

SITCOM

BY LEWIS SHINER

LET ME TELL YOU about a TV show. If you're under thirty-five, it's probably a major part of your life. If you're forty-two, like me, it probably doesn't mean much to you, and you'll find it hard to understand how a simple situation comedy could destroy my marriage and make me doubt my sanity. And you'd never, ever believe the rest of it: that it got Richard Nixon elected president and killed the sixties.

It did, though.

I'm talking about *The Harrigan House*. You know, the one *Time* magazine called "America's favorite TV show." Only I'd never heard of it until last week.

My name is Larry Ryan and I'm a freelance magazine writer. My wife—we're still married, but that's just a matter of time at this point—is named Linda, and she's nine years younger than me. At thirty-three, she's a card-carrying member of the Harrigan Generation.

She sells hosiery at a boutique operation in Highland Mall, some nights until after ten. It was just last week that she came into my study to give me a peck on the cheek and ask me to tape a show for her. "*HarriganMania*," she said. "It's on ABC at eight."

"What mania?"

"Harrigan. You know, the Harrigans?" She let out a quick snatch of song. "*That's life at the Harrigan house.*"

"I have no earthly idea what you're talking about."

"I love it. You sound just like the professor. Except it's 'I haven't the foggiest notion.'"

"What professor?"

"Professor *Harrigan*. Why are you being this way?" She wrote "8:00/ABC/2 hrs" across my notes for the stock car racing piece I was writing and walked out.

TOOK A LUNCH BREAK about two o'clock and turned on MTV while I ate. I came in on a Tabitha Soren interview with a blonde teenager named Denise O'Brien. Under her name on the screen was "Janie Harrigan" in quotes.

"This is too weird," I said, probably out loud. The occasion was a live stage show, off-Broadway, where a bunch of semi-professional actors like O'Brien recreated *Harrigan House* episodes line-for-line on a minimal set. Tabitha flagged down a passing boy in his twenties and asked him, "Do you know who this is?" The boy stared for a second and then yelled, "Janie Harrigan!"

When I went back to work I couldn't concentrate. I admit I've never been a sitcom fan. Maybe they failed to get their hooks into me at an early enough

age, since my father never permitted them in the house. He was full of rules like that, as if the fact that he taught at SMU law school gave him some kind of anointed knowledge of right and wrong for him to crack over my little brother Phil and me like a whip.

Even so, how could I miss something that's this much a part of the cultural *gestalt*? I'm in the entertainment business, I do profiles of musicians, actors, athletes. It didn't make sense.

It's hard to sit and stare at a computer screen when your mind is not on your work. I found myself up and searching the house for the TV section. If the show was such a big deal, it had to be in syndication—probably two or three times a day. But I couldn't find it anywhere in the schedule.

In my business, if you want answers you pick up the phone. I called Austin Cablevision and got a woman in the PR department.

"You wouldn't believe how many calls we get for that show," she told me. "We had it on up until, I don't know, a couple of years ago or so. TBS, I think it was. It seems like whoever it was that owned the rights pulled it off the market. I don't know if it was the studio or what. Maybe they're gearing up for a videotape release or something."

"The shows aren't on tape?"

"Never have been. I think the video rental places get as much grief over it as we do. Seems crazy, doesn't it? A show that popular and it's just not around any more?"

I HAD TO GO OUT that afternoon for the usual post office and Fed Ex drops, so I swung by the Bookstop in Lincoln Village. The woman who asked to help me was about my age, wearing a long dress and glasses.

It's one thing to sound like an idiot on the phone, and another to do it in person. I found myself suddenly embarrassed. "Do you, uh, have anything about a TV show called *Harrigan's House*?"

"*The Harrigan House*? Sure. You can take your pick."

She showed me to the section. There was an oversized paperback called *HarriganMania*, same as the special Linda wanted me to tape, and one called *That's Life at the Harrigan House*. Then there was *Harrigan House: The Compleat Episode Guide* and a smaller, brightly colored one called *The Ultimate Harrigan House Trivia Book*.

"Good lord," I said.

"I have a confession to make," the woman said. "Until these books started coming in, a couple of years ago? I'd never heard of the damned show."

I looked up at her from where I knelt by the row of books.

"Maybe," I said, "we're too old."

The girl who checked me out was in her late teens. "The Harrigans," she said. "Cool."

The guy at the next register, who was blond and not much older, looked over. "Oh yeah," he said. He turned *HarriganMania* over to check out the photos on the back. "Remember this one? The pie fight?"

"Yeah," the girl said. "It's like really sad about the professor, you know?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

“You know. Dying and all.”

“Oh,” I said. “Yeah.”

INSTEAD OF WORKING that afternoon I read *HarriganMania*. It was hard to understand what all the fuss was about—even Tina Storm, the author and self-proclaimed “number one Harrigan fan,” admitted that the show’s premise was “dumb,” the episodes were “banal and formulaic,” and the acting was “wooden at best.” After reading a few of the episode synopses, I had to agree. I found myself skipping on to the next section.

The bare facts were these: the show premiered on ABC on Friday night, September 27, 1968, at 8:00 pm Eastern. It ran seven seasons, through 1975, 161 half-hour episodes in all. John “Prof” Harrigan was an English teacher at Ivyville College and “Mom” (Joan) was a widowed socialite; Nancy, their unflappable housekeeper, was from “back East” somewhere. The five kids were the show’s gimmick, such as was: Mom and the Prof each had one child from a previous marriage, Jeff and Janie respectively. They’d adopted one child together, Joey, plus taking in Nancy’s daughter Judy to raise with their own.

The first episode took up shortly after the arrival of fifth child, who was actually the Prof’s little brother. He had obviously come very late in life to Prof’s parents, since he was only five—younger than any of the other kids—when he arrived at the Harrigan house. The death of his (i.e. the Prof’s) parents, and any possible associated traumas, were never alluded to.

In fact, the show didn’t just avoid controversy, it completely obliterated it. There were no student protests at Ivyville College, not even in the wake of the Kent and Jackson State shootings of 1970. Adopted brother Joey was pure WASP, not Italian or Jewish, let alone black or Hispanic, let alone Vietnamese. How could he be, since the Vietnam War didn’t seem to exist in the world of the Harrigans?

The episodes I was able to slog through dealt with such matters as the importance of investing your allowance wisely, and strategies for being popular in school. The professor was a bit pompous, but always full of good, solid common sense at the end. Like when little Jimmy gave the other kids permission to misbehave because he was, after all, their uncle. The Prof straightened everything out at the end when he explained that it was a combination of age, experience, and position that made authority work, and it took all three.

It was that kind of attitude that doubtless attracted Richard Nixon and prompted him to declare, two weeks before his 1968 presidential victory: “It’s my favorite show. Families like the Harrigans are what makes this country great.” When they asked Hubert Humphrey about the Harrigans, he said, “Who?” At least that was how Tina Storm, who was a decade too young to vote at the time, remembered it. The next week, in mock elections in grade schools and junior highs across the country, Nixon won by a landslide.

Professor Harrigan reminded me uncomfortably of my own father, who was of course an avid Nixon supporter. He was so convinced of his own infallibility, so rigid, so heroic in his own eyes. The difference was that Prof Harrigan was able to tell his kids that he loved them, and in turn his kids

thought he was a hero, too.

Harrigan catch phrases abounded. Prof's "I haven't the foggiest notion," of course, and his "Do you mind?" every time he found one of Mom's cats in his favorite armchair. Little Jimmy's cries of "Say uncle!" Janie's accidentally overheard remark, "Professor Arrogant you mean!" which was later picked up by the rest of the family—in a good-natured way, of course.

There weren't a lot of pictures in *HarriganMania*. Pub shots of the actresses, none of whom I recognized, and few posed studio stills. There was nothing from the actual episodes because Sheldon Browne, the show's creator and producer, had supposedly refused permission.

I had a tingling feeling that meant there was a story lurking somewhere. The feeling turned into certainty when I got to the chapter about The Song.

It was irresistible, Storm said, like the theme from *Gilligan's Island* or any of those other viral little tunes that hook into your brain and refuse to let go. In sixty seconds the theme covered the entire hare-brained setup, including the business with Prof's little brother "who was an uncle and a brother to them all."

The theme was performed by the 1910 Fruitgum Company, of "Simon Says" and "1 2 3 Red Light" fame. According to the book, an extended version of the song hit the top ten late in 1968.

That, I knew, was wrong, and I could prove it.

I had a lot of music reference books, including *Billboard's Top Ten Charts* and Norm N. Nite's *Rock On Volume II*. The 1910 Fruitgum Company was listed in both books, but not "Theme From *The Harrigan House*" or anything remotely like it, not by any artist. Okay, big deal, Storm had been sloppy in her research. Instead of a feeling of superiority, I got a chill.

THAT NIGHT I WATCHED the *HarriganMania* special while the VCR taped it. In typical network fashion it was all form and minimal content.

Tina Storm was the host, and she spent most of the show interviewing celebrities about their favorite *Harrigan House* episodes, and what the Harrigans meant to them. "The Harrigan House," Jay Leno said, "was like an island of calm in troubled times. It was a place you could come to for milk and cookies while the rest of the world was full of riots and Vietnam and girls putting you down." Shannen Doherty, wearing a "Do You Mind?" T-shirt, said, "Prof Harrigan was the father everybody wants to have. He was just so cool." Arnold Schwarzenegger said, "The Harrigans were about family values. Why can't there be shows like that today?"

There was an overblown emotional farewell to the actor who played Prof, who had died a few months ago in a private plane crash while doing a dinner theater tour. Then more tears were shed over the kid who played Joey Harrigan, who'd died of an O.D. in 1980. The woman who played Mom was brought onstage for a standing ovation, then hustled off again because she hadn't aged well and was obviously drunk.

In one segment they read excerpts from the thousands of letters the show had received from kids who wanted to run away from their own families and come live in the Harrigan House. The studio had been forced to come up

with a form letter explaining that the Harrigans were fictional, that the kids should stay with their own parents and make the best of it.

Sheldon Browne did not make an appearance; he had refused permission to use any clips from the show. So instead we got footage of *The Harrigan House Live Onstage*, and shots of the *Harrigan House* comic books and trading cards, dolls and board games.

At the end all the celebrity guests got onstage and sang The Song together.

AT TEN LINDA got home and we had sandwiches. I went on to bed while she stayed up to watch the tape. I read for a while and then tried to sleep. Linda's side of the bed was cold and empty, not that that was anything new. Most mornings I had to be up at eight to talk to editors in New York, while she slept in. More and more we seemed to live in separate worlds.

Maybe I could try harder. I thought I would go in and see if she wanted to talk, or maybe even fool around a little. I put on a robe and got far as doorway into the living room. Linda sat on the couch, tears rolling down her face. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen her cry. Her lips moved as she sang along softly with the tape:

*And there they had their own little world
Nancy and the kids, the professor and his spouse
Laughter and love for each boy and every girl
That's life in the Harrigan house.*

She didn't see me as turned and went back to bed.

WHEN LINDA AND I first dated there was an awkwardness that I chalked up to her being only twenty years old, compared to my worldly twenty-nine. I thought it would pass in time, but it never did.

I went in the next morning, which was a Saturday, to talk to her. I found her curled up on the couch, watching a black-and-white movie from the forties and reading the morning paper.

"So," I said. "Did you like the special?"

"It was great."

"I watched it while it was taping." For just a second she looked at me with real curiosity and interest, the first time in longer than I could remember. The look went away when I said, "I have to admit I didn't get it."

She turned back to the movie. "Well, you don't like T V . You say so all the time. I wouldn't really expect you to 'get it.'"

"So maybe you could help me, here. What is it you like so much about the Harrigans?" She shrugged, and I could see her slipping into hurt and anger. I kept after her anyway, knowing I should stop, a little angry at her myself for liking something that seemed so awful to me. "I mean, it didn't seem to have much to do with the real world. It's like some fascist fantasy, where there aren't any black or poor people, women just stay home and have babies, there's no crime, no injustice..."

"And what's wrong with that?" She was actually angry and letting it show,

something even rarer than her tears. “Does everything always have to mean something? Some of us are tired of real life. I have customers in my face all day and when I get home I just want to relax. I don’t need to be challenged or stimulated, I want things to be nice. *The Harrigan House* was a nice show, okay? Is that so terrible?”

“I was just asking.”

“Just asking. With that superior tone in your voice. Just because you went on a few protest marches in the sixties, that’s supposed to make you some kind of holy person. Well, look at yourself. You used to talk about this Great American Novel you were going to write, about how you were just doing journalism while you got your novel together. Now you don’t even bother to talk about it anymore, let alone do anything. You don’t even vote, for God’s sake. Your talk and everybody else’s holier-than-thou talk about changing the world is just bullshit. Talk is all it is. The rest of us want to keep our houses and cars and TV sets, thank you very much. *The Harrigan House* is shown all over the world. Eastern Europe, Somalia, Brazil. That’s what everybody wants, everywhere. To be like the Harrigans.”

“Linda, I—”

“You think I like my shitty job? You think I like it that we’re too poor to have kids? You think I wouldn’t trade my life for Mom Harrigan’s in a second? Or for the life of any one of those kids?”

“I’m sorry.” With a tinge of bitterness I added, “I guess I didn’t know you were that unhappy.”

“Surprise! I am! Are you going to tell me your life is that great?”

“It’s not so bad that I want to live in a sitcom.”

“Fine. Don’t then.” She turned away again and the conversation was over.

AFTER LINDA LEFT for work I called my brother, who lives on the other side of town. He’s two years younger than me, but he’s got a steady job at Community National Bank, a big house, kids, and a bass fishing boat. “*The Harrigan House*?” he said. “I don’t think I ever watched it when it was first on. The kids watch the reruns.”

“But you’ve heard of it.”

“Hasn’t everybody?”

“Put one of the kids on, will you?”

“Sure.”

The phone clunked, and a second later a voice said, “Hi, Uncle Larry.”

“Hi, Danny. Do you ever watch *The Harrigan House*?”

“We used to. It’s not on any more.”

“Did you like it?”

“I don’t know. It was kind of dumb.”

“But you watched it.”

“Yeah.”

We talked about baseball for a minute or two and then I got Phil back on the line. “Is this for a story or something?” he asked.

“Maybe. Just bear with me for a second, okay? Do you remember ever actually seeing this show, or is it just that you heard the kids talk about it?”

He thought it over. “I guess I never did actually watch it. It’s just part of the culture, you know? Like how you can not watch TV or read the paper, but still know everything that’s going on? It’s like it’s part of the air we breathe and the food we eat or something.”

THE STOCK CAR racing piece was a loss, at least for the moment. I went downtown to the main library to put an end, once and for all, to the knot of dread at the bottom of my stomach.

The first place I checked was the *TV Guide* for the week ending September 27. The Friday night listings had ads from all three networks featuring their new shows. *The Harrigan House* was not among them. Eight o’clock Eastern was seven o’clock in Texas, and nothing started at that hour. The second half of *High Chaparral* was on NBC, the second half of *Wild Wild West* was on CBS, and the second half of *Operation Entertainment* was on ABC. I tried the rest of the night’s schedule, then the rest of the week. I tried the next week’s issue, and the week’s after that. Then I moved on to the fall of 1969 and 1970.

No *Harrigan House*.

I got the *New York Times* and the *Austin American-Statesman* on microfilm and checked them as well. I looked up *Harrigan House* in the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature*. There were no entries until the mid-eighties, and then the articles were either of the where-are-they-now or the sitcom-that-defined-a-generation variety.

I double-checked the alleged date of the show’s premiere in *People*, and xeroxed the incriminating page from *TV Guide*.

Back at home I called LA Directory assistance. Sheldon Browne’s number was unlisted, of course. I dug out my research on an article I’d done the year before on telephone hackers—phone phreaks, they call themselves—and dialed the number of a kid in LA. He got me Browne’s home number while I waited, and threw in his fax for good measure.

A personal secretary answered at Browne’s house. I was sure she would hang up on me if I mentioned the Harrigans so I said, “My name is Larry Ryan. It’s about an investment of his. It’s rather urgent, I’m afraid.”

“Please hold.” There was faint classical music on the line for less than a minute. “Mr. Browne does not recognize your name. What company are you with, sir?”

“Uh, Merrill Lynch.”

“Mr. Browne has no investments with Merrill Lynch.” The line went dead.

In for a penny, I thought. I punched his fax number into my machine, scrawled my name and number at the bottom of the *TV Guide* page, and fed it through.

The phone rang approximately a minute and a half later.

“So,” the voice said. “You’ve discovered the secret of *The Harrigan House*.”

“Is this Sheldon Browne?”

“I suppose it is.” His voice sounded tired. “A journalist, are you?”

“Well...yes.”

“I don’t care. If you’re recording this, fine, you have my consent. None of it will do you any good.”

In fact I hadn’t thought to record it, but I turned the machine on as soon as he mentioned it. “I’m onto something,” I said, “but I don’t know what it is. All I have right now are questions.”

“The answer to one of them, Mr. Ryan—that is your name?”

“Yes.”

“The answer is, *Harrigan House* never existed. I never created it. There are no tape archives that I’m refusing to license to video or put in syndication to the cable stations. It’s never, to my knowledge, actually appeared on a television screen anywhere.”

“But...that’s impossible.”

“I said that for years, to anyone who would listen. No one wanted to believe me.”

“But the books, the trading cards, the TV special last night...”

“You’re a journalist, Mr. Ryan, an educated man. I’m sure you’re familiar with Voltaire? ‘If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him?’”

I DIDN’T BELIEVE him at first. On Monday I made a few calls to editors I’d worked with for years. “Try the *Weekly World News*,” they said. “We don’t do that kind of story, Larry, what the hell’s wrong with you?”

At the end I even got desperate enough to think about the *Weekly World News*. But what was the point of burying the truth amid all those Elvis sightings, UFO encounters, and miracle cures?

Late at night I tried to make the pieces fit together. How long had this been going on? Did it go all the way back to the sixties? If the Harrigan audience wasn’t old enough to vote, how could they have swung Nixon’s election? The easy answer was that they had exerted some kind of influence on their parents, conscious or otherwise.

The other answer is much more frightening. What if the same elemental forces that had brought an entire TV show into existence had also created Nixon—five o’clock shadow, political history, Pat, Tricia, Julie, Checkers, and all? My mind shrank from the thought as violently as those of the Harrigan generation had fled from the tumult of the sixties.

IT WAS JUST yesterday morning that I came into the living room and found the morning paper in my chair at the breakfast table. Linda was in her place, head buried in the Lifestyle section.

“Do you mind?” I said, picking up the stack of papers. I hadn’t thought of Prof Harrigan until the words were already out of my mouth. Obviously I had let myself get deeper into the Harrigan world than I realized.

Linda peered around at me, a big grin on her face. “Do you mind?” she said back to me.

I smiled. “Oh well,” I said. “That’s life—”

And suddenly I saw where I was headed. Linda’s warmth and acceptance reached out to me like a roaring fire in a blizzard. It was the chance of a lifetime. I could be part of something larger than myself, an unconscious

conspiracy of light and happiness that could shelter me from a world of fear and anger and despair.

All I had to do was finish the sentence.

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