

'SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE' AND PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS PANEL DISCUSSION

Saturday Night Live has provided an irreverent yet influential perspective on American presidential politics since its debut season in 1975. Two days after kicking off its fall 2008 season with a sketch portraying Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton, *SNL* was the subject of a panel discussion with series creator and executive producer Lorne Michaels, selected by *Time* Magazine as one of the world's 100 most influential people; cast members and *Weekend Update* co-anchors Amy Poehler and Seth Meyers; and veteran *SNL* writer James Downey. The program celebrated the launch of the 2008 edition of the Museum's website, The Living Room Candidate (www.livingroomcandidate.org), an archive of American presidential campaign commercials.

Panel discussion with James Downey, Lorne Michaels, Seth Meyers, and Amy Poehler, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (September 15, 2008):

ROCHELLE SLOVIN: Now, to introduce Lorne Michaels: Herb Schlosser, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Museum of the Moving Image. While Herb was president of NBC, he put *Saturday Night Live* on the air, so there's no one more fitting as an introducer tonight. Herb! (Applause)

HERB SCHLOSSER: Back in 1975, in the spring, NBC began to think about putting a program on at 11:30 at night. We had *The Today Show* and *The Tonight Show*, which were very successful, under the brilliant Pat Weaver, and we put on some other late night programs, and they always worked. So we decided that we would do it. To begin with, we only had three conditions that we wanted to achieve. One was that it be live; that it be in the Toscanini studio that was created by General Sarnoff for the NBC Symphony Orchestra; and that it go on at eleven-thirty at night. Now, were thinking—because Johnny Carson had left New York for California, and the building was without that activity and excitement—that we would do a kind of hipper version of *The Tonight Show* with younger people and so forth and so on.

Then we hired a thirty-year-old writer called Lorne Michaels, and we got so much more than we ever bargained for. Dick Ebersol, who was in the program department, was the program executive,

but Lorne created the show, and it had certain characteristics. It had brilliant writing, the casting was outstanding, and most important, Lorne was not afraid. He was willing to test the limits of what the executives would permit, and test the audience, as well. He was willing to put pins into balloons, say outrageous things, and he created something new.

Lorne got the respect of the audience—we had great audiences—and beyond that, he got the respect of the entire creative community. It was a great success, and it goes on today after thirty-three years. There's really no other show that has managed to achieve that. And as you've seen tonight, then in the political realm, there's no program which every four years, creates the kind of excitement that *Saturday Night Live* does—and as it did last Saturday night, if some of you saw [with Tina Fey and Amy Poehler's parody of a Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton]. I was told by one of the NBC executives that last Saturday's show had the highest opening rating of any show in seven or eight years. I mean, it really captures the imagination of the country.

Lorne did it. He did it. And NBC and the country have benefit from it. The talent that the show has developed has gone on to motion pictures and other areas. I think that if you added up the gross of all the movies of the *Saturday Night Live* talent, you'd be talking about many billions of dollars. Its impact has been huge, and it still continues, and it's my pleasure to introduce Lorne Michaels. (Applause)

The panel will be moderated by David Schwartz, whom you saw just a few moments ago. The other panelists are:

James Downey, a writer for *Saturday Night Live*. (Applause) He's been with the show since 1976 and has written many, if not most of the political sketches.

Seth Meyers. (Applause) Seth is in his eighth season on the show. He's the head writer and *Weekend Update* co-anchor.

And Amy Poehler. (Applause) She's in her seventh season on the show and *Weekend Update* co-anchor, and she's played Hillary [Clinton], as you've seen. And now she has a great career, I believe, in motion pictures, as well. (Applause)

DAVID SCHWARTZ: Thank you. I guess you worked out a Bristol Palin sketch for—

AMY POEHLER: That's right. (Laughter) It's very good. [Poehler was also pregnant at this time.]

SCHWARTZ: I was going to start originally by talking about Gerald Ford and Chevy Chase, but since everybody is talking about Sarah Palin these days, let's get into this sketch that you just did. As background, let's talk a little bit about Hillary [Clinton], because the sketch combined Hillary and Sarah Palin. And I just want to remind people of the impact that the show had way back—it seems like years ago, but it was in March or late February—when Hillary appeared on the show. The sketch led to an actual mention of *Saturday Night Live* in a real debate, and then Hillary came on in person. So we've seen sort of politics and entertainment playing interesting roles. Let's talk first about that sketch and Hillary's appearances earlier.

LORNE MICHAELS: Well, Jim [Downey] wrote the debate piece, the first Hillary/Obama debate piece. And the thrust of it (Laughter, applause) was that the media was infatuated with Obama. It wouldn't have gotten the reaction it got if it hadn't resonated. And then I think that sent the Hillary people off in a trajectory, and they wanted to come on the show, and she mentioned it in one of the debates.

JAMES DOWNEY: It wasted a lot of time, on everyone's part.

MICHAELS: Yes, yes.

SCHWARTZ: Can you talk about what it was like creating the impersonation and then actually having to do a sketch with the real Hillary?

POEHLER: Well, it's always weird to be next to someone, dressed as them. (Laughter) No matter if they're a politician or not. So it was what you would imagine it would be, kind of surreal. But on *SNL*, you get used to having very surreal moments. I don't really consider myself a really great impersonator, and so I wouldn't say that I sound very much like her or ever look like her. But I think with Jim's guidance, in terms of him writing the pieces and helping me find a voice, I think it was interesting over the last couple years to try and find what you could kind of play about her.

MICHAELS: There's a thing that happens on the show too—Amy is a great example of it or Dana Carvey, when he was doing the first president Bush. There's a point for me where you sort of start watching Dana do Bush, or her do Hillary, and you begin, when you see the real person, [to find that] they sort of disappoint you a little. (Laughter) Because they've encapsulated some essence of them, they become characters, as apposed to impressions.

SCHWARTZ: Right. Well, I think as viewers, we all sort of wait to see how that person is going get the *SNL* treatment. In a way, that becomes a job of the show: getting at this essence that you're talking about. Could you talk about what your thinking was? When did you first see Sarah Palin and start to put the idea together of how you were going to treat her?

SETH MEYERS: Well, it seemed like you only have this one opportunity a year to have a lot of time to think of what the story of the summer is. It seemed like at the time we came back, it was Sarah Palin. Now, we only have five days to come up with something for this week.

MICHAELS: I think it's still Sarah Palin. (Laughs)

MEYERS: It might still be Sarah Palin for you. (Laughter) Thank, you Sarah Palin. So we wanted to do a piece about that. I think the trick with all these people is to try to come out as fair and even-handed as possible. And it seemed to make sense, as well—obviously, we had Tina Fey back and we had Amy. (Applause) That's the least applause that Tina has ever... (Laughter)

POEHLER: Tina would be furious at that moment! (Laughter)

MEYERS: But you know, when you have faith in two performers and you put them out there, there's going to be a natural charisma. So you have that, and it was a nice way to use of what we believe is probably Hillary's at disappointment that Sarah Palin is closer to the White House than she. Using that idea made it safer to mention things about Sarah Palin without it looking like an attack piece, which I think is always the fear.

POEHLER: A lot of sexual chemistry. (Laughter)

MEYERS: A lot of sexual chemistry. Well, you know, my dream is you, Tina, and a podium. (Laughter) But it was really nice because once we came up with the premise, which was a fairly simple one, a lot of people pitched in with different jokes. It was one of the more fluid pieces we've done in that it was changing up until the last minute, and I think the results turned out okay.

POEHLER: Up until like five minutes before I went on, I was playing Palin.

MEYERS: Right, that was a terrible decision. (Laughter) Lorne caught it.

POEHLER: I liked how Lorne was like, "Should we switch it?" And you're like, "That's why you're making the big money." (Laughter)

MICHAELS: I knew there was something wrong. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: You're all obviously looking for laughs; I mean that's what makes the show work. But you know that you're comedy does have some sort of impact. I mean, there have been times—we'll talk about Al Gore and the debates a little bit later—but you must have some sense that

what you do is going to have an impact on how people think of Sarah Palin. Do you think about this or not? How do you deal with...?

MICHAELS: You think about it, but the thing you think about first is whether it's going to work, whether it's going to be funny, and if the take is original and fresh enough. You can't think about the fate of Western civilization. You know, we're part of it, but we're not—honestly, nobody's going into the booth, and [saying], "You know I watched *SNL* and now I'm clear (Laughter) on what to do. We're just part of it, and invariably, we're part of it because we deal with the small part of it.

We don't try and deal with it in that grandiose way of what's best for the country. And again, none of this stuff works unless it hits pretty close. You can't go out there and just do a partisan rant. I mean, you can do that if you're on MSNBC (Laughter) but you can't really do it in comedy, because if you lose the audience, you lose them really fast.

SCHWARTZ: But was it odd, then, to see that when you did the sketch about Hillary, the mainstream media started repeating this idea that she was getting the hard questions? That showed up and seemed to actually have an impact on real debates.

MEYERS: I feel like the media also—that piece was more a criticism of the media than anything else. So I think there was an inner delight that the piece was about the media, and then the media started talking about the media. (Laughter) And they were like, "Are we doing this?" (Laughter)

MICHAELS: All part of the plan. (Poehler Laughs)

DOWNEY: And no one follows the press more avidly than the press.

SCHWARTZ: Right, right.

MEYERS: But then, of course, the snake sort of ate its own tail when Hillary mentioned it in the debate the next week.

MICHAELS: We're not 100% sure she ever saw it.

MEYERS: No.

DOWNEY: There's no evidence, from the way she quoted it. One time, we were talking about doing a show called The Niensens. Do you remember that? We decided it would be the highest rated show ever on television. (Laughter) We should have done that.

MICHAELS: We should have.

POEHLER: It's not too late. (Laughs)

DOWNEY: No.

SCHWARTZ: Well, based on what Herb said about the ratings for the show and the internet viewings, I guess most of you have seen the sketch that ran on Saturday. In case you haven't, or just want to see it with a live audience here, let's run this opening sketch of Saturday night's show, with Tina Fey and Amy Poehler. (Clip plays; applause, laughter)

POEHLER: (Laughs exaggeratedly)

SCHWARTZ: Was that Hillary laughing or you laughing?

POEHLER: No, that's me laughing. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: What has the response been like politically? Do you get responses from people who said you were too hard on her? You know, "When are we going to see the Joe Biden sketch?" Do people gauge what you should be doing, politically?

MEYERS: I think it's one of the most interesting things that people who are on the left think it was just hard enough and I bet people on the right love it, too. I bet the Palin people were perfectly happy with that, as well, which is the weird thing. (Laughter) I mean, even not doing political sketches, I've done impersonations of people in the past that are not that flattering, and then you meet them and they're like, "Oh my God, that was the best!" They just like the cultural significance of like being on the show.

SCHWARTZ: Well, the report was that [Palin] watched it on a campaign plane and said she was happy, because she used to dress as Tina Fey at Halloween parties. (Poehler laughs)

MEYERS: So we lucked into that.

SCHWARTZ: But it covers a lot of ground that sketch; a lot of topics, a lot of issues that came up during Hillary's campaign. Could you talk a bit about just how this sketch evolved? Were there other rejected Palin sketches you could tell us about that you didn't do? (Laughter)

POEHLER: That's a good idea. Let's talk about the ones we didn't do. (Laughter)

MEYERS: It is funny how there are moments in it—anything that gets a little preachy doesn't work quite as well. Certainly, you watch it again and you're happier with the jokes than anything that sort of takes the high road. I think that you always have to remember that we write these pieces. I also want to add that the last word we added to that sketch was "boner-shrinker." (Laughter) And as I heard that I was like, "Why are we on a panel for a museum?" (Laughter) What have we done?

MICHAELS: That was a change from "boner-killer."

MEYERS: It was "boner-killer"! (Laughs) I wasn't going to say that, but it was "boner-killer." (Laughter) Surprisingly, "boner-killer" killed the audience, but people love "boner-shrinker."

SCHWARTZ: And did a lot of people look up FLURGE?

POEHLER: I don't know.

MEYERS: I don't know. It does not stand for anything.

DOWNEY: I was going to ask.

POEHLER: Nothing. Well...

DOWNEY: What does it mean?

POEHLER: And there was a couple funny people who were like, "Oh I know what that stands for." I was like, "Oh, okay." (Laughter)

MEYERS: We just liked that there was a term that people had created just to call Hillary Clinton, and nobody knows what it is. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Did you guys watch *Saturday Night Live* growing up? I have such indelible memories of all the sketches that we saw in that opening reel; I vividly remember all of them. I'm just wondering what your memories are and what sketches made an impression.

POEHLER: I absolutely did. In fact, when you're younger, you watch the political stuff in a different way; at least I did when I was younger. You don't really know who the people are or the issues are; you like them as characters. Well, I wasn't born when it... No, no, I'm kidding. Let's see, what was it? It went on in '70...

DOWNEY: Four?

POEHLER: So I was four, and you know, the first cast... I was in love with Eddie Murphy. He was my person at the time. But all the Ford stuff, I didn't get it. I didn't get what was... Other than I loved Chevy falling down. (Laughter)

MEYERS: From a very young age, I read *The New York Times*, so I did get all those jokes. (Laughter) But again, I think I'm the unique one, though. I think most people would be... (Laughter) The show that taught me my sensibilities about doing political writing is now the show I work on. And most of those pieces were written by Jim. As I started to work, I realized that. And he holds that over me.

POEHLER: That's for sure.

SCHWARTZ: So what was it like from the very beginning? The impersonation of Gerald Ford and the way that that became sort of part of the race; and then Ron Nessen, the White House press secretary, was he asked to be on the show? So politics and the show were married right from the beginning.

MICHAELS: Yes. Right from the—we came on right after Watergate, and everyone had watched the hearings for six months. I think it was just part of where that generation was at the time. One of the sort of bold things—which seems not at all bold now—was when that Chevy did Gerald Ford, which was I think from the fifth or sixth show, he made absolutely no effort to look like Gerald Ford. (Laughter) I remember this moment, the first time

he was doing it. We were sort of a little tense over doing it. There was a moment before the first laugh, when he didn't hear the first laugh, so he sneezed into his tie. (Laughter) And I thought, "You can't do that with the president of the United States!" But evidently you could. (Laughter)

So it just sort of matured into people looking like the people they're playing, and it got more sophisticated. The very first debate, which they showed a bit of, was Ford/Carter. You know that high point of "I didn't know there would be any math." That sort of encapsulated the take on Ford; and Carter talking that kid down from a bad acid trip sort of summarized everything we thought about Carter.

We opted, particularly in the eighties with Mike Dukakis—*After Dark*, which is a Jim piece—they just got silly, you know, and fun. I think if they're not fun, then it's like taking medicine. Not that the op-ed page isn't a lot of fun. (Laughter) But our job is to find a way to make it light and work.

SCHWARTZ: The Reagan sketch was brilliant because a lot of times, the way to make fun of candidates or presidents are to pretend that they're dumb. The idea that Reagan had this sort of false happy persona and was totally different when he was behind the scenes was a brilliant idea.

MICHAELS: Jim was involved in that.

POEHLER: Talk about that, Jim.

MICHAELS: Yes; go ahead, Jim. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: That's your cue.

DOWNEY: Actually, I think five of us wrote that. It was unusual in that it was sort of a gang-written piece. I think the only thing that was essential was the fact that Phil Hartman could handle all that speed stuff. We had him, like, speaking Arabic, and German, and he was trading Swiss marks for francs and stuff on the phone, and then like (Impersonating Reagan) "Well..." you know, he'd go out and do the thing. We had Jimmy Stewart, I think, interrupt him or something. I suppose just because so many people still don't like Reagan, that's one that they keep bringing up to me. But

Phil Hartman was really—you couldn't have done that with a lot of performers.

MICHAELS: You certainly could with Amy and Seth.

POEHLER: Oh, you're nice.

MICHAELS: Or Dan Aykroyd. But I think that one of the things that was difficult about Reagan, and I think is very much the problem we have with Bush, this president, in the last few years, is that when the audience knows everything there is to know about them, it's very hard to find an edge. So much the criticism of Reagan in his first term and then much more so in the second term, was that he was old, he was an actor, he was a generalist. But the audience was way ahead.

DOWNEY: Well, we also kind of lucked out with Reagan, in that you and I were away from the show for his entire first term.

MICHAELS: Yes, that's true. Which was the plan.

DOWNEY: Actually, I had come back a year before Lorne, and I had written a piece which—I only mention this because I was exactly right in the politics; forget the comedy. It was a piece in the '84 election that was Mondale planning his campaign to win Minnesota. So it was like the big war room with a map of the state, and it was, you know, sending people into different counties and stuff. And that was the only state he won! (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Just barely, yes. (Laughs)

DOWNEY: But then when we got to the second term—I guess we were there for the full second term, pretty much?

MICHAELS: Yes.

DOWNEY: Then we had an easier time. You know, Bush Senior was one term. Clinton, different things kept happening to him; I wasn't really at the show for the last two years of Clinton's term. But the problem with George W. is that [he's been] in for eight years... I mean I'm the guy who came up with "strategy," and I got sort of bored with the mispronunciation kind of thing. Also, when Will [Ferrell] left the show—I think it's safe to

talk about this—there was a problem in that we cast about. I think Darrell [Hammond] tried him first; and then we went to [Chris] Parnell; and then we went back to Darrell; then we went to Will Forte. So by the time—like that clip you showed from the thing I wrote for Bush/Kerry... '04. I'm trying to remember, "Who is he again in that piece? Oh yeah, he's Bush." For our purposes, it would be nice if they changed every four years. (Laughter)

MICHAELS: Yes. Term limits.

POEHLER: Looking at some of those clips, though, I remember how much I loved Hartman's Clinton, and how much I loved Darrell's Clinton, too. They're very different.

DOWNEY: But one of the pleasant surprises to me, I wrote—we had not done Carter since he was president. I mean, there wasn't a lot of reason to. Then there was a thing a few years ago, he went down to Cuba. I remember writing a piece where Darrell did Carter talking to Castro, with Maya [Rudolph] as his translator. I love writing foreign language pieces with translations. It's sort of a tick I have. (Laughter) But Darrell did the cruelest—which is to say the funniest—Carter I've ever seen, because he had all those weird facial pops. (Laughter) Do you guys remember that?

MICHAELS: Yes, yes, yes.

DOWNEY: I'd love to have Darrell to Carter again anytime.

MICHAELS: Well, he did it last season, didn't he?

MEYERS: Yes, yes. He did a Larry King piece where he had just written a book, and Larry King was like, "Now, do you expect anyone to buy this book?" (Laughter) It was great.

DOWNEY: But he has that thing where his eyes totally open, you know? Like, for no good reason.

MEYERS: It's interesting to watch Darrell, sort of as you talk about these presidents, because I do think there are these two kinds of impressions: the ones where you make it a character, and then there are ones where you're sort of just a

technician about it. I think Darrell's the one who can do both.

DOWNEY: Yes, Darrell's, like inductive, where he assembles the impression from like a thousand little elements, and then there's the broad stroke, kind of coming from the other direction.

MICHAELS: It's also that that voice is [Al] Gore. You know, it kind of leads you because you're noticing the wig he was wearing—

DOWNEY: Ssh!

MICHAELS: Oh, sorry. (Laughter)

MEYERS: Darrell will come to you, in recent years, when you've written a Gore piece. He's like, "Do you want 2000 Gore? Do you want now Gore?" (Laughter) Because he's actually noticed that Gore changes, and then he does a Gore that's not sort of the Greatest Hits Gore. And you're like, "Well, I think just do the 2000 Gore that everyone loves." And in his head, he's like, "Alright, but..."

DOWNEY: "...we're going to get letters on that." (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Well, there were a few different 2000 Gores. I mean, the famous story was that after the first debate, with all the sighing, that—and I don't know if this is true or not, but that Gore's advisors sat him down and said, "Look at this sketch from *Saturday Night Live*," and then he went out and changed his performance in the second debate.

DOWNEY: Oh, I can actually vouch for its truth. I was at Al Franken's apartment, and we doing a—

MEYERS: Name-dropper.

POEHLER: Name-dropper.

DOWNEY: We were writing wrap-arounds—that's right, *The Al Franken*. (Laughter) We were writing wrap-arounds for this political "Best Of..." And there's going to be another one, presidential "Best Of..." coming up November 2, Sunday, at 9:00 p.m.?

MICHAELS: I don't know! (Laughter)

DOWNEY: Anyway this guy who—I suppose I can name him; maybe I shouldn't—it's true, though.

SCHWARTZ: Go ahead.

DOWNEY: Eli Attic. He worked for the Gore campaign, and he calls Franken up while we're working and Al's like, "Uhh, maybe I should do this later." (Imitates Franken) I go, "No, no. Do it now. I want to hear this." So they were talking. They'd just shown Gore the piece, and I know, because I got on the extension and eavesdropped. (Laughter) He was explaining, "No, we made him watch it because it's really..."

Then I watched the next debate, and he sort of went from being all defined and sort of the bullying to being just such a little wallflower in the next one. That made it more fun because, like you say, it was like three different Gores. It kind of evened out by the day they had a town hall debate, where it was just kind of a lot of like special pleader questions from the audience, if you remember that one. But there really were three different Gores, and also a couple different Bushes, because in the second [debate], that was the one where they really, really schooled Bush on a few basic things, so he kept mentioning like, obscure members of the Nigerian cabinet and stuff. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Speaking of Democratic candidates who are painful to watch at times, what was it like playing John Kerry, and building up that perception?

MEYERS: It wasn't a comedy jackpot. (Laughter) I was lucky in that Jim was writing great stuff for it. But it's hard when... You know, you try to like find something to exaggerate, and when its gravitas, that's...

DOWNEY: It's the only Kerry impression I've ever seen. He's not an easy impression. I actually thought you did a great job.

POEHLER: I did too.

DOWNEY: Because anyone will tell you that there are some... Hillary Clinton is really hard. I'd say Kerry is just about as hard.

MICHAELS: I think it was that *he* let *you* down.

MEYERS: Oh, he definitely did. (Laughter) He definitely did.

POEHLER: That's the way to look at it.

MEYERS: It's funny, I realized in recent years how you feel people will be—well, like I've said about Bush: people want to vote for people they think they would like to have a beer with. I was actually at a Red Sox game last year, and John Kerry was there, and I was actually having a beer with him. You should always vote for the other guy; it'll increase your chance of having a beer with the loser. (Laughter) Yeah, but it was great. It is thrilling to be in an *SNL* debate sketch. It's thrilling to be in a cold open.

POEHLER: It's thrilling to say, "Live from New York." It is! It's as simple as that.

MEYERS: And the debates are a perfect design for us to write sketches about, because then with the sketch, you're making fun of both sides—just by design, because both sides are performing at the debates.

SCHWARTZ: So what's your plan for the first debate, which is on a Friday night?

POEHLER: Jesus, give us a break. (Laughter)

DOWNEY: Already got it done.

POEHLER: Monday, it's Monday.

DOWNEY: We'll probably have some pre-fab stuff that you can imagine is likely to come up, and then just have a hellish night, and hope for the best.

MICHAELS: I think there's another point that sort of gets lost a little bit, which is that there's also the likeability of the cast member playing the person. I think Amy's Hillary is a perfect example of it, because Amy is one of the best loved people ever on the show. (Applause) I didn't mean to do that! What I meant with it was that if you like Will Ferrell and he does "strategy," you're more on the side of Bush, because you like who's playing him. But you know, I think that if you feel a connection...

The fact that the audience already liked Chevy, and him doing Gerald Ford as a guy who falls down—I mean, I'd like to say we had more of a take than that. But it was very early days. (Laughter) And...

DOWNEY: We didn't have the budget.

MICHAELS: We didn't have the budget then, you know. (Laughter) But there's also connecting with the performer. I think if you like the person doing it, that has an influence.

SCHWARTZ: So you've probably been surprised when some of the people you were spoofing adopted these performers as friends. Like the first George Bush, I guess, was quite friendly...

MICHAELS: Oh, totally.

SCHWARTZ: ...and enjoyed Dana Carvey's...

MICHAELS: And what was so interesting about the Sarah Palin thing was that there're at least two people at the show right now who can do her, and do her perfectly. But that was the situation where the audience just cast Tina Fey. You know, emails, letters... Everybody you'd talk to would go, "What a gift, huh? You could have so much fun with Tina Fey. But you know, Michaels, she's actually on her own show now." (Laughter) But the audience sort of felt that's what they wanted to see. And then when that moment came together, which it did, I think...

DOWNEY: Now they're all going to want money because they think they thought of it.

MICHAELS: Yes; no, I know.

POEHLER: It was a collective scratch to a giant itch.

MICHAELS: That's what the rebate was for. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Well, you've sort of answered this before, but do you think it's true that many people get their political news from comedy or their ideas about politics? This is something that we hear a lot, that young people, you know, get their news more from *The Daily Show* than watching TV

news. You know, this Sunday there were two lengthy pieces in print in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* about Sarah Palin, long investigative pieces, that were important if people read them; but probably, many more people saw your show.

MICHAELS: But the people who write these things read them. So it's just a distillation of the same information—with a point a view. I think that you can encapsulate it. I mean, there are lots of op-ed writers, particularly with *The Times*, who be very funny and witty, and that's part of what they do, but they do it in a different form. For ours, we just have to distill it. I mean, you can tell from Tina kind of waving from the first moment she spoke that they were there with it, that it got something right. In the same way with Hillary, I don't think it's in any way—her Hillary is *her* Hillary. It's not like you go, "God, she's similar to what Amy does." It's like we have a character. Hillary is continually put upon, and is continually, always at the point of explosive rage. (Laughter)

DOWNEY: Fending the thing off.

SCHWARTZ: Since I've brought up news, could you talk about you're approach to *Weekend Update* and how you sort of deal with the news as it's breaking during the week and decide how you're going to put that together?

MEYERS: One of the nice things about *Weekend Update*, it's sort of a last stop for any stories that have sort of slipped through our fingers. The later in the week, the harder it is to build a set or anything like that; but we have our features, in which people who come on and do pieces, so we can always cover stuff there. It's also been a really nice home in the last year for political candidates to come on. You know, you get them there and it's just nice to—it's nice for us to have pictures of them at the desk, to be honest. (Laughter) But it's good. Obviously, we try to open covering what are top hard news stories, and then as *Weekend Update* rolls on, there are sillier jokes. But it is still, for us, a parody of a news show. I would not get your news from *Weekend Update*.

POEHLER: Oh, God. (Laughter) Yikes!

MICHAELS: But I think on cable, people do; with *The Daily Show* and *Colbert*...

MEYERS: Those aren't bad places to get your news—but this is.

SCHWARTZ: How do you deal with the fact that when a politician comes on the show, they really are seeking some political gain? I mean, when Hillary appears on the show, she has an agenda; when Barack Obama appears; I guess when Huckabee appeared, it was a bit late in the game for him but...

MEYERS: Huckabee was on his gift basket part of running for president. (Laughter) He really was. I said, "Why are you still in the race?" He was like, "Well, would you have had me if I wasn't?" (Laughter)

DOWNEY: The whole *raison d'être* of Al Sharpton's role, I think, was the per diem. (Laughter) Back the year before you came, Jesse Jackson hosted the show. Obviously, anything that they do enhances your writing. It's much cooler than one of our people impersonating them, in that sense. On the other hand, for that very reason, they're not going to do everything.

I remember when Jesse Jackson—this goes way back for a lot of you here tonight—but the Rainbow Coalition was like the black, brown, you know, yellow—everybody. So I wanted him to do this piece where he does the Rainbow Coalition thing and says, "But that doesn't mean we have to take *everybody* in the Rainbow Coalition." (Laughter)

So it was a list of all the groups not welcome (Laughter) in the Rainbow Coalition. Of course, it was an insane thing that I ever thought he would do, but I'm sitting there with him and his guys, its like, "Won't do that. Won't do that. Won't do that. Won't do that." It was like three things that were left.

Just this spring, I wrote a piece for McCain. You know, he's the big pork buster and there were certain outrageous programs like that are just, "Why are we spending money on this?" I remember one of them was—I would so love to John McCain do this on television!—"What about

this? \$150 million to the Department of Justice for a program that notifies convicted sex offenders when a child moves into his neighborhood?" (Laughter) It was one that, "Please, just don't read the script until you're out there!" (Laughter) But they were too smart for me. I was like, "Senator McCain, really? Just come on. Just take another—" "No, he's not going to do it." (Laughter)

MICHAELS: They have to maintain a certain level of gravitas...

DOWNEY: ...but does it have to be that high? (Laughter)

MICHAELS: It's hard to trust someone with no apparent sense of humor.

SCHWARTZ: Well, when Al Gore did the hot tub sketch, people we're speculating about whether he was going to run or not.

MICHAELS: That was that weekend he announced he wasn't going to run.

DOWNEY: And that was the moment it was clear.

POEHLER: He was very loose on the show. He was ready to do anything on the show. That week, we were saying, "He's not going to run," because he was saying 'yes' to so many pieces. (Laughter)

MICHAELS: Also, I think if more people had seen *that* Al Gore in 2000, I think it would have had an effect. He did win the popular vote, didn't he?

DOWNEY: Yeah, he did.

MICHAELS: Right.

DOWNEY: But I remember seeing—I think it was Bob Dole or somebody was on saying, "The moment I saw that hot tub thing, I knew Al was not running for president." (Laughter)

MEYERS: I will say that for me, the joy is when a political—because Al Gore came back and did an address a few years ago as if it was in an alternate universe, as if he had won president and things were going well. The glaciers were so strong they were, like, encroaching on Minnesota,

and George Bush was the Commissioner of Baseball. (Laughter) He was so loose, but there were a few things... It was the Supreme Court Justice joke about him having put somebody on the Supreme Court like Michael—well, there was some joke he didn't want to do, and it was really funny.

Michael Moore, maybe? (Laughter) But Lorne is very funny with them when they're like, "I just, I can't do it, Lorne." He goes, "Well, just try it." It's really great to have them—they're used to having people agree with them right away. And Lorne's advice is always just to get it up on its feet.

DOWNEY: I wrote a piece that was the opening of the last show. It had nothing to do with politics, but it was just a high school graduation where it was all the filthy names like, Comonawanna Lay, and stuff. Lorne thought it would be fun to have John McCain in it as a faculty member. (Laughter) So I have a great tape of McCain laughing at the crudest stuff.

POEHLER: Yes, he loved it.

MICHAELS: He loved it, yeah.

DOWNEY: Then we had—his people said, "The senator can't—"

MICHAELS: I think he has a great sense of humor, and you could tell it because he was hearing those names for the first time, and it was truly really funny. But I think that we live in a time now where that becomes an attack ad. Everything becomes an attack ad. At worst, you know, the minimum on the international—

SCHWARTZ: Well, there is an attack ad against Al Franken out now that uses his comedy rantings put together to make him look erratic and insane.

DOWNEY: You should see the stuff we saw! (Laughter)

MICHAELS: It's so unfair to do that Al. No, I think there's a certain behavior that you want, obviously, when someone's in office. But I guess my point of view is that you can be a very serious person—and be funny.

SCHWARTZ: Whose idea was it to get Jesse Jackson to do *Green Eggs and Ham*? That was brilliant.

MICHAELS: That's Franken. It's Franken.

POEHLER: I took a shower with John McCain.

DOWNEY: That's right, I wrote that piece.

POEHLER: You wrote it? He was a stalker and he was right in my shower. It was a *Lifetime* movie.

DOWNEY: Yes, I did a *Lifetime* movie with John McCain. (Laughter) I always thought I could have, like, the title with, "Ted: Played by Senator John McCain, Republican, Arizona." (Laughter)

MICHAELS: I think that I want to go back to that for a moment.

POEHLER: The shower? Well, it was good. (Laughter)

MEYERS: He smells great.

MICHAELS: No! I think that you have to believe that people have a sense of humor about themselves, because I don't think anybody can be serious for four years. So the idea that it's off-camera, that that part of them doesn't get shown, is not realistic.

SCHWARTZ: You got George W. Bush to be on just shortly before the election.

MICHAELS: Both of them, yes. They both came on the presidential bash.

DOWNEY: Weirdly, the one thing both campaigns said—you remember this—was that they obviously didn't want to take any chance of them running into each other, because the likelihood of anything good coming out of that was...

SCHWARTZ: This is Bush and Kerry you're talking about?

MICHAELS: Bush and Gore in 2000. They both came to do the special.

DOWNEY: We did a split screen thing that was assembled from different... The way the thing

worked out, they ended up being first; my God! It's going to be the next day. And then—no, it was the same day! And then it was like they almost ran into each other in the studio!

The great thing about my memory of that was that Gore was very much tougher to convince than Bush. Bush was like, "Yeah, I'll do it." (Laughter) Gore was like very—he needed a lot of hand holding. Franken interceded because Franken knew him very well, and so we were able to talk him into doing the stuff.

But then we didn't have a "Live from New York" thing, so I had the idea of Gore going, "Normally, we end these things with 'Live from New York,' but I just don't feel this would be dignified, so Governor..." and then we got Jesse Ventura to do the "Live from New York."

I remember, on the phone, one of our producers, calls the Minnesota governor's office. Jesse's in the background, and it was like, "They want you to do, 'Live from New York.'" (Gruffly) "Yeah, fine!" (Laughter) So I didn't even get to see it! I'm listening in on a phone hook-up. He was doing a *Hardball*, and I just knew that if Jesse Ventura could do anything, he could do a "Live from New York." But he did the perfect professional wrestler kind of thing, and I just heard the way he did it: "I don't need to look at the thing."

SCHWARTZ: So, let's just talk about this year's election to wrap up. It's been such an amazing year. You did have to sit out a bit early on because of the writers strike.

MICHAELS: Yes; that was for the greater good. (Laughter)

DOWNEY: I think it helped us, though. I know you might not agree with me, but it compressed the—we didn't have to stay on top of the less interesting, more complicated things, where there were seven or eight candidates technically alive. By the time we got to it, it was about Hillary and Obama. I think that helped us.

MICHAELS: Yes, in that sense, it was good for us, it was just very frustrating not being on the air in an election year.

SCHWARTZ: What was it like dealing with Obama and how to characterize him? There was discussion about who would play him and how to make fun of him. Nobody was really making jokes about him; I remember that was a discussion.

MICHAELS: Well, on the first show of last season, in August, we get a call from Hillary Clinton's office that she wanted to come on that show. Although we really didn't have any sort of point of view on it, because she called first, we said yes. Then the Obama people called a couple days later, and I said "We've already given that show away." The next available date was in November, that he could do. So, we agreed that he would do that show, like November 3. Then the week of the first show, Hillary's people decided it wouldn't be right for her to do it, and they cancelled. Now, you know I'm great at...

DOWNEY: Would have won the nomination...

MICHAELS: Yes. (Laughter) No one transcends pettiness more quickly than I do. (Laughter) So it isn't something I would have, in any way... But there's something when people don't show up, when they were the ones who requested it. They have important, evidently, very important decisions to make, but my sense is, I don't know how things would have turned out if she'd been on that first show, or if Obama had been on that first show, but by the time he came, sort of momentum was starting to happen with him.

MEYERS: Yes, but it was still before Iowa. It was really interesting, because the last time we had had him, he came in with like two other guys.

MICHAELS: Jim had written a piece for the first show, which was about her—

DOWNEY: Her inevitability.

MICHAELS: Planning for 2013 and on and all that. And that sort of encapsulated what—more than the media thing about Obama, that encapsulated the way the media was at that time. I think if she'd been there, it would have been—people would have got a glimpse into who she was, more than the kind of entitlement that seemed to be the way she was perceived at the time.

POEHLER: To continue with surreal moments, I met Obama dressed as Dennis Kucinich. (Laughter)
MEYERS: *You* were dressed as Dennis Kucinich.

POEHLER: I was dressed as Dennis Kucinich.

MEYERS: It was awesome. That was actually really interesting, because Amy was Dennis Kucinich. Kristen Whig was Dennis Kucinich's wife...

POEHLER: His hot wife...

MEYERS: ...sitting in your lap. Obama was laughing really hard, and his guys were like, "We've got to get out here." (Laughter)

POEHLER: I shook his hand in ears and a little suit.

MICHAELS: I think when politicians over-think things, and become super cautious and start eliminating things, they get farther and father from who they are—and I think the audience senses it. That's sort of my theory. I don't know whether any of you picked up that McCain might represent a Bush third term. Has that gotten through to anybody here? (Laughter)

DOWNEY: I heard something.

SCHWARTZ: We've seen some ads like that.

MICHAELS: Yeah, no; it's been mentioned. I'm saying; we got it. We're there. Okay. Now what else? Do you have something else? Oh, you're going to go with repetition for three months? That's your idea? I know it's a big country. I know that to reach 300 million people is really hard, and you have to repeat things over and over. But I think we're there. We get it. You've made your point. Now give us another point or show something else.

MEYERS: Then it's easier for us to write new sketches. Repetition hurts the sketch writer.

SCHWARTZ: That gives us some idea, I guess, about how you might approach dealing with Obama in further sketches. Looking at this race, which has so many twists and turns and interesting characters and unexpected things; if you could talk for a minute about what sort of things you're picking up on?

MEYERS: I think we're all pretty anxious for that first debate. I think that it will be a very interesting thing to see at this point because when the ads devolve into attack-y ads, they're really hard to parody because they're already a little silly to begin with. So ideally, we'll see them talking about issues and have a way to make that comic, rather than taking things that to some eyes are already comic enough. You know, when they talk about, like, the whole like lipstick on a pig thing, that seems like it's ripe for comedy, but when you actually try to sit down and have a take on it, it's like, "This far too ridiculous to even talk about."

MICHAELS: And Obama's speech at the convention, which couldn't—I mean, it was so heroic and strong and delivered perfectly. You can't sort of do the parody of that. But I think you can in a debate, when you start to see—because they're off guard. The off guard moments, those are the glimpses we get of, "I'm not sure about that guy."

DOWNEY: Speaking for myself, I mean to me, he's the scariest person to write for in my entire run of the show.

SCHWARTZ: Obama?

DOWNEY: Yes, because he's so fucking smooth! (Laughter) He's like a master jewel thief, like in a 1950's movie, who never leaves any finger prints. No one ever saw anything. No one heard anything. I'm saying he's just really impressive as a figure. I talk to people from other—the *South Park* guys say the same thing. Other comics and stuff, they go, "Wow. He doesn't have many handles, does he?"

For someone like me, Al Gore was a gift that would keep on giving. (Laughter) For me, a lot people thought like, "Oh God, you're lucky Bush won the Florida thing." And I go, "Really, I didn't feel that way at all." I thought Gore was a much richer thing. Whereas Obama is just—he's tough. And I don't know any one... I've seen people who think they have the handle, but I don't think it's that good. But I mean so far, there have been enough other things going on, like Hillary, Sarah Palin. Inevitably, we're going have Obama and McCain.... I'm going to be sick that week. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: And what about McCain? What do you see in him as something to mime?

DOWNEY: Well, he obviously has lots of the, "My friends..." (Imitates McCain's voice) (Laughter) Darrell does a very good impression of him that is a work in progress. It's constantly in flux, you know. But he's a little easier, for sure. That side of the ticket is the easy side.

MICHAELS: Jim had written one for Darrell as McCain, and then we got McCain and Jim wrote one for McCain. Whoever's in charge, we're pretty much opposed. You can't get close, as it were, and you can't go in with your own politics. If people are way over the line, that's what you do.

SCHWARTZ: So in a way, back in November, when it seemed like Hillary was inevitable, you were poking fun at her, and then you were poking fun at Obama when he was—

DOWNEY: Well, I wrote it—not really against Obama, it was more against the media. People feel about Obama that this is different. This is about more than just winning an election. This is about putting the race problem behind us and—and the fact that he is kind of inspiring. To me, in my lifetime, he's the best I've ever seen. I guess people go back to JFK as the only analogous thing.

But there was also an issue of something about Hillary. It was like she was a stand-in for her husband, for punishment, and he wasn't around anymore. It began, I think, with her vote for the Iraq War resolution, because that gave the *Daily Kos* people a reason to hate her, which sustained Obama for that whole first year. If she'd voted against the war resolution, I swear she would have been the nominee, because there would have been no rationale for Obama's candidacy. But when I saw, especially the MSNBC—I watch almost nothing but MSNBC—and when you saw the way they really were relishing just laying into her, it just made a nice kind of thing. Obviously, those pieces were sort of Hillary-heavy. Fred was just finding the impression, which is a really tough thing to get down.

SCHWARTZ: I guess one just last thing about Obama, because it goes back to something you

said about this idea of likeability. It seems like, as you were talking about: what's the flaw here? But one thing he seems to have trouble with is appearing emotional, hitting people on a gut level.

DOWNEY: Well he's not. He doesn't have vulnerability, because he isn't vulnerable.

SCHWARTZ: Right, but that is something that is like valued in politicians, this whole idea that you want to have a beer with them or they connect with people.

MICHAELS: In the time that he was with us, for the few hours that he was with us, he was incredibly impressive and charming. There wasn't anything he didn't get.

DOWNEY: I grew up in Illinois—and so he was going—there was like a receiving line. You know, he showed up, “How are you doing?” I'm like, “Hey, I'm from Joliet.” And the politician charm beam comes on. He's quoting, like, street intersections in my town to (Laughter) let me know that he's a real hands-on senator. But I sort of like that—a lot of people, a lot of politicians, you'd want to have a beer with or think they're really cool guys. And with Obama, you want to get his autograph, you know? It's a different thing.

MICHAELS: Obviously the celebrity ad and all that put them on some kind of defensive because you go, “Why are you paying any attention to this?”

SCHWARTZ: It seems to work, that's why.

DOWNEY: Evidently it did, yeah.

POEHLER: I'll take a shower with him, and I'll let you know. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: With Joe Biden too?

POEHLER: Yeah, sure! All of them, I don't care.

DOWNEY: If I had a dime for every guy she's taken in the shower... (Laughter)

POEHLER: This is vodka [holding up her glass of water.] (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: I think we're going to end on that note. Anyhow, we'll be watching every Saturday night till the election is over and beyond that, so...

MICHAELS: Hopefully, yes!

SCHWARTZ: Thank you much for being with us.

MICHAELS: Thank you. (Applause)

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