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ARMY ARCHERD

JUST FOR VARIETY

GOOD MORNING: The day the show could not go on, 30 years ago: It was my usual Friday visit to the sets at MGM. I was heading down the rickety wooden stairs of the studio's publicity building. I was accompanied by young publicist Bob Crutchfield. Suddenly, someone shouted the news he'd heard on his car radio. We ran into publicity chief Howard Strickling's office, which boasted a radio. (There were no TV sets in the building in those days.) We heard Walter Cronkite's emotion-filled report. The president was dead. In shock and disbelief, Crutchfield and I headed into the MGM lot. The shattering news had reached the giant soundstages, which now became temples of mourning. Limousines, returning from the locations and backlots, seemed a funeral cortege. Inside the cars, big and bit players wept openly. Adult and youngstars, members of the same showbiz family that John Kennedy loved, were unashamed in their sorrow. On the studio streets, players in gay costumes sadly made their way to the gates. Ann Harding, her eyes flooded, slowly walked past me. Outside Stage 26, Connie Stevens wept openly and murmured, "Oh those poor children!" The studio doctor arrived moments later to assist her ... The focal point of each stage suddenly became the familiar transistor radio ... Robert Goulet had a radio in his dressing room on the "Honeymoon Hotel" set. He was surrounded by cast members — he wept. Keenan Wynn unfacetiously whispered in an emotion-filled voice, "I hope it wasn't an actor" ... Debbie Reynolds, in her dressing room on the "Unsinkable Molly Brown" set, said, "That's why I work for mental health. One out of 10 people today is potentially as sick (as the president's murderer). But what can you expect with so many slutty books, dirty movies and pornographic material? Teenage pregnancies are at an all-time high and parental discipline is at an all-time low. The country's morals are at a new low." In the studio commissary, actresses and office help alike took lace-like paper doilies from table settings to use as head coverings when they joined all denominations in prayer at St. Augustine's Church across the street from the studio ... In the executive dining room, where everyone commented on the impossibility of putting such a bizarre tale in a script, Alan Courtney noted the public had never accepted a feature or TV show which has as its theme a fictionalized presidential assassination.

AT THE ENTRANCE TO DESILU'S Culver Studio, a clown from "The Greatest Show on Earth" sadly waited at the gate — the mournful makeup grotesquely accurate for the day. On the "Americanization of Emily" set, producer Marty Ransohoff and director Arthur Hiller were in confabs with Jim Garner and Jim Coburn as they were unable to continue one of the film's publicized scenes ... Meanwhile, over at the Joey Bishop stage at Desilu Hollywood, the live audience was dismissed as Bishop filmed a show replacing a seg guestarring — Vaughn Meader doing one of his well-known JFK imitations. Zsa Zsa Gabor substituted ... Bob Hope canceled taping Bing Crosby and Janet Leigh until the next weekend ... Among the many cancellations were previews of "Company of Cowards," Jerry Lewis' "Who's Minding the Store?" and "Dr. Strangelove, Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb" ... Showbiz had relationships with previous presidents, like FDR, but JFK, more than any other president, had a feeling for people in the performing arts and a high regard for those in the entertainment world. The country had suffered an immeasurable loss but Hollywood had suffered a personal loss from which it never recovered ... On this 30th anniversary of his passing we also remember the good times here — from the private dinners upstairs at LaScala in Beverly Hills to the open fun and games at the beach at Santa Monica. Thirty years — we will always miss him.

ONE OF FRANK RICH'S LAST two B'way reviews for the N.Y. Times is Neil Simon's "Laughter on the 23rd Floor," which bows tonight. Simon returns to L.A. after Thanksgiving weekend to write the first draft on an untitled movie for Paramount. He hopes he won't be writing the movie script of "Laughter" for Ray Stark and Columbia for a long time ... Emmy-winning TV and movie producer-writer Harve Bennett winged to Brisbane over the weekend to direct, for the first time, one of his scripts — a seg of his "Time Trax" for Gary Nardino Prods.-WB TV. Guestar Julius "Dr. J" Erving plays a retired NBA great who stops a ghetto war. Erving liked the message and yes, he also plays basketball in the show ... The "Comics for Kids" benefit for ERAS at Budd Friedman and Mark Lonow's Improv was SRO. In addition to funcee Fritz Coleman and comic Dennis Wolfberg, Bruce Fine and Pam Mattison had the crowd in stitches.