



James Burrows



HOLLYWOOD'S HEAVY HITTER

Networks have picked up more than 70 sitcom pilots directed by James Burrows since 1977, including these favorite hits.

THE MAGIC MAN

Director James Burrows shepherds hit after hit to the small screen

FOUR OR FIVE TIMES EVERY SPRING, James Burrows can be found on a Los Angeles-area soundstage in front of a live studio audience. To shoot a sitcom pilot requires a multimillion-dollar investment, with the director responsible for nailing down every last visual detail. And yet as Burrows paces the floor just outside the range of his four cameras, he often has his eyes shut.

It's a technique he picked up as he watched his father work on the stage, the 70-year-old, five-time Emmy winner explains. A prolific writer, composer and director of some of his era's leading musicals, Abe Burrows "would always pace backstage, and listen to the pauses."

Now the younger Burrows applies some of those same theatrical methods to the specific rhythms of multicamera comedy. His actors, for example, are able to move somewhat freely, not required to hit specific marks on the floor as they recite each line, "which makes them feel a little like trained monkeys." Burrows' unique approach clearly works; season after TV season, he has built a reputation as



1978:
Taxi
(ran five seasons)

1982:
Cheers
(11 seasons)

1983:
Night Court
(nine seasons)

1986:
The Hogan Family
(six seasons)

1988:
Dear John
(four seasons)

1989:
Wings
(eight seasons)



the go-to guy to greatly increase a sitcom pilot's odds of getting picked up to series.

"The pilots that [Burrows] directs have this extra, magical quality that other pilots don't always have," explains Wendi Trilling, CBS' comedy development chief. "And that's the extra magic we look for."

HAILED FROM TAXI

Burrows got his start on the small screen by directing episodes of 1970s series such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and, later, *Taxi*, for which he won his first Emmy in 1980. Shortly thereafter, he partnered with brothers Glen and Les Charles to create and direct the hit *Cheers*. Since then Burrows' résumé has read like a list of TV's greatest hits, as he built an ever-growing reputation for quality television by creating the pilot templates of ultimately long-running shows such as *Frasier*, *Friends*, *3rd Rock from the Sun* and *Will & Grace*, the last of which he also directed for all of its eight seasons.

More recently, Burrows directed the pilots for both of CBS' new comedies last fall—and he continues as the regular director of *Mike & Molly*, created by veteran producer Chuck Lorre. In fact, Burrows has directed the pilots of all of Lorre's recent hits, from *Dharma & Greg* in the '90s through this decade's *Two and a Half Men* and *The Big Bang Theory*.

"The list of four-camera, studio audience directors is: Jimmy Burrows, and then everybody else," Lorre says. "And that's not a slam on everybody else. But there's a certain fluidity and elegance when [Burrows] is helming the ship. The actors tend to find a rhythm with each other, and so even though you're watching a brand-new cast working together for the very first time, you get the sense that you're entering into a world that has existed for a while. The pilot ends up looking like the 80th episode of a series, as opposed to the first."

"Nobody understands a script better—finding its problem areas and how to get the most comic potential out of what you've written—than [Burrows]," concurs *Will & Grace* co-creator Max

Mutchnick, who also worked with Burrows on the pilot of *\$#! My Dad Says*. "That's why his name carries a great deal of weight."

ENTER THE 800-POUND GORILLA

With a track record like his, Burrows gets nearly two dozen sitcom pilot scripts each winter, vying for his services during the same busy weeks of pilot production the ensuing spring.

Many of the shows are similar in concept, he says, so he looks for the one with the best execution of that concept on the page. It's a very writerly approach for a director, he admits; often he'll request fixes to the story and clarifications to the motivation of the characters. "I think you have to be trained in the theater to understand that stuff," he explains. "With what I do in a multicamera comedy in front of a live audience, the cameras are an afterthought to me."

As his longtime collaborators attest, that extra level of contribution is most welcome. "Burrows is a tremendous ally of the written word," Lorre says. "He'll tell you when he thinks something isn't working, and so he becomes a creative partner."

Burrows, meanwhile, refers to himself as "an 800-pound gorilla"—but says he throws his weight around wisely, because it's his job to make sure the writer's vision is kept intact. "When I read a script, I know what the writers are trying to say," he says, "and it's my job not to let it be homogenized." So while he's receptive to suggested changes from network executives, he'll also ask them to leave the production alone if need be.

Should any such disagreement occur, Trilling says, "there is a trust that [Burrows] is absolutely entitled to, and that we at CBS and probably any other network would give him." After all, she says, she's seen the Burrows Technique yield quantifiable results. In focus group tests, "I've seen a moment of physical comedy—not lines, but a little look or gesture—raise the dials up. And I know that that moment came from [Burrows]. Those little moments are what makes a pilot great." — *Jim Colucci*



ON THE BEAT: Burrows directed the pilot of both of CBS' new comedies last fall, and continues to direct episodes of *Mike & Molly*.

2010:
Mike & Molly;
\$#! My Dad Says

2007:
The Big Bang Theory
(four seasons)



2003:
Two and a Half Men
(eight seasons)

1998:
Will & Grace
(eight seasons)



1997:
Dharma & Greg
(five seasons);
Veronica's Closet
(three seasons)

1990:
Roc
(three seasons)

1993:
Frasier
(11 seasons)

1994:
Friends
(10 seasons)



1995:
NewsRadio
(five seasons);
Caroline in the City
(four seasons)

1996:
3rd Rock from the Sun
(six seasons)