

Entertainment



Malcolm in the Middle works hard to hone a perfect combination of comedy and true emotion. The show is being credited with breathing new life into the situation comedy. Photos by Fox

'Malcolm' is in no muddle

► Unlike many formulaic sitcoms, Fox's inventive series is mapped out with precision

By ELLEN GRAY
Philadelphia Daily News

It's been said dying is easy, but comedy is hard. I never knew exactly what that meant until now. I'm sitting in a room with the writers of Fox's *Malcolm in the Middle*, one of the few shows on TV that can make me howl with laughter, and I am trying to stay completely quiet.

That was the agreement: I get to be a fly on the wall here in Building 6, where the worker bees do whatever it is they do to make *Malcolm* funny. I am not to talk. Or fall asleep, as a previous visitor apparently did.

Not talking is hard. Not sleeping is easy.

"We're at a crucial juncture here. The entire fairy kingdom is at stake," co-executive producer Michael Glouberman announces to the five men and two women assembled before him as he maps out a future episode.

They appear unmoved, aware that he's suggesting a line of dialogue, not an actual crisis.

At this point, a Thursday in mid-January, Glouberman is working on the fifth of what by the end of the week will be eight columns of tiny printing on a huge marker board that contains an outline of each scene, complete with key pieces of dialogue.

It's probably not giving too much away to say that the episode involves a motor scooter, a pingpong game, *Dungeons and Dragons* and, possibly, a house fire — though not necessarily in that order. While the story line laid out on the board will no doubt appear typically chaotic once it's filmed, I'm not sure the Allies planned the invasion of Normandy this precisely.

Walk through the writers' rooms of most TV sitcoms and you might think you've wandered into a day-care center for bright young adults. Full of toys and sugary snacks and wacky wall art, they're like playpens with sofas, the peculiar province of former neds for whom every day is dress-down Friday.

Real work is being done in all



On *Malcolm*, the boys (including Frankie Muniz, above) are ageless and 'pop-culture references are a huge no-no ... so it feels like it's from the past, from a childhood kind of thing, maybe.'

these places, but the inhabitants don't usually like being caught at it. There's a different feel to the *Malcolm* writers' room, despite the jars of candy and gum and the dart board in the corner.

For one thing, there's the blueprint of the house where Malcolm (Frankie Muniz) and his brothers live with their parents. It's posted above one sofa so the writers can keep track of characters' entrances and exits.

While conversations occasionally wander off point — there's desultory talk about Liv Ullmann's role in *Lord of the Rings* and of a wedding one producer had attended — the writers tend to stick to the work at hand.

What they're doing requires more organization than writing a standard sitcom, which is shot from several different angles before a studio audience and may involve relatively few scene changes. *Malcolm in the Middle*, one of the few single-camera, half-hour comedies to become a bona fide hit, is shot more like an *NYPD Blue* or *ER*, with each episode taking six days to film and up to seven weeks to edit.

"On a multiple-camera show, you can sort of show up with a subpar script and work on it through the week," Linwood Boomer, *Malcolm*'s Emmy-winning creator, had explained to me a few days earlier. But "we have to build sets and book locations and do all that stuff

two weeks before we even shoot, and so the scripts have to be done way ahead of time."

It's a system that helps the actors, according to Jane Kaczmarek, who plays Malcolm's mother, Lois.

Unlike most sitcoms, "we get very few rewrites," she said. "A lot of other sitcoms, often four-camera shows, they get blue pages, pink pages, goldenrod pages — rewrites are done constantly."

Every so often, a particular kind of TV series is declared dead, only to be resurrected by one big hit. Just as *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* brought back the prime-time game show and Fox's *The Simpsons* launched a new wave of prime-time animation, *Malcolm in the Middle*, a show about a boy with a genius-level IQ and his idiosyncratic family, is being credited with breathing new life into the situation comedy.

The show won two Emmys last fall — for writing and directing — after being on television only a half-season, but it's not clear how seriously it takes any of this. On Jan. 28, opening credits for a rerun bragged, "*Malcolm in the Middle*: Three-time Golden Globe loser."

In announcing that the show had won the "TV Land Future Classic Award" earlier this month, Larry W. Jones, general manager of the rerun-friendly cable network, singled out the

show for its "departure from the familiar sitcom formula."

That familiar formula can, of course, be found all over TV Land, which has the luxury of airing only those long-ago series where the formula worked.

But sitcom-loathing is rampant right now in Hollywood, where even some of the people making them can't stand them.

Anyone who ever watched Rob, Sally and Buddy pitch jokes on *The Dick Van Dyke Show* knows that TV comedy is the kind of work that gets done by committee. But the best shows tend to reflect the vision of one or two people — Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David on *Seinfeld*; Ray Romano and Phil Rosenthal on *Everybody Loves Raymond*; Bill Cosby on *The Cosby Show* — no matter how many people do the actual writing.

On *Malcolm in the Middle*, the guy with the vision thing is Linwood Boomer.

"It's Linwood's life," said David Richardson, one of Boomer's former co-executive producers, who's now working on a midseason sitcom that stars Joan Cusack.

Boomer, a former actor who played Adam Kendall for five years on *Little House on the Prairie*, has written for a half-dozen sitcoms, from *Night Court* to *3rd Rock from the Sun*, but *Malcolm* clearly is closest to his heart — and his past.

"When I first started, I would

think things are just too mean," said co-executive producer Al Higgins, referring to stories like last season's finale, in which Dewey's baby sitter, played by Ben Arthur, keeled over and died in mid-tango. "But Linwood — it's from his family."

If the boss comes to dinner on most sitcoms, "some wacky thing happens," Higgins said. If that plot were used on *Malcolm*, "the boss would come to dinner and die."

Is he saying that Boomer's family killed people?

"Well, they would have, if they'd been given the chance," joked Higgins, an Iowan who claims to come from "very pleasant people."

Boomer, a 45-year-old native of Vancouver who favors big cigars and has a couple of kids of his own, seems himself to be one of the pleasant people. Like Malcolm, he spent time as a youngster in a class for the gifted ("for no good reason, as my subsequent life has proven," he told reporters last year).

Much of the show, he has said, "is from my own childhood, filtered through a lot of self-serving lies and distortions."

Whatever he's shared with the writers on the show, when talking with reporters, Boomer tends to avoid the specifics of that childhood. He recently noted that he had a brother who, like Malcolm's brother Francis (Christopher Kennedy Masterson), spent time at a military school. Odder details, like the fact that Lois periodically shaves Hal's back in the kitchen, are also supposedly drawn from his own family.

Higgins, walking me through the show's set — which is cluttered to a level that actually approaches reality for a family with four boys — said that all the writers get to mine their childhoods for story ideas, but it's the boss who sets the tone.

It's Boomer, for instance, who decided that Malcolm's last name would never be mentioned, that the boys would be ageless (a decision that came in handy when three of the boys underwent growth spurts last year) and that their home town would never be named.

"Pop-culture references are a huge no-no so it feels like it's from the past, from a childhood kind of thing, maybe," Higgins said.

"We've gotten to the point where we sort of have learned what he likes," he said of Boomer. "He's amazing about keeping these true, emotional stories."

TV Q&A

Questions: On the Friday evening show *Providence*, who is the singer during the lovely views of the city? Is it Syd's sister? — D.M., Providence, R.I.

Answer: That's Canadian singer and songwriter Chantal Kreviazuk who sings The Beatles' tune *In My Life* at the start of each show. It's not actress Paula Cale, who plays sister Joanie.



Paula Cale

Question: I loved *Leave It to Beaver*. Whatever happened to Sue Randall? She played Beaver's teacher, Miss Landers. — Wondering, Cincinnati, Ohio

Answer: Actress Sue Randall retired from acting in 1965. She died of cancer in 1984 at the age of 49. Besides her regular role as Beaver's teacher (1958-62), Randall appeared in the Tracy-Hepburn film *Desk Set* and in the 1960 B-movie *Date Bait*. You might also spot her in reruns of *The Twilight Zone*, *The Fugitive*, *Bonanza* and *Gunslinger*.

Question: I read an article somewhere that listed the most-watched television events of all time. There were some like the 23 Super Bowls, a Lakers-Celtics game and a Notre Dame-Florida State football game in the Top 25. Is there a place that I can find the latest statistics? — S.Y., Sacramento, Calif.

Answer: An Internet search at infoplease.lycos.com for "top TV programs" turned up Nielsen's "50 all-time top-rated TV programs" from Jan. 1961 through Aug. 31, 2000. The final episode of *M*A*S*H* and the "Who Shot J.R.?" episode of *Dallas* top the list, which also includes 22 Super Bowls.

Question: I read some time ago that David James Elliott's wife occasionally has a guest role on *JAG*. Can you tell me the name of the character she plays on the show? In my opinion, this is one of the best shows ever. — P.E., Irving, Texas



David James Elliott

Nancy Chambers has played various characters on *JAG* in her seven guest appearances. Last year, she appeared twice as Lt. Lauren Singer. She and series star Elliott have been married since 1992.

Question: Do you have the address for tickets to *To Tell the Truth*? — R.T., Providence, R.I.

Answer: If you're 16 years or older, you can request tickets to a taping of the show at NBC's Burbank Studios. Call (323) 769-5538 or e-mail your request to tickets@nbc.com. Send small mail to On Camera Audiences Tickets, 224 E. Olive Ave. 205, Burbank, Calif. 91502.

Questions: I've been faithfully watching the UPN show *Girlfriends*. Please tell me about Jill Marie Jones, who plays Toni Childs on the show. Where can I write to her? T.C., Riverside, Calif.



Jill Marie Jones

Answer: The former Dallas Cowboys cheerleader and Dallas Mavericks dancer attended Texas Woman's University before moving to Los Angeles to pursue acting full time. Her acting credits include the HBO movie *America's Dream*, and NBC's Saturday morning series *City Guys*. *Girlfriends* is Jones' first prime-time series role. Send fan mail in care of UPN, 5555 Melrose Ave., Marathon Office Bldg., Suite 1200, Los Angeles, Calif. 90038.

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