

A week behind the scenes at 'SNL'



Taran Killam (from left), host Melissa McCarthy and Bobby Moynihan during a skit on "SNL" in 2013. Photo: Dana Edelson/NBC/NBCU Photo Bank

When [Melissa McCarthy](#) hosted "Saturday Night Live" for the third time in February 2014, the actress and "SNL" cast member [Bobby Moynihan](#) were hoisted in midair by harnesses, spinning and flying in a parody of Japanese martial arts films.

But according to author Alison Castle, who hung out behind the scenes of the 2013-2014 season for "Saturday Night Live: The Book" (out Feb. 25), the real special effect was getting it on the air.

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"Melissa came in with this idea. They went all out and it backfired, because [the pulleys and cranes weren't] working at dress rehearsal," Castle tells The Post. "I was watching the seamstress sewing [McCarthy's] costume 10 minutes before air ... and thinking, This is crazy."

Consider the successful end result one of the many miracles that "SNL," which premiered Oct. 11, 1975, has pulled off weekly for 40 years.

To celebrate this milestone, [NBC will air a 3½-hour special](#) Sunday at 8 p.m., featuring stars and guests from the show's tenure, including [Steve Martin](#), [Eddie Murphy](#), [Will Ferrell](#), [Justin Timberlake](#), [Tina Fey](#) and more.

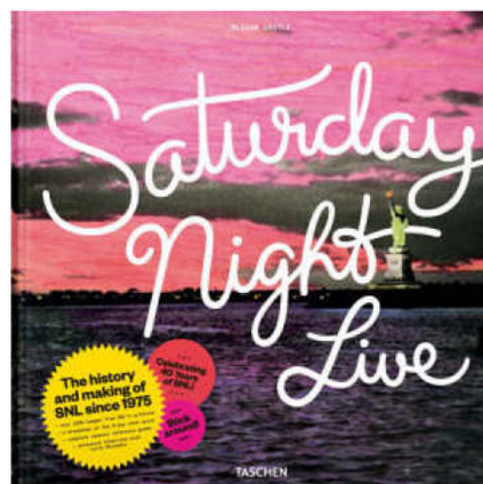
Much of the show's success comes from its deceptively simple structure, put into place by creator [Lorne Michaels](#) at Studio 8H in Rockefeller Center — a weekly plan that remains intact to this day. Here's a look at the astounding feat that is getting "SNL" on the air.

Monday: Pitch meeting

The six-day work schedule begins on Monday, when the writers, cast members and celeb host gather in Michaels' office to pitch ideas for that Saturday's show.

These meetings have taken place in Michaels' office at 30 Rockefeller Plaza since the show premiered. Back then, there would be around 12 participants; these days that number is closer to 30. They could've moved it somewhere else, but Michaels loves his traditions.

"Lorne's office is not big enough now to have that meeting," says Castle. "There are people crowded all over the floor and leaning on the windowsills, and the last people to



get there have to stand in the doorway." She recalls this happening more than once to Seth Meyers, who was the show's head writer until February 2014.

Michaels chats with the guest host after the meeting to learn what sketches they like or don't.

"The host usually has strong views," Michaels tells Castle. "Sometimes, if a host is really attached [to a sketch or a joke], I will make the case as to why I don't think it's going to work, but ... you can't explain that we know the room better than they do. If they're emotionally attached, that's what it is, and you still need to get them through the whole show."

Tuesday: Writing

The bulk of the writing occurs, as it has for 40 years, overnight on Tuesday into Wednesday morning. Although these sleepless, all-night sessions facilitated strong bonds of friendship for many on the show, some couldn't adapt.

According to the oral history "Live From New York: The Complete, Uncensored History of 'Saturday Night Live,'" Larry David, who wrote on the show during the 1984-1985 season, once tried to leave early Tuesday evening.

When he was told to stay all night, even though he'd already written his sketches, David considered this "the beginning of the end" of his time on the show.

Wednesday: The read-through

At Wednesday's read-through, 40 or so sketches are read aloud. There were times in the past, especially during the Adam Sandler-David Spade-Rob Schneider era of the early '90s, when writers and the cast often wouldn't laugh at sketches, for fear of someone else's being picked over theirs.

Castle reports that cast camaraderie now is strong.

"I could see the anxiousness among writers and cast members who wanted their sketches picked. But when you're in a read-through nowadays, there's so much generous laughter, and so much support for each other. It's a team," she says. "It's four hours of good vibes and laughing."

Castle credits that spirit to former head writer Meyers, who left to host NBC's "Late Night," which Michaels produces.

"He was a great unifying factor because he's an incredibly generous, funny and just nice person, and that really rubbed off on the whole team," Castle says. "I was there when he left, at the last read-through, and there wasn't a dry eye in the room."

As for Michaels' current MVP, Castle points to Steve Higgins, a longtime writer-producer who also serves as the announcer on "The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon" (which Michaels also produces).

"He's really, really important [to 'SNL']," she says. "He does a lot of the last-minute rewrites, and he's got his hands in everything."

Thursday and Friday: Rehearsals and set building

Castle says that other than the writing, the bulk of the work of creating an episode — from rehearsing sketches to building sets and putting together costumes — doesn't really begin until Thursday. (Set design starts a bit earlier: Wednesday night.)

Creating "SNL" is a team effort and many of the show's

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Nasim Pedrad (from left), Abby Elliott, Andy Samberg, Kristen Wiig and Vanessa Bayer in costume prepping for a 2011 sketch. Photo: Mary Ellen Matthews

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Gilda Radner and John Belushi share a tender moment in the hair and makeup room in 1976. Photo: Edie Baskin

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heroes are behind the scenes.

One key player is dresser Donna Richards (every cast member has their own hairdresser and makeup artist, as does the host), who not only handles the host's wardrobe for the week, but literally leads them around the studio by the hand during the show to ensure they're exactly where they need to be at every moment.



"Weekend Update" anchors Seth Meyers and Amy Poehler review their cue cards in 2007. Photo: Mary Ellen Matthews

"She's all business. Tough lady," says Castle. "She's been doing it for a long time, and doesn't take s—t from anyone. She's not shy about pulling them around like toddlers."

Saturday: Dress rehearsal and showtime

The most incredible thing Castle witnessed was the frantic 90 minutes between Saturday's 8 p.m. dress rehearsal, before a studio audience, and the 11:30 live show.

That's when Michaels, along with his top producers and head writers (currently including "Weekend Update" co-anchor Colin Jost), decide which sketches to air, rewrite or cut.

While Michaels relies on the dress rehearsal to shape the televised broadcast, Castle notes its tenuousness. "Sometimes things will get a huge laugh at dress and not get a laugh on air, or vice versa," Castle says. "My question to Lorne was, knowing that, how do you use dress to gauge? They use it as a sounding board to get a feeling for things, but it's something no one can explain."

Ultimately, Michaels told Castle: "I ask a lot of people their opinions, and then I make my decision."

No one is more important to the show than the man in charge.

When Michaels created "SNL" at age 30, he spent the first five years as close pals with the cast, especially Chevy Chase — who broke Michaels' heart when he left in Season 2.

But then Michaels also parted from the show, along with what remained of the original cast, in 1980. When he returned five years later, having to start from scratch, things changed.

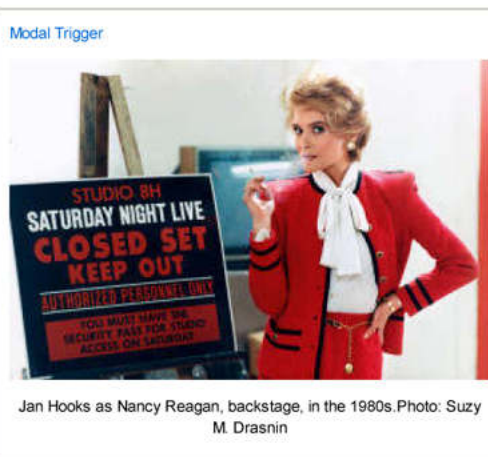
"He realized that it's hard to be friends with someone and cut their sketch," Castle says. "He's there if you need him, but he's not your friend."

"Now it's more paternal," Michaels, 70, tells The Post. No matter what, his gravitas is clearly felt.

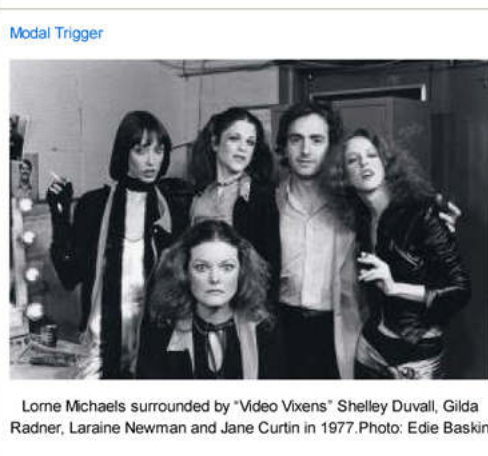
"There's a hush that comes over everyone when Lorne walks into the room," Castle says. "The paradox is that if you let him intimidate you too much, you're not gonna go very far. And yet, he can be intimidating, because he doesn't speak a lot."

Overall, the whole package of the show — the history, the chaos, the anxiety churning itself into laughs — combines to create an institution that is seemingly indestructible.

"Studio 8H is a small place — it's not fancy," Castle says. "Yet they're doing something every week that nobody else has ever done — putting live comedy on TV in America."



Jan Hooks as Nancy Reagan, backstage, in the 1980s. Photo: Suzy M. Drasin



Lorne Michaels surrounded by "Video Vixens" Shelley Duvall, Gilda Radner, Laraine Newman and Jane Curtin in 1977. Photo: Edie Baskin

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