



MAKING *It* FUNNY



CBS series executive producers
Tom Hertz, left, Steve Molaro
and Kourtney Kang

Executive producers from TV's top sitcoms share their experiences behind the scenes

BY JIM COLUCCI
PHOTOS BY CLIFF LIPSON

WATCH! CAUGHT UP with the executive producers of three long-running CBS hits—Kourtney Kang of *How I Met Your Mother*, Steve Molaro of *The Big Bang Theory* and Tom Hertz, who created and runs *Rules of Engagement*—to find out how they juggle their hefty responsibilities with the joys of making us laugh.

WATCH!: What's the first part of your week like, when a script has its table read with the actors?

STEVE MOLARO (*The Big Bang Theory*): Our table reads tend to be very solid, and the actors always come in and read it as if we were shooting it, which is very helpful to us on the writing side, to hear what works.

KOURTNEY KANG (*How I Met Your Mother*): Now that we're in Season 7, everybody really knows what they're doing. So the table reads are a lot of fun—much better than in Season 1, when we were still figuring it out.

TOM HERTZ (*Rules of Engagement*): In contrast to that, at *Rules of Engagement* the cast straggles in at various degrees of being late. It takes me a while to get their attention and get them to be quiet so I can give a canned speech about how terrific last night's episode was and how happy we are to be doing this again. Throughout the table read, Oliver Hudson and Bianca Kajlich are tickling each other and flirting like fourth-graders, and there are various degrees of eating while delivering the lines. But we're used to it, and it seems to work for us.

WATCH!: How do you organize your show's writing process?

TOM: First, it's a whole team thing—all the

writers come up with each episode's outline together. Then I send out one writer with the outline, where each scene has some lines and a couple of jokes, although there's room for their own creativity. The first thing I do when the draft comes in is viciously insult the writer. And that's usually before having even read it. They know that from me, that means "good job." I've tried a few times to be earnest and complimentary, and the writers got creeped out.

KOURTNEY: The most important part of our job, and the hardest part, is story breaking. It's that moment of starting from absolutely nothing. The crucial part is knowing how the story is going to get from A to B, and the core of what your story is about. There can be great scenes and jokes, but you need to be able to say what this story is about, in one sentence.

STEVE: On *Big Bang*, we break the stories as an entire group, but I think what might be different is we also write them in a group.

WATCH!: As you get notes from the studio and network after the table read, and spend the rest of the week rewriting and refining, what are your hours like?

TOM: It's gotten better over the years, because our table reads are far closer to what the final

The Big Bang Theory stars Johnny Galecki, left, Jim Parsons, Kunal Nayyar and Simon Helberg

product will be. Usually we goof around in the morning, then do a run-through with the cast, a little rewrite and we try to get home in time for dinner. Or even better, just in time to kiss the kids good night, and they're already in bed.

KOURTNEY: We're really lucky. We're home not too much after dinner most nights. Things are running pretty smoothly.

TOM: All three of these shows are in at least Season 5, and so they're well-oiled machines. At *Rules*, we haven't eaten dinner at work in over three years. I guess we know what we're doing or something. Not that you guys don't. [Laughs.]

WATCH!: The title "executive producer" can mean so many things: Sometimes you're the final decision maker, sometimes not. Sometimes the head writer, sometimes not. Are you the one where the buck stops?

TOM: I am, because I created the show.

STEVE: I would say that the buck stops with Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady.

KOURTNEY: The buck stops with Carter Bays and Craig Thomas, who created the show. They're very involved in every aspect and all decisions. My job is to help them do the show that they see, and I've known them for so long that I know what they're looking for. There are times when I might do something a different way, but it's their show and their baby. I also like to say that I'm a little bit like the mom of the show, because I'm a mom in real life, and—

TOM: That's a spoiler! Kourtney's the mother? How exciting! Except right now, you can hear America going, "What?!"

WATCH!: Which earlier shows did you work on, on your way up the ladder?

KOURTNEY: I have a very impressive track record, with the American version of *Coupling*, and several



STEVE MOLARO
THE BIG BANG THEORY

NBC shows that never aired. On one of those, I got to write my first episode of television ever. My parents came out from Pennsylvania, and literally as they were calling me from the studio gate saying "We're so excited!" we got the word that after that night's taping, the show was being canceled. Everyone I worked with just lost their jobs, and as she watched the taping, for some reason all my mom could talk about was, "What are they going to do with all these lamps?" on the set. "Where do the lamps go?"

TOM: She was angling for a free lamp.

KOURTNEY: She totally was. From there, I went to *How I Met Your Mother*, starting as a story editor. But for a while, I felt like the Black Widow. Any show I went on died. During that time, I went to my 10-year high school reunion and said, "I write for TV shows." I named all these shows that hadn't hit the air, and it was as if I'd said, "I invented Post-its." Nobody believed me. They were like, "Kourtney, that's so sad. You make TV shows that don't air?"

TOM: I started in New York in late night. I wrote for Jon Stewart's talk show on MTV, and then moved to L.A. for *Dennis Miller Live*. My first primetime show was *Spin City*, and then *Less Than Perfect*.

STEVE: You're forgetting one ...

TOM: I haven't gotten up to that. During *Less Than Perfect*, I wrote a pilot called *Married to the Kellys* that became a show for a year. For a year I ran *King of Queens*, and then worked, with Steve here, on Freddie Prinze Jr.'s show, *Freddie*. That lasted a year as well, and while there I wrote the pilot for *Rules of Engagement*.

STEVE: I started working on some Nickelodeon shows, and then the first few seasons of *What I Like About You*. And then a few shows that were one glorious season: *Complete Savages* and *Freddie*, where I sat next to Tom while he was writing *Rules of Engagement*.

THE BIG BANG THEORY

airs Thursdays
at 8 p.m.
ET/PT on
CBS.

TOM: And that's not a great seat. Because I'm messy. And I spill things.

STEVE: You played with that snow globe a lot. That was a hobby of yours, filling the snow globe with Purell.

TOM: I needed little activities to occupy my mind.

STEVE: You showed me that thing on your toe one time. It was one of our bonding moments.

TOM: Steve also informed me after the fact that, if I would run to my office or to the restroom, the other writers would put snacks on the table in front of my seat, in a game called "What Won't Tom Eat?" Because I would come back into the room, sit down, and just absent-mindedly pick up whatever was in front of me on the table and eat it, without questioning it.

WATCH!: As a writer you succeed by being creative, but as a showrunner you have to use the other half of your brain and make business decisions. How do you balance it all at the same time?

TOM: Sometimes they say being a producer is punishment for being a good writer.

STEVE: Bill Prady has described that transition as "You're a writer, you're a writer, you're a writer, and by the way you're also now running a 7-Eleven." But I've been fortunate enough to work with some really great showrunners, so when I make business decisions, I channel those people. I've gotten a lot of on-the-job experience.

KOURTNEY: I think it's interesting that the skills that get you to have your own show are not the skills you need to then do that job. But the best showrunner can communicate what it is he or she wants, so other people can go off and make those things happen.

TOM: I always say I have no training to manage people or be in charge of people. And yet I am. But I've learned to delegate. I focus on the story and script and jokes, and I have other writers on my staff checking wardrobe and giving descriptions of guest characters to casting. You hire people you can trust so that when you identify what you're really good at, you can just do that.

WATCH!: But can it be hard to focus?

STEVE: It's a weird situation, where you can be dealing with something outside of the writers room that's aggravating, but then you need to walk in and somehow turn that off and be funny.

TOM: You need to walk in and find a way to take out your anger on your writing staff.

STEVE: I find the trick is going home and taking it out on my family. You might want to try that.

WATCH!: What education background do you think would best prepare you to be a showrunner?

STEVE: I know very few writers who studied writing. I feel like we all fell into it in different weird ways.

KOURTNEY: I actually went to school for writing, at Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh.

TOM: I think maybe being funny is innate. I guess you could study the structure of the story, and you can learn how to produce a show. But on our staff, we have English majors, and I was a business major at the University of Connecticut.

STEVE: I was a graphic designer. I designed junk mail for Publishers Clearing House for a very long time. So maybe that's a road some people could consider.

WATCH!: What's different about your current shows, compared with the others you've worked on?

STEVE: So far, this one keeps coming back. That's been a new experience for me. I haven't had to scramble for a job at the end of the season.

KOURTNEY: There's nothing better than going on summer hiatus and knowing you have a job.

STEVE: For a long time, I couldn't even imagine what that was like. That was the dream. Not that looking at Tom's toe on *Freddie* wasn't a highlight.

HOW I MET YOUR MOTHER

airs Mondays
at 8 p.m.
ET/PT on
CBS.



KOURTNEY KANG
HOW I MET YOUR MOTHER



How I Met Your Mother stars Alyson Hannigan, left, Jason Segel, Josh Radnor and Neil Patrick Harris

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

airs Saturdays
at 8 p.m.
ET/PT
on CBS.

KOURTNEY: And seeing what he would eat sounds like fun.

TOM: Unlike Steve, I've had the excitement of not knowing if we're coming back every year. But now I feel like we're over a big hump, and I'm developing a new show now for CBS again.

WATCH!: After long days at work, do you have time to watch TV?

TOM: I watch all the other CBS shows out of curiosity. I don't always catch *Big Bang* because I don't understand the science and it makes me feel dumb. During the writers strike [of 2007] I picketed once with Bill Prady and *that* made me feel dumb. He just assaulted me with fun facts.

KOURTNEY: My favorite show is *Survivor*. And I was smart enough to write a cameo for Jeff Probst. That's a benefit of working on a CBS show. You get to write parts for people you want to meet.

TOM: Now I want to watch *How I Met Your Mother*, with that guy who we will find out later married Kourtney Kang. In the world's most disappointing series finale.

KOURTNEY: I don't appreciate how you find that disappointing. I think there are a lot of people who would really like to find out that I'm the mom.

TOM: Yes, but their last names are all "Kang."

WATCH!: What attracted you to writing sitcoms?

TOM: For me, it was the jokes. In a multicamera

sitcom they want so many jokes per page, which I guess I was good at providing. I also realized there was a ceiling to my salary and career progression in late night, so I had to get into prime time. So I guess it was, you know, cash.

KOURTNEY: I grew up obsessed with sitcoms. Then I came out to Los Angeles and got a bunch of people coffee. But I always had my eye on the prize. And it's such a fun job being a writer. It's a little bit of everything. You goof off in a room all day, and then you go down on the set, you work with the actors. It's great for people who would just get bored with one thing.

STEVE: I think it's a weird job that takes some getting used to. A lot of writers tend to be introverted, in a room by themselves, writing. Then you get this job, where you're now in a room with 12 strangers and it's like a first date every day. Now you have to say your thoughts out loud to everybody. It takes some getting used to. But it's fun, when it's not stressful and horrible.

KOURTNEY: It's true—first you write by yourself and then you're on staff. It's a weird transition.

STEVE: It's like a reality show. "Here's your new family of 10 people. Go be funny in front of these strangers"—but you're used to sitting in your underwear in your bedroom typing.

KOURTNEY: Just wearing pants is a change.

WATCH!: What is your advice to people who want to break into sitcom writing?

TOM: Just keep writing. But you can't expect to write a spec script, hand it in and say, "Well, make me a writer." You have to start at the bottom and just get on the studio lot in any job you can.

KOURTNEY: You can't be afraid to get people coffee and photocopy scripts. It's about learning at every stage. And I think a lot of it is luck. I was very lucky in that I was able to get people coffee who were really nice and who were able to help me. I think it's a combination of hard work, talent and tons of luck.

STEVE: Another thing: Don't be a jerk. In the writers room, you need to be funny and a good writer, but also because you're together 10 to 12 hours a day, personality counts for a lot. If you have a reputation for getting along with everyone, that will help. For example, I'm probably going to try to get a job on Tom's new pilot.

TOM: On the record, I'd like to formally pass on Steve. **L**



Rules of Engagement stars David Spade, left, Patrick Warburton and Megyn Price

TOM HERTZ
RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

