

THE VIEW FROM HERE

Filmography

The Twisted Tales of Felix the Cat
(animation)

*The Rudy Show or
Blah, Blah, Blah*

Rocko's Modern Life
(animation, CableAce Nominee)

Sim City on CD-ROM
(interactive)

London Underground
(comedy/variety, CableAce Award)

*David Steinberg's Biased and
Insensitive Review of the Year*

Stop with the Kicking!
Kevin Pollak in Concert

Get That Puss Of Your Face:
Kevin Meaney in Concert

Hard Rock's Save the Planet Special

Comic Strip Live

Monsters
"The Demons"

The Power of Choice
(1989, A.C.T. Award, Outstanding
Educational Series)

*Share the Warmth: Bobcat in
Concert*

(co-written with Bob Goldthwait)

Don't Watch This Show

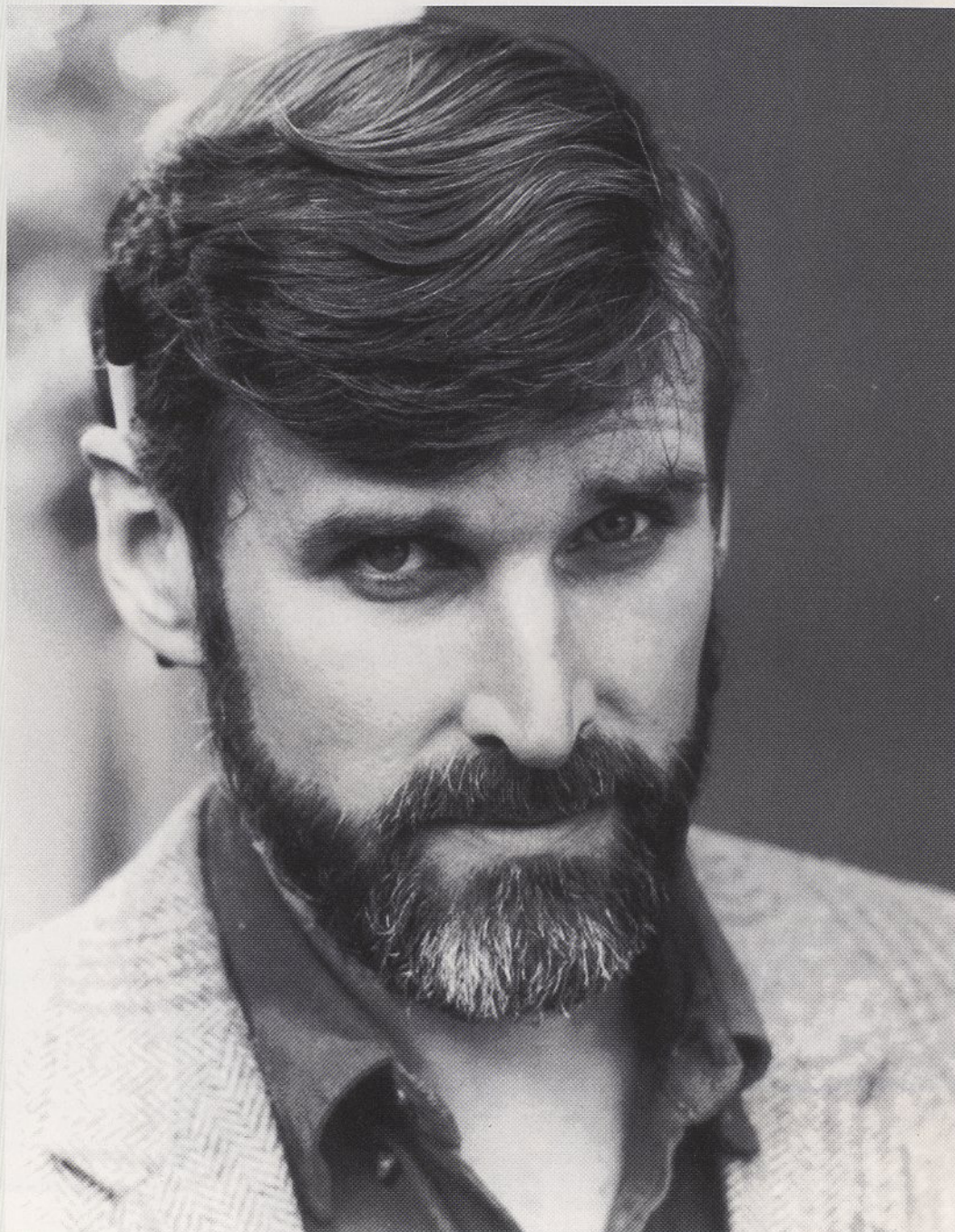


Photo by Monica Piper

A CONVERSATION WITH...

MARTIN OLSON

by Susan Bullington Katz

“**A** journeyman-writer” he calls himself. Which he is. I’d also call him a Renaissance writer. An award-winning juggler of many spinning plates, Martin Olson is one of the people in town whose conversations over pizza tend to focus more on physics than on *Film Comment*. Or the surrealism of *Felix the Cat*, for which he’s just completed 40 stories, or how to teach yourself blues improv on the piano.

On the Sunday before Labor Day, Martin Olson closed down Prego in Beverly Hills while talking about his wife, Kay, who’s a writer and counselor; his two kids; the nature of comedy; and the nature of the universe...

SBK: You were in college studying...

MO: English. I wanted to teach Shakespeare. I ended up at the same time starting the comedy club, so every night I was at the comedy club, working with comedians. This was in 1977, before the big comedy boom.

I used to do music with my music partner—played piano, keyboards and guitars—wrote music, was recording music albums, producing records for guys in Boston in the bands.

Then these two other guys and myself started the first comedy club in Boston, called the Comedy Connection. We didn’t have any comedians at first, so all of us did acts. We put an ad in the paper and who answered the ad but Bob Goldthwait and Steven Wright and Lenny Clarke and Joe Alaskey and Steve Sweeney.

SBK: What did your ad say?

MO: ‘Comedians wanted.’ I was the creative guy at the tryouts, so I would work with the comedians. One guy was at the door, the other guy was organizing the tables, and I was playing the piano.

And I did films, comedy films.

Sometimes I’d be different characters. I always had to hide behind something because I’m not a performer. So sometimes I’d have a wig and sunglasses and a guitar and I’d do some songs—comedy things. And then I’d say, ‘Now I’ll show a movie.’ I had a Super-8 sound thing and I would show the movie...

I did one about a new language for the mute

quadriplegic—because if you’re quadriplegic and you’re mute, you can’t use sign language ‘cause you can’t use your arms and legs. They just were weird. But I got laughs. So that was the major learning—I just learned what was working.

SBK: Were there times you didn’t get laughs?

MO: Yeah. Bombs. Half the time bombs, half the time kills. But the movies always got laughs. Because that was solid, there was no timing involved. It wasn’t a traditional act; it was a writer’s act. I would come out sometimes as a guy with a wig and a suit—Ned Nefertiti.

And Lenny Clarke would be hosting and he says, ‘Look, this guy came in and he says he has the scoop about UFOs or something,’ and I’d be ‘What do you mean, he says?’ I’d be trying to make him laugh, and it was really a blast. And then I’d have proof—I’d have a movie of UFO’s. And it always got really big laughs.

Sometimes I used the other comedians in my little show-within-a-show. I used to pull in Bob Goldthwait, dressed in a Boy Scout uniform, to be my witness. I think he was eighteen.

So I did that same character, and a psychic, making things levitate and stuff...

SBK: So how’d you start writing for these guys?

MO: Way before that, before there were comedy clubs, me and my music partner did comedy tapes. We put sound effects and stuff in and then we sent them around to comedians. We had three or four comedians, including Jay Leno—Jay was working in the strip joints on Route 9—we’d go in and write a bunch of jokes and try to sell ‘em to these guys. And you know, sold some stuff...and that’s why it shifted.

SBK: Shifted?

MO: From the Shakespeare.

SBK: You did short stories and things in high school?

MO: That was all I did. That and music. So I was always in my room.

My parents didn’t encourage it. The piano was right in the middle of the house, so they didn’t encourage me to play. Otherwise they were totally supportive and loving parents. But I was different. I was like pasted into this working-class, blue-collar place. So it

A member of the WGA
Journal’s Editorial
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Katz is a screenwriter
and journalist.

was understandable they'd say, 'Get a job.'

My father's the one who actually got me writing for TV. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have done it. I was writing novels, I was writing plays, Mr. Poet... Poetry I got published, and a couple stories. Some of the short stories I sent out to science fiction magazines and mystery magazines, and got millions of rejection things.

My father sat me down. He said, 'Hey, look. You're writing, I don't understand what this is about, but you should write for TV. You should make money. At least it would be a job-job, you wouldn't be sitting around in your room.' So he said, changing the channels, 'Look at all this! All these shows have to be written. So why don't you just go into town...'

So I wrote a proposal for this monster movie show, and a year later, they called me about the proposal, and we did the show.

It was a UHF station, channel 38 in Boston. So that was fun. All from my dad suggesting it. A housepainter.

SBK: What was your show called?

MO: *Lenny Clarke's Late Show*. Lenny was the big Boston comedian. There was Jay Leno, and there was Lenny Clarke. Lenny was like the Richard Belzer of Boston.

We did a half hour of comedy a week, interspersed between a monster movie. It would be totally mental. If one movie had 50 people killed by monsters, we did it like a sportscast: 'Monsters, 6; Villagers, 0.'

After two years we got thrown off the air, but it was really fun.

SBK: How did *London Underground* come about?

MO: Basically it was the result of me writing for these comedians. [Laughs.] It was a phone call from Kevin Meaney at the last minute: 'Do you want to go to London and write a live show at Piccadilly Circus?' So the next thing I know I'm on a plane and he and I are writing... The show was a stand-up show with Kevin as the host. Meaney and I wrote the whole thing and then we won an Ace award, which was great.

It was live comedy, so it was do or die. My favorite, live comedy. We ran out of ideas the last two shows, and Meaney was saying, 'All right, look. If we can just get two more, 'cause this is great, we'll take a tour of Ireland.' So we just stayed up all night—we were in this flat and were just howling laughing. Right after we taped the last show we hopped on a plane and toured Ireland.

Kevin Meaney's also a great writer. He just does his idiot act, but he's a brilliant guy. Most of the comedians are.

SBK: What to you constitutes brilliance?

MO: Sympathy with all things. In writing or any-

thing, that's generally the rule, as far as I can tell. Even the things you hate, you know? That's the trick with comedy: even things you hate, you have to make it relatable.

With comedy, you posit opposite against opposite. So if you're doing a joke about casual sex, you imagine what formal sex would be like. And so on. Just posit opposites.

Then there are jokes that comment on the structure of a joke. Like what Andy Kaufman did or Steve Martin did, where there's no punch line—although they mixed in the other things—but they comment on the structure of a joke. That's why Kevin Meaney's super, because he does them both at the same time. He would do bad jokes on purpose and sell them to the hilt, like a Fuller Brush man, and it would be so funny because one, it's a joke, so it's funny on its own level, and second, you know it's a bad joke, so he's doing a parody of a comedy act, and with such gusto and glee that you just come out loving it, and howling and laughing.

Look at Steve Wright's jokes. His joke structure is very conventional, and that's a quote from Steve. But his juxtaposition is totally weird. It's Woody Allen. The juxtaposition is Woody Allen. You talk about philosophy in a real mundane way. You talk about waking up, and you just switch it—the opposite of what you think. You study Steve's jokes, you get joke writing down.

Joke writing is a profound thing to do, because you could, using hyperbole, argue that it was the same process used in creating the universe. Opposite against opposite. And it is like this big joke, if you think about it. Just this bunch of permutations and juxtapositions. Male/female. Love and hate. It's all joke structure.

That's why Hitler's the funniest. The greatest evil to a loving soul would be the funniest—I mean, it's the saddest, too, of course, and the most unbearable—but also the funniest, because it's unthinkable. It's like the ultimate juxtaposition. That's why Mel Brooks' constant refrain is Hitler, you know?...

SBK: Now, how did *Rocko's Modern Life* fit in here?

MO: Mary Harrington at Nickelodeon hired me. She read some scripts I'd written or saw something I'd done. She brought me in because Nickelodeon was hiring live-action writers, comedy writers, not animation writers. It opened up a whole world because all the directors, each one of them is their own universe. They all have their own projects and their own feature ideas and series ideas, and it's exactly like the comedy world.

As you know, there were no scripts there, so it was a true mind meld with the directors. Since there's

The following is an actual page of script taken from *Veronica's Daughter*, a script Olson wrote for special effects maven Phil Tippett.

ASH
Veronica!

100

The flesh swallows Miranda. Sinking deeper into the folds of gore, his eyes wide, his face stained with tears, sobbing --

ASH
Veronica! VERONICA!

Ash shrieks as the grotesque mountain of flesh that is his wife crushes and engulfs his body. His metastasizing arm is sucked in last of all, expanding grotesquely as it slowly sinks into the sea of protoplasm.

ANGLE ON JACK IN THE GULLY watching in horror from 500 feet away.

JACK'S POV - THE CATACLYSM OF FLESH

rips through the foundation of the villa, crumbling it as it expands. Now it shudders and pulsates and distorts to an enormous, unthinkable size in a preposterous orgy of horror.

This ghastly vision peaks as the gigantic mound of meat rises like a monstrous apocalyptic demon in the center of the storm. Raging with a deafening SCREECHING, the Veronica-Creature engulfs the estate, villa and all, slowly pulling it into the earth, disappearing with it beneath a vast whirlpool of sand. The whirlpool stills as the creature disappears into the earth. The few remaining bits of structural debris and plantlife are buried by the violent, rising sandstorm, obliterated as if it had never been.

ANGLE ON JACK

alone watching this fantastic scene in horror. Suddenly, through the blinding sandstorm, he sees a figure approaching him. It's Jimenez's DOG, limping on a sprained leg. The dog sees Jack, limps up to him, whining. Jack grabs the dog and holds him close, protecting him from the blasting storm. A sudden violent gust of sand blows Jack and the dog backwards over the edge of a huge dune. Overpowered, they roll together down into a deep gully. Half buried in the sand, Jack tries to claw his way out, clutching his infected arm, fighting to keep himself and the dog from being buried. A cataract of sand slides over them. The sandstorm howls and rages into the camera, burying and covering Jack and the dog and everything else, as we --

SHOCK CUT TO:

JACK SCREAMING IN QUARANTINE CHAMBER

no scripts, you shake it up, just like you do with comedians...it's really fun.

After *Rocko*, one of the directors asked me to work on *Felix the Cat* with him. It was another show with no scripts. We did the first season—40 stories or something. It was the same thing—I get to work with geniuses, so it's just the greatest job.

In the meantime, I'm doing at least three things at once. I did the CD-ROM, which was a 600-page script, during *Rocko*, and a bunch of spec things.

SBK: How did you end up doing the CD-ROM?

MO: I got the job because I had previously written up spec designs for two software programs, 10 pages each. I'm not a programmer so I just went under the assumption that I don't need to know anything except to write what happens. So I just did that and had pictures from encyclopedias and everything. And it looked really good and it was amusing. They were educational programs about how to teach kids about electrical circuits, AC and DC.

And I used comedy, so I had one hosted by Nikola Tesla, who invented the AC circuit, and the other program hosted by Michael Faraday, who invented the DC motor.

So when I went in to the meeting, I had actually done a lot of thinking about it and I had something in front of me. Plus it was science fiction, and I had written a lot of science fiction scripts. I had, like, four science fiction features I'd written, plus half-hours.

You know what I used to do? I used to get work by taking short stories, 'cause I don't watch TV that much... I would take short stories and adapt them to half-hour and hour formats. So I've got a number of those. And so that I didn't feel foolish, like I was wasting my time and just writing for nothing, I made up a format for an anthology show called *Untouched by Human Hands*, based on Bob Sheckley's stories, which he gave me the rights to. And I sold one of his short stories to the TV show *Monsters*.

SBK: Who'd you do the CD-ROM for?

MO: The CD-ROM was for Interplay. It's supposed to come out in a year; it's called *Netrunner*. Live action with pretty wild visual things.

The other thing about the spec scripts and stuff...I had worked with Ron Shusett, who wrote *Alien* and *Total Recall*, and Ron and I wrote a bunch of film treatments together. We pitched to all the studios a 20-page treatment of this novel called *Manhattan Transfer* [by John Stith], which is really a cool story.

This production company had bought the rights, and I had met with them. It's such a huge budget thing, so I brought it to Ron... In other words, I needed Ron to go with me because he already had the

track record for that stuff. Then Ron agreed, and I knew I was in business. We wrote up the thing and it went really well and we went to all the studios with it. And they loved it and wanted to see a script. So we're waiting for them to pay us.

Since then I've been working on *The Rudy Show* or *Blab, Blab, Blab*. It's a special effects show with the same format as the old *Jack Benny Show*. Created by Doug Lawrence, one of the directors I met at *Rocko*. He showed me his drawings and ideas for it, and I suggested a little different way of doing it. I'd worked with David Steinberg on two specials, so I brought Steinberg the idea and he loved it, and the three of us went to USA and we made a deal.

So I'm supervising producer on that and head writer. It's just a pilot, though—you never know if it'll get picked up.

It's pretty crazy. It's six-foot special effects puppets. It's like Jack Benny surrounded by idiots, and they all have their own self-interests. The show opens with him coming out of the hospital after a nervous breakdown, being forced to do the show in order to keep everyone working. So the comic conceit is him having not to crack up and be able to finish the show.

SBK: How in the world do you balance all this in your daily life?

MO: Well, there isn't much balance. You know, I'm a writer, so I'm in my room constantly writing. One guy typing. So, balance? No. Zero balance! [Laughs.] I have to be Daddy, you know.

I used to write all night with Bach on, and now I write in the mornings with Rota on. Rota's the guy who scored all of Fellini's movies. For some reason that does it for me now.

SBK: What was the demarcation line?

MO: Being Daddy and having to switch the time. Rota is much more morning for me and Bach helped me stay up all night. To keep the mathematics in the air, you know?

I like the Rota thing in the morning because it starts the day off with surrealism.

And I guess in terms of the way I operate personally for writing is that I just will write the first draft out really fast and get into the fun of it and allow myself to be lousy. Then I have a framework in my hand. It's funny because every day it's a constant battle of mind games with yourself.

Luckily with being a comedy writer it's amusing, because it's funny observing my own psychology. And the only gauge is how many pages are done at the end of the day.

But the key to my writing success at home is I have double locks on my office door. ☞