

The American Comedy Archives

Tom Poston

Interviewed on March 11, 2005

By Bill Dana and Jenni Matz

In Los Angeles, CA

Biographical Information:

Veteran comedic actor Tom Poston, (Born October 17, 1921 in Columbus, Ohio) with his trademark vague look of bewilderment, was appearing with an acrobatic troupe by the age of 9. He was attending Bethany College in West Virginia when his studies were interrupted by World War II. He would later receive an Honorary degree from Bethany College in 1990.

Poston enlisted with the Air Corps as a Buck Private and left as a Captain, having flown many sorties, including on D-Day. Following military duty in 1945, he went to New York and studied at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts with many who would influence him, including Charles Jehlinger, Sanford Meisner, Paton Price, and Frank Pacelli. He made his Broadway debut in 1947 in José Ferrer's production of "Cyrano de Bergerac".

Poston appeared in such classic plays as "King Lear" and "Richard III", but comedy would be his forte. Hosting the daily TV show "Entertainment" (1955) led to his biggest break on the TV variety series "The Steve Allen Show" (1956-1960). He, Louis Nye, and Don Knotts made famous the "Man on the Street" sketches, and Poston was memorable as the interviewee who could never remember his name. Winning an Emmy in 1958 for the Allen show, Tom went on to host a game show "Split Personality". He would continue to appear as a panelist on other quiz shows, notably "To Tell the Truth" (1956).

TV again became his primary focus alongside such top comedians as Bob Newhart on "The Bob Newhart Show" (1972) which earned him an Emmy nomination for his role of George Utley, and Robin Williams on "Mork and Mindy" (1970). Poston appeared in many Broadway shows such as "40 Carats", "Come Blow Your Horn", "Plaza Suite", "Mary, Mary" and the musicals "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" and "Fiddler on the Roof". He has appeared in numerous films, such as "The Happy Hooker" with Vanessa Redgrave, "Cold Turkey" with Bob Newhart and Dick Van Dyke, "Soldier in the Rain" with Jackie Gleason and Tuesday Weld, and "Carbon Copy" with Denzel Washington among others.

Now an octogenarian, Tom Poston is still working in television comedies and making us laugh. He has guest-starred on television shows from "The Phil Silvers Show" and "Get Smart" to "Touched by an Angel", "Cosby", "Diagnosis Murder", "The Larry Sanders Show". "Murphy Brown", "Coach", "Chips", "The Simpsons", "Will & Grace" and most recently, the film "Christmas with the Kranks" with Dan Aykroyd, Tim Allen, and Jamie Lee Curtis in 2004.

10:51.17

POSTON: (laughs). I thought we could start that way. You know, because ha-ha-ha-ha-ha Laughs are not easy to--

DANA: Have you ever defined, categorized laughs a, I'm not talking about Berle when he used to say Charlie Douglas will love it, that the laughter machine will always fill in.

10:51.48

POSTON: Well, {Milton} **Berle**, if you remember, Berle used to stop everything and say, "That was a seven! Giving me a four for that. It was clearly a seven. Do it again." Remember that?

DANA: Yeah, I remember.

POSTON: He was hot.

DANA: Well we remember absolute audience dependency on that seven, four, three, two whatever the degree of laughter we got at the Hudson Theater in New York City.

POSTON: Well, we didn't have a laugh machine.

DANA: No. I'm saying. They were real live humans.

10:52.26

POSTON: I used to wonder why **Steve {Allen}** preferred that the performers to ring-a-ding-ding for, instead of, during rehearsal he would ask us not to say the joke line. He would just say ring-ding or ring-a ding or whatever instead. *Why did the ring-a ding cross the ding-a-ling? To get to the ring-a-ding-ding-ding thing.* So that would be the rehearsal for time for the show. But I said, jeez, you know, actors like to rehearse exactly what they're going to say so that they can say it in exactly the way they want to get the best effect. And he said, "well, between you and the audience there's a camera crew. Three or four cameras, three or four microphone operators, and the big, the band is just off to the side between you and the audience. So I want to get the first hot laugh from the band." That was his expression. "I want to get that first hot laugh from the band on the night". So if they've never heard the

joke before, they're going to respond-- That was in '54.

DANA: '54, yeah. *Entertainment*, was that an ABC show?

POSTON: Yeah. Did you ever see **Gene {Wood}** work an audience?

DANA: The best.

POSTON: The best!

DANA: Yeah.

POSTON: Unbelievable. It's too bad Gene isn't here to talk about this. But I've been working a show where Gene is the host.

DANA: We ought to talk-- because Gene is an Emerson grad.

POSTON: I know.

10:55.37

POSTON: **Gene Wood** when he went to Emerson was Bill Dana's partner. He became the warm-up guy, they called it the warm-up guy on game shows, audience participation shows. And I have seen Gene working with an audience before the show started, then for 20 minutes, and just have them in hysterics. Then the show would start, and between commercial breaks and so forth Gene would once again would be working with the audience making them laugh, making them enjoy themselves. And on several occasions when there would be a breakdown, a technical breakdown of some kind, Gene could entertain for up to I don't know how long, because I've never seen him quit and say I'm done, I have, I got no more. But sometimes an hour, and hour and a half just kept right on. He was fantastic. And he learned all that at Emerson? I don't think so. He was just incredible at what he did there. He would have those people, boy, he would just, and that was an art in itself, really.

10:56.55

DANA: Well if you go back to '54, Dana and Wood, we broke up, I went on unemployment. And how did Gene get his job with you? To this day I don't, I remember he started writing for Tom Poston on *Entertainment*, but I never knew how he got the gig.

POSTON: I didn't know him at that time. I knew of you guys as Dana and Wood, but I didn't know him personally.

10:57.22

DANA: You didn't know him when he was writing for you?

POSTON: Of course, but I don't know, I didn't know him when he got the job. I don't know how he got the job.

DANA: Oh, I see.

POSTON: I expect he probably mentioned Emerson and, like magic. You know. That was all it took.

DANA: Yeah. That's all it took. That's right. You had, well Jenni will know whether you had a college background.

MATZ: Yes. Well yeah, I'd like to go back pre-'54. Because I read that originally you had dreams of being a chemist but then the war kind of changed your plans. So could you talk about how you got into drama?

10:58.01

POSTON: Well, the chemist thing, my father was a chemist. So when they asked me what my major was in college, I was like 17 years old or something and I didn't even know what major was. So I said chemistry, you know. But I, not a, not a great chemist.

10:58.22

DANA: Was he with the bureau of standards?

POSTON: My dad?

DANA: Yeah.

POSTON: No, but he did, he did practice in Boston. He was a food and dairy guy. Yeah. Very bright. Very bright guy.

DANA: Was there a parental family source of humor growing up with?

10:58.47

POSTON: No, he was, he was a, there's a joke that is now so current. But he used to tell stories. One

of them was the, he was a very amusing human. Loved to laugh and loved humor. A woman buys a duck to take home for the family dinner, and she's accosted by a man who is intoxicated. And he says, "where are you going, where are you going with the pig?" She says, "**it's not a pig, it's a duck**". He says, "I was talking to the duck". That joke is now in every young comedian's repertoire, but I got it from my dad who told it to me many, many, many, many, many years ago. He also told-- he was from Kentucky. And he told about the time that he encountered a hillbilly, real hillbilly with a rifle on his should and a jug of what they called white lightning. Panther something piss, I remember. And the hillbilly said, *Hi 're. I want you to take a drink of my liquor.* And my dad says "no, that's all right, it's a little early in the day". He said, "*You heard what I said*", and he threw the gun down. And he says, "*you take a drink o' my liquor.* And my father says, "all right, don't get excited, I'm glad to have a drink with you". Took a drink. "Pss, poeey! That's the worst whiskey I ever tasted in my life!" And the hillbilly says, "*ain't it? Now you hold the gun on me*". So, pretty funny stuff.

11:00.36

DANA: Pretty funny, pretty sophisticated stuff, too.

POSTON: Not to a hill bill-- well, he was from Kentucky, so.

DANA: My wife is from East Tennessee.

POSTON: Conceivably it could have happened to him.

MATZ: Now, from the army you went to the Academy of Dramatic Arts and you had hopes of being a dramatic actor, and you did do some Shakespeare early on. I wonder when you realized that you were funny.

POSTON: Who is that?

DANA: I don't know. {laughs} I have Jenni Matz attached to my hip.

11:01.10

POSTON: Jenni Matz. Peter Matz. My brother was in the business. My brother was besotted with

show business. Nothing would, so I read an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* about **Charles Jehlinger**, the genius at the **American Academy of Dramatic Arts** and I thought I would like to study with him no matter what he taught, because that was the, the portrait of him as a teacher was so compelling. So, but my brother and I had determined that we were going to do the same thing together after we got out of the service. And we were both flyers. So naturally I assumed that we'd be flying. And so I put the magazine down and paid no more attention. I was in France at the time. And as days went-- wait a minute. Nothing is going to stop my brother Dick from, he's insane about show business and acting. I said, "I'll be flying a load of nitroglycerine over the Andes in a junk heap and he'll be in Boca Raton Florida saying dinner is served. Let me see that magazine again". So applied for entrance into the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, because at that time the war was winding down and I figured I'd be able to attend at some point. So sure enough, came back over on this side to go to Japan. Japan got knocked out drastically, and I was separated from the service. They didn't discharge you in those days. They just separated you. And made my way to New York by way of families and friends, came to the academy and said "here I am. Let's start." And the poor man said, "I don't know who you are". And I said, you know, I wrote you that I wanted to be. I didn't get any letter from you. So my brother helped me get in to the academy because he was a member of Screen Actor's Guild and he was a member of Equity and so forth. So he said he would help me. So they finally let me in.

11:03.49

DANA: Before we leave World War II, we're talking to Gelbart and the fact that M.A.S.H gave a chance for people see how a sense of humor was used in that, times of adversity. Do you have memories then, especially as a flying air-- what kind of airplanes were you flying?

POSTON: At that time I was flying a troop carrier. C47.

DANA: C47. Goony birds.

POSTON: No, that was some other C something. But C47. C47 was the DC3 converted to paratroop,

glider tow and para drops and things. Well, that was all very funny. I'm surprised that you weren't laughing. So anyway, I got a shot at *Cyrano*, thanks to my brother again. He heard from a friend of his who had gone to Emerson. Is that in Boston somewhere in Massachusetts? There was going to be a replacement in Jose Ferrer's *Cyrano*. So I went with him. Turned out that they needed a tumbler, an acrobat and so forth. My brother was not, I was, so he said you stay.

11:05.19

DANA: You were an acrobat?

POSTON: Yeah.

MATZ: Trapeze or? It was a flying, oh. What was it? The flying?

POSTON: Zeblies. Yeah. I don't know what this has to do with anything.

MATZ: (laughs) It all has to do with the story of your life.

POSTON: They're not interested in my history. Ask me something else.

11:05.40

MATZ: Well, I'm curious at how you moved from this focus on being a dramatic actor, when you realized you were, you had a gift of comedy.

POSTON: Oh, well that's true. And I was trained at the academy. I was going to be a classicist, I assumed. And there is a funny story, though. We were rehearsing. **Charles Jehlinger** was about this tall. {holds hand low} Is that in camera? About this tall. Little man like this, fierce. And very professional, but fierce. We were scared to death of him. I was rehearsing a show. And he said, "stop, stop!" Like, he said something, I can't remember what it was. And I was trembling and shaking in my shoes. And he said, "Mr. Piston!" And I couldn't help but smile. I was scared but he, it made, you know. My classmates were there and they all heard him say 'Mr. Piston'. So I kind of -- and he looked at me and he said, "you see? You see? He knows! He knows! Go back! Go back! Do that again!" So every time that I would pull some kind of a rock in rehearsal he would scream "Mr. Piston!" And I would

immediately break from the tension, and then he would say, “of course you know what I’m talking about, so go on and do it”. So he did this regularly through the rehearsal of the thing. Then when we did the show on, at a theater on Broadway that we did the shows on, he came to the footlights before the show and held my hand and talked to me about knowing what I was doing and being calm and so forth. And at the end of that, just before they let the audience in and so forth, he released my hand and said, “now, go on, Mr. Poston”. He knew what he was doing. I was beyond admiring him. Genius. **Charles Jehlinger**. We became good friends. So, that was that. Another humorous passage in my life. Not funny.

11:08.15

DANA: Very poignant. Poignant and funny.

POSTON: I worked with **Garry Marshall**. In "*Princess Diaries 2*" or something. And he told me on time, he said Milton Berle told him that when he got an audience really worked up, he could say anything. He could say, "Fish for sale!" and get a big laugh. So, now that’s, like, a watchword between me and Garry. [laughs] Fish for sale.

11:08.45

DANA: Well, there is that pre-conceived notion -- I mean, when Bob Hope walked his walk on, onto the stage, he could have said "Fish for sale" and people are going to laugh. I mean, that's stimulus and response. Do we skip to the Steve Allen time, because that experience, that group, which became such a historic blend of folks, was a great example of the survival of a family that really did -- I mean, there was (spritzes?) in between. But if you could talk about the working as part of a comedic group, a team. You've been with a bunch of them.

POSTON: I'm trying to think of what part of all that would appeal to students of comedy and students of humor.

DANA: Well, one of the aspects of it is that comedians -- and one of the things we have talked about is that when you and I were growing up in the business, ‘comic’ was almost a put-down, almost a --

POSTON: Oh, definitely. Sure .

DANA: Yeah, yeah.

11:10.16

POSTON: Well, we were actors. So, you didn't want to be a comic. You know, they didn't know how to act, you know. They were just silly joke-tellers. But, later on, later on, we found out how talented they really were. And they're gifted.

There's so, there's so many wonderful stories about -- for instance. I was minded terribly that I wasn't in on vaudeville, because the stories that I'd read about it and the stars that I'd read about and so forth, they seemed to live such an exciting and wonderful high-level life, you know, full of -- all kinds of things happen to vaudevillians. And the stories were wonderful, on-stage and off. So I said, 'Ohh, missed out.' And I also admired silent-movie entertainers. And I felt bereft that I had missed out on silent movies, you know. The early days of Hollywood, and so forth. They'd get up in the morning, and didn't know what they were they going to shoot that day, I'd go roaring out someplace, shoot a scene and then roar back in, shoot the -- that must have been really exciting. At the time I didn't realize I was in on the birth of television. But we were, I mean, we were the early boys.

11:11.52

DANA: That's right. Don Knotts, Louie Nye, Tom Poston --

POSTON: The men on the --

DANA: (overlapping dialogue) the Tom Pistons.

POSTON: Tom Piston. **Men on the street.** Men on the street. That was really -- the first, at first I did it, on some kind of a fluke. I met -- well, maybe they would be interested in this, because it's how you get a job. I had done stuff in nightclubs and I had a little daytime show. Before the *Steve Allen Show*. So I was like a working actor, but not really successful. And so...when I was working in a nightclub with **Gabe Dell** on the bill, his writers, two of his writers used to spend time in the club. And when I wasn't on -- Gabe was on, I wasn't -- I'd go and spend

time with the two writers. **Stan Burns and Herb Sargeant**. And Lenny was the other third writer of that, of his act. I don't know if you remember that.

11:13.05

DANA: I didn't even remember that.

POSTON: Oh yeah, Gabe had an act that those three guys put together. It was funny, too. So we became pals, you know, just casual pals from intermingling and so forth.

Then I did the daytime show, in the daytime, two and a half hours a day, five days a week.

Hello. And Stan and Herb were now writing for Steve Allen, on his Sunday night show. And they would watch the *Entertainment* show in the daytime, and if there was anything good,

they'd put it on Steve Allen's show at night. He was still doing both shows at that time. The nighttime show and Sunday night show. So they were going to expand the man on the street.

They had been using a stage manager-esque little girl, stage manner with the big brown eyes.

And they used **Skitch Henderson**, the orchestra leader. They used **Gene Rayburn**. But they weren't, like, really professional comedians in any sense. And Louie, and Louie always

wound up. And he was so powerful that they said, why we don't get more **Louie Nye's**, and do it like in a more professional way. So, they called me, and Stan was having lunch with

something, and Herb Sargent sat across from me and said, "What can you do on the show?"

The Steve Allen Show." I said, "Well, I would need to have a really strong straight man."

And he said, "Well, Steve will be straight. Come on, Steve will do the straight." And I said,

"Well, for instance, we're... let's say we're two, like, we'd be two sailors, uh, okay. All right.

We'd be a couple of immigrants in Chinatown, and, see, then...we'd both be actors..." And he

got tired of this nothing that was coming out. And he said, "Oh, never mind that. Never mind

that.

11:15.06

You're standing there camera comes up on you, tight close-up." And he went like this

{lunges with hand- a camera zooming in on his face}, like that, and he said, "Here's our next

man on the street. What is your name, Sir?" You know, and I went, I was in character enough to be startled by what he said and how he said it. And I went, "Abba, abba, abba," You know, I couldn't think of, couldn't think of my name. So, he laughed. And he asked me a few questions and so forth. But, he laughed about the fact that I couldn't think of my own name. So we showed it to **Leonard Stern**, who was the head writer. And he laughed. And we showed it to Steve, and Steve says, "Okay, good." Saturday. Or Sunday, or whatever. This was, like, Saturday. This was Friday or something. He said, "Okay, good. Sunday." Now, I'd been used to rehearsing Broadway shows for three and a half weeks. Out of town before we were....[laughs] Saturday. Sunday, he said. So I went on and I did the man who couldn't think of his own name in the *Man on the Street* segment. And then I had to do, I had to go out of town to do an opening, Broadway opening in Philadelphia. So, when I came back, the -- all these stories are running through my head. I came back, and that was available again. They said, "We want you to do the show again. *The Steve Allen Show*." And I said, "Okay, what should I do?" And they said, "Well, you know. Do your man on the street." I said, "They're not going to believe that I can't think of my own name twice. Come on." "Yeah, yeah, yes, yes. Don't worry about it." So, I said, "They're going to throw stones. They say, 'what's your name', and I don't think of it? 'Get out of here, you bum!'" So, they not only -- they laughed. And they laughed for three years.

11:17.00

DANA: It was Tom Poston, and then Louie Nye, we talked to Louie about *Gordon Hathaway*. And that is-- I think he's finally over the resentment of -- he competed with Gordon, the television version of Franklin Pangborn. You know, he was [laughter] he's just...

POSTON: But you know that wasn't his, that wasn't his sissy? I mean, he was sissified. But he wasn't a homo. I saw him do his homo one time, backstage. It was completely different. It was completely different. I'll tell you sometime in private who he, who he was doing when he was doing Gordon Hathaway.

11:17.53

DANA: That was not -- I will make a date based on that solely.

POSTON: Well, it was a woman. He was doing a woman. A living woman, or, you know. He wasn't doing a homosexual. He was doing a woman.

11:18.10

DANA: I always --

POSTON: His homosexual is completely different from that. And hysterically funny.

DANA: Well, it had a hint of mint, and I always --

POSTON: Oh, yeah.

DANA: And to me, he was an ad-man. He was one of the precious ad man who ran it up the flagpole to see who was going to salute it, that type of thing.

11:18.26

POSTON: I always thought Louis was the funniest human being I've ever met in my life, if you just said, "Be funny," to any comedian or comic, Louie would just slay you. So funny. But he knows an interesting little point about the man on the street. I used to wonder why Louis and Don weren't upset that I always got so much more applause than they did. You know. So much louder and heartier and rewarding and so forth. And they didn't seem to mind. About a year of Sunday night's shows later, I said, "Wait a minute. That applause isn't any different than -- " Took me about a year that I wasn't getting any more applause than they were. But then I started to resent the fact that they might think they were getting more applause than me. [laughter] Isn't that funny? And that's a true story.

11:19.34

DANA: You are a comedian.

POSTON: It's a true story! [laughs] I thought my applause was just way more than theirs.

DANA: Then we were adding a, we added the, we had the, the three stalwarts. The Tom Poston, Louie Nye, and Don Knotts and then we started to use that a la Alan (Zowie?), as several

characters. Remember Gabe Dell, **Pat Harrington** did his bartender we would cut to on whatever the theme for the day was, and then in '59, we added Jose Jimenez. But Jose actually came from the Nutley-Hinkley-Butley-Winkly. The weekly Nutley-Hinkley-Butley-Winkly Report.

11:20.19

POSTON: That was -- if you look at credits for writers on television shows today, they're really extensive. **George Schlatter** was here, and he used to have a crawl of writer credits that just never ended. When we did the *Steve Allen show*. Leonard Stern was the head writer and director of sketches and things. But other than that, there were three groups of two man teams. Three two man teams to do that marvelous Sunday night show of *Steve Allen's*. Wonderful show. Wonderful, wonderful show. Twelve minutes were allowed for laughter on a one hour show. The show was timed twelve minutes short of an hour. Did you know that? There were 12 minutes unaccounted for on "The Steve Allen" rehearsals.

11:21.24

DANA: I remember that. And those teams were my team was Don, was Don Hinkley, and me. Then we had Arnie Sulton, Marvin Worth, for a time...

POSTON: **Marvin Worth**. And then --

DANA: This was when Larry --

POSTON: Stan Burns and Herb Sargent.

DANA: Stan Burns and Herb Sargent.

POSTON: That was it!

DANA: Yeah, I know. I -- when I see these crawls with these squadron or platoon or company of writers all going up there.

POSTON: For a half-hour situation comedy show, they have long lists of writers.

DANA: Yeah. So --

POSTON: But those were early days, eh?

DANA: We should be, should be able to get some retroactive pay for that.

POSTON: I'll give you a dollar.

DANA: I'll take it [laughter]

POSTON: That's right! Billy was a writer. Although Billy, although Billy was an entertainer before "**The Steve Allen Show**," on "The Steve Allen Show," he was a writer. And a very gifted one, too. Except when Steve says, "Doesn't hit me. Doesn't..."

11:22.36

DANA: Yes, that was the dreaded...God. Isn't that interesting -- you said that, of stimulus and -- I started to salivate, Pavlov's dog. Steve Allen was a memo-writer and a note-taker and a commentary-by-pencil on the script. On it, whether it was to Tom Poston, a note. If Tom Poston was in the next room, he'd write a memo.

POSTON: Oh yeah.

DANA: But, you would get 'Good but doesn't hit me.' But when you got 'Doesn't hit me,' all by itself. That, that, that was a dreadful --

POSTON: But was it, was it 'Hit me'? Was it -- ? That doesn't seem like the right word, I thought you were going to correct me and say...

11:23.28

DANA: No, it doesn't. Doesn't -- I had good, 'cause these were writers' notes. Or -- see, I started on "The Tonight Show." My baptism of fire was I went into the Hudson Theatre, it was Stan Burns and Herb Sargent, and for the first, I forget how long it was, I was, I was it. Because they went on to develop the Sunday show. My baptism by fire was as the only writer an hour and a half, five nights a week.

11:24.07

POSTON: No, Hinckley wasn't in the mix then.

DANA: Then they brought in Hinckley. And then **Paul Keyes** came in for, like, a minute and a half. And **Nick Vanoff** wanted to know if he had finished his novel he had -- [laughter]. Maybe

you could, because we were talking about family before, talk about the interaction, because you've had so many great families, this -- A little bit with "The Steve Allen Show," and then on to *Newhart* experience, so forth. Would you talk a little bit about families?

POSTON: I had, I had a little girl, my darling daughter in New York, so I couldn't go to the coast. Didn't want to anyway, I already had a television show of my own, and I had a Broadway play at the time and I had a wonderful family called "*To Tell The Truth*," a panel show, an audience participation show. That kept me alive and in New York so I could watch my daughter grow up, God bless her. Because her mother and I were separated. So, that was a good family, a wonderful family, "To Tell The Truth." Started with **Paulie Berger, Kitty Carlisle**. Ralph...what was his last name. And me. I took somebody's place, a columnist or something, and then it was, later on it was Peggy Cass and Kitty, and Kitty and Orson Bean and I. So we did that for several years, it was wonderful. Kept me in New York where I could be with my daughter. Then, I finally did go to California. I did "On the Rocks," I think, started. And "*Mork and Mindy*," and I did Bob Newhart's college roommate. Did he go to Emerson? On "*The Bob Newhart Show*." And then other, a few other things, so forth, and then, finally, "*Newhart*," his second, great wonderful show, which wonderful, a wonderful family. And, now I'm doing one called "*Committed*," which is a delightful show, just delightful. And I, I play the part of a dying clown. In a bathrobe and slippers. It's heaven. My wardrobe is not important. And my makeup is not important, my -- nothing is important. I just come out, sneak out, say a line or two, and sneak back into my closet.

11:26.54

MATZ: I just wonder how different it is working on a show like "*Committed*" from back in the day when you and Bill were working. I think students would be interested in how a live show would come together and the challenges of really having to respond on your feet, and you were talking about keeping the laughter *hot*, before we started here.

11:27.18

POSTON: The first hot laugh from the band. Oh, that's different. And as somebody who has done live comedy, I'm sometimes embarrassed by the length of time it takes whoever is responsible for changing costumes and preparing for the next scene. It's -- I was working on a show, and a scene had ended, and the audience is there, and the poor warm-up guy is there trying to keep the audience entertained. And five minutes go by, 10 minutes goes by, 15 minutes, 20 minutes is now going by. 'So, what the heck, why aren't we the next scene?' Well, the costume change. I said, 'We used to do this live.' There's no excuse for a...long, long, long delays between scenes. Because we literally did them live, and there's no, there was no -- and Shakespeare! We did....

11:28.29

DANA: Did you ever work in 8 H? in any of the --

POSTON: Do you know what a 'mudgeon' is?

DANA: Mudgeon?

POSTON: Yeah. Do you know, well the curmudgeon is a dogmudgeon. But --

DANA: Mmm-hmm.

POSTON: What -- I'm sorry.

DANA: I was talking about the -- Gene Wood, Sam Denoff and I were all pages at a, we were on a six. Sam Denoff was our, outside of 8H. And once in awhile, I would relieve there, and that was all live drama. They had, uh --

11:29.11

POSTON: Gene Wood was -- Gene, uh, Gene Rayburn was a page.

DANA: Yeah.

POSTON: **Peter Marshall** was a page. A lot of pages --

DANA: Regis Philbin was a page.

POSTON: Was he?

DANA: Yeah.

POSTON: I think **Gregory Peck** was a page.

DANA: Yes, he was. He was --

POSTON: Yeah, that's some alum, alumnae group there.

DANA: The one thing I remember -- I don't you if you have a parallel story - was in, uh -- I forget -- what- whatever it was, the guy get -- in Scene One -- and they used to run from scene to scene at age where our -- where Toscanini used to conduct -- the guy got knocked off the top of a building, fell on to the -- to the sidewalk, and when they cut to the shot, you see the guy and the grip putting the Heinz tomato ketchup on (laughter) on his forehead on the floor. And he -- Any live experiences like that?

11:30.18

POSTON: Well, they're -- they're legion, of course. The best was *Steve Allen*. If something like that happened on The Steve Allen Show, his remarks about it were always hysterically funny. And witty. He was very, very witty. But, uh, it happens. It happens, it happens. I was in *Cyrano* -- as I said, the first Broadway show I did -- I was still in the Academy. You weren't supposed to be working when you were in the Academy, but I wasn't going to turn down a chance to do a Broadway show. So, I was (laughter) in a Broadway, *Cyrano de Bergerac*. And they had the, uh, the roof tops of Paris scene. And all of a sudden you see the firemen's silhouette walk across the rooftops of Paris. (laughter) Oh, he was mortified. He was mortified! He didn't realize he was being silhouetted against the Paris sky. The audience just killed themselves. (laughter) They wanted more.

11:31.27

DANA: More. (laughter)

MATZ: Do you think that the, the live element and having to respond really quickly unexpected shaped your own brand of humor at all?

POSTON: Perhaps. I suppose, uh -- I don't know. I don't feel as though I've been very amusing throughout this particular, uh, interview, but I dare say a lot of my friends would say, "Yes.

Much more than usual." But, when we were doing *To Tell the Truth*, we used to meet in a dressing room, the four panelists, and they would give us what they called an affidavit, which told the story of the contestant that was going to be on. *To Tell the Truth* had a real person and two liars. All of them -- pre -- two liars pretending to be the real person and the real person having to tell the truth. And we were able through questioning to determine which one was telling the truth and which two were liars. Not always, but sometimes. So, we would meet in the dressing room, and we would have a pad and a pencil, and the affidavit, and without communicating with each other beyond saying, "Hello, how are you? How's everything going?" and so forth, we would jot down questions to -- for ourselves to ask the panel -- the, the, the three people when they would get on the stage. So, one, you've been a captain how long? Two, uh, what's a yard-arm? You know? Three, four -- So, we would have that half hour that they asked us to be there before the show started to go over these affidavits and write down our questions. So, then there was the, the TV scandals.

And, uh, our producer said, "Look, either we're going to have to tell the audience that we give you these affidavits beforehand from which you ask your questions, or you're going to have to do it cold and receive the affidavits on the show in front of the audience, and not before." So, we all went, "OHMYGOD! Oh my God, I don't know what to ask for the questions." Because we, we -- I don't think any of us ever went out there and made up a question. We looked at our little pad and said, "Uh, Number One -- " A lot of times people would say, "Number One," meaning their number one question, and Number One would have to answer. So, then they'd say, "Number Two, Number Three -- " (laughter) without realizing they were going down their list of questions. So, anyway, we were scared to death. We said, "Well, we can't -- we can't tell the audience that we know what they do beforehand. They would all say, 'Oh I can ask him. I know how to find out in a minute if I knew what he did.' So, we can't -- We're going -- Should we try it? We'll have to try it to see if we can possibly do it." So, from then on, we just did it cold. And, the, uh, the onus, the big burden

was on the first person because, while he was -- he or she was asking -- his questions, you had -- you now knew the affidavit, you could jot down yours as fast as you possibly can. So, it worked out that we did it, but -- Again, that was an example of having to do it on your feet, more or less.

11:35.16

DANA: Do you remember the Errol Flynn sketch --?

POSTON: Do I? Ralph Bellamy. I played Ralph Bellamy on that sketch before I did *To Tell the Truth*, or even before I had ever seen it. Did you know that?

DANA: No, I didn't.

POSTON: Yeah, I played Ralph Bellamy, who was a panelist on *To Tell the Truth*, before I'd ever seen the show even.

DANA: Now you're one of the few people that can corroborate when Evy and I -- my wife Evy and I -- went to see *My -- My Favorite Life*, or what was the name of it? What -- ?

POSTON: *This is Your Life*?

DANA: No. It was about the young, uh, assistant writer. It was Mel Brooks' movie --

11:36.03

POSTON: Oh!

DANA: -- about this -- a, a parallel of *The Sid Cesar Show*, and Peter O'Toole played this --

POSTON: Right!

DANA: -- Errol Flynn-like --

POSTON: Right!

DANA: -- and that was the story of Bill Harback assigning me to Errol Flynn doing that sketch that you were in. "Don't let him get drunk."

11:36.25

POSTON: Right!

DANA: Which do you -- you take it from there. Because he succeeded in getting tipsy.

POSTON: But he was tipsy. He was OK. He was OK. It was funny because -- Saying, "Will the real **Errol Flynn** please stand up." And after a lot of shaking around and so forth, **Don Knotts** stood up. In those days, he weighed about 90 pounds or something. God that was funny! Now, you can help me. Who -- What part did Don play, with the glasses? That columnist. Do you remember? **Don Adams** played one of the -- one of us. Ralph Bellamy and -- I don't know who played Kitty and I don't know played Polly, but Don played that --

11:37.09

DANA: Don Adams?

POSTON: Yeah. With glasses. One, two, three, four glasses, because the guy --

DANA: Oh God!

POSTON: -- always put up his glasses before he talked. Columnist. I could never think of his name.

DANA: Gardener?

POSTON: No. He was very sweet. He moved down to the Florida.

DANA: Ahhh -- The -- We're looking for the name of the columnist -- I know who it is.

POSTON: Isn't this funny? (laughter) Huh? Huh? (laughter) It's not comedy. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

DANA: Yeah. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) at this point. They're saying -- They're saying it's urgently important that we know from Tom Poston what the name of that columnist -- Hy --

POSTON: Gardener.

DANA: Gardener.

POSTON: Was it Gardener?

DANA: Well, it was -- I think so --

POSTON: Hy Gardener.

DANA: Yeah.

POSTON: I think you're right.

DANA: With the glasses pushing him --

POSTON: Yeah. And Don played him.

11:38.02

MATZ: Can I ask you a question about some of the skits that you're most memorable for? Some of the characters? It seems that almost in the lines you didn't say, your physical comedy is what was unique to you in terms of what got the biggest laughs. Would you agree with that? That the -- the waiting, the thinking, the rolling of the eyes -- And I'm, I'm wondering where that came from? How you developed that?

11:38.30

POSTON: Probably stole it from somebody. We borrow. We borrow. I remember (cough) -- uh, uh, **Bob Newhart** complained to **Johnny Carson** that it was like talking to himself. You know? And Johnny said, "We borrow here and there." (laughter) Well, comedians do borrow. Young -- young comics often appeal to me for -- Step up, what to do. How to. Etcetera. And I say, "Go to the comedy clubs. Go wherever comedy is being performed. Steal one joke a night." They -- They think I'm kidding, but, of course, I'm not. What I mean to do -- What I mean to say is, "Go -- Find a particular joke that seems to fit you, switch it so that it's not a theft -- not an outright theft -- and one -- one a night, and by the end of a couple of weeks, you've got a full act."

11:39.39

DANA: I can hear the notes being taken as we speak.

POSTON: Uh. You know **Jack Rollins**? His wife, when she was a kid had a phenomenal memory. And, uh, **Bernie West**. Bernie West. Who -- Who is fabulous. A wonderful entertainer. With Mickey Ross. They had an act, Ross and West. And, uh, when he -- He would ask Jane -- Jane Rollins, Jack's wife -- to accompany him to the *Paramount*, when **Henny Youngman** was performing, because although they discouraged any note-taking of any kind at the *Paramount*, they wouldn't let him -- Jane had a phenomenal memory. So, she would sit there and watch Henny Youngman, they would leave, and then she would recite his act

back to, to Mickey -- to, uh, to, uh --

DANA: Ross.

POSTON: -- West. Ah. What the hell's his name? I just said it.

DANA: Howard -- err -- Mickey Ross and Howard Wes -- Howard --

POSTON: Anyway. They later -- They later created *Three's Company*. So, you can move up in this business.

DANA: And they went on to *All in the Family* also, didn't they?

POSTON: Well, that was before.

DANA: That was before *Three's Company*. Right. Yeah, when Gene-- when Dana and Wood were at the *Reuban Bleu* -- Ross and West were working there too.

11:41.16

POSTON: "Bring me that ear". Remember that joke? I remember that for all these years. I was a teacher in a rough neighborhood. One morning I just had to -- to -- "Bring me that ear!"

DANA: You must have jokes to live by. I know that Evy and I do. That -- He would -- He'd just say the punch line, and everybody -- everybody knows, you know, exactly what you're getting at.

POSTON: Well, you know, **Buddy Hackett** was one of the really great creative comic minds ever. And, you just -- you couldn't tell him a joke. He'd just -- He knew -- He knew all the jokes. He just knew them. And -- And he used to make up jokes. He was a real, uh, creative guy.

DANA: The putting down -- There seems to be a, uh, a disregard in the current crop of comedians. They'll say, "Oh, that's a joke." What -- What do you mean that's a joke?

11:42.27

POSTON: (sigh) I agree. I know that -- I don't know about now, but when -- when **Bob Hope** was still the king, the young comedians despised him. I mean -- They just -- They -- They put him down. And he was the master. There was -- There was nobody -- There never was anybody quite like Hope. I remember when I was a kid, uh, I used to be angry in a movie theater because people would laugh and miss the next joke or two. (laughter) Because I wanted

them to be quiet, so I could hear the next one, and then the next one, and the next one. So --
But, you're right. I mean -- A lot of modern -- modern comics don't have any respect for
Berle, who was (WHEW!) unbelievable! He was a hurricane on-stage.

11:43.28

DANA: That we've been talking about the fact that if -- if you put -- putting down a joke, is like a
cabinet-maker putting down his saw or his hammers. They -- They -- Those are the basic
tools that everybody should know. If you say, "Don't do the Jack story," and they don't know
what you're talking about, then you know somebody who really doesn't know what he should
if he wants to be in the --

POSTON: I-- listen. You know, these things change. I mean, there's, uh, a young man that I worked
with, uh, who's very interested in the business, loves the business, never heard of Danny
Thomas. And, it's hard to believe that you could be interested in television in any way, and
not have heard of Danny Thomas, who at one time owned television.

DANA: Yeah, he was instrumental in my career as, uh, Lou Edelman. Louis Edelman, who put
Danny Thomas and Sheldon Leonard together. Mark Terratoe (sp?). Remember when they
-- they did *Make Room for Daddy*. Did you ever work at *DesiLu* -- Cahuenga? You weren't
coming out to New York that much.

11:44.51

POSTON: No. I did only in *Mork and Mindy*. It was there. *Mork and Mindy* was Paramount-DesiLu,
but the DesiLu side of Paramount.

DANA: But that was a -- that was a, uh, uh, pivotal team, and then -- then Sheldon did *I Spy*. It was a
first, employing Bill Cosby as a peer to a white performer. I'd like to, uh, bring up the
subject of the -- the healing power of laughter and play and the positive attitude. You --
Norman Cousins was -- Norman -- was Cousins a, uh, friend or acquaintance of yours?

POSTON: No. I know he was of yours. And his wife. But, I -- No, I never met him.

DANA: The *Anatomy of an Illness*. I mean, they -- It's so true. And now you see they're starting to

feature on television. They talk about how laughter is good for you. I mean, this was stuff -- Lawrence Peters and I wrote *The Laughter Prescription* in 1983, so there's like a 20-year cycle all of -- all -- all of a sudden. This therapeutic use of -- of laughter is getting some -- some attention. Is -- Is that something that -- that means anything to your particular life?

11:46.23

POSTON: I'm just curious: Is this your interview? Or mine? (laughter)

DANA: Would you make that -- We can edit this, can't we?

POSTON: Where's the -- (laughter) Exactly is the camera at this time?

MATZ: It's all you, sir. (laughter)

DANA: Well --

POSTON: That's infuriating.

DANA: Yeah. OK.

POSTON: I'm leaving.

MATZ: (laughter)

POSTON: I believe in -- in the curative powers of laughter. I don't like to be laughed at, do you?

DANA: I'm not going to talk anymore.

MATZ: Oh. (laughter)

POSTON: Good.

DANA: You know --

MATZ: We need to heal him through some --

DANA: Yeah. Do you -- Now heal me -- heal me through laughter.

POSTON: Heal me through laughter. (inaudible) Oh, I am married to one of the funniest people in the world.

DANA: Well, let's hear about that.

POSTON: Suzanne. **Suzanne Pleshette** is -- She's -- Her reputation is of a beautiful, seductive, sexy actress, but people -- people who know her, her friends, they all know how funny she is.

And she is a true crack-up. She's very, very funny. Ribald. A bit. But funny. I'm a lucky guy. In more ways than one. She's also a beautiful, seductive, sexy actress. Wife. Human.

DANA: And she has a very colorful speech pattern.

POSTON: She does. She does. I won't attempt to lay that out any clearer than that, but she's colorful. And proud of it. But, if I was sick, I know she'd cure me with laughter. But, I believe in that. I -- I think -- I think, uh, someone who lives a life without laughter, is bereft. I suppose there are plenty of us.

DANA: These, uh -- This phenomena we've been talking about, which I labeled the Pagliacci Syndrome and the people that we know in -- as friends -- depression seems to be something that happens to an awful lot of people, in comedy. Paradox. Paradoxically.

11:48.49

POSTON: [sigh] Yeah. I've never -- I've -- I'm lucky I never had it. I never experienced it. There are a lot of things I never experienced that I'm grateful for. I don't have a gambling, errr, gene. I don't have a drinking gene. I don't have any of those compulsive things that destroy lives. So, I've been very grateful for that. And I -- I've never had the displeasure of a -- of a, uh -- of a need for Zoloft or -- you know? I feel really sorry for people who suffer from depression because nothing seems to get them out of it. **Shecky Greene** is probably as funny as anybody's ever been on the face of the earth. And successful. So, immediately you say, "Oh my God. What does he have to be depressed about? Why would he ever spend one minute not happy and swinging and having a great time?" But, uh -- So, that's kind of the way I feel about my life. I'm so lucky that I'm happy and -- and, uh -- enjoy my wife and my children. My life. My friends. My dear, sweet friends.

11:50.15

DANA: That is a blessing. Absolutely a blessing. There was a -- You probably didn't experience this either, but there's a sort of a common rift -- My wife Evy, in a conversation with third parties, will get, "You're married to Bill Dana?" Oh, you must laugh all the time.

POSTON: Sure. Pass the butter dear. (laughter)

DANA: Stop. (laughter) Oh stop.

POSTON: But -- you know what? -- I bet she does. I bet she does. There's nothing going to stop you from being funny, so -- Except for the fact that you do the same dumb joke over and over. But other than that. (laughter)

DANA: Oh, Tom.

MATZ: Tom, could you talk a bit about the staying power you've managed to have in this business? It's -- It is a tough business, and you've been very lucky, I guess, to be working in it this long and I wonder if there's anything you have to say or any advice you have to give about what you think it was that has maintained you?

11:51.35

POSTON: Yeah. I know what you mean, and -- and it's -- you're absolutely right. I -- **When I started**, I either got a job or starved, so -- So, I was scurrying around every -- every rat hole trying to find a piece of cheese. In any form, in any form. That's really where I got into comedy, because there were more comedy plays being done than dramatic plays. So, I went where -- where something was being done. And it didn't matter whether -- I didn't care whether it was comedy or drama or falling on my head off of a parapet, which was how I got the first job I got on Broadway. I -- I usually say that to young people. 'For God's sake, if you have a talent, nurture it, because somebody it's going to be what gets you a job. Whether you play an instrument or whether you dance or whether you speak a -- a foreign language of some kind. It doesn't matter almost what the talent is. Playing with a comb and a tissue paper, it doesn't matter. **If you're good at something, keep at it because someday it's going to get you a job**'. And -- And jobs lead to jobs. You know? It's -- In some ways, it's a very small community, as you've seen here in your various interviews, so if you do good, that word gets out. And, if -- if you're reliable and on-time, and know your lines and know your cues and know your business and so forth, that word -- that dependability, uh, factor gets to be

common-knowledge, and they say, "Well, we'll get Harry because Harry's always on time," you know? But isn't he tall? He's awfully tall. Yeah, well, we'll shoot it different.

11:53.50

DANA: Your having escaped Zoloft and depression and -- and that --

POSTON: Thank God.

DANA: You also escaped what so many other people in our field have gone through. Unless I'm mistaken, you've pretty good representation and in -- in management and the -- in the business aspects.

POSTON: Oh. Oh, the best. Oh, luckiest man alive. **I'd still be chasing cheese at every rat hole if it weren't for Jack Rollins.** Oh yeah. Oh, I would still be looking to get the next job and -- and scrounging. But Jack believed in me, and -- We were doing our club act. **Jerry Matthews** and I were doing a nightclub act, and Rollins came to -- as he always did -- he came to see, and he said he'd like to represent me. I didn't know he was, of course. And, uh, so I sai -- I thought he meant the act, you know? And he said, "No, no, you." So, I wasn't going to break up the act just because the old show business thing -- you know? 'Want you - - Take you to Broadway, but your partner can stay in Peoria'. So -- But that's -- But then the act when to pieces, we had no place to play, and I got a job in summer theater with Constance Bennett, touring with the Sabrina Fair (sp?). And several months later, uh, I went and saw Rollins and said, "Did you mean it?" You know? And I sai -- He said, "Well, yeah. I'd just give you advice. I won't take you on as a client." But then I got a job in a play, and did very, very well. And, uh -- So then, he agreed to take me on and -- and he was the real reason that I ever did anything in the business, really.

11:55.46

DANA: Then who -- who followed, uh, Jack? It was Rollins, then Joffe -- Did -- Were -- Were they together at that period?

POSTON: No. Charlie was just a -- a friend and kind of like a -- a gopher. Jack was kind of training

him. You know? Jack loved him as a father to son, but, uh -- and still does -- but, but, uh -- **Charlie {Joffe}** then joined the firm while I was with Jack. And, uh, then **Buddy Morra**, and then **Larry Brezner**, and now it's -- it's Brezner, Steinberg, Tannenbaum. The management firm.

11:56.26

DANA: When did -- ?

POSTON: They don't know that I'm still with them, and I don't want you to tell them. (laughter) You know -- But --

DANA: When did Woody Allen come in with -- with Jack?

POSTON: Well, what happened there -- This is a story that nobody really knows. Uh -- I was do -- I wanted to do a club act. You know? Wanted to do a stand-up, so Jack put me with **Woody Allen**. And we went over some things and so forth. So, I said -- I remember, I said, "Can we go outside and work? Central Park is just -- " So we went to Central Park and he was so nervous -- Woody -- and, uh, finally I said, uh, "Are you OK? Is everything all right?" He says, "Well, can we go back inside?" So, I said, "Sure. Why?" He said, "There could be a bee." (laughter) So, anyway, as we went in, he -- then he read me some of his -- some of his stuff. And I said, "Oh my God! Woody you should do this." I said, "I don't think anybody could really do it quite the way you do." He -- He was a great admirer of **Mort Sahl**. He said, "Oh Mort Sahl, Mort Sahl. Mort Sahl has great jokes. Mort Sahl has great jokes." I said, "Yes, but -- but he's not really a -- a perfor -- a actor-performer. You could be -- You could -- If you do your own thing, you'd -- There's -- Nobody could do it but you. You'd be the best. If I were you -- " He was then with, uh, half a rabbi, something, and I said, "If you're smart -- " since Jack knew him, he represented it -- He told me -- He got me together with him. So, I said, "If you do the -- do the right thing, you'll go to Jack Rollins, and ask him to manage you, and do an act with these pieces that you have here, that are so great." And, uh, he said, "No, no. Mort Sahl is really good. I couldn't -- I couldn't do that."

And that was the end of that and then the next thing I know he was with Jack Rollins and he was doing his doing his act. That's never been acknowledged.

11:58.40

DANA: The Jack Rollins family is amazing. Billy Crystal. Fill in the rest of those guys. Currently they're --

POSTON: Mike and Elaine, **Mike Nichols and Elaine May**, he is, I don't know, well first of all, he managed Harry Belafonte from, not only obscurity but a failure in two or three other singing styles. He was already, he was flipping hamburgers when Jack and Jane, Jane Rollins got a hold of him and did the calypso stuff.

DANA: I happened to be in the office and I, don't ask, I think I was looking for work when he, he never had paper with Harry Belafonte when he got a letter from Harry saying I'm going elsewhere.

POSTON: You mean just because Harry went with his psychiatrist's husband? Well I was very fortunate because it was at that period right at that moment that Jack agreed to take me on as a client. He was so upset. Boy, he was upset. And he was a sweet man, still is, God bless 'em.

DANA: Yeah. We had a session with Irvin, Arthur, Jack and myself where we were talking about, about Woody and his prompting Jack that Woody had opened for Ruth Price here at the Jazz Bakery and done well and let's get Mort Sahl out there again, so Woody is still on Sahl's team.

12:00.53

POSTON: Oh he was very, very admiring of Mort, and why not? Mort's wonderful. But I just felt that Woody could do his stuff, you know. Better than anybody else could. I was also responsible for Woody performing for the first time although I understand he did something in Tamiment or somewhere. They made him do something. But he had written a wonderful piece that I did in Madison Square Garden for the *Sane Nuclear Policy Committee*. Huge laughs about

the mayor of Miami calling the mayor of New York and apologizing for the ICBM being on its way to New York with a hydrogen bomb warhead that was going to explode in 'let's see, about four minutes your Honor'. You know, so, that was 19,000+ people laughing, the loudest laugh I ever heard in my life. So afterwards we did a little thing for them like the next night in a hotel, *Sane Nuclear Policy Committee*, and Woody had written this psychological warfare bit. Do you remember it?

12:02.13

DANA: No I don't.

POSTON: No guns, no ammunition, nothing, just psychological warfare. So these two guys met on an island in the Pacific, enemy combatants, and insulted each other and that was, and Woody, he really didn't know anything about, he thought the joke was, "Your mother wears GI shoes." You know, and then the other guy would respond with "Your father sleeps in pay toilets" you know, and the other guy would say, "You're short, you're short." I had the first line. We bumped into each other and turned around, and I had the first line, whatever it was -- "You're short." And he came back with his line, and I went, "Owwwww". **It never occurred to him that his barbs would wound.** He just thought it was bing, bing, bing, bing, bing. So when I reacted to what he said, it was like -- it was almost don't do that you know. So that night, first of all, I made him do the other soldier in the bit and then he did some stand-up afterwards, first time.

12:03.35

DANA: The team that we're traveling with now from time to time are all pals of yours.

POSTON: Oh yeah.

DANA: Irwin Corey, 91-years-old. I'm looking at you and I'm looking at me and I'm looking at all these guys and it's got to be that 80 is the old 60. I mean it's --

POSTON: I suppose. I don't know. I used to think, I remember as a child a famous book came out. Life Begins at 40 at which the entire world said "Ho ho ho, not that I know of. Oh no it

doesn't, it's over." So, life begins at 40. Forty now is, I mean, what?

12:04.23

DANA: Infancy.

POSTON: Yeah. I mean the sexiest people in television are 40.

DANA: So there's hope for us all.

POSTON: Yes, I'm going to be 40.

DANA: What about this infant sitting next to me? Jenni --

POSTON: She thinks she's old.

MATZ: I'm just in awe.

POSTON: She thinks she's old. She goes back to college and wonders where all these kids came from.

MATZ: I wish. Um, talking about Woody Allen and Mort Sahl and all these people, just, I mean the essence of what it is we want to know is not something we can ask which is "Why are they funny and what is funny." But I'm wondering if there's any way to describe or put into any kind of a word that you could tell us, what is it that you think is funny?

12:05.12

POSTON: Ahh, oh. I'm sorry, Steve Allen isn't, I'm sorry he isn't alive for many reasons, but I'm sorry he isn't here because he would tell you in a matter of 10,000 words what funny really is. But, surprise, unexpected, play on, playing on known funny things. What did they, what do call that in a situation comedy? Recall. Recap? Re-something?

DANA: Yeah, I remember trying, and there's nothing --

POSTON: Call back, call back, right?

DANA: Yeah.

POSTON: Call back when you to something that happened before and you reprise it in another way.

So, go ahead Bill, I'm sorry.

DANA: No, there was.

POSTON: If you insist on talking.

DANA: I have to explain this. He's only kidding Rob Silverman.

MATZ: You have to give me examples of what these things are.

DANA: The, hey, I'm 60 years old, what do you want from me? I've forgot the press.

MATZ: Are there any for just the benefit of the camera? Any examples that could come to mind to explain what a 'reversal' is or what a 'recall' is?

POSTON: A call back?

MATZ: Yeah.

POSTON: It's jus referring to something that happened earlier in the sketch that was funny and then you nail it on the way out so to speak, you know, again. Call back, is that what it was called? A callback?

12:06.54

DANA: Gene and I did a think called a comic's Olympics where the comic, Yesheki, Berni Sheki, whatever, would come out in the shorts and with a number on their back and the guys have the cards that said, 10, 9, 8, so forth and would say, so now, Shecky Piston will do a single take.

12:07.24

POSTON: Oh right.

{Poston does an example of a "take"}

DANA: Now Mr. Piston will do a double take. (Laughs) And then the double take going away, or the reverse double-take. (Laughs).

POSTON: How about the skull, do you what the skull was?

{mimics eyes popping out of head}

DANA: Go ahead.

POSTON: Sssststttt

DANA: and MATZ: Laugh.

DANA: What others can we put names to?

POSTON: The going away, going away take with the elbows.

{Gets up to demonstrate}

DANA: Yes, that's right.

POSTON: Know the going away take with the elbows? You know that I did this, oh, I can't. I'm locked in.

{Standing, mimics walking away, tangles in wire}

MATZ: (Laughs)

POSTON: Locked in loveliness.

MATZ: (Laughs)

DANA: We would do that with your, I saw your wife.

POSTON: I'm still on aren't I?

DANA: I saw your wife, and the guy starts to walk away, with another guy. And then the shoulder take.

POSTON: Right.

12:08.35

DANA: Shoulder take going away. And obvious the Bobby Rosengarten on the drums, the rim, the rim shot.

POSTON: Right, yeah.

DANA: Now again, that's because, I never liked it. I'm so sensitive when somebody says 'barump bump' I take it --

POSTON: Keep your hands to yourself.

{To the soundman}

DANA: He's only kidding, Rob.

POSTON: Uhh, I, this is something interesting maybe for kids. I did some summer theater work for Maxwell Anderson's son was a director. He directed me and we became friends. So Maxwell Anderson had written a Broadway show called *Barefoot in Athens* and it was being cast and I

asked my friend, you know, do you think I could see about the play? So he set it up so that I could audition for the play when they're having auditions on stage. So, I came out and did double take, triple take, skull, going away with the elbows, and so forth and the stage manager was furious, just livid. Came, grabbed me, he was going to take me out by the collar, by the seat of the pants. And **Maxwell Anderson** stopped him and turned to the people with him, secretary and so forth and said, "Do we have something humorous in this play that he could do?" That was how I auditioned. **So you have to have guts to, really, comedians have a lot of nerve. You maybe scared out of your pants but you have to go ahead and do the thing that you know is going to get you killed.** There's an example of humor in a burlesque situation where the straight man is heavy handed and the comic is always, always in danger of being hit or sent to jail, or killed. And he has to always be on that edge of doing the wrong thing and the straight man pulls him back up and says, "Don't do that, how dare you in front of these nice people?" And the comic still has to, always approach the point where he's either killed or sent to jail. And that's how that works. Then what happens is the comic gets to be the star. {motions head being cut off} And the comic now, nobody is going to send him to jail. Nobody's going to shoot him; he might shoot somebody, but you're not shooting this comic because I'm the star of this and it just goes all to hell. But he's got to be in danger of being beat up or ostracized.

12:12.06

DANA: I've never seen that observation; it's so true. You get canteen floss (?) of the Chaplin, beyond the burlesque, but that central focus, yes, he's in jeopardy.

12:12.26

POSTON: Oh, terrible, yeah, always. But he has to always approach that point where he's killed; otherwise it's not funny. Otherwise the straight man can't, "Straighten up here you silly thing."

DANA: Berle's line about the straight man walking on the beach?

POSTON: Ha ha, go ahead.

DANA: No, you do it. It's your interview.

POSTON: **The world's greatest straight man is retired**, he's in Florida and he's walking along the beach and hears a man out in the ocean. "Help, help I'm drowning." The straight man, "Help help you're drowning?"

(Soft laughter).

DANA: Are you trying to tell these people in this theater?

POSTON: Wait a minute.

DANA: Oh, Berle, my gosh. I'm so happy for you to acknowledge his greatness because he's absolutely the prototype of what today they're calling the standup comedian.

POSTON: What energy, what, oh. He would just bombard you with humor. Funny stuff and jokes and physical, he could make a sphinx laugh.

DANA: The reputation he had, I don't know who came up with the thief of bad gags, that type of thing reinforces what you're talking about only he took it to the extreme. There wasn't a joke out there that Milton, that Uncle Miltie wasn't going to put, use or put into his files.

12:14.13

POSTON: Right. And you know he had the cold nerve to say that he didn't **steal jokes**. He stole jokes from people that weren't funny.

DANA: When was the first time that something that you had conceived came back to you?

POSTON: Well maybe not me but I have a friend, Bob Abergast (sp?) who is one of the funniest people that I've ever met and he created what they called, I don't know which one was the answer man and which one was the question man.

DANA: This brings up a subject because --

POSTON: Which one was the radio thing? What was the radio show? The Question Man?

12:14.54

DANA: The thing that this leads to is the creative moment because on the *Steve Allen show*, sitting,

when we had offices on 7th Avenue, one night Don Hinckley, Leonard Stern and I are sitting and my sense of memory is that I came up with this concept that you get the answer first and the qu, you know, 9W, all of that stuff. I know, because I was there. We created it and then Steve said, "Well wait a minute, there's this guy Bob Arbergast." And until this moment I never really got the, the total story which you're going to reveal to us know.

12:15.50

POSTON: What was the original radio show? The Answer Man or the Question Man? Do you remember?

DANA: Oh the original one was the *Answer Man*.

POSTON: ***The Answer Man***, all right. The Answer Man, you'd ask him a question, any question, and he would give the answer. Bob Abergast was a great wit and a great, and he switched it so that he gave the **Question Man**. You gave him the answer, and he would provide the question and of course they were always amusing. So he did that on his radio show with Pete Arbergast and Pete. And then when he came to *Entertainment*, my show, we did it on my show. With Art Fleming. Remember Art Fleming, the announcer? Art Fleming, the announcer did the Question Man on our show. And then Steve Allen did it; Johnny Carson did it forever with the great Karnac, and do you know that, now this is so sad because he could have been a wealthy man if they had honored -- but do you know that the game show, uh, with uh.

12:17.04

DANA: *Jeopardy*.

POSTON: *Jeopardy* is.

DANA: I talked, jokingly, I talked to Merv Griffin one time and I said, you know if it wasn't for me, now here's, I'm talking totally honestly but **what the students should know is that they can very easily invent something that's --**

POSTON: **That's already been invented.**

DANA: -- already invented. I know, because I did it. Ask anybody. In my act for years one of the things that I created on the *Steve Allen show* along with Don Hinckley was the Question Man and the Bob Arbergast thing, that was, I had no exposure to it. So it is possible for people to invent generation after generation to invent the same--

12:17.56

POSTON: But *Jeopardy* is interesting because Art Fleming was the guy that gave the answer on the *Entertainment* show, my show, and I gave the question and then he became the guy on *Jeopardy* who gave the answer and insisted on getting the question from the participants. That was Art Fleming. It was interesting.

DANA: Yeah. Merv credits his wife as having come up with the concept.

POSTON: Sure she did. No, that was Bob Arbergast. He's very witty. He was very witty. IS very witty and just, a funny, funny fellow. Do you know him? Do you know Bob?

DANA: No!

POSTON: Oh, yeah. He's a funny, funny fellow.

DANA: I never met him.

POSTON: He's moved up to Mariposa, California and is as happy as a clam. Not doing any-- He comes down once in a while and does voiceovers but he's not in the business anymore, bless his heart. Wonderful, wonderful friend of mine. But that notion has now gone all the way around in the business but it was his and yours notion.

MATZ: Another maybe interesting thing for people to hear is when you create a character that is so original and has such depth like your *George Utley*. How do you prevent being pigeonholed as that character? Because you went on to do many different characters after that but a lot of people remember you very specifically as that role.

12:19.42

POSTON: Well, there is something that's not much fun and that is **typecasting** if you call it that but, the industry getting a notion of you or of what you can do and it can be very limiting. I did a

panelist on *To Tell the Truth* and *Goods and Todman* liked my contribution so they put me on "What's My Line" from time to time and "I've Got a Secret" once in a while and then every new show that they came up they would ask me to be a panelist on to get it started. Kitty and I were the first two people to do "Password" if you remember that show?

12:20.31

DANA: Sure.

POSTON: And I did the thing with Gene Rayburn, bless his heart, for several times and so forth. So, like it or not I became know throughout the industry as a panelist. Not as an actor, not as a comedian, not as anything but a panelist. So when I would be proposed for some role of some kind the response would be, "No, oh, we know Tom, we like Tom, we like him, no, not for.. what about for? No, no. What about? No, not, no. What about a panelist? Yeah, that's right. Perfect." So I had some difficulty overcoming that, but fortunately in our business two weeks go by and they've forgotten you anyway so you start off fresh.

12:21.27

DANA: From a kneeling position.

POSTON: Oh please, oh please oh please. **Every kid, every kid watching this will experience this at some point.** Before you get the job, I'll do anything. I'll do anything. I'll get up, time means nothing to me. Money means nothing to me. I'll do anything, I'll play any part. I'd do anything, anything. OK, you get the part, the contract, and as you finish the last letter on your name on the contract, "10 o'clock? Isn't that kind of early? Do we have to get here? When's lunch?"

DANA: (Laughs) Amen.

POSTON: It's immediate. Immediate. Sign that thing and jeez, you know, those costumes are so heavy. I wonder if--

12:22.23

DANA: Do you remember the transition between being a supporting player, then a recognizable

personality and then, this is star? Did that impact you?

POSTON: Well, I know that at first when you're a star like, I would go to theaters outside of, or in New York either for that matter, but the first time I got my name in lights I was in a summer theater outside of Chicago where Jerry Aeurbach was an apprentice, 16-years old and looked exactly the same. Same height, same, everything, just the same. Just old Jerry. I loved that kid. We became pals and stayed pals forever. But they needed a name. I had already done a few shows for them so some of the audience knew me and so forth so they needed to put somebody's name in lights so they put my name in lights out in front. That was the first time and then different times. But I never really, I don't think I ever believed it. I don't think I ever believed it. I was waiting for a Broadway hit in a role that I created to be a real star and that never happened. I always was in replacements in hit shows and I starred in shows that weren't hits so that really never happened. I'm still waiting.

12:24.23

MATZ: Not yet. (Laughs). Your next chapter.

DANA: That's why you're here today Mr. Poston and Mr. Piston, the bod of ya's.

POSTON: The bod of us.

DANA: You be stars. Genuine stars.

POSTON: **I have only love and admiration for people starting out in this business because it is fraught with fraughtness. And my heartfelt suggestion is don't be afraid.** Nervousness and anxiety and stage fright, that's fine. Those things are just natural. But don't be afraid that you've chosen the wrong career. Don't be afraid that somebody's going to turn you down because somebody is going to turn you down over and over and over and over but that's just, that's part of it. That's as much a part of our business as learning lines or putting on make-up. You will be turned down; that's part of it. And don't ask why because you could give a lot better reason than the person who's turning you down. But don't be afraid. Just gird your loins and.

12:25.50

DANA: Well, with that generous contribution I must ask you the one liner, it's sort of silly but somehow it's a good button. **Was it worth it?**

POSTON: Ohmigod, omigod. I educated my children. I mean I paid for their education. I'm afraid I didn't educate them very much but I paid for their education. My son's a lawyer; my daughter's a doctor; my other daughter is a singer/dancer/actress/waitress, so. Sure, I wouldn't -- first of all, there's nothing else that I could have done. You know, except day labor and you know, sweep floors and dig ditches and so forth, just a physical human. But nothing else that I could have done that would have garnered me this kind of lifestyle or success with my family. What would it have been? I was a terrible, terrible thief.

12:27.11

DANA: (Laughs). You could have stolen a C-47 and gone into drug smuggling. You would have thought of something.

POSTON: Maybe, I don't know. No, do I have any regrets? None. None whatsoever. I would like to have been better but no regrets.

DANA: Well that, that is absolutely --

POSTON: Can I ask you a question?

DANA: Yes.

POSTON: Is this the seat that George Schlatter sat in?

MATZ: No but it's the seat that Betty White Wilson is.

DANA: Betty White will sit right where your tukis was. She'll be thrilled about it. She may demand certain favors.

POSTON: I'm roasting Betty tomorrow night.

DANA: You're?

POSTON: I'm not, but we're roasting Betty White tomorrow night.

MATZ: Oh yes.

DANA: Oh.

MATZ: That's right, that(inaudible)

DANA: Where is that? Friar's? Who's roasting her?

POSTON: Peter or one of those, Animals and Others for Animals. And I don't know where.

DANA: Oh, I'd like to go.

POSTON: My wife knows; I'm not going to get lost but I don't know where.

DANA: Well thank you Tom Piston, Poston or whoever you are.

POSTON: And you are, I'm sorry?

DANA: Ber Tilstrom.

POSTON: Ber?

DANA: People don't remember me without Fran and Ollie.

POSTON: Did you ever do his show? I did.

DANA: You spoke to Kukla?

POSTON: I spoke to Kukla and Fran and well, Ber, I knew Ber was back there so I used to make horrible nasty asides that only he would know what I was talking about. Pretending to talk to the creatures.

DANA: You certainly flipped to, when Gene Wood and I were pages on the third floor, and Dayton Allen did the voice of Mr. Bluster and used to do these dirty rehearsals before the kids came in? "Oh, he's Princess Summer Spring Winter Fall. Come here, my, sit on my face, it's not disgrace." (Laughs). Our pal passed away a few years ago didn't he? Dayton?

POSTON: Recently.

DANA: Dayton Allen, recently?

POSTON: Recently, yes. Yup. They're calling in our class.

DANA: (Laughs). We'll never go and if we do it'll be screaming. Thanks so much Tom Thomas.
Tom Poston, Star.

POSTON: Shoulda stayed in the Air Corps.

DANA: Shoulda stood.

POSTON: I coulda done that.

DANA: You coulda done, you could have had an honest life.

POSTON: You know why I got out of the Air Corps? I couldn't stand one more writing my name. You couldn't just fly the plane. You had to make out a flight plan thing and sign it and then put that thing and take this and sign and make it out and sign it. I knew who I was. I didn't need to --

12:30.34

DANA: Where we in France at the same time? I was there let's see, after D-Day. Christmas Eve. Are we still running?

MATZ: Yes.

POSTON: No.

MATZ: They don't stop until we tell them.

DANA: Oh yeah. Anyway, that, we can talk about.

POSTON: Well I was in France. Well not exactly in France. I was over France on D-Day.

MATZ: Lucky.

DANA: So you were involved in the debarkment?

POSTON: Yeah. I was the 13th airplane over the coast.

MATZ: Yeah.

DANA: Whoa.

MATZ: Oh wow.

POSTON: When I flew over Normandy it was pitch black except for on the side of a hill it looked like a fire of some hundred yards or more in width, that's how big the fire was and that's all there was, just that one fire down there to the south. When I left Satan was dancing down there sending up things. It was a sea of crap.

End of Interview - Tom Poston