TELEVISION

Dork wars

Or, how I'd make my bid for daytime-talk-show stardom

by Richard B. Eckhaus

Oh Lord, won't ya make me
A talk-show host.
My friends are like Oprah,
They're on coast to coast.
Yakked good all my life,
I don't like to boast.
Oh Lord won't ya
make me
A talk-show
host.

I want my own daytime talk show. Everyone has one, so why shouldn't I? Just look at your *TV Guide*. There's Oprah, Phil, Ricki, Vicki, Leeza, Bertice, Regis and Kathie Lee, Geraldo, Montel, Rolonda, Sacco, Vanzetti, Nash, Young, and probably a dozen more. The only two people who don't have their own shows are Tom Menino and me, and he doesn't speak English.

So I would like to correct what is obviously an oversight on the part of the networks, sponsors, programmers, and syndicators and propose myself as a host. I know I could do it. Just look at the competition. How tough could it be?

But if you're gonna play in the Big Leagues of Television, it's always good to know what you're up against and to steal from wherever possible, because too much originality isn't good for anyone. So I'd have to take a look at Phil, Oprah, Maury, Vicki, Ricki, Bertice, and Geraldo, whom I've selected because: 1) they consistently do well in the Nielsen ratings; 2) they appeal to a wide, demographically diverse audience; and 3) they are easy to make fun of.

To compare these media giants, let's assume that the same guest has been booked on all seven shows. (This has never happened; it just seems that way.) How would each host approach that guest? Of course, it would have to be someone who brought a topic so controversial and filled with scientific and emotional impact that the future of our world hung in the balance. And only one person who could fill these requirements *and* appeal to the typical daytime talk show audience comes to mind: Dr. John E. Mack, the eminent Harvard psychiatrist and author of the hot-selling book *Abduction,* the man responsible for what might be the greatest scientific breakthrough since phrenology. It is the good doctor's contention that people who wake up believing that they have been abducted by, mated with, or have had major surgery at the hands of space aliens actually have; that there is no other logical explanation for their hypnotically revealed memories, and that the aliens are trying to tell us to save our environment. Dr. Mack was *made* for the talk show circuit.

So let's start with Donahue, the Babe Ruth of daytime hosts. He began his talk-show career in America's heartland, back in daytime TV's deadball era, the late '60s and early '70s. When the powers that be decided to give him nationwide exposure, audiences didn't quite know what to make of him. His guests were controversial and newsworthy, and his questions were smart. Best of all, Phil knew how to sic a crowd on a guest better than anyone since Pontius Pilate. It took a little schedule reshuffling, and a whole lot of advertising, but in time Phil caught on and eventually became a nationwide phenom. Of course, then programs like Phil's began to spread faster than mold in a petri dish. One of the first out of the lab was Sally Jessy Raphael, a host/clone so close to Phil their only apparent difference was an X chromosome.

As in politics, as the number of talk-show contenders grew and the ratings war intensified, sleaze became the weapon of choice. At first, Phil stayed out of the swamp and continued to grill some of the world's great minds. But alas, even a liberal, intellectual feminist has to eat. So now, when Sweeps Week rolls around, one can expect to see Donahue dressed in a chicken suit and mesh stockings along with the rest of them. But I digress. How would the Phil Donahue handle Dr. Mack? For one thing, he wouldn't be the heavy; he'd let the crowd do it for him.

Phil: "Is the caller still on line one?"

Caller: "My wife has had three children. . . . all by aliens."

Phil: "Uh huh. How do you know, Caller?"

Caller: "Well, they don't look like her *or* me."

(Brandishing his microphone, Phil roams through the audience, who look mighty skeptical.)

Phil: "Help me out." (to a man in a "Perot in '96" T-shirt) "Whaddya think . . . could there be another explanation?"

Guy: (sneering) "Had a good look at the mailman?"

(The camera pans the studio audience as they guffaw.)

Mack: "I believe you, Caller."

Phil: "I've got to tell you, Dr. Mack, this audience thinks our Caller's a little, how would you say . . . nuts; and it would be fair to say they've got some doubts about you too."

(Another shot of the smirking crowd)

Mack: "They've got a right to their doubts, but my research stands own its own. I mean . . . what other explanation can there be but extraterrestrials?"

Phil: "Uh-huh. You still there, Caller?"

Caller: "Sure am. It just can't be the mailman's fault."

Phil: (smiling) "How do you know that, Caller?"

Caller: " 'Cause Elvis wouldn't do that to me."

■

How about Geraldo Rivera? I just love to watch him. In the his early years as a real broadcast journalist, Geraldo became famous for digging up stories that took on the establishment, kicking butt in the name of the Little Guy. Now, Geraldo just loves kicking butt, or getting his own butt kicked, in the name of the Nielsens. You're likely to find him picking scrapes with racists and nuts on his show or on the street, then blocking their punches with his face. Recently I saw him confront an unruly studio audience member with, "You make a scene on my show, man, and I'll mess you up!" — backed up by a handful of burly stagehands. And so:

Geraldo: "I gotta tell you, Dr. Mack, there are a lot of people out there who are having trouble buying your stories. I mean, it's not like you have anything solid for us to grab onto like, say, Al Capone's vault."

Mack: "Well, until they land on the front lawn of the White House, or park one of their craft in the middle of the MIT campus, I'm going to have to put my faith in my clients."

Geraldo: "I'm a busy man, so here's what I'm gonna do." (Into the camera) "If any of you so-called aliens are watching out there — Sunday, high noon, in Central Park. You and me, mano-a-mano, rain or shine! We'll settle this crap, once and for all."

■

Oprah Winfrey had a nice little talk show until she won an Academy Award for her performance in *The Color Purple*. Oprah used that Oscar to wangle her show's owner, Merv Griffin, into the most one-sided deal since Peter Minuit clipped the Indians out of Manhattan, making her the richest woman in the his-

A PIT BULL?
Ricki Lake dives into all topics with bared fangs.

tory of television. To judge by all the pieces about her in the TV tabloids, Oprah wants us to know that despite her hundreds of millions she's really "just folks" — someone still pulls her pants on for her one leg at a time.

Face it, the woman's got the common touch, and the numbers are there to prove it. A season doesn't go by without her loyal fans sharing her heartbreak and joy as they watch her weight bob like a Duncan yo-yo. How many times have the *National Intruder*'s supermarket racks been emptied because it's headline screamed, "OPRAH'S LATEST SURE-FIRE DIET" or "OPRAH AND STEADMAN BUY GRAND CANYON FOR WEDDING OF THE CENTURY"?

So, how would Oprah deal with Dr. Mack? Down home, of course. If the psychiatrist/author appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* with one of his space-and-time-traveling clients, Oprah wouldn't waste precious airtime; she'd cut right to the important issues.

Oprah: "So, what are these aliens like? I mean, are they little green men? Do they look like E.T. . . . what?"

Mack: "That's really interesting, Oprah, and goes right to the heart of the matter as to why I know my clients aren't delusional. They all describe the same beings."

Oprah: (amazed) "Wow . . . that's sumpthin' else!"

Mack: "My client Mrs. Belfry has some paintings to show you. She's done hundreds of them in her spare time."

(Mrs. Belfry, a gaunt, nervous-looking woman who clearly has *plenty* of spare time, holds up a couple of poorly done Crayola drawings. They all show a short, frail-looking creature with a humongous head and eyes that resemble the windshield of a 1948 Tucker.)

Belfry: "As you can see, they're little, intense things with big, bedroom eyes that lull you into a deep sleep. Once they have you in a trancelike state, they perform the most unspeakable . . ."

Oprah: (deeply concerned) "But child, they're so *thin*! How'd they ever get so darned skinny??"

Belfry: (clearly rattled) "Uh . . . well . . . one time, they had me tied to this futuristic davenport, and . . ."

Oprah: "I mean, are they on Slimfast? Do they work out? What?"

Mack: (calmly interjecting) "Well, they *do* have to travel great distances."

■

Among the current hosts, nobody does sincerity as well as Maury Povich. If Maury were to look me in the eye and tell me that Miami had been chosen to host the Winter Olympics, I'd believe that he believed it. The man is so sensitive, too. He could sit beside a sobbing, convicted mass murderer and say, "I'll bet your childhood was a nightmare." He's got heart.

So Dr. Mack has just finished telling us his theories about how his clients were abducted by a race of space creatures who just want us to be kind to our planet. Maury puts his arm around the doctor and switches on his best "I understand" look.

Maury: "How does it feel to be ostracized by your peers?"

Mack: (suddenly growing misty-eyed) "Uh . . . I'll tell you, it's hell, pure hell!"

Maury: "It's gotta be. I mean, you *were* a respected member of the psychiatric community, and now they talk about you like you're just another headline-grabbing New Age loon."

■

Next, there's Bertice Barry, who is one of the latest additions to the daytime TV fold. A former comedienne, she is, we have often been told by her handlers, the holder of a fistful of advanced degrees. She is hip, happy, extremely likable, and she buys it all. As far as Bertice is concerned, even themes like "Women Who Marry Farm Animals" have merit. On her show, leaders and losers are treated equally. And Bertice always manages to be both incredulous *and* believing.

Bertice: "So, let me get this straight, Dr. John E. Mack. Can I call you 'John E.'?"

Mack: "Sure . . . I guess so."

Bertice: "You say some of your clients have been having sex with their aliens and have been having children by them?"

Mack: "That's what they tell me, and I have no reason to doubt them."

Bertice: "Wow, talk about your mixed-race kids! Who's raisin' 'em?"

Mack: "Uh . . . they take them back with them."

Bertice: (relieved) "Thank God they're so responsible!"

■

Before we move on, a confession. Personally, I don't understand Vicki Lawrence. She was okay as a second-banana copy on *The Carol Burnett Show*, and she was often just mildly annoying in the title role on the inexplicably long-running *Mama's Family*, but why did they give her a talk show? No matter what happens, the woman is always sweet *and* sour . . . sort of a cross between Marie Osmond and the Church Lady.

Mack: ". . . so what they're trying to tell us is that we must stop destroying our planet."

Vicki: (with *that* smile) "I seeeee. What you're saying is that the aliens are abducting human beings in order to get us to do something about pollution and overpopulation."

Mack: "Exactly!"

Vicki: "Isn't that just precious! If they grabbed enough people, that'd solve the problem, wouldn't it?"

(The audience roars.)

Mack: "I guess."

■

Another Oprah-come-lately is Ricki Lake, former John Waters chubbette and current spokesmodel for Pittsburgh Paint's new line of make-up. Whereas Phil lets his audience tear his guests to pieces and Maury kills them with kindness, Ricki just descends on hers like a starved pit bull on a hunk of brisket. No matter what the topic begins as, it invariably becomes a battle against the subjugation of women. What if our Mrs. Belfry were to appear on *The Ricki Lake Show* with Dr. Mack and tell of her experience of being impregnated by aliens and giving birth to their offspring?

Mack: "After 23 sessions of intense therapy, Mrs. Belfry finally became comfortable with her formally suppressed memories of having been abducted and impregnated, and of giving birth on the alien craft."

Belfry: (shaking slightly) "Yes, thanks to Dr. Mack, I am once again comfortable with myself. I know I was just a victim of a more advanced civilization."

Ricki: (outraged) "I can't believe I'm hearing this! Mrs. Belfry, these creatures abused you, raped you, and still you kept going back to them, again and again. Didn't you ever hear of the word, 'NO'??"

Belfry: (beginning to shake hysterically) "What was I supposed to do? I was in their power." (Sobbing) "Ask Dr. Mack, he'll tell you!"

Ricki: "Sure . . . he's a *man*! He's not going to tell you about something called *free will*!" (Mrs. Belfry runs from the stage, screaming. A few seconds pass, and we hear a shot.)

■

So, how would we do it on my show? First off, I'd have to come up with a hipper name. Richard Eckhaus just wouldn't cut it in today's market — too hard to spell and pronounce. I'd need something solid and revolutionary. Maybe "Ticonderoga." That's got a history to it; it's recognizable.

Next, how to handle Dr. John E. Mack, the eminent Harvard psychiatrist and best-selling New Age author. I could be sincere like Maury, annoyingly cute like Vicki, or downright friendly like Oprah. I might work the crowd like Phil, allowing the worst of their emotions to erupt while I stay calm and liberal. Or, I could go for broke and do something really different. I could be honest.

Ticonderoga: "So tell us, Dr. Mack, how can you try to peddle this nonsense to a naive public with a clear conscience when you know it flies in the face of all responsible scientific proof and methodology?"

Mack: "I've considered all possible explanations, and . . ."

Ticonderoga: "And since, as with most issues concerning troubled minds, you could find no simple answer, you went for a cheap, fast, book-selling explanation that was bound to appeal to people who've lost their faith in channeling? Or is it that you really believe space aliens are the best thing to happen to the environment since composting toilets?"

What do you think? Would my approach work with the theme shows that are a must-do in the Daytime Talk Show Big Time? You know — "Today on *Sally Jessy Raphael*, Housewives Who Love Luggage," or "Montel Exposes Federal Secrets . . . How the Post Office Really Killed JFK!" I think I could sink my teeth into those.

Of course, no network or syndicate would keep me on the air past my first show, and I'd never get an invitation to appear on *Lifestyles of the Rich and Flatulent*. But maybe I should be happy sleeping well at night and being able to look at myself in the mirror, knowing that I'm going to spend the rest of my life teaching college and writing for small, honest publications. Or . . . I *could* work a little harder on my "sincere." ❑

GLADIATORS OF THE TUBE:
Phil Donahue (top) lets the crowd make the kill; Oprah Winfrey (middle) likes things down-home, with a just-folks approach; and Geraldo Rivera wants to settle things *mano-a-mano*.