

Television

They won't be there for you—not much longer, anyway. Behind the scenes as 'Friends' begins its final season, and great sitcoms become an endangered species.

BY MARC PEYSER

YOU'D THINK IT WAS A SIMPLE enough scene. Chandler, Joey and Rachel are in their apartment—that is, the apartment Joey and Chandler shared before Chandler moved in with Monica and Rachel had the baby and moved in with Joey—and the guys are fighting. Joey wants Chandler to help him get a part in a commercial that Chandler's advertising firm is shooting. Only Chandler doesn't think that Joey is right for the role, so he lies about recommending Joey to his bosses. When Joey finds out, he runs to his bedroom, returns with a tape of his last commercial and insists that Chandler and

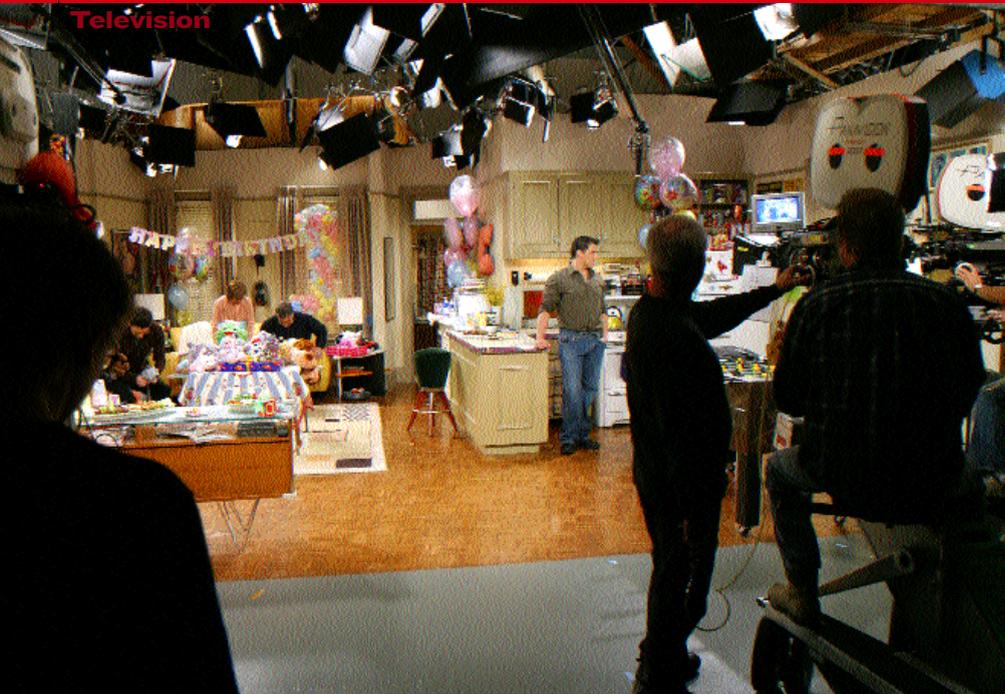
Rachel watch, even though: (a) it was for "male lipstick" that happened to be blue and (b) it was shot in Japanese. And—action!

Except no one gets through much of the action. Matt LeBlanc, a.k.a. Joey, for those of you who've missed the first 223 episodes of "Friends," can't get the tape to stay in the VCR. "Piece of s--t," LeBlanc yells. The audience giggles. Take two. LeBlanc comes out of his room, approaches the VCR—and the tape spits

LAUGH IN The set is typically closed to outside photographers, but two weeks ago David Hume Kennerly was allowed in to capture the gang in some of the last of the 'must-see TV' moments

Losing 'Friends'





People won't come up to Brad as easily as they'll come up to me. I'm in their living room every week. —JENNIFER ANISTON

back at him again. Bigger giggles. Bigger expletives. "Nice language," Matthew Perry (Chandler) yells back, making the audience, and LeBlanc, howl. The next time, LeBlanc aces the VCR and his line, but by now Perry can't resist the four-letter fun. "You f---ing ass," he ad-libs, and LeBlanc loses it again. Take four. LeBlanc appears, but before he can touch the VCR, the audience is roaring so loudly, you'd swear someone accidentally hit the laugh-track button. To screw up LeBlanc again, Perry and Jennifer Aniston (Rachel) have run away and hidden in the kitchen. LeBlanc stops and looks around the empty room. "Good," he says, trying to stifle a smile. "They're f---ing gone."

They're not, but they will be all too soon. When "Friends" goes off the air next spring, the mania will be—oh, God, can't you already

hear that "I'll Be There for You" theme played about a billion times? Not many TV characters have entered our living rooms and our hearts like "Friends." Ross and Rachel. Chandler and Monica. Phoebe and "Smelly Cat." The sitcom was a hit the minute it debuted nine years ago—it's never

LITTLE-KNOWN FACT No. 1

The producers hadn't planned on Chandler and Monica's marrying or even having a relationship.

They were only going to have a one-night stand. "But people rooted for them," says exec producer Kauffman. "They worked together."



been out of the top 10—and it's only gotten bigger. The Emmy. The spinoff. The movies (OK, maybe not the movies). No wonder NBC is charging Super Bowl-size ad rates, about \$2 million per 30-second spot, for the May finale. Hard to believe that, a decade after Rachel stumbled into the Central Perk coffeehouse after running away from her own wedding, we're still dying to know who she ends up with—Ross or Joey? Will Chandler and Monica have a baby? Read on and we'll spill some secrets, though you already know the essence: breaking up will be hard to do. "I can't even think about it. I get anxiety," says Aniston. "It's like a divorce nobody wants."

As Chandler might say, could this be any sadder? Well, yes. The folks at NBC are more than a little queasy about losing their No. 1 show and the linchpin of their Thursday lineup. If CBS, home of "Survivor" and



"CSI," takes the night after "Friends" retires, the whole must-see-TV idea sounds pretty silly. But the future doesn't look great for the sitcom anywhere. This is also the last year of HBO's "Sex and the City," "Everybody Loves Raymond" and "Frasier" might call it quits next spring, too. Unless something hilarious hits the air soon—and given the new crop of shows, what's the chance of that?—think about where that could leave us. *The Emmy nominees for best comedy are "Will & Grace," "Curb Your Enthusiasm" and—"Yes, Dear."*

At least we've still got another season of "Friends" to help us forget our troubles. The sitcom probably won't go down as one of the greatest of all time—it's not in quite the same league as "All in the Family," "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" or "I Love Lucy"—but it's one of the most consistently funny shows ever. "Even while we were shooting the pilot, I was like, 'This is really good. I think I'll buy myself a present, and I bought a Porsche,'" says Courteney Cox. "Friends" certainly deserves more credit than it gets from the wags who dismiss it as "Seinfeld" lite. Unlike with "Seinfeld" and most other comedies, we grew to care about the "Friends" characters beyond their ability to make us laugh. The

relationships, the parents, the weddings, the baby—we've followed their lives as if the gang really did hang out at the corner coffee shop. "They were brilliant at crafting stories that had you absolutely clutching your heart and going, 'Oh, my God, that's the most vulnerable moment I've ever seen,' and then you were falling on the floor laughing," says Warren Littlefield, who ran NBC's entertainment division when "Friends" debuted. "It's a soap opera that's also funny."

This being Hollywood, there were plenty of geniuses who didn't get it. "You have to remember, there was no show at this point that focused on 20-year-olds living single in

Manhattan," says executive producer Kevin Bright. "The network would say, 'Can't you create an older character—a cop on the beat or the guy who owns the coffee shop—who gives the friends advice?' That's not what this show was about." Other people just missed out. Craig Bierko ("Sex and the City") was originally cast as Chandler, but he turned it down—talk about an expensive career choice. Aniston almost didn't get to do the show at all. The producers wanted to hire her, but she was committed to another sitcom called "Muddling Through." "I even went to the producer and said, 'Please let me out of this. Let me do "Friends"'," Aniston says. "The guy looked at me and said, 'Muddling Through' is going to make you a star. That 'Friends' show, I saw it. It's not very good!"

Can you imagine anyone else playing Rachel? Actually, Cox originally auditioned to play her, but she knew that wouldn't work. ("I would have made her neurotic and annoying," she says.) When you meet the actors, you can't help but see their characters peeking out from behind them. LeBlanc, like Joey, is so sweet and earnest, he even liked working with Marcel the monkey. "The monkey was killer!" he

LITTLE-KNOWN FACT No. 2

Phoebe hasn't been romantically involved with any of the other friends, but she might have been. "Lisa and I had a pitch that Joey and Phoebe have been having casual sex all along," says LeBlanc. "Nobody wanted to go for that."



says. "Have you ever been around one, up close? They are so much like people, it's kind of trippy." Lisa Kudrow isn't dense like Phoebe—she went to Vassar—but she can be spacey. "When we started, people would ask me, 'Who's in your show?'" she says. "And I'd say, 'There's a couple of guys named David. Or a couple of guys named Matt. I don't remember.' Then I'd see them, and I still wasn't sure." David Schwimmer is more earnest than Ross but just as nerdy. "I read National Geographic. I'm genuinely excited by paleontology," he says. And he does not, as a rule, watch "Friends." "I watch documentaries, the Discovery Channel. Sometimes I'll accidentally catch a 'Friends' rerun and I'll be like, 'Wow, so this is the show?'"

You know what's even crazier than that? The "Friends" really do seem to be friends. We know, we know. You've heard it before and never believed it. It does sound impossible, given how they're all multimillionaires and arguably the most powerful cast on television. But their affection for each other feels real. They're constantly hugging and kissing between scenes, though Perry—the "Friends" class clown—also enjoys delivering a raspberry in an unsuspecting castmate's ear. They all show up on time. On rehearsal days, the guys arrive unshaved and the women don't wear makeup—seeing Aniston and Cox in flip-flops, ponytails and shorts is like waking up in a National Enquirer fantasy. "No matter how big people's careers have gotten, or how we've taken hits in movies or something, it's all really a question of the six of us trying to make the best show we can," says Perry. "There's never once in 10 years been a raised voice here." That's not entirely true. "Sure, we have little tiffs over the years, like you do with siblings," says LeBlanc. About what? "I'm not going to tell you," he says.

They've had plenty to bum them out. During season two, there was a huge "Friends" backlash—remember the I Hate Friends Web site?—touched off by the stars' endless magazine covers and a splashy \$10 million Diet Coke campaign. They got

At the Center of the Sitcom Universe

'Friends' was cloned but never dethroned. Now, with a television audience bored by generic comedies, the networks will try once again to strike gold. Cue laugh track.

THE COPYCATS

'Friends' launched a fleet of shows about twentysomethings, all of which died.



Two Guys, a Girl...

- ABC
Two Guys, a Girl and a Pizza Place
- FOX
Ned and Stacey Partners
- NBC
Boston Common
Caroline in the City
Men Behaving Badly
The Single Guy
Union Square



The King of Queens

THE OLD FAITHFULS

There are a handful of hit shows that could get even hotter once 'Friends' pulls the plug.

Everybody Loves Raymond (CBS)
PRO: Enormously popular;



Everybody Loves Raymond

just won Emmy for best comedy series.
CON: Ray Romano is threatening to call it quits, but chances are CBS will bribe him into staying another year.
The King of Queens (CBS)
PRO: It's a hot show, and it has been holding steady for years.



Diagnosis Murder

THE COMPETITORS

Over the years, going up against 'Friends' on Thursday night at 8 began to seem positively suicidal.

- ABC
Charlie Grace
Monk
My So-Called Life
Whose Line Is It Anyway?
- CBS
Diagnosis Murder
Due South
Promised Land
- FOX
Living Single
World's Wildest Police Videos



Jennifer Aniston, Rachel
David Schwimmer, Ross
Courteney Cox, Monica
Matt LeBlanc, Joey
Lisa Kudrow, Phoebe
Matthew Perry, Chandler

Season one, 1994-95



Scrubs

CON: It stinks. But seriously, it's just a very generic 'Raymond' copycat.
Scrubs (NBC)
PRO: It's a wonderfully written show with a genuinely unique voice and a great cast. If you ask us, anyway.
CON: The show didn't take off last year when it got the big call-up to Thursday night, so why should it now?

Will & Grace (NBC)

PRO: A popular, edgy, hilarious show. It's got an unforgettable cast, and already owns a big chunk of Thursday night.
CON: It's entering its sixth season, so it's no spring chicken either.



Living Single

THE FUTURE?

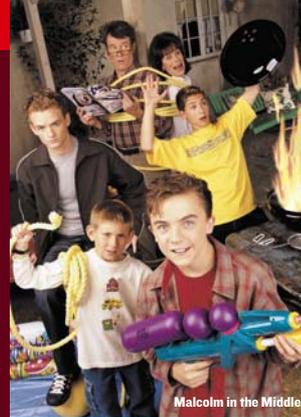
The networks have plans, of course. Judging from their record in the past, not many of them will work.

Coupling (NBC)

PRO: Three attractive men, wacky banter, sex talk. It looks like 'Friends,' it sounds like 'Friends'... CON: ...but actually it's absolute garbage.

8 Simple Rules for Dating My Teenage Daughter (ABC)

PRO: Genial old-style family sitcom that got off to a hot start last year.
CON: Its star, John Ritter, just died. Can a comedy survive such a tragic turn?
I'm With Her (ABC)
PRO: Cute concept about an ordinary schoolteacher dating a gorgeous movie star.
CON: It's tailor-made to be a quiet success, not a huge phenomenon.



Malcolm in the Middle

THE FEW, THE PROUD

Just enough truly inventive comedies are now on the air to make audiences resent lame, derivative sitcoms.

- BBC AMERICA
The Office
- COMEDY CENTRAL
The Daily Show
South Park
Trigger Happy TV
- FOX
The Bernie Mac Show
Malcolm in the Middle
The Simpsons
- HBO
Curb Your Enthusiasm
Sex and the City



Bernie Mac



I'm With Her

Joey (NBC)
PRO: The only 'Friends' wanna-be with an actual Friend in the cast. Come on. Who doesn't love Joey?

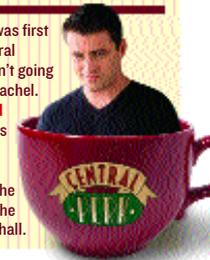
CON: Spinoffs, the great 'Frasier' notwithstanding, are usually dead ends. Ask the 'Seinfeld' cast. If you can find them.



8 Simple Rules

LITTLE-KNOWN FACT No. 4

When the show was first written, the central relationship wasn't going to be Ross and Rachel. It was **Joey and Monica**. She was supposed to be something of a den mother, and he was going to be the hunk across the hall.



slammed again two years ago when the cast won \$1 million each per episode to stay on the show. The fame wasn't always fun, either. "There were many times in the first several years I would have quit," says Schwimmer. "I remember feeling this is not what I became an actor for, to suddenly have people grabbing you in an airport, or writing lies about you, or people staked outside your house." Aniston, arguably the biggest celebrity of the group in part because of her marriage to Brad Pitt, says it took her a while to get used to being everyone's Friend. "People won't come up to Brad as easily as they'll come up to me. I think 'cause something about movie stars is untouchable. In TV, we're in their living room every week," she says. "Some days you're not in the mood. I'm premenstrual and cranky and you just want to tell everyone to f--- off, but you can't. The people are so warm. They come right up and practically hug you."

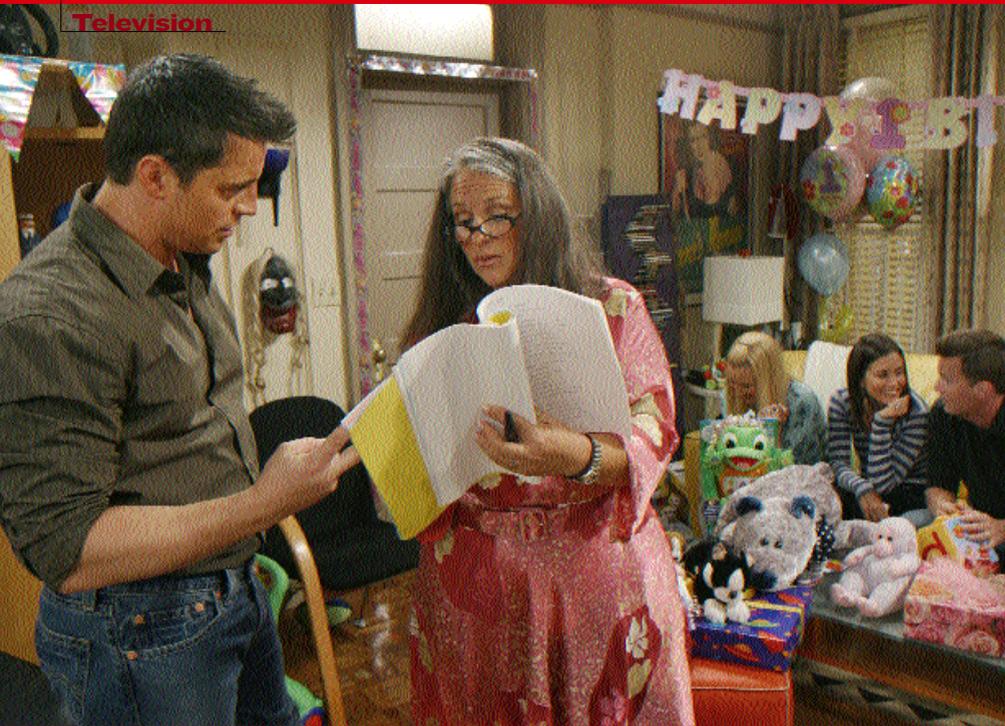
So we're losing these friends. Are we going to make any new ones? It's no secret that the sitcom is dying. This fall, the four major networks broadcast 24 comedies, compared with 46 in the fall of 1993. It's become fashionable to blame the rise of reality TV for the sitcom's demise—heck, it's fashionable to blame reality TV for *society's* demise. But the fact is, what gets on the air is pretty depressing. The latest crop—"It's All Relative," "Two and a Half Men," "Hope and Faith," "The Mulletts," etc.—are almost all "Everybody Loves Raymond" with an "Odd Couple" twist. "The executives think, 'Well, 'Raymond' is a family show, just do a family show,'" says "Raymond" creator Philip Rosenthal. "They don't get the other part of it, which is you have to create a family, with deep-seated relationships and characters that are not stereotypes. They think if you're not laughing every three seconds, people are going to change the channel."

Join Marc Peyser for a Live Talk on "Friends," Oct. 1 at noon, ET, on Newsweek.MSNBC.com

LITTLE-KNOWN FACT No. 3

After 200-plus episodes, the cast doesn't have many regrets, but there are a few. "I wasn't nuts about working at some coffeehouse on roller skates with big boobs and a wig," says Cox. "I felt pretty silly."





I can think of worse fates than being Joey forever. Will 'Joey' work as good as 'Friends'? Probably not. —MATT LEBLANC

Why is this happening? A major reason is corporate. Over the last few years, the networks have gobbled up almost all the independent TV producers, which means ABC buys most of its shows from Disney, and NBC creates most of its own. There's no competition, and as that great TV producer Adam Smith would tell you, lack of competition is bad for business. "The truly great comedies were risky, whether it was 'All in the Family' or 'M*A*S*H' or 'Seinfeld,'" says Michael Saltzman, executive producer of "Murphy Brown." "If the network is both producing and buying the show, you can't afford to piss them off, even if it's for the creative good of the show." With the bean counters running the studios, television has become much more product than art. If a show doesn't perform within a few weeks, it's gone. "People need to be invested be-

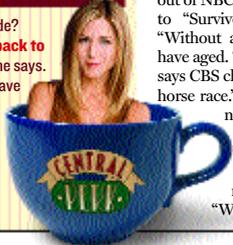
fore they embrace a sitcom," says Susan Lyne, ABC's president of entertainment. "'Cheers,' 'Raymond,' 'Seinfeld'—it's two or three years before they find their audience."

No one needs to find an audience faster than NBC. With "Friends" about to leave, the

network is in danger of losing Thursday night for the first time in 20 years. That's not just a blow to NBC's "Must-See" ad campaign. Thursday is the most profitable night on television, largely because the major movie studios drop serious cash trying to get you to see their blockbusters over the weekend. CBS has already taken a huge bite out of NBC's pie in the last few years, thanks to "Survivor," "CSI" and the fast-rising "Without a Trace." "Some of their shows have aged. 'ER' is not at its height anymore," says CBS chairman Les Moonves. "It's a real horse race." The folks at NBC insist they're not worried. "Every time one of the Thursday-night staples has gone away, another one has come in," says NBC entertainment president Jeff Zucker. "When 'Cosby' went away, along

LITTLE-KNOWN FACT No. 5

Aniston's favorite episode? "Whenever we flash back to Fat Monica, I love," she says. Schwimmer and Perry have the same favorite: the blackout episode. "That was the first time I realized we were doing something great," Perry says.



ANISTON BY WARNER BROS., CUP BY DAMIEN DONCK FOR NEWSWEEK



came 'Cheers.' When 'Cheers' went, along came 'Seinfeld.' When 'Seinfeld' went away, along came 'Friends.' It's just always worked out that way." So who's going to win? "NBC has had years to develop something to plug in once they lost 'Friends,' and they've never been able to do it," says Stacey Lynn Koerner, director of global research at Initiative Media. "I'd rather be CBS than NBC a year from now."

And now for the part of the story you may want to skip—the part where we tell you about the finale. OK, the truth is, we don't know exactly, because the writers haven't written it. "It's really sad to think about," says executive producer Marta Kauffman. "It's something we're holding off on because it's very difficult to come to terms with. It's hard to say, 'This is the end.' They do know some things (skip ahead, "Friends" fanatics). The Rachel-Joey romance will end fairly soon, much to the relief of the cast. "I hated it," says Aniston. "Joey's like my brother. I thought it was dangerous territory." Chandler and Monica will shop for a house, which probably means there's a good shot they'll become parents. And Ross and Rachel? "We've got

to wrap it up. They've gone off and on and off and on. I would probably want them to get back together," says Cox. Needless to say, the creators are keeping mum about this one, though draw your conclusions from Kauffman's only concern: "We know we want all of them to be happy and OK."

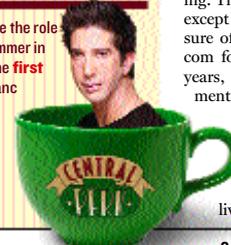
Which is more than you can say for the cast these days. People aren't weeping in their lattes yet, but each week gets sadder. "Every night before the show we have a cast huddle; the six of us get together and we say a couple of things—'break a leg,' you know," says Schwimmer. "Now in my mind,

I'm like, wow, this is 17 more huddles, and then 16 more huddles and then 15. When January comes, we're all going to be very emotional. It's going to be tough." It won't be a picnic down the road, either. "When it's really going to be hard is three months after it's over and I go, 'Wow, I'm not going back,'" says Cox. "That's going to be a killer. I mean, these are my buds."

And then what? What will they do when they're not "Friends"? LeBlanc won't go far: he's starring in a spinoff, "Joey." "I can think of worse fates than being Joey forever," he says. Cox and Aniston want to start families. Schwimmer will work in his theater in Chicago and do some directing. They'll all keep acting, of course. And except for LeBlanc, the one thing they're sure of is that they won't do another sitcom for a very long time. "Maybe in 20 years, if I'm literally pounding the pavement and I haven't even found a waitress job," says Aniston. "I would consider it maybe, maybe, maybe years down the line, 'cause you're never going to top this. I'd want people to forget 'Friends' first." She should live so long. ■

LITTLE-KNOWN FACT No. 6

The producers wrote the role of Ross with Schwimmer in mind, and he was the first person cast. LeBlanc was the last. Cox competed with two women to play Monica: actresses Nancy McKenon and Leah Remini.



SCHWIMMER BY CHRIS HASTON—NBC, CUP BY DAMIEN DONCK FOR NEWSWEEK