



It's Mad, but it just might work

BY GLENN McDONALD

ILLUSTRATION BY NORMAN MINGO, WHATSITOO U.

LEGENDARY *MAD* MAGAZINE ILLUSTRATOR SERGIO Aragones is standing at the back of a Hollywood sound stage. Before him, cast and crew prepare for the final take of "Apollo the 13th," *Mad TV*'s Jason-meets-Jim Lovell send-up of the horror genre.

Aragones, who just dropped in on the set out of curiosity, chuckles. "This should have happened a long time ago," he says. One of the founding fathers of *Mad Magazine*, Aragones has seen efforts to bring *Mad* to the TV screen float and flounder for 20 years. "This is wonderful."

Aragones pauses to consider the giant orbital module prop. "You know the Russians had sex up there," he says out of nowhere. "I mean — that's the first thing you'd do, right? Zero-gravity sex? Masturbation, at least."



Gump Fiction — "I am going to get medieval on your buttocks."

It's a mad, mad, mad *Mad* world. This fall, television's upstart network teams with juvenilia's sacred, satirical monthly to launch *Mad TV* — an ambitious foray into the occupied lands of Saturday night sketch comedy. The show has a lot going for it — the prestige of the *Mad* moniker, an experienced production team, a talented cast and a world-class director (John Blanchard, *SCTV*, *Kids in the Hall*). It also has some stiff competition — a pesky little 20-year-old comedy institution called *Saturday Night Live*.

All right for fighting?

Executive producer Adam Small realizes the particular spot *Mad TV* is in. It's hard enough to make a sketch show work in a half-hour weekday format. (Small wrote for *In Living Color* and co-produced the frequently lame *House of Buggin'*). But competing with *SNL*, even considering that show's current slump, is a tall order.

"I don't think you can last at 11 p.m. on Saturday night without having that freedom to really be edgy," Small says. "We're going up against *SNL*, and the show's called *Mad*. We better be able to pack a wallop, or we won't last."

To that end, *Mad TV* hopes to incorporate some unorthodox elements into the show, including animated "Spy vs. Spy" and Don Martin cartoon sequences, as well as frenetic, MTV-like computer animation. The show will shoot about a third of its material on location, with the other two-thirds taped live before an audience a few days prior to the Saturday airing.

"One of the things we've tried to do is use lots of different looks and textures," says executive producer David Salzman. "Like the animation, and movie parodies in 35 mm letter-box. And we plan to do at least two significant music parodies each show."

Raising heck

But can the show capitalize on the rich satirical tradition of the magazine? Will a network tolerate such wanton subversity?

"We're going on the air with a sensibility that there are no sacred cows," Salzman says. "The magazine was always about the mocking of authority, hypocrisy exposed. It's statement comedy as well as amusement comedy."

Well, we'll see. *Mad TV* draws its spirit from the magazine, but little else. There is no actual creative liaison between the magazine, produced in New York, and the TV show, written primarily by a young staff with sitcom and stand-up comedy backgrounds.

Still, there is a deliberate effort to move away from established sketch comedy norms, and you can't complain about that. Blaine Capatch and Patton Oswalt are one of the principal teams on *Mad TV*'s staff of 15 or so writers. Pop culture junkies and comedy scholars, they

riff effortlessly on everything from Ernie Kovacs to *The Simpsons*.

"We're aware of what limits *SNL* and other sketch stuff, and we try to look at our stuff through that," Capatch says. "They got the formula and they knew what worked, and they were afraid to move away from it. As it got bigger and more bloated, they would get one joke — 'OK, it's a guy with a massive head wound.' And they would write backwards from there."

"No offense to *SNL* — they've had their ups and downs — but right now they're in a real bad down," says Oswalt. "They lost their focus because they got too much money and became too much of an institution."

Those involved with *Mad TV* go out of their way to praise *SNL* for its pioneering history. They're anxious to avoid the inevitable media-fueled confrontation. But the criticism is valid — they know it, we know it and *SNL* knows it.

"This is going to sound snotty, but we're writing *endings* to the sketches," says cast member Nicole Sullivan. "I don't know where [*SNL*] lost the fact that they needed endings. I think they stopped caring."

What, then worry?

Sullivan, a classically trained actress with considerable theater experience, says most of the cast has ensemble training and experience —

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ADAM SMALL, *MAD TV* EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

another deliberate decision on the part of the producers.

"One of the things that shows have done before is just impressions of political figures or entertainment figures," Salzman says. "Usually the point of those sketches is 'Look how great I am at doing this impression.' Some of the people that do them are hilarious, but its kind of a one-level form of entertainment."

"So we looked for actors as opposed to stand-ups," says Small.

All of these elements add up to a show with fundamental differences from traditional sketch comedy television. *Mad TV* has an ambitious agenda, and a lot on its plate. It's time to skit or get off the pot.

"There's a lot of pressure," says cast member Bryan Callen. "But it's very exciting."

Like the rest of the *Mad TV* team, Sullivan says the ultimate goal is to produce a funny, maybe even ground-breaking, comedy program. And there's only one real judge of that — America's TV nation.

"My favorite moment was after shooting the pilot," Sullivan says. "My friends came out and said, 'You know what? This is funny.'"

"I went, 'Oh, my God. We could have a show here.'"

Glenn McDonald is *U. Magazine's* music editor, and he always pulls for the *White Spy*.



Mad TV's sporty, reliable cast. Available in compact or mid-size sedan.