

## SPITTING IMAGE

### A GUIDE FOR WRITERS

**TOPICALITY:** Only about three minutes of the programme is really topical. This is the bit of the show that everyone wants to write: hence there is always a lot of material to choose from. However, the small Topical Team spends the whole of Thursday with me writing material to fill this slot and anyone not at that session stands little chance of getting anything on. Unfortunately, some writers are attracted to Spit because of it's topicality, and never really accept that their topical material is not required. Others find it too much of an effort to dream up ideas, subjects and targets... it's far easier to open a newspaper and pick something. Anyone willing to put effort into thinking of unexpected subjects, targets and ideas are likely to be successful, especially if those ideas are not likely to go out-of-date for weeks or months.

**THE AUDIENCE:** Half of the eight million people who watch Spit do so because they like seeing funny puppets hitting each other, and the sketches about sport and Bruce Forsyth. The other half are middle-aged broadsheet-readers who like intelligent hard-hitting satire and can't understand why we bother doing sketches about Bruce at all. Spitting Image comes down decisively on the side of pandering to both tastes equally.

**DURATION:** The average duration of a sketch is fifty seconds. There are usually two sketches per show of 90 seconds (which is the maximum). This relative brevity is partly to do with the "soul of wit", and partly because puppets can't sustain longer sketches... The puppets have an initial impact, but this fades geometrically with each second they are on the screen.

**SETS:** Sketches with just one set have an advantage in that they are easier to shoot. A minute long sketch with four different locations would have to be very good indeed to get on. Please use the absolute minimum number of locations. Please try to avoid dull places like offices. For some reason puppets don't work well with a desk between them. (Probably because they can't hit each other).

**PUPPETS:** Writing for puppets is not at all like writing for actors. The differences are crucial. Brevity of the sketches has already been touched on, but brevity is vital within the individual speeches too. A puppet can't convincingly deliver a speech of more than twenty or thirty words. You have to cut away to something else otherwise the puppet begins to look like a lump of rubber and the illusion fades. Part of the illusion of Spitting Image is this editorial slight-of hand: cut away before the brain says "this is just a puppet". Another vital point is that puppets are caricatures. They look and sound like

gross exaggerations, therefore the words they utter must be suitably heightened. Naturalistic dialogue is out, no matter how funny it might be on Rory Bremner or WeekEnding or Smith & Jones.

Dialogue has to be snappy and very energetic. A good rule of thumb is to say that PUPPETS CAN'T ACT, BUT THEY MUST PERFORM. They cannot go "ashen-faced" they can't look "depressed" they can't even smile or look angry. As far as possible mood should be inherent in the dialogue. There are also a lot of actions that puppets can't do because by-and-large THEY DON'T HAVE LEGS. So... a lot of writers think that since puppets are limited performers, just put them in an office and write a "conversation". This doesn't work either, because without some physical vitality the puppets begin to look like lumps of rubber again... The trick is to provide dramatic energetic situations so the puppeteers can have something to work with. By all means write visual jokes, but expect half of them to be cut.

GENERICIS: Generics are puppets like JOBSWORTH who aren't caricatures of famous people... they generally play bit parts. Please do not rely heavily on generics. Viewers want to see famous caricatures on their screen... sketches with lots of generics seem dull by comparison. If you have an idea which involves a lot of generics please check with me first.

CHARACTERS: Spitting Image is about characters more than issues. Casting your sketch well is half way to getting it on. Some puppets are nearly always funny: they have a funny character, face and voice (eg ROY HATTERSLEY). Some puppets couldn't be funny even if Woody Allen were writing their lines. Knowing who is funny and who isn't can only be gleaned from watching the programme or asking someone who works on it. Occasionally a character can be invented for one of the 'unfunny' puppets. This happened recently when Kenneth Baker was made into a slug, and Kaufman was characterised as a "creep". New characterisations (complete with catch-phrases) are very much in demand.

IDEAS: Writers who spend less time writing sketches and more time thinking of ideas are the most successful. A very good idea will get on, even if the sketch needs tinkering with or overhauling. An idea that doesn't appeal won't get on no matter how much time you've spent crafting the sketch. It's impossible to say what I'm looking for since generally I like to be surprised and I wouldn't want to prescribe a formula for getting stuff on. What doesn't appeal: sketches that tackle "issues" head-on: eg a sketch about health cuts starring the health minister and the Prime Minister. TV show formats are fine in small quantities...(one per show). NO PUNS PLEASE.

SOME SUCCESSFUL IDEAS: The last potato in Russia defects to the west. Gorby's birthmark declares independence. Jesus O'Christ appeals against wrongful conviction by the Bethlehem Serious

Crimes Squad. Neil Kinnock decides that to have the dignity of a true Statesman you have to stop going to the toilet. John Major shakes off his grey image and pretends to be Gay so as to make himself more memorable. Tony Hancock becomes a sperm donor. Kinnock replaces Hatterley's head with that of a blonde girl's so as boost the party's sex appeal. Laurel and Hardy are digging the British side of the Chunnel. John Sessions goes to the doctor because he's disappearing up his own arse. The word "bollocks" is declared 'polite' by the 1991 Bollocks Act... with hilarious consequences.

THE PUPPET LIST: You need to consult the list of puppets for inspiration, and to avoid writing for puppets we don't have.

RULES Every other sketch on the programme breaks at least one of the above "rules".

Best of Luck!

Bill Dare