

A half-hour ahead of our time

CODCO comedy crawls ashore

BY RON MACDONALD



Mary Walsh, Greg Malone, Cathy Jones, Tommy Sexton and Andy Jones offer room service with a twist

PHOTO: ALBERT LEE

On Thursday October 13, 1988 a new era in Canadian television comedy got underway with the broadcast of the first program in the *CODCO* television series. With that series, one-hour comedy specials and the added ballast of the best British shows, like the scabrously funny puppet satire *Spittin' Image*, it seems as if the CBC is intent on building an audience for non-American comedy. While this does not constitute a radical step in itself, it is useful to remember that earlier attempts (like the *Frantic's Four on the Floor* or the old standby, *Wayne and Shuster*) were plagued by ever-shuffled time slots and inconsistent production. And that's not to mention the pale imitations of American sitcoms often featuring American stars in the twilight of their careers.

With the looming prospect of free trade providing the scariest of worst case scenarios - Flip Wilson, Carrol O'Connor and Valerie Harper all streaming north to perpetrate cheap Canadian versions of their former sitcom glories - it is reassuring to know that the Mother Network is moving in the right direction. In fact, the dear old CBC has been on something of a winning streak with some of its movie presentations like *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Squamish Five* and *Cowboys Don't Cry*; a successful comedy series, however, seemed elusive.

Off the edge of the map

Enter, then, the obvious: from our 10th province, off the edge of the map, a collective comedy troupe that has no clear leader, has film and television experience galore, and most

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importantly, is funny like you've never seen or heard before. Mary Walsh, Andy Jones, Cathy Jones, Tommy Sexton and Greg Malone make up *CODCO*, a group that has been together since 1972. They specialized in current issues, often Newfoundland-specific, yet they managed to tour the country attracting sellout crowds that must have been comprised of more than just homesick Newfoundlanders.

CODCO's new series, co-produced by Halifax's Salter Street Films (*Seige*, *Def-Con 4*, *A Switch in Time* and the forthcoming *George's Island*), uses sketch comedy, the speed-of-light narrative and outright visual gags treated so that they touch universal concerns. Theirs, however, is not so much a Canadian as a Newfoundland

vision tempered and tested by years of theatrical techniques and vitally informed by an awareness of place.

Everywhere is far from Newfoundland. Montreal, Toronto, New York, London, Vancouver. Even Halifax seems as far away as any other place. The world is equidistant to Newfoundland. And *CODCO's* comedy is equidistant to the world, a gaze from a culture that is off the map, totally marginalized by the tyranny of distance.

Marginalized cultures, however, are often the most vital. Didn't one of McLuhan's truisms concern the increasing importance of the margins of culture as the centre collapses? I think it might be safe to say that Newfoundland

hasn't played a central role in Canadian culture since it joined Confederation in 1949. And yet Newfoundland has a strong, self-sufficient culture based on oral traditions, only recently diluted by American cable TV (brought in, rather bizarrely, from that citadel of collapsed centres of culture, Detroit, U.S.A.).

"Newfoundland can sit back and look at Canada and look at the United States and look at Britain because it's at the bottom of the pecking order so it has nothing to lose," says Tommy Sexton. "You've been the 'stupid Newfie' for so long they can't tear a strip off you; there's nothing left."

There is a worry how people back home will respond to exporting *CODCO's* strong comedy. Mary Walsh notes that "Newfoundland is like one big family and what we do comes from our everyday associations. It gets tough though when we take it out of the province. It upsets the home people because it's O.K. to send ourselves up in front of our own, but it's questionable to expose all our Newfoundland quirks to the rest of the country. Newfoundlanders are a bit afraid that the rest of Canada won't take it the right way."

Please don't let me be misunderstood

The possibility that the rest of Canada, indeed the world, is not ready for *CODCO* is a real worry as evidenced by the reception of the feature, *The Adventures of Faustus Bidgood*. The film was scripted by and starred Andy Jones and it featured many of the troupe in various guises. The only epic comedy ever produced in English Canada, *Faustus* fought against many drawbacks, including the fact that it took 10 years to make. The intricate structure of the film,

studded with Byzantine plot twists, vulgar episodes and sharp political satire, put many central Canadians off.

Producer Michael Donovan, however, thinks that "CODCO actually works better on TV than on stage or film. The small screen seems to like their rapid changes and frenzied characterizations." Television would seem to be a natural for sketch comedy. After seeing CODCO you start to wonder what went wrong with the Americans. How could they reduce all their comedy to standup or sitcom? Of course, it's easier to market the commodity of personality than a collective. Once a personality is accepted as "funny", he or she can be placed in various domestic situations that are identifiably common to all of us. The result is the *Cosby Show*, which is as close to a Stalinist cult of personality as America will ever get.

Codco's real forte is the ensemble expose like "Wake of the Week" or the "Jim and Tammy/Reverend Swerdlow" episode. Usually, these are fractured narratives that are running gags through one or two programs. In both sketches the five members of the troupe take several parts, often the opposite gender role, and always disappear into their characters as opposed to expressing the dominant characteristics of their personalities.

Collective expression is of supreme importance to CODCO. As Mary Walsh says, "We are very aware that this is a group of five people and that each gets his or her say. As the material is written we have to balance that out." Sometimes problems arose when dealing with the broader interactions of television.

"We had a line editor early on," Walsh recalls, "and he said we couldn't do it that way, that you couldn't do that on television and that this was a case of 'wanna do or gotta do'. I got very upset and so did everyone else. We thought it was the end because that's not the way we were used to doing things."

The line producer was soon disposed of and the troupe carried on with its collective writing and editing procedures. Andy Jones likened it to the process of conception. "You start with lots and lots of ideas, and you winnow it down to the best ones, and then to the achievable ones, and then the producer and the director knock a few more out, and finally one little sperm gets through to the egg. Of course, once you're on the set you start to improvise again." Donovan speaks of CODCO "going through hundreds of ideas. They never seem to stop; they continually come up with fresh ones as they dispose of the old."

Many of CODCO's theatrical ideas did not come across on the small screen. The first series seemed to have left more on the cutting room floor than in the can. The newer series has reversed the process. Andy Jones even mentions that he'd like to stage some of the TV material at the LSPU Hall in St. John's where he and Walsh are heavily involved in all sorts of



Dolly Parton (Cathy Jones) with hayseed cousin Lester (Mary Walsh) in a CODCO sketch



Henry Kissinger (Greg Malone) talking to Barbara Walters (Tommy Sexton) in Salter St. Films CODCO television

theatrical offerings. In fact, the theatre in St John's, says Sexton, "is the liveliest in the country. There's several new companies springing up, most of them young, and in 10 years they'll be the new wave and we'll be, God help us, the Old Guard."

Getting better all the time

Although the ratings for the first shows have been very high, critical reaction has been mixed. Many people seem to be aware of the program but are not ready to pronounce judgement. Frankly, until CODCO receives some international acclaim, Canadians may not know what to make of the show. Donovan thinks CODCO "gets better as you watch it. I had a friend staying with us who watched all the programs five times. He said some of the sketches only reach their full effect after three viewings. CODCO is very rich for television and it may take viewers a couple of times to get used to it." This is not to say that there is any lack of straight sight gags. The "rectal dentistry" sequence takes a hilarious verbal idea and visualizes it, making physical the absurd and the vulgar.

In much of what CODCO does there is a keen and gleeful manipulation of television form. The "rectal dentistry" sketch occurs on a TV talk show called "Frank Talk" starring a vacuous host named Frank Arsenpuffin. It's another running joke and "Frank Talk"'s real purpose is to put all those ill-fitting comedic ideas into a

kind of catch-all delivery system. It gets to display all the flotsam of CODCO's overly fertile collective comic mind, the material that does not warrant a fully developed sketch.

The "laugh-cry"

This self-consciousness is taken further in "The Ricardo Huerta Story", a full narrative that runs through one full program. Ostensibly, a satire of both the CBC radio show *Ideas* and CBC TV's *Man Alive*, the sketch becomes a debunking of CODCO's own pretensions. Huerta, who appears to be the Citizen Kane of con men, is a St. John's lad who has inexplicably adopted Spanish accent and ancestry. He is an impresario, failed radio producer and trash filmmaker who hyperbolizes everything. Andy Jones' manic characterization is set off against Greg Malone's authoritative voice-over dripping with false import. The result is doubly funny, managing to debunk the process and pretensions of artistry and to deflate the self-importance of the so-called "objective documentary".

Huerta also has its unexpected moments of twisted poignancy as we see him in one of those rundown St. John's rooming houses run by overly inquisitive couples so beloved by CODCO. It is an infatuation that belies a certain melancholy; it speaks of a culture cooped up in close quarters with no privacy; of a place where every wish, dream or desire is subject to the scrutiny of all.



Andy Jones is out of the bin and into a tutu

Andy Jones calls the melancholy "the laugh-cry. That's where I think we're most successful, where you're laughing through tears. It's hard to go for guffaws, the belly laughs. There are no guffaws in life except in the context of sadness, of reality. The greatest humour is what you overhear on the bus or your Uncle George in the basement with a funny hat on. That's certainly funnier than anything contrived in a studio."

The "laugh-cry" is there in "Friday Night Girls". A hopeless pair of belated teenaged spinsters whine like table saws about their empty social lives. Their situation, however, is heavily rooted in the reality of everyday loneliness. Like the best humour it plays off paths to achieve a rich emotional tapestry of humour and drama.

There is a risk in putting this kind of material on television. The unexpected depth and resonance may not fit in the shallow pool of the small screen. H. L. Mencken's famous dictum that "nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American people" may be the rule. Let's hope CODCO is the exception for television comedy. After all, aren't all intelligent people in North America marginalized? The next step, of course, is to declare that we're all Newfoundlanders. If Newfoundland is equidistant from everywhere, then we must all be in Newfoundland.