

This American Life: What I Learned From Television, Seattle edition

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Raymond Chen

Ira Glass paid another visit to Seattle (here's [an appearance on local public radio station KUOW](#)), this time for a live taping of an episode of his radio show *This American Life* titled "What I Learned From Television." He also took the opportunity to introduce another auditoriumful of people to the [same-named television program premiering March 22nd](#). I myself was skeptical of the idea of transitioning *TAL* to television, but the clips we saw were absolutely gorgeous. Footage of people's shoes? Interviewing pre-teens in a field of waist-high grass? It sounds crazy, but it works and, more importantly, remains true to the spirit of the radio show. Storytelling at its finest. After an introductory story (adorably animated) on the power of the television camera, even an imaginary one, the show proceeded with its three (four) acts. First, the sleepy-voiced [David Rakoff](#) is given the task of watching 29 hours of television (not all at once). This may not sound like that difficult a task, but it's a real challenge for someone who stopped watching television decades ago, back when *Candid Camera* was what passed for reality television. Would he even understand *My Super Sweet 16*? Second came Alexa Junge who told stories about life as a sitcom writer. Hers was the weakest of the three acts; hopefully she will improve with time. Besides, she was up against David Rakoff and... .. [Dan Savage](#). It needs to be one of the fundamental rules of show business: Never be the act that goes on stage after Dan Savage. Whereas Chicago lays claim to Ira Glass, Seattle has Dan Savage to call its own. He tells us that he fears that the Disney program *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody* is corrupting his eight-year-old son. And when he explains why, you sort of end up agreeing with him. Furthermore, since it's Dan Savage, you somehow take it in stride when the story manages to involve a policeman with no pants chained to a tree. (What about the parenthesized fourth act? That's a for-the-live-audience-only fourth act wherein Ira Glass and Chris Wilcha talk about and show us clips from the television show. No moron he, Ira inserts the bonus act between Alexa Junge and Dan Savage.) One thing that stood out, at least to me, is how much more aware of the mechanics of radio taping Ira is. When he flubs a line, he just backs up to the start of the sentence and says it again, knowing that the flub can be removed in the editing room. The other guests didn't know this (or forgot in their nervousness), and when they got stuck on a word, they struggled with it instead of just starting over. Dan Savage was called back to record a *pick-up*; this is radio and film jargon for going back and recording new dialog/shooting new footage to

be inserted into what was already taped. In Dan's case, he had to mentally rewind to the middle of his story and explain to the radio audience what "just happened" on stage. As Ira read the credits, David Rakoff walked quietly up to the microphone, and as soon as I heard, "WBEZ management oversight..." I knew what was going to happen. What was funny was that David repeated the line live. On the studio version of the show, they just re-run the tape from earlier in the show, but in a live show, there is no time to cue up the tape. David had to re-create his line and make it sound as if it was an insert. Here are reports from the [New York show \(and another\)](#), the [Boston show](#), and the [Minneapolis show](#). The live performances of "What I Learned From Television" will be edited together and aired on the March 17 episode of *TAL*. Who knows how much of the Seattle version will make the final cut.

I believe Ira and crew are in Los Angeles next week. If you have tickets, here's my advice to you: *Buy your kite before the show*. Ira will show off various fundraising items on stage, and the line at the table after the show will be *insane*. Do yourself a favor and buy the kite when there is no line. I wish somebody had told me this.

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