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VOL. 2 ISSUE 2  
JUNE 2007





# contributors

## Jeff Probst

As host of *Survivor*, Jeff Probst has had his share of exotic adventures. In this issue of *Watch!*, he shares his recent getaway to the Mayan archaeological site of Tikal in Guatemala ("Life in the Ruins").



## Phil Keoghan

You can't have a travel issue without CBS' in-house globe-trotter Phil Keoghan. Author of *No Opportunity Wasted* and a frequent contributor to *Watch!*, *The Amazing Race* host recounts his trip to Jean-Michel Cousteau's Polynesian resort in Fiji. Join the adventure in his piece ("The Amazing Vacation").



## Rebecca Ascher-Walsh

A former senior writer at *Entertainment Weekly*, Rebecca Ascher-Walsh has contributed to *The Wall Street Journal* and *Hollywood Reporter*. For *Watch!*, she chats with game show host-cum-author Chuck Barris ("The Quiz Man").



## Shelley Levitt

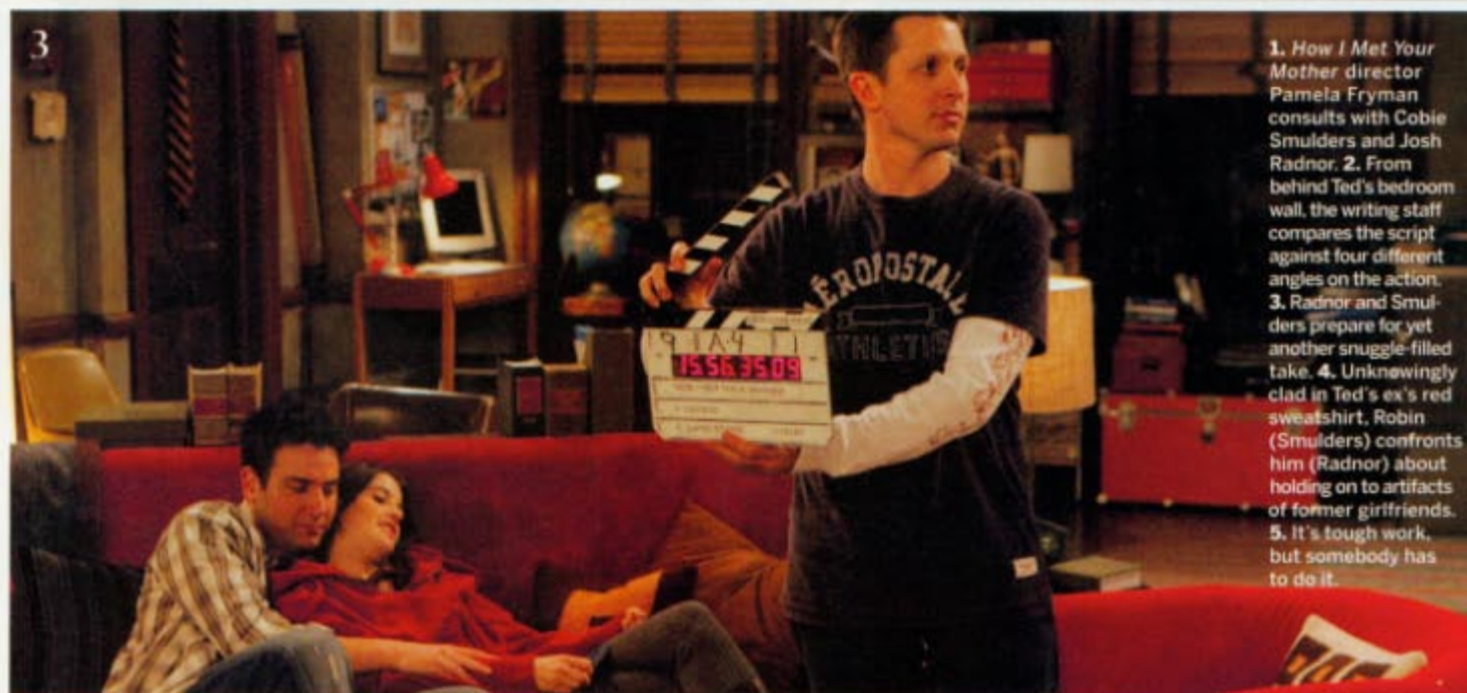
Los Angeles-based lifestyle writer Shelley Levitt regularly contributes to *Self*, *Los Angeles* magazine, *Women's Health* and *Mare*, among other publications. In this issue, she asks chef Brandon Boudet to create recipes inspired by his favorite shows ("Watch What You Eat").



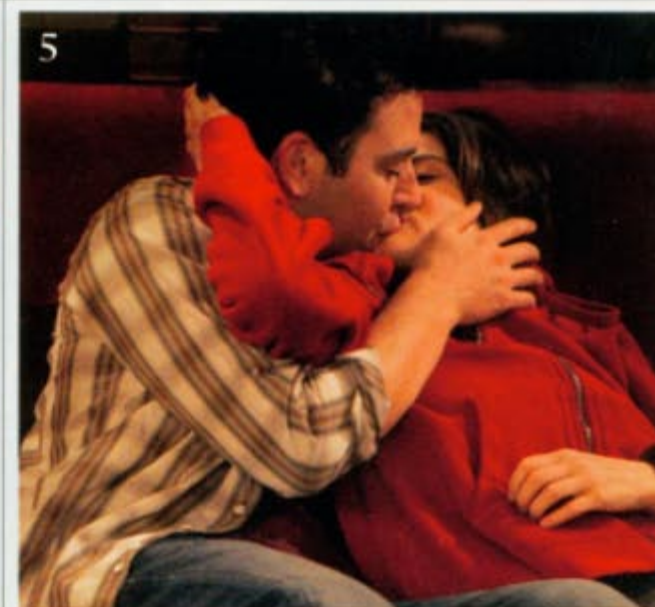
## Jim Colucci

Jim Colucci is the author of the TV companion books *The Q Guide to The Golden Girls* and *Will & Grace: Fabulously Uncensored*. Both a journalist and a TV writer himself, Colucci goes behind the scenes of *How I Met Your Mother* ("Mother's Day") for this issue of *Watch!* magazine.





1. *How I Met Your Mother* director Pamela Fryman consults with Cobie Smulders and Josh Radnor. 2. From behind Ted's bedroom wall, the writing staff compares the script against four different angles on the action. 3. Radnor and Smulders prepare for yet another snuggle-filled take. 4. Unknowingly clad in Ted's ex's red sweatshirt, Robin (Smulders) confronts him (Radnor) about holding on to artifacts of former girlfriends. 5. It's tough work, but somebody has to do it.





Ever wonder what it's like  
to film one of television's  
most *untraditional* traditional  
sitcoms? Spend a day on the  
set of *How I Met Your Mother*

# MOTHER'S Day

BY JIM COLUCCI  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CLIFF LIPSON

**I**t's a particularly chilly Friday evening, and Robin Scherbatsky is wrapped in her boyfriend Ted's fuzzy, red zip-up sweat-shirt. Few words are exchanged before the couple, nuzzling alone together on the couch,

begins to make out. Suddenly, as director Pamela Fryman yells, "Cut," actor Josh Radnor proudly smiles for the few dozen people gathered just where Ted's fourth apartment wall might be. "Nailed it!" he yells out in a self-mocking boast.



**YES, OBVIOUSLY** things are not what they seem with Ted and Robin—for one thing, the sweatshirt is not Ted's but turns out, to Robin's dismay, to be an artifact of one of his former girlfriends. But more importantly, the particularly chilly Friday is not actually being spent in the New York bachelor pad Ted Mosby supposedly shares with roommate Marshall Eriksen, but is instead, located inside Stage 22 on the Fox studio lot, during an unusual cold snap in Los Angeles. Even the audience that viewers will eventually hear laughing along with the weekly exploits of Robin, Ted, Marshall, Marshall's fiancée, Lily, and everyone's favorite swinging single, Barney, is not really there at all. Because CBS' Monday night hit *How I Met Your Mother* is just not that kind of sitcom.

### A Style Is Born

In the spring of 2005, former *Late Show with David Letterman* writers Carter Bays and Craig Thomas set out to create a comedy chronicling their own earlier lives as a real-life Ted and Marshall, respectively, in New York City. At the time, their sitcom experience consisted of jobs on FOX's animated *American Dad* and the short-lived *Oliver Beene*, which was shot like a minifilm: over the course of several days, with a single camera and no live audience. But with the pendulum at the time swinging back toward traditional multicamera sitcoms, staged in one night from start to finish like a play on three-walled, proscenium sets, the duo was forced to make some adjustments. And so, inadvertently, the pilot of *How I Met Your Mother* came with its own, brand-new format: a sitcom shot with multiple cameras but over the course of multiple days, with laughter added only later, when the completed episode is shown to a crowd seated in the studio's bleachers.

"We were forced to do it," director Fryman says of creating this new hybrid, "because Carter and



Even though it can make a showrunner's life "crazy and chaotic," the show can build a set and shoot scenes from three different episodes all at one time.

Craig dared to write a sitcom with 60 scenes. So there was no way to shoot it in front of an audience unless we brought in beds and blankets. But actually, what we've found is, we have the best of both worlds."

"I think that having no studio audience is really the key to our show," agrees Radnor, who was the first actor auditioned for Ted, nailing the part like he just nailed that kiss. "As an actor, I like that on our show we're able to play to each other rather than to a disconnected crowd of laughers 50 feet away."

With that, Radnor is called back to that faux suede couch, where he re-kisses red-sweatshirted Robin while his stand-in, Evan Ham, reads the scene's voice-over lines, which will ultimately be performed by Bob Saget. Although the show is tightly scripted, with both Pamela and the show's script coordinator occasionally reminding Radnor and Cobie Smulders, who plays Robin, of the exact wording of their lines, some of those lines have nonetheless changed for this take. There's less "sweetie" this and "honey" that between the lovers, which turns out to be at the suggestion of Radnor and Smulders, who found the terms of endearment a little too saccharine.

Meanwhile, 10 feet away, behind the wall that supposedly leads to Ted's and Marshall's bedrooms, costar Neil Patrick Harris sits at Maclaren's Tavern at a back booth—not the front one usually occupied by the gang—and taps away on an Apple laptop. Although his breakout character, Barney Stinson, lives by and is famous for the motto "Suit up," Harris is wearing a black running suit with green stripes—for reasons which will soon become apparent.

"When I did a multicamera show," Harris interjects, referring to the failed 1999 NBC sitcom *Stark Raving Mad*, "there was this jacked-up live audience who had been fed chocolate and told by some guy with a mic to laugh really hard at all the jokes, whether they're funny or not. It was inauthentic feedback, and at the end of the day, I'd leave not really sure if the show was working. I'd rather do what we do here. If we can make the crew laugh, then I know it's funny."

Jason Segel says of playing Marshall, "On a lot of single-camera shows, like when I did *Undeclared*, you end up sitting around a lot. But this is so much more fast-paced." And he's not kidding. Minutes later, Robin's red sweatshirt is gone, and Marshall and Lily have joined Ted and her on the couch as Barney enters—track-suited up—and brags about having finished the New York City marathon. If this seems to have little to do with Ted and Robin's earlier canoodling, it's because this moment belongs to a different day, with different concerns—from a different episode.

That's one of the advantages built into *How I Met Your Mother*, Bays explains: Even though it can make a showrunner's life "crazy and chaotic," the show can build a set and shoot scenes from three different episodes all at one time. But with so many story lines going on at once, how does an actor keep from getting confused?





1. Co-creator Carter Bays with director Pamela Fryman.  
 2. The crew of *How I Met Your Mother* shoots as if on a multi-camera show, but without having to worry about blocking an audience's view of the action. 3. Lily (Alyson Hannigan) marvels at Barney's (Neil Patrick Harris) marathon medal.  
 4. Exit Barney, fresh off his triumph in the New York City marathon. 5. When downtime happens on the friendly set, actors like Hannigan get a chance to hug their director.

Segel says—only half joking—that “I find not reading the scripts is helpful.” But in truth, there’s not much time for studying anyway, because the actors receive each script only on a Friday evening, to perform at a table reading the following Monday. After that, it’s rehearsal on Tuesday, and by Wednesday the cast is already jumping in and shooting, scene by scene. And so the truth is that at any given point, Radnor, Smulders, Segel, Harris and Alyson Hannigan, who plays Lily, know little more about *How I Met Your Mother* than we do.



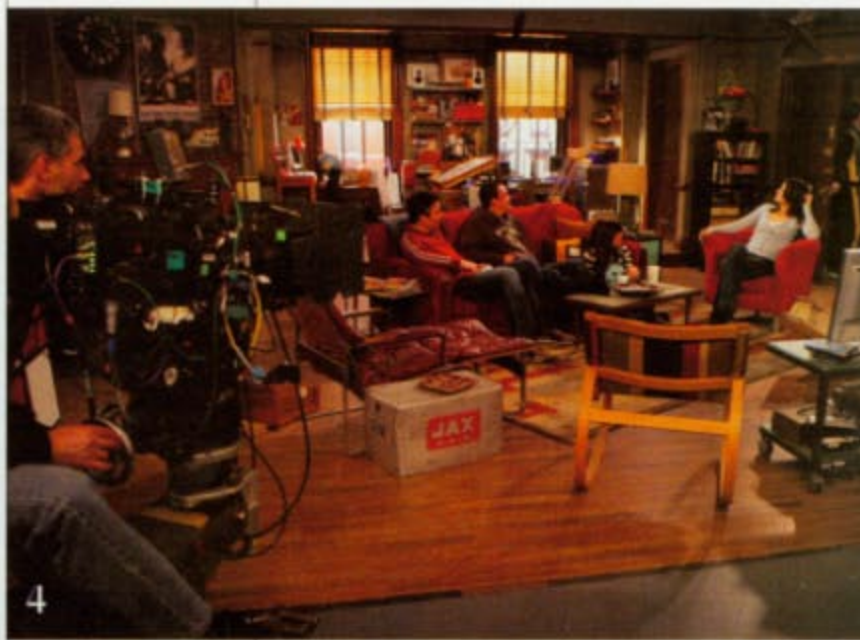
### Coupling, Uncoupling and Recoupling

In the show’s first season, Bays says, story lines were often cribbed from real life. Like Ted and Marshall, he and Thomas met at college (Wesleyan) and often shared their apartment with their very own Lily (Thomas’ now-wife, Rebecca). They, too, liked to hang out in local Manhattan watering holes, particularly a bar near the Letterman studio called McGee’s, which, with its carved-up wooden booths and faded, WPA-era murals, became the inspiration for Maclaren’s, named for the writing pair’s assistant.

Even the disingenuous Barney is an amalgam of several real-life friends—“and I know for a fact that one of them likes to tell that to girls, which in itself is a very Barney move,” Bays says, laughing.

But at the end of its first year, the show began to diverge from reality; whereas Thomas happily married Rebecca, in the first-season finale their TV alter egos broke up. “I can’t remember how far in advance we told Jason and Alyson about that,” Bays remembers. “But it wasn’t long.”

Segel, for one, was happy with the change. “It was great fodder for jokes to see Marshall have to be



Serialized story lines are common these days in hour-long TV dramas: Who are the Heroes? Where are they Lost? Why did someone bomb everything but *Jericho*? But in a sitcom?



single for a while and have to learn how to go to a party or pick up girls,” he says. But Hannigan—famously a witch on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a certain band camp attendee in *American Pie* and now the kindly kindergarten teacher and aspiring artist Lily Aldrin—had a different experience.

“People who came up to me were devastated,” remembers the actress, the only married member of the cast. “They said how it had been so nice to see a positive example of a good, functional relationship on television, because you don’t get that anymore. And then seeing that threatened really struck a chord. People would say to me, ‘You guys have to get back together!’”

They did. And now that the uncoupling and recoupling, and the simultaneous coupling of Ted and Robin have proved fruitful, Bays explains that the writers have planned similarly big changes for the show’s second season finale and beyond. “When we started season two, we knew where it would end, and what season three is going to be,” he reveals. “We’re starting to think of each season as having its own theme, or journey. There are certain big moments in everyone’s life that mark points on a journey. So each season, particularly in the beginning and the end, will have some of those.”

### So ... How Did He Meet ‘Mother?’

As the crew switches over to prepare for a group scene at the front booth of Maclaren’s, the actors get their longest break of the day so far. Smulders edges over toward the living room couch. Like Robin, she is both (A) originally from Canada and (B) so beautiful that you can see why Ted impulsively asked her to marry him in the show’s pilot episode. Trouble is, we’ve also known since the pilot that Robin—or “Aunt Robin,” as Bob Saget’s future-Ted



1. How did it ever get a liquor license? Maclaren's, minus its fourth wall. 2. The gang, gathered at their customary booth at Maclaren's. 3. Jason Segel (Marshall) proves there's always spare time to crack up your fellow cast members in rehearsal.

voice-over mysteriously called her—is not ultimately the one for Ted. And therein lies *How I Met Your Mother's* most intriguing mystery: If Robin's not Mom, who is?

Serialized story lines are common these days in hour-long TV dramas: Who are the *Heroes*? Where are they *Lost*? Why did someone bomb everything but *Jericho*? But in a sitcom?

It's another innovation, a concept that Bays says he and Thomas borrowed from favorite classic shows like *The X-Files* and *Twin Peaks*. "We loved the idea of taking all that intrigue and mystery, and applying it to a comedy," he says. Still, in order to focus more on individual story lines in season two—not to mention the fact that the actors playing Ted's future children listening to this drawn-out tale are growing



up fast—the show has temporarily put that central question on hold. "But we're never going to abandon it," he avows. "In fact, regarding that question, we've always known what the last five minutes of the show will be, whenever that is."

Although the show's filming pace is quick, it is also relatively low pressure, without the prying eyes of a studio audience. So when longer breaks like this do happen, Segel says, he likes that he can head back to his trailer, where he is putting the finishing touches on a screenplay. A self-taught piano player, he also can often be found in his TV apartment, working on one of his own compositions. But today, it's Bays at the keyboard, providing a jazz piano backdrop as Radnor settles in with his own laptop at a desk behind Ted's couch, and Harris and Hannigan pop just outside the stage door to admire her brand-new sports car in a nearby spot.

Often on these breaks, Smulders says, the five-some gathers at a picnic table set up in a common area just outside their trailers. Having heard that

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acting on a multicamera sitcom can be "scary," she says, she's happy with the relaxed pace—and that applies to Robin's relationship with Ted as well. "I definitely relate to Robin, because we're both very independent. She and I are both in the period of our lives where career is coming first, and it's hard to juggle that with a relationship," she claims—perhaps because she knows, as do we, from that line in the pilot that the relationship must ultimately be doomed.

But neither she nor anyone else in the cast knows any more than that about the identity of the titular mystery "Mother." "I have no idea who it is, and I'm as anxious to know as anyone else," Segel says. Then he adds, jokingly, "But I think that we've settled into that when Carter [Bays] meets The Girl, then Ted might meet The Girl."

And when that happens, to quote just one of the many phrases Barney and company have coined over the past two years, one thing's for sure: It is going to be legendary. **U**