

Jeff Nierst/CBS

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NIGHT & DAY

Since joining the late-night fray in 2005, Craig Ferguson has managed to carve out his own comedic niche. How does he continue to do it night after night? Well, take a peek behind the scenes of *The Late Late Show*

BY PHIL ZIMMERMAN

Craig Ferguson

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Watch!: What is your average day like, leading up to the show's taping?

Craig Ferguson: Like the show itself—a combination of panic, improvisation and cheesy snacks.

W: Are there any comedians or people in general who inspire your comedy?

CF: David Letterman and Les Moonves—and anyone else who holds my fate in their mighty hands.

W: How much of your monologue is done extemporaneously? Do you normally share your general outline with anyone?

CF: The censors like to know what's going to happen. I tell them as much as I know.

W: Your comedy, particularly your monologues, has been sensitive to issues in your own life and in the lives of others. How much of your life experience impacts your comedy?

CF: All of it. I talk about my life. It's the only thing I am an expert on.

W: Was there ever a moment on your show that didn't go as planned—a joke, a skit, etc.?

CF: We don't plan—so that way nothing can possibly go wrong. Rehearsal is for sissies.

W: Hosting the post-Super Bowl show is a daunting challenge. Were you nervous?

CF: Funnily enough, I find live TV relaxing. Weird, I know, but I have never claimed to be a poster boy for sanity.

W: I have to ask—because you so often bring it up on your show—why do you believe Bob Barker is a vampire?

CF: Why do you believe he isn't?

IT'S 9 A.M. in Los Angeles, just off Beverly Boulevard. As tourists pack the nearby farmers market, celebrities, agents, publicists and some of television's most influential media executives and producers make their way through the morning gridlock to begin their workday at the legendary studio, CBS Television City. It is at this same location that late-night comedian Craig Ferguson and his staff of nearly 50 begin their day as well.

Ferguson joined the late-night television arena as host of *The Late Late Show* in January 2005, following a career that has included film, television and stage. The Scottish-born actor, writer, director and producer, who

is also known for his role as Nigel Wick on *The Drew Carey Show*, has brought a unique approach to late-night television, with unscripted monologues that often can last up to 10 minutes.

Airing weeknights at 12:37 a.m., after *The Late Show with David Letterman*, the program has become popular among millions of nightly insomniacs. Helping create the nightly mix is head writer David Nickoll—one of 10 writers, including Ferguson, who develop the comedic direction the show takes each night. He also works closely with Ferguson in creating the monologue and delegating any other comedy assignments.

Even though he works in late-night comedy, Nickoll—who began working at *The Late Late Show* when it first launched with Craig Kilborn in 1999—is awake well before sunrise. As he stumbles out of bed each morning, the first thing he does is pick up his copy of the *Los Angeles Times* from the driveway and scour the paper for any interesting stories or topics of the day.

"I'm really trying to figure out what people are interested in and what topics might work for the show," Nickoll says. "Some days are obvious and the writing comes easy. When Dick Cheney accidentally shoots his lawyer in the face, we're grateful," Nickoll jokes. "On other days, we have to be very careful about topic selection. You want to be relevant and topical, but there are some stories we don't find appropriate, so we avoid them altogether."

Shortly after pulling into his parking spot at 9 a.m., Nickoll is in the office trolling the Internet with one hand and holding a TiVo remote in the other. He scrolls

through the competing late-night shows and quickly puts any finishing touches on a list of topics to discuss with Ferguson for that evening's monologue.

"In the monologue, we have covered topics as varied as Freudian psychology, disgraced preacher Ted Haggard and the ban on trans fats," Nickoll explains. "We try to be topical and relevant without being too harsh or overtly political. Craig, however, is not afraid to make a point or express a strong opinion when he feels passionate about something. The ideal monologue has a narrative thread, a point of view and big laughs."

While Nickoll is doing his morning research, the other staff writers regularly stop by and review their ideas for any sketch segments later that night. Needless to say, the topics discussed during these staff meetings aren't typical of most office jobs.

"Craig is a fearless performer who's willing to embarrass himself on camera. We tend to do a fair amount of British humor and we're not afraid to put Craig in a dress," Nickoll jokes.

Knowing Ferguson's personality and enthusiasm, the writers pitch ideas that have Ferguson dressed in costumes ranging from a Playboy Bunny outfit and heels to a ridiculous Kim Jong Il costume complete with wig and glasses. The writers also discuss fake guest bits that would get a laugh, including split-screen, faux news coverage and celebrity impressions.

"Craig does a range of celebrities and we have excellent performers who come in and do spot-on impressions of President Bush and Governor Schwarzenegger," Nickoll explains.

During these morning sessions with the other writers, Nickoll listens intently while jotting down notes, and gives feedback. He not only listens to the actual content of the writers' sketches but also notes who the writers have in mind to star in each sketch.

"The sketches tend to be more written, but it's not uncommon for Craig to veer off the page, especially with performers he



Ferguson welcomes the audience with *Late Late Show* executive producer Gary Considine.

has confidence in such as Tim Meadows and Dave Foley," Nickoll says.

Cue the Rewrites

It's 10:30 a.m. and Nickoll is just about to enter Ferguson's office for the next hour to discuss the morning's monologue and the major stories of the day. It's during these morning meetings that Ferguson will often punch up a joke or sometimes suggest a different ending.

"On a good day, the notes are nominal. On a bad day, we'll do a major rewrite," Nickoll says. "Every piece of comedy flows through Craig. We facilitate his vision and bring as much as we can to the table ... He knows what works for him as a performer. Our job is to take his and our collective experiences, ideas and humor and adapt it to his voice. Craig's interests, enthusiasm and passion define the show."

At 11:30 a.m., Nickoll rushes to attend the staff meeting, run by Executive Producer Gary Considine, where they review the show's rundown. Considine and Nickoll work closely with Ferguson and the *Late Late Show* crew at every step of the process from creative content to office and studio personnel to operations systems and financial status.

NOTABLE MOMENTS ON THE LATE LATE SHOW WITH CRAIG FERGUSON

JULY 14, 2006

Bob Barker, host of CBS' long-running game show *The Price Is Right*, pays Ferguson a visit, along with his announcer Rich Fields and the infamous Barker Beauties, and demolishes the set previously used by host Craig Kilborn.

JULY 24, 2006

A new set is unveiled by Leo Akira Yoshimura, who has designed award-winning sets used by such shows as *Saturday Night Live*, *Access Hollywood* and *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. Ferguson's new set was designed to resemble old Hollywood with a backdrop featuring some of Los Angeles' most iconic landmarks such as Grauman's Chinese Theater, the Santa Monica Ferris Wheel, Pink's Hot Dogs and the Farmer's Market clock.

FEB. 5, 2007

The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson pulls an all-nighter with a live, post-Super Bowl special from Miami.

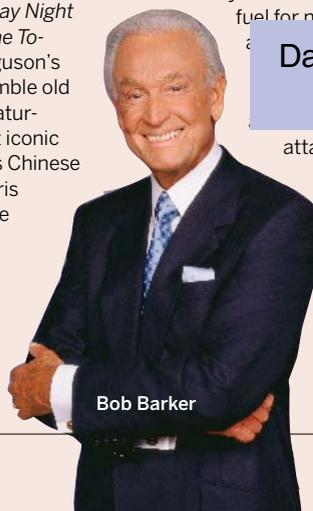
After filming the show the Friday before the game, the staff flew to Miami, did the live postgame show on Sunday, and shortly afterward, flew back to Los Angeles to tape Monday night's show.

FEB. 19, 2007

Ferguson takes a bold stand when he refrains from poking fun at Britney Spears, who notably shaved her head and created comedic fuel for numerous late-night comedies.

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attacking the powerful people, attacking the politicians and the Trumps and the other blowhards. It shouldn't be about going after vulnerable people," Ferguson says during his monologue, where he also discusses his past alcohol-addiction problems.



Bob Barker

"The process is a lot more collaborative than it sounds, as Peter Lassally and I work very closely with Craig to make sure we're all in sync," Considine says. "Craig's name is on the show and much of what appears becomes a reflection of him, so he has to be comfortable with all important decisions.

"We always start our show with two acts of comedy: Ferguson's monologue in the first act and then an act consisting of spontaneous, pretaped and scripted comedy elements," Considine says. "Of course, on our show, this sounds more structured than it is, because Craig makes up so much of the monologue and comedy as he goes along."

Ferguson, say staff members, likes to be loose and have the freedom to improvise. "What's fascinating is to watch a joke or a concept we've discussed throughout the day and then see Craig take it in an entirely new direction. He really likes to reinvent the material. When the audience is responding, he has a lot of fun and the comedy works better," Nickoll says.

As the day continues, Ferguson and his staff continue to review the daily news and work on the jokes that they believe will get the most laughs. Meanwhile, outside the office confines, more than 100 fans with tickets in hand begin to stake their claim in a line that wraps around the side studio gate at about 3:30 p.m. The crowd is filled with college students as well as people of all ages and backgrounds.

"We don't target a specific audience," Considine says. "Instead, we try to include elements that appeal across the demographic landscape. Our comedy focuses on current news and pop culture events, as well as Craig's life experiences and his take on a wide range of topics. Together, our show mix attempts to have something for everyone."

The time continues to pass and it's now 3:45 p.m. Back inside the studio, the audio and light technicians, camera operators and floor personnel take their places and go through a short technical rehearsal. Inside the green room, a number of the late-night staff members and interns watch the video clips or comedy pieces on the TV set with curiosity. The makeup artists rush by to begin the process of making Ferguson and the guests look their best for that night's program.

The technical rehearsal goes as



Executive Producer Gary Considine, right, and head writer David Nickoll discuss the day's major stories.

Breaking into Comedy Writing

For a late-night program that broadcasts weeknights at 12:37 a.m., Ferguson and the other writers put in a long day and intense work schedule. Here are some inside tips and advice to break into the television writing biz:

DAVID NICKOLL, HEAD WRITER

"There is no clear path to success like you might find for a more traditional career like a teacher, doctor or banker. But, if you can work in late night, you'll probably have a lot more fun.

My only advice is to make sure you really want to do this for a living and then find a way to get your foot in the door. You also need to write a lot. When you find someone willing to help you out, you need to have your material ready."

GARY CONSIDINE, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

"For a person to be hired as a comedy writer on our show, you need to have the ability to write well on your own as well as work in a verbal, collaborative environment. You must understand the show and, most importantly, Craig's voice."

planned and soon the audience coordinator signals for the audience to file in.

The audience quickly files into their seats and soon the clock hits 5 p.m. The music plays and out comes Craig Ferguson to deliver his monologue. The audience's cheering soon turns into laughter as Ferguson delivers his first line, with most viewers not even thinking about the amount of work that leads up to that evening's show.

"The greatest reward is doing a funny show and getting feedback from the audience both in the studio and at home," Nickoll says. "I still get excited when a joke or a sketch

gets big laughs. There's also

a great sense of pride when you meet fans of the show or hear from friends about something that made them laugh."

Considine agrees.

"Doing a good show makes or breaks my day. I endure the daily ups and downs for that one hour when we make the show. ... There's the constant ratings evaluation, which may or may not agree with how I feel about the show. Fortunately, our ratings continue to set records for CBS, and that's very rewarding." ❗

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—David Nickoll,
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