

Creating a Late Night Television Show

by

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A thesis presented to the Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
graduation from the University Honors College

Fall 2025

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by Troy Steward

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Abstract

Tardy! With Troy Steward is a late-night television pilot aiming to bring the antiquated format of late-night talk shows to new audiences. The show takes inspiration from shows starring Conan O'Brien, David Letterman, and Craig Ferguson. The thirty-minute show consists of comedy sketches, a musical guest, and celebrity interviews, with each segment staying true to, but also innovating on, its influences. The purpose of creating this show is to dive deeper into a format of show not explored enough at Middle Tennessee State University: a collaborative comedy show combining most majors in the college. This thesis lays out the history of late-night television and the process of putting *Tardy!* together over the last six months.

YouTube Video Link

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RHXmCW0VeWM&t=5s>

Acknowledgements

A special thank you goes out to the following:

- Amy, Doug, and Callie Steward
- Mome and Dade Stanley
- Leland “Doc” Gregory
- Andrew Humphries
- Charles Scudder
- Michael Forbes
- Laura Horton
- The Central Educational Center
- Middle Tennessee State University
 - MTSU’s KUC Theater
 - Live Show Audience

and, of course, Lane Stanley. I love you.

Table of Contents

Preface.....	iii
Abstract.....	iii
YouTube Video Link	iii
Aknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
History.....	2
<i>Tardy! with Troy Steward</i>	
Starting From Scratch and Pre-Production	3
Production	6
Production	7
Reflection.....	7
<i>Tardy! With Troy Steward Full Script</i>	10

Preface

In 1993, Conan O'Brien was selected by Lorne Michaels to pick up where David Letterman left off with *Late Night*. At the time, there was only a handful of comedians taking on similar talk show roles like Jay Leno and the aforementioned Letterman. This made O'Brien an anomaly, a complete unknown who was handed the keys to his own show. My idea was to use the knowledge I've developed over the last three years to make my own opportunity and not have to wait to be given a one-in-a-million shot.

The average "late night" show consists of five main segments: a monologue, a pre-taped remote, celebrity interviews, a musical performance, and comedy sketch. Each portion of the show serves a different purpose, but they combine to make one cohesive television program. The monologue involves the host of the show, typically a comedian, making jokes about current events. It is traditionally followed by either a celebrity interview or a pre-taped remote.

The idea of a show based entirely on the backs of celebrity interviewing has become less important in the modern age, with every celebrity having the opportunity to post about any part of their life on social media. Actors, athletes, and musicians amass several millions of followers. Social media platforms like Twitch and YouTube allow for anyone to be involved in creating their own interview shows. This means that the actual celebrity interview portions of late night television have become less and less meaningful as celebrities are easier to access. Additionally, viewership for late night television is in a decline, and as more and more of late night television becomes more political, audiences want something different.

Late night television means a lot to me. I grew up watching Conan O'Brien, David Letterman, and, more recently, Eric Andre. Comedy is a big part of my life, and it pains me to see these late-night institutions start to crumble. To me, there is something special about a host putting on a suit and tie at midnight to make some fun television. My ultimate goal in life is to become one of these legacy hosts, to take control of a show like *The Tonight Show* or *Late Night*. The things I've learned at Middle Tennessee State University, combined with my enthusiasm for comedy, are the perfect storm to create a late night television show of my own.

History

In 1949, television giant CBS brought late night to the small screen for the first time with *The Faye Emerson Show*. The fifteen-minute show introduced inklings of the main format for late-night talk shows, with Emerson interviewing political figures and presenting works from variety acts and musicians. The show ran nationally until 1951, where it was cancelled after its sponsor, Pepsi, opted not to renew its contract. Three years later, *Tonight Starring Steve Allen* premiered on NBC, forever setting the stage for the next seventy years of the genre.

Tonight was immediately different from shows like *The Faye Emerson Show*. The biggest change of the show was its running time increasing to an hour and a half, providing many more segments of the show, but also meaning that *Tonight* could only run twice a week because of its heavy production schedule. After Allen left the show in 1957 due to studio pressure, the title of host was passed to Jack Paar, and then to Johnny Carson five years later. *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* reinvented the format,

bringing in a monologue, character bits, musicians, and standup comedians to fill the hour and a half timeslot. Carson and his team are credited as the inventors of the modern formula for late night talk shows.

During the thirty years of Johnny Carson's career, CBS tried multiple times to capitalize on the popularity of the format. Finally, *Late Night with David Letterman* stuck, with Letterman providing a more dry and sarcastic sense of humor than the work of Johnny Carson. Over the years, countless comedians took the reins of these shows and others that were created in more recent years – Conan O'Brien, Jimmy Fallon, Jimmy Kimmel, Craig Ferguson, and many more. Traditionally, these big shows were part of one of the big three television companies – ABC, CBS, or NBC. However, when Conan was forced out of *The Tonight Show* by a second Jay Leno term, O'Brien brought his entire crew to TBS, where he stayed until the end of his late night career.

Ratings are dwindling and the funniest comedians in the space are retiring, leading to a seeming decline in the genre. This is unfortunate, because late night television doesn't have to be this tired format anymore. It can be anything the team producing it wants. The format had changed so much in its first ten years, and it is sad to see that late night television isn't breaking free from the chains of tradition.

Starting From Scratch and Pre-Production

There is an immense amount of work that needs to occur as soon as the idea for a project is finalized. The second my thesis proposal was approved, I immediately began recruiting a team. The first and most important position was to find a producer for the show. For that, I sought out Lane Stanley, a recent graduate who had, among other things,

produced two capstones that I admire for their technical achievement. Before setting out on this project, I had only produced small exercises for my Multicam I and II classes, where I had actually done a shorter version of this exact show. My goal for this iteration of *Tardy! With Troy Steward* was to bring this small pilot to its fullest potential. Lane's producing experience was just what I needed to make my dreams a reality.

This show would take heavy inspiration from shows like *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* or any of his other similar shows, *The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson*, and *The Eric Andre Show*. The comedy that these shows put out is very avant-garde, with strange characters and bits that are often taken seriously by the three hosts. Looking deeper, each of these shows pull from the traditional tropes of late-night talk shows. Each has a live band, a sidekick, musical guests, a monologue, and celebrity interviews. Where these shows differ, however, is the comedic stylings of each of the hosts. Conan O'Brien prefers to be the butt of the joke, pulling from his cartoonish inspirations. Craig Ferguson and Eric Andre tend to use more absurdist styles of comedy, with robot sidekicks, characters like Kraft Punk, and the ideas to stray further and further from the typical segments of a similar broadcast.

There were multiple options to record the show. MTSU's Media Arts program maintains two mobile units. The 43' Mobile Production Lab, known simply as "The Truck" or "Big Blue," and the smaller video flypack that has recently been deemed "Baby Blue." Both units were built for different reasons, with Big Blue having the capability to cover shows with more than ten cameras, with video playback machines, a dedicated audio booth, and room for over 15 crew members in the truck. Baby Blue was

purpose-made for smaller venues, with only four slots for broadcast cameras and a capacity of only three people sitting at the desk.

The dream scenario would have been to use The Truck and to film in MTSU's Tucker Theater, but that idea was quickly shot down after learning that the week we had planned to film the show, the Department of Theater and Dance were putting on *Pirates of Penzance* at the theater, meaning any opportunity I would have had would fall second to that project. After some discussion, we landed on a new venue: the KUC theater. With a much more limited capacity and smaller stage, choosing to film at the KUC theater would mean that the flypack would be the best option for recording our show. Additionally, camera coverage is pretty minimal for these types of shows, with only three required camera angles for the interview: medium coverage of both the host and guest and a wide of the set.

After landing on the venue, Lane and I discussed how we would execute the musical performance with a smaller setup. Audio mixing on the flypack is difficult because of its open design and limited space for microphone inputs – not to mention that the turnover time between the bits at the desk and the musical guest would be hours. We chose to film this segment in Studio 1, MTSU's permanent production studio in BRAGG 161. This would allow us to spend as much time as necessary to make sure this segment really did well.

The team for a multi-cam production starts with the director and associate director. For these, I recruited the dynamic duo of Maddie Phillips and Lauren Turnage. Maddie had made her voice known as the upcoming director of Media Arts Productions, and Lauren had been climbing the ranks with MTSU's Event Productions for the last

three years. I knew that this team of two would be dedicated, responsible, and ready to help. The both of them would direct and AD for both of the multi-cam segments of this show: the live show and musical performance.

After establishing the location and size of our crew for our in-studio segments, I next gathered a team of writers, consisting of members of MTSU's Film Guild, students from my Screenwriting II class, and some of my funniest friends. This team was tasked with writing the three main segments of the show: The cold open, the pre-recorded sketch, and the dreaded monologue. After a quick production meeting describing my vision for the show, they were set free to write whatever their hearts desired.

Production

As the weeks went by and filming came closer and closer, doubt and nervousness began to creep in. On November 9th, we filmed the show with a live studio audience at the KUC theater. It went far beyond my expectations. The week of filming was so full with other events for the College of Media and Entertainment, with a big show happening almost every day of that week. This made it difficult for my team to focus on the upcoming thesis when we had nationally broadcast ESPN+ football games to worry about.

All in all, with over 20 natural audience members and four members planted for a bit about the MTSU Pisser, the vibes were fantastic in the theater. Before filming, I came out and borrowed a trick from Conan O'Brien. Before every show, he would come out and interact with the audience – dance, joke around, and have fun, to get the audience loose and ready to laugh. That worked great! I guess he knows something about hosting a

television show. I had fun, the audience had fun, and we only needed to re-film one segment of the show because of a power issue that took one of our cameras and my microphone out of commission.

Post Production

The production stage for this project was composed of three distinct segments – the musical performance, pre-recorded sketch, and the in-studio show. Since the musical performance was the first section of the show to be filmed, it was also the first to enter the post-production stage, where it would be re-mixed for a better sound fidelity. The musical segment was to be played at the in-person studio shoot, so there was a pretty quick turnaround to get it complete. The live portion of the project had to spend a bit more time in the post-production space. While we were able to film the entire segment in one take, we had planned to execute things a little bit looser than if it was actually live. This means that the only tweaks needed to be made was a little bit of trimming between every segment in the show and adding bump music and occasional applause.

Reflection

Tardy! with Troy Steward took a couple months to put together, and in that time, I found that I bit off more than I could chew. The day of the live show, I was jumping around from role to role, hopping between executive producing, final writing tweaks, flypack engineering, rehearsing, moving set decorations, and being nervous. Those nerves quickly disappeared as I ran up on stage for the first time. Unfortunately, due to a

technical issue, we had to immediately restart filming. For whatever reason, a sudden power issue took out one of our cameras and my lavalier microphone. Other than that little issue, there was only one thing that I think would have made the final product a lot cleaner and more realistic.

Weeks before stepping foot on stage, I should have done a pre-interview with my guests. Traditionally, late-night staffers will reach out to each guest on a show and ask them what they want to promote or discuss. Late Night is traditionally a promotional tool, with actors, artists, and athletes coming on to discuss their newest works. For *Tardy!*, I sat on stage and met with my guests for the first time live. The interviews turned out pretty good, but I wish I had previously contacted them to pre-write the questions and dialogue between us.

The defining characteristic which makes *Tardy! With Troy Steward* different from legacy shows like *Late Night* and *The Tonight Show* is the sheer amount of episodes those industry giants can put out. If we were to make this into an actual late-night show, all of the production work that my team had put in would have to increase exponentially. We created one thirty-minute show and it took us four months. The big boys manage to put out forty-five minutes of consistently professional television almost every weekday.

Immediately after filming the in-studio segment of the show, I felt a weight lift off my shoulders. The scariest and most difficult part of a project I had been working on for the last half a year was complete. The past six months of anguish and anxiousness about this project had ended, and I was glad to feel like myself again. I was lucky enough to keep the desk, chair, and middle set of lockers and bring them to my apartment in Mt Juliet, where they sit in my guest bedroom. This means I have the option to keep working

on a smaller, less intense version of the show. I can still do taped segments, tell jokes, bring on guests, and increase my hosting abilities. Filming this show made me really happy, and I want to keep that feeling going for as long as I can. Throughout the entire production of this project, I have learned so much about the process of putting on a large event like *Tardy! With Troy Steward*.

Tardy! With Troy Steward

Written by:

Emily Sanchez

Jacob Lee

Micah Lematoa

Abbey Smith

Maddi Wright

Lane Stanley

Troy Steward

Troy runs into the stage violently - a large applause highlights his entrance.

TROY

Hello and good evening to everyone! Sorry for running late - My alarm clock couldn't stop going off. It's so wonderful to see you all here tonight on my dad's birthday. I'm sure this is exactly what he wanted - A room full of people playing into his son's delusions. Isn't that right, Dad?

The camera cuts to the audience and the camera pans to a chair in the audience with a piece of paper taped to it reading "Reserved for Doug Steward."

The camera pans to another chair to the right with a piece of paper taped to it that reads "he's not disappointed in me - it's more that he lives 4 hours away and we both agreed it's cool if he stays home for this one." Back to Troy.

TROY

Now, you're all here tonight for a
great cause! You're all - Go ahead
and lock the doors -

Points over to the doors.

TROY

You're here because each one of
you is going to be writing my
honors thesis. Left side of the
room, you'll focus on the
introduction and abstract. We need
a good hook, but not something
that's too ai-ey, you know what I'm
saying?

Beat.

TROY

Right side of the room, you're
doing the body. I really want
something the honors people can
sink their teeth into.

Beat.

TROY

And the center of the room is
going to be taking on the biggest
challenge of them all -
deciphering my bibliography. In
case you didn't know, my name is
Troy.

Beat.

TROY

Troy Steward to be exact.

Beat.

TROY

Steward spelled S-T-E-W-A-R-D.
Troy is T-R-O-Y. I've been
mistaken for a Tony, a Tory, a
Toby. Most commonly my last name
is mistaken for StewaRT. S-T-E-W-
A-R-T. Which is understandable.
Both names have the same origin.
We're both stewards. A steward is
supposed to support and provide

for others. Hopefully tonight, I
can provide some laughs for you
all.

Beat.

TROY

I will say I do struggle with the
supporting and providing meaning
of my last name. After graduating
high school, I was a camp
counselor for a summer. And let me
just say, I think I ruined some of
those poor kids' lives.

Beat.

TROY

So, I don't know why I'm the one
in charge here. When I was a
counselor, I got the kids addicted
to red 40. They became violent
after that.

Beat.

TROY

And ya know, all the moms just started throwing essential oils and unpasteurized milk at me.

Beat.

TROY

Ugh, and then there was the time when a kid crapped his pants at 8 in the morning and didn't tell anyone until 8 at night. And I was on underwear duty. No pun intended, unfortunately. But let's not talk about those truly unforgettable times... That I don't miss.

Beat.

TROY

Man, I really hope you guys are doing alright tonight.

Beat.

TROY

I know I'm doing alright. You'd think I'd be super anxious before coming up here tonight, right? Well, wrong. I'm feeling so confident. I feel unstoppable. I feel like I could take over the world, but like, not in a patriarchy type of way or anything.

Beat.

TROY

I'm an ally ladies, don't worry.

Troy obnoxiously winks.

TROY

But, I guess you could say anxiety is a real problem. We all experience it in one way or another.

Beat.

TROY

I always get super anxious before a big event; like an important job interview...or even before a first date.

Beat.

TROY

My first date with my girlfriend had me so nervous, I became so gassy, I made her drive us back in my car to my place.

Beat.

TROY

So, anxiety can lead to physical problems too. Shivers, hives, even peeing the bed. But guys, you'll be glad to know I didn't pee the bed last night...at least not from anxiety.

Beat.

TROY

I just keep forgetting I can't
watch scary movies before bed,
that's all.

Troy shivers.

TROY

Ughhhhh...

Beat.

TROY

Last night, after I prepared
endlessly for this show, through
the blood, sweat, tears... something
magical happened.

Beat.

TROY

Really! It did. and this magic is
the reason I am standing on this
stage right now, ready to give you
all a great show. And I have
decided to share this magic with
you all and show you that I may or

may not be a part of the foreseen
prophecy of the talk show gods.

CUT TO: PRE-RECORDED SKETCH "THE CHOSEN ONE"

Int. Apartment. - NIGHT

TROY STEWARD (long night cap and PJs) sits at his desk at candlelight and writes the phrase FUNNY JOKE on a legal pad. He scribbles out the writing and tosses it into a small trash can next to him.

The television screen flickers beside him. A TELEVISION HOST talks as the audience laughs. His head turns to the device.

TROY

One day I wish I could be like one
of the greats. They make it look
so easy.

Troy looks down to the chicken scratch in front of him. He rips his legal pad papers in half.

TROY

Stupid, stupid, stupid!

His voice grows increasingly frustrated. He sighs and puts his head down on his desk.

The television audience roars with laughter. He grabs the remote, turns it off, and tosses it aside.

Troy looks at his clock. It reads "10:00 PM".

TROY

I guess I should go to bed.

He drops the entire mug of coffee into the trash can and stands up. He blows out the candle in front of him and pushes his chair under the desk.

Int. Bathroom - NIGHT

Troy stares at his reflection as he brushes his teeth. He spits, wipes his mouth, and walks out.

Int. Bedroom - CONTINUOUS

Troy walks in the room. He kneels in front of a table with candles and pictures of various late night television hosts. He bows his head and plants his hands on the shrine.

TROY

Hello Conan. And David. And Jimmy.
And the other Jimmy. Tonight, I am
praying to you because tomorrow I
host for the first time.

Troy peeks his eyes open and looks towards the framed
photos. He speaks softly.

TROY

I know how excited you are for me,
Craig Ferguson.

He turns his head and scowls at a picture of Jay Leno
haphazardly propped up in the corner of the room.

TROY

I also know that you exist, Jay
Leno.

Troy turns his head back down.

TROY

Give me the strength to talk the
best on the best show no matter
how late at night it is.

He stands up and gets into bed. His eyes shut.

Beat.

A framed photo of Johnny Carson hangs just above his head. A loud CAR ENGINE roars past his bedroom, the building shakes. The tremor knocks the framed photo off the wall. It falls and hits Troy in the head. He awakens with a jolt.

TROY

Hello?

Another car's headlights shine through the window as Troy shields his eyes. He reaches for his phone, bumps a remote, and the TV is turned back on.

TELEVISION HOST

You are just the best! I mean it!

TROY

Me?

TELEVISION HOST

That's right.

TROY

Wow, Conan O'Brien thinks I'm the best!

Troy swoons down back in bed.

Int. Living Room - MORNING

Late night television posters riddle the walls. Troy furiously scribbles on legal pads while he shoulders his phone to his ear.

Troy

No, trust me, he seriously contacted me last night.

He tears papers off the pad and sticks them to the bulletin board on the wall.

Troy's mom (O.S.)

Honey, are you okay? You have to host in a few hours?

TROY

Mom, you don't get it. He talked to me and responded. The late night greats have blessed me. I'm their..

Troy takes his phone away from his ear and steps back.

TROY'S MOM (O.S.)

Troy? What are you going on about?

You're their what? Troy? Are you
still there?

His eyes wildly examine the bulletin board where the
pages form "CHOSEN ONE". He whispers.

TROY

Chosen one.

Troy looks up and smirks.

TROY

Thank you, Ed Sullivan.

TROY'S MOM (O.S.)

Helloooo? Troy?

He puts the phone back to his ear as his eyes linger
on the bulletin board.

TROY

I gotta go, Mom.

TROY'S MOM

Oh okay. Well I guess I will see
you-

Troy hangs up.

Int. BEDROOM - Night

Troy approaches the candlelit shrine of late night hosts with a photo in hand. He smiles proudly as he sticks an unflattering headshot of himself onto the collage of hosts.

He puffs out his chest and mumbles under his breath with a goofy smile plastered on his face.

TROY

Look out, world. Here I come.

CUT TO: IN-STUDIO

Troy stands at the front of the stage.

TROY

As you all know, we're on MTSU's campus, and a lot has happened this semester. Among many fun things, the reigning champion of fun had to have been the "mtsu pisser" incident.

Beat.

TROY

For those of you who don't know,
the "MTSU Pisser" was one of the
many daring in a greater trend of
anonymous public urination. Our
pisser was a beloved member of the
community who brought a shining
gold shower of joy to our dull
lives.

Troy gestures towards backstage.

TROY

There is no one more qualified to
talk about the incident than the
man himself: Tonight folks, we
have for you, the MTSU Pisser-

An audience member stands up aggressively.

PISSER 1

Errrr! Wrong!

TROY

Excuse me?

PISSER 1

Wrong! whoever you've got there is
a phony!

TROY

What? What do you mean?

PISSER 1

They're a fake, they aren't the
real pisser!

TROY

How in the world could you know
that?

PISSER 1

Easy! Because... I'm the MTSU
Pisser.

TROY

What? No, you're not!

PISSER 1

Yes I am. If i wasn't the pisser
then why would i have pissed in
the STU? And I ain't talking about
the urinals.

TROY

That's disgusting. I have no idea
why you would do that.

PISSER 2

Oh yeah? Well, I peed all over the
honors building.

A third audience member stands.

PISSER 3

I peed on the blue horseshoe!

A fourth.

PISSER 4

I peed on Lightning once!

TROY

Ok stop! Are you guys "I am
Spartacus-"ing the MTSU Pisser?
This is not what we're doing!

PISSER 1

Oh, so it's gross to listen when
nature calls?

TROY

When you do it in public, yes! and
it's illegal!

PISSER 2

Oh yeah? we're all in this
together!

Pisser 2 gestures to themselves and the other pissers.

PISSER 2 (cont.)

I piss, you piss, we piss. Piss.
Together. Strong!

The audience cheers. Troy waves to quiet the room.

TROY

Sure, whatever, you changed my
mind. Maybe, you're all telling
the truth. Maybe, everyone is an
MTSU Pisser. Maybe, the real MTSU
Pisser is the friends we made
along the way. Maybe, I'm going to
become the pissiest pisser MTSU
has ever seen - And maybe, I will
piss all over every inch of this
campus since it seems everyone
else is already doing it!

The room goes silent. After a second, the audience boos.

PISSER 3

Creep!

PISSER 1

What? Bro, that's weird.

PISSER 2

What is your problem?

Troy sighs and puts his head down and music bumps.

CUT TO: IN-STUDIO AT DESK

TROY

And we're back! My first guest, ladies and gentlemen, is a star in the making. She's the defining "mcbling" stylist of the modern age and has amassed almost two million followers doing so. That's right, it's the black haired brat herself, please welcome Jayden Naomi!

Troy stands up. Jayden walks on stage. They hug and sit back down. The interview commences.

TROY

Thanks so much for being here.

Jayden walks off stage.

CUT TO: PRE-RECORDED BUZIE MUSIC PERFORMANCE

CUT TO: IN-STUDIO AT DESK

Troy sits at his desk. He has brought out a set of thick cards.

TROY

Ok, here's the part of the show where we talk about the news.

Troy presents the first card, showing an image of a monkey hanging from Spirit Halloween rafters.

TROY

Last week, a pet monkey ran wild in a Texas spirit halloween. The management responded to the incident by taking this costume off the shelf.

Troy presents the second card, showing an image of a man in a banana costume. He throws it away. He presents another card, showing an image of an article headline reading "Scientists develop an artificial tongue."

TROY

Alright- Scientists have developed an artificial tongue that checks the spice level of food. The scientist's name? God.

Troy throws the card away and picks up the next one, showing an image of NYC mayor-elect, Zohran Mamdani.

TROY

In political news, Zohran Mamdani has won the New York City mayoral election, narrowly beating out Andrew Cuomo. Finally, Knicks fans get some sort of win.

Troy throws the card away.

TROY

Alright, those were the jokes!
My final guest of the night is a
designer, storyteller, and an all
around cool guy. His newest
exhibit, "archive, marsielle,"
debuts next spring. Please give a
hand to Kam'Ron Young!

Kam'Ron walks on stage. Interview commences.

Kam'Ron walks off stage.

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