

# Send in the Clowns

The late '50s and early '60s were the golden era of the campus talent shows, and the kings of comedy were a couple of wild and crazy guys named Schwartz and Bledsoe.

by Michael Waters

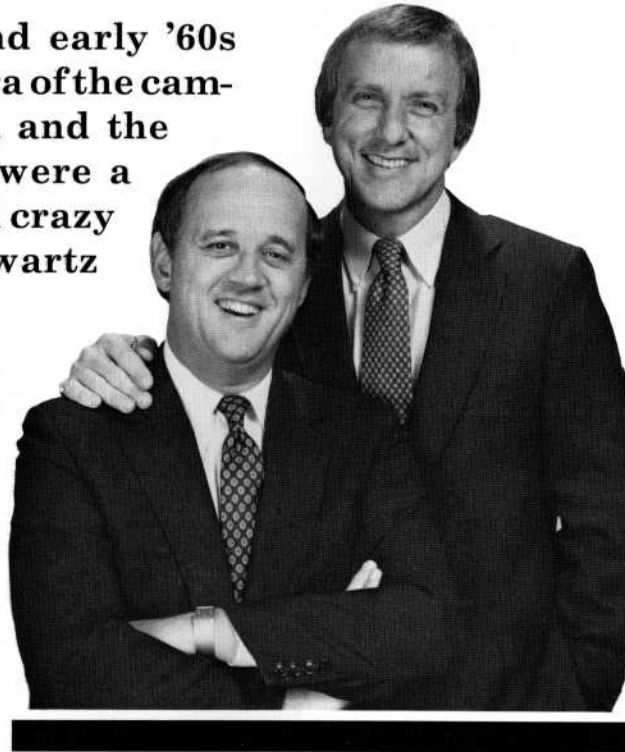
**D**id you ever hear the one about the two fraternity guys who formed a comedy team at OU in the late 1950s, won 21 first-place trophies at campus and regional talent competitions, then stormed New York City in a valiant attempt to crack the Big Time?

Well, it goes something like this:

Curt Schwartz and Larry Bledsoe came to the University of Oklahoma in the fall of 1956 having been, in Bledsoe's words, "joined from the hip since the 12th grade." Products of only-child families, Schwartz and Bledsoe each found a "brother" in the other, their friendship forged in part by their mutual fascination with the stage—Schwartz as a dancer and record-pantomime artist and Bledsoe as a stand-up comic.

They made two vows after graduating high school: (1) to go to OU together, and (2) to form a comedy team. Standing side-by-side, their appearance seemed to suit them especially for the latter: Bledsoe had the straight-man's look—lanky, angular-faced and chestnut haired—while his dark-haired partner stood shorter, his round face possessing the rubber-masked countenance of the born funnyman.

Their looks alone might not have



*Sooners Schwartz and Bledsoe always left 'em laughing.*

tipped off their fellow pledge brothers at Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity that these freshmen were budding comics. But their personalities spoke loudly enough. It took only one performance in front of their new friends to catapult the comedians into their first campuswide spotlight.

"There was some function scheduled in the frat house," Bledsoe recalls, "and they didn't give us a choice about it—they said, 'We want you guys to entertain.' So, here the members were seeing us for the first time—maybe some of them hoped for the last—but one of them came up afterward and suggested we get into the Campus Chest Variety Show which was coming up."

In fact, the suggestion became an order that the two pledges represent the Lambda Chis in the show. Unfortunately no one remembered to tell the

duo that the show was a prize competition.

"We got up on stage at the talent show and did our act. Then, we got in the car—it was Friday night—so we came up to Oklahoma City for dinner and a movie. We got back at one-thirty in the morning, and the members were hollering, 'Where have you been?' . . . Some of them were getting a rope.

"What happened was everybody had gotten together in the Union ballroom, where the prizes for the Campus Chest show were announced, and we had won the darned thing. It was a big deal, and we weren't there. The fraternity members didn't know whether to laugh or cry."

Fortunately, it was the heyday of OU talent shows. So Schwartz and Bledsoe (or Bledsoe and Schwartz—their billing depended on "which one of us you asked first") had plenty of opportunities to redeem themselves in their freshman and sophomore years. They took first-place trophies at the Engineers' Show in 1957 and 1958, a second place in the 1957 Mothers' Day show, runners-up in the 1957 Sooner Scandals and first prize winners in the Scandals of 1958.

Their act—which by their sophomore year was beginning to draw instant

recognition and requests for autographs—had originated simply enough. Bledsoe did a brief stand-up routine of topical one-liners, then introduced Schwartz, who came on and pantomimed a hit record. It took only a few months of dedication to their craft to give their barbs and ad-libs a more professional gloss, and their routines began to tap into Schwartz's proficiency with dance and the team's growing self-assurance as performers.

One Schwartz and Bledsoe highlight occurred in the 1958 Scandals when they donned tutus and tennis shoes for a slapstick performance of the *pas de deux* from "Swan Lake." "I was the girl—and he wasn't," Bledsoe explains, adding that it was more than a knack for comedy that made the routine work; it was the fact that "dance was so much a part of Curt's background. Boy, he was a hooper."

**A**nother Schwartz and Bledsoe routine was a takeoff on the old "Candid Camera" television show. Schwartz would announce to the audience that a camera had been concealed in a moosehead mounted on the wall of a sporting goods store. Then Bledsoe, as a customer anxious to hurriedly exchange a leaky basketball, would enter:

*Schwartz:* I understand you're double-parked, and you're on your lunch hour, and you just want to get something exchanged. But do me a favor.

*Bledsoe:* Okay, anything.

*Schwartz:* Will you look into the moose?

*Bledsoe:* Why do you want me to look into the moose?

*Schwartz:* Just look into the moose.

*Bledsoe:* What's wrong with the moose?

*Schwartz:* Nothing! It's just fine!

*Bledsoe:* You and the moose have a little thing going?

*Schwartz:* No, we don't.

*Bledsoe:* Well, he must have really been traveling when he hit that wall . . .

The comics enjoyed spicing their slapstick with an element of surprise, such as the time they appeared before a civic luncheon in Oklahoma City. Taking full advantage of their lack of celebrity with

*"Some people wonder if the boys are ever serious." Not!*

this particular crowd, the pair asked to be introduced as "two music students from the University of Oklahoma." They then took the stage—Bledsoe on piano, Schwartz on trumpet—performing a very average rendition of "Blue Moon."

As soon as the listeners' lulled minds began to drift, Schwartz let out a blood-curdling scream, then wailed that his tongue was stuck in the trumpet.

And so on.

Although the young comics spent four years at OU honing their humor skills, Bledsoe remembers he and Schwartz had begun to consider their chances at a comedy career when they were still sophomores. Their dreams received a shot of adrenalin following a visit to OU by Western movie actor Chill Wills, who was the guest of honor at a Lambda Chi banquet.

"His agent was with him, a guy named Harry Bernsen, so we shook hands, and they had us get up and do a routine. When we got through, the agent asked us what year we were in, and so forth. Extremely nice guy. He got back to Hollywood and sent us a letter saying, 'If anything ever comes up out here, I will contact you.'

"Now that lit the candle. We thought, 'If somebody like him looks at somebody like us and thinks we can do it, we ought to turn up the heat.'"

Not much later, an OU official tried to bring the duo to the attention of Hugh Downs, then a regular on NBC's late-night Jack Paar Show. Schwartz and Bledsoe were invited to send Downs a

film of their work. Later that same film went to Hollywood after Harry Bernsen contacted Schwartz and Bledsoe about the possibility of working in a new television comedy show then under development.

Ultimately, neither opportunity panned out, but, as Bledsoe remembers, "If we hadn't been committed before, that really did it."

While performing in and emceeing Sooner Scandals from 1958-61, Schwartz and Bledsoe set their sights further afield. They were chosen to represent OU in Texas A&M's intercollegiate talent show and toured as OU's entry in a show sponsored by the schools of the Big Eight Conference. They spent the summer of 1959 in a resort in Colorado and worked in Denver as well.

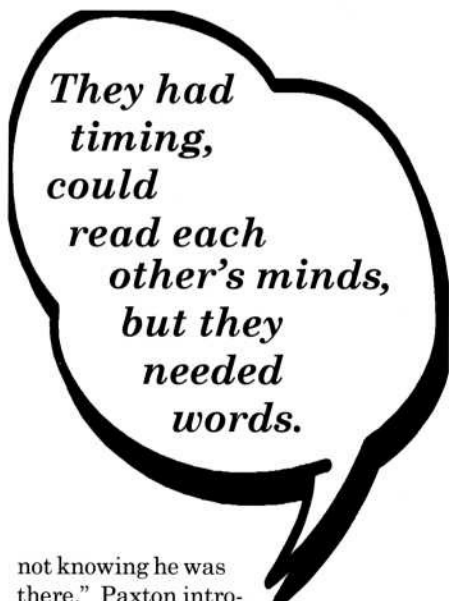
A 1959 *Daily Oklahoman* article said of the pair, "Some people wonder if the boys ever are serious." Yet as graduation day loomed, Schwartz and Bledsoe did a lot of straight-faced pondering about their future.

"We were going to California," Bledsoe says, "but our favorite drama professor, Charles Suggs, said, 'If you want to get to California, you go to New York.' At the time they were still doing a lot of TV shows in New York.

"Charles Suggs told us about a guy named Chuck Rosen. Chuck was from New York originally, then came to OU because of its national reputation for set design and got his degree here. He and his wife Mary just took us under their wing."

Rosen happened to be the set designer for the Jack Paar Show, a happy accident that, after Bledsoe's graduation in the spring of 1961 (Schwartz had completed his degree in drama in 1960), helped get the comics a chance to audition for the Paar show. With three weeks' expense money in their pockets, Schwartz and Bledsoe took off to New York to display their comedic wares to a then-little-known writer for the Paar show named Dick Cavett.

"Cavett was about five-foot-four—he and Ross Perot would see eye-to-eye on just about everything," Bledsoe recalls. "He took us into a big, open room where some secretaries were working, with



*They had  
timing,  
could  
read each  
other's minds,  
but they  
needed  
words.*

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*Larry Bledsoe, left at the mike, and Curt Schwartz arrived at OU determined to form a comedy team. There was no shortage of opportunities as the duo swept the campus talent shows and even took their act on the road to other colleges.*

projectors and other equipment stored in a corner; no walls, just partitions. We did our act for him, and some of it was a *little* loud, and every typewriter in the place just stopped.

"He was very kind, but we didn't get on. Still, we had our shot."

One rejection didn't stop Schwartz and Bledsoe from trying to climb the ladder of success in the Big Apple. They took day jobs as photocopier repairmen and within weeks had gravitated toward the pop-culture hotbed of Greenwich Village, where young comedians such as Bill Cosby and Woody Allen had walked the sidewalks and stages, and where a new generation of folksingers, led by Bob Dylan, was busily shaping

the musical language of the decade.

Though at first Bledsoe felt like he would "rather eat a gun" than take the stage cold in a New York club, the comedians soon worked their way up from amateur night performances to regular work at Village nightspots such as the Cafe Wha? and the Bitter End—places open to new performers, at pay scales ranging from abysmally low to nonexistent. "There wasn't a lot of money around for the unknown and the wannabees, but you could use their stages any time you wanted to," Bledsoe says.

"We were in school at the same time as Tom Paxton, and one day we almost literally ran right into him, face-to-face,

not knowing he was there." Paxton introduced his Sooner colleagues to the Gaslight, one of the better-known folk clubs. Schwartz and Bledsoe took the stage there—yet just as had happened with the Lambda Chis five years before, Paxton neglected to tell his friends the whole story.

"We get up on stage, and it's a good crowd, very responsive. Everything's working. Then, the minute we get through and say 'good night,' they start doing like *this*. . ." Bledsoe methodically snaps his fingers several times.

"And that's it. We thought, 'Uh . . . yeah, thanks . . . is this all the applause that's left? What did the *last* guy get?' So we walked offstage wondering what in the world was going on. Meanwhile, Tom's on the floor laughing, saying 'I forgot to tell you.' What had happened was all the people living above the club had previously complained about the noise, and this was their way of fixing the applause problem."

**A**s 1961 faded into 1962, Schwartz and Bledsoe carved out a small niche for themselves among the hordes of entertainment career-seekers. They hooked up with an agent, Roz Ross of the William Morris Agency, who helped them find work on stages from New England to New Jersey. She paid a polished young writer, Bruce Howard, to come up with material.

Still, the comics never made enough to leave their day jobs, and after 18

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months of battling to get ahead, they made a decision that changed the course of their lives.

"It was great, and we were getting the work, but it never had the big dollars tied to it, the kind you get when you break through. Also, people we respect had told us, 'Your timing's there, the relationship between you on stage is there—it's as though you were reading each other's minds—and all you need are the *words*.' But the really top writers who were creating good material there were getting a thousand dollars per finished minute.

"So we had a long talk with Roz. We said, 'You've been paying for things, and you can't keep doing that.' We had been in touch with a writer whom we graduated OU with, named T.Y. Hill, who was in Dallas. Roz said, 'If he's that good, why don't you go back to Oklahoma City for awhile, commute to Dallas and work on fresh material with him?'"

**W**hat was supposed to be a sabbatical for Bledsoe and Schwartz turned instead into an affectionate farewell to their pursuit of the Big Break. Bledsoe remembers that after spending some time working on new material, his and Schwartz's perspectives on the meaning of success were changed by "being home a few months, by seeing everybody again, going to the old familiar places and doing entertaining around here.

"One thing led to another, and we decided we were not so hungry that we wanted to go back and keep on going through what those who make it—and those who don't—are willing to put up with. Humanity took over."

Within a few years, Bledsoe and Schwartz each had married and started raising children who would follow them to OU. Larry and Nanette Bledsoe's daughter Tiffany graduated in 1987; Curt and Claire Schwartz's son Steve is an OU freshman with daughter Katie waiting in the wings. The comedy team delved into more conventional careers—Bledsoe first in insurance and now with his own marketing and advertising agency, Schwartz in commercial property development. Whenever opportunity arose and time allowed, the two

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*The Oklahoma City collegians were thinking comedy career when they posed for this publicity shot they labeled "Schwartz & Bledsoe: Our Comedy is a Tragedy."*

continued to perform their comedy routines before ever-appreciative conventions and luncheon audiences.

Schwartz became a major force in the Sooner state arts scene as well. He served as chairman of the State Arts Council of Oklahoma as well as the boards of four major Oklahoma City

arts organizations, while making a name for himself locally in television commercials and stage acting. His contributions were cut short by his tragic death in an August 2, 1985, jetliner crash in Dallas. He was 46.

In describing that day, Bledsoe's voice still hints at the raw hurt of separation



Gil Jain

*Larry Bledsoe, now an advertising executive, stands alone on the Holmberg Auditorium stage where he and his partner, the late Curt Schwartz, performed their zany act so many times in so many Sooner shows in the '50s and early '60s.*

from his oldest and closest friend. Yet a recent encounter brought home to Bledsoe just how much of Schwartz's spirit continues to live with him.

Schwartz's work in TV commercials had made him known, by one newspaper account, as "the boisterous TV pitchman with the high-pitched voice." ("That's incredible!" "No, that's Southwest Ford!") Sometime after Schwartz's death, Bledsoe stepped into his old

partner's "pitchman" role in a series of commercials for the same automobile dealer.

"Then," Bledsoe recounts, "the other day a stranger came up to me and said, 'I can't tell you how many times when I've heard your voice on TV, I thought it was the voice of your friend who died; it sounds so much like him.'"

Hearing that took Bledsoe back to an evening in the fall of 1956, when the two

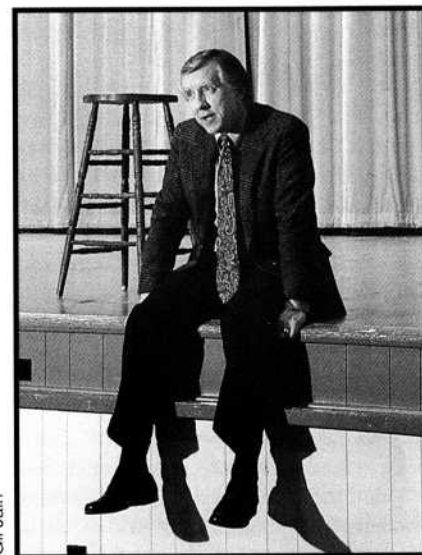
freshmen were driving around the Campus Corner. Schwartz, who up until that time had let his pantomime skills speak for him on stage, turned to his pal and said, "Tell me a joke."

Nonplussed, Bledsoe replied, "I don't think I know one you haven't heard."

"Tell me a joke!" Schwartz insisted. "Any joke."

Bledsoe did so, then Schwartz said, "Now let me tell it back to you."

Bledsoe caught Schwartz's mean-



Gil Jain

*Larry Bledsoe reminisces about Curt, comedy and their college days at OU.*

ing—to succeed as a team, the two of them would have to work hard learning each other's skills. For the next six years, in their dorm room, in the frat house, on stage at the old South Base auditorium, and finally in New York and a hundred other places, they worked and learned.

While the end result was less than the acclaim of which most aspiring entertainers dream, the process meshed the two men's personalities and welded a bond between the "brothers" that Bledsoe says no amount of fame or fortune could have bought.

And the dedication, closeness and good humor of the two ensured that, to those who saw the duo in their heyday, the names Schwartz and Bledsoe remain linked—and still, 35 years later, ignite memories of laughter and good times on the Sooner campus. 