



The sleepy search for yuks

By Karen Francis

Late night television has been rejuvenated in recent months by the clash between David Letterman and Jay Leno, the arrival of new guys Conan O'Brien and Chevy Chase, and tribulations of the once dominant Arsenio Hall. The always trailblazing CBC has even jumped aboard, unleashing *Friday Night with Ralph Benmergui* on an expectant audience. Late night television has been transformed from virtual obscurity to a big-money market with a lot of young guns duking it out, but has the competition increased the quality?

Late night talk shows seduce us when we're at our most vulnerable: near sleep. When awake and alert the always dumb and obvious late night monologue would probably only get moans, but on the verge of unconsciousness we're more inclined to chuckle. The variety show has always been a haven for mediocrity, from the talentless Ed Sullivan on. Only in the early eighties did it capitalize on its own stupidity with *Late Night With David Letterman*, which took the medium's inherent idiocy to an endearingly child-like extreme. For its time, the show was actually rather avante garde and surreal. Since then, though, nothing much has happened. That is, until the once revolutionary Letterman moved to CBS and became late night's new king. To rule this market it seems that one has to beat Letterman at his own game.

David Letterman's big-bucks CBS model is absolutely identical to what it was just months ago on NBC. Indeed, Letterman is going out of his way to let you know this is the same show: all the old tricks--the top 10 list (now the crutch of the imaginatively challenged), stupid pet and human tricks, those multiple choice quiz things--are still there, though NBC's claim that they are their "intellectual property" has resulted in some silly, barely noticeable name changes. Letterman has long since left his prime: the writing is now tired and cliched, with a disturbing propensity for fat and gay jokes. *Late Show With David Letterman* rests solely on Letterman's shoulders, and his shtick does wear thin--the man revels in repetition. Still, it must be admitted, he is a comedic genius--a quick-witted host, a sharp comic, just a funny guy. A lot of Letterman's tricks have become virtual institutions, but the original retains a freshness above the imitations. The Letterman/*Kids in the Hall*

one-two punch has yet to be capitalized upon.

Letterman's *Late Night* replacement, Conan O'Brien, an unknown comedy writer, frequently inflicts a deep sense of embarrassment upon me. Actually, his earlier days were probably the most ridiculous display of incompetence a major American network has ever known. O'Brien remains a jittery, giddy host and a bad actor and he has an annoying tendency to laugh at his own jokes in the monologue, as if trying to lead us on. *Late Night With Conan O'Brien* lacks the spontaneity and anti-talk show attitude of the young Letterman *Late Night*--

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it's very conventional, right down to a bookend cohost and the same tired format. And how about just ditching the monologue all together, always the most boring part of any show. At its best the writing can make the competition look like dinosaurs; unfortunately, the humour is too often inane and O'Brien, even with good material, lacks any visible merits as a comic. The potential is there, but O'Brien's limitations coupled with the show's lack of playfulness with its format will probably ultimately kill this program. Expect O'Brien to be a very difficult Trivial Pursuit question in the year 2000.

Jay Leno has gotten increasingly Letterman-like since Letterman has become his competition, but the best gags in the world couldn't save this twit.

Since Fox is unavailable on PEI, I haven't seen Chevy Chase's short-lived, critically drubbed vie for a piece of the late night pie. Said *Esquire*

of the ill-fated project: "Do you have dreams in which you put your fingers through the eye sockets of Chevy Chase's grinning skull?" That pillar of good taste, Howard Stern is currently being courted by Fox. It may be a sad commentary, but the hot young jerk's brand of vulgarity sends audiences into a frenzy. If he enters the market, expect him--at least for a while--to dominate.

Arsenio Hall remains unwatchable.

Canada's attempt at a variety show, *Friday Night With Ralph Benmergui*, is, in typical CBC fashion, a ninth-rate imitation of the American product. Unendurable and arrogant, and we pick up the tab.

So are you any more likely now to catch a few yuks before you nod off nowadays? Probably--if you're a big Letterman fan, since the entire field seems to have adopted his personality. Those hoping for something to liven things up the way the original *Late Night* did will be disappointed by late night's general lack of creativity. But things may be shaken-up soon: I have seen the future and its name is Howard Stern. Lord help us.