



Aaron Sorkin '83

Script Sensation

Emmy Award winner Aaron Sorkin always envisioned himself as an actor. Then he discovered writing and became one of Hollywood's hottest voices.

By Brad Herzog

Back in 1972, a little sixth-grader named Aaron Sorkin stood on the side of the road in Scarsdale, New York, and waited for President Richard Nixon's motorcade to roll through town. He carried a sign that read: "McGovern for President." But before his 11-year-old voice could be heard, a woman—older than Methuselah and shorter than Sorkin—grabbed the sign out of his hands, whacked him over the head with it, threw it on the ground, and stomped on it.

Revenge can be sweet.

Twenty-nine years later, Sorkin's voice—as the creative soul behind NBC's critically and commercially acclaimed series *The West Wing*—reaches more than 17 million viewers each week. In only two years, the hour-long political drama about President Josiah Bartlet and his impassioned White House staff has accumulated a record Emmy haul (nine awards last September, including one for Sorkin's writing) and has tapped a cultural vein to such an extent that "Bartlet for President" bumper stickers can be spotted on Sunset Boulevard.

Yet the irony is that this tale of retribution has nothing to do with politics. That sixth-grader's sign merely symbolized a crush he had on a classmate who had volunteered for McGovern. And Sorkin will tell you his writing career, which includes authorship of *A Few Good Men* and *The American President*, stems from the very same get-the-girl pursuit.

"I was standing in the back of the theater during a test screening of *The American President*," Sorkin recalls. "At one point, Michael Douglas says something nicely romantic to Annette Bening. Way down in front I heard three women gasp, and I thought, 'Wow, I did that to them.' So I became very happy being sort of heard and not seen."

Which wasn't the original plan at all. *The Los Angeles Times* has christened Sorkin as "TV's new golden boy." *Mirabella* dubbed him "the most literate voice on TV." And *TV Guide* listed him—along with such entertainment icons as Oprah Winfrey and Regis Philbin—as one of television's 10 most valuable people. But Sorkin never set out to conquer the small screen. He loved the stage. And he never expected to write for a living. He was an actor.

Sorkin first caught the acting bug in eighth grade when he played General Bullmoose in *Li'l Abner* at Scarsdale Junior High School. "I have always loved plays," he says. "My parents began taking me at an early age, and as soon as I was old enough to take the train into the city by myself, I did. I saw all of them." He also saw himself starring in them, in part because he figured the writing life required a more exotic background than his middle-class, mostly suburban upbringing.

So he enrolled in SU's College of Visual and Performing Arts, and having been a star performer in high school, he expected much the same on campus. But his 8:30 a.m. theater classes interrupted his sleep schedule, and he found himself repeatedly being quizzed about plays he hadn't read. When you're unaware that the salesman dies at the end of *Death of a Salesman*, you're not going to get by on wit and charm. He flunked his freshman core requirements. "Come back and pay attention next time" was the familiar refrain. "The professors felt I wouldn't amount to anything unless they knocked me down a few pegs," Sorkin says. "And I'm eternally grateful to them."

Duly humbled and newly serious, he re-dedicated himself to his studies, gained the faculty's respect, and graduated in 1983

with a bachelor of fine arts degree in musical theater. The story comes full circle—as Aaron Sorkin stories often do—a few years later when playwright Arthur Miller actually asked Sorkin to fill in for him as a lecturer at City College of New York. The subject: *Death of a Salesman*.

After graduation, Sorkin returned to New York City expecting immediate fame in front of the footlights. Instead, he joined the horde of aspiring actors for whom no job is too odd. He delivered singing telegrams, drove a limo, toured Alabama with a children's theater company, and donned a moose head and handed out fliers promoting a hunting-and-fishing show. His most successful gig came as a bartender on Broadway, which, for a theater major, turned out to be the ultimate postgraduate education.

Then one night—the kind of Friday night, Sorkin says, "where it seems like everyone was invited to a party but you"—he slipped a blank piece of paper into a friend's semi-manual typewriter and began banging the keys. This was Newton's apple, Naismith's peach basket, Fleming's petri dish. "Almost instantly, I felt a confidence that I had never felt with acting. And I thought acting was all I ever wanted to do," he recalls. "But I realized all that time I hadn't been learning acting. I had been learning what a play was."

Sorkin's first creation, *Removing All Doubt*, was good enough to merit several high-class stage readings. His second, written primarily on cocktail napkins and based very loosely on a case involving his attorney sister, was *A Few Good Men*. To paraphrase Sorkin's instant-classic line, the truth—if you can handle the truth—is that this aspiring actor was an overnight writing sensation. When your first full-length play opens on Broadway, earns you the Outer Critics Circle Award as Outstanding American Playwright, and nabs you a Golden Globe nomination by becoming a hit movie directed by Rob Reiner and starring Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson, well, that's a heck of a rookie year.

Sorkin's next collaboration with Reiner was *The American President*, the story of a widowed commander-in-chief who falls in love with a lobbyist. While writing the

Sorkin continued

screenplay, which earned him his second Golden Globe nomination, Sorkin spent two years holed up in the Four Seasons Hotel in Los Angeles. In the process, he developed an affinity for late-night ESPN *SportsCenter* breaks and an understanding of White House machinations. These led to yet another feather in Sorkin's multimedia cap—two television series.

Sports Night, a half-hour behind-the-scenes look at the frenzy of an 11 p.m. nightly cable sports show, debuted in 1998. *The West Wing* arrived in 1999. Serving as executive producer and writer or co-writer of every episode of both series, Sorkin would pen the latter during the week and the former over the weekend. In all, he churned out about 70 scripts in his first two years of television. A 5:30 a.m. to midnight workday was the norm.

ABC canceled *Sports Night* after two seasons, despite its enthusiastic core audience. Some observers had trouble categorizing the show. Was it a comedy? A drama? A sitcom? An anti-sitcom? The question surprised Sorkin, given television's successful hybrid history with shows like *M*A*S*H*. He offers an analogy: "If you're driving along and your radio is tuned to a rock station, you don't say, 'Wait a minute! I just heard elements of jazz and blues. Let's get to the bottom of this before I can enjoy this song.' To me, it was just a half-hour show."

Indeed, Sorkin's body of work defies such categorization. *The West Wing* is a drama with laugh-out-loud moments. *The American President* was a romantic comedy with moments of sobriety. Even *A Few Good Men*, a very serious story, included some very funny lines. Some may consider it Sorkin's calling card; he claims it's just compensation. "To use a sports analogy, my fastball isn't fast enough just to throw a fastball. My curveball doesn't break enough just to throw a curve," he says. "I have to mix up my pitches."

What Sorkin's creations also have in common is an attempt to surmise what it might be like behind the scenes, whether it's the military, ESPN, or the White House. In fact, *The West Wing* has been so successful at examining political issues and dramatizing the challenges facing all the president's men and women that *Time* magazine described it as a "national civics lesson." Sorkin, however, insists his goal is neither to teach nor to preach. "I don't have a political or social agenda with the show," he says. "The show's not meant to be good for you. I'm not asking anyone to eat their vegetables. I'm just trying to come up with an entertaining, compelling hour of television."

Sorkin signed a \$16 million development deal with Warner Bros. Television last September, meaning he will shape new projects for the studio. But television's golden boy will always point to the theater as his first love. "There's never going to be anything more exciting than doing something on stage for a live audience," he says. "On the other hand, with television, I'm doing a new play every week. I'm reaching a huge audience, much larger even than I have in the movies. I think, for a writer, I have the best job in show business."

David Solove '90



Clowning Around

Go ahead, call David Solove a clown. He doesn't mind. That's because he is a clown—the boss clown of one of the traveling units of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

Solove joined the circus nine years ago, after a one-year stint at the Ringling Bros. Clown College. Back then he'd looked at clown college as good training for work in children's theater. Now he considers clowning his calling. "I don't think it surprises anybody that this is what I'm doing," he says. "I love being able to touch people's lives, make it a personal experience so they're not just one of thousands of people sitting in the audience. They feel as if they have a clown of their own. In fact, I have people who come back year after year looking for me."

Solove is one of 18 clowns in the Blue Unit, one of the circus's two traveling troupes. Solove's routines include refereeing a juggling match, diving onto a table and sliding across it, and cramming into a Volkswagen Beetle with 12 of his colleagues. He also keeps a road diary that's published at *Ringling.com*.

Among his duties as boss clown are making sure the other clowns have everything they need for shows—from shaving cream to bicycle inner tubes—and helping new clowns learn routines and adjust to life on the road.

The average professional life span of a traveling clown is three to four years. So how has Solove lasted so long? "I like the travel," admits Solove, who is on the road 50 weeks a year. "Every week I'm in a different city with new audiences and things to see and do. It's always fresh. But on the downside, every week I'm in a different city."

At least he doesn't have to stay in hotels. Solove lives on the 56-car Ringling Bros. train, in a room that houses a stove, refrigerator, microwave, washer, and dryer. The drawback: no eating in bed. That's because it doubles as the kitchen table.

It's not exactly a life that's conducive to long-term relationships, which is one reason Solove says: "I'm probably closer to the end than I am to the beginning."

But don't count on a retirement party anytime soon. "I will continue to do it as long as my heart is still in it," he says.

—Debby Waldman



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Heather Paige Kent '90

That's Life in Hollywood

When New Yorker Heather Paige Kent graduated in 1990 with a musical theater degree from the College of Visual and Performing Arts (VPA), she headed straight to California. "I always thought I'd end up on Broadway," Kent says. "I figured I'd try out Hollywood for six months, and then go back home."

Today, more than a decade later, Kent is a successful television star, appearing most recently in CBS's *That's Life* as the bubbly Lydia DeLucca, a 32-year-old New Jersey woman who breaks up with her longtime fiancé and returns to school. "We follow Lydia's journey through her new life and see how her friends and family react to this situation," Kent says. "We also witness how their lives change, too."

For Kent, achieving success in Hollywood took a lot of hard work. "It's a difficult, confusing business," she says. "It took a while to figure out what was going on, and in the meantime I used my VPA training to earn a living." After dabbling in musical theater and performing at Disneyland for a year, Kent formed a 14-piece big band and became the lead singer. "It was really fun being in a big band with swing, jazz, and blues," she says. "We were

opening for Mel Torme and The Manhattan Transfer—it definitely was a great time in my life."

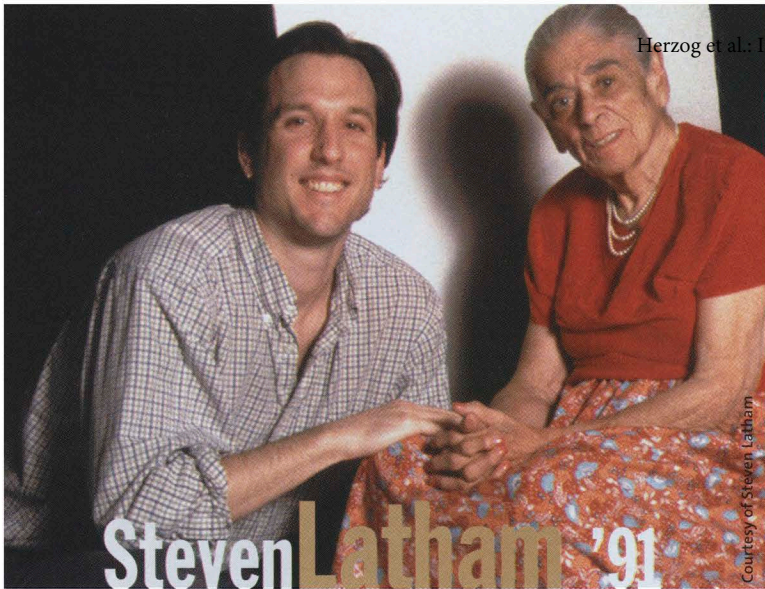
During her four years with the band, Kent also began landing acting roles. She appeared in the play *Funny Business*, which led to work in sitcoms and TV movies. "That's how I made my transition from singing to acting," she says.

Kent snagged a part in the TV show *Life with Roger*, appearing in 10 of the 13 episodes. She went on to play roles in *Jenny*, *Men Behaving Badly*, and *Stark Raving Mad* before joining the cast of *That's Life*.

In *That's Life*, Kent works with such outstanding actors as Ellen Burstyn and Paul Sorvino. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," she says. "And I think we're doing quality television."

Even though Kent is not yet ready to move on from the small screen, she plans to keep her options open. "I'm a firm believer that whatever is meant to be will happen," says Kent, who hopes to produce her own show in the future. "I love my job. There are very few people who get up every day and are really excited to go to work. I'm grateful for what I have accomplished and to be able to do what I love."

—Erin Corcoran



Celebrating Extraordinary Lives

Steven Latham was intrigued with the idea that there were people alive today who'd gone from the horse-and-buggy days to seeing the Pathfinder land on Mars. That was the impetus for the television series he created, *The Living Century: The Extraordinary Lives of Ordinary People* (www.TheLivingCentury.com).

The series, which runs on PBS through 2002, profiles people 100 years of age and older who still lead active lives, and features one centenarian per 30-minute episode. "These are people who have either touched history or made history," Latham says. "They were born before plastic, before Communism, before zippers. Amazingly,

each centenarian we've met never thought about aging."

Latham, who received a public relations degree from the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, created the series after a long apprenticeship in various facets of the West Coast entertainment industry. He accumulated experience by working in public relations, advertising, feature films, television and theater production, and producing an Academy Award-winning short documentary, *Dolphins: Minds in the Water*. "After 10 years of working for studios, I wanted to develop projects I was passionate about," he says. "I began thinking about what's important."

Realizing there are more than 70,000 people in the United States who are at least 100 years old, he located some and began talking with them. "I was absolutely amazed at their humor, their agelessness," he marvels. "They're old only in body. In spirit and mind, they're magnificent and incredibly young."

He and his producing partner, co-presidents of Reverie Productions, interested filmmakers Barbra Streisand and Cis Corman of Barwood Films in producing the project with them. With Latham as creative director, they put together their first two programs, each a carefully crafted mix of interviews, archival photographs, historians' perspectives, home movies, and original music of the time.

The first two programs, hosted by Jack Lemmon, featured 107-year-old Rose Freedman, who was the last remaining survivor of the infamous 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in New York City that killed 146 women; and 100-year-old farmer Ray Crist, who helped develop the first atomic bomb.

"The critical and public response has been overwhelming," Latham says. "This project and others that we are producing have been indescribably rewarding. For me, work and life are inseparable. We do this as our work, our fun, our everything."

—Carol North Schmuckler

Late Night Buffoonery

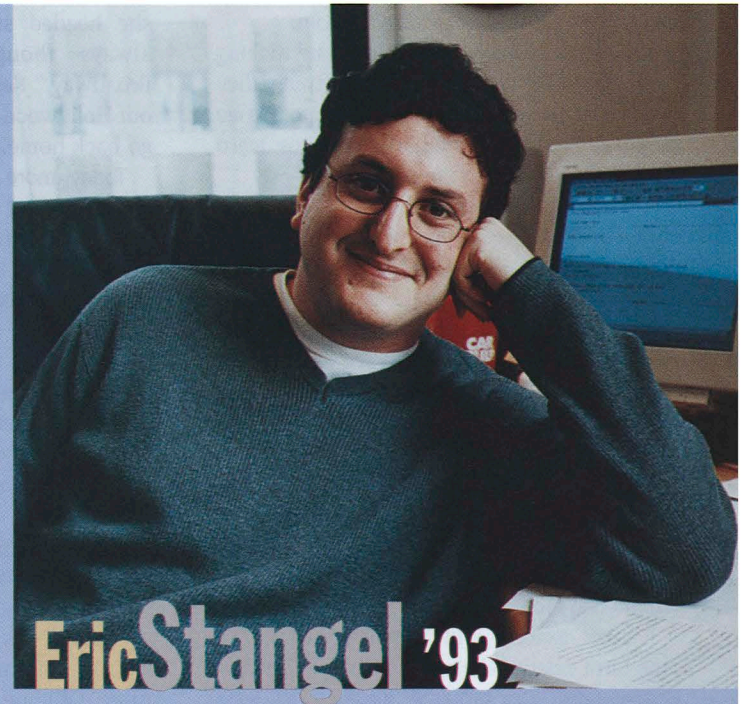
It may not have been an auspicious beginning, but growing up in Chappaqua, New York, Eric Stangel and his brother Justin fancied themselves as filmmakers with their father's Super 8 camera. "The movies would be a mess, but they were interesting and fun to do," Stangel says.

The two still have fun collaborating—and now they get paid for it. They are the head writers for *The Late Show with David Letterman* on CBS. "People always ask if we write the Top 10 lists," Stangel says. "We have 12 staff writers and they hand in maybe 40 jokes each for a Top 10. That's just to get 10 jokes."

Comedy was far from Stangel's mind when he came to the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications for the broadcast journalism program. "I wanted to be Bob Costas," he says. "On my first day there, I was in a roomful of other people who wanted to be Bob Costas, but they seemed to know every single statistic. I thought, 'Maybe I don't want to be a sportscaster.'"

Shortly after graduation, Stangel and his brother created their own stage show, *Big City Comedy*, in Manhattan. That led to work for Fox Television, *Saturday Night Live*, and USA Network. At USA they created comedy shorts to air between shows. Using a series of Chinese martial arts films in a manner reminiscent of their childhood efforts, the Stangels re-edited the footage and added humorous voice-overs.

Their next assignment for USA—creating "day-in-the-life" video pieces for a comedian who would take a different job each week—helped get them hired as staff writers for *The Late Show*



in 1997. Soon they were doing similar pieces with Letterman. The brothers traveled worldwide on these assignments, including a three-week stay in Nagano, Japan, to cover the Winter Olympics with Letterman's mom. "That's the best part of the job," Stangel says. "You constantly find yourself in situations where you can't imagine how you got there."

—Gary Pallassino