

Acting for the Cameras: Performance in the Multi-Camera Sitcom

By Christine Becker

“The multi-camera sitcom is dying out. It’ll go the way of the vaudeville variety show,” remarks [Janet Kagan](#), script supervisor on *How I Met Your Mother*. [Steven Levitan](#), producer of *Back to You*, offers a different viewpoint: “I grew up watching *Dick Van Dyke*, *Mary Tyler Moore* and *Cheers*... They were incredibly meaningful, and I refuse to believe that human nature has changed that much.”¹ These quotes showcase a now-familiar debate: will the single-camera sitcom supplant the multi-camera sitcom? What is it that audiences today, especially in the highly desired 18-34 demographic, supposedly are not responding to in the traditional multi-camera sitcom? While opinions on these questions are voluminous, few, despite the centrality of performance to the reception of any format, have considered performance as a relevant component when comparing sitcom formats and predicting the future of the multi-camera. So I would instead like to ask, how does performance differ between the formats? Might performance have something to do with the ways in which audiences are currently responding to the formats? And if the traditional multi-camera does evolve into a different form or even dies out, what unique performance style might we essentially lose as a result?²

Traditional textual analysis can answer certain components of these questions; however, a thorough assessment requires more comprehensive methodologies of performance study. As Brett Mills, author of *Television Sitcom*, rightly argues, “It is necessary to move away from an assumption that performances are nothing more than texts to be read, and instead move towards examining the rehearsal and production process which creates them and which rely for their effectivity on the abilities of individual actors and audiences’ abilities to recognize and take pleasure in them.”³ In taking one step toward such an examination with this article, my research involved interviewing industry practitioners and observing firsthand the shooting process of an episode of two 20th Century Fox Studios-produced sitcoms: the first-season Fox network comedy *Back to You* and the third-season CBS network comedy *How I Met Your Mother*. While *Back to You* retains the format of a traditional [multi-camera sitcom](#), *How I Met Your Mother* mixes multi-camera production with [single-camera](#) elements and features a [laugh track](#) but does not shoot in front of a live audience. Based on those discussions and observations, I would like to offer an overview of the primary aspects that define traditional multi-camera sitcom performance, as well as some speculations about how the hybrid format of *How I Met Your Mother* fosters a related yet distinctive style of performance that may reflect a contemporary evolution of sitcom acting.⁴

The Multi-Camera Performance Style

The multi-camera situation comedy performed in front of a live studio audience calls for an acting style charged with unique tensions fostered by the meshing of character naturalism and performative excess; advanced planning and timely spontaneity; address to the camera and a live audience; and a simulation of liveness despite recorded status and frequent interruptions. The resulting style is a combination of theatrical, filmic, and televisual methods, or “a strange amalgam of different kinds of skill sets,” in the words of *How I Met Your Mother* actor [Neil Patrick Harris](#).⁵ It is theatrical because the actors perform scenes straight through with an audience present. It is filmic because the cameras enable retakes and partial reshoots. And it is

televisual because the studio attendees represent only part of the audience an actor has to contend with; these performances are being captured on camera to be edited together and transmitted onto living room screens. Thus, to be effective in this format, actors must modulate their performance for the live audience and the four-camera blocking and the TV screen; for both a continuous acting style and a piecemeal method; and they must keep a live audience engaged across a multiple-hour shoot, all while making the finished product look like it came together smoothly in twenty-two continuous minutes. Due to these heterogeneous conditions, Steven Levitan calls multi-cam acting “the most difficult type of acting to play well out of anything.”⁶

[Image: multi-camera diagram]

The typical production schedule on a traditional multi-cam starts with a day of table reading, followed by three days of rehearsal, in which the writers tinker with the script while the actors hone their line readings and learn the camera blocking for the episode. This process culminates in a performance in front of a live audience on the fifth day. The shoot usually takes two to four hours, as the cast acts out the half-hour script scene-by-scene in order, performing two or more complete takes of each scene with restarts as needed to rectify mistakes. Despite the occasional necessity for such restarts, director [James Burrows](#), a television legend who has been behind the camera for countless shows including *Cheers* (NBC, 1982-93), *Will and Grace* (NBC, 1998-2006), and now *Back To You*, strives not to cut during takes, so that the actors can take advantage of the performative momentum that the multi-cam format engenders. As this would indicate, he prefers generating a production experience that is more like theater than film.⁷ Actress [Alyson Hannigan](#), currently on *How I Met Your Mother* and previously on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB & UPN, 1997-2003), also appreciates the multi-cam’s acting unity: “I love that we have a day where we get to run through the whole episode, sort of like a mini-play.” She also relishes that in this format, “I am reacting to what [another actor] just said in that exact take,” rather than acting just to a camera as is common in the single-cam format.⁸ Here, a successful performance entails listening to and sharing the continuous experience with the other actors, and one of the primary aspects of viewer enjoyment of this form is watching the ensemble’s rapport play out.

Another key to this ensemble relationship is the timing, rhythm, and cadence of dialogue among the actors. Indeed, some argue that the format is not only like theater, it is very much like musical theater. *Everybody Loves Raymond* (CBS, 1996-2005) and *Back to You* star [Patricia Heaton](#) observes, “A sitcom is like a musical. There are not a lot of ways to read a line. There are only a few ways that the rhythm will work.”⁹ In this light, it seems quite fitting that *Back to You*, which some critics point to as a potential savior of the multi-cam, would focus on news anchors. As Heaton describes, “There’s a certain way that anchors speak. There’s a musicality to the way they do their [lines].”¹⁰ This sounds quite like a description of a multi-cam actor. In fact, when James Burrows directs an episode, he barely watches the stage action. Instead, inspired by a technique his theater-director father utilized, he turns his back on the stage and the video monitors completely, paces around behind the crew, and listens to the comedy play out to ensure that the proper rhythms are being maintained.

In addition to carefully controlling their dialogue rhythm and pacing, a multi-cam actor must also be aware of multiple audiences, from the crew encircling them to the people in the rafters

watching live (though mostly via video monitors) to the eyes at home that will soon be trained on their TV screens to watch the finished product. This is where the most unique and most substantial challenge of multi-cam acting comes into play: how to balance address to the live audience of 200 people with address to the camera, which can represent a small screen audience of 20 million. Of course, it's the 20 million who matter most (or at least the ones among them with Nielsen meters), but in order to leave the best possible impression on the screen and on the soundtrack, the actors need to generate a strong response from the live audience. There is a danger, however, in playing to that audience too much, especially since the cameras can pick up on every behavioral nuance. [Ken Levine](#), a writer on *M*A*S*H* (CBS, 1972-83) and *Cheers* and a director for many multi-cams including *Wings* (NBC, 1990-97), *Becker* (CBS, 1998-2004), and *Frasier* (NBC, 1993-2004), described to me, "When I direct, what I tell actors is don't play to the audience as if it's a play. If you play to the audience, it's too big. Just pay attention to them as a form of feedback, as a form of input. The value of performing in front of an audience is that immediate feedback. The actors feed off of that energy."¹¹

That description of the interaction between the actors and their live audience is the most-cited by experienced actors, directors, and writers about the performative quality of the multi-camera sitcom: the audience on performance night fuels actor energy, resulting in a thrilling, heightened performance style. And many claim that this essential trait, this special, ephemeral "something" that is captured on screen as a result of the actors responding to a live audience, will be lost if the traditional multi-cam sitcom disappears. *Frasier* and *Back to You* producer [Christopher Lloyd](#) claims, "The reason the form has worked as successfully as it has for the past forty years is that energy of a live audience laughing takes the actors up to another level... The home audience feels that too." James Burrows similarly believes that the audience presence produces something unique and discernable to living room audiences: "When the actor gets a laugh, he gets a gleam in his eye. If there's no audience there to laugh, there's no gleam." Patricia Heaton agrees: "There's an energy in a multi-camera show with a live audience that you just don't get when you're doing single-camera. It's a different animal... There's a heightened tension with an audience... It brings things out that weren't there in rehearsal."¹²

[Image: Kelsey Grammer and Patricia Heaton]

Everybody Loves Raymond and *Reba* (WB & CW, 2001-07) director [Will Mackenzie](#) concurs, but also alludes to the red flag this circumstance raises: "What the single-camera show doesn't get is the fever pitch that two hours in front of an audience gives. At times, it borders on too silly and the actors can get carried away. Sometimes I have to keep the lid on, but the audience's influence is mostly good."¹³ As Mackenzie indicates, there is a danger in going "too big" in playing to the live audience. Actors must always remember that there are multiple cameras surrounding them to capture every movement. Ken Levine and his *Almost Perfect* (CBS, 1995) star [Nancy Travis](#) both cite [Ted Danson](#) as a master at this performative control. Says Levine, "Ted Danson brings a whole new level of subtly with him on shoot day. Small things that the audience watching at home will get. He learned to act for TV, not for an audience." And Travis comments, "Ted Danson is a master to watch. He seems as though he is barely working—his acting looks effortless—but in the finished product his performance is fully realized, detailed and every joke works."¹⁴

As Travis's praise implies, a level of naturalism is highly valued in multi-cam performance; however, a measure of broadness in sitcom acting also offers significant pleasures, both in performing and in watching. Further, the four-camera production mode encourages the dominance of wide shots, and close-ups are rare. Thus, the kind of subtle, underplayed acting that one could display for a single film camera is generally not possible in the multi-cam, and a full-body performance is also necessary in this format, not just one of the face. The result is that a successful multi-cam performance style requires a delicate balance of performative effects. As Steven Levitan defines this acting style, "You have to be big enough to be funny but not too big... And you have to be larger than life but also able to deliver the small heartfelt moment. You're walking a razor's edge."¹⁵

Multi-cam performers additionally have to take into account the concrete presence of audience laughter. They have to listen to and wait for laughs, incorporating an external response into their internal sense of a scene, and audience laughter thus becomes another component of the sonic rhythm of a multi-cam. The legendary [Don Knotts](#) commented that playing to both camera and audience laughter could even be confusing: "I think doing a television show before a live audience diffuses the focus of an actor and even the people in charge because they're always listening for what gets a laugh and they're punching up lines with jokes."¹⁶ A lackluster or tired audience that does not offer the desired response can compound this confusion, and it potentially leaves a comedian uncertain about their effectiveness. In such cases, James Burrows tells his actors "not to push. Trust the material. Trust your performance. Assume it's just a bad audience. If you push, it will look ridiculous."¹⁷ And like Ken Levine, Nancy Travis suggests that a multi-cam actor should not focus too heavily on the audience response at any time: "Concentrate on your relationship with the other actor and your objective in the scene. The jokes will either work or they won't."¹⁸ Indeed, accomplished actors like Patricia Heaton contend, effective multi-cam performers must let their instincts and experience guide them much more than audience response.¹⁹

Multi-camera sitcom actors must also have a technical awareness of camera blocking, more extensively than for the single-cam sitcom and for film, given that three or four cameras record the action simultaneously. The combination of skills required to adapt to such technical elements as well as to fellow actors and the multiple audiences, all while still being funny, clearly demands a lot of the actors' performance style. Ken Levine says, accordingly, few are truly expert at it: "There are so many *painfully* mediocre actors out there (many forced upon showrunners by the networks)—not reacting to anyone else in the scene, stepping on laughs, crunching jokes, zero physical skills, and even in a few cases sneaking quick peeks to see if they're on their mark. I watch shows, I spot these people and cringe. And some of them are household names. Many writing staffs spend 3/4 of their time just trying to hide these *enemies of comedy* [*sic*]."²⁰

With all of these elements an actor must process while performing, in addition to the thorough rehearsal and repetition of lines needed to carry off an episode, it can become a challenge to keep the comedy sounding fresh and spontaneous enough to keep an audience engaged for three hours or, in the case of *How I Met Your Mother*, to sustain the freshness without an audience there to remind them of its necessity. The prevalence of accomplished stand-up comedians in multi-cams certainly makes sense in this light, as these performers have honed their skills of repeat joke

delivery and audience engagement night after night in comedy clubs. But actors can also develop techniques to manage this situation. *How I Met Your Mother*'s [Jason Segel](#) says that preparedness helps him to stay in the moment of a repeated scene: "I try to come in super prepared, know my lines, know how to do the jokes. I'm no longer thinking about anything when I come in to shoot. I've done all the work before I get here. From there, I'm not too conscious of anything going on around me."²¹ According to prolific multi-cam director [Pamela Fryman](#), who directed over thirty episodes of *Frasier* and currently helms *How I Met Your Mother*, [Kelsey Grammer](#) utilizes a contrasting technique. Fryman says that Grammer regularly went into *Frasier* tapings with only about 25% of his lines down, because he relished the spontaneous feel of searching for his dialogue and the genuine audience response that process allowed him to generate.²²

"Spontaneous" and "genuine" are not adjectives typically associated with the multi-cam much these days, however; instead, "[stale](#)" and "[artificial](#)" are used repeatedly. Whether this artificiality is inherent in the format is a matter for much debate. Multi-cam proponents like Burrows and Heaton would likely argue that because the format involves actors responding to a real audience and moving in real time through a complete scene it is not at all inherently artificial. Perhaps the format is simply stuck in a rut of insufficient creativity and overly familiar rhythms. But others like Neil Patrick Harris assert that there is indeed an artificiality built into the format. Here he compares *How I Met Your Mother*'s choice to not shoot in front of a live audience to his experiences on the 1999-2000 NBC sitcom *Stark Raving Mad*:

I like [shooting without a live audience] so much better because I'm a stickler for authenticity, regardless of how broad or subtle the acting is, and I find the multi-camera audience incredibly distracting because it's such an inauthentic environment. There's a guy there that's telling them to laugh really loud and saying, "OK, everybody, this is the fourth time you've seen it, but remember, you've never heard these jokes before, and the louder you laugh the more you'll hear yourself when you're on TV, and here's some chocolate." And so then when you go and perform as an actor, you're getting huge reaction and response to jokes that aren't that funny. So then your whole world is spinning because you don't know if anything's good or failing or really funny or not funny... And so it was all very strange. At the end of the whole taping of [*Stark Raving Mad*] I kept looking to people and saying, "Was that funny? Legitimately, was it funny?" I still to this day couldn't tell. So [*How I Met Your Mother*] is nicer because it's the crew we're sort of trying to amuse. If we can get the crew charged up and thinking we're funny and spitting new lines at them, they're a very good gauge. They wouldn't laugh if it's not funny; they're a good litmus.²³

[Image: Neil Patrick Harris]

The Hybridity of *How I Met Your Mother*

How I Met Your Mother utilizes a production method similar to the multi-cam, in terms of using the three-walled proscenium stage, shooting with the four-camera set-up, and running through scenes in their entirety. But because the show is full of so many scenes set in so many locations, it takes not three hours but three days to record an episode, and as a result, there is no live

audience present during production. Show co-creator [Craig Thomas](#) jokes, “There’s no way we could shoot this amount of material in front of an audience. It would blur the line between audience and hostage situation.”²⁴ A laugh track, generated from actual studio audience viewings of previous episodes, is added in post-production, however.

In regard to the decision to buck the single-cam trend by including a laugh track, co-creator [Carter Bays](#) comments: “For some reason it felt like we wanted to have a laugh track on the show. Having worked on single camera shows, I know... you can fall victim to the thing of because there’s not a laugh after every joke, not every joke has to be funny. And we wanted to try to set the bar for ourselves and make it funny from start to finish.”²⁵ Indeed, despite all of the [critical praise](#) for the [cutting-edge hipness](#) of recent single-cam sitcoms and the corresponding [disparagement](#) of the [imposition](#) of audience laughter (whether real or canned), some TV writers [strongly defend](#) the multi-camera format and believe that a laugh track simply puts constructive pressure on them to write funnier lines. As television critic [Alan Sepinwall](#) describes:

Going laughtrack-free is a more forgiving format for comedy writers. If you have a so-so joke that’s just there in the middle of a scene, no worries. But if that so-so joke is accompanied by real or fake laughter, it had better be funny enough to seem worthy of it, or else it goes from a so-so joke to a ‘Why are they laughing? That wasn’t funny!’ joke. The tougher task of feeding the laughtrack monster is why writers for traditional sitcoms often look down their noses at people who work on shows like *Gilmore Girls* or *Scrubs*.²⁶

How I Met Your Mother’s showrunners apparently take this notion to heart and appreciate the value of a represented audience.

However, they also draw great value from the absence of a real audience, and this has an evident impact on performance. Due to the lengthier shooting time offered by the show’s unique production format, the actors have a great deal of freedom to vary and refine their performances as the shoot proceeds. Pamela Fryman describes this contrast with the traditional multi-cam: “We massage a lot more on shoot day.”²⁷ As a result, Fryman, the writers, and the actors can be rather indulgent when working scenes out while shooting. They perform numerous takes and test a variety of deliveries, then allow the editors to mix-and-match the pieces. Neil Patrick Harris details, “I try to spit out nine, ten slight different ways of saying the same joke, to either make me laugh or if I think I can get enough funnies in there, then our editor can have enough to work with.”²⁸ The typical multi-cam shooting style simply does not allow the time and freedom for that kind of variability during recording (though there is time for it in rehearsal). To cite an example I viewed on the set, actor Jason Segel performed a piece using excessive physical comedy that involved him emphatically gesturing with his hands. After the cut, he yelled out to Fryman, “Too much?” Fryman responded, “No... choices.” Segel subsequently performed a handful of takes without the dramatic gesture, leaving it to the editors to choose which version would look best on the small screen.²⁹

This incident reveals another key factor on *How I Met Your Mother*: that those on the set decide in collaboration with the editors what works best for the show without any influence from a studio audience. Accordingly, the lack of audience presence engenders intimacy among the cast and crew that is key for their performative style. Carter Bays stresses, “Intimacy is a big part of

it. There's something very genuine about just trying to make your friends laugh."³⁰ In fact, in contrast with the well-entrenched sitcom convention of stone-faced reaction shots, the cast members do laugh at each other's jokes while shooting, and the production staff encourages this very response. Hannigan recalls of certain shoots, "We were laughing at each other in rehearsals, and then we'd get to shooting and stop laughing, and they'd say, 'No! No! No!', we really liked it when you guys were responding to each other."³¹

[Image: How I Met Your Mother cast]

Shooting multi-cam ensemble scenes in full while the actors perform them essentially for each other rather than for an audience in the rafters generates a dynamic sensibility. I sensed this dynamic continuously on the set, from a palpable camaraderie among cast and crew to specific moments where crew responses impacted scenes. For instance, in debating during rehearsal whether or not to retain one of actress [Cobie Smulder](#)'s lines, Carter Bays defended it by noting that it got a genuine laugh from the crew. Similarly, after shooting a take of one scene, Neil Patrick Harris commented to Bays that he could feel the crew waiting for a punchline from him after another cast member's joke, and partly as a result of that evident feedback, the dialogue was reworked. Thus, the actors get the benefit of genuine, spontaneous feedback to their comedy without the potentially excessive lure of a full audience. Correspondingly, Hannigan stresses that with an audience, "it would be a completely different show, and our performances would definitely be different. [We] play it more for the reality of the scene rather than to get the laughter... With audience stuff, you're just slightly more silly."³²

That said, Fryman says she would love to shoot just one episode in front of a live audience, as "a gift to the cast," because comedic actors relish the immediacy of audience feedback.³³ As an example, during rehearsal, Jason Segel generated a big laugh from the camera crew on a particular line reading and turned and grinned at them in manifest excitement to acknowledge the response. This was exactly the kind of instinctual reaction, however, he fears would diminish the organic composure of his performance if he were acting in front of an audience: "If there was a live audience I would get hacky, be playing for audience laughs."³⁴ Neil Patrick Harris concurs, but also cites the crucial value of the multi-cam audience: "We would be tempted to milk it with an audience there. But on the flip side, we do find ourselves in times of lethargy where an audience would force us to memorize our lines more or keep us on point more, all the time. We can kind of slack off a little bit, because if we screw the lines up we just do it again."³⁵ Patricia Heaton commented that this is exactly the primary drawback of the single-cam sitcom for her: "Acting without an audience is like being in a tomb. You need to hear the laughter."³⁶

Fittingly, the cast and crew of *How I Met Your Mother* think the audience's energy would be the only significantly positive aspect they would add to the show. Alyson Hannigan emphasizes that the "energy thing" can become problematic on their show, "because I think the audience naturally builds in the 'you've got energy' because you're performing and you have to be on. And here we're all comfortable and we forget." She also stresses how challenging this is given *How I Met Your Mother*'s prolific shooting style:

The hard thing with comedy is that you want that feedback, and after doing a take like six or seven times—we do a lot of takes here—which for comedy, is like, "I really don't

think this is funny anymore.” So your instincts, they go out the window because you’re like, “Oh my god, this cannot be funny.” Because one, you’ve heard it all week, and two, it was an hour ago that the crew laughed at it, and who knows what I did back then...It’s hard to remember what your instincts are after take six.³⁷

[Image: Alyson Hannigan]

Thus, as the show’s director, Pamela Fryman has to find ways to reassure the cast as to their effectiveness and spark their energy. In regard to the former, Fryman stresses that she does her best to create a safe, honest environment for the actors where they trust that she will help them find their way to effective line readings. She also actively works to ensure proper energy. For instance, during their first production after the lengthy Writer’s Guild Strike break, it apparently took some time for the cast to locate their usual rhythms and energy. At one point, Fryman instructed Neil Patrick Harris to make one take of his character’s entrance to the scene “really big,” hoping it would lend the rest of the scene and the cast more life. Similarly, shooting one of the final scenes on the final day of the episode’s production, Fryman felt the actors lagging, so she gave them a direction: “Be a better audience for each other,” she told the cast. As a result, Segel responded with laughter to one of Cobie Smulder’s lines, and Fryman commented at the scene’s close, “Great energy.”

How I Met Your Mother star [Josh Radnor](#) claims that this kind of response translates the cast’s genuine rapport to living room screens: “The lack of an audience keeps us truthful and playing to each other,” he says—and it is not diminished by the fact that there is a laugh track added long after the actors have left the set.³⁸ Of course, the post-production laugh track requires the actors to leave room for laughter that does not exist during shooting. For instance, during one scene, Cobie Smulders immediately followed one of Jason Segel’s jokes with one of her own, and Fryman reminded her, “Give me a long beat there for the laugh.” That direction resulted in Smulders offering a noticeable pause between lines in subsequent takes.

Conclusion

This is when it is possible to get lost in a wormhole trying to negotiate the various definitions of realism, naturalism, authenticity, and genuineness attendant to these different formats and different moments. Debating which is “more real”—pausing for non-existent laughter or hamming it up for an audience hopped up on chocolate—quickly starts to seem pointless. Further, realism is not the primary (and perhaps not even the secondary or tertiary) standard by which quality television comedy performance is typically judged. As Brett Mills describes, “Award-winning performances are often not the most ‘realistic’ or appropriate; instead, they are the ones which most pleasurably balance the naturalistic requirements of the text with the expectations and pleasures associated with the star performing them and the ‘skill’ which this process involves.”³⁹ Thus, while it may be conceivable to parse out some difference in the “reality” of actors’ performances in *Back to You* and *How I Met Your Mother*, the very differences between their methods of textual production and the actors’ own star identities likely makes such a comparison moot.

Nonetheless, current debates about the future of the multi-camera sitcom continue to focus on notions of naturalness and authenticity as standards for acceptance within the 18-34 demographic, and ignore the future of the heightened performance style that tends to result from live audience prompting. This does not necessarily signal the demise of the multi-camera shooting style itself; as I have explained here, I believe the format does foster dynamic on-screen performances that generate considerable viewer and performer pleasure, not to mention modest budgets that the studios appreciate. Additionally, standards of representation in performance, including those related to judgements of naturalism, will inevitably evolve across time. Indeed, the type of multi-cam performance offered by Jackie Gleason in *The Honeymooners* is not the same as Kelsey Grammer's performance in *Back to You*. With this in mind, it seems reasonable that future developments in sitcom performance will be more a matter of nuanced degrees of change rather than wholesale upheavals.

In fact, rather than thinking of contemporary television sitcoms in terms of only two distinct, opposing modes of production, especially in light of shows like *How I Met Your Mother*, it is perhaps more accurate to describe contemporary television as drawing from a range of available choices, with pure single-camera or multi-camera techniques at either extreme. Given the current state of apparent crisis for the prime-time sitcom, it is not surprising that as the networks struggle to respond to ever-changing audience tastes, new combinations and variations of techniques would emerge between those extremes. For performance too, then, a range of styles and methods are likely to continue to co-exist. At a time when reality television refuses to recede and scripted television is becoming more cinematic and less theatrical, the future of the live audience shoot for the sitcom is even less clear. Perhaps both Janet Kagan and Steven Levitan are right: the multi-cam format and its corresponding performance style may indeed survive the current single-cam onslaught, but it is likely that the two will never be the same again.

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¹ Kagan, Janet. Personal interview. 28 February 2008.; Miller, Martin. "Time Seems Right for 'Back to You'." Los Angeles Times. 18 September 2007: E3.

² One must be careful not to overplay the current struggles for the multi-camera sitcom. The top-rated sitcoms currently on the air, such as *Two and a Half Men*, are multi-cam, while single-cams like *30 Rock* sit much further

back in the ratings, and multi-cams like *Seinfeld* and *Friends* still thrive in syndication. The problem is really more that the sitcom in general is struggling to find its place on first-run prime-time schedules right now. But there is no question that members of the 18-34 demographic claim that they respond more positively to single-cam sitcoms than multi-cams, and given the strong focus on that demographic among networks and advertisers, these questions are therefore relevant and central.

³ Mills, Brett. *Television Sitcom*. London: BFI, 2005. 73.

⁴ By using the term “evolution,” I do not mean to imply positive progression or improvement over the past, simply a recognizable, developmental change. I also recognize that *How I Met Your Mother*’s hybrid form is not necessarily new; 1960s sitcoms like *Bewitched* were shot predominantly in a multi-cam format but without an audience. I delineate later in the paper what is distinctive about *How I Met Your Mother*’s contemporary production methods.

⁵ Harris, Neil Patrick. Personal interview. 29 February 2008.

⁶ Levitan, Steven. Personal interview. 24 October 2007.

⁷ Burrows, James. Personal interview. 24 October 2007.

⁸ Hannigan, Alyson. Personal interview. 28 February 2008.

⁹ Heaton, Patricia. Personal interview. 24 October 2007.

¹⁰ Kinon, Cristina. *New York Daily News*, 18 September 2007. 15 February 2008

<http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/tv/2007/09/18/2007-09-18_with_back_to_you_patricia_is_reheaton_he.html>.

¹¹ Levine, Ken. Personal interview. 4 March 2008.

¹² Miller, Martin. “Can One Multi-Camera Comedy Turn Trend Around?” *The Los Angeles Times*. 12 August 2007

<http://www.boston.com/ae/tv/articles/2007/08/12/can_one_multi_camera_comedy_turn_trend_around/>; Burrows, James. Personal interview; Small, Jonathan. “Hot List.” *TV Guide*. 10 September 2007

<http://www.backtoyouonline.com/print_hot_list_back_to_you.htm>.

¹³ Belli, Mary Lou and Phil Ramuno. *The Sitcom Career Book*. Watson-Guptill Publications, 2004. 133.

¹⁴ Levine, Ken. Personal interview; Belli and Ramuno, 134.

¹⁵ Levitan, Steven.

¹⁶ Kelly, Richard. *The Andy Griffith Show*. John F. Blair, 1985. 32.

¹⁷ Burrows, James.

¹⁸ Belli and Ramuno. 134.

¹⁹ Heaton, author interview.

²⁰ Levine, Ken. “Back to You.” 20 September 2007. 14 February 2008

<<http://kenlevine.blogspot.com/2007/09/back-to-you.html>>. Levine used this description to lead into his praise for Grammer and Heaton’s work in *Back to You*: “[T]o have the privilege of seeing two of the very best perform at their prime, that’s sure worth 22 minutes of my week.”

²¹ Segel, Jason. Personal interview. 28 February 2008.

²² Fryman, Pamela. Personal interview. 28 February 2008.

²³ Harris, Neil Patrick.

²⁴ Ryan, Maureen. “‘How I Met Your Mother’ is Not a Traditional Sitcom.” 15 January 2007. 15 February 2007

<http://featuresblogs.chicagotribune.com/entertainment_tv/2007/01/how_i_met_your_.html>.

²⁵ Keller, Joel. “Carter Bays of *How I Met Your Mother*: The TV Squad Interview.” 11 May 2007. 13 February 2008

<<http://www.tvsquad.com/2007/05/11/carter-bays-of-how-i-met-your-mother-the-tv-squad-interview/>>.

²⁶ Sepinwall, Alan. “Jezebel James’ Review.” *The Star Ledger*. 14 March 2008. 20 March 2008

<http://blog.nj.com/alltv/2008/03/sepinwall_on_tv_jezebel_james.html>.

²⁷ Fryman, Pamela.

²⁸ Harris, Neil Patrick.

²⁹ Segel’s gesture did not appear in the aired episode.

³⁰ Porter, Rick. “‘How I Met Your Mother’ Cast Suits Up.” 14 March 2006. 13 February 2008

<http://www.zap2it.com/tv/news/zap-howimetyoumotherpaley_0_6480443.story>.

³¹ Hannigan, Alyson.

³² Ibid.

³³ Fryman, Pamela.

³⁴ Segel, Jason.

³⁵ Harris, Neil Patrick.

³⁶ Heaton, Patricia.

³⁷ Hannigan, Alyson.

³⁸ Radnor, Josh. Personal interview. 28 February 2008.

³⁹ Mills, Brett. 72.