lucky to begin as young as I did, but that was through a kind of fluke situation.

DANA: 15 was it?

MATZ: 16?

GELBART: I was 16 when I signed with the {William} Morris {agency}. They took a year and six months as commission, so I was actually 14 and a half, but - here comes a plane.

MATZ: When you speak again, I think it would be an interesting story, just how you got into the business. It was a very lucky situation, but --

GELBART: OK, will you ask me that?

MATZ: Sure.

GELBART: Because I've already forgotten what I was talking about.

MATZ: We were talking about the beginning, the first radio with Danny Thomas.

DANA: We could go back to where your dad grabbed a pair of scissors in his hand, he says --

GELBART: Well, my dad, I think I described him once as kind of a cross between Sweeney Todd and Mama Rose. He was a barber all his life. Started in Latvia, and wound up in Beverly Hills doing it until he was almost 90. A lot of his patrons, or customers as we would call them in the house, were people in show business. One of them was **Danny Thomas**, who came first to Hollywood who came to work first on something called *Maxwell House Coffee Time*, starring **Fanny Brice's** Baby Snooks. It was the longest marquee in show business. He talked me up to Thomas as someone who could write comedy. I had written the way a lot of kids do, you know? For school assemblies and shows, monologues, whatever. But not professionally, and not with any thought

of doing it professionally. I think I'd become a failed musician, that was my ambition. And it worked out. But, I see Bill, and I go into standup. But he {my father} got me this opportunity to write some material for Thomas, and he liked it, and he had me hang around. I worked for about 8 weeks just before the show went off the air. And **Mac Benoff**, who was the head writer of the show, gave me \$40 and he said, here, get yourself a sport coat. \$40 in those days, you got a sport coat and a sports car. I was very lucky, I worked for that show for this very limited time. Then, I went onto a show called *Duffy's Tavern*. The two {radio} shows that were really language oriented, and playful with language, were Fred Allen's and *Duffy's Tavern*. And so I had two years of experience - it was my College, it really was. I did not go to college. Barely got out of high school.

MATZ: The language aspect is something we were talking about before. We were very interested to learn that you had spoken Yiddish the first five years of your life. I wonder if hearing English from those ears affected the way that you see puns and wordplay?

GELBART: Well, I think it's pretty well established that people for whom language is a second English, we talk about *Duffy's* and I start doing spoonerisms.

{brief interruption for overhead plane}

GELBART: I'm not comparing myself to Vladimir Nabokov or Tom Stoppard, but English was a language they {had to} learn. One was Czech of course, and one was Russian, and I think that when you come to English fresh, not through memory, each word stands out a little bit more. I'm being fanciful when I put myself in their company. I think it's the fact that *Duffy's Tavern* was so word oriented. There was such attention paid to getting a wonderful **malapropism, or a spoonerism, or a pun**. That was such early training, that I think it stamped itself on me. You close your eyes and *M*A*S*H* is a radio show.

MATZ: I wonder if I could trouble you. There are a few delicious lines from *Duffy's Tavern* --I wonder if you remember anything that could be an example of a word reversal or a malapropism?

GELBART: I remember **Ed Gardner** signing an autographed photo for me. I was still quite young. He said “To Larry, who should become the world's greater comedy writer, after he goes through puberty and adultery”. We used to call it “the Putziler Prize” {sic}. We were probably the first people to say putz on the radio, outside of Radio Israel for example. Putziler Prize was one. Our big problem with malaprops is that in the old days, you would send your scripts to the network {stenography} pool. They would type your scripts before copying them. The pool people were forever correcting the malaprops, so we had to keep a list of what we really meant that they thought we didn't -- I remember on the first show {of my employment}, I worked on the {show's} opening monologue. The guest was Deans Taylor, who was a very celebrated musicologist. On the phone {Archie, the manager and Garndner's character} said, “tonight, our guest, Duffy, is Deems Taylor, as in Deems, Dem, and Dose”. It was just taking every word and seeing if there was something else in that word, stuffed in there like an anchovy, that you could turn around and use in a different way.

MATZ: You didn't go to college, but I know that you were heavily influenced by the Ritz Brothers. That word play came just by trial by doing?

GELBART: **The Ritz Brothers**, I don't think they went to college either. The three of them combined probably got to the sixth grade. That didn't have anything to do with college. That had to do with just shtick, that had to do with funny, funny, funny people. Bill knows, half the comics working patterned themselves after Harry Ritz who -- (laughter) we're being attacked by Beverly Hills.

DANA: One of the things that Emerson is studying is --

GELBART: Whoa! (laughter)

[plane overhead]

GELBART: This is hysterical.

MATZ: Those are bombers coming for us now.

GELBART: You can sell this tape to Boeing. Oh, God, I apologize for my zip code.

DANA: A mugging in Beverly Hills.

GELBART: Or a tear around 90210, as it's called. OK, quick, the next question!

MATZ: Go! OK. I wonder if the switch from working in radio, and getting your feet wet in that format, and then your next gig was writing for Bob Hope?

GELBART: No, no, I worked for a lot of people before. Duffy's Tavern, then **Jack Carson, Jack Paar**. It sounds like a passenger list on a ghost ship, right? **Eddie Cantor**, for five minutes. And then finally **Bob Hope**, for four years.

MATZ: And the format to move to television was different how, from radio?

GELBART: At first we didn't realize it was different. We thought you did the same jokes, and you just wore a funny hat when you did it. Or you looked for the sight jokes that didn't have to have anything to do with what you're saying. For my time, I think for all of Bob's time, there wasn't any real television quality to {any of} it. I think the first pure television show was *Laugh-In*. Because it used the medium. I think before that, all television kind of photographed either radio shows, or Vaudeville sketches, but it didn't employ electronic techniques in a medium that was strictly electronic.

MATZ: I think it would be interesting for students to understand, your career is very varied. You started in radio, and you went through many different kinds of formats of comedy writing.

GELBART: Right.

MATZ: Bob Hope was like the classic one-liner, and you described it as like every writer, you didn't know what part of the Bomb you were building. But later you worked on teams, and I wonder if you could talk about how your style had to change to fit those different needs.

GELBART: Well, you're more or less, when you're writing for comedians or comedy shows, of a variety nature. {You're writing} revues, really. Monologue, stand-up, sketch. Perhaps pantomime. Exchanges with someone else. You write in the style of the performer, and or the guest. It's really all craft. I think it was **Mel Tolkin** who once said we're all a bunch of clever monkeys. We could write for a sound, for a style, and for a character. If you wrote for **Jack**

Benny, you knew Benny's characteristics, and you wrote for Jack Benny. There was no, is no -- yeah, Bob Hope did have certain characteristics. The brashness, the cowardly hero. But, you just didn't - you wrote for them. You didn't write for yourself. You wrote jokes that you didn't really particularly care about. You just wrote because you were hired to write jokes. Later I was lucky enough to do things where it was my voice and my feelings about stuff that I was able to get on the page. What was the question?

DANA: What was that transition, where you started writing for Larry?

GELBART: It was *M*A*S*H*. *M*A*S*H* was really the first opportunity that I got to say what I felt. All sides of me. The heroic side, the idealistic side, the not so attractive side. Not everybody in the series was a hero. But I didn't stint in making them as bad as I knew I liked to be sometimes.

MATZ: Tracing a little bit more of the history, because we do have a lot of *M*A*S*H* questions.

GELBART: Go ahead, go ahead.

MATZ: You said that working, like, for Red Buttons, you really grew in terms of how you approached sketch comedy. But then working for Sid Caesar, this was a totally different thing. This is more when self revelation started to come out about following a moment. Could you describe how that was different?

GELBART: Well, working for Red; when I first went to work for Red, back in '18, was it? 1852, I think it was, give or take 100 years. I'd never written a sketch. Because the Hope sketches I wrote were not really sketches. If it was a western sketch then they were all western jokes, you know, "I'm so bowlegged that when, I sit around the house, I really sit around the house". And then the guns went off and you knew the sketch was finished. But Red was from burlesque, and Red knew the structure of a sketch, which is really a -- kind of a one-act play, or even a three act play, but done in seven or eight minutes. And so I really did learn from him, working with him, how to do something that had a beginning, however meager, and a middle and an end. With Sid we did sketches that were pure sketches. And we did an awful lot of parodies. We did takeoffs on movies that he {Sid Caesar} hadn't even seen yet. You got to use all your tricks on that show.

You did write monologues and you did write pantomimes, and you did write domestic sketches, sketches which let you employ the personal side of your life. Your relationship with your wife or your girlfriend or both at the same time, and your friends. So that was another kind of experience. It really wasn't until *M*A*S*H* that I could just settle down with a set of characters with a set of characteristics and let them say what it was I had to say.

MATZ: We've been talking about the 'Pagliacci Syndrome' that seems to follow comedy writers. I was very interested to see you'd done a parody of *Pagliacci* with Sid Caesar. Could you talk about how that came about?

DANA: Pagliacci syndrome, she's talking about depression.

MATZ: The connection between sadness and comedy.

GELBART: Well, I don't think - I mean, I don't think people who deal in comedy are any, uh, have a greater quotient of sadness than anybody else. I mean, comedy is, is one front we put up. We put up for really good money, you know? Other people, you know, work in a bank and smile all day, and they're quite sad, too, as we know. I think farmers, it turns out, are the saddest people. They have an enormous rate of suicide. I don't know. Maybe we can talk to their wives before they're put in their pens, we'd know a little bit more about it.

DANA: That's just the funny farmers.

GELBART: (laughter) Where's the sad farm? But what's the question? So what's the what?

MATZ: The link between comedy and sadness. The expression of using - of being able to express - to put a lighter side to life, to put --

GELBART: That's, that's just humanity. That's what people do. We just, we can't go around - some people do, sadly - go around being sad. We can't go around being silly all the time. We are this incredible mixture of light and dark, of loving and hateful, or hating. I don't think comedy writers particularly, it's not our exclusive property.

MATZ: It's an interesting combination that you seem to balance, especially in the writing for *M*A*S*H*, of pure folly with this undertone of seriousness.

GELBART: Well. I mean, war is the greatest folly, really, that - that - that grown-up men can't solve politically what has to be solved, and so young men have to die, you know? I guess you could call that folly. It's more tragedy, obviously. I guess another word for comedy is making the best of it, you know?

MATZ: Survival again, we come back to.

DANA: Yeah.

GELBART: Not just survival. I mean, turtles survive. Well, (inaudible). I've never met a --

DANA: There is the aspect of the healing power of laughter and play.

GELBART: Yes, **Norman Cousins**.

DANA: Norman Cousins in the *Anatomy of illness*. I had the privilege of working -

GELBART: Did you?

DANA: Yes, I worked with Norman, here in Santa Monica.

GELBART: Right.

DANA: Where Harold Benjamin had the wellness community that Gilda's Club spun off of. I used to do a thing with Norman Cousins called Titters for the Terminal. It was everybody wearing a babushka and they were, you know. I did the Laughter Prescription with Lawrence Peter.

GELBART: Right.

DANA: Let's have a riff on that, the healing power of.

GELBART: I don't - I don't think anybody ever died laughing. A lot of people die crying, you know?

MATZ: There was a great quote in the book on the table that Jay says.

GELBART: Oh, Jay **Malarcher**.

MATZ: Yeah, yeah. It was just a wonderful expression. He said it was a Kennedy quote actually. That there are only three things that are real: God, human folly, and laughter.

GELBART: That's right. And we can't do something about the first two, and --

MATZ: We do what we can with the third.

GELBART: We do what we can with the third, yeah. Well, he was a great - he was funny, he was witty, he was very dry. Norman Cousins had the theory that if depression and the negative side of life can create certain enzymes or chemical changes to the body that are very negative, then he thought why can't laughter do the opposite, or does laughter do anything like that, but of a more positive nature. I don't know that that can be quantitatively or qualitatively proved, but we all know we feel better when we laugh than when we cry. Although maybe sometimes we need to stop denying some of the things that we're doing when we laugh at them. Uh, I'm not going anywhere.

DANA: In the cadre of comics that we know, comedians. That's, actually, we should get into that. When you and I were --

GELBART: Young?

DANA: Young, comic was -- he's a *comic* was almost a pejorative, almost a put down.

GELBART: Yes, yeah.

DANA: You insisted on being called a comedian.

GELBART: As comedy-writers insisted on not being called gag-men.

DANA: Yeah, that's right, that's right.

GELBART: Well, earlier comedy didn't have as much content. Earlier comedy tended to be of the Henny Youngman variety, maybe elevated in some area. I was thinking of **Morey Amsterdam** {who} was funny, Henny Youngman {who} was funny, **Milton** who was funny. But it was not about anything except being funny. We've come to expect, I think, social comment and material that we identify with as people from our modern day comics.

DANA: Social comment, interesting to get Larry Gelbart's view on, I've been using the analogy that on television, when I was on the *Steve Allen show*, you couldn't show a close-up of the stork on *zoo parade*. We had to shoot Elvis Presley from the waist up, and --

GELBART: That's right, no belly buttons.

DANA: You couldn't use the word pregnant.

GELBART: No. Of course not. You couldn't even get pregnant. If you got pregnant while you were watching, the FCC came and got you. Well, we've come a long way, and we've come too far in some ways. What's to be said about that? That's progress, and progress, invariably, is, uh, disruptive.

DANA: Did you develop techniques of getting around the program practices, which was a euphemism for censorship?

GELBART: I think the only really original thing I ever did to get around the silliness of the **censorship**, which was usually - they {CBS} were worried about two things {on *M*A*S*H*}. They were worried about blasphemy. You could say 'God', you could say 'damn', but you couldn't put the two words together. And they were worried about sexual, anything graphic sexually. This was in pre-cable days, and nobody let their pee-pee hang out, or whatever. You just, you didn't do it on television. I don't know why they were so worried about it. But, one week they objected to the word 'virgin'. Because they were afraid that {young} people watching at home {might} ask their parents what a virgin was, and their parents wouldn't be able to explain it probably. I fought long and hard, but I lost the fight to retain the word virgin. I used it in a non-sexual context. Radar was walking in the compound one night, and a soldier {on guard appeared} - - a young GI - clearly nervous about having a gun in his hand, and he {asked Radar for} the password. {Radar} said "Stop shaking soldier", and the kid said "I'm a virgin, sir". They wouldn't let him say virgin. So, I lost. The next week, I did an episode in which the {hospital} bus pulls into the camp, and they're doing triage. They're deciding which soldier needs to be treated first. Radar is there with his clipboard, and he says to this one kid- "What's your name" and he says "Johnson" or whatever. And {Radar asks} "Where you from?" And the kid says "The Virgin Islands, sir". So I got my virgin in, with a capital V. They made you play games in those days.

MATZ: There were some other words you fought for on *M*A*S*H*. I think, I don't know if it was "damn it", but there was some expression, and you really fought the network because you felt that these

characters, to be believable, they were in the middle of this chaotic war zone, they would have to

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GELBART: Well, how far have we come? I mean, the other day, ABC hesitated in putting *Private Ryan*, *Saving Private Ryan*, on the air, because some no-nuts said there's too much indecency in that movie. There's too much cursing. But-- success breeds all kinds of freedom. In the first year of *M*A*S*H* when we had no rating at all, they wouldn't let us say the word "bris". Bris being the ceremony by which a young child is circumcised. Males, in this country. We lost the battle. We could not say bris. In the third year, when we were number two or number three in country in the ratings, we did a bris on the air. I mean, we cut above the cut line, but that's the kind of, you know. Censorship is serious, but it can be got around if you make enough money for the network.

DANA: Talking about making enough money for the network.

GELBART: Yes?

DANA: The business of show business.

GELBART: Yes.

DANA: Scar-tissue from it, or was everything OK?

GELBART: I -- for better or for worse, I've always been able to open my yap about the business that's feeding me and my loved ones and even some people I don't particularly care about. I guess I'm scarred. I guess I'm cynical somewhat. I guess I'm callous. But, what am I going to do? Go to the show business across the street? You know, this, this is it.

DANA: So the -- not so much the writer as the performer, as commodity. You've been on both sides.

GELBART: I've not been a performer, if that - are you saying?

DANA: No, no, I'm saying it doesn't apply that much to the writer.

GELBART: No, not the writer, no.

DANA: But, in the chats we've had, it's almost a universal, like a begrudging type of thing. I had this manager who did this, was OK, but.

GELBART: I have all the horror stories, and even a few nice ones, but I don't know. As I get older I knock more wood than I do people. They're all forgiven, for making me.

DANA: It's, in the top five or top ten points of interest for people who are going to go into humor as a profession.

GELBART: Well, to those people, I have another message altogether. "Go back! Go out! Get a drill press". No, it is a far, far different business. And when I say business I'm talking about not radio anymore, clearly, but television and motion pictures. It's a far meaner business. It's a far more corporate-minded -- aviation minded. Here comes the plane.

[brief interruption for plane overhead]

GELBART: See, you say one word against them. That's Rupert Murdoch. Watch, he's going to strafe us.

MATZ: It's an important warning to tell people. It is a very different world now.

GELBART: It has never been an easy business to get into. It's an easy business to get born into sometimes, if you happen to be on the receiving end of nepotism, which never went away here.

DANA: Nepotism is OK, as long as you keep it in the family.

GELBART: But, it is more difficult these days. It really is more difficult. I think more people are chasing after more jobs, there are more jobs than there ever were. Not so much television for writers, as we're going through this so-called reality show period, but it is a very, very tough business. Uh. And you're never above being disappointed, and you're never above being surprised. I'm not surprised, but I am disappointed. **Paddy Chayefsky**, his last movie was called *Altered States*. He received a million dollars for it. He eventually took his name off the picture, because the director, **Ken Russell**, did what he wanted with it. So you're never so protected, unless you are a producer, writer, director, all in one person. There's always someone looking to rewrite you, revise you, rescrew you in a way. If that sounds too cau -- (car alarm) there's somebody stealing an idea down the street! Get that guy!

DANA: This is fascinating, the whole texture of this thing. We're really controlled by the sounds in the other room.

GELBART: Yes, and the sounds are ever more intrusive. Networks now have been given the right to own what appears on their networks. And so they own the shows, many of the shows that we see. This was not the case 25 years ago. Therefore, what once was a suggestion is now a demand. They literally sit at writer's tables. Executives, company representatives, they sit there and deal with creative content. CBS is owned by **Viacom**, which is a monster that owns several other kind of show business. General Electric owns NBC. General Electric is probably the largest supplier of armaments to the United States government. So already you know a certain kind of movie and a certain kind of TV show is not going to get made. And maybe a certain kind of news is not going to get broadcast, for those of you, the three of you watching this that want to be news writers. ABC we know is Disney, who, like the other three, is constantly courting Washington for approval. And are very careful not to offend. Rupert Murdoch, who owns News Corp and Fox, is not afraid to offend. And there are a lot of people who think he's right to be so offensive, you know? So, what you're really dealing with as a writer; probably not as a comedian, but perhaps as the owner of a show as the comedian, you're dealing with the emissaries of these companies, which have a larger agenda. I think someone said to me that in the year-end financial report of General Electric, it's about this thick. About half a page is devoted to NBC, you know, we laugh-makers, music-makers, whatever. We're like so many hired hands. You try to get hired hands for as little as you can, and try to have them do the most that they can, for that little. Not that you still can't make millions and millions, and millions, but it's just harder to get those millions and millions.

DANA: That's the commodity factor. This level is using this level, the next level down is using the other.

GELBART: But they all have this allegiance to the top, to the name on the stationery.

MATZ: Do you think a show like *M*A*S*H* could happen today?

GELBART: I don't know. I don't think it could be the same. I know that several networks are trying to do something based on Iraq, and let's see what they come up with. I think it's very daunting to do something without some time in between to get yourself together about what you thought about what happened, instead of writing about something that's happening all the time, and is completely available on the news all the time. Although I tuned in the news this morning at 8 o'clock, and I didn't see one story about Iraq. It's like, you know, the *Scott Peterson case* is over, *OJ's* over, *Iraq's* over.

DANA: Tsunami's over.

GELBART: Tsunami's over, sure. Well.

MATZ: So aside from dealing with specific censorship issues with *M*A*S*H*, like about the bad words you couldn't say, it seems that they did let you have a lot of freedom to discuss, to have a conversation basically with an audience on air, about something that everyone seemed to want to talk about but wasn't addressing.

GELBART: Yes. No, I was very grateful for that. I didn't mind losing a hell or a virgin or a little, what's essentially lint, a little bit of language here and there. I did have, in the beginning, quite an on-going conversation with them as being as anti-establishment and anti-war as we wanted to be. Finally, the clincher was -- so, **Normal Lear** was sort of winning the other battle on *All in the Family*. I said last night, I tuned in and I heard them say this, and this, and this. Why can't we flush a toilet, and why can't we - because you're in the Army, and the toilets didn't flush. Oh. But I then said, you know, in terms of content and political material, I said this same network is allowing **Walter Cronkite** at 6 o'clock to question our being in Vietnam. Why can't we question it at 8 o'clock or 8:30? The truth is, during that particular period, if you look back, there was no drama on television. A lot of blue lights, cop lights going around, and lawyers, much as it is today. And doctor shows. Civilian doctor shows. But there was no real - melodrama - but no real drama, no real issue-oriented shows, or one-off shows. The occasional Studio One or Westinghouse Playhouse. This is, I mean, these are -

DANA: What was it?

GELBART: Not important. In the early days of television there was a lot of drama. So it was the half hour comedy show that was really carrying the ball. It was *M*A*S*H*, but we were really freed in a way by Norman Lear and *Mary Tyler Moore* and a number of other shows, which really were talking, and even Carl's show - **Carl Reiner's** show, the **Dick Van Dyke** show - was talking about marriage as marriage. Marriage as sexual relationship, as parenting relationships. We didn't form a club and say what are we going to attack and defend next week, but we were aware that we were a part of some kind of, if not a Greek chorus, at least an interested chorus.

MATZ: I'm curious, with a show like that, which dealt with so many complicated issues, if you wrote with any assumptions about your audience.

GELBART: I wrote - I think I wrote like every writer writes, and that is with the assumption that if you think like this, there are others who do as well. And even better, maybe they will think like that afterwards. That's not to say that your idea is the one that should be the dominant one, but perhaps you will influence someone, or have them see a situation differently because of what you've presented. But the presumption was, I think, always, you write for yourself. Which is a presumption, but who's going to criticize you when you're talking to yourself?

DANA: It's - I'm sitting here projecting a few years down the line, when people are watching Larry Gelbart.

GELBART: The late Larry Gelbart, thank you.

DANA: (laughter) OK.

GELBART: I was a great guy.

DANA: We'll put, what, dimes on your eyes?

GELBART: No, pennies.

DANA: Pennies!

GELBART: You must have been from a rich neighborhood. (laughter)

DANA: We killed them ten at a time.

GELBART: (laughter)

DANA: Oh, lord. That is, actually, the people who were - the hired guns in those days had that commonality of survival. So many of that generation is a totally different mix of people now.

GELBART: When I - when I was a boy, I --

DANA: When I was alive.

GELBART: When I was alive, yes. During the early part of my life, my former life, most of the comedy writers were, there were even some immigrants who were comedy writers. Mel Tolkin who wrote for Sid Caesar for years was born in Russia. And there were others. Not a lot. But by and large, it was first generation Americans. And predominantly Jewish. Predominantly urban. Predominantly uneducated. Now, we're several generations down the line. We have college people. We have assimilation. All kinds of other influences. So why isn't it funny?

DANA: Why isn't it more - I've thought of that, too. With the license they have today in so-called family hour.

GELBART: The license is part of the problem. If you can say a four-letter word, then you don't have to think of a {different} four-letter word, or a six-letter word to replace that four-letter word.

DANA: Taking the art away.

GELBART: In a sense, in a sense. You know, it's an old story, about where when they take your freedom away, then they really make you creative. You have to bang on the pipes in another way.

DANA: Yeah, banging on the pipes.

MATZ: There was a totally different turn that you took when, I think after *M*A*S*H*, you did a play called *Mastergate*.

GELBART: Yes.

MATZ: And it was much angrier.

GELBART: Yes.

MATZ: I wonder if there's different values you've placed to the comedy as, you know, you've grown as a writer yourself, and if you think one's more effective than the other in expressing yourself, or..?

GELBART: I think - I think - I think that's an airplane. Rrrraaaarr.

DANA: We could do a medley of these.

GELBART: Yes, this is an album. And for best conversation with a comedian: the Aviator.

DANA: We talk to Jonathan Winters on Monday, and he does his own. If you want to be as good as Larry Gelbart, give us a Boeing F4/B4 and a C-47.

MATZ: Yeah, I didn't know you were a ventriloquist. That's pretty good.

GELBART: I only do planes.

MATZ: And sirens.

GELBART: That's OK! What was I going to lie about next?

MATZ: You were going to lie about *Mastergate*.

GELBART: Oh, *Mastergate*. No, that wasn't a question of choosing one medium over another. That was a question of being so outraged over Iran/Contra that the idea hit me, and I had, um, the opportunity to put it on the stage very quickly up at the Cambridge, uh, what's it -- the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass. And so we put it on, you know? It did go to Broadway, and we did do it on Showtime. So it had a kind of a medium-jumping little life.

DANA: On the way to the forum.

GELBART: Yes.

DANA: Was that the first working in concert with other funny folk?

GELBART: You mean?

MATZ: I think he means lyricist.

GELBART: Well, no, I'd written with far funnier folk in radio and in television, but that was the first effort that was meant to go on the stage. And I was not only collaborating with **Burt Shevelove**, with whom I wrote the book, and **Stephen Sondheim**, who was writing the first score that he wrote that contained his music and his lyrics, we were working with Titus Maccius Plautus, a

Roman playwright, who died at 243 BC at 7:30 in the evening in his driveway. That was a challenge. It really was. **Plautus** wrote - nobody knows how many plays he wrote. But 26 have survived. While he borrowed from the Greeks, those plays have every, every comic technique known. Shakespeare's used them, Henny Youngman used them.

DANA: Can you identify them? Some of them?

GELBART: Henny Youngman, you know, "take my wife, please". Plautus, "two Romans meet on the street, one says to the other, "how's your wife", and the other one says, "Immortal". You know, that's as good a joke. Um, Plautus, Prologus comes out and addresses the audience. He says "it's another play by Plautus, nobody go to sleep". "I know there are people out there, I can hear snoring, you know?" (Siren noise) All together now! You know, this could also be sold as a police benefit.

MATZ: Didn't you once relate comedy writing to a jazz symphony?

GELBART: Comedy writing is a jazz session, jam session, you know. Good. (laughter)

MATZ: Talking about Plautus some more.

GELBART: Yes.

MATZ: It was, someone said it was like a senior thesis on 2 thousand years of comedy to go and do that play.

GELBART: It really was. Some people said, some critics said it was a scholarly piece of work. We kept that quiet. That's a great thing to get audiences in. Very scholarly, masterful. But it was. It was a wonderful piece of work, because we took elements of some of his plays. We took some of his characters. We wove them together with an overall storyline of our own. It worked. It worked. They just finished doing a revival of it at the National Theater in London, and it's almost 50 years old. I was a child when I wrote that. I wasn't even toilet trained.

MATZ: Part of what's nice this week is everyone we're talking to is referencing a lot of the same, you know, early influences. Like Jack Benny, the Marx Brothers. In philosophy they say it's just the great conversation, and it seems like comedy has its own.

GELBART: Oh yeah. Has its own stand-up. Well Groucho, **Groucho**. Groucho was such a, influenced so many people. Me among them. Me chief among them. Listen to Hawkeye with your eyes closed, and you'll hear Groucho's rhythms. I had the good luck to meet {Groucho Marx} late in his life. Whenever you met him it was late in his life. I treasured every moment of it. I once went to lunch with him in London. He, uh, the waiters -- he, he could be funny, he was funny. He was irredeemably funny. He was terminally funny. (Plane)

DANA: Here he comes now.

GELBART: Here he comes. Um, he uh - no, we can't do it.

DANA: This gives a whole other texture to this. It's the *ma-nish-ya-naw* syndrome.

MATZ: This is where you need to do your soft-shoe. You need to bust out your clarinet and your saxophone.

GELBART: Tell me when this guy is outgoing.

DANA: Uh. Memories, lasting influence.

GELBART: **Groucho Marx** didn't need an audience. He really didn't. He was constantly amusing himself, or if not that, he was just playing with words all the time. I remember having lunch with him in London, and the waiter said, "What will have you Mr. Marx?" And Groucho said, "Omelet". And then the waiter went on to me, but I could hear Groucho saying to himself, "Christian Soldiers." He was a miserable man. They didn't call him Groucho for nothing. He wasn't Happy or Sneezy, he was Groucho. But, by God, he transferred that into funny stuff.

DANA: I remember when Coca, Imogene Coca, used to have this salon at 300 Central Park West a couple of times. With Hal March and Groucho loved the position of mentor, you know.

GELBART: Sure, yes yes. He was the king and the court jester at the same time.

DANA: We literally sat at his feet. He sat in the chair, we just squatted down in front of him.

GELBART: First time I met him, I was sitting at his feet. I had written something, he was doing - not important, but a guy came over to him and he said, "Mr. Marx, I've always been a loyal

supporter.” And {Groucho} says, “I’m wearing one of those right now.” He just was incorrigible. Yes! Hurry up before something comes through.

MATZ: Yeah, well, it just that it seems that the importance of knowing who came before, like pioneers of comedy, even if you don’t go to a laugh school, that you could really learn a lot of tools.

GELBART: Well, you can learn - first of all, you have to enjoy it. You don’t think you’re learning a thing. I remember going to the Chicago Theater as a child, four, five, six, seven years old, and laughing my head off at **Billy DeWolfe**, and a World War I comic named **Johnny Burke**. I didn’t think I was - I wasn’t taking notes. Something was taking notes, maybe. But just enjoying that conversation where a comedian says something, and the audience’s answer is a laugh. I didn’t say to myself, ‘oh, boy I’ve got to do that one day’. And, as I said, I mean, people were funny in my house.

DANA: Billy DeWolfe brings up an interesting subject, because everybody knew that he was gay, but I don’t think they used --

GELBART: They didn’t use the word gay then.

DANA: the word gay then. And Franklin Pangborn -

GELBART: Yes.

DANA: And today, the joy is that it’s all there.

GELBART: That’s right.

DANA: I’ve noticed the writing on *Frasier*. This restoration comedy where this door opens and somebody goes out.

GELBART: **It all goes back to Plautus**. It all goes back to mistaken identity, and the braggart warrior. The hen-pecked husband. The dominating mother. The lovesick youngsters. The confidence man, the wily slave, Sergeant Bilko. It’s just, nothing has changed. The form of getting it to an audience has changed... Maybe they were this filthy back in ancient Rome, I don’t know. But, can comedy change? We are who we are as people. We laugh at what we laugh at. We laugh at what we’re scared of, we laugh at what we’re delighted with. Mostly, we have a lot

of trouble laughing at ourselves, which is where it should really start. Because if you don't do that, then you really have no license to laugh at anything else. But, um, there's nothing new under the sun, only the people who provide it.

DANA: That's right. It's a temptation. I'm sure you've shared that emotion. I've been on writing staffs where I was the elder statesman, and you have to keep yourself from saying well, what you're doing is the third joke in from here comes the judge.

GELBART: Yeah, of course.

DANA: The formula, people are inventing old stuff everyday.

MATZ: Sometimes-- we talked with Shelley Berman. We were talking about Larry David's comedy, and how he is not even really aware that he is reviving a lot of this comedy. It is like the same, it's the same joke.

GELBART: Of course. How can you invent a new human condition? You know, how can we be other than what we are?

DANA: I guess that's the problem that comes when people try to do that. Or delude themselves.

GELBART: No, they don't-- You can invent a new form, but you can't invent a new content. It is all, after all, about us. We can be a painting or we can be a cartoon. {Plane flies overhead} Or we can be an airplane.

MATZ: Just in terms of, you know, how people, oftentimes, they overlook comedy as something that's really vital in our society, as the mirror. Can you talk about why we need it?

GELBART: Sure. I think, because people think comedy's easy. They rarely honor motion pictures that are comic, because they think they're easy, whereas in fact they're you know. A pause in a drama can be very pregnant and poignant and meaningful, even if you don't know why or what they mean you to feel. But a pause in comedy is death. That's called a lull. You know? I think it's because you can get a script read by any number of people in this city, and New York, and if they see a certain name on the front, they'll laugh before they get to the cast of characters. But if they don't know who wrote it, and they don't even know if it's a comedy, you get in a lot of

trouble. And that's, talking to now, whoever's watching this, some of you may be dead now, this is a very long interview. That's another problem. You have to, if you're going to write comedy, you have to depend upon a certain sensibility that's as creative as yours, that will understand what you meant by this. I have trouble, because a lot of my stuff is very sly. I mean, you can't tell that, because I'm sitting here with a red nose that keeps flashing on and off, but that's for the airplanes. But, people tend to like things they understand very quickly and, even better, things they've seen before. Or things they've read before. A big word in this business is "another". This is another *M*A*S*H*. This is another, uh, *Sopranos*. This is another substitute of your own hit. If you come in -- that's why *Forum*, good as it is, I can say that now, because it's kind of proved its durability, *a funny thing happened*. We had a hell of a time selling it to anybody. Because 17 people, one set, wearing togas. They thought it was some kind of artsy, craftsy, pretentious little piece of pseudo-New York Shakespeare. They didn't understand that it was a bare-assed comedy. They did once it went on. But people, I remember -- oh, *Mastergate*. *Mastergate* is this political satire I wrote, although it's hard to write political satire. I mean, the headlines are political satire. (Plane) Come on, before I finish this! I wrote *Mastergate*, and some very important person in, uh, in the theater, who shall be nameless, **Gerry Schoenfeld**, who was, is still, one of the partners of Shuberts, the Shuberts, a very, very prestigious producing entity in New York, and theater owners, and he said I hear you've written a play. I'd like the chance to read it before anybody else. I said sure. And so he read the play and we went to lunch immediately. He said this is probably the best thing you've ever written. This is just sensational. I can't tell you how good this is. I said well thank you very much. He said "I just have one question. Can it be about something else? It wouldn't be a big job, either." I guess not. So that's one of the perils you run into.

DANA: Yeah, that, to - to explain to the, uh, aspiring screenwriter that you're going to come in with Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, love it, but could it be on a submarine?

GELBART: Yes, Yeah. An American submarine! Yes. You have to - for those of you who are going to write, you have to remember that that's all, that's your voice. No one will be hearing you read it to them. Don't spend a lot of time being - if I can offer this gratuitous advice - don't spend a lot of time being funny in your stage directions or your action, and then have the people sound like wooden Indians. Unless it's a play about wooden Indians. But be very - be very sure you're communicating what it is you want to communicate. And even that won't protect you against the philistines who kind of break their lips reading your script.

MATZ: Are there any lessons you wish you would have learned at the beginning of your career that you know now?

GELBART: I wish English had been my first language. I could have been working 5 years sooner. You know what, I learn - everybody learns every day. You know, I, I, I said I'm never surprised, and I'm not. But new lessons come to you in different ways. No, I can't say I've learned anything. I've learned everything, and I think I have a lot more to learn.

MATZ: Have you learned what makes people laugh?

GELBART: I make people laugh. I don't know why, but I do. I don't know what - sure, I know what makes people laugh. What makes me laugh, makes them laugh. Not all of them, some of them don't get it. See, you didn't get that, did you?

DANA: No, that's corroborated all down the line. It's hard to realize that there are people without irony. People who don't understand.

GELBART: One of the problems with *Mastergate*, because it was full of deliberate uh ... malaprops, and fractured phrasing, one of the problems was people are so used to hearing that on television, that they didn't see the humor in what I thought would be humorous to them. I remember one woman called the Criterion Theater, she wanted to buy tickets for the show I guess, she dialed that number. The receptionist said "*Mastergate*", and the woman said "I don't have to take that kind of talk", and she hung up. The title comes from - I wanted to do some kind of Gate. Contragate, Watergate, we know all the gates, although we haven't seen them all yet. I said to

my wife, what's a good, what can I put in front of "gate" that'll make it good? She said, "Mastergate". That helped me name the studio, the motion picture studio, which is contained in the investigation, or in the hearing, I called that Master Pictures to justify the *Mastergate*. But you can see I'm insane about words.

DANA: It's interesting, you mentioned Pat. I've got my heavy(?) the sounding board, of tremendous value.

GELBART: Absolutely. You can't - you're really blessed if you're married to, going with, or even divorced from, someone who gets you, and you get her or him. Because I can't imagine a worse life than saying something which you think is reasonably clever, and having somebody say "pass the Splenda". It sounds like we're winding down. Are we winding down?

DANA: No, everything is, everything is --

GELBART: Oh, it's gold! It's gold!

MATZ: I wonder if you could offer any more advice, to offer someone who's going into satire, political humor, about challenges of addressing a hard subject?

GELBART: You know, I don't think you can ever - you might advise somebody, but I don't think you can encourage or discourage somebody who's not going that way anyway. We're all drawn to whatever it is we want to do. Satire's hard because, you know, truly so much of contemporary life is airborne.

MATZ: It's biting you in the rear.

GELBART: This is - you know, it's not - maybe it is like this. Maybe I don't even know it anymore. You can't send a boy up in an interview like this.

MATZ: It's a good metaphor for the unexpectedness of life.

DANA: Well, to sum up. Was it worth it?

GELBART: Was it worth it?

DANA: Was it worth it?

GELBART: In fifteen seconds, was your life worth it. You know, when you say was it worth it, was what I did worth it? Was what I'd done worth it?

DANA: The scar tissue.

GELBART: You'd have to show me what it was I could have done other than what I did, and tell me whether it was worth it. On its own - and I don't, I'm not comfortable using the past tense, because I'm so - I'll hopefully finish a lot of the things I'm still doing. On its own, it was more than worth it. I've had a fantastic run. I've done this for over 60 years. I was alive for 16 years before that. Those weren't exactly chopped liver. Um. Yeah. I got to work with some terrific people, in front and behind the camera. I was taught by some wonderful comedy writers. **Abe Burrows, Bill Manhoff.** Some great guys; **Jack Douglas**, who preceded **Jonathan Winters** and **Pat McCormick** as whatever's left of left-field comedy. It's been a terrific, I don't want to say ride. Movies are a ride, rides are rides. It's been a terrific life. And you, want to know who I think is funny?

DANA: Yeah.

GELBART: You didn't ask me who I think is funny. My children and my grandchildren. And my great-grandchildren. We have a family dinner every Monday night, it was my wife's idea. Started about 20 years ago. I don't think I laugh harder anywhere else. Because it's so spontaneous, so real. This was a reality show before reality shows became so popular. I mean, hearing unplanned humor, because like so many people who I'm sure you interview, because we watch or we listen and we either recognize or we revise as we listen or we improve, but this is all spontaneous. And the discovery, they're telling jokes at eight years old that I told when I was eight years old. And just this kind of innocent wonderful first take on things, it's a privilege to be around that and enjoy it.

DANA: So then just keep them away from the Morris Office and everything will be fine.

MATZ: I have one last question, and then I think we do have to wrap up, because you have to be somewhere.

DANA: Yeah.

MATZ: You've done high comedy, you've done low comedy. I wonder, just looking back now, would you claim any as your greatest achievement, or something you're most proud of doing and being a part of?

GELBART: I'm working on a first draft of that right now. No, I just, lucky timing, whatever, I don't know what. I got to do a lot of stuff that people don't get to do. I think the basis for it all though, the education was writing, co-writing, "*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum.*" Because it was a very complex, multi-tiered story, which all had to finally - there was a confluence at the end where they all come together. Mind you, mind you, it took five years to get it right. But five years at that point in my life was petty cash. But it enabled me to do a lot more after that. Most - and no small thing - it enabled me not to have to be in the daily or the weekly grind of television. Turning out a show after a show after a show. I hope everybody, or a large percentage of people watching, have the opportunity to do something where they don't tear the set down after it's done the first time. There's something nice about your work going on clearly beyond you. But if I had it the other way around, I would rather the shows died and I lived forever. But you can't have it all, right?

MATZ: Part of it certainly will.

DANA: We thank you so much.

MATZ: Thank you so much.

GELBART: Thank you so much. And the United States Air Force thanks you, too.

MATZ: Right.

GELBART: The Beverly Hills Police Force, and the Ambulance Corps.

DANA: And a few words from Lucky Lindy himself.

END OF INTERVIEW

