

The American Comedy Archives Interview

JAY SANDRICH

Interviewed June 6, 2005

By Bill Dana and Jenni Matz

In Beverly Hills, CA

Biographical Information:

Jay Sandrich (b. February 24, 1932 in Los Angeles, CA) has directed many of the best-loved television sitcoms of the past 50 years. His father, Mark Sandrich, was a notable director of film, most famously five Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers' films.

Jay began his career after his father's death, as 24-year old Assistant Director on *I Love Lucy* (1956), "Our Miss Brooks", and "December Bride." Later he would work on *The Danny Thomas Show*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961), and *The Bill Dana Show* (1963).

Associate Producer credits include *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960) and *Get Smart* (1965-70). He signed on as regular Director (for seven years, two-thirds of all episodes) of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in 1971, for which he won an Emmy.

Sandrich has directed pilots and episodes of many television sitcoms such as *He and She* (1967-70), *The Bob Newhart Show* (pilot and episodes during 1972-78), *Phyllis* (1975-77), *The Tony Randall Show* (pilot and episodes), *Soap* (1977, 2 seasons), *The Cosby Show* (1984-92), *The Golden Girls* (pilot), *Empty Nest* (Season 3 pilot), and numerous other shows as a guest director or series director. He directed the film "Seems Like Old Times" (1980) with Chevy Chase, Charles Grodin, and Goldie Hawn.

Archivists note: Items in {brackets} were corrected by the narrator, post-interview.

DANA: The whole idea here is -- As I was saying outside, it is though as if we would have had a chance to see our own party --to talk about the craft-- But, from your point of view, which is gold for us, that--

SANDRICH: OK.

DANA: --we're seeing is the director's eye.

SANDRICH: OK. So I'll talk about writing and casting and pilots, and what-- OK.

DANA: Yeah. Well, we're just, we're already rolling. Yeah. What we're doing is just sort of sliding into this thing.

SANDRICH: So, we've slid.

DANA: Jenni knows what she's talking about--

SANDRICH: And I hope you know what she's talking about.

DANA: And I know who we're talking to.

SANDRICH: Now, can I talk to Bill?

DANA: Yeah, either one of us.

SANDRICH: OK, so mentioning names.

DANA: And anybody you want.

SANDRICH: Great. OK. OK.

MATZ: So, let we want to start at the beginning with how you got into the business. Your father was a film director--

SANDRICH: Right.

MATZ: And what the interest was and what was the motivation was that got you here?

SANDRICH: Well, basically, I was 13 when my father died. And when I was a junior in college, I got a phone call from the Director's Guild saying that they were going to change the rules. The rules were --when I was in college -- that any son of a member could automatically get in to the Director's Guild. Not daughters, but sons. And they were going to change the rules and that you'd have to take a competitive exam. So, I didn't want to take a competitive exam. So, as a junior in college, I joined the Director's Guild. My mother gave me the money, because I didn't have any money, and, um, so now I'm a second assistant director, have no idea what a second assistant director does, and I knew somebody who worked on the *Lone Ranger*, so I followed the second assistant director around on the *Lone Ranger*. Then, I graduated and went in the army, and I was sent to Officer's Training School in Georgia (infantry officer) and I had put in for Signal Corps, because that's where films were made. And at the last minute I was transferred, so now I spent two years making training films, and I'm getting out of the army, and I say well, what would I like to do, and the shows that I enjoyed watching were done by

DesiLu. They were, you know, *The Lucy Show* and a show called *Our Miss Brooks* and a bunch of comedies. So I sit down and I see that there's one man, the production manager in all these shows, and I write him a note saying I'm in the army, and I'm getting out, and I got an immediate response back saying, "When you're out, come see me." So, I go to see him, and I sit down and I introduce myself and he says, "When can you start?" "Well," I says, "I can start Monday." Great. So, I go home and tell my then wife, I guess I really had a good interview. I learned out later - - I learned later -- he had been my father's assistant director. He didn't tell me that.

(laughter)

So, that's how I got the job. Now, I'm put on at DesiLu and those days we worked six days a week, so I was second assistant director for *The Lucy Show*, a show called *December Bride* and *Our Miss Brooks*. And about two months into it the assistant director on Lucy is promoted up to associate producer and they make this kid --I'm 24 or 25, I don't know-- the assistant director on the *I Love Lucy Show*, the last year of the half hours. It turned out Lucy's first picture was made with my father, and he had been very nice to her, so none of this did I earn. It was all luck. I got into the director's guild, because the

rules were going to change and somebody notified me. I just got lucky. And today you can't do that, so that's how I got started. So, now I'm 25 years old, I'm the first assistant director on the *I Love Lucy Show*. They go to hour shows after my first year of half hour shows. I've never been on location. I don't know what I'm doing. But, this wonderful man, **Jack Aldworth**, who had been the assistant became the associate producer. He showed me everything. So, I really owe my whole assistant director career to him. Do you want me to keep going?

MATZ: Sure.

SANDRICH: Now, the director, a wonderful director named **Jerry Thorpe** was doing *Lucy*, and there was an argument with Lucy over something unimportant and she said, "I won't work with him anymore" and Desi says, "I'll direct." So, Desi became the director on the hour shows. And I loved Desi dearly, but he was not meant to be a director, because he was drinking pretty heavily at the time. And so I did about three shows and I just wasn't happy and I'm walking by **Sheldon Leonard**, who shoots on the same lot, he's doing the *Danny Thomas Show*, and I say, "Do you need an assistant director?" and he said, "Just happen to need one. The regular assistant is leaving to go do some features, if you want the job, it's yours." So the next lucky step. I go

to work for Sheldon Leonard, who was one of the most creative, brilliant, men-- and **Danny Thomas**. So, I'm there for about two years and we do a pilot for **Andy Griffith** and we do a pilot for **Dick Van Dyke** and so this company that was just one show starts growing and I'm lucky enough to be there. And then they put me on a show called the *Bill Dana Show*. Well, I gotta tell you, I had so much fun, I did. I don't know about Bill--

(laughter)

but we had a great time. And I had done a pilot for a man named **Leonard Stern** called "*I'm Dickens He's Fenster*" and he remembered me and we {*The Bill Dana Show*} were canceled like the week before Christmas, I think.

DANA: Second year. In '63 we did 42 shows.

SANDRICH: Right. well, the second year I think is when I joined you. But, I remember it was right around the holidays we heard that the show wasn't going to be picked up and so I'm walking by Leonard Stern's office again this one wonderful lot and I say, "Do you need an assistant director?" and he says, "Yeah, we may be doing a pilot." And he gives me a script that's this thick - too big to shoot for half an hour and too expensive, but it was called *Get Smart*. And he says there's a guy named **Don Adams**, who they're probably going to cast and I say, "Oh God, he's

hysterical. I just finished working with him." And he took basically the character that he used on Bill's show--

SANDRICH: Byron Glick.

Dana: Byron Glick. Talked like that, did the same thing.

SANDRICH: He had all those -- those catch phrases.

DANA: We did most of them. We did "Would You Believe." Well, I had written "Would You Believe"--

SANDRICH: Right.

DANA: --a long time earlier than that for a routine. But I was under the impression that your first directorial chore was on the Bill Dana Show.

SANDRICH: Uh, the second. I had directed, uh, one or two Danny Thomas shows, and then--

DANA: And then--

SANDRICH: I said to Sheldon, I'll do *the Bill Dana show* if I can direct some, and he said, "Yeah." Well, so they gave me the last two shows after the series had been canceled already. (laughs)

(laughter)

But, this man is so talented, and what a wonderful writer, and nice human being, and it was very sad for all of us that it didn't work, but for me it was great. (laughs) It turned out great, because I got to be the associate producer on *Get Smart*, and then when the pilot sold, --

Leonard Stern made me the producer, so I produced *Get Smart* the first year. Then I decided I'd rather be a director than a producer and sort of freelanced for a while and when things were really bad, they let me direct a *Get Smart* and then *Mary Tyler Moore* came along. So, that's enough basic history.

DANA: So, then you went from *Get Smart* to the *Mary Tyler Moore*--

SANDRICH: Oh, well, I went from *Get Smart* and I did... uh, I directed a few *Get Smart*'s, I directed *That Girl*-- Then I get a call from Grant and Mary. I had been the obviously, I had been the assistant on the Van Dyke show, the pilot and first couple of episodes, so they knew me from there and then I'd been a second assistant on a movie Mary made called *X-15*. And after *Get Smart*, Leonard hired me to do -- Leonard Stern hired me to direct a show called *He and She* with **Dick Benjamin and Paula Prentiss**, so that was basically my calling card, because it was quite a wonderful show, and I directed all of those, and when that got canceled, and Grant and Mary were looking for a director, they had seen *He and She* and liked it and remembered me. So, they asked me if I wanted to direct **Mary Tyler Moore**. And I said, "Yes, but I don't want to do all of them, because I was having such a good experience moving around

to different shows, so I said, and they were going to do 12 without a pilot, just make 12 shows. So, I said, "I'll do the first couple and then let's see how we get along." So, I did the first three I think, and then I left to do some other shows, and I remember calling Grant and said, "Boy if you want me, I'm coming back, because I just loved the show." The pilot was sort of a difficult time getting the whole cast to work in the same style, but once we did that and I just thought the writing was so wonderful, and, so I decided to go back to *Mary Tyler Moore*. So, what I did was I would do two thirds every year of Mary's show and go off and direct other shows.

MATZ: Now, in terms of—there's a lot we want to cover, in terms of directing in general and directing comedies, specifically--

SANDRICH: OK.

MATZ: --but you know, you mentioned working with an ensemble cast--

SANDRICH: Right.

MATZ: --and I would imagine that the role of the director is largely psychological, like trying to -- knowing what buttons to push to get people to deliver..?

SANDRICH: Well, here's, here's the secret. Interesting that you ask that, because everybody's different. Every show is

different. Uh, what will happen, when I started directing *He and She*, which is really the first show that I was directing all of them. Dick Benjamin, who is just a wonderful actor, and who has now become really a top notch director, one time said to me, "Why am I saying that line?" and I said, "Well because Paula says her line and you're setting a joke up." And he says, "No. Why am I doing it? Why would this character say that line?" And I said, well it's in the script. "No. No. Why would I say that line?" And it got me starting to think in terms of: you can't just say to a good actor, "Say those lines." You've got to find a reason. So what we would do is we would sit there and try to figure out how to find a way for him to do or say that line or something similar to set Paula up. So that really was the first challenge I had as a director.

Technically, I understood how to do audience shows, because I had been Sheldon Leonard's assistant, and when Danny became the director, I did cameras. So, I didn't have to worry about cameras, but I had to worry about how to talk to actors, because I had never really done that. I hadn't gone to school, I hadn't taken classes.

So, and then we had another wonderful actor named **Kenny Mars** on the show, and his character was a fireman, who lived across the way from Dick and Paula, and he'd just

drop in to visit, and he would say to me, "Why am I coming over?" And so eventually, I couldn't say, "Because you want to make an entrance because you're in the scene" -- I'd have to --- I'd start making up reasons. "Well, Paula had a cold, and Dick said if you could just stop by to see if she's OK. Fine, OK. Never mentioned the scene. {The scene} had nothing to do with Paula having a cold, but it solved his problems. So, yes, you have to do -- eventually start realizing, certain actors need certain stimuli to help them find the characters. Well, *Mary Tyler Moore* -- it was such a good acting cast, but the problem -- the original problem was, **Ed Asner** and myself, because Ed, who was this really good, dramatic actor, would approach scenes dramatically, so there would be a little, from my point of view, a little slow in pace and very heavy. And we had to work that out, because he hated me and I didn't like him for the first three or four weeks. I mean it was a constant battle, and then eventually, he started seeing that scenes were working my way, and I started seeing, well that's the way Ed works. He approaches scenes dramatically, before he can get to comedy. So, we started trusting each other. And that's one of the reasons I think most shows today, who don't have a regular director, or have directors come in every week, really are {missing a

lot}. But, the biggest thing a director, I think in comedy has to do, is sort of be a buffer between the cast and the writers, because what happens is a lot of writers will write a script and really think very seriously about it. I mean, it isn't just words. Bill will tell you those lines are thought out and a lot of times acted, but they may not work for that particular actor. So, they'll come down and say, "Well, why isn't this working, why doesn't so and so do it this way, or why did you guys change it?" And the actors will be saying, "Tell them I can't do it because of so so." So, you don't want -- the actors and the writers to get into conflict. You need that buffer. Somebody they both can get upset with or you can speak for them. That's what I would do, many a times say the writers on all the shows I work with, "I don't quite understand this" or "I'm having trouble explaining this." Well, I might understand it, but I knew the actor was having trouble, so whatever the deflection is or whatever the way of keeping the writing/producing office staff happy with the actors is to get somebody in the middle, because it's key. I have seen shows where the writers don't talk to the actors and actors hate the writing and pick up a script and say 'it's a disaster.' You must have great respect on both sides and a regular director can do that.

Psychologically, it's interesting. On the *Mary Tyler Moore* show, we rehearsed every day for seven years. We'd come in on Monday and rehearse and eventually we'd spend three quarters of the day sitting around and talking about life, but we'd still rehearse. When I was doing the ***Cosby Show***, we were lucky to get in a half a day of rehearsal, because Bill didn't like to rehearse. And we were dealing with kids, so I really became more of a camera director on that show, although I would serve the function of saying to Bill, "Well what are you trying to say here? What is it that you want to impart to an audience?" And I would work with the kids, and I'd say to the writers, "I don't think Bill likes this" or "I think he'd do it when we do the show" -- I would just have to instinctively find that out. And I remember, and I got to tell you, it was a great experience, it was an amazing experience, but I was more of a technical director. I had to figure out how to edit the show and put it together. And then, one hiatus, I came back from California to do the *Golden Girl's* pilot, and I remember going home to my wife and saying, "Oh, yeah, that's what I do, I direct actors" because I'd forgotten what it was like.

MATZ: You said something interesting in your interview about being a technical director about that being the reaction line-- the punch line..

SANDRICH: Mmmm-hmmm.

MATZ: ..Is the more important shot to get in comedy? Can you explain this?

SANDRICH: What I always felt that usually with really wonderful comedic actors, it's not always the joke, it's how the person -- the other person reacts to the joke. And so, what I would do in the *Cosby Show*, because we were doing that basically on tape, it was done like a live show, although it was recorded, I would have to figure out how I could edit these shows and put them together, because we never got whole long scenes, because we hadn't rehearsed much. It was just, the kids didn't know their lines, Bill didn't know their lines. It was **Phylicia Rashad** who kept the show together, because she would always give me a reaction, no matter how many times she heard the line, no matter what was going on, I could always cut away to her reacting, and then take Bill's speech sometimes from the first take, or sometimes we do two shows, an afternoon or an evening show, and I'd take one line from the evening and one line from the afternoon, play them over her and then get back to Bill. So, that's what I mean by a technical

show. It was much more story telling than working with the actors on *Cosby*.

I did a show called *Soap* where we had 16 regular actors, including **Billy Crystal**, who was a stand-up comic, but was playing fairly legitimate scenes, and there were weeks where they'd have nothing to do. So that was sort of being like the daddy to everybody, saying, "I know you don't have anything to do this week, next week, or I know there's a story coming up." You know, just trying to keep everybody happy because that was a brilliant cast, but psychologically, everybody was different. The two families -- there was the Tate family and the Campbell family, and the Campbell family was **Richard Mulligan**, who at the time was maybe drinking a little too much, so you never knew what was going on, and Billy and **Ted Wass** and **Katherine Damon**, all three wonderful, wonderful actors, but you never quite knew what Mulligan was going to do and the Tates with **Katherine Helmond**, who I dearly adore, could do anything, and her family, and **Bob Guilliams**. So you'd go from one scene that would be very farce-y to another scene that might be very serious without a laugh in it to another scene that might be fairly sophisticated dialogue. So for a director the challenge was immense. Plus we had all

these people, we had all these sets, and just trying to keep the cast happy. So every show's is different.

DANA: And all those shows were audience?

SANDRICH: All those shows were audience shows, yeah. I've always firmly believed personally, comedy needs an audience. I've done a couple one camera shows, I did a movie, a one camera movie where I was lucky enough to do a **Neil Simon** script with **Goldie Hawn** and **Chevy Chase**. And I always felt, boy, this could be so much better if they heard an audience reaction, rather than just the director saying, "That's great." Laughing. It's just so much better for comedians, isn't it, Bill?

DANA: Oh sure, yeah.

SANDRICH: I mean you do things because there are people laughing.

DANA: When we had the audience -- we had the three Mitchell cameras.

SANDRICH: Right.

DANA: 35 millimeter on film.

SANDRICH: On film.

DANA: That was -- was everything on film?

SANDRICH: *Mary Tyler Moore* was on film. But *Soap* and *Cosby* were on tape. And we used four cameras because we didn't have film. Tape wasn't so expensive.

DANA: Yeah.

SANDRICH: So that extra camera really was a big help. But also, one of the advantages of doing the tape shows, was when we did film, the audience could only see the play going on in front of them and sometimes the cameras would be blocking or people were at one end of the auditorium and the set was down at the other end. They couldn't see it. With tape, you'd put monitors up there and edit -- the director would edit it so they could see everything and they would react to that.

Now for me, I always felt it was important for me to make the cuts because I hold a laugh on somebody's face or if I felt it was going on too long, I could cut away and audiences would laugh at what they'd see. So I felt that part of directing, is controlling the laughing. Because sometimes you see on television a laugh that goes on forever and it shouldn't, you know. And sometimes by cutting to a reaction shot, you could help a laugh. So that's also part of directing. Directors have to visualize how they want their show to go together.

MATZ: So you'd always be editing it live as it was happening?

SANDRICH: I was editing it live, which you could go -- I mean, since it was recorded, especially on *Cosby*, we'd go back

and spend a whole day and I would look at every single shot and pick lines. Let's use that from here, and we'll cut. The other shows, they were usually on top of their lines, so the line cut would pretty much be the final version. Excuse me, on {film} shows, the editor would take it and they'd develop the film and he'd get it the next day and then he's -- three or four days putting it together, then he'd show it to the director and the director hopefully would, you know, you'd have an editor you'd work with, he'd make a few changes, but your input wasn't quite as great.

MATZ: A lot of comedians had said that was really the training grounds-- in front of the live audience.

SANDRICH: Yes.

MATZ: So that makes sense. How much of when you're directing are you directing for the reaction, and how much can you anticipate that?

SANDRICH: (shakes head) No. I never know. You don't know. I mean, I would work differently with **Bill Cosby**. Bill would not really like to rehearse. And I would -- but we'd have to. I mean we'd have to at least stage scenes and do them. And I got to know, as I said, "Well, I think Bill is going to do this." Just from the way he'd mumble through it. Or I'd say to him, "Bill, do you like this? Are you happy

with this?" And he'd say, "No." So then I can say that to the writers.

But, I would give Bill suggestions when we got close to the show and it was an amazing experience because Bill would always say, "Right. Yes. OK." And then he'd either do it or not do it, the way I'd suggest it. But this man is a genius. Who was I to tell Bill Cosby how to do comedy? I would give him thoughts, and I certainly had an input on the script, but what he did was what he did best. And a lot of times, I would say to him, "I think you're playing it a little broadly." Or, to the kids, "Don't play it quite so broadly." So there was -- I did do directing, but on other shows, you have much more of an input. Like on the -- on the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, they were all actors. There were no real standup comedians. Mary would never ad-lib a line. Every line had to be written down. So this was actors that could do comedy. On *Soap*, Billy Crystal was the only standup and he wasn't really playing a standup comedian's part so that would have to be very, very well rehearsed. So my experience has always been the best shows are with actors who can do comedy. Except when you're lucky to get involved with a Bill Cosby.

And I have to say this: every show came from Bill's mind. He would start every story. Now, the writers would write

it. The writers -- we had great writers who really could help him, but every show would get their basic start, *I want to tell a story about or I want to do this about, or one of my kids did this* from Bill's mind. That's why every show has to have a point of view. And I think it has to have one person's point of view, whether it's the actor or the executive producer-writer. And what's happened today is there's too many people with input. So sometimes that original point of view just gets lost.

DANA: That's interesting because one of our themes has been don't buck the bromides. A little bit clichés, you started right out with- it ain't what you know, it's who you know.

SANDRICH: Well, yeah.

DANA: And there has been kind of a snobbism about it -- you know, about snobbism about it, about the field, and that's such a cliché. But -- out of sight is out of mind, perception is truth, all of these -

SANDRICH: Well you know, it's very hard to get started in show business. In any business. I mean, I always felt the reason I went into this business is because that is what my father had done and I'm a 21 year old kid, I don't know what else to do. I guess if I'd lived in Detroit, I would have probably gone into an automotive factory. I was not a Steven Spielberg who as an eight year old was making films.

I never thought, gee, I want to be a director. I just thought, well, OK, what am I going to take in college? Well, I guess I'll take motion pictures, you know? What else was I going to do. But there are kids today, because they do have video cameras and they -- are learning how to tell stories and will be directors far ahead of the way I was. It took me eight, ten years to direct. But my concentration was on being an assistant director. And then eventually I realized, gee, I think I'd like to direct. Whereas I didn't start off saying I want to be a director. So--

DANA: You got tools there that--

SANDRICH: Oh, I was just so lucky. I started off watching Desi and Lucy and then I went to Sheldon and Danny Thomas. And then I went worked with you guys. I was just -- **Dick Van Dyke**, I did the first -- as the assistant -- the pilot and the first three *Dick Van Dyke* shows and I watched **Andy Griffith** and **Don Knotts**. I mean, I was just -- it was just being there at the right time. But one thing I did learn as I got older was everybody is frustrated when they're young. And I used to want to be a director and I'd say, "Why am I still being an assistant?" And then I'd say to Sheldon, "I really want to be a director." Because especially when the Van Dyke Show -- when **John Rich**, who

was the original director left and they were shooting right next door to us and I said, "Please let me direct, Sheldon." And he said to me, "Kid, someday, maybe a producer. You'll never be a director." So he really didn't want me to direct.

Let me tell you this great story. Many years later I won a Director's Guild award for directing a **Lily Tomlin** special and he's giving the award. So I get up there and thank everybody and then I tell this story. And Sheldon looks at me and says, "Well, I was right."

(laughter)

And then Sheldon came on the *Cosby* show because he had given Bill his start on *I Spy* and Bill loved him so much. And of course I loved him.

DANA: Yeah.

SANDRICH: And he had the most miserable time, because we didn't rehearse and he keeps saying to me, "We're not rehearsing and I don't like this scene and this isn't the way we do it." And I'd have to say, "Sheldon, this is the way we do it on this show and it's not our --the old way, but it works, and just you're going to have to trust me that I know how to put this together." And I did, but it wasn't a happy experience for him.

DANA: It's the name on the garbage cans.

SANDRICH: What's that?

DANA: It's the Bill Cosby--

SANDRICH: Yeah, exactly.

DANA: --name on the garbage can.

SANDRICH: But techniques evolve and {the way shows are done is} different. And every {series} is different. As a director, you {adapt} -- what happened is we were rehearsing on the early *Cosby Show*, five days. And Bill would be so bored. So I had to find a way, because I started to realize, the first two days would just be wasted time and his mind wasn't there. It didn't get there until the audience was there. So, as the director, I had to find a way to really take this process down. So the first day we'd come in and read the script and Bill would give his notes and we'd all have thoughts. The writers would go away and rewrite that night. Then we'd have Tuesday to rehearse, you know, from 10 to 4 we'd rehearse the show. Then I'd do cameras on Wednesday and film in on Thursday. So we got a whole day out of the process and basically I didn't even bring Bill in until like late in the afternoon on camera days. It worked.

And then, then the hard thing in situation comedy is today, I don't know if you want me to jump to today--

DANA: Yeah, no do it.

SANDRICH: But there are two big, big changes. Directors are not involved in casting, and I think that's -- being able to read a script, especially a pilot, and help cast are the two most critical things to being a director.

DANA: You're saying that directors are not involved in casting?

SANDRICH: No. What they've done in a lot of instances is they - don't pick up the show until they know they have a cast. So what they do is they're called cast contingents. They say, OK, we like this script, but we don't know who the cast is, so we're not going to give you any money. We'll give you money for a casting director, they say this to the producers, writers, the studio. So they never hire a director until they know they've got a firm commitment. So that's a terrible mistake. Because I can talk about casting. And the other big mistake is, when we did it, we didn't get any interference. We had Sheldon who would come down, who was the executive producer and whoever was producing the show, and maybe they would get notes from the network, I don't know, but it was the show that was made by these creative people.

DANA: It was basically it was the same family.

SANDRICH: Yeah.

DANA: Right? Ronnie Jacobs, Sheldon, and Danny Thomas.

SANDRICH: Right. But basically you were hearing notes from Sheldon--

DANA: Yeah.

SANDRICH: And whoever the writer was. Today, there's the studio who owns the project. There's the network production company, like CBS Productions or NBC Productions. Then there are the network people, the comedy people. And then there's the head of comedy. So these notes are layered. And they're just too many people who have their -- have to have their own input because they're getting paid to do it.

DANA: Yeah.

SANDRICH: And so the original vision of the writer or the actors get lost. And I think that's why there's so few really good comedy shows on the air today.

DANA: I'm hacking that horse, but that's too many cooks spoil the broth.

SANDRICH: Absolutely. Absolutely.

DANA: All these bromides that just--

SANDRICH: In comedy, you need -- I always felt, too, that producers who direct lose out on something. Or the writer who wants to direct, because they're not -- they need another eye. And that's another thing, a director has to sit and say, this scene isn't working. It's not enough to say the scene isn't working. It's -- you should be able to

say the scene isn't working, because. Or what if you try this. Now, they may not take your ideas of what to try, but at least if you -- you're sitting there rehearsing it all day and you look at it differently than the original writer. Because the original writer is hearing how he heard the lines {as he was writing it} and how he wants them said, and sometimes they miss the big picture. And that's what a director is there for.

I've always looked as what I thought an audience would be seeing for the first time. And that's how I would shoot a show. What do I want to see as the audience. Do I want to see that person, do I want to see them together, do I want to see how he's reacting to what she's saying. Um, and sometimes writers want every line to be on the person saying it. The more collaborative a comedy is, it's really good, where everybody respects everybody. And today -- the producers don't always want one director. They want to be able to have their input so they bring in three or four directors or try to tell the director how to direct the scene. It's just the way it is. I'm not saying I wish we'd go back, but I'm just saying how it was and how it is.

DANA: It's good for the family to have a daddy.

SANDRICH: It is good. Even if you don't like him. I mean, eventually, when you work week after week after week, you

almost have to work your problems out. You know, as I said, Ed Asner and I just fought and fought and fought for the first two or three shows. And then we started to realize, OK, how do we make this work. And we did. You know. Then we became great friends and I'm such an admirer of his.

DANA: Were you directing, a couple of the MTMs with -- Chucky?

SANDRICH: I didn't do that one. No, it's funny because what happened was, I was going back to New York to direct a show and so I had a choice of doing that show or the first one with an actress named **Eileen Heckart**. She was going to play Mary's aunt and I loved her so much as an actress and I said, "No, I'd rather do that." So I didn't do "Chuckles the Clown", which was a great episode. Nope, missed it. I did two thirds of the show, but I didn't do that one.

MATZ: But that one brings up another very interesting point about -- you mentioned before that there's a serious side of comedy and as a director, what are the challenges to walking that line between -- some of the issues you tackle in *Cosby* and *Mary Tyler Moore*, off the top of my head--

DANA: Right.

MATZ: --had huge social and political--

SANDRICH: Well, it's -- it is walking a fine line. Sometimes you know, things aren't working for you as a director and everybody around you is laughing. The writers are laughing and everybody's laughing, you have to say, "I don't think this works. I don't care that we're all laughing." Or, "I don't care this got a big laugh at the first reading." It's not- Why is it funny? And sometimes you're wrong. And sometimes you're right. But you still have to be honest to {rely on} your own instincts. And I remember one time in a show, I can't remember what it was about, but I gave Mary a bit of business and she said, "I don't think this is going to work." I said, "It's going to work, trust me." So we get to that point in the scene, there's not a laugh, and she just looks up at me and goes right on --

(laughter)

Never said a word to me, but just in the middle of the scene, it didn't get a laugh, she goes, OK, but she knew I'd been right enough times. You know, nobody's always right. And sometimes you read a scene and think, boy, this isn't very good, and the actors get hold of it and it comes to life. That was one of the reasons I didn't like producing. When I was a producer, you worry about last week's script that's in editing and this week's show, you have to cast it. And next week there are no sets {built

yet} -- as a director, you don't really worry about anything until you get on the set and you work it out with the actors. And when you have creative, wonderful actors, things work out. And if it isn't funny, then you try to make it funny or you try to convince the writers to rewrite it. And on the successful shows, it works more than it doesn't work. And I'm not a funny person, so I don't -- I don't act it for actors. Some directors will do it and be hysterically funny and I don't write a lot of lines. I will come up with lines. My -- I always felt my advantage was seeing story and trying to help with scene work and trying to find another way for the actors to do it. I mean, if it's a fight scene, I might want to say, let's start it as a love scene. And let it build. Don't start fighting right away. You know? And sometimes that would work and sometimes you couldn't do it. But that's what a director's there for. A director is there, I think, to be the audience's interpreter. Casting. You want to talk about casting?

MATZ: Sure. Tell us about your casting.

SANDRICH: A pilot, what happens today, I think in a lot of cases, and I'm not working so I don't really know, but what I hear. The writers will do the casting, go to the network and they'll pick an actor. And then they'll bring a

director in. Sometimes it'll be a director {at the original casting}, but usually it's the {producer}. And I found that the first person to come in and makes the writers laugh at their lines will get the part. Not always -- sometimes it's the first person who reads it because they've never heard it read, or sometimes it'll just be, they've seen six people who are no good and somebody comes in who's good and gets it. And everybody will fall in love. The director's got to say, "How is this person going to be five, six, ten -- shows down the line?" Plus, is there an intelligence to the reading, or is it just that this person has a facility to get the laughs.? And that's very hard to do. It's very hard to be able to look at an actor and say, this person made me laugh once. Nobody else is laughing, but I laughed. I think they can do it. I've done that on two occasions on *Soap*. I was the only one who laughed at a -- in my mind, an actress made me laugh once and if they can make me laugh once, once they get comfortable or once we've had a chance to really discuss it, they'll do a good job.

When we were doing *Golden Girls*, we -- the first person who came in -- this wonderful casting director, **Judith Weiner**, brought in **Estelle Getty**, because she was in Los Angeles doing a play-- And she was a little young for the part,

but you know, we knew we'd put a wig on her. And she was just wonderful. And so she was the first person we saw. She's great. So in our minds, even though the casting director kept saying, "Well, you should see some more people", we knew we had Sophia. And then we sent the script immediately to **Betty White** to play Rue McClanahan's part, the sexpot. And Betty came in and read six lines and everybody said go home. So now we've cast two parts and we still had two to go. And we can't -- cannot find anybody that works doing Betty's part. Just can't find the person. And the producers were doing something else the day **Rue McClanahan** came in. And Rue read {Rose}. And I had never worked with her and I was so impressed but I said, "I hate to tell you this. I think you're wonderful, but there's not an innocent bone in your body. I just don't believe you're this innocent person." And I said, "Would you read, you know, the other part." She said, "Well, that's Betty's part." And I said, "Yeah, but I would love to hear you read it." So she said, "Can I do it southern?" I said, "Yeah, don't make it heavy southern, but sure. Go out in the other office and look at it." So she came back about a half and hour later and {was brilliant}. So I called Paul and Susan and Tony and I said, you guys have to come down and listen to this. So they heard {Rue} and everybody

agreed. She was just sensational. So now I go back to New York to do the Cosby Show. I wasn't there for **Bea Arthur's** casting. And we come to the first day of the reading and Betty White comes up to me, nobody had called her and told her the parts were changed.

DANA: Oh, wow.

SANDRICH: I had assumed that she heard. And she came up to me, "How could you do this to me? I don't know how to play this part." So I gave her my handle on the part and she went and read it and the first reading worked. But, and I'm just saying sometimes a director will find things that a producer, writer won't. *Rhoda* was supposed not to be attractive and pretty heavy. Because it was based upon a real person. And Valerie came in and I just knew this was somebody special and one of the producers who really knew this lady, said, "It's a shame, you know, we can't use her." I said, "We've got to." "Well, she's too pretty." "It doesn't matter. She's too talented. We've got to go with her." So I call the casting director, when Valerie comes back to read with Mary, tell them her to dress down and don't wear any makeup and don't try to look pretty. But that's one of the advantages of having somebody who didn't write it, didn't know the characters. And tries -- hopefully can understand acting. **Ed Asner** came in, I

wasn't there for that, evidently gave a terrible reading because he was -- just didn't get it. He left and came back and said to the guys, "I gave a lousy reading. Let me try something different." But, again, so sometimes the actor will realize they're doing the wrong thing.

DANA: Interesting. I'm trying to get a handle on the fact that this new structure that you describe -- that has to have an impact on the product. I'm saying, removing the--

SANDRICH: Right.

DANA: --the director--and says I'm going to pick -- this is the actor that's going to Moses.

SANDRICH: Well, no, there's always collaborative. I don't mean, I'm not trying to say that the directors cast and the producers, writers can't. But there is a collaborative effort that is really needed.

DANA: No, but you're saying that certain scenarios now, the casting--

SANDRICH: Oh, the casting is done without a director.

DANA: Yeah.

SANDRICH: Yeah, yeah. Plus the network -- I mean, I know that there's been occasions where the network will say, "Well, we don't want this person. You can't use this other person or we won't make the pilots." There's a couple shows I've done where the network has wanted to replace actors that

went on to be major stars and got their own series because they didn't test well. When we were doing *Soap*, they didn't want Bob Guillaume. And I said, "This guy is really wonderful. You got to go with him." And he went to have his own show *Benson*. So the networks are very, very involved in everything these days.

MATZ: I mean, to think about a career that's spanned from *I Love Lucy* to *Two and a Half Men* -- I mean, you're--

SANDRICH: I only did *Two and a Half Men* as a favor.

(laughter) The director got sick.

MATZ: But so much must have changed. But from hearing you talk, it sounds like really the key skills about good directors are --

SANDRICH: Oh, yeah, talking as a director, naturally I'm going to say that. But I mean, there are some -- you know, there are wonderful writer producers, but I don't think you can do everything. As a director, I never took a producer credit. I know a lot of directors do, because I felt I had to be on the stage all day and I think a producer - {should} be involved in editing and casting and scoring conferences, {besides the script} and that's producing to me. And a director is on the stage. Some directors will be on the stage and still get a producer credit. I think

it's two separate, distinct jobs. There's directing and there is producing and writing.

DANA: Let's talk a little bit about the "biz" in showbiz.

SANDRICH: OK.

DANA: About representation, agents, managers, and all that. And their effect on Jay Sandrich.

SANDRICH: Well, I was really lucky. I was very lucky. I went with CAA, about the, I don't know, within their first year when they started and **Ron Myer** became my agent. Ron, who is now the head of Universal Studios--

DANA: NBC.

SANDRICH: And one of the really terrific people who always told me the truth and many of times I would say, "These are my friends, don't kill them in the deal." Make a fail deal or he would come up with interesting ways of creatively getting deals that if the show made money, then the director would. But basically, it was a wonderful collaboration. And when *Mary Tyler Moore* finished, both Ron and **Mike Ovitz**, {had} a meeting and they said, "You got to do features. You really have to do features." And they would send me scripts and I would say, "I got to be honest with you, I don't think they're as good as some of the stuff I'm doing now." You know, the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* and **Susan Harris** can write as good as anybody. And then I

-- so they said to me, "What would you like to do?" And off the top of my head, I said "I'd like to do a Neil Simon script with Goldie Hawn", not knowing there was such a project out there. And there was and what happened is something happened to the director who had been set to do that movie and I get a phone call from the production company, "Have you ever done a movie, would you be interested?" So what I wanted came about, but Ron was a friend and then advisor. And in those days, in television, once you -- I mean, I turned down, I always did, I turned down much more than I did because I found that if I didn't really believe in the material or didn't really like the actor, I'm talking about pilots, it wasn't fair to anybody. I'd be unhappy, they'd be unhappy, it wouldn't work. I had to really understand the script. I mean, I had to understand what I was -- what the story was about and what the characters were about and why it was funny. And if I didn't, I wouldn't do it. And some of those shows went on to be big hits. Some of them never made it. But I turned down an awful lot and over the years I got a reputation for turning down things and now they don't ask.

(laughter)

But fortunately, economically, it turned -- because of Cosby -- I'm OK. Don't worry for me. I don't need a benefit.

(laughter)

Now I haven't said **Tom Werner and Marcy Carsey**. I haven't mentioned their names. Two sensational producers. See, there again, I was very lucky in my career -- I stayed with the really wonderful producers. I mean, **Jim Brooks and Allen Burns**, boy, could they write. And **Paul Witt** and **Susan Harris and Tony Thomas** were great to work with, and Tom and Marcy. So, one of the things is I always stayed with shows where I was happy. I was happy if the actors were good and the writing was good and the people were nice. And today I couldn't do that. Today you have to do shows that you really don't like to do. So I was lucky in that it was at a very {special} time.

MATZ: And... why comedy?

SANDRICH: Because basically that's what I sat and watched. You know, it was -- that's how I got started. My father was a director but he did {Astaire}, Rogers musicals. With some comedy in it. But I was only 13 when he died. So I didn't learn anything there. And I just liked comedy, I guess, because when I was watching television, those were the shows I liked -- so I went to work at DesiLu. So I learned

my craft in comedy. Not being a writer. Not being a funny person. Not understanding how to even talk to actors. But I learned from the good ones -- there's a truth in every scene and an attitude. And you have to keep -- when I say pace, I mean, you have to keep things moving. You don't have to go so fast nobody understands it, but movement is wonderful. A lot of comedy shows, people sit in a chair and you'll do six pages of dialogue and nobody will ever move. It's boring to watch. So you have to try to keep it visual. But you have to basically find out what's human and funny and attitudinal in the acting. Right?

DANA: You're doing good, Jay.

SANDRICH: Thank you, Bill.

DANA: You're a good teacher.

SANDRICH: (laughs)

MATZ: Does the best comedy come from truth?

SANDRICH: Oh, absolutely. Well, from my point of view. I mean, the shows that I did. Even *Soap*, which was considered, you know, a radical departure in its day -- was very truthful. {Jessica Tate} who basically was very similar to Betty White's character in *Golden Girls*, saw everything very literally. Was not dumb but just looked at the bright side of life. And she was married to a man who was a terrible cheater. He just, you know, had women lined up. And she

wouldn't believe it. And in the first show, she gets involved with a tennis pro because she's been treated so badly. Well, I mean, the world was ready to collapse you would have thought. And we had -- we introduced I think probably the first gay character, regular character on television, Billy Crystal, who had a male lover. I mean, we just broke all these boundaries, but they were basically really decent people. And there was, I've always felt there was a truth and honesty in how the mother would relate to her kids and there are a lot of cheating husbands whose wives don't know it. When they find out, look out. And the *Cosby Show* was based upon not yelling and screaming at your kids and you don't think your kids are stupid and the kids don't think their parents are stupid. There is a mutual understanding that these are bright people, -- the kids still have to be supervised. And it's {the parents'} home. Well, yeah, there's a basic truth in that. And those are the only three shows I ever stayed with fulltime, so my personal philosophy is I want to do a show where I could see a truth. You know, it's television, it's a comedy, but there is some real human emotions there. You don't find many of those shows on the air today.

MATZ: Well, yeah --

SANDRICH: *Raymond* was one of them, and that's gone.

MATZ: Could speak now, to the next generation perhaps of writers, directors cropping up, trends that you see now in situation comedies that you think are maybe going off course?

SANDRICH: Well, society has changed. The world has changed. I mean, I think that MTV -- that style of quick cutting and a lot of different scenes--has negated long, wonderful scenes of dialogue, two people you know, loving or fighting or whatever it is. And I think the shows are forced into a really fast pattern. I think because -- in our day we had to talk around sex. Not that we didn't have sex, but we had to talk around it. Today they, I mean, they don't talk around it, they {practically} do it in a lot of these shows. So every joke is sexual. Everybody is doing sex jokes and they're not really dealing with a lot of the other things in life. Besides sex. Yes, it is a tremendously important part.

DANA: It's the main part.

SANDRICH: But we did a *Mary Tyler Moore* show where her mother is visiting and Mary stays out all night. And this was a single woman in her early thirties. Well, it was so -- I mean, {the mother} couldn't handle it. And the network couldn't believe we were going to have Mary Tyler Moore stay out all night. Big deal, you know. But those were

certain restrictions. I mean, we did it, but it wasn't lascivious and she just basically said it's none of your business whether I stay out all night or not. Today they do whole big routines about oh my god, she's staying out all night.

DANA: I'm just wondering, with a license, if you had today's license, would the *Cosby Show* be improved?

SANDRICH: Well the *Cosby Show* we still did a lot of sex. Between husband and wife.

DANA: Yeah.

SANDRICH: And I can't imagine ever wanting to do or show more. I mean, they were so in love and you knew they had a sex life and Cliff was always getting very excited when {Claire} was ready, but it was sweet.

DANA: It wasn't in your face.

SANDRICH: No. And they'd do these lovely dance scenes. It was there, but we didn't have to hit it. Today, every joke that you see seems to be sexual. Except on, you know, some of the better written shows. Also I'm not sure the characters grow and change. I don't watch enough, but in the shows that we always did, things changed -- you know, I mean the people grew. I mean, certainly Mary changed. Ted Baxter changed from this idiot to a man who really knew he was insecure. *Soap*, once Katherine Helmond's character

found -- was forced to face the fact that Chester was cheating, her relationship changed. We didn't stay the same, you know? And as the kids got older, on *Cosby*, their relationship changed. So there's something to the really good series where the characters grow and you see new developments.

DANA: Yeah.

MATZ: Yeah. I mean, it's also so interesting to watch those shows now. The subtlety of the humor was--

SANDRICH: Well, yeah. We weren't hitting -- it's interesting because *Mary* was, of its time, I mean there was a specific time in American society when women were just starting to get really in the workplace and starting to feel they didn't need a man in their life. And yet people see the shows sometimes for the first time and love them. There's somewhere -- even though it's time specific, there's enough truth I guess to it. That it still works today. *The Cosby Show*, I think, as long as anybody has kids, young kids, they'll still find humor in it. And even *Soap*. *Soap* is very funny. There was a time when writers had to write not jokes, but characters that had attitudes that were funny. And then you would go out as the actors and the director and try to amplify it or really make those attitudes work and not worry so much about the lines. Bill {Dana} was a

little different because his character was a guy who did malaprops. You know, that was the character. So it was hard to do subtle humor on the *Bill Dana show*. It was not that type of a show. Am I right? You know?

DANA: I had no idea. I never did -- I didn't know that they did malaprops.

SANDRICH: (laughs)

MATZ: Well, Larry, we interviewed Larry Gelbart and he talked a little bit about malaprops, but those watching who might not know what some of these terms are, could you give an example.

SANDRICH: Well, you know, I'm sure you've interviewed **Jose Jimenez** who's very funny. Very funny guy, but you weren't doing a lot of subtle jokes with those -- you were doing language jokes.

DANA: Well, actually you know when we were designing that show, and we had done Jose as an elevator operator--

SANDRICH: Right.

DANA: We tested him for a few -- on the *Make Room for Daddy* -- and that was a flesh and blood character as opposed to the Jose, the astronaut--

SANDRICH: Right.

DANA: --or the submarine commander, or whatever.

SANDRICH: Right.

DANA: But I remember the feeling that we had on that show
was that it was like a thirties -- all the characters were
bigger than life.

SANDRICH: Mmmm-hmmm.

DANA: Don Adams.

SANDRICH: Right.

DANA: hotel detective. Jonathan--

SANDRICH: Harris.

DANA: --Harris was Franklin Panghorne

SANDRICH: Yeah, absolutely.

DANA: You know?

SANDRICH: Absolutely.

DANA: And a little hint of mint--

SANDRICH: Right.

DANA: Whenever the notion of gay or anything ever entered
into it, and all of the -- so this was definitely a Laurel
and Hardy--

SANDRICH: Right. A little bit broader. Right. And as I
remember, the plots were always a little bit broader.

DANA: Yeah.

SANDRICH: And there's room--

DANA: And they all had a point of view.

SANDRICH: Yeah. And there's room for all of that. I don't mean that. But today, it's just -- it seems there's a sameness to all the comedies.

MATZ: Is there anything that you've picked up along the way, that with hindsight now-- anything you wish you would have known when you were starting out that might benefit someone who is starting out?

SANDRICH: The only thing that I look back on and say I wish that I hadn't been so frustrated for so long on not being given the chance to direct. Because when I did get the chance to really direct, I knew what I was doing. I didn't know I knew it. I remember the first time I directed which was on a **Danny Thomas** show. Literally hoping I'd get a phone call in the middle of the night saying the {stage} had burned down. Because I was so scared. So scared. But, somewhere along the line, the more time you spend watching really good people, by osmosis, you're picking up a lot of wonderful things. You're learning how jobs are done. What the good directors do. What the bad directors do. So you learn from good and bad. And nobody really takes -- I don't think -- a director seriously into their in their thirties. Well, I was 27, 28 and was very frustrated. And I didn't really start directing until I was about 30. And I think I'm lucky, in a way, because sometimes you get

something too early and you're not ready for it and it sets you back. So I guess the only lesson I've learned is try to watch good people. And if you get with somebody who's good, stick with him, because you'll learn a lot. And the other thing is: youth wants it now. But I mean, that's the way it {is}. You want to do it now, you don't want to wait three years. But sometimes you're very lucky you're not getting it now.

DANA: We've been asking the same question and it's pretty obvious but it's interesting the different reactions you get. The one-liner is, "Was it worth it?"

SANDRICH: For me? Oh, God. I had a great -- I look back at my career-- the shows and the people I worked with and I feel so fortunate. And part of the thing is and I have this argument all the time with people. I have never felt myself as the creative person. I'm an interpreter. The creative person is the writer or the actor who takes something and makes something really wonderful out of it. It needs somebody to see -- to see what works and what doesn't, but I don't feel that's really creative. If somebody gave me a blank piece of paper and said, OK, whatever you write we'll make a series of, I wouldn't know what to do. I don't get those wonderful ideas. I couldn't sit down and write characters, although I have certainly

come up with lines. But I have never been a writer because I've worked with the good writers and I know how their minds work. So from my point of view, for somebody who doesn't think of themselves as a tremendously creative person, I've had an amazing career and I've worked with brilliant people and I couldn't be happier. Couldn't be happier. And my life progressed the way life is supposed to. You know, you go through ups and downs but you're a different person in your forties than you are in your thirties and hopefully you're getting more and more secure in yourself. Now I'm in my seventies and I think life was great.

DANA: So let's get to work.

(laughter)

SANDRICH: Yep, I'm ready. I'm ready. I can still work, but I don't find anything I really want to work on these days.

DANA: Jay Sandrich, you're a gem. Thanks so much.

SANDRICH: Thank you, Bill.

MATZ: Thank you so much.

SANDRICH: And you too, Jen. It was very nice.

END OF INTERVIEW- JAY SANDRICH