

Yuks in the Night: A Viewers' Guide

Television comedy finds new life on home video



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PHOTOTEQUE

An air of danger: Belushi as Joliet Jake Blues, Aykroyd as Beldar Conehead

TV comedy has always been ephemeral by nature—a yuk or two in the night, the odd belly laugh slipping into the ozone and “Good night, ladies and gentlemen!” If we missed one installment, well, there was always next week.

The VCR, which changed everything, changed this, too. Now TV comedy is a commodity for the ages. Video stores are filled with a bewildering variety of material originally produced for broadcast. **NEWSWEEK ON CAMPUS** offers this viewers’ guide.

Live From New York

Starting in 1975, “Saturday Night Live” scrambled everyone’s ideas of what TV comedy could do, be and say. The first few years have come to be seen as SNL’s golden age, and younger viewers may wonder what all the fuss was about. Two Warner Home Video anthologies, **The Best of John Belushi** and **The Best of Dan Aykroyd** (\$24.98 each), help answer that question. Here’s Aykroyd as Richard Nixon, a creature so vile and corrupt he can barely walk upright; as sleaze-ball toymaker Irwin Mainway (manufac-

turer of the popular “Bag o’ Glass”), and as earthbound alien Beldar Conehead (“We’re from . . . France”). And here’s Belushi as the godfather in therapy (“Vito,” a group member gushes when he refuses to talk about his son’s assassination, “you’re blocking”); as Blues Brother Joliet Jake; as Captain Kirk on the day an NBC executive beams up to tell him that “Star Trek” has been canceled (“Set phasers to kill, Mr. Spock”). There’s a real air of danger here, a sense of writers and actors wandering out along what was then the edge of TV comedy. But there’s poignance, too—Tom Schiller’s lovely short film “Don’t Look Back in Anger,” in which an elderly Belushi, the last original cast member left alive, dances on his old friends’ graves.

Monty Python and Progeny

The BBC’s **Monty Python’s Flying Circus** was surely the strangest TV comedy series of the 1970s. It was highbrow and lowdown, slapstick and surreal, from a troupe of six writer/performers who flaunted their knowledge of Proust and Sartre but weren’t above slapping each other with fish now and then. In December Paramount Home Video issued the first three cassettes in an ongoing Monty Python series; each has two half-hour programs and lists for \$24.95. Volume 1 is a rich introduction. It contains an inside look at the Ministry of Silly Walks, a visit to a drugstore in search of fish-scented after-shave and a mock documentary on the careers of dreaded London criminals Doug and Dinsdale Piranha: “Dinsdale says to me, ‘You’ve been a naughty boy, Clement.’ And he splits me nostrils open, and saws me leg off, and pulls me liver out. And I says, ‘My name’s not Clement.’ And then he loses his temper.”

After shattering the boundaries of sketch comedy, the two funniest Pythons went on to bend the half-hour format. Nine installments of **Ripping Yarns**, starring Michael Palin, have been released on three CBS/Fox cassettes (\$29.98 apiece). The **Ripping Yarns** are period pieces, lavishly produced but a bit slow. Much sharper is **Fawlty Towers** (CBS/Fox, four cassettes of three episodes each; \$29.98 each). Think of a black-comic “I Love Lucy” set in a British lodging house and you may begin to get the



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Sartre and slapstick: Monty Python, with Cleese (left) and Palin (second from right)