

# THE SECURITY

guards who work for *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart are brawny men, imposing and menacingly bald. In the daytime, before hopefuls for that evening’s studio audience begin to gather on Eleventh Avenue, the security guards sit just inside the doorway to the show’s midtown Manhattan office building, carefully checking over unfamiliar visitors. Anyone lucky enough to pass the guards’ scrutiny is rewarded with a purple wristband, a normal-seeming ID bracelet printed with the message, “Not a Threat to THE DAILY SHOW WITH JON STEWART Or National Security.” Wait, is that a joke?

Given the bracelet’s levity, the guards’ baldness begins to feel less threatening and more comical, like the baldness of Curly from the Three Stooges. In a sense, then, the wristband-dispensing security guards embody a paradox that some say is central to *The Daily Show* itself: at times the show seems serious, capable of damage even, but for the most part it’s playful, silly, there to make you laugh.

“The thing we don’t like to hear from our audience is, ‘I only get my news from *The Daily Show*,’” says supervising producer Jim Margolis ’93. “We’re a comedy show, not a news show, and the things that are on this show are not the most newsworthy things that happened that day; they’re the most comedy-worthy.”

Margolis, understated and circumspect, is uniquely qualified to draw distinctions between what counts as news and what does not. After graduating from Wesleyan, where he majored in American studies and government, he spent years as a television journalist, beginning as an unpaid intern at CNN and later working on documentaries, such as the 1995 PBS *Frontline* documentary “High Stakes in Cyberspace,” which won an Emmy Award.

Margolis (right) chats on the set with *Daily Show* regular John Oliver, a British comedian.



# comic makeover

BY BRIAN SCHWARTZ  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL BURKHART



In 1997, just four years after his college graduation, Margolis was already approaching the summit of the TV news field, becoming an associate producer for Lesley Stahl at *60 Minutes*. He worked closely with Stahl for several years, producing some of his own pieces as well. The highlight of Margolis' time at the revered CBS news program was an investigative report about hardball tactics used by Wal-Mart lawyers in court, which resulted in the discount giant instructing its legal department to change the way it operated.

The Wal-Mart story wasn't funny at all, and neither was most of his other work for *60 Minutes*, as Margolis himself is the first to admit. Nevertheless, in 2001, Margolis did something very funny, or at least very unexpected: He got in touch with the executive producer at *The Daily Show* and pitched her several comedy ideas. Soon after that, he received an offer to attempt a radical professional make-over, from CBS journalist to Comedy Central funnyman. Margolis made the leap.

"It was a hard decision to make," he says. "*60 Minutes* was a hard place to leave, and most people thought I was insane to take *The Daily Show* job. But I wanted to do something more creative. From the time I was in middle school, I was obsessed with *The Late Show with David Letterman*. I always thought I would work in comedy, but I somehow ended up in news."

**MARGOLIS** started his new job on Sept. 4, 2001. A week later, after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, no one was sure if *The Daily Show* would be able to go back on the air, if viewers would have any appetite for a satirical take on current events. But *The Daily Show* has thrived in the half-dozen years since then. The show is now in its eleventh season, and Margolis has been an important part of that success.

He was initially hired as a field producer. "When I started, I spent a lot of time in the middle of nowhere, in small towns with Stephen Colbert," Margolis recalls. Along with Colbert and correspondents Steve Carell, Rob Corddry, Ed Helms and Samantha Bee, Margolis collaborated on story ideas and jokes, wrote scripts, and produced and directed countless segments for the show. In that sense, Margolis



contributed significantly to the pop-culture ascent of former *Daily Show* regulars like Colbert and Steve Carell, now the star of NBC's *The Office*.

Margolis has experienced an ascent of his own during his *Daily Show* tenure. After a string of promotions, he is now in charge of all of the show's field segments, a job that entails overseeing its correspondents, its six producers, as well as its researchers and editors. Margolis spends his days coming up with story ideas, rewriting scripts, and moving in and out of edit rooms, all the while serving as a liaison between the department and the show's host/star/master-of-jokes, Jon Stewart.

**ACCORDING** to Margolis, "Everybody asks, Is Stewart really that smart and funny? He is. You will spend hours trying to rewrite a line or make a bit work better, try dozens of things and nothing works. Then Jon will come in, watch something once and immediately know how to make it work. It can be maddening."

While this is no doubt true, Margolis' contribution to the show meant that, when *The Daily Show* won an Emmy Award in September for Outstanding Variety, Music or Comedy Series, Margolis was among the handful of people who went up to the podium to accept the award. As Stewart lifted the statuette, Margolis was standing there in the background, beaming.

Margolis is self-effacing when describing what his current position entails: generating ideas for bits, going over story possibilities with the producers in his department, pitching the best ideas to Jon Stewart, and making sure his department generates as much content as possible for the show. There's more, of course, but Margolis doesn't want to bore anyone with a dry litany, so he enlists his co-workers to help him explain.

Correspondent Samantha Bee describes Margolis as the "lube of the field department." After pausing for a moment to consider the aptness of that expression, Bee continues: "Jim thinks on a higher plane than everybody else—he's good at elevating material, bringing out the best in everyone. He has no shame whatsoever in telling us when our ideas are bad...And he still has that *60 Minutes* brain. He brings sobriety to the show."

Perhaps. But if you visit Margolis in his office, which is

decorated with such talismans as a green plastic Incredible Hulk figurine and a Stephen Colbert bobble-head doll, you will notice that he frequently laughs at the ideas and scripts his co-workers come up with. And if you follow him to a quick script meeting with writers, you might hear Margolis say something like this: "I wonder if rather than the joke about Osama bin Laden's penis, it might be an upper-body-strength thing?"

"Jim has an uncanny story sense and the ability to make any piece better and funnier," says John Oliver, another of *The Daily Show's* correspondents. "A year ago, while shooting a piece on Civil War reenactments, I broke my nose. When he learned of the accident, Jim gave explicit instructions to keep shooting at all costs. It is this willingness to put others' safety and well being in jeopardy in the name of comedy that makes me hope that this story you are writing is in fact a punishing exposé."

None of this fully resolves the paradox of a show that looks like news, but isn't, and sounds like comedy, but often provides incisive commentary about world affairs and the wayward media.

*The Daily Show* has its own research department. There are leaning stacks of newspapers all over the office, and a neatly kept library of magazines and books near the kitchen. And it's not just the researchers who constantly read and watch the news in an effort to keep up with the week's most important (and most inane) stories.

"Everyone here is basically that kind of person," Margolis says, meaning the kind that reads voraciously, cares about current events, and generally adheres to the Jeffersonian ideal of the literate electorate. "But we're doing this because it's satire."

Certainly many of the segments that Margolis has worked on are sublimely silly. Take, for example, his investigation of gay penguins at the Central Park Zoo or Stephen Colbert's *pas de deux* with a pizza deliveryman, performed in the middle of an interview with a Republican adult film star. The pizza sketch, made in 2005, has little if any journalistic value, yet it's a favorite of the now-veteran comedy producer. "*The Daily Show* allowed me to go from working in the news to skewering it, which is a lot more fun," Margolis says.

But then there's Rob Riggle's recent trip to Iraq. Riggle, a former Marine Reservist who served in Kosovo and Afghanistan, is now a *Daily Show* correspondent. In August, he flew into Iraq and filed reports from various

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locations there, interviewing soldiers and constructing a scathingly funny indictment of the rhetoric used by politicians to spin the reality on the ground.

"I think it's amazing," Margolis says of Riggle's trip. "They were working with incredible restrictions and what they got was really funny and hopefully poignant."

Hoping for poignancy within comedy may be the mark of a true satirist, as opposed to a simple clown. Not that the two are mutually exclusive. Get yourself a purple wristband and visit the offices of *The Daily Show*, and you'll see.

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