

# AT HOME, FROM NEW YORK, IT'S SATURDAY NIGHT

A herculean remote effort enabled *SNL* to complete its 45th season amid COVID-19

BY NANCY JUNDI



In its 45-year history, *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) has hosted, made and chronicled a deafening amount of America's cultural fabric. Between skits and musical guests, Weekend Update and Digital Shorts, *SNL* has served as both a timeline and touchstone for several generations of viewers. Paul Simon bringing the show back post 9/11, the New York City Children's Chorus singing "Silent Night" to open after Sandy Hook, Adam Sandler's moving tribute to Chris Farley and Cecily Strong's cold open in French after the Paris attacks of 2015, *SNL* is a show that faces grief head on. Laughter through tears, the show goes on.

As New York's COVID-19 cases continued to climb, Governor Cuomo ordered "New York on Pause" measures beginning on March 22, effectively canceling *SNL*'s plans of returning to a live broadcast on March 28. "On March 7th we wrapped what would become our last live show of season 45 and started our pre-planned two-week hiatus" says *SNL* coordinating producer

Adam Nicely. "The idea of creating new content remotely started coming up during that time as it became clearer to everyone that we'd be in this situation for quite a while. As soon as the idea was out there, everyone sprang into action – writers sent pitches to the producers, cast, special guests and musical guests who all ended up shooting material on their iPhones. There was a lot of uncertainty about how a show like *SNL*, where the live audience plays such an important role, could continue, but there was a definite sense that the show must go on, and a willingness from everyone to contribute if it was possible."

"Around the first week of April, I heard whispers of the show potentially trying something remote," shares Sean McIlraith, one of the film unit editors on *SNL*. "We had no idea if that meant producing solely digital content, a 30-minute special, or a full 90-minute show. When we got word a remote show was happening, it was a flurry of frantic phone calls between the post department about how we were going to pull this off."

How would we receive footage? When were the final scripts going to come in? What does this workflow even look like? I've been working in the *SNL* post department since 2013 and it's already an intimidating, anxiety-inducing place to work in terms of the tight schedules and little-to-no turnaround time, but add in the remote editing factor and it was completely uncharted territory. It was scary, but exhilarating. It felt very in line with the youthful and dangerous spirit from which *SNL* was born – the show airs at 11:30 p.m. on Saturday and by any means necessary, we get these sketches on air.”

McIlraith had the rare fortune of self-isolating with his brother Ryan, who also happens to be one of the other film unit editors. “All of the editors had multiple pieces to work on and there was a lot of co-editing and passing projects back and forth,” he explains. “That first week, Ryan and I co-edited the music video Drake Song. It was a flurry of us yelling at each other from the other room and sprinting hard drives back and forth as we shared and switched off projects, especially as I worked on edits for the opening montage, where footage would come in on a rolling basis, and I would have to switch gears in an instant.”

*SNL* uses Adobe Premiere Pro for editing as well as After Effects for their pre-recorded sketches. “I think if you compare Drake Song from the first ‘At Home’ show, to Danny Trejo Song, a music video I edited for the season finale four weeks later, you can see the difference in production quality and manpower involved,” says McIlraith. “Drake Song is a much more bare-knuckled effort while Danny Trejo Song has a lot more varied coverage and VFX work. I would say at least one-

third of that piece is greenscreen supplemented with animated titles and graphically treated stock footage. By the third *SNL* ‘At Home,’ the wheels were greased, and everyone was firing on all cylinders, trying our best to make these sketches look as if they belonged on a normal episode of *Saturday Night Live*. The main goal for all of the editors was to have the audience believe these sketches were worthy of being on any normal episode of *SNL*. While the production value and use of iPhone cameras might have been distracting, editorially our aim was to transport viewers and help them believe this content belonged on air.”

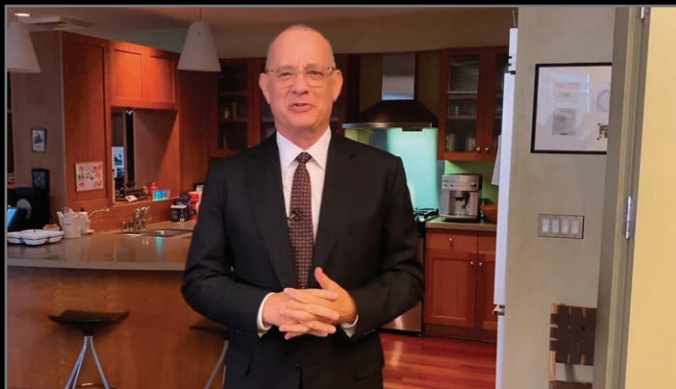
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“The first *SNL* ‘At Home’ show came together really quickly and spontaneously,” relates Nicely. “We sent whatever microphones and LED lights we had to talent and we did a read-through of several sketches via Zoom on Wednesday, as we typically do for live shows. Then shot several skits via Zoom the next day.”

By Friday evening, they shot a 12-minute Weekend Update with anchors Colin Jost and Michael Che, using Zoom. They used Jost and Che’s iPhones (1080p 30fps) so the files wouldn’t be too large or difficult to upload. “By then it was clear that we had more than enough content for a full 90-minute show. With the second and third ‘At Home’ episodes, we had the additional time and opportunity to really improve the quality of the production,” Nicely says.

While the first *SNL* ‘At Home’ was a feat in and of itself, the second and third ‘At Home’ episodes benefited from the extra time and previous week’s crash course. “We used the built-in camera app on the iPhone for capturing audio and video since everyone was already familiar with using it,” explains Nicely. “Mostly at 1080p 30fps to keep file sizes low. Sometimes 4K if we really thought we’d need to punch in on the shots during the edit. I think almost everyone had at least an iPhone X, but most had an iPhone 11. We had the time to procure lav mics, the ClipMic digital from Apogee, which could plug right into everyone’s iPhones. We also purchased an iPod touch for everyone so they could record the lav if they were too far from their iPhones to plug in directly. We used the Voice Memos app on the iPhone and iPods when recording the lav – with the quality set to ‘lossless’ instead of ‘compressed’ in settings. With Dropbox, we created a file request link to which the cast could upload their videos for all three ‘At Home’ shows. Installing Dropbox on the iPod touches made it so the cast could





just “save to Dropbox” directly from the Voice Memos app and their audio would land where all of the editors could get at it.”

Nicely adds that they also shipped greenscreens to those that would need them, and “found a way for our directors to see the cast’s iPhone screens directly while they were shooting. This helped immensely in that the directors were able to quickly give notes and get the framing they wanted or make adjustments to the lighting. This was critical because the sketches were getting more and more ambitious now that we knew we could pull it off. This also allowed us to use the higher quality rear-facing camera since we could keep an eye on it for the cast, allowing us to know how long a take had been shooting and to keep them short so they wouldn’t take forever to upload afterward.”

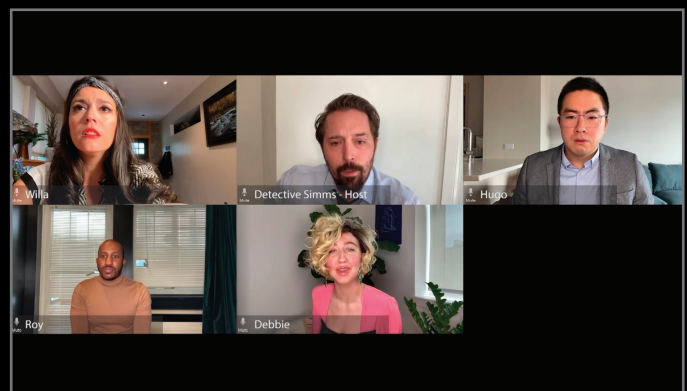
McIlraith notes that the shared Dropbox folder effectively acted as the series production SAN. “For obvious reasons, this was sometimes less than ideal in that the Dropbox would routinely bottleneck as our editors, assistant editors and graphic artists were all uploading and changing their own files at the same time as we were all working on multiple, simultaneous edits,” he says. “Even though a cut of a piece was ready to send for feedback, that video file had to export and sync to a Dropbox that was being bombarded with competing files that are simultaneously being uploaded to this one shared Dropbox.”

Associate director Mike Poole advised that they stick to using the HEVC codec that the iPhone produces and edit natively without transcoding. McIlraith relates, “This was the correct decision in that it didn’t add the extra step of transcoding footage, but it proved a little tricky as we found that Adobe Premiere doesn’t play too nicely with this codec. We were getting slammed

with our render and export times. I cut the show’s opening montage, which had a lot of speed ramps, digital noise and VFX overlaid on top of the footage.” He reports that on his 13-inch MacBook it typically took 25 minutes, when the timeline was only one minute and 55 seconds long. “I have been in a lot of sticky situations in my tenure at *SNL*, delivering video files 10 minutes before they went to live air, but I think *SNL* ‘At Home’ takes the cake for the most nervous I have ever been waiting for a render to finish or a Dropbox file to sync.”

Nicely relates that by the second and third “At Home” episodes, “we knew that we needed a lot more time to edit and mix the sketches, so we moved the read-through and subsequent rewrites (all done via Zoom) up in the week. Traditionally, our read-through has always been on Wednesday afternoon.” For the second “At Home” show the read-through was held on the Tuesday before broadcast, and for the third “At Home,” the read-through took place on the Monday. “We were asking so much of our cast in the way of production – setting up greenscreens, their own lights, mics and cameras, hair, makeup and wardrobe – but I was so impressed with how well everyone did with these new responsibilities.”

“One of the nice parts of editing remotely was that the cast was essentially their own film crew,” adds McIlraith. “As I was editing, if I thought I needed a certain shot or I needed more coverage of something, (director) Paul Briganti could just call and ask the cast member to shoot what I needed and 30 minutes later I would have more footage in my Dropbox. This was one of the nice parts of working on Pete’s (Davidson) music videos. For *Stuck in the House*, that was less a video



that relied on performance footage than a video that needed cutaway shots for every line for the jokes to land since the lyrics of that song were so specific. Pete and Adam Sandler were literally sending footage to me right up until the last possible minute on Saturday. Sandler sent me a shot of him looking bewildered while his kids were talking to him to splice into his last chorus at 3:30 p.m. that Saturday. It really shows how these *SNL* 'At Home' shows only came to be because the entire *SNL* family across generations and departments came together to make them happen."

*SNL*'s live shows typically stick to three pre-taped sketches, but with *SNL* "At Home," every piece of content required an editor, which opened the door for the team's assistant editors, like Chris Salerno, to cut their first piece. "The team was so overwhelmed," shares McIlraith, "so we asked Chris to step up to the challenge, and he edited *Andre 2000* for us. The VFX team also went above and beyond – watching the first *SNL* "At Home" to the third (season finale), you see production values increase with each episode." Adds Nicely, "I cannot say enough about our post team. The amount of edited content in the 'At Home' shows increased tenfold from the traditional live show. Because it was all hands on deck for the editors, we brought in a former film unit director and several additional editors who had since moved on to other projects, but were available to help us out and knew the demanding nature of our schedule."

Turnaround time also varied. "Typically, for the live show, pre-taped pieces and short films are shot either on Friday morning or Friday night. Depending on when they begin filming, we either start editing that Friday afternoon/evening or Saturday at 4 a.m.," explains McIlraith. "For *SNL* 'At Home,' I was getting footage sometimes on a Monday of a show week and then footage for other pieces I was working on that week would either trickle in as the week progressed or would be shot later in the week. By the season finale we had reached peak confidence, and I think the writers felt very assured in the post department's abilities, so they naturally started pitching more ambitious sketches.

"The Sunday night before that finale show week, I received a script for a sketch called *Dreams*, which was a love letter to New York City, showing each cast member in a different environment going about their daily life before the pandemic hit. To be completely honest, I thought I was being pranked when I first read it. It was so ambitious. The amount of time it would take researching for stock footage, the amount of visual effects work it would entail to rotoscope out all of the cast members on greenscreen, I remember telling everyone and anyone that I didn't think we could pull it off. But sure enough, come Saturday evening I find myself exporting the final piece for air. Though we were working [remotely] and our conditions had changed radically, the same *SNL* spirit of pushing the impossible held firm." **CE**

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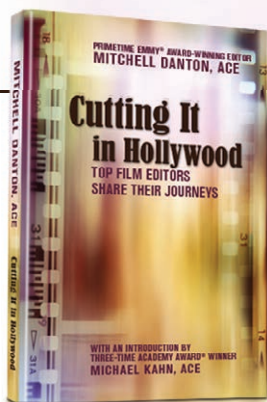
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