



Writer-director-producer Judd Apatow of Apatow Productions

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Judd Apatow

Creates Comedy

With A Little Help From His Friends

Writer-director-producer Judd Apatow knows that the premise for his new film, *Knocked Up*, may not be the most original idea for a comedy. “Every story that has ever been told has already been done as well as it can be done on *The Simpsons*,” Apatow says. “So it’s really more about putting your own spin on the story, and I’ve come to believe that good story ideas are very simple, and the rest is all about the execution. For a long time, I thought you needed a big, high-concept idea or an intricate plot. But now I think that if I’m really honest, any idea can be funny and interesting, especially if I’m not afraid to go all the way with a confessional style.”

As writer-director-producer of the smash-hit *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, Apatow has honed his comedy writing skills with the best in the business. “A great lesson that Garry Shandling taught me when I was working on *The Larry Sanders Show* was that whenever we were really stuck on a story beat, he would say, ‘Well, what would really happen? What would Hank do?’ And then we’d know where to go next.”

After paying his dues as a stand-up comic, Apatow went to the USC School of Cinema-Television for a year and a half. But when he landed his first job in television in 1991, Apatow started at the top as the showrunner for *The Ben Stiller Show*. “Ben and I had heard that HBO was looking for a sketch comedy show, so we came up with this idea.

I had no idea what I was doing,” Apatow says with a laugh. “I’d sit in my office listening to relaxation tapes every day to deal with the stress from not knowing what I was doing. But that’s kind of the charm of the show. It was clearly made by people who are figuring it all out as they go and are too dumb to do something that has been done before.”

Inspired by the films of Albert Brooks and *Second City TV*, the writers of *The Ben Stiller Show* took parody to a new level by raising the production values. “When we did parody, the sketches really looked like the movie we were making fun of. Ben loved the idea of making our sketches exactly like the movie we were parodying, down to the point that we’d often use the same locations.”

Still, *The Ben Stiller Show* struggled over two years to find an audience. “I’ve always tried to do things that are original,” Apatow points out. “I felt like the work would be better if I hadn’t seen it a hundred times before, so I’ve tried to avoid what has been traditionally done—which is probably why so much of my work in television was cancelled so quickly.”

After *The Ben Stiller Show*, Apatow landed two jobs in television—writing for *The Larry Sanders Show* as a consultant and writing for *The Critic*, an adult cartoon created by Mike Reiss and Al Jean of *The Simpsons*. “*The Critic* was produced by James Brooks, so I was lucky enough to be in a few situations where we broke stories with him,” Apatow says. “The

best film school education you can get is watching James Brooks work through a story problem. The rest of the week, I would do that with Garry Shandling. So just by paying attention and thinking carefully about why they were making the choices they did, I was able to begin to understand how to tell stories.”

Apatow knows that his lifestyle has forced his writing style to change over the years. “Before I was married, I’d stay home and watch television all day, procrastinate until 7:00 or 8:00 at night, and then I would write for two or three hours. That was a successful writing day—10 or 12 hours of procrastination and not showering, followed by a short burst of creativity. Now that I’m married with children, I’ve learned how to schedule my writing. I’ve tried everything. Sometimes, I write at night after the phone stops ringing, and every once in a while, I’ll go to the office early before the phone starts ringing and try to get some pages written before the madness of the day begins.”

With time and experience, Apatow believes his writing process has become fairly simple. “I take a few months to ramble out some ideas. I don’t outline at first. I just write down tons of ideas because I know as soon as I outline, I’m going to get somewhat locked into that story; so I try not to lay out the story too quickly. Then I outline for a month or two, and once I’m happy with the outline, I try to write more than seven pages a day. I do that every day”

