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Spring 5-1-2011

Float Your Boat

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Recommended Citation

Shapiro, Jamian, "Float Your Boat" (2011). *Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects*. 233.
https://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstone/233

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Capstone Reflection Paper

In the fall of 2008, four seniors created the sketch comedy show, *Float Your Boat*. The show was produced through Citrus TV and aired on the Orange Television Network, OTN. Prior to creating the show, they were all long time friends with academic majors either in Television Radio Film in Newhouse, or Film in the School of Visual and Performing Arts. The show was shot in a single camera style and entirely out of studio. *Float Your Boat* stood out at Citrus TV as an entertainment show with unmatched production value and quality sketches. In addition to writing, filming, and editing, the four seniors also acted in most of the sketches and had terrific chemistry. In the fall of 2009, the four seniors had graduated and the show's momentum stopped. There was a lack of talent, direction, and passion for the show. The quality and quantity of sketches sharply decreased and the future of the show was in doubt.

Last fall, I assumed the role of Executive Producer for *Float Your Boat*. I had been a member of *Float Your Boat* since it's first season and had witnessed the show's decline. As Executive Producer, my main objective was to resume making content at or above the level of quality those four seniors had achieved. To do this, I first recruited talented fellow Television Radio Film majors who could assist me in creating quality content. I showed them sketches from the first season and generated excitement saying we could make something just as

good. Next, I sought out actors from the drama department. This was the first time that *Float Your Boat* had tapped into the talents of the drama students. Finally, I brought on some underclassmen that I could teach throughout the year hoping they would be ready to take over the show once I graduated this spring.

With all the people in place to produce quality content, I began to focus on what direction I wanted to take the show. I decided to revisit the sketch comedy shows I enjoyed watching to see what aspects of these shows made them successful. Growing up, my favorite sketch comedy show was always *Kids In The Hall*. This comedy troupe featured five cross-dressing Canadians with a knack for physical and verbal comedy. The show was successful for two main reasons. The first has to do with the writing. The writers for the show were incredibly witty and were not afraid to push the boundaries with sketches about taboo subjects. This meant that often the content would range from very bizarre short movies about a sausage factory to sketches where every actor is in drag and playing office secretaries. The combined effect of visual and verbal comedy made the sketches edgy and hilarious on multiple levels. The other reason the show worked so well had to do with the actors and the level of comfort they had while working together. I took careful note of this and tried to recruit actors from the drama department that had worked together

in various productions. The more comfortable our actors were, the better their performances would be.

The main difference between *Kids in The Hall* and *Float Your Boat* is we shoot our sketches separate locations for each sketch while the majority of their sketches are shot in one television studio. Therefore, I turned to another show that had an impact on my appreciation of comedy. While *Saturday Night Live* is known for its sketches shot in a converted radio studio at 30 Rockefeller Plaza, they recently produced a number of out of studio digital shorts. These sketches have a very distinct style from the in studio sketches. First, they shoot at a lower shutter speed than the in studio sketches. This means there are fewer frames per second that gives their content more cinematic look. Also, since they have more time devoted to each shoot, they can use lighting to create more dramatic effects and moods. To this end, their sketches are both extremely funny and are fascinating to watch based solely upon the visuals. It made me realize that when the image looks good, the jokes seem funnier and people are more interested in the show. With this frame of mind, I decided to abandon our previous shooting style of 30 frames per second and adopt a new frame rate of 24 frames per second. Additionally, I sought out more diverse dramatic lighting set ups to make our sketches distinct and more visually appealing.

There were certain sketches this year that I wanted to pursue because they were opportunities to manipulate lighting and create dramatic looks for *Float Your Boat*. In the sketch, "Saw 14," we were trying to parody the *Saw* movie franchise with a new take that shows how the torturing devices have become so complicated that even the mastermind, Jigsaw, cannot understand them. In trying to create an image that mirrored the feeling of the *Saw* movies, I was able to create a lighting scheme that focused on harsh shadows and light sources to lend an unsettling quality. To further emphasize the evil in the room, I took one light and placed an oscillating fan in front of it. As we recorded, I had one person slowly move the blades. This created a beam of light that constantly flickered on the actors, further exaggerating the danger in the room.

The "Director Sketch" was another opportunity to use lighting and camerawork in new dynamic ways. The premise of this sketch was to film an eccentric director who motivates his actors through physical pain in a "mockumentary" style. This means I had to set up lights in the shot that would act as the lights for the fake shoot and then set up additional lights outside of the shot to properly expose the entire image. This involved creating a very complex lighting scheme that tested the limits of our equipment and power in the house. The result is a very dynamic and interesting visual effect that allows the sketch to work on multiple levels.

With my vision, goals, cast and crew established, it was now time to put everything into motion. In past years, we opted to hold one meeting a week to go over sketches and plan out shoots for the weekend. I decided to keep this meeting and also add a new meeting every week. The goal of this second meeting was to bring in ideas and incomplete sketches so we could workshop them and form them into finished scripts. This new meeting proved tremendously successful. “Adult Discovery,” “Bill Cosby Exorcism,” and others of our most popular sketches were a direct result of these meetings. Additionally, this provided the underclassmen in *Float Your Boat* (who may not yet be comfortable presenting a sketch to our normal meeting) a new forum to air out ideas. In doing so, they have improved their writing and gained confidence that will make the show strong in the future.

As the Executive Producer of *Float Your Boat*, I was involved intricately with nearly all levels of production for every sketch. I was our principle cinematographer, director of photography, director, and editor. This means at most shoots I was the one who decided where each light would go and how it would be used, operate the camera and make stylistic decisions on how best to shoot everything, give the actors notes on how to better portray their characters, and edit the final product. If this sounds like a lot to juggle, it is. One of my biggest problems was I acted reluctant to let other people join the collaborative process. As time has gone on, I have been more willing

to stand away from the camera and let other members of *Float Your Boat* gain valuable experience filming, lighting or directing.

In addition to these roles, I also would coordinate the shoots. This involved reserving all the proper equipment for every shoot, making sure we had an adequate crew to facilitate the shoot, ensuring we had transportation to pick up the equipment for the shoot, reserving locations, and making sure the script was casted with proper costuming and props. Often a cast member would drop out of a shoot with very little notice for various reasons. This would put me in a difficult situation where I would either have to scramble to find someone to replace the role or cancel the shoot. This became a problem in the fall semester as people kept canceling at the last moment and I had no actors that could fill the spot. To remedy this, we have attempted to increase our pool of available actors to avoid canceling shoots. As a result we have had far less cancelations this semester and have kept to our schedules.

Every sketch in *Float Your Boat* goes through a number of steps before the final product is made and posted online. The first step is the idea. Ideas may come from any member of *Float Your Boat* observing actions or thinking of a clever concept. However, a witty idea or set up is not enough. It must be written into a script. While most people chose to write the first draft of a sketch alone, some chose to workshop that idea in a meeting and try to gain input before

writing. Once a draft of the script is completed it is then read at a meeting. We have actors attend these meetings so the writer can hear his script read professionally in order to better evaluate it. After the reading, the room will offer notes to the writer and suggestions on how to include more jokes, tighten and trim the script, or change other aspects of it. A typical script will go through three or four revisions and readings before it is ready to be casted and filmed.

Once everyone in the room is satisfied with the script, the second step is scheduling the shoot and casting it. Most of our shoots take place Friday through Sunday, as this is a common time when most cast members are free. The first part in setting up the shoot is establishing who will direct the sketch. While I did the majority of the directing, we had three or four other members who served as director. With the director established, the next important part is to secure the actors. This can present the biggest problem as our cast members often find themselves overbooked with various theatrical obligations. Once the cast is secured, we then assemble a crew and vehicle transportation for people and equipment. After the cast is crew is solidified, I had to secure a suitable location to film at. For the most part, we relied on friend's living in off campus housing. However, for special shoots, such as "Adult Discovery," we had to reserve a meeting room in Newhouse since the shoot was set in a business

meeting room. Finally, it was necessary to reserve the proper equipment and secure any needed props.

The third step is to shoot the sketch. On the day of the shoot, the director and some crew would arrive at Citrus TV an hour prior to the starting time and pick up the equipment needed. This equipment usually included a light kit, a tri pod, a camera (we use a Sony HDV-Z7U camera that records to mini dv tape), a boom microphone, an XLR cable (for the microphone), headphones, any gels needed for the lights, and a mini dv tape. This equipment would be driven to wherever the shoot was located. When arriving at the location, the first thing we would do is block out where the action is going to take place and take stock of the natural light and features of the room. With a specified part of the room blocked out, we would then set up where the camera will be. Next, we would set up the lighting for the room. Often times in the older houses around Syracuse it would be necessary to bring adapters to convert two prong outlets into three prong outlets in order to plug in our lights. Additionally, with these older houses we had to find out what outlets were on different circuits so that we did not pull too much energy from one source and blow a fuse or trip a circuit breaker. However, despite our best planning (and sometimes guessing) a circuit would sometimes trip so it became very important to know where the fuse box was located in the house. As we designed a lighting set up, it became important to take stock of natural

light already in the room and what light you are trying to mimic such as a lamp or natural moonlight spilling in from a window. Getting the proper lighting always consumed the most time during set up so we would allow extra time if we felt the set up was going to take longer than usual.

Once all of this was accomplished, the actors would come to the shoot. We always tried to have the shoot ready prior to the actors arriving so they are not sitting idly by. Since we are a single camera show, it was necessary to do different takes of most lines at different angles such as close ups, wide shots, and medium shots. The more angles we had, the easier the editing process would be later on as there are a variety of clips to pick from. Additionally, we would usually film multiple takes for each shot to make sure we had a good take that did not violate continuity with previous shots. During shoots where we filmed in multiple rooms at the same location, a crew would often set up lights for our next shot while I would still be filming the current one. This way, we could easily transition to that next shot without too much wasted time. If a shoot called for a few shots at different locations than the majority of them, we would often capture these pick up shots at another time.

With the shoot wrapped and all pick up shots acquired, we would then move onto the fourth step, postproduction. I edited all sketches using Avid Media Composer on my laptop while other

members of *Float Your Boat* opted to use Final Cut Pro in the Newhouse editing suites. During this process, I would first capture the media by linking the camera into my laptop. While the footage was being captured, I would re-read the script several times and print out a copy to refer to while editing. After the media was all captured, I would start to cut up the footage, noting which takes were good and labeling various shots. With everything labeled and marked, I would then set up a rough cut of the storyboard focusing mainly on matching clips and trying to preserve continuity between different shots. After the video was looking good, I would move onto sound design. Since each clip has sound and background noise distinct to itself, it is important to smooth out the audio transitions so popping and clicking between different sound clips do not distract the audience. There are two main ways to do this. The first involves raising and lowering the audio gain as each clip starts and stops when possible. The second involves creating a new audio track to carry additional atmospheric noise that is constant throughout the sketch. For example, during "Sorority Rush 2010," there were a lot of discontinuities in the audio because we were filming in an actual sorority house with people coming and going. To smooth this out, I established an audio track of people talking that played throughout the sketch. This helped out the audio's continuity while also complementing the environment of college girls meeting each other and having conversations.

With the sketch completed, we would move onto our fifth and final step in distribution. By the end of last semester we had in all 42 minutes of content. We chose to distribute this content using several platforms. First, we posted individual sketches online throughout the semester as they were completed. These sketches were posted on youtube.com, campusbasement.com, and funnyordie.com. In past years, we have posted on youtube.com and campusbasement.com, but this was the first time we posted on funnyordie.com. This was a big step forward for our distribution because funnyordie.com is a worldwide forum for humor videos and it provided us with a chance to market towards our largest audience ever. Second, we decided to hold a public screening that all members of the Syracuse Community were welcome to attend. While *Float Your Boat* has done some screenings in the past, this one was very well advertised using flyers, social networking, and word of mouth. As a result, we had our largest turnout ever for an end of the year screening. Additionally, we posted a complete copy of the episode on vimeo.com. By saturating the online community, we hope to generate more exposure and excitement about *Float Your Boat* and content in the future.

Float Your Boat has experienced much success this year but that has not come without problems and setbacks. The biggest problem we had at first was trying to capture and edit our footage. As I stated earlier, I decided to adopt a 24 frames per second recording

format this year in order to achieve a cinematic quality. To record at this speed on our Sony cameras, I had to set the format to 24 frames per second progressive. The issue is that most mini dv tape decks cannot read this recording format and the non-linear editing software we use (Final Cut Pro and Avid Media Composer) are very specific on settings for importing footage. Thusly, we were unable at first to ingest the material and edit. Obviously this is a huge problem because tapes begin to pile up and none of our sketches are being finished. Eventually I consulted with Neal Coffey, the manager of the video production unit at Syracuse University. We were able to find a solution to this issue by importing the footage straight from the camera (rather than a mini dv tape deck) and finding an exact project setting that accepted the footage. With importing possible, we could finally start cutting up the footage and create finished sketches.

Another issue we encountered this semester involved a sketch about a made-up study abroad program called, "Wafoofee." The premise was to create an infomercial about this fictitious place and show very primitive natives teaching skills much in the way a caveman would talk. The jokes were funny and the script really flowed. We filmed the sketch and I took on the job of editing. However, once I imported the footage I realized that this sketch might offend people, as it appears that we are calling people from Africa primitive and less educated. Seeing this problem, I decided to consult

with professional screenwriter, Richard Dubin. He explained that this kind of sketch is low risk and high reward where it is quite possible people will laugh, but it's more likely they would be offended. Since I did not want to create any bad press for *Float Your Boat*, we decided the sketch as it was could not be aired. However, we were able to tweak the idea just enough to make it not offensive. We decided to make it a study abroad program set back in time where the natives actually were cavemen. Since this is not specific to one kind of people, we would not be offending anyone. The jokes still worked and we were able to salvage the sketch and not waste a shoot. This taught me that funny ideas can almost always be translated from a format that could be offensive to one where it is not while still maintaining the integrity of the jokes.

In past years, *Float Your Boat* has experienced issues transitioning from one year to the next. As I mentioned, when the four seniors left after the first season the show experienced a sharp decline. To avoid this happening next year with much of our cast and crew along with myself graduating, I have already named next year's executive producer and have encouraged him to start organizing the show. Next year's Executive Producer will be Alex Carmedelle, an enthusiastic and dedicated sophomore with the right talents and energy to lead *Float Your Boat*. Alex has shown great leadership and recruiting abilities this year that will suit him well as Executive

Producer. While I still oversee the show and make sure we meet all our deadlines and requirements, Alex is the one now that organizes meetings and coordinates shoots. This experience will allow Alex to come into next semester with the knowledge and abilities to manage a quality show right away. Additionally, I have been making sure our underclassmen in the show begin to take a more hands-on approach to Float Your Boat. They are now very involved with all aspects of production from writing to post-production.

I have grown tremendously since the beginning of the year both creatively and as a leader. One of my biggest issues when I first started directing was asking my actors to do another take and not giving them notes on what exactly I wanted different. I relied on them to telepathically read my mind and know what I wanted to change. This also was a result of me going into some shoots without an intricate knowledge of the sketch. Since I was still trying to understand what was happening and who the characters were, I was unable to give proper notes that would allow for a better performance. As a result, the actors would either become frustrated as they felt they were not performing well enough or burn out by the end of the shoot and give weaker performances. Now when I go into a shoot, I make sure I know the script cold and can communicate

constructive notes. This way the shoots go quicker, the performances are richer, and there is a better relationship between the talent and myself.

I also have sharpened my technical skills throughout my time as Executive Producer. Last year, I lit and filmed my first few sketches for *Float Your Boat*. My style for these sketches was very similar every time even though the content of the sketches were drastically different. As I mentioned before, a priority this year was to achieve a number of different styles that offered a dynamic and distinct visual component. This meant learning a number of new lighting tricks and styles that have strengthened my knowledge of exposure and proper composition. I also have learned to use the camera outside of the conventional zoom and pan techniques. Now when I am set to direct a shoot, I can take a look at the script and visualize what exact technique I should adopt in order to best compliment the themes of the sketch.

Additionally, I have experienced substantial growth as an editor. In "Saw 14," we were presented the challenge of having a television monitor play video during the sketch. I made the decision to film a television turned off during the shoot and then in postproduction put an image in the monitor. However, the issue with this is I shot the sketch handheld and the image on the television monitor keeps moving making it difficult to keep a video clip stay

inside it using Avid Media Composer. Therefore, I had to use After Effects, a visual effects software. This allowed me to track how the clip was moving and have my new video clip mirror the camera's movement and stay inside the monitor. The result is seamless; it is nearly impossible to tell that the video loop was laid down in post-production.

"College Gameday" was another sketch that tested me as an editor. Here, we were making a sketch that spoofed *ESPN's* show *College Gameday* by having them cover an organic chemistry class rather than a sporting event. The challenge here was to create *ESPN's* bottom line (a scrolling line of graphics displaying sport scores and news) at the bottom of the screen along with the footage and graphics. To put in the bottom line, I downloaded an episode of *ESPN's Sportscenter* and put that as a video track. I then made all of the sketch's footage in another video track and enabled picture in picture. This allowed us to see just the bottom line from the *Sportcenter* video with the rest of the screen displaying footage from the sketch. Since Avid does not have the capacity to make graphics, I had to use Adobe Photoshop to create the title graphics and then put those in another video track, again using picture in picture effect. I then had to color correct the whole sketch by using another video track. When all was said and done, I had a very professional looking video with four video tracks and ten audio tracks.

I could not be more proud of what we have accomplished this year with *Float Your Boat*. Last year, we did not meet our requirements set forth by the Executive Staff at Citrus TV. As a result, the show was placed on probation and was not viewed upon in good graces by members at Citrus TV. This year we have met and exceeded our content requirements. We reestablished a reputation for making our content in a timely manner and following the rules and standards at Citrus TV. As for the show itself, I think it is actually better than what those four seniors were able to achieve in season one. Furthermore, we had some sketches this year that are different from anything we have done before. In past years, the sketches for *Float Your Boat* have been a boys' club with females being a premium in any sketch. That starkly changed this year and we had our first sketch with all female actresses in "Sorority Rush 2010." We also are currently developing the first-ever animated sketch to be show on Citrus TV in "Cub Scout Bear Country," which shows what happens what a Cub Scout patrol goes on a winter retreat in Bear Country. Finally, we are working on a few sketches that utilize a green screen for various special effects.

As I reflect on the vision and goals I had entering the position of Executive Producer, I am very satisfied with the end result. While there are some sketches I wish I could reshoot and some writing I wish was tighter, I feel I met the goals I set forth for myself. The

writing this year compared to previous years shows a higher level of wit, sophistication, and variation while challenging the audience. The content is similar to the sketches found on a professional show such as, *Kids In the Hall*. The visual components of every sketch this year is much more dynamic and interesting than those of last year's sketches. The images are very reminiscent of the *Saturday Night Live's* digital shorts and feature a strong cinematic quality that engages the viewer and compliments the comedy.

I have been extremely fortunate to have a wealth of people to support and aid me throughout my time with *Float Your Boat*. Whenever a technical issue arose or I needed advice on how to film a certain sketch I could always turn to Neal Coffey and receive the right information. If writing questions ever surfaced or if I was unsure if a sketch was in good taste, Peter Moller and Richard Dubin were always more than willing to offer good advice. Additionally, Ryan Bolton, Bill Sharp, Ali Mierzejewski, Dan Foley, and Ben Slutzky have been extremely supportive at Citrus TV and have been very accommodating to meet my needs for the show. Finally and most importantly, I am extremely grateful to the amazing and talented cast and crew of *Float Your Boat*. They have sacrificed countless hours of their free time to be part of something special and create a show that defines quality in the entertainment department at Citrus TV.

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Capstone Summary

Since last fall, I have served as the Executive Producer for the sketch comedy television show, *Float Your Boat*. Syracuse University students produce this show through the student run television station, Citrus TV. The role of Executive Producer is the highest possible position to hold on a show and comes with a multitude of obligations. With this title, I assumed all responsibilities with regards to organizing, managing, and producing the show along with meeting deadlines and abiding by station-enforced bylaws. This position is unique in that it encompasses equal amounts of creative and managerial responsibilities. On the creative side, I would have the last say in what sketches we would produce and what material would be deemed fit to air. Additionally, I would oversee and organize the cast and crew of about thirty people for *Float Your Boat*.

As a sketch comedy show, we do not produce typical half-hour programs with a central theme and continuous characters. Instead, we produce many 30 second to five minute sketches that are self-contained stories with distinct characters and theme. We treat each sketch as a separate short film that requires individual attention from writing to postproduction. After each sketch is completed, we then combine them and begin to form a longer episode.

Float Your Boat holds two meetings every week and conducts shoots on the weekends when the cast and crew are free. It is my

responsibility as Executive Producer to organize and run these meetings. The first meeting we have each week serves as a platform to read polished scripts that are ready to be shot and plan out shoots for the upcoming weekend. Our actors attend these meetings in addition to the writers so the writers can hear a professional reading of their scripts. The second meeting we hold each week allows members to bring in ideas and incomplete sketches so that they can be work shopped into completed scripts.

Each sketch created for *Float Your Boat* goes through a number of steps before the final product is created. The first step is to come up with the idea or premise for the sketch. This can come from observing something unusual or just thinking of a clever premise. Once the idea is established, it must then be fleshed out into a script. With the script complete, it will be brought to one of our meetings to be read by our actors. After the reading, the room will offer the writer notes on the script about what areas can be tightened and trimmed, where new jokes can be added, and other suggestions. The writer will incorporate these suggestions in a subsequent draft and bring it to a future meeting. A typical script goes through at least three to four revisions before it is ready to shoot.

The second step is to cast the script. This includes who will act in it, who will direct, and who will serve as crew for the shoot. If someone canceled on the shoot, it would be my responsibility to either

find a suitable replacement or reschedule the shoot. The third step is to film the sketch. Prior to the cameras rolling, the crew would meet at the Citrus TV station to pick up the equipment and transport it to the shooting location. Typically this equipment included our camera, tripod, lighting equipment, videotape, and microphone. Once at the location, the crew would decide what portion of the area would be filmed and establish where the camera will be. Next, the crew would set up lights so the shot would be properly exposed and achieve desired lighting qualities such as mimicking daylight or moonlight. With the camera and lights set up, the actors would arrive and the shoot would commence. We would typically film each line from a few different angles such as close ups and long shots. This way, when the sketch was all shot the editor would have stylistic choices when assembling the final product.

With the sketch filmed, the fourth step is to edit it. To do this, we would take the footage from the videotape and import it onto a computer using editing software such as Avid Media Composer. As the footage imported, the editor would reread the script a few times to understand the story and how to cut up the raw footage. While editing may seem like a fairly straightforward process, the editor actually possesses a great deal of stylistic creativity on how to assemble the final product. The editor controls how the sketch is paced, how the visual and audio elements interact to convey moods, and which takes

to use. Once the sketch is completely edited, it is exported as a digital file.

With the digital file of a sketch created, the fifth and final step is distribution. Every sketch we complete for *Float Your Boat* is posted online through a variety of websites. We chose to post on websites frequented by college students as our humor resonates strongest with them. Additionally, each semester we compile all our sketches into a complete episode. This episode is distributed online and also is showcased in an end of the year screening. This screening is open to the entire Syracuse community and serves as a way to market *Float Your Boat* while celebrating the hard work done by the cast and crew in making the episode.

I was intricately involved with most sketches from the idea's inception to it being posted online as a final product. I served as our head writer, primary director, camera operator, lighter and editor. Furthermore, I would often times find myself serving many of these roles at the same shoot. In order to bring more people into the production process and make *Float Your Boat* a more collaborative effort, I have spent a great deal of time this year training underclassmen with the hope they will stay active in future years. With this training, the underclassmen will be able to come into next year and begin the process of making quality content from day one.