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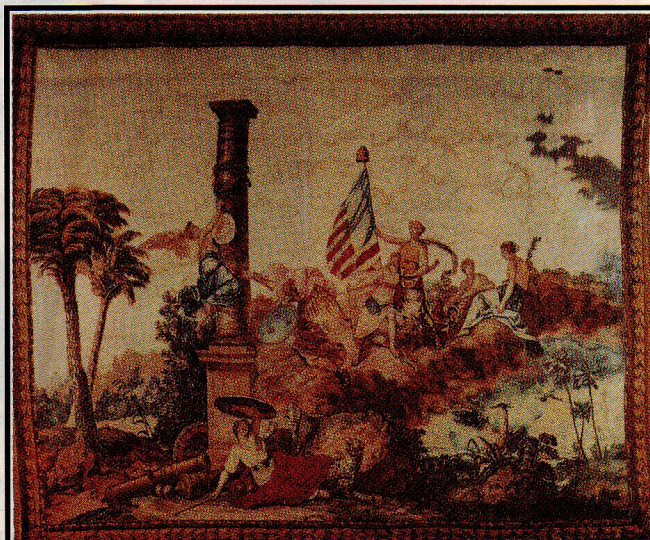
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Translating Comedy

A veteran production team tries to make an American hit sitcom funny to the British

By CHRIS OLIVER WILSON

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW WAS DEAD right. When he famously observed that the Americans and the British are two peoples divided by a common language, he might have been talking about comedy. Americans and Britons have evolved distinctly different national senses of humor. For years,

1970s teenagers in suburbia—debuted Feb. 12 to a rocky reception. It picked up mixed reviews and only 6 million viewers, serving to emphasize the difficulty of taking comedy across the Atlantic. "It's like making a soufflé," says Werner. "All the ingredients have to be exactly right."

Writing, casting, set, pace, mood, format and time slot must snugly fit together to create a successful transatlantic

creating an entirely American show with the kernel of an English idea. Cultural differences always get in the way. The crux of the problem, says top U.K. comedy writer Simon Nye, is that the two cultures laugh at different things. The British public is amused by the struggle of the underdog and distrusts affluence and fame. American society celebrates wealth and success but doesn't find losers funny. "What's fundamentally different in Britain is we're in love with eccentric failures," says Nye, who created the U.K. hit *Men Behaving Badly*. But Roseanne Barr's hope of launching an American version of the U.K. hit *Absolutely Fabulous* foundered because U.S. television chiefs adjudged its excesses—champagne, cocaine and sex binges—unacceptable.

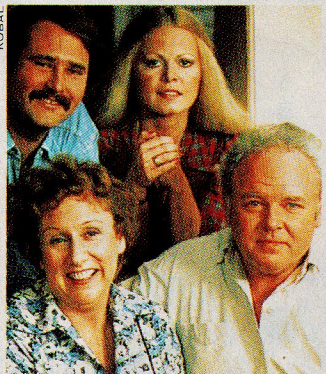
Carsey-Werner's remake of *Men Behaving Badly*—about the disgusting habits of two hedonistic, sex-and-drink-obsessed, thirty-something men—struggled and was dropped by NBC amid falling ratings in 1997. Werner says the cast lacked the chemistry to make "the characters' bad behavior charming to the audience." As it was, the show was toned down: the alcohol consumption was reduced; some of the sexual exploits were cut and the unemployed character was given a job.

We appreciate each other's humor—as long as it's not passed off as our own. Original exports have become cult hits on ground-breaking channels. *Frasier*, *Roseanne*, *Seinfeld*, *Friends* and *The Golden Girls* were all critically acclaimed in the U.K. on non-mainstream stations. And America's PBS has showcased Britcoms like *Fawlty Towers*, starring John Cleese as a snobby hotelier. But attempts to adapt that classic series for the American market haven't worked. British TV companies find translating American comedies particularly taxing because they cannot afford to start over with a 12-member scriptwriting team. U.K. producers rely on cosmetic anglicization of American scripts. Often it doesn't work. For instance, *Brighton Belles*—an ITV remake of *The Golden Girls*—was taken off air halfway through its first season.

Americans love gags in their sitcoms and don't care if they can see them coming. The English want the humor to come from misery plotlines and unexpected jokes. As Carsey-Werner is finding with *Days Like These*, the highest hurdle in adapting an American sitcom is making it self-deprecating enough for British viewers. If the characters look happy, its U.K. audience won't be. ■



RECYCLED BELL BOTTOMS: U.K. version, *Days Like These*, above; U.S. hit *That '70s Show*, right



BIGOTED HUMOR: British hit *Till Death Do Us Part*, above, spawned success as *All in the Family*, left

British remakes of American shows like *The Golden Girls* and *Married With Children* have belly flopped in the U.K. So it is a brave man who attempts to turn a comedy as American as mom's apple pie into British fare.

Step forward a courageous Tom Werner, founder of Carsey-Werner, the Los Angeles-based producers of sitcom giants *Roseanne* and *The Cosby Show*. In a unique deal, Werner landed a \$4 million contract with the U.K.'s largest commercial channel, ITV, to reshoot his recent U.S. hit, *That '70s Show*, in London with a British cast and crew. Rechristened *Days Like These*, the show—about

translation. Turning American comedy into British humor—and vice versa—is an art that can confound the most skillful practitioner. Historically, American TV networks have a good track record at remaking shows. The BBC's classic *Steptoe and Son* became ABC's *Sanford and Son* from 1972 to '75. CBS hit a home run remaking the Cockney comedy *Till Death Do Us Part* as *All in the Family* with bigot Archie Bunker.

Generally, U.S. producers buy a British show's format and some story lines but not its scripts. Then, with big production budgets and highly paid writing teams, they start from scratch,