

Chicago Tribune

The week in funny: Behind the scenes at 'Wait Wait...Don't Tell Me'

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Scorekeeper Carl Kasell (from left) and host Peter Sagal watch the banter between panelists Paula Poundstone, Adam Felber and Julia Sweeney. (Tribune photo by Alex Garcia / July 9, 2009)

As green rooms go, the one backstage at Chicago's Chase Auditorium on the night of a "Wait Wait ... Don't Tell Me!" taping is not bad.

There is a table, where Paula Poundstone, perhaps the favorite panelist among "Wait Wait" die-hards, sits in her trademark seersucker, writing quickly, shaping the actual news story that she'll soon read aloud in an attempt to make a caller think it's not really true.

NPR newsman and "Wait Wait" scorekeeper Carl Kasell is at the table, looking at the brand new

opening script pages that have just been handed to him. He's going to "quit" the weekly comedy news quiz until tempted back by a chance to impersonate Michael Jackson.

Peter Sagal, the show's host, is listening to the fake news story, on a theme of lost things found, concocted by panelist Adam Felber, a "Real Time With Bill Maher" writer and another fan favorite, and he's not feeling it. Perhaps it's the father-son theme. Perhaps it's the severed finger found in the door panel of a car.

"Is it weird, or is it funny?" Sagal asks.

"It's the stuff of urban legend," pleads Felber.

"Maybe," says Sagal, "the trick is to go AWAY away from the amputated digit."

There is a couch where Julia Sweeney and her husband sit quietly, a little apart from the general banter. This will be Sweeney's second appearance as a panelist on "Wait Wait," and she confesses to feeling anxious. "I love this show so much," says the former "Saturday Night Live" cast member. "I'm gonna try really hard."

Outside, the auditorium is packed with 500 librarians in town for a convention, the first group ever to buy the house for "Wait Wait." (Tip: To see librarians nearly take up pitchforks, casually mention in front of them that your radio show used Wikipedia as a primary source for information.)

And beyond them, also waiting, but for the edited version of the Thursday-night taping to come out of their radios, there are some 3 million weekly listeners who have made this Chicago gem—more serious about its comedy than its scorekeeping—into a certified hit, a member of public radio's weekend pantheon, alongside "Car Talk," "A Prairie Home Companion" and "This American Life."

"Is everyone ready to go?" asks Sagal. "Julia? Adam? Let's go, guys."

Watching the show come together through a week is an exercise in trolling for news, embracing (and rejecting) snark, free associating, fretting about being too mean to Sarah Palin, writing jokes, driving a minivan, and eating English candy. Never forget the English-candy eating.

It's also a reminder that however sharp and polished something comes across on the air, it's almost always the result of ordinary-looking people sitting down with simple production machines—keyboards, editing software, human brains—and working diligently to make it happen.

The meat of "Wait Wait" is the script and all the advance planning done to try to give people space in which to be funny. The magic is in the performance of that script, especially when a panelist comes up with a dream line—Poundstone tying together a Paris Hilton insult to earlier discussion of the Michael Jackson memorial service: "You say that now, but if she dies, you'll be at the Staples Center"—or when the celebrity guest (this week, indie singer-songwriter Neko Case) turns out to be capable of first-rate improvisational riffing in the style of Ken Burns' "Civil

War."

"Wait Wait" came very close to never having a routine. It's an oft-told story: NPR wanted a show to follow "Car Talk" and asked "Car Talk" executive producer Doug Berman to come up with something. After trying a couple of pilots during the 1990s, he finally hit on "Wait Wait," with Chicago Public Radio as the co-producer and hosting station. But the show's first host didn't work out; and, worse, the program wasn't sure how to be funny about news.

Within weeks of the January, 1998 debut, Sagal, a writer of serious plays with funny moments who had signed on as an original panelist, was asked to move to Chicago and host; and, within a couple of months, the show started to find its stride. Taking it in front of live audiences, beginning in January, 2000, added an extra level, and, although some panelists are better than others and it's sometimes a struggle to get anything useful from celebrity guests, the show is a reliably funny dissection of the week's news, from the hottest stories to the most obscure, carried on almost 500 stations nationwide.

If that's not enough evidence that it has entered the mainstream, there is this: Oprah.com made the show a "staff pick" this March, calling it "a funnier version of 'The Daily Show' in a convenient play along format."

"Wait Wait" begins its weekly mission to please Oprah.com staffers each Monday, when the producing staff of six gathers a little after 3 p.m. at a cluttered conference table amid their desks. The headquarters of "Wait Wait," for all its ability to sell out theaters in Chicago or on its frequent road shows, is just a collection of cubicles on the second floor of Chicago Public Radio's Navy Pier offices, adjacent to the cubicles used by the station's fundraisers. (The "Wait Wait" staff members are the ones dressed more like bicycle messengers.)

Mike Danforth, a wry and wiry redhead who serves as senior supervising producer, passes out the "storyboard," a collection of stories staffers have been gathering based on how funny they might be on the air.

There's a story about a beer festival running out of beer, for instance, and one about Chinese computer porn filters blocking Garfield.

And there are the candidates for the show's lead stories, usually the week's biggest news. Under early consideration are Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin quitting, the Michael Jackson memorial service scheduled for the next day and President Barack Obama traveling in Russia.

There is concern about how to be fresh about Palin's week-old resignation. Then, another question: What to quiz Neko Case about in the weekly "Not My Job" segment, which quizzes celebrity guests with multiple-choice questions about a topic they're unlikely to know anything about.

"Necco Wafers?" suggests producer Ian Chillag, because of the singer's first name.

"That's funny," Sagal says. "I'll look into that."

What he discovers, —that they were big among Civil War soldiers, —will lead to the show's most inspired moments.

On Tuesday, the staff tries to watch the Jackson memorial, but the big TV on the wall isn't working, and the Internet coverage cuts in and out. On Jackson, they decide, they need to make fun not of the man, but of the overcoverage.

There's another afternoon meeting Wednesday, with more refinement of the story list, but Thursday is the big day, although it doesn't necessarily look it. Sagal describes the "Wait Wait" work process as "the typing and the staring."

"Does everyone know who Jon Arbuckle is?" Danforth asks at one point, trying to craft a joke about the Garfield porn blockage by invoking the name of the cartoon cat's owner.

For the mid-afternoon script read-through, Kasell, who says he sees himself as George Fenneman to Sagal's Groucho Marx, is there, as well. Usually, Berman, the executive producer would be listening in, too, over the phone ("I'm Charlie to their angels," he says), for questions of taste and broad appeal; he's on vacation so the show has regular panelist Tom Bodett filling the role.

"So this week, it's my job to dumb it down?" Bodett says, through the speakerphone. "I excel at that."

The read-through of the 28-page scripts starts at 3:40—less than four hours before the taping is scheduled to start in the auditorium. The reading goes well, with much laughter, though plenty of tweaking remains.

The Palin segment "feels really sharp and mean-spirited," Danforth says, although he likes Sagal's favorite line: "You're Sarah Palin. You've made ignorance hot."

A joke about the Iranian president's failing to kill a fly during a televised speech gets improved, so that it reads "ruling Mullahs declare that despite what you saw with your own eyes, the bug was killed by a vast majority of Iranian voters."

But as the read-through breaks up, more than an hour later, there is much rewriting to be done, and, again, the staring and the typing commence.

At 6:40, Danforth and Chillag are still polishing the script. Sagal finally leaves the office with the rest of the staff in tow, driving Danforth's family minivan across town to the central Loop theater location.

In the green room, the panelists—the ones who live out of town fly in on show day and stay overnight—learn the last joke they'll have to write for the end of the show: Predict what Sarah Palin's next job will be.

And, finally, the show starts. To say it goes swimmingly is an understatement. Sagal caters to the

librarians by asking them to take off their glasses and toss their heads seductively. That, though, and the hilarious Wikipedia misstep are cut from the final show: Berman believes firmly that radio shows should exist, to the degree possible, on the radio, not in another place.

The taping runs 90 raucous minutes, including about 30 retakes done at the end that will be spliced in during Friday morning's editing. They cover audio glitches, replace specific references to the librarian audience, and even are used to try a new version of a joke. For all the sound of spontaneity, a "Wait Wait" episode, clocking it at under an hour, is a carefully constructed thing.

Sagal's "make ignorance hot" line ultimately won't make it. Neko Case's line, in the tremulous voice of a Civil War widow, about Necco Wafers being "cursed Yankee candy" will. Felber's story of a found finger still wearing a wedding ring, hurriedly "de-grisly-ed" from the original, as Felber put it, not only goes over big with the crowd, it fools the caller into thinking it's a real news story.

When it's all over, the panelists, staff, family members and friends head over to a bar across the street, for cocktails and chewing over what worked and didn't. They roll into the office Friday, trim and shape the show with digital editing software, and upload it to an NPR program source for subscribing stations to play over the weekend.

And already, they're watching the news, thinking about next Monday, when the cycle starts all over again.

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