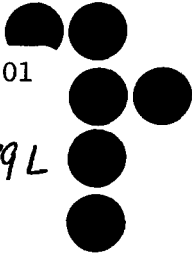


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COMMUNICATIONS
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WRITING AND DIRECTING FOR PRIME TIME TV

April 13, 1989

Seminar Notes

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COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

WRITING AND DIRECTING FOR PRIME TIME TV

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John Romano
Writer, Producer, Story Editor
MTM Enterprises

Prof. David Thorburn
Moderator
MIT

Gail Kosloff
Rapporteur
MIT

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This session of the Communications Forum featured writer, producer and story editor John Romano of MTM Enterprises. His impressive credentials include work for television ("Hill Street Blues," "Beverly Hills Buntz," and "Home Free") and in the realm of features ("Key Exchange" and "Trail of the Fox"). (Refer to Exhibit 1) John Romano was previously an English professor at Columbia University and earlier a graduate student of Prof. David Thorburn at Yale University (now of MIT) before jumping ship. Romano noted that his academic study of Dickens has made him particularly sensitive to the issue of holding the attention of an audience, whether it be for television or features.

Romano described how the career of a fledgling writer might evolve: Earlier in his/her career a writer might write episodes for several shows and then pitch these ideas to several producers. If the writer's work is accepted it is typically rewritten extensively by staff writers so much so that the original writer may barely recognize the material. The next job that a writer might aspire to is that of staff writer on a show. As time passes and there is attrition in the executive producer ranks, the writer may find himself taking over more responsibilities and in fact have an opportunity to run the show. In this scenario the writer's next step is to become a "writer/executive producer." As he/she takes on this role the writer and the network are entering into more of a "partnership" arrangement. In this situation the network would likely ask the writer for his/her ideas for future projects rather than dictate on which projects the writer/producer should work.

In Romano's opinion, most writers are more comfortable with a "patron" arrangement in which they are working for someone, as opposed to a partnership arrangement. The patron arrangement enables the writer to criticize the "them" for whom they are working. He notes that in TV there is really no "they" since the writer/producer has to approach creative decisions with an awareness of how it will impact his budget.

John Romano went on to contrast movies and television in terms of who holds the control. According to Romano the producers and the studios "own" the movies, while the director works for the writer

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in the television business. John Romano noted that he strongly believes TV is a "writer's medium," as opposed to being either a producer's or studio's medium. In the world of TV Romano believes the role of the director is to "execute what is on the page and create an exact realization of what is in the script." Romano did acknowledge that writers often do want directors to contribute a "little" idea (e.g., how to move the camera) in the show creation process. He noted that often it is especially important for the production of a pilot to seek out a director that will give the work a "distinctive" look. Romano noted that it is not uncommon to have a feature director in such a role.

Romano described the role of production companies, such as MTM, as being like a "good hotel" for writers, directors and producers. He believes that companies like MTM have a tremendous amount of money to attract and nurture talented writers and producers. The production companies also play the role of professional management companies in assuring the network that a project will be delivered. According to Romano, as a result the production companies make out very well financially for all their efforts.

Romano noted that some production companies like Lorimar are learning to get out of the way of their executive producers. He believes that some companies are just so large, like Universal, that this often dictates the look; in the case of Universal he believes the result is a very slick look that comes off well, e.g., "Miami Vice." Romano noted Grant Tinker as famous for "getting out of the way of creative talent; a strategy of which Romano greatly approves.

Romano went on to address the issue of prestige and the medium. He noted that he is familiar with screen writers who are making very good livings writing material for film and are satisfied to continue to do so eventhough none of their work has thus far been released. According to Romano, these people have no incentive to leave the realm of film and write for TV.

Romano's biggest complaint as a writer/producer is that "there is not a good pool of talent (actors) available to TV today." He believes that most of the talented individuals in the 20-40 year old range are waiting for Hollywood to give them their big break in features. Romano noted that since "the acting in TV often

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seems to be below the creative content this holds TV back from being as good in production as it is on the page."

Romano went on to discuss the fact that writers face many demands in TV today. These restrictions might take the form of censorship or political pressure, and result from the reality that TV is a commercial medium. Romano feels that sometimes the audience invites writers to break these taboos as evidenced in the success of shows like "All in the Family" which dealt with some sensitive social issues. He noted with some frustration that ratings play a very powerful role in what programs "succeed" on TV. Romano does not believe the current ratings system works. According to Romano it is difficult to believe that a TV show cannot be called a success when it has attracted an audience of 12-14 million viewers instead of the necessary 20+ million. Romano noted this was unfortunately the situation with a pilot spin-off of "Hill Street Blues" called "Beverly Hills Buntz" on which he worked. In response to the role of advertiser, Romano believes that advertisers are sold "spots" on shows they are told will do well. In his opinion, the sponsors are not concerned ideologically with what the writers are putting on the air.

Romano noted that U.S. television does not seem to learn from its mistakes and successes. He feels that the attempts by those in the U.S. to copy "successful" British TV programs for the U.S. market have not fared well. Romano characterized the British TV series "Faulty Towers" as a brilliant show, but noted that it was simply bad TV when it was rewritten for the U.S. market. Romano believes that an example of brilliant writing in the U.S. market today is "Family Ties" starring Michael J. Fox. He believes that only in an episodic series like this could we have come to know the "inside of a yuppie."

As a writer, Romano noted that he feels a tremendous responsibility to give the actors material they want to perform. He believes that if this relationship does not exist between the writer and the actor the result is often bad acting. Romano acknowledged that the actor often knows the character better than the writer especially if he/she has been playing the character for a while.

Romano noted that there are new areas for TV to explore but that next season we will probably see copies of shows like "Rosanne" (about lower-middle class life) and "Married With Children" (a

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popular show inside the industry). Romano related that he is in the process of developing a new show called "Delaney" about the private lives of cops. He believes that it is important to give viewers good writing since people are "hooked" by story and character. Romano believes the better picture quality promised by HDTV and other technologies will not matter to the viewing audience as much as content.

Romano ended his presentation by showing video clips from his work on "Hill Street Blues" which revealed a story within a story. Romano remarked that this is the kind of thing writers like himself like to do. He likes the challenge of keeping the attention of the audience.

MTM

JOHN ROMANO

Television

Writer	HILL STREET BLUES	1985-87
Emmy Nomination	HILL STREET BLUES (Final Episode) "It Ain't Over Till It's Over"	1986-87 Season
Co-Producer/ Executive Story Editor	BEVERLY HILLS BUNTZ	1987-88
Co-Executive-Producer	HOME FREE NBC Pilot	1988

(All the above are MTM Productions)

Features

KEY EXCHANGE	20th Century Fox	1984
TRAIL OF THE FOX	Orion Pictures	Forthcoming

Exhibit 1