



A Harrisburg Perspective on Hollywood

A Q&A With Carmen Finestra

By Larry Portzline

Carmen Finestra is bi-coastal these days, traveling frequently between the Harrisburg area, where he cares for his aging mother; New York, where his Wind Dancer production company is headquartered; and Los Angeles, a town that still beckons the comedy writer-turned-producer.

In fact, at the time of this interview, Finestra was getting ready to fly back to L.A. to record some audio commentary for a DVD of the first season of "Home Improvement," the enormously successful Tim Allen sitcom that he produced and helped to create in the early 1990s.

Finestra, 57, grew up near 26th and Derry Streets in Harrisburg, where he remembers watching Jack Benny and Jackie Gleason on TV with his Italian immigrant parents and dreaming of being in show business himself someday. He got his wish in the 1970s, performing off-off-Broadway and then moving into television, where he paid his dues writing specials for Steve Martin and Johnny Cash, and for the sitcoms "Chico and the Man," "Love Boat" and "Punky Brewster."

His career hit high-gear in the 1980s when he wrote and became a supervising producer for the now-legendary "Cosby Show." Since "Home Improvement" ended its run, he's also been the co-creator and executive producer of shows starring Dan Aykroyd and Ed Asner, and executive producer of the 2000 film "What Women Want," starring Mel Gibson and Helen Hunt. This fall he's hoping to shoot a "wild" Rob Schneider comedy that he co-wrote called "Harv the Barbarian," and he currently has projects in the works with actresses Reese Witherspoon and Sandra Bullock.

Rounding out his impressive résumé are a Peabody Award for co-writing "The Cosby Show," two Golden Globe nominations for his work on "Home Improvement," six Emmy nominations for "Cosby" and "Home Improvement," and three Writers Guild of America Awards.

Despite his achievements in Tinseltown, this 1965 Bishop McDevitt High School grad has never turned his back on his community; he's an active fundraiser for his alma mater, as well as for Good Shepherd school in Camp Hill. He also donated a video editing facility named in his honor at Penn State University, from which he graduated in 1971.

Finestra still counts Tim Allen and Bill Cosby among his closest show business friends, but he credits his bricklayer father and seamstress mother for the work ethic and family values that took him from Harrisburg to Hollywood and back again.

What do you think of all the changes that have taken place in Harrisburg since you've been back in the area?

Like most people, I think Mayor Reed has done an incredible job. I love City Island. I go to a lot of Senators games. I take a lot of walks and bike rides in the city, and there's a real feeling now that things are happening. It's a very different city from the one I left.

Is it true that you got your start in show business at St. Catherine's Catholic school on Derry Street?

You know, Steve Martin and I both did something around the same age. In the third grade, he used to go to school and recreate sketches from the Red Skelton show, and that's exactly what I did. I remember one of the nuns saying to me, "Ya know, Finestra, you're pretty funny. Why don't you go on the loudspeaker and do a sketch about giving to the mission drive? Just do something funny." So I did. We had talent shows there, too, and I did comedy routines.

Were you the class clown when you went to Bishop McDevitt?

I was a smaller guy, so I used my humor to try to stand out, but no, I wasn't the guy who broke the class up or did wacky things. I was president of the student

council when I was a senior, which is not normally a position the class clown would have. One of the things I loved about McDevitt is that it was a tremendous, multi-ethnic place with Polish, Italian and Irish families. A lot of the kids had a great sense of humor, which is not uncommon when you come from immigrant homes. I always said there were probably 20 or 30 guys at McDevitt who were far funnier than I am, but they chose not to go into the field that I did.

You studied for the priesthood for a couple of years, didn't you?

Right after high school, I went to a seminary in Indiana. It was a very creative place for me because I was the sports editor for the newspaper. We didn't have teams that played other schools, we had intramurals, so we turned the sports page into a comedy page. I was always accusing people of fixing games, and we'd have investigations. One time we announced that the school was building a \$75 million stadium, and we had a name-the-stadium contest. It was fun.

What made you decide not to enter the priesthood?

With any vocation, you often question, "Is this what I should do?" And I guess God had other plans for me, so I continued my religious education at Penn State [laughs]. I majored in general arts and sciences, which I called "pre-nothing." I was in a fraternity, and we did a lot of sketches for mixers or for Spring Week, so I was always doing things like that.

What did you want to do when you graduated from college?

I loved comedy shows when I was growing up. I always wanted to be in front of the cameras. I just couldn't figure out, being from Harrisburg, how I was going to end up in New York or L.A. But after college, I went to New York, and I got involved in theatre and worked for a TV producer named Joe Cates who was looking for a production assistant – a gofer. He did a lot of variety shows, some country music shows. And eventually I got to see how the writers worked. And I said, "Ya know, maybe I could do this."

What did your family think about your decision to get into show business?

Once it started happening for me, they were thrilled. They were very excited and proud. Up to that point, they said, "Didn't you go to college? What happened to that?" It's kind of hard to explain to people.

What were your early years like in Hollywood? Were you a starving artist?

I was fortunate because I was at least making a living. I never had to take a different job like waiting tables. I was always somehow able to get a script sold, or a residual would come in. Sometimes it was close, but I was always lucky.

What's the legacy of "The Cosby Show"? Was it really as groundbreaking as people say it was?

It was groundbreaking for a couple of reasons. One, it came along in 1984 when

everyone was saying the sitcom was dead. How could a black family, which represented only a portion of the population, become this gigantic hit that people of every race and nationality would fall in love with? Also, Bill said, "This is going to be a show where the parents are smarter than the children. They love their children and they'll be given every opportunity, but things will be expected in return." And for the next eight years, he was at his creative peak. He had done all the earlier material about childhood, about parenthood, he had raised his kids, he had a wealth of knowledge, and he was able to do all of the physical things that were required of a comedy show, so I was writing for a master of comedy. I considered myself one of the luckiest people on the planet.

What would you say is your biggest professional success?

Without question, "Home Improvement," because I helped create it. Tim Allen wanted to incorporate the persona from his comedy act into the show. So, we spent a year with him, developing the show, going to Detroit, watching his dynamic with his wife, getting to know more about him. We really did our homework. Normally, when you write a sitcom script, you allow for about two minutes of laughs. Well, the pilot for "Home Improvement" had a nine-minute laugh-spread. I mean, every single line worked. Another amazing thing was that before we ever went on the air, the people who came to the tapings were laughing as if they had known these characters all their lives. We were a hit show from the first week on. It was truly humbling.

What does it take to be a good comedy writer?

I think it takes good life experience. You can't be too self-important. You have to be a little off-center and see the world differently. You need to think in terms of, "What does somebody really do in this situation?" And then, "How can we make that funny?" rather than, "Let me think of something funny and then I'll make that person do it." Because good comedy comes out of a certain emotion. The more real and more identifiable the comedy is, the funnier the audience will find it.



As someone who's been in the television industry for a long time, what's your take on reality TV?

They may wax and wane in popularity, but reality shows are not leaving. The reason they're on, of course, is they're very inexpensive to produce. You don't need writers, you don't need actors. But the problem with reality shows is that they don't repeat very well. Half-hour comedies are a gold mine for a studio because they repeat and repeat. We're now in the third run of syndication for "Home Improvement" – the third sale of it – and I think Disney will be able to sell it forever. It may dwindle in value, but it's not going to go away. You can't sell "Survivor" forever because once people have seen it, how much do they want to see it again? So, with reality TV, you've got to do more and more spectacular things. That's what the Romans learned: Pretty soon the lions are going to have to eat people to keep everyone entertained.

Do you believe that the sitcom is in trouble as a TV genre?

Today, the networks go to a comedy club to see a guy who's got five minutes of material, and they build a sitcom around him. Where are the people who've had lots and lots of comedy experience? Plus, because of reality TV, you're not schooling a whole new generation of writers. I worked for eight years on shows that weren't particularly successful, just to learn my craft and get the chance to work on "The Cosby Show."

What's fun about working in Hollywood, and what's weird about it?

It's fun as a writer because you're not the celebrity. You get to be at the center of everything, yet you don't have the spotlight on you. It's an exciting world. The weird thing is that when you're on a successful show, people treat you like the King of England, and you can get a very false sense of yourself. And you're brought down to reality very quickly if you fail. It's a very intense, competitive place, and there's a big brass ring there if you can get it, but there are a lot of people who have fallen off the merry-go-round. I've been lucky because most of the people I've worked with have been fairly normal, decent people.

What's your favorite personal anecdote about show business?

I went to the Golden Globes one year, and when I drove up, out stepped Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson from the limousine in front of mine. And as they went up the red carpet, 200 photographers were taking their pictures. And then I came up behind them, and I remember thinking, "Wow, this is a long way from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania." Then one of the photographers turned to me and said, "Background! Out of the way, please!" It put it all in perspective. **HBG**

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