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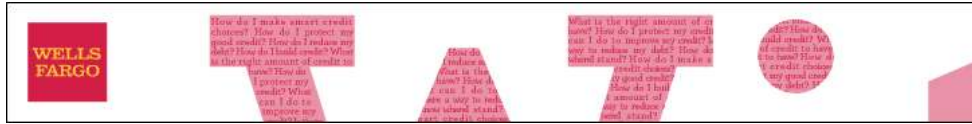
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COMEDY PIPELINE

FunnyorDie.com: 'SNL' for the online crowd

The sketch comedy website started as a lark for Will Ferrell and his friends. Now it's become a brand-name powerhouse



Jake Szymanski has water applied to his belly in "Rachel Bilson's Deleted Sex Scene" with Adam Scott. (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

By Gina Piccalo
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Second in a series of occasional articles about how alternative comedy is fueling Hollywood.

Inside a darkened Hollywood warehouse, doe-eyed Adam Scott lay on a bed in his boxers earnestly flicking water droplets out of Jake Szymanski's fleshy belly button -- a stunt everyone agreed would be hilarious in slow motion. As the

crew held its breath for this tricky maneuver, the gamin-starlet Rachel Bilson stood off camera, waiting to take her turn on the bed, talking about how her childhood admiration for Lucille Ball had led her to this moment.

It was a strange bit of theater, even by FunnyorDie.com's exaggerated standards. But the popular sketch-comedy website revels in awkward moments like these. FunnyorDie's production staff churns out three or four sketches like this one each week, filmed cheaply and on the fly.

And unlike other fledgling comedy websites, FunnyorDie's got a gaggle of stars like "The O.C.'s" Bilson and Scott from "Step Brothers" on speed dial, all of whom perform for free.

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"There's been this whole comedy renaissance going on for the last five years, really hitting the culture in the right way and really resonating," Scott said when the scene was concluded. "FunnyorDie is inviting everyone to the party. . . . The free-for-all nature of it is exciting."

Like "Saturday Night Live" for the new millennium, the site has become home for celebrities eager to lampoon themselves in bizarre, even humiliating sketches because this awkward, alternative brand of comedy now holds such an exalted place in Hollywood that no one wants to be left on the sidelines.

"We suspected but weren't certain that it was time for an Internet version of 'SNL' or 'Letterman' where celebrities can go to promote and try stuff," the site's co-founder Adam McKay wrote in an e-mail interview. "Creative freedom is a huge carrot."

FunnyorDie.com, launched in 2007 by Will Ferrell and his producing partner McKay, draws hordes of visitors -- an average of 25 million per month. They come to see Lindsay Lohan spoof her tumultuous private life with a fake eHarmony ad and Jon Hamm shed his Don Draper veneer by donning a bald cap to play Lex Luthor humbled by the financial crisis. Studio marketing heads and other deep-pocketed advertisers took notice and now FunnyorDie.com is a hip place to promote a movie or slip in some product placement.

In fact, the website that started as a creative outlet for Ferrell and his friends is itself a brand with a successful comedy tour, an upcoming HBO series, a half-dozen offshoot websites and plans for a feature film division.

So when Bilson gamely volunteered her lovely visage to be superimposed over Szymanski's formidable gut for this sketch titled "Rachel Bilson's Deleted Sex Scene" -- a video that debuts on FunnyorDie.com in the coming weeks -- she (and her manager) agreed to it knowing that everyone in Hollywood would be watching.

"It's harder to be funny than any other thing," said Bilson, eyeing Scott and Szymanski as they rolled around on the bed. "So if it's something you can do, you want to show it off."

Well connected

FunnyorDie was the brainchild of a teenager who aspired to comedy -- which sounds like a typical story except the teen was Michael Kvamme, whose dad, Mark, was a partner in Sequoia Capital, the venture capital firm behind Google. Which meant there was money to hire a top-tier agent, Creative Artists Agency's Michael Yanover, who in turn tapped Ferrell and McKay and their producing partner Chris Henchy.

Since its launch, the site has transcended the initial hype of Ferrell and McKay's debut video, "The Landlord" (with 66.7-million views and counting). Now it's a fledgling new media studio with a CEO, a Silicon Valley office and a reported (\$15-million investment. (Though the site is making money, it hasn't turned a profit, according to those familiar with its finances. McKay calls it "our not-for-profit theater.") For the legions of comic unknowns out there, the site offers another way to network and possibly get discovered. For the A-listers, it is a creative outlet, set apart from the conglomerates running entertainment, that may not earn them a dime but pays off with street cred on the comedy scene.)

"What this really represents is a burgeoning sort of world," said creative director Andrew Steele, who spent a dozen years on "Saturday Night Live." "The way stand-up in the '80s or '90s was for development people; the Internet is [now] sort of the comedy go-to. That's what makes it kind of exciting."

There are FunnyorDie-affiliated comedy offshoots in Britain (funnyordie.co.uk) and Brazil (morraderir.com.br), and others for food lovers (eatdrinkordie.com), video gamers (pwnordie.com) and action sports fans (shredordie.com). Feature-length films distributed online are next. And then, FunnyorDie will inspire greeting cards, humor books and calendars. Maybe even a Broadway show. At least that's Chief Executive Dick Glover's hope. "If they come," said Glover, "we will build it."

Anyone can submit videos to FunnyorDie, and the site receives about 300 submissions a day. (The "or die" part means viewers can banish sketches that don't make them laugh.) So for every sketch of James Franco spoofing a Gucci ad (mispronouncing it "Gucky") or Denise Richards talking about colorful party favors she calls her "fun bags," there are half a dozen others like "Cats on a Treadmill," which is exactly what the title states, or "California Raisin Man," a guy wearing face paint singing along to "I Heard It Through the Grapevine."

Then there are the working comedians like Nick Kroll or Ben Schwartz who routinely post sketches to stay fresh in the minds of casting agents or test ideas that might grab development executives. The

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comedy typically gets raunchy, but FunnyorDie appears to draw a line at nudity or seriously coarse material.

It plays well with the most marketable demo -- those 18- to 34-year-olds -- and advertisers have taken note. They've begun slipping product placements into FunnyorDie's "exclusive" sketches -- those produced by Ferrell and McKay's team -- and buying custom-made videos to slyly promote talent and upcoming projects.

In September, video game mammoth Electronic Arts sponsored an episode of Zach Galifianakis' Web series "Between Two Ferns." True to his character as a belligerent public access TV talk show host, Galifianakis unceremoniously held a copy of the game "Need for Speed Shift" in front of Charlize Theron's face. It was good for a laugh and a hip endorsement for EA.

"It's a heck of a lot less than it costs a traditional media company to do the same kind of thing," said Glover. "Part of the beauty of what we do is that we can do things very quickly, very independently and very inexpensively."

Central command

Until recently, FunnyorDie's small writing staff wrote and edited in a warren of rooms inside a modest A-frame house off Hollywood Boulevard. (In September, they relocated to a slightly larger space a few blocks away.) The décor was postgraduate frat house.

During a brainstorming meeting in mid-September, the writers sat around a table, each behind a laptop and lobbied sketch ideas. There was a dollop of sarcasm with every A-list name dropped, as if the writers were slightly baffled by their level of influence. They quickly kicked aside a few duds -- Kevin Costner in a "JFK" spoof, singer Josh Groban searching for Osama bin Laden -- before talk turned to the Holy Grail of FunnyorDie videos: Michael Bay directing "The World's Greatest Cat Video." The blockbuster director passed on the concept a long time ago. But that didn't faze anyone.

"The fact that we got his agent to say, 'Yeah, I'll tell him you guys want him to shoot a video of a cat,' " writer-director Szymanski said, ignoring the room's palpable smirk, "that's an insane accomplishment." For all the big-deal financing, the site's production staff has a DIY sort of moxie. There's no real budget for each video. They script, film and edit with a skeleton crew. And the sketches are often posted days after a sketch is conceived.

"We pitched Natalie Portman and Rasheeda Jones [on a] Monday at 5, and we shot three videos with them the next day at noon," said head of production Mike Farah.

FunnyorDie wasn't exactly a sure thing. The company launched after several well-publicized failures to bring sketch comedy to the Web, NBC's DotComedy.com, Time Warner's This Just In and Time Inc.'s Office Pirates among them. Only Barry Diller's New York-based CollegeHumor.com has thrived. So when Sequoia Capital's Mark Kvamme first approached Ferrell and McKay, they balked.

"But it soon became clear that Mark and his team were first and foremost interested in a funny site with its own voice," said McKay. "They knew that a watered-down lowest-common-denominator site would not work."

At the time, Ferrell and McKay had already established themselves with the blockbuster "Talladega Nights" and cult hit "Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy." The "Saturday Night Live" veterans had a lot of famous friends. One of them, Judd Apatow, became a principal partner in FunnyorDie.

They introduced the site in time for the presidential election and rode the ensuing political dust-ups to Internet fame. The campaign led to two of the site's biggest hits: "Paris Hilton Responds to McCain Ad," featuring the bikini-clad heiress as a surprisingly articulate, visionary candidate, and "Prop. 8: The Musical," starring John C. Reilly, Neil Patrick Harris and Jack Black as Jesus.

Back on the set of "Rachel Bilson's Deleted Sex Scene," Scott and Szymanski concluded their romantic pas de deux, rolled off the bed, donned matching flannel robes and wandered off in opposite corners of the studio. Everyone else filed over to a table stacked with pizzas and Bilson disappeared into a dressing room. Scott later reemerged fresh-faced and fully dressed, as if the cringe-inducing scene had happened to someone else.

For Scott, who costars on the Starz network's ensemble comedy "Party Down," the shoot was a quick, easy way to stay comically nimble and have fun. Best known for his risky (read: full frontal nudity) dramatic performance in HBO's "Tell Me You Love Me," Scott also recently costarred with Ferrell in the goofy comedy "Step Brothers." Still, he didn't realize exactly what he was in for when he signed on.

While Bilson's role amounted to a few breathy close-ups, Scott spent a good 20 minutes with his finger in another man's bellybutton. "I am taking the hits on this one," Scott said, running his hands through his hair. "I've hung out with Jake a couple of times -- but wow."

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