

Old School

Irving Brecher is the last of a generation's gagmen.

Written by Ben Schwartz



Carole Lombard, Mervyn LeRoy, and Irving Brecher on the set of *Fools for Scandal* in 1938 (above); Brecher with Groucho Marx on the set of *At the Circus* (opposite right); with Milton Berle at the *Friar's Club* (page 40).

In March 1933, 19-year-old Irving Brecher worked at his cousin Leo's movie theater, Manhattan's Little Carnegie Playhouse, adjacent to Carnegie Hall and the Russian Tea Room on West 57th Street. It specialized in foreign films, and Brecher was the doorman, usher, program writer, ticket puncher, press agent (he mailed out fliers), and anything else his cousin Leo asked. The kid was just happy to have a job during the misery of the Great Depression.

A regular, *Variety's* foreign film critic Wolfe Kaufman, stopped in one day and offered Brecher some unsolicited career advice. A classic "mugg," as *Variety* dubbed its hard-drinking, cynical staffers of the day, Kaufman knew Brecher from the Little Carnegie. He also knew that Walter Winchell had published some of Brecher's one-liners in his gossip column. Brecher loved seeing his name in the paper. In 1933, a mention from Winchell, the most popular and powerful columnist in the country, meant that America knew your name. Forget America—to Brecher it meant every kid back in his Yonkers neighborhood knew it.

"Kaufman came in because we had a new picture to start," says Brecher today from his apartment in Los Angeles. At 92, his eyes are failing and he's hard of hearing, but he retains a clear memory: "Kaufman said, 'I heard some of your gags last night at Loew's State.' I said, 'What are you talking about?' He said, 'A couple of the lines that I saw that you had in Winchell's column. Bob Hope used them at Loew's State.' 'Isn't that nice?' I said, 'Did they laugh?' He said, 'They laughed really loud.' I said, 'That's wonderful.' He said, 'You're a schmuck. People get paid for that. There's a market for material. Why don't you take an ad in *Variety* and advertise that you got something to sell?' And that," says Brecher, "is where I began to learn a little about show business."

There's nothing quite like a professional critic taking you down from Yonkers big shot to Manhattan schmuck in 10 seconds. Naturally, it got Brecher thinking about that ad. That serious money could be made writing jokes was still a relatively new concept to people outside the business like Brecher. Not 10 years before, you

might make \$5 selling a joke to a vaudeville act or humor magazine. By 1932, when a joke writer earned \$75,000 in one year, it made the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker*.

Writing comedy for plays, sketches, movies, or magazines was

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nothing new. Writing jokes was nothing new. But by the 1920s, comedy was changing, and the demand for jokes grew so rapidly that writers who could provide them in bulk were needed. They were called gagmen, and today, Irving Brecher remains the last of that first generation. How that shift happened, and why it happened, led to Brecher’s decades-long career in radio, film, and TV, but also the single-most radical shift in comedy writing in the 20th century.

The Gagman Cometh

The term *gagman* first appeared in the '10s on silent film lots like Mack Sennett’s. A gagman was any crewmember who wanted to move up in the company by throwing out funny ideas on the set to the cast or director. Sennett shot from tight seven- or eight-page plots that only indicated *biz* (for *business*) where Sennett expected actors to ad-lib the funny while shooting. Technically, gagmen weren’t writers. They helped execute slapstick on-set in hopes of moving up to directing. Chuck Reisner, known in town as “the original gagman,” was the model. He began as a gagman for Chaplin, moved up to assistant director, and then onto directing himself. Frank Capra, Leo McCarey, and Eddie Cline all started this way.

Sennett comedy was typical of the New Humor, as critic and humorist Carolyn Wells labeled it in 1910. It was distinctly different from 19th-century Victorian comedy and distinctly American. There was no sense of realism, in that Sennett’s jokes were not incorporated sensibly into plot or character, but done if funny enough and only if. Sennett had no interest in morality lessons or “thoughtful laughter,” as psychologist James Sully called it in 1902—humor hoping to improve society by educating us to our comical faults. Sennett thought cops who couldn’t catch crooks and fat people falling down were funny and did not care much if real cops caught crooks or anyone lost weight. Movie shorts, comic strips, humor columns, and joke magazines like *Judge* and *Life* packed in as many gags as possible for the sole purpose



of packing in as many laughs as possible. As Brett Page wrote of modern sketches and shorts like Sennett’s in his 1913 book *How to Write for Vaudeville*, “Merely a thread of plot holds them together, and on it is strung the elemental humor of the comedy bits.”

Naturally, the traditionalists objected. “Too often comedy is classed with rough-and-tumble play [of movies],” wrote Henrietta Crosman, a star of Broadway drawing room comedy in 1916, “which in its essential sense is hardly real humor. To make them laugh, you have to make them cry—the difference between heart and art is but one letter.”

“America has not been prolific of writers of comedy,” wrote husband-and-wife playwrights Frederic and Fanny Hatton in 1917. “Perhaps it is because our much advertised sense of humor is, after all, merely a sense of farce. That we have a sense of humor as the French and Irish have, or for that matter the English have, is much to be doubted. Our humorous tradition is farcical, a tradition that several thousand newspapers nail down a little harder each day with their so-called ‘funny’ pages.”

Up to that point, neither vaudeville, movies, nor Broadway had use for career joke writers. What made the profession possible was Chaplin’s *The Kid* (1921). Keaton and Arbuckle tried traditional feature comedies in 1920, forgoing their slapstick characters and gags for light Victorian humor. Rather than drop his Tramp for someone else’s idea of art, Chaplin shot a comedy feature matching the pace of laughs in his two-reelers. It was a breakthrough hit, and Harold Lloyd’s *Safety Last* (1923) and Keaton’s *Three Ages* (1923) soon followed as major hits. Studios saw audiences flocking to the joke-driven “new” comedies and began hiring gag men to punch up existing features for the new era.

“Laughs are no longer in their infancy,” Katherine Lipke wrote in a November 1925 trend feature for the *Los Angeles Times*. “They are increasing in importance, and the men who create them are increasing in importance and in financial status

also.” Citing \$1,000 weekly salaries for the part-time gag men from the comedy lots, Lipke wrote that for the first time gag man was a career in and of itself for each phase of production. They inserted bits into developing scripts, worked on set, and wrote jokes for title cards. That year, the *New York Times* ran a similar piece on studio gag men and one on stage producers hiring gag writers to punch up their shows to compete with movies. The *Times* drama editor, playwright George Kaufman, hired one himself, Morrie Ryskind, for Kaufman’s first Marx Brothers show, *The Cocoanuts* (1925).



Besides Ryskind, playwright Dorothy Donnelly, actress Florence Moore, Jack Benny’s writer Al Boasberg (the first to strip a vaudeville monologue to nothing but non sequitur jokes in 1924), Paul Gerard Smith, and sports writer Arthur “Bugs” Baer were seen as specialists who created big laughs that saved shows. Treated like surgeons, and paid like them, they could work in movies, cartoons, revues, or vaudeville.

“Although it has escaped the analytical eyes of the Department of Commerce and the labor unions, a new industry has been created in America. It is known as *gagmaking*,” sniped Bella Cohen in a 1927 *New York Times* think-piece. She blamed the mass media for forcing out the mellower character-driven humor of Twain for cheap one-liners like Groucho’s. She compared new comedy to Detroit assembly lines. “With this difference,” she wrote, “old cars are scrapped. Gags are never scrapped.” Cohen dismissed the new writers as hacks: “Those who leaped into the breach were not necessarily humorists. They merely knew the tricks of the trade. They were laugh mechanics.”

A radical change in comedy writing was under way, one *Theatre* magazine’s slightly more optimistic critic Howard Barnes saw as “a state of transition.” He saw a fusion of high

and low comedy, one in which clowns like the Marx Brothers or Chaplin starred in full-length comedies yet allowed elegant “high-comedy” playwrights like Philip Barry to write a jokier, early screwball piece like *Holiday*. “Somewhere between high and low comedy, witty eloquence, and slapstick burlesque, a national form of light drama is being evolved, thoroughly distinctive and owing no allegiance to foreign lands,” wrote Barnes. “The wisecracks and broad jests of the musical stage have been taken over by our comic writers.”

“There’s too much laughter, and burlesque, and gagging about Hollywood,” Russian director Sergei Eisenstein told *Variety* in 1932, who fought to preserve the grim tone of Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*. “It is to laugh, people say. It should be the reverse; it is to weep.”

By 1930, sound movies and a new mass media, radio, were huge markets for the gag men. Paramount alone had the Marxes, W.C. Fields, Mae West, Joe E. Brown, and a slew of two-reel comics on the lot, all hiring gag writers. In 1932, Russian director Sergei Eisenstein, at Paramount to make Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*, was fed up. His fight to preserve Dreiser’s utterly grim tone, which he felt the only true way to view America, had no chance at the joke factory. He told *Variety*: “There’s too much laughter, and burlesquing, and gagging about Hollywood. It is to laugh, people say. It should be the reverse; it is to weep. Because the most important cultural and art center of the world is being gagged to death. The word *gag* goes for both its meanings.”

The irony of Eisenstein’s situation was that the lot’s other Marxists, Groucho, his brothers, and their left-leaning producer Herman Mankiewicz, were developing *Duck Soup* (1933), their joke-centric masterpiece and the best Hollywood film yet made on out-of-control capitalism [until perhaps Mankiewicz’ *Citizen Kane* (1941)]. But Eisenstein was not alone. The audience was with him. *Duck Soup* was the peak of gag comedy. Creatively brilliant and financially a bust, the film cost the Marxes their Paramount deal in November 1933.

The Gagman Goeth

This then was the “market for material” Wolfe Kaufman mentioned to Irving Brecher outside the Little Carnegie in March 1933. Brecher decided to take out that ad and seek writing work. He teamed up with a writer friend, Al Schwartz (older brother of Sherwood Schwartz), a law student who wrote jokes for columnists. “I knew from the papers that Milton Berle was known as a thief of other people’s material,” says Brecher. “So I wrote, ‘For Sale—Positively Berle-Proof Gags!’

And I put in the phone number of the theater with both our names on it. The following Tuesday when *Variety* came out, I looked to see if my ad was in there. It was, and I was kind of excited to see my name in print.”

Variety's wiseguy editors were excited too. They were planning an unflattering story on Berle when Brecher took the ad. Berle was up for a radio job and was not the first choice, competing with Lou Holtz and Bert Lahr (who loathed Berle's joke thievery). Knowing Berle had just come off an on-stage altercation with Bob Hope and comic Richy Craig over stealing, and that the sponsor of the show considering Berle was sure to see it, on March 14, 1933, *Variety* placed Brecher's ad directly below their story.

Not that Brecher knew any of that. “The phone rang, and I picked it up and said, ‘Little Carnegie Playhouse.’ And a man said, ‘This is Milton Berle.’ I thought it was a friend of mine, so I hung up. The phone rang again and he said, ‘No son of a bitch hangs up on Milton Berle.’ Then I started to shake. ‘If you think you're so smart, bring some stuff over to the Capitol Theater tonight at 11.’ I called Al Schwartz and said, ‘If you can think of some one-liners, phone me and I'll type them in.’”

Brecher bought the New York papers and started riffing. Schwartz called back, and they put some pages together. At the time, New York's mayor, Jimmy Walker, was under investigation by a morals committee. Walker had said publicly, “I'll match my private life against any man's.” When it was revealed he had a showgirl mistress, Brecher wrote that Walker was revising his statement to, “I'll match my private wife against any man's.”

Backstage at the Capitol, Berle greeted Brecher in his dressing room completely nude. “Quite a sight,” says Brecher, “which later became famous, but I won't go into that. I gave him the stuff, shaking, nervous, and a few minutes later he said, ‘Some of it is pretty good. Go over to the Park Central Hotel and see my agent, Charlie Morrison, and he'll give you a check.’ I ran all the way.”

Brecher collected \$50, triple his usher's salary, to split with Schwartz. He was sent back to Berle, who told him they were going to work all night. Berle preferred working with Brecher alone rather than Schwartz, who was already savvy to selling jokes. They ate at the Edison Hotel and worked in Berle's rooms where he showed Brecher how to shape his random gags into a monologue.

“I had never been away from home all night,” says Brecher. “The following morning when he left, he told me to be at the theater at 11. When I saw the first show, he was remarkable. No one was funnier than Berle in vaudeville. Not Hope—no one. He got big laughs. Rolling laughs. Also, I had a thrill because some of the lines I had given him got tremendous laughs. And I thought, *My future is gonna be gigantic. I'm going to make a fortune of money.*”

If Wolfe Kaufman was Brecher's first lesson in show business, Berle was his second. A more experienced gag writer would have told Berle upfront he had to pay a fee every time he used the

material. “What happened was I assumed that Berle would need me every week and that I would get \$50. Well, I went and quit my job. And we started to starve because he moved around from theater to theater using the same stuff. Occasionally, I would get to him and say I got a couple of lines here. If he liked 'em, he gave me \$5 or \$10. So naturally I had to scramble. Occasionally, I ran into a vaudevillian in front of Lindy's [delicatessen], where I would lurk, looking for customers. I would manage to sell \$10 worth of something. It was really very tough.”

Eventually, Berle put Brecher on a miserly \$15 a week, less than his usher's salary, to wire Berle topical jokes while he toured. Brecher could take some cold solace in that the biggest names in the field were treated the same or worse. By 1935, Benny fired gagman Harry Conn for demanding credit on a show Conn created. In December 1936, David Freedman's backstage war over payment with Eddie Cantor brewed into an epic lawsuit. It came to a tragic end when Freedman suffered a heart attack and died in the courtroom.

The Great Depression

If *Duck Soup's* failure showed that the audience's appetite for jokes was not as bottomless as once thought, the number of comics struggling on radio made it clear. An early goldmine for gagmen, they now saw Joe Penner, Cantor, Frank Fay, and Ed Wynn come and go. The one who stayed, with Conn's invention, the situation comedy, was Jack Benny. Benny had been the first “wise-cracking” comic, and now he gave it up, sensing audience burnout. “Radio writing has reached a new crossroad,” opined the *Los Angeles Times's* Carrol Nye in December 1935. “One sign post reads ‘Satire Street’ and the other, ‘Obvious Avenue.’” Nye argued that stand-alone jokes were over, and the ratings bore him out. Joke-driven shows were fading. It was a lesson Brecher saw played out firsthand in 1936.

“Still mad at me, bubbelah?” It was Berle on the phone. “I'm not mad at you, Milton,” Brecher said, although he was wary. “What's on your mind?” He said, “I was supposed to do an audition show in Boston for Gillette Razor. David Freedman was supposed to write it. And you know what happened.’ I said, ‘Yes, that's a shame.’ He said, ‘I would like you to do it.’ There was a pause, and I said, ‘Yeah? Do I get paid?’ He said, ‘You get paid. How's \$250?’ Well, that was big money in 1936. I said, ‘All right.’”

It was a Thursday. The first show was Sunday. They quickly wrote a pilot for *The Gillette Community Sing-Along*. Berle hosted, bantered with his regulars, the Happiness Boys, singer Eileen Barton, and comedians Bert “the Mad Russian” Gordon and Judge Hugo Straight. Each week, audiences joined in for live sing-alongs. Berle lasted the 1936-'37 season, but it demonstrated two things: Berle was not a natural on radio and Brecher was.

While in Los Angeles for some broadcasts, Brecher's agent got him a meeting with producer Edward Small, who needed a script doctor. Brecher explained that he wrote the show all day and had no time. Small said, “You're young; you can do

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"Speed of Sound," cont. from page 49

(UCTV) to bring the university's content online.

Chane, who calls Google the "greatest lead generation system," believes that if there is a relevant video, Google will deliver it, as it does images and web pages.

"More and more users are spending their time online: More and more users have broadband connections," Chane says. "And content creators are embracing online distribution rather than resisting it. A number of things are coming

"Old School," cont. from page 41

it." That May and June, Brecher wrote the show days and punched up the movie nights, when he got a call from Jack Benny. Al Boasberg died that June of a heart attack while working on his show. Brecher was brought in to replace him and "spike" scripts for Benny's 1937-'38 season, but he soon found that gag writing had taken an unpleasant new turn. Benny's two writers, Ed Beloin and Bill Morrow, froze Brecher out at story meetings.

Brecher could see that gag writing was another kind of business now. That year, Pepsodent asked Bob Hope to star in a sitcom. He refused, laying out instead a groundbreaking show. Knowing his strength was jokes, Hope's format built in simple stages from a) his solo monologue, to b) bits with show regulars, to c) a guest star scripted/ad-lib interview, to d) a musical-sketch finale. Hope had hit upon a simple formula that had eluded all the rest, and it remains the blueprint for *The Daily Show* or Chris Rock's HBO show, and, if you add more guests, *Tonight* and *Letterman*. Hope hired a record eight writers (up to 13 by mid-season) to make sure the volume of jokes he demanded (triple anyone else) did not mean a loss in quality, and he pitted a brilliant team of gagmen against each other that included Mel Shavelson, Milt Josefsberg, Norman Panama, Jack Douglas, and brothers Al and Sherwood Schwartz.

Through Hope, the modern writers' room took shape. Groups of gagmen

together, making the user experience and the diversity of content better."

When 16-year-old Alex Ostrovsky downloaded Coldplay's "Speed of Sound," the one-billionth song sold through iTunes, he ushered in a milestone for digital music. Google and AOL prove video isn't far behind. **WB**

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were now hired to compete against each other to get material on a show, and the competitive writers' room was born. Brecher's era, of gagman as solo specialist, was over.

Fortunately, for Brecher, he could quit Benny for other offers. "My agent asked me to meet with Mervyn LeRoy, who said he loved the Berle show. He was at Warners, and we walked into a long room and at the far end I saw a small nice-looking man. Behind him, on the wall, was a large picture that I recognized to be Irving Thalberg, who'd recently died. Mervyn took a look at me, he was talking to his wife, and he said to her, 'You won't believe this: A young man named Irving Brecher just came into the office who looks exactly like Irving Thalberg.'"

In one of the easiest meetings of Brecher's life, LeRoy signed him as his in-house gagman, starting with Carole Lombard's *Fools for Scandal* (1938). Brecher quickly moved to fully scripting films like the Marx brothers' *At the Circus* (1939), his Oscar-nominated work on *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), and creating the long-running radio and television show *The Life of Riley*.

Today, Brecher trades flirty e-mail with Maureen Dowd, works on his autobiography *Go for the Jocular* with journalist Hank Rosenberg, and performs stand-up several times a year at the Oasis Seniors Home. For targets, he's moved on from Jimmy Walker to George W. Bush. "I just heard George Bush has taken a record 300 vacation days as president—not enough!" **WB**



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