



THIS HOUR HAS 25 YEARS

By Joanie Veitch

Last January, a week after the U.S. presidential inauguration, a video was posted on the *22 Minutes* Facebook page with the tagline: Worried about Trump? Sounds like you need Angry Yoga. In the sketch, Cathy Jones — *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* veteran and brilliant character comedian — leads a yoga class, dropping her soothing tone as she moves into downward dog.

“And if I see one more man with a bun, not a ponytail, a bun with an honest-to-god scrunchy. And those Birkenstocks? Like he’s some kind of homeless samurai? And he’s the one turning me down,” she huffs. By the end of the video — the class now in an extended child’s pose — she’s ranted about airport security, clear cutting, climate change, and government corruption. “Just bang your head a little bit because you’re a little bit angry,” she says, hitting her head on the mat to emphasize each word. “Just. A. Little. Tiny. Bit. Angry.”

The video was a clip from season 22 but it struck gold as people began seeing it on their social media feeds. To date it’s had more than 9.6 million views on Facebook and more than 50 million views when YouTube and other platforms are added in the mix: it’s been shared more than a million times.

“That yoga sketch kind of took us by surprise,” says Peter McBain, showrunner with *22 Minutes* for the past six years. “We knew it was funny, we knew the live audience liked it and it worked on TV but it

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kept getting discovered, it keeps bubbling up as new groups of people find it and share it.”

This fall, *22 Minutes*, which is produced by DHX Media, returns to CBC for its 25th season. The anniversary is a milestone in itself, but in an era of declining television ratings, *22 Minutes* is not only holding its own, through social media and YouTube hits the show is now reaching more viewers than ever before.

The first episode of *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* aired Monday, Oct. 11, 1993 with Cathy Jones, Rick Mercer, Greg Thomey, and Mary Walsh at the helm. Three years before *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart and 12 years before *The Colbert Report* hit the air, *22 Minutes* was gleefully offering up clever news parody and taking the piss out of politicians.

Filmed in front of a studio audience in Halifax, both the live and television audiences loved it and *22 Minutes* quickly became one of CBC’s top-rated comedy programs, winning numerous accolades, including the Academy Icon Award at the 2016 Canadian Screen Awards.

The cast has changed over the years, of course. Of the original four, only Cathy Jones remains (although Greg Thomey is back as a writer and shows up on air from time to time). Comedic talents such as Colin Mochrie, Gavin Crawford, Geri Hall, and Meredith MacNeill have all spent time at the news desk, along with many other guest hosts and special correspondents. This year, Mark Critch, Cathy Jones, Susan Kent, and Shaun Majumder are all returning to their chairs as news anchors, with comedian Trent McClellan joining the cast this season as well.

“We were fake news before it was cool,” boasts the show’s Twitter bio.

It’s a fitting description.

Taking a satirical look at news and social issues, along with their trademark ambush-style interviews with politicians has become *22 Minutes*’ stock in trade.

Who can forget Marg Delahunty, a.k.a. Marg, Princess Warrior, ambushing Jean Chrétien or Toronto mayor Rob Ford? (Ford called 911 on Marg and the crew.) Or back in 2000, when Rick Mercer got George W. Bush to respond to a question about Prime Minister Jean Poutine? Or how about when Stephen Harper’s security detail handcuffed Geri Hall and nearly had her arrested, or 2014 when Liberal MP Carolyn Parrish took Mark Critch up on his offer to stomp on a George Bush doll? (She was kicked out of caucus for her efforts.) Or the time Critch took a joint out of his pocket and asked then Liberal party leader Justin Trudeau where he could light up? (Trudeau’s people asked *22 Minutes* not to air the piece, which was ignored. “Once they say something like that if you take it out then you’re just working for them, so I had to put it in,” Critch says. “It was good going forward though because it established the rules of the game. If we’re going to do this then we’re going to do it and whatever happens, happens.”)

“Where else can you walk up to a politician like that?” says Critch. “There’s nowhere else in the world that does this ... they don’t do it in the States and they don’t do it in the U.K. This is the only country where that happens and it’s what the viewers have come to expect.”

Over the years the core format of the show has remained largely the same — four anchors poking fun at the news of the week, interviews with “special correspondents,” ad and song parodies, as well as character sketches — but the news landscape has



PHOTO: AARON MCKENZIE FRASER

Mark Critch, Susan Kent, Shaun Majumder, Cathy Jones and Trent McClellan are latest cast incarnation of *22 Minutes*



Various scenes from a typical 22 Minutes table read

changed dramatically. “Now people tend to talk about how news is interpreted so you’ll get a news story and everyone will be talking about how the media covered the story or who said what on Twitter, so it’s less about the news event and more about that perspective,” says McBain.

Back in the early days of *22 Minutes*, the Internet was a mostly unknown entity vaguely referred to as the “information super-highway” so the writers got their news from actual newspapers, television, and radio. “We used to get papers delivered from across the country but if a flight coming in had too much cargo, those newspapers would often be the first to go and we’d have nothing to work with,” recalls Edward Kay, a Toronto-based writer who left the world of journalism — even turning down an editor position with the *Globe and Mail’s Report on Business* to write for *22 Minutes* from seasons four through seven. “I was the first person on the show that I’m aware of who used the Internet. I’d use some of the early search engines — there was no Google yet — to try to stay ahead of the news. It would have been late 1996 or 1997 and I think I was using it for at least a year before other writers started getting onboard. It’s hard to imagine that now.”

When the show first started, cast members wrote all their own material but writers were soon hired on (Ed Macdonald, Paul Bellini, and Alan Resnick were the first hires) and the show’s first producer, Gerald Lunz, established a writing and production system. That system remains mostly in place today: the day after the show airs, cast members, writers, and producers hold a pitch meeting to discuss ideas before going off to write — usually five to six sketches per person. They hand in their work at 11 a.m. the next day, at which point McBain speedreads through the sketches and makes three piles — yes, no, maybe — to determine what will make it to “the book” and go forward to the read-through (called “the humilatorium” by Lunz, a moniker that stuck). “Wednesdays are nerve-racking because that’s the table read when you find out if your stuff made it, or that nothing of yours is funny enough to get read,” says Allison Hogg, the newest writer on the show. “I always find that the things I liked aren’t as funny as I thought, it’s the other stuff that makes it through ... so you can’t always trust yourself,” Hogg says.

Toughening up comes with practice, but strategy helps too. “In the pitch meeting I don’t give away too many details of my sketch,” says head writer Mike Allison, who has been with *22 Minutes* since 2009. “I’ll say I have an idea and I might do this or that with it. So if it dies at the read-through I don’t feel that flop sweat. But then again, myself and another writer, Bob

Kerr, we hit our 150th episode last year, so 150 times five or six sketches per episode means you’re going to have hundreds of flops. You get used to it.”

Along with the sketches, writers have to produce upwards of 100 copy jokes, the jokes read by the anchors each week. They get written on Thursday and Friday, while the sketches get taped. “They have to continually pump stuff out and not worry too much about whether it’s working or not, because the reality is that 90 to 95 per cent of the work gets thrown away,” says McBain.

Coming from a sketch comedy background, it was a challenge to learn how to write the jokes, says Jennifer Whalen, now with *Baroness von Sketch Show* and a writer with *22 Minutes* from 2003 to 2007, the last two seasons as head writer. “Repetition was the thing. I wrote so many jokes eventually something clicked. It’s a little more technical than writing sketch comedy. I would write a joke and then go through and edit taking out all the extra words — because a copy joke has to be bulletproof and can’t be dependent on the performance; it has to be straight up funny, so it was learning about the economy of words.”

Having a back-up plan helped as well, says Kay. “For every joke I wrote on that show — every single one — I always wrote three different punchlines. In part it was an exercise to force myself to work harder but also, in terms of my ego, I wouldn’t be crushed if one didn’t work — I could come back with something else. Just pushing myself like that was one of the biggest things I ever discovered because I wasn’t over invested in any one thing. I’ve kept that, I still use that in my career now.”

The mix of talent — some coming from sketch comedy, others from the world of stand-up comedy — and the frequent turnover of writers has been a large part of the show’s success, says Angela Mombourquette, a Halifax-based journalist whose book *25 Years of 22 Minutes: An Unofficial Oral History of This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, is being published by Nimbus Publishing in November.

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The show’s “outsider” status has helped too. *22 Minutes* always been filmed in Halifax and over the years most of the cast members have hailed from Newfoundland. “That outsider perspective gives Canadians an outlet for their frustrations with whatever is happening politically or socially,” says Mombourquette. “I think giving a voice to that frustration has been a big part of why the show matters to so many people.” ■