

“A LOT OF OUR HUMOR WAS A MIXTURE OF THE SAD AND THE FUNNY. . . I USED TO LOVE TO DO SAD LITTLE GUYS, SCHLEPPERS, IN MONOLOGUES ABOUT INANIMATE OBJECTS. . . ONE THAT IS REMEMBERED BY A LOT OF PEOPLE WAS ‘THE WHITEWALL TIRE.’ I PLAYED THIS TIRE, WHO STARTED LIFE VERY PROUDLY ON A WHEEL OF A ROLLS ROYCE. BUT THEN HE GETS THROWN OUT WHEN HIS USEFULNESS IS OVER, AND HE GOES THROUGH ALL KINDS OF TERRIBLE EXPERIENCES BEFORE HE FINALLY ENDS UP IN A DUMP, WITH ONLY HIS MEMORIES OF THE GOOD OLD DAYS. THE AUDIENCE ACTUALLY LAUGHS AND CHEERS WHEN HE’S PICKED UP BY A KID AND REGAINS HIS DIGNITY AS A BACKYARD SWING.”

—SID CAESAR



S I D C A E S A R

■ Sid Caesar probably would not have been a very successful stand-up comic. He never liked one-liners, and he rarely told jokes. Yet he evoked spasms of uncontrolled laughter for nearly a decade, and in the process, he became the medium's first and foremost actor-comedian, a performer who was always more intrigued by characterization than comedy.

Caesar was remarkable in his various sketches with Imogene Coca on *Your Show of Shows*. But television's "clown of majesty," as *TV Guide* called him, was at his best, his most riveting, when he appeared on stage alone. It was then that he became the master monologist, the funny little man inside us all, the American Everyman circa 1950.



Caesar's sketches with Imogene Coca included much mugging and a minimal amount of props.

During his monologues, he played various roles. One week he would be a young man frightened by his impending marriage: "It'll be nice," he tried to assure himself. "Get up in the morning, no more running down to some one-arm joint and grabbing a glass of orange juice and a cup of coffee. . . . No, sir. Eat like a man. Put my robe over my pajamas. Get into my slippers. Walk into the kitchen. Yes, looking for somebody? Oh, it's you, darling. I didn't recognize you."

The next week, Caesar might show up as a middle-aged, balding man confronting his own changing image in the mirror: "Look how chubby I am . . . look at my ears, how fat they are. My eyeballs don't even fit in their sockets anymore. And look at this jacket.

It used to be a topcoat. . . . Yep, today's the day I'm gonna do it. . . . Today's the day I'm going on a diet. . . . I gotta have will power. . . . I gotta be strong. . . . And you gotta have a lot of strength. . . . So make me a big breakfast, 'cause I gotta have a lot of strength to go with this diet!"

Caesar's brand of humor, with its antic impersonations and its overblown images, helped to release television from its dependence on the broad, noisy comedy inherited from vaudeville. In that sense, Caesar gave the fledgling medium a new comedy—satire—the kind of comedy that wasn't supposed to work on television. Almost singlehandedly, Caesar added a new dimension to television entertainment, a new sophistication and an increased vitality. For the first time, the ordinary man saw his fears, his doubts, his triumphs—his life—reflected on the home screen. Through Caesar's personal brand of satire, the ordinary viewer for the first time could laugh at himself.

Sid Caesar came to television almost by accident. In the late 1940s, he had wanted, as did most young performers, to find a place for himself on the movie screen or Broadway or the nightclub circuit. Earlier, much earlier, when Caesar, the youngest of three sons of



Polish-Austrian immigrants, was growing up in Yonkers, New York, he had wanted to become a saxophonist. In 1939, after he graduated from Yonkers High School, he was still passionate enough about music to want to turn the saxophone into a classical instrument. ("I was a real longhair," he once recalled.) Instead, he worked in a band at the Avon Lodge in the Catskills, where he also helped comedian Jackie Michaels perform his pie-in-the-face slapstick routines.

Caesar's interest in comedy continued after he enlisted in the Coast Guard during World War II. He played saxophone in the base orchestra and wrote comedy skits for a military revue called *Six On, Twelve Off*. Eventually, he performed comedy routines in a Coast Guard recruiting show entitled *Tars and Spars* and directed by one of Caesar's first mentors, Max Liebman.

Eventually catching Hollywood's attention, *Tars and Spars* was made into a 1946 Columbia Pictures movie starring Alfred Drake and featuring Caesar, who garnered the better notices. But despite the role, and despite his portrayal of a nightclub comic in a Rosalind Russell vehicle, *The Guilt of Janet Ames*, Caesar's gifts were largely ignored by Hollywood.



From top: guest hostess Faye Emerson, Caesar, dancer Alicia Markova, choreographer James Starbuck, and singer Jack Russell in a *Your Show of Shows* curtain call; another curtain call, with Carl Reiner, guest host Frederic Franklin of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, Caesar, Coca, and singers Bill Hayes and Judy Johnson; television's "clown of majesty."

Returning to New York, he worked the nightclub circuit, played the Roxy and, in 1948, acted in a well-received stage revue called *Make Mine Manhattan*, directed by Max Liebman. In January of the following year, when Liebman began producing and directing the weekly NBC-DuMont show, *The Admiral Broadway Revue*, he brought Caesar to television.

The short-lived (nineteen weeks) *Revue* is remembered today primarily because it brought together the comedy team of Caesar and Imogene Coca and it was the predecessor of what was to become the classic of television's golden age, *Your Show of Shows*.

After *Admiral* withdrew its sponsorship of the highly successful *Revue*, allegedly because it couldn't keep up with the demand that the show created for Admiral-brand TV sets, Caesar, Coca, Liebman, and company found themselves afloat.

At this point, Sylvester (Pat) Weaver, then vice-president of television at NBC, approached Liebman about producing a new live comedy-variety show that would run two and a half hours each week. Liebman replied that, while two and a half hours would be much too demanding, he did want to produce an hour-and-a-half show. Weaver agreed and

promptly set about packaging the proposed program under the umbrella title *The Saturday Night Revue*. The program consisted of two variety shows telecast back to back on a single evening, one originating live from Chicago at 8 p.m. (*The Jack Carter Show*, which was dropped after the second season) and the other live from New York at 9 (*Your Show of Shows*).

With Caesar, Coca, Carl Reiner, and Howard Morris, *Your Show of Shows* was one of the most ambitious entertainment projects in the history of the new medium. It was a live ninety-minute telecast that presented a wide range of original comedy nearly every week for four years. From the show's beginnings, it was clear that Caesar possessed a comedy talent of extraordinary range. It seemed that he could do just about everything—from pantomime to monologues to satirical burlesques of opera, ballets, popular TV shows, and movies.

In a series of memorable sketches that grew in popularity throughout the four years, he also portrayed Charlie Hickenlooper, the lumbering, loutish husband of social-climbing Doris Hickenlooper, played by Coca:

Doris: "You never treated me like this before we were married."

Charlie: "That's the biggest lie

of all! What a lie! I always treated you rotten—that's the one thing about our marriage. It's honest and aboveboard."

Caesar also portrayed the professor, the self-styled expert on everything or, as Caesar has described him, "the fraudulent know-it-all with a German accent." In one sketch, Caesar turned up as Professor Sigmund von Faidy Katz, author of *Mountain Climbing: What Do You Need It For?* In another, he was Dr. Sigfried von Sedative, author of *Wake Up and Sleep*; in yet another, Dr. Rudolph von Rudder, author of *You Too Can Fly*.

Garnering two Emmys for Caesar and Coca and another two for itself, *Your Show of Shows* went on for 160 weeks, until June 5, 1954, when, as Caesar wrote in his autobiography, NBC decided "to break us up into three, four, or even five series . . . [to] multiply the profits of the network." NBC had apparently been "wondering



why so much talent should be used on a single series," he added.

The result: Max Liebman produced several musical specials. Imogene Coca got a comedy-variety show of her own, and Sid Caesar returned to television with his *Caesar's Hour*, a comedy-variety show that regularly featured such comedy skits as "The Three Haircuts," in which Caesar, Reiner, and Morris satirized rock 'n' roll musicians, and "The Commuters," in which the three portrayed suburbanites taking the same trains to and from work every day.

On May 25, 1957, after completing three seasons and winning another Emmy for himself, Caesar and his show left the air because of reduced ratings. In January 1958, he launched another comedy-variety show, ABC's *Sid Caesar Invites You*, which expired after a four-month run. During the 1963-64 season, he returned to ABC for another comedy-variety program, *The Sid Caesar Show*, which featured singer Gisele MacKenzie.

More recently, Caesar has been seen in such movies as *Airport '75*, *Silent Movie*, *Grease*, and *The Cheap Detective*. His autobiography, *Where Have I Been?*, which detailed his triumph over alcoholism and drug abuse, was published in 1982. ■

—J.S.