

Exit, laughing

Joe Ferullo | Nov. 16, 2009 NCR Today

Tragedy lingers, we all know -- but comedy seems more ephemeral. Laughs don't often leave a lasting mark. Comedy writers out here in Hollywood struggle with that: all the big prizes and awards go to dramatists, whose works enrich the soul and expound on the human condition. Laughter is just what we use to fill in the gaps between our various anxieties.

But not this past week. If you needed any proof that laughs last, you just had to check out the obituary sections of publications as diverse as *The New York Times* and *Entertainment Weekly*. They were filled with the news that [David Lloyd had passed on](#) [1].

Name doesn't ring a bell? No, probably not -- but he is venerated in television for writing arguably the funniest 30 minutes of comedy ever filmed: an episode of "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" about the death of WJM-TV's kiddie show host, Chuckles the Clown.

It was called "Chuckles Bites the Dust," and focused on Mary's disdain for all the tacky jokes made by newsroom staffers when they learned of Chuckles' death. (He went to a parade dressed as Peter Peanut, and was shelled by "a rogue elephant," Lou Grant tells everyone.) But Mary herself then has to stifle laughs at Chuckles' funeral, as the minister recites the clown's credo: "A little song, a little dance, a little seltzer down your pants."

I was in high school when "Chuckles" aired in 1975, and that Monday, it was all my friends and I could talk about. By the end of the week, we were able to recite the funeral oration by memory -- very annoying to our Latin teachers, who labored mightily getting us to memorize various Roman funeral orations with half the success and none of the fun.

In fact, for my generation (late baby-boomer to early-whatever-came-just-after-and-just-before-Generation-X), "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" remains a TV touchstone, the way few programs in our 500-channel world are now. In an era of constant change, Mary was a constant -- and a perfect bridge between a society that used to be and a culture yet to come.

The show's producers originally wrote Mary as a divorced woman, getting a second start on her own in Minneapolis. ("You might just make it after all.") But the network got cold feet, at a time when divorce was still talked about mostly in whispers. Mary was re-written, as single and never-married -- but, even with that, she was one of TV's first true "career girls," a woman working hard to make it in a man's business.

And the program's humor -- thanks to people like David Lloyd and creator James Brooks -- was just off-kilter enough to keep up with the times. Not in-your-face like Norman Lear's sitcoms ("All in the Family," "Maude," "The Jeffersons"), Brooks' show always left you caring for its underdog characters. Even Ted Baxter.

To stand out in a show like that was remarkable - and David Lloyd did. To be remembered so well so many years later, in a business where comedy writers and their work are often seen as disposable, is fairly close to miraculous. (For a quick refresher, or for the unfortunately uninformed, YouTube has an eight-minute clip of

the episode's [final, hilarious sequence](#) [2]). That's because Lloyd pulled off something very special: the '70s was a decade filled with and remembered by its tragedies and disappointments, from the fall of Saigon and Watergate, to stagflation and the American hostages in Iran. It was, trust me, a woeful time.

Except for David Lloyd's thirty golden minutes, stuck right there in the middle.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.latimes.com/news/obituaries/la-me-david-lloyd13-2009nov13,0,2505414.story>

[2] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwC361O13gk>