



AWARDS

20 years ago at the Emmys: An effusive Elaine Stritch has the time of her life





Elaine Stritch reeled off names to thank in her acceptance speech, declaring she wasn't going to leave the stage "until somebody comes and gets me." (Ricardo DeAratanha / Los Angeles Times)

By Randee Dawn

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What constitutes variety at the Primetime Emmy Awards can be a toss-up. Is it a sketch comedy series? A stand-up comedy series? A musical? A late-night talk show? The answer over the decades has been yes and no, depending on the year. From 1979 to 1989 and then again in 1991, variety series and specials competed together, after which the variety special category was created. Since 2015, there have been two categories to cover the various programming — variety sketch series and variety talk series — but 20 years ago, on Sept. 19, 2004, at the 56th Primetime Emmys, the story was a little different.

Known then as variety music or comedy series, the nominees included three late-night talk shows and two sketch comedy series, a combination that might not have been apples to oranges, but still was at least oranges to tangerines. Comedy Central's "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart" won the award for executive producers Ben Karlin and Jon Stewart; co-executive producer Stewart Bailey; and supervising

producers Kahane Corn and David Javerbaum, its second consecutive win in a streak that would go from 2003-2012.



AWARDS

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June 19, 2024

Its competitors were a mixed bag. “Chappelle’s Show” (Comedy Central) had three nominations that night, but won nothing; “Late Night With Conan O’Brien” (NBC) earned a writing Emmy in 2007; “Late Show With David Letterman” (CBS) won in the category six times; and “Saturday Night Live” (NBC) has won the category (in various forms) twice prior to the category being renamed in 2015.

And then there was one of the highlights of the evening: Elaine Stritch. Her one-woman show, “Elaine Stritch: At Liberty” (HBO), told the story of her life and career. The show earned a variety special (pre-recorded) Emmy for executive producers Sheila Nevins, Richard Fell and Helen Asquith; co-executive producers Scott Sanders and John Schreiber; supervising producer John Hoffman and producers Chris Hunt and Frazer Pennebaker.

And with the individual performance in a variety or music program — a category that was last presented in 2008 — Stritch earned her second of an ultimate three Emmys (her first was as a guest actress on NBC’s “Law & Order” in 1993; she’d win a third in 2007 as a guest on the network’s “30 Rock”). Her competitors were all comedians: six-time winner Billy Crystal (“76th Annual Academy Awards,” ABC) won in the category in 1991; Ellen DeGeneres (“Ellen DeGeneres: Here and Now,” HBO) had one writing Emmy from 1997; Bill Maher (“Real Time With Bill Maher,” HBO) tied in 2014 with Anthony Bourdain in the informational series or special category; and Tracey Ullman (“Tracey Ullman in the Trailer Tales,” HBO) had seven Emmys from various categories, including this one in 1990.

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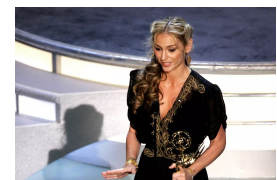
May 29, 2024

Stritch had the audience in stitches, putting on a performance en route to her acceptance speech and on the stage itself. Hearing she'd won she shouted "Oh! My! God!" while still in her seat, danced up to the stage (with a little assist from George Lopez) and had Stewart (who presented) hold the Emmy while she enthused into the microphone. "I cannot tell you what would have happened to me if I couldn't have gotten out what's inside of me tonight," she said in an emotional voice. "I try not to drink, but s—!" She gave out all the appropriate thanks, declaring of Sanders: "I don't like him very much ... but he got the money! He got us the money to do the show, so tonight I love him!"

At last, she ran out of names but declared she wasn't going away "until somebody comes and gets me." And at first it seemed like no one would ... but then she says, "You never know. You just effin' never know." And that's when the camera cuts away and the music drowns her out. The speech has become something of an Emmy legend. Elaine Stritch was just clearly having the time of her life.

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