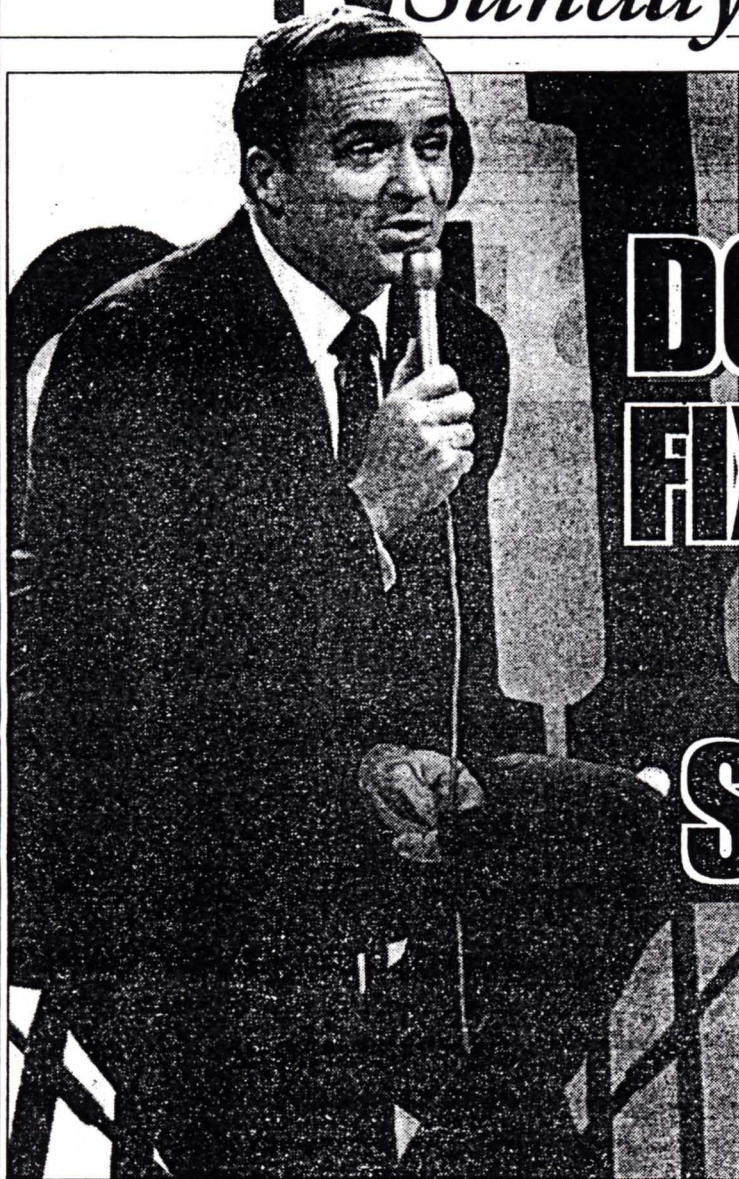


TV Sunday



MIKE DOUGLAS FIXES THE TALK SHOWS

He was the first syndicated talk show hit, the first to make \$1 million a year, and the first to fight off an upstart. Who better to straighten out today's crop of gab masters?

By MICHAEL GILTZ

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Talk show icon Mike Douglas is almost always right about who will win the ratings battles — even if it takes the rest of us a little time to catch up.

When David Letterman and Jay Leno squared off in late night, *The Post's* Cindy Adams called up Douglas for his take on their talents. "I said at the time Leno's going to win it because he has wider appeal," says Douglas. "And then for about a year Letterman ruled that spot. But now it's all turned around, and I don't know that it's ever going to turn back for David."

"I quite honestly watch both of them, and I watch David more than I do Jay," he says. "I don't know why; he fascinates me."

"But you know some-

thing? When his producer, Bob Morton, left that show, it went straight downhill. I'm sure David knows about this. He must think about it from time to time. But he's never invited the man back. I think that had a lot to do with it. Producers are very important people."

Douglas is in town to promote "I'll Be Right Back," a chatty, breezy memoir about his days hosting the most popular talk show of its day. Filled with an astonishing number of names from music, politics, and Hollywood, it also features his sometimes caustic comments on the current glut of talk shows.

It's no surprise the 73-year-old admires Rosie O'Donnell: She publicly declared Douglas her idol, openly modeled her show on his and even wrote the introduction to his book. "I love Rosie; I love what she's

doing," says Douglas, who's also seen musical highlights from his show aired on VH1 and a boxed set of episodes featuring John Lennon and Yoko Ono selling in stores.

Douglas believes Johnny Carson is the gold standard and that few people — and certainly not the two men duking it out in Carson's old time slot — can measure up.

"I'm sorry," says Douglas. "I like both of those guys; I helped both of those guys. They didn't invite me on with my book, but I'm not saying this for that reason. I could care less. I don't think the kind of people that will be buying my book are watching those shows anyway."

"But neither one of them has even gotten close to where Johnny was. I think you could put them both on together, and they wouldn't



Douglas, with Muhammad Ali, pioneered theme shows broadcasting from different cities, having weekly co-hosts and coming up with the most unusual mix of guests imaginable (hello, "Politically Incorrect").

reach Johnny."

His opinions on everyone else are just as firm. In fact, about the only people Douglas doesn't have an opinion on — like Queen

Latifah, the host of Bravo's "In the Actors' Studio" — are people not airing yet in Palm Beach, Fla. where he lives.

Casual references to the

TV Sunday



■ **Conan O'Brien**
Sidekick Andy Richter is "a tremendous asset that Conan's going to be missing."



■ **Oprah**
"People say, 'Oh, they're paying her too much money.' She's worth every nickel."



■ **Jay Leno and David Letterman**
"I think you could put them both on together and they wouldn't reach Johnny Carson."



■ **Charlie Rose**
"You don't meet many people [like Rose] who listen when they do an interview."



■ **Martin Short**
"What a talent that young man is. But that doesn't always translate into doing a talk show."



■ **Sally Jessy Raphael**
"Shouldn't she be running a real estate office in a small town somewhere?"



■ **Howard Stern**
"I'm an Imus fan."

trades and other industry news quickly show the avuncular Douglas is just as much on top of the business as he ever was.

"Oprah is unbelievable," says Douglas. "People say, 'Oh, they're paying her too much money.' She's worth every nickel; she wouldn't be getting it if she weren't. The shows that she is doing!

"One of the first book club shows, she had on the author and all these lovely ladies who'd read the book and in some way it affected their lives. I tell you, that's the best television I've ever seen. This woman is a marvel; she can handle any situation."

Perhaps Douglas can appreciate her innovations because he pioneered so

many himself: theme shows (such as a week devoted to the military), broadcasting from different cities like Honolulu or London (a ratings booster adapted by everyone from early morning news programs to late night talk shows), having weekly co-hosts (a novelty that will pay off whenever someone finally imitates it) and coming up with the most unusual mix of guests imaginable (hello, "Politically Incorrect").

Other hosts may make less than Oprah, but — according to Douglas — they're the ones who are overpaid.

Jerry Springer? Douglas hopes Springer will have an on-air change of heart and finally dump his cynical act.

Howard Stern? Douglas

winces at the mere mention of his name. (He's more of an Imus fan.)

Sally Jessy Raphael? Douglas writes that she seems nice enough, but wonders, "Why does this woman have a talk show? Shouldn't she be running a real estate office in a small town somewhere?"

Of course, his positive comments far outnumber the negative.

Douglas likes Donny and Marie, respects Barbara Walters tremendously, believes Bob Costas is one of the best interviewers ever and knew Charlie Rose would always make it.

"He interviewed me years ago in Dallas. I knew then he was going to be something. You know, you don't meet many people who lis-

ten when they do an interview. That's the key. Listen."

Indeed, Douglas knows better than anyone that some of the most talented people in the world won't make good talk show hosts. "Sid Ceasar was absolutely brilliant. But he could not walk in front of a camera and say, 'Good evening and welcome to Your Show of Shows.' They had to have somebody else do it."

While he hasn't seen Martin Short's show (except when he was a guest on it last week), Douglas thinks that might be the same story again.

"What a talent that young man is," says Douglas. "But that doesn't always translate into doing a talk show. He's a great performer and a funny, funny man."

"But I'm told, according to my sources — the Hollywood Reporter and Daily Variety — that it's not doing well ratings-wise."

As he points out, if there's just one missing factor — the right producer, the right sidekick — a show simply won't work. When told Andy Richter was leaving The Conan O'Brien Show, Douglas knew that wasn't good news for a show he'd enjoyed.

"Why is he leaving?" wonders Douglas, who rattles off the names of great second bananas like Tim Conway and Jonathan Winters who weren't meant to carry a show by themselves. "That's a tremendous asset that Conan's going to be missing."

Television's been missing Douglas for too long, as well. Though happily retired, Douglas admits he's occasionally intrigued by the possibility of getting back in the game.

He's in no mood to re-enter the grind of a daily show, but a weekly cable program or series of specials does offer temptation. The closest he came was several years ago, when a British talk show host similar to Douglas struck gold by returning to the air after many years away.

"She'd play her tapes interviewing Dudley Moore and Peter Cook when they were brash young guys and then bring them on today to talk to them again. They wanted to do the same thing here with me and I got so excited."

"It got as far as meetings. I don't see how it could have missed. I had ideas springing out of my mind. I had so and so on and they're still around. What would they say today?"

"It could have been a great way to pop back on there," he sighs.