

Chat Transcript

Live Chat with Craig Hoffman

Sunday, June 13 1999

[21:00] <Manuel> In a few minutes our live chat with Craig Hoffman, producer and writer of "The Wonder Years" and "Family Guy" will start.

[21:03] <Manuel> Welcome to Craig Hoffmans's first "The Wonder Years" chat session!

[21:03] <Manuel> Hi Craig, thanks for being here today!

[21:03] <HoffLA> thanks everyone

[21:03] <HoffLA> how is everyone doing?

[21:03] <Manuel> I'd also like to welcome Peter Schubert (TWYChatInfo). Peter will help you if you have any problems and supervise #HoffmanQuestions

[21:04] <TWYChatInfo> my pleasure

[21:04] <Manuel> Craig, would you like to make any opening remarks before we delve into questions?

[21:04] <HoffLA> I'm just really pleased that the show seems to have translated so universally.

[21:04] <HoffLA> For me, it was a very personal experience...I was a few years younger than Kevin was

[21:05] <HoffLA> supposed to be, so it really struck a chord with me, and I'm glad you didn't have to grow up in that era, or even in America for it to do the same

[21:05] <Manuel> ok, here is our first question from Zer: Recently, Ken Topolsky, in a speech in the Roberto Goizueta Business School, warned about the influence of money in the show business. So I would like to know if you had a bad experience in your work as a producer, and what do you think about Ken's affirmation?

[21:06] <HoffLA> First of all, I loved working with Ken, and he directed the favorite episode I wrote

[21:06] <HoffLA> but if he's talking about the fact that television now depends on the bottom line, I'd agree

[21:07] <HoffLA> I've seen too many shows given the boot after one or two episodes because of ratings

[21:07] <HoffLA> There are so many examples of classic shows that didn't take off until a year or two into the run...

[21:07] <HoffLA> Dick Van Dyke, Cheers...and now, nobody has the luxury of building an audience

[21:07] <HoffLA> so yeah, it's pretty frightening.

[21:07] <Manuel> what was your favorite episode to write?

[21:08] <HoffLA> my first...Hardware Store.

[21:08] <Manuel> <philipp> [...] and why?

[21:08] <HoffLA> although writing "Politics As Usual" was a lot of fun...I just wasn't as happy with the finished episode.

[21:09] <TWYChatInfo> what was wrong with it?

[21:09] <HoffLA> I'll tell you about Hardware first and then we can talk Politics :)

[21:09] <Manuel> ok

[21:10] <HoffLA> I had just finished my first job as a staff writer on a show called "Dream On"--don't know if any of you know it

[21:10] <HoffLA> Previously I had written a couple of "Murphy Browns", so I was still pretty new to all this.

[21:10] <HoffLA> My agent sent me to meet with Bob Brush just to talk about a single script, so I spent a lot of time

[21:10] <HoffLA> coming up with ideas for an episode.

[21:11] <HoffLA> One of them came out of my first job in high school. I worked in a local hardware store for someone very like the character I wrote about.

[21:11] <HoffLA> He was old fashioned, and very demanding, but very knowledgeable, but I didn't care about that.

[21:11] <HoffLA> I just wanted to have fun on the job, and after a couple of days, I quit.

[21:12] <HoffLA> So I pitched that to Bob, along with a half a dozen others, and after a day or two, he called me back in and said they were interested in doing it.

[21:12] <HoffLA> I came up with an outline--at that point, it had a "b" story about Kevin missing work to sneak into

[21:12] <HoffLA> "Carnal Knowledge"--which we pulled out and later used elsewhere

[21:13] <HoffLA> but while I was writing that episode, they told me I had been added to the staff, which was a complete surprise to me

[21:13] <HoffLA> Anyway, filming it was a delight...great cast. Al Ruscio, who I've worked with since, was wonderful, and it played like a two act play.

[21:13] <HoffLA> I thought Ken did a marvelous job directing it, and it still resonates for me.

[21:14] <HoffLA> I'm through now....someone else can talk :)

[21:14] <Manuel> over to politics as usual. where you actually disapointed by politicians like Winnie?

[21:15] <HoffLA> no..but that's an example of an episode that came out of research. I did a ton of research on the McGovern campaign

[21:16] <HoffLA> And I came across his speech when he admitted defeat. It basically said that even though he lost, if he brought young people into politics and taught them they were part of the process, it was a victory

[21:16] <HoffLA> unfortunately, that speech was never added to the mix...it was supposed to play during that last scene.

[21:16] <HoffLA> ok, next?

[21:16] <Manuel> <bren86> have you ever used plot devices from one show on another show you wrote for later?

[21:16] <HoffLA> hmmm...well, I don't think you've seen family guy yet, but we've done a wonder years parody

[21:17] <Manuel> which episode?

[21:17] <HoffLA> the second one

[21:18] <Manuel> I hope FOX will sell the show to European networks...

[21:18] <HoffLA> the daughter is in school, trying to make a decision, and we show a close-up of her face while Snuffy-like music plays and a danny stern soundalike does voice over

[21:19] <Manuel> our next question comes from Taras: did cast members have any input in the scripts?

[21:20] <HoffLA> I can only remember one instance in which Alley asked me to make a line simpler, and she was right.

[21:21] <HoffLA> But in other instances, for example, Dan had always wanted to do a story about a buddy of his who died in the Korean War, but we could never make it work

[21:21] <HoffLA> And I have to tell you in most other shows, if a star wants something, it's done, no matter how bad an idea it may be, which is why television suffers.

[21:21] <HoffLA> When I was on Evening Shade, Burt Reynolds, who was the exec producer and star, would come up with an idea, and you'd have to find a way to make it work

[21:21] <TWYChatInfo> :o)

[21:22] <Manuel> There are 4 big issues now: Winnie, the finale, lost scripts and the atmosphere on the set. I'll begin with the first one

[21:23] <HoffLA> okay

[21:23] <Manuel> <bren86> why was winnie absent during a good bit of the fifth season (ep 69-83)? was this a concious decision or just how it turned out?

[21:24] <HoffLA> hmmm...she was pretty involved in all the episodes I did...but if she seemed to be missing, I think it was because the feeling was we had explored this relationship in so many ways for the past four season

[21:24] <HoffLA> that to keep the show fresh, we had to find other story areas, other girls for Kevin to be interested in, always knowing it would come back to Winnie in the end

[21:25] <Manuel> why did you decide to bring her back in "Double Date" (is it true that the ratings were going down without her)?

[21:26] <HoffLA> No, not at all...and I don't think any of us thought that "Double Date" represented a "Comeback" for her.

[21:26] <HoffLA> We had just been investigating other areas of Kevin and the Arnold's life...like Wayne joining the Army,

[21:27] <HoffLA> that kind of thing.. Don't forget, every episode had to be about the Arnolds, not the Coopers, so there was only so much open to do with Winnie

[21:28] <Manuel> ok, to the lost scripts: "what do you know about episodes that were written but never

made it to the screen? (do you have done one of them? can we have them?)" and from <Idiot_Jed>"
Q: Do you know how many unfilmed scripts were left at the end of the series? can you tell us some of the storylines if ya remember..."

[21:28] <HoffLA> You know, I don't...I seem to recall there were at least one or two that were abandoned...but by the time I got there, I think the feeling was, that even if it was a page one rewrite, it was our job to make an episode

[21:29] <HoffLA> if you want, you can tell me what you've heard, and if it rings a bell, I'll confirm it

[21:29] <Manuel> we had once a discussion about an episode called "The Big Spin"

[21:30] <HoffLA> what was it about?

[21:30] <Manuel> someone bought it at www.scriptshop.com : it was about a party at Kevin's house

[21:31] <HoffLA> that got out of control? That might be "The Lost Weekend" which we totally rewrote..in fact, I put my then Fiancee's name in it as a joke

[21:31] <Manuel> :-)

[21:31] <Manuel> did you ever have to cut scenes out of the wonder years because an episode ran too long, or the network wanted something cut, or something like that. if yes, can you tell us anything about them?

[21:32] <HoffLA> whole scenes? that I don't remember...we were pretty sparing as far as filming went. ABC made us change the ending to "Eclipse," though. That I remember very well

[21:34] <Manuel> what did you have to change?

[21:34] <HoffLA> well, at first they weren't going to let us do it at all, because we were showing vandalism at a public place, the planetarium

[21:34] <Manuel> haha. sorry

[21:34] <HoffLA> then, they finally allowed us to do it if we showed the kid being caught and led away by the police in handcuffs.

[21:35] <HoffLA> So that no innocent child would think it was okay. Oh, brother!

[21:35] <TWYChatInfo> HAHA!

[21:35] <HoffLA> in the original, I just let him get away with it.

[21:36] <HoffLA> which, I guess would have led to the downfall of civilization as we know it

[21:36] <Manuel> from Bren: did you guys wrtte any holiday episodes which weren't filmed (like Halloween specials)

[21:36] <Manuel> :-)

[21:36] <HoffLA> Boy, we tried SO hard to come up with a Halloween episode. I think Mark Perry actually wrote at least as story line for one.

[21:36] <HoffLA> But we could never come up with one that Bob liked....which I still regret...what a great arena.

[21:37] <HoffLA> Oh, I remembered a story we ended up not doing. And it was mine!

[21:37] <HoffLA> We had this story where Kevin joins the newspaper and sort of gets carried away with it, under the guidance of a teacher.

[21:38] <HoffLA> He ends up doing a story on the school custodian, showing that he had been a war hero, but instead of being grateful as Kevin would have thought, He's angry that Kevin used his life without permission

[21:38] <HoffLA> I actually wrote several scenes before realizing that the story just didn't work

[21:38] <Manuel> sounds interesting, though

[21:39] <HoffLA> IT was, it just didn't hang together in the end.

[21:39] <Manuel> ok, let's talk about another big issue, the atmosphere on the set: "was there any tension on the set of the wonder years?" and "Somewhere I heard that Fred Savage and Josh Saviano had problems and that was the reason why we didn't see Josh very often in season 6. Is that true?"

[21:40] <HoffLA> I've been on several shows now, and except for "Murphy Brown", I've never come across a set like the Wonder Years.

[21:40] <HoffLA> We adored the actors, and I like to think they respected us. I still run into Fred from time to time, and get the warmest welcome, and same with Dan.

[21:41] <HoffLA> As for Josh, no, there were no problems with Fred and Josh, but if I had to come up with a reason why you didn't see Paul very often, I'm afraid to say his character didn't age as well as we had hoped.

[21:41] <Manuel> so you're still in touch with the cast and the staff? tell them that we'd like to chat with them :-)

[21:42] <HoffLA> As Josh grew up, the character of Paul seemed less and less the archetype we'd

had.

[21:42] <HoffLA> I'll mention it, but can't promise! :)

[21:42] <HoffLA> Dan is VERY involved in local LA theatre here...

[21:42] <HoffLA> He runs something called "The Playwright's Kitchen Ensemble", dedicated to new plays

[21:43] <HoffLA> Fred, as you know, did a season and a half of a show called "Working." He was a great kid and grew into a great young man

[21:43] <HoffLA> No affectations, no attitudes, just a nice, nice guy.

[21:43] <Manuel> what do you think about "Working", by the way

[21:44] <HoffLA> well, you know, Sy Rosen was on it, so it was kind of a reunion...and Danica guest-starred. I never watched the show enough to have an opinion

[21:44] <HoffLA> The irony of working in TV is you're never home to watch it!

[21:44] <Manuel> there is one topic which everyone is interested in: the finale! " Did the producer/actors knew that it would be the final episode when they filmed it? Or did they have plans for a seventh season?"

[21:44] <HoffLA> at the start of the sixth season, we had only been picked up for thirteen episodes, so we knew ABC was losing interest.

[21:45] <HoffLA> We had no idea whether we'd even have the final nine episodes...but when we were picked up, the handwriting was on the wall, so we pretty much wrote to a season finale.

[21:45] <HoffLA> And because all of Danny's narration could be changed at the last minute... sometimes until the day before air, we were able to do that wrapup knowing it was our last

[21:45] <Manuel> do you have the alternative end narration?

[21:46] <HoffLA> no...by that time, it was clear we weren't coming back.

[21:46] <Manuel> From Tony Pickett: Why in the final episode did you have Winnie leaving for Paris, while returning eight years later to be met by his wife and first son, eight months old? Was this an attempt to write a bitter-sweet rather than a happy ending? There are a number of fans who are unhappy with

this ending as you must know. Was this an attempt to draw a final line, because this rules out any possibility of even a 'one-off' reunion movie. There is even a planned reunion script widely available

[21:46] <Manuel> on the net. You can never say never again, because you never know. It would be fascinating to pick up the story again, years later.

[21:46] <Manuel> and "What do you think about Reunion Shows?"

[21:47] <HoffLA> Yeah, we all knew that it wouldn't be totally popular. But the one thing we wanted to keep up was the "reality" of the series. Most series wouldn't have started by killing off Winnie Cooper'

[21:47] <HoffLA> s brother, and throughout the series, things weren't always wrapped up neatly

[21:47] <HoffLA> which is why it was so much fun to write. For a comedy, you could be sad, mournful, nostalgic, or bittersweet.

[21:48] <HoffLA> And for better or for worse, folks, life rarely if ever ends up that way. The person you were so in love with during your "Wonder Years" will always be precious and special to you, but is rarely the person you spend your adult life with

[21:48] <HoffLA> anyway, I've got to get moving...I'd be happy to do this some other time again if you have more questions

[21:49] <HoffLA> Take care everyone...gotta run!

[21:49] <Manuel> there are in deed a lot of questions still unanswered

[21:49] <Manuel> see you Craig!

[21:49] <Manuel> I would like to thank Craig Hoffman for taking the time out of his Sunday afternoon schedule to participate in his FIRST "Wonder Years" chat! We all appreciate it!

[21:49] <HoffLA> email me, Maneul, we'll do it again!

[21:49] <Manuel> ok guys, today craig only had about 45 minutes to chat

[21:49] <Manuel> we'll answer the rest of the questions the next time, ok?

[21:52] <Manuel> A transcript will be available soon on <http://twybook.cjb.net> !

[21:52] <Manuel> Please send any feedback to twychat@yahoo.com !

[21:52] <Manuel> And I would also like to thank all the fans who came out today!