

By MICHAEL GILTZ

It happens to the biggest stars and the smallest sidekicks: every show comes to an end and every character has a final line. Sometimes everyone calls it a day after a long and healthy run; sometimes the ax falls before an episode ever makes it on the air. But whether the stories are painful or just painfully funny, getting that pink slip is something you never forget.

ERIC MCCORMACK

What series?
"Jenny" starring Jenny McCarthy, which would debut on NBC in September of '97 (without McCormack).

How did it happen?
"I was the male lead, the romantic lead," says McCormack, about his first big break.

"We did the pilot and then I was in Toronto doing a TV movie when I got the call. It was about a month before I got married and I was paying for the reception."

So how did he make do for that very special — and very expensive — day?

"With canned goods, mostly. Of course, as it turns out, thank God they fired me. [Then-NBC program chief] Warren Littlefield appeared for a taping of "Will & Grace" and he said, 'Well?

The day I got

CANNED!

How big stars got the pink slip

Didn't we do you a favor?
"Thank you, sir, for firing me."
Where is he now?
"Will & Grace" on Thursdays at 9 on NBC.

JAMES GARNER

What series?
"Nichols" on NBC, which last aired in August of '72.

How did it happen?
"It was a wonderful show and it would have gotten better and better. It was cancelled by General Motors. When they saw the pilot, one of the bigwig's wives said, 'Well, that's not 'Maverick.' "So it was cancelled the

first time they saw it. But they had a contract for 24 episodes so we did them.
"It was getting great ratings. They didn't have a show on the

network the next year that had those kinds of ratings. But they cancelled it.

"We're dealing with network executives here. You might as well go to an insane asylum and deal with those people. You get more sense."

Where is he now?
"First Mondays" on Fridays at 9 on CBS.

JANE KACZMAREK

What series?
"Hometown" on CBS, which last aired in October of '85

How did it happen?
"We knew it was getting bad," says Kaczmarek. "The order had come in: don't buy any more wardrobe. And [food] service got

worse and worse. "You knew your days were numbered. Morale was going down. And the producers invited us into their offices for lunch — sandwich making.

"We're making sandwiches and I'm putting on tons and tons of mayonnaise, which is what I love more than anything in the world. The wardrobe people said, 'Be careful! We don't have a double for that shirt. Just be careful during lunch.'

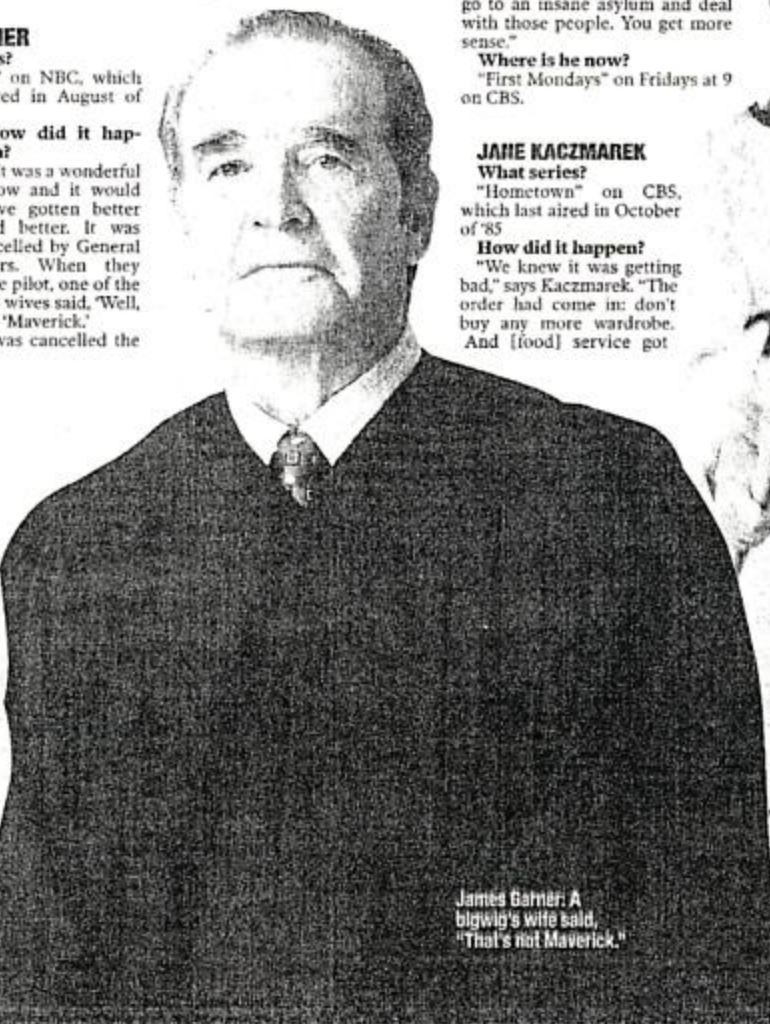
"I said, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah.' So I take a big bite of the sandwich and mayonnaise falls all over this blouse — just ruins it!

"I'm thinking, 'Oh, my God.' Then the phone rings and it's CBS saying, yes, they've pulled the plug. And my first reaction was, 'Thank God they cancelled the

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Eric McCormack: Got the bad news a month before he got married.



James Garner: A bigwig's wife said, "That's not 'Maverick.'"



Jane Kaczmarek: Got a sandwich and a pink slip.

TV Sunday

The day I got **CANNED!**

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show. Now they won't yell at me about ruining this blouse."

Where is she now?
"Malcolm in the Middle" on Sundays at 8:30 on Fox.



Malcolm-Jamal Warner: Took the bad news really hard.

MALCOLM-JAMAL WARNER

What series?
"Here and Now" on NBC, which last aired in January of '93.

How did it happen?
"It was a really difficult experience for me because from the onset it did not have the support of the network," says Warner.

"I specifically remember coming in to work and we were told that we were cancelled. We had to bring the cast and crew together and let them know they could pack their things and go home.

"I made the announcement. That hurt because we had been struggling the whole time with the ratings and just getting the show off the ground and getting the proper tone. That was a hard experience.

"I also took it very personal — not as a personal attack on me but the fact that this was Mr. Cosby's [project].

"Here's a man who basically single-handedly saved NBC and I just could not understand how after eight years and all of the wonderful things this man did for this network, how they treated that show. That really burned me.

"I took that really hard. I might have taken it harder than Mr. C

"TV is hardcore. When you hit the jackpot, you hit it way above what any normal person should get. But you usually have so many strikeouts."



Shannee Smith: Cancelled just in time for Christmas.

took it."
Where is he now?
"Jeremiah" on Fridays at 11 on Showtime.

SHANNEE SMITH

What series?
"The Tom Show" starring Tom Arnold on the WB, which last aired on March of '98.

How did it happen?
"I was in Barney's New York buying a bathing suit to go to Hawaii for a vacation on the first day of Christmas hiatus," says Smith.

"Tom [Arnold] calls me on my cell phone and says, 'Umm, they're not going to have [your character] back after Christmas.' They'd already cancelled the show and just wanted to save the salary, basically, because it was a sinking ship.

"They owed Tom Arnold so much money it was easier to do the last four shows instead of just cancelling it. And I was the easiest character to knock out.

"I was like, 'Okay, I guess I better put my bathing suit down and cancel the trip. Merry Christmas!'"

"TV is hardcore. When you hit the jackpot, you hit it way above what any normal person should get. But you usually have so many strikeouts."

"Getting fired from "The Tom Show" is pretty hardcore."

Where is she now?
"Becker" on Mondays at 9:30 on CBS.

BARBARA GAINES

What series?
David Letterman's morning talk show on NBC.

How did it happen?
"The show was losing



Barbara Gaines: affiliates," remembers Gaines.

"One day they said, 'You're cancelled' and we still had a month of shows to do. I think Dave — this was 20 years ago — I think he came around and said, 'Hey everybody, it's over.' We knew we were in trouble.

"Obviously they kept Dave on contract, so we thought there might be something else. But I didn't know I was going to be back. As far as I knew then, I was out of work. And I remember we all got together and took a staff picture giving the finger."

Did they send it to the network pinheads?

"No, we gave it to ourselves."

Where is she now?
Gaines is executive producer on "Late Show with David Letterman" weeknights at 11:30 on CBS (for now, at least).