THE ROLE OF A SERIES PRODUCER: A WEEK WITH THE "NEWHART" TELEVISION PRODUCTION

by

KEVIN KNEISLEY

B. S., Kansas State University, 1982

A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Journalism and Mass Communications

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1984

Approved by:

Paul Prince
Major Professor

LD
2668
.R4
1984
K64
c. 2

A11209 480761

THE ROLE OF THE SERIES PRODUCER: A WEEK WITH THE "NEWHART" TELEVISION PRODUCTION

by

KEVIN KNEISLEY

Copyright © 1984 Kevin Kneisley

No part of this report may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iv

I. The Role of the Producer 1

Definition 1
Qualifications 7
The Producer as an Organizer 11
The Producer's Role in Production 13

II. Relationships with the Producer 25

The Producer and the Writer 25
The Producer and the Director 28
The Producer and the Actor 30
The Producer and the Craftsperson 35

III. The Television Show in Production 39

. . . . . .

APPENDIX 57

BIBLIOGRAPHY 334

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

There are a number of gifted people who practice the business on a daily basis, who shared their expertise and gave their time in an effort to help me understand the television industry. They deserve the credit. It was a pleasure working with them.

MTM Enterprises was generous with permission to reprint paper work examples from productions arranged through the aid of Abby Singer, production consultant for the company.

Barry Kemp, executive producer; Sheldon Bull, producer; and Stephen Grossman, coordinating producer, kindly allowed attendance to readings, rehearsals and filming of the production of "Newhart." Thank you also goes to the fine cast and crew of "Newhart."

Mike Stanislavsky, unit production manager and 1st assistant director and Randy Cordray, 2nd assistant director, both with "Newhart," answered numerous questions throughout the production process. For this I thank them.

John Tracy, director of the "Newhart" episode I viewed, was very open in his remarks about the industry. Many thanks go to him and Matt Dinsmore, production assistant for the "Newhart" show.

Thanks go to Tommy Goetz, a very talented art director, for the set plans to "Newhart."

And speaking of art directors, this whole report would not be possible without a good friend that I am glad to have. Jacqueline Webber, art director for "St. Elsewhere," has helped me more than she thinks.

Jacque was introduced to me by Gordon Jump, a graduate of K-State, and a good friend. He is one person I can depend on for a lot. He answered questions, opened doors for me, encouraged me to do things I wasn't sure about.

Thanks to Corey Allen who, during his busy schedule while directing an episode of "Hill St. Blues," talked with me about theatre and television.

Patricia Bruner, set decorator for "St. Elsewhere," gave me scripts of the show to read and answered many questions about the business. I still owe her lunch for a bet I lost on the USC-KU football game.

Thanks also for the tour of the Burbank Studio, lunch and the talk I had with a struggling actor and future producer, Rod Russell, a former K-Stater whose ambitions match his talent.

Thank you's go to the men of Delta Sigma Phi Fraternity at USC for their interest, support and friendship they gave while I stayed there for the month.

To Mark Richter, a new member of that Fraternity and now a good friend, who, during the late hours while I was up transcribing notes, showed me numerous all night "greasy spoons."

This paper would not be possible without the untiring

effort Mary Nansel put into typing it. It was a long haul to spend five to six months typing one report.

And finally to one special person who taught me to persevere, quit arguing and just do what they want. She helped make this report a reality.

For those that helped but I have failed to mention, I am sorry and I thank you.

I. THE ROLE OF A PRODUCER

Definition

Everyone concerned with television knows that it is a team operation and that like any team or group, it needs a leader; someone with authority, responsibility, organization, and talent to plan the operation and make the decisions. In television, that is the role of the producer. The producer develops the program idea and supervises the entire production, from the first pre-production meeting to the last edit. The producer is the one person with the ultimate responsibility for every element--both technical and creative--that goes into production. The producer serves as coordinator between the network for which the show is produced and the parent production company. This combination of tasks and power is common in the role of television producer, but is not necessarily associated with the title producer in other media. The title has a variety of meanings in the entertainment field. Often a producer is the person who raises the money for the production, whether it be motion picture or a stage production. Even in television, where most of the production is financed by the major networks, the title may be assigned to someone with the responsibility to see that the production budget and costs are achieved. However, for this report the title of producer will refer to that producer who is responsible for

the day-to-day decisions of television series production.

Because the producer is part of a large organization, he does not have complete control. He is the working producer--the man in the middle between those above him in the production company and those he supervises in the series production crew.

There are structural differences in organizations and also differences in the actual degrees of authority that are delegated to various producers from show to show and from studio to studio. In order to give a better idea of how the series producer functions and how he fits in the heirarchy, a definition of the various titles must be made.

Regardless of a program's size or budget, a producer's job is pretty much the same, even though there is a difference between the network's coverage of the Superbowl and the local station's news program. Whether the producer is working in Kansas City or Hollywood, he is doing essentially the same job, with the same responsibilities and with the same overall objectives.

There are distinctions among various types of producers. One type, which is considered the "top-of-the-line" producer, is the <u>independent producer</u>. He is usually considered the "packager." That is, he puts together a "package" of other people who are under his supervision. This "indie," as he is better known, is responsible for almost all network and syndicated programs. This "packaged" show may be produced at any facility, and will not necessarily be the studios of the

network or station that buys the program. (See Appendix, page 57, for programs currently produced in Hollywood.) "Indies," such as Aaron Spelling ("Love Boat," "Dynasty," "Hotel") or Norman Lear ("All in the Family," "The Jeffersons," "One Day at a Time"), are one level removed from the working production when they begin to supervise a number of productions and become more involved in the administrative, managerial, corporate, fiscal and selling responsibilities. As a result of Norman Lear's success, he purchased Avco Embassy from Avco Corporation in 1981 and dropped Avco from the name. Lear now supervises all shows produced by Embassy Television.[1]

Another type of producer is the executive producer (EP). The job varies depending on the circumstances. However, in Barry Kemp's (EP for "Newhart") case, which is the subject of this report, executive producer is like an editor-in-chief of a newspaper. He has the ultimate power to assign, edit, approve, reject, or cut stories out of the series. Kemp describes his position:

> The way television works, the ultimate responsibility for everything that goes on in the show is the executive producer's. It's my fault if the show is not on budget and it's my fault if the show's not funny. I mean I may make changes in the organization to make that better, but ultimately, the fault is mine. It's not somebody elses.[2]

Titles of producers will also vary depending on the method of recording the program. In Television Production, Alan Wurtzel states that the "day-to-day supervision on the set is handled by one of the EP's subordinates called a line producer.[3] Wurtzel is correct with regard to one technique

of production. However, according to a number of producers in the business, including Kemp, the title of line producer depends on the medium the production is using.

> A line producer, in this business, is a technical-producer. You rarely have line-producers in a three-camera because your producers have writers controlling the creative aspects of the show. Generally a line-producer is on one camera film shows, dramas, even one-camera comedies, for that matter. For instance, shows like "Hill Street Blues," "St. Elsewhere," and "Duck Factory" have like a line-producer. When you're shooting a one-camera film show, your executive and your creative producers are not on the set. The production goes on independently of the creative process so that in one-camera shows you need someone there on the set when the actors are doing lines, watching costs and controlling that location action, while someone else is back in the office creating ideas, writing, casting, doing all of that. So it's a different division of labor. We are doing a three-camera show and we can control all of that because every afternoon we go over to the stage, watch a run-through. We're right across the street from it, the whole time, so we are sitting on top of it. Our show is put on in 30 minutes and is done on that stage [Stage 17] and it's done in one night. So, we don't have a line-producer. What we have is an associate producer and a coordinating producer. There are people who oversee technical aspects. We meet with them constantly so that we know what's going on. These are people, for example, who communicate our thoughts about the sets to be built, about the props that we want, and about wardrobe.[4]

Subordinate to but working closely with the executive producer is the <u>supervising</u> or <u>creative producer</u>. These titles appear to be randomly selected and the choice is solely dependent on the whims of the production team. Norman Lear, producer of one of America's most successful comedy series, "All In the Family," explains:

> When you look at the credits of a typical television series, you often find executive producers, supervising producers, producers, executive story editors, story editors, and probably others I can't think of. Those titles are bestowed as a way of making it more attractive

> for the writer to stay where he is on the third year of the show. A large number of those people are not really producers. They don't assume all of the casting functions or all of the below the line functions, or other producer functions. They are writers exclusively. A producer, in my opinion, is someone who touches and affects the whole.[5]

In certain instances, such as situation comedies or three-camera shows, a coordinating producer supervises the day-to-day process of the show. This producer may be, depending on production requirements, aided by a co-worker called an associate producer. The associate should complement the producer. For example, if the producer is strong on talent and script, but unknowledgeable on business and negotiating property, the associate should handle what the producer cannot. The functions of the associate producer vary, depending on the producer.

On MTM shows, the coordinating producer and associate producer are somewhat similar. Kemp explains the positions as related to "Newhart."

> The associate producer is really under the coordinating producer, but both are responsible for technical aspects of the show. In our particular case, the coordinating producer oversees editing, oversees any kind of location work we do. For example, we have to go back twice a year to New England to shoot exteriors for the show, shoot the Inn, shoot the exteriors (places in town where we'll need them for inserts of exteriors) and things like that. He's in charge of coordinating plans--he takes that trip back with the cameraman who shoots that. He's responsible for any clearances we need; any approvals that we need; or people's names or music, songs, or whatever. He has to get all of the things that we need. If we need permission, he handles all of those aspects. He delivers the show. He oversees the post-production of the show in terms of title-editing. He keeps us on a post-production schedule because he's the one who ultimately has to take the show to the network. Our job is to get it as good as we can. And his job is to make sure that

> we get it there on time. So, his job is to say that you've got to get the show over in four days, so you've got to find time to do that . . . and just sort of keeps us on schedule.
>
> The associate producer, in our case, we use as a liaison between ourselves and all of the technical people on stage. He communicates our feelings and the stage's feelings from a technical standpoint, he oversees wardrobe so that we don't have to keep a crew to check wardrobe. We're telling one person and then he can work with the case and with the costumers in terms of sighting which wardrobe is right for each show and overall characterwise. He works with the set designers and the set decorators in terms of the pieces that we like and the props that we want and don't want. He supervises the music and the scoring session. We have music that Nelson Riddle writes, individual music for each of our episodes. He oversees that by going to the recording session. The Associate Producer shows Nelson Riddle the shows that we are doing; he shows him where we want the music and what kind of music we want. He also oversees the recording/dubbing of the show, so that when you send the show to post-production for sound quality it's smoothed out and its sound levels are brought out. All the extra little things that are brought into a sound track during filming are dismissed. If we have had to edit out a laugh, we can replace that laugh in post-production. If we have an off-stage sound that we need, we can put that into post-production as a car passing or anything like that.
>
> Also they're in charge of color correcting, so that the show is the same color when it goes on the air as it was the night you shot it; making sure that the credits are put on the front of the show and where guidelines are necessary as far as limited time you shoot.[6]

Hyphenates

With the producer having as much control as he does some creative people connected with productions resist his authority. Frequently, functions are merged within one person: a producer-director, a producer-writer, or the producer-writer-director. This phenomenon of hyphenates has evolved because the producer is the final arbitrator. Any writer, director, or designer who sees his vision constantly reordered by the producer he works for, begins to realize that he is tied down,

especially if the producer has apprenticed in a position other than production. In any case, it occurs to many that if they themselves are the producers as well they could eliminate at least one step of the committee ladder.

Kemp was a writer on "Taxi" prior to his becoming executive producer on "Newhart." Kemp explains his reasoning behind hyphenates and his decision to become a producer.

> You are a writer and the network or production company likes what you're writing, they want you then to take whatever talent you have as a writer, to use it to oversee the show. And that's how you wind up as a producer. They give you your show to produce, using your style of writing, because they like it and they think that it's marketable.[7]

Creative control is one reason for this phenomenon, but another is the ownership of the work. If someone has designed a certain look, written the characters, or directed the production, but did not produce or package the program, he will be paid salary, and no more. On the other hand, if he is the producer/packager, he will have equity in the creation which will increase his profit potential. He will also have the opportunity to participate in decisions regarding all subsequent uses of the project and receive a substantially larger share of the profits from these.

The hyphenate phenomenon sometimes works in reverse. Producers may get frustrated by directors and writers who do not meet their expectations and become hyphenate directors and writers.

Qualifications

Since the producer is responsible for every element that

goes into the production, he must have some knowledge in all areas of production. Even though the producer may never dolly a camera, light a set, or install the lapel microphones, he must know enough about these and other aspects of production to make sound decisions. The producer must be familiar with every job to understand and evaluate the contribution each team member makes toward the entire production.

The Skill versus the Craft

Some argue that, like acting, producing can be either a craft or a skill. Skill can be defined as the learned ability to use one's knowledge effectively and readily in execution or performance. On the other hand, craft is defined as an occupation requiring an artistic skill. Therefore, producing is a craft developed by experience, study, or observation.

While Uta Hagen seldom worked in television, she was a well known teacher and actress in New York and her thoughts about the role of an actor are valid for that of the television producer.

> . . . the prerequisite is talent. You only hope to God you've got it. Talent is an amalgam of high sensitivity; easy vulnerability; high sensory equipment; a vivid imagination as well as a grip on reality; the desire to communicate one's own experience and sensations to make one's self heard and seen.[8]

According to Hagen, talent alone is not enough. An education must be acquired and developed in addition to innate talent.

A producer must also be a creative individual, someone with a broad and varied background, who is conscious of the world around him, sensitive to events, and able to undertake

different responsibilities and varied program topics. Ideally, the student desiring to become a producer, should seek a thorough education in the Arts and Humanities. All of these, in addition to a complete knowledge of the television industry, are required. However, in the opinion of many, attainment of the above prerequisites is not necessarily the means for achieving success. Kemp's opinion seems to echo the industry's ideas of qualification for a position in television.

> Television is one of those rare things that it doesn't really require you to be anything. The only thing that it requires is that someone believes that you can do it. No one in television will care if you went to college or care what you studied. They don't care for actors, they don't care for writers; if you can do it, great! That's not to say that college can't help. Obviously training can help; it helped me. But, no one is going to ask you for your resume in terms of what have you studied.[9]

Throughout the time a college student is attending classes, the saying, "It's not what you know, it's who you know," makes the rounds among students. Corey Allen, director of numerous television shows, heard the same while attending UCLA. However, after many years of working, he now knows differently.

> Who you know can be helpful and can be career-making, but it's certainly not true that it's not what you know. You have to know it!! If someone knows you and you can't do it, it's not going to help any. You might get a start, and--if you're really brilliant--learn on the job . . . and you can keep ahead of the sceptics and your own insecurities. Very few people are able to do that. I think that people who make it politically, not only make it, but get into it quick. Very few of them rise. I think the mortality rate is terrible because they can't put up. Given that you do know stuff, then who you know becomes really helpful.[10]

Anyone who wants to be good in television must have a desire to be successful. What does it take to be successful? Kemp always wanted to be in television and knows what it is like to sit in school and have that desire to be successful and get that job.

> I think that you'll find that most people who are achieving some kind of success . . . or at least what would appear to be success to other people . . . are probably people who are very focused on what they want to do. It's very hard to achieve tremendous success and not know where you're going. Or not have an idea of what you really, really want. I can understand people not knowing for sure what they want to do. But, in my particular case, I knew for years what I wanted to do; from the time I was a kid I knew what I wanted to do. I didn't know I wanted to write, but I knew that I wanted to be in this business.
>
> When I got into college, I found out that I just loved writing. It just gave me a high that I hadn't experienced anywhere else. I turned from acting to writing because I realized that the only thing that I liked about acting was being on the stage. But I hated the rehearsals. I hated the auditioning . . . I hated everything leading up to it. I realized then that whatever you choose to do you have to love the process.
>
> One of the things that is very hard about acting . . . is the process of acting in this town: going to auditions, taking classes, and practicing. If you don't like that part of the job . . . if you can't get interested in that part of the job . . . it's going to be real tough to make it. In writing, you've got to love sitting down to the typewriter and writing. If you only like sitting home and watching your name as it rolls by, you've got a real problem. Because your job is not sitting there and doing that . . . most of the time you're doing something else and you won't see what you've done. So, you'd better love the process. The same with directing . . . if what you love is being in the screening room editing, be an editor. But if you love directing, you'd better love working with actors and being out on the stage and working with them constantly.
>
> If you don't love that process, find what you do love and do that. And if you do what you really want to do, you won't have to worry about the play or anything else because you'll be successful if you're doing whatever it is that you're really focused on . . . if it's what you <u>really</u> want to do, you'll be very good at it. Most people are very good at something. They just don't think

that they can do this for a living.

People who are brilliantly talented in their hobbies and spend their whole lives doing it, could have made more money and been infinitely happier. I'll use my uncle as an example. He spend most of his life (30 years) doing a job that he despised and all that he really liked doing was working with model airplanes . . . little airplanes with engines in them that fly by remote control. Here's a man, who, with a very small loan from a bank, could have had a hobby shop. He can talk about this stuff until he's blue in the face and he attracts people around him everywhere . . . everybody is interested in it. They come to him for advice and ask him why he didn't do that for a living. You could have had a little shop, you could have had a club, you would have been happy . . . made a nice living. He said that he wasted his time thinking that he enjoyed that too much . . . that can't be work. So I'll go to work and punish myself. I'll do this and be stupid.

I think that they had better be doing what they like and I think that they'd better forget about all the practical reasons for not doing it. As soon as someone says that you should have something to fall back on, you're going to fall back on it. You're going to spend your whole life falling back. If you can't be without a net when you're 20 and 21 years old, well then you're never going to be without a net. That's the time that you've got to be without a net. Anything that happens bad to you at that age, you can rebound from. So take a chance. Go out and do it; give yourself some time, work on it. That doesn't mean that you don't take good care of yourself . . . you don't take any responsibility for yourself. Sure, you've got to work. You've got to get a job. If you want a job in television, be focused, be committed, and go for it.[11]

The Producer as an Organizer

Creativity alone is not enough for a successful producer. Television is a complicated and technical medium, which demands an efficient organizer to coordinate hundreds of different details. According to George Heinemann, an Emmy-winning producer for NBC, "Producing is 60 percent organization and 40 percent creativity."[12] The point is that without the ability to organize, there is little chance that anyone would have the ability to transform an idea into a successful tele-

vision program. Considering the producer has to oversee at least thirteen departments during each show, keep an eye on the budget, be in contact everyday with the show, be a mediator if problems exist between director, writer or actor, and even look for more material to do another show, the producer has a job in which all duties may collide at one time.

Organizing all of these areas can be made easier by the development of a production notebook. As stated earlier, organization is the key to producing. If the producer scrambles around to locate a rehearsal schedule or shooting schedule, he will likely be delayed in his production. What to include in the notebook is based on personal taste, but the producer can include the script, the budget, various production forms and schedules. The following should be included in the notebook:

1. Addresses and phone numbers of everyone involved in the show.

2. The current script and the various changes. It should be kept up to date. (See Appendix, page 59.)

3. The rehearsal schedule. (See page 41.)

4. The Overall Production schedule for the series. (See Appendix, page 235.)

5. The Shooting Schedule, if a one-camera show. (See Appendix, page 238.)

6. Call Sheets. (See Appendix, page 259.)

Some producers feel that it is necessary to include the budget for the show in this notebook. It may be wiser to place the