

30 Rock Packs In the Laughs with Total Avid Workflow

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Devoted fans of the hit comedy *30 Rock* know one thing for certain: they need to pay attention when they watch the show. Otherwise they might miss some of the delicious humor—a wry piece of dialogue, a quick cut, or a subtle sight gag that help give the Emmy® Award-winning show its distinctive comedic edge. With its talented cast (Tina Fey, Alec Baldwin, Tracy Morgan), smart writing, jazzy soundtrack, and sophisticated production style, the show's rapid-fire and offbeat editing rhythm adds to the allure.



These elements also make for a whole lot of work behind the scenes. For its post work, the creative team relies on a complete Avid video, audio, and shared-storage solution for an integrated, digital process. This gives the picture editors, sound editors, online editor, and mixer the ability to easily communicate with one another and streamline their entire workflow for on-time network delivery week after week.

Loaded for Laughs

With as many as three storylines in each half-hour episode, it can be a challenge to whittle down each program to its 21-minute run time. “It is a jam-packed show,” says editor Meg Reticker, who recently won an ACE Eddie award for her work on the show. “It’s really all about the writing and trying to maintain all the storylines while keeping all the jokes in each scene.”

As many as five episodes are in various stages of editing at once. This keeps Reticker and co-editor Ken Eluto busy, along with assistants Elizabeth Merrick and Alex Minnick. Each uses a Media Composer workstation connected to an Avid Unity MediaNetwork shared-storage solution with 3 terabytes of storage. The comprehensive digital setup enables the team to handle a wide variety of cutting tasks with temp effects and sound, whether they are creating a rough cut for a first screening or a final version for network approval.

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- Ken Eluto, Editor, *30 Rock*

The Avid Unity system's media management capabilities are a real time-saver, enabling the team to compare, contrast, and repurpose material instantly. “We keep the entire current season on Unity, plus we have a project just for music, sound effects, and footage from past seasons,” says Minnick. “We are constantly going back to older shows to find generic shots or temp music.” Reticker likes to review older material for creative inspiration as well. “I’m always looking at season one or two, just to get an idea of how to handle certain scenes,” she says.

The More, the Merrier



Now in its third season, the show continues to add even more sophisticated creative elements, particularly in the area of visual effects. “We really do an amazing number of visual effects and greenscreens for a comedy show,” says Eluto. A storyline with Tracy Jordan (actor Tracy Morgan) as a guest on the *Larry King Live* show, required television footage to be placed in monitors or displayed in full frames.

Greenscreens are frequently required to composite backdrops, such as the St. Patrick’s Day Parade or a football stadium filled with fans. Other effects might include adding lights to a Christmas tree.

The assistants rely on the Media Composer software’s effects tools, including 3D Warp and the AniMatte feature, to create temp effects that are seamlessly transferred to the Avid DS Nitris system, which is used for finishing the show in HD at Postworks. Ben Murray, who handles online finishing and visual effects for the show, believes that the use of the Avid DS Nitris system is one of the reasons that the producers decided to tackle more effects-heavy scenes over time.

“I noticed that during the second season they weren’t as worried about trying bigger visual effects ideas,” says Murray. “What happened is that they saw how they could use DS Nitris for finishing and effects work. They could stay in the same box for the same lower [hourly] rate and handle all of the effects instead of farming them out to [a different system] at a higher cost.”

By keeping the project in an all Avid workflow, the staff eliminated time spent importing and exporting files and dealing with color management. Using Avid Advanced Conform for its offline-to-online workflow, the post team also ensures that all of the temp effects re-sizing, motion effects, titles, color effects, and composites come across completely intact. “Plus, the detail you can work with on DS is not something you find on other systems. You can use increments of 1/100th of a scan line for re-sizing or render in 16 bits,” says Murray, who works with 10-bit uncompressed HD-SR 4:2:2 masters in 1920 x1080 for finishing. The Avid DS system is also used to deliver masters to meet all SD and HD network requirements.

Writing and Rhythm Rules

While Murray handles the show’s finishing work, the sound team uses Pro Tools|HD systems, some with ICON work surfaces, to handle ADR, dialogue editing, sound effects, music editing, and mixing. The easy interoperability of the Avid editing systems with the Pro Tools systems, from Digidesign, a part of Avid, allows for quick video and audio file exchanges. The offline team can use the export to Pro Tools option to supply media, and the sound team can pick up immediately where the offline editors left off.



As with visual effects, mixer Tony Pipitone of New York-based Sync Sound, which handles all of the show’s audio work, has noticed the show gravitating toward increasingly complex sound elements. He cites a recent episode that took 10 hours to mix. “There was one storyline where Tracy Jordan was in a fake space launch, which had to sound very realistic because the character thought it was real. In another storyline there was a scene where the crew was having a laugh attack because of [character] Liz Lemon. We needed to weave

the laughter with the dialogue so that the dialogue could be heard under all of the laughing. It was complicated.”

Pipitone relies on his Pro Tools setup with a D-Command console to handle the demands of every episode. “I really take advantage of all the bells and whistles that I have. It’s so much faster to have all of the [ICON] controls at your fingertips,” he says. In particular, he uses plenty of plug-ins, such as the Avid EQs that map directly to the EQ section of the ICON console. Other favorite plug-ins include TL Space and Avid’s Reverb One for music and the Avid Dynamics III and Waves Limiters to meet network specifications for mix levels.

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Fundamentally, his job remains the same for each episode. “We need to get the words out and make them clear,” he says. “We don’t put in sound effects that get in the way of a joke. And we make sure the music clears the joke.”

Because in the end it is a show about words. “It all starts with the writing,” says Reticker, who says that each episode stays very close to the script with a relatively small amount of ad-libbing. “They don’t like to cut lines. The writing rules, and the whole rhythm plays to that.”

It is a formula that is clearly working, on screen and off. “It’s been a great show to work on from top to bottom,” says Reticker.

“Besides that,” says Eluto. “We laugh a lot.”

CREDITS:

NBC Photos: Nicole Rivelli & Jessica Miglio