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## The Rib Tickler's Approach to Social Provocation

By LAWRIE MIFFLIN

**M**ORE THAN RATINGS ARE at stake for Michael Moore this summer as his sometimes loopy, sometimes acidly satiric news-magazine program, "TV Nation," returns to prime time. His whole world view is on the line.

Mr. Moore, the iconoclastic film maker who is destined to have his name followed forever by the phrase "producer and director of the award-winning documentary 'Roger and Me,'" says his career is propelled by the conviction that Americans are smarter and more politically sophisticated than the television industry thinks.

"The proof is in the Nielsen ratings," he says. "The top 10 shows are the smartest, the most risk-taking shows, shows like 'Seinfeld,' 'E.R.,' 'N.Y.P.D. Blue.' Look, '60 Minutes,' a news show, is always in the top 10. And 'Roseanne,' whatever else you may feel about it, deals with serious social issues and controversies."

Social issues, smart-aleck interviews and general rabble-rousing are what Mr. Moore plans to offer in eight new episodes of "TV Nation." The show, which he has moved to Fox from NBC, where it ran last summer, will be seen on Fridays at 8 P.M., starting this week.

"I really think this country is ready for a good dose of political humor right now," Mr. Moore said recently over lunch at a cafe near his midtown Manhattan office.

This summer, "TV Nation" will mock everyone from Presidential candidates to "whining white men"; everything from companies that don't provide enough toilets for female employees (in a memorable segment featuring portable Johns of Justice delivered by truck) to fancy-dress brigades that re-enact Civil War battles. What Mr. Moore calls his "merry band of troublemakers" will include Janeane Garofalo, late of "Saturday Night Live" and "The Larry Sanders Show"; the comedian Steven Wright, and an investigative reporter called Crackers the Corporate Crime Chicken.

"TV Nation," which is produced by Kathleen Glynn, Mr. Moore's wife, often recycles the pester-the-powers-that-be method that brought Mr. Moore success in "Roger and Me," his 1989 film about the effect of the

closing of a General Motors factory in Flint, Mich., his hometown. In a new segment called "Payback," for example, Mr. Moore goes to the home of the chief executive of a car-alarm company, lines up 10 cars and sets off the alarms at 6 A.M., to see what the executive will do (he calls the police, who make Mr. Moore move the cars).

"But my idea with the car alarms and that sort of stuff is to draw people in," he explained. "Once they're in, we'll talk about real issues."

In another new segment, Ms. Garofalo takes a multiethnic group of 24 New York-

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**Michael Moore,  
rabble rouser, is  
back, working on the  
assumption that  
Americans aren't a  
bunch of dopes.**

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ers by bus to the town beach in Greenwich, Conn. (Only Greenwich residents are allowed.) Turned away, they rent a boat; stopped by police boats, they swim ashore. "It's a public beach," Mr. Moore said, eyes flashing behind his glasses. "You can't say only residents of Brooklyn can go to Coney Island. This is America! You can't say only people in Venice can use Venice Beach. This is America!"

Since "Roger and Me," Mr. Moore has mellowed in age, to 40, and in appearance, with a few extra pounds on his 6-foot-3-inch frame. With a Detroit Tiger baseball cap almost always perched on his mop of brown hair, he looks just like what, on one level, he is: a white, middle-class, middle-aged husband and father (he and Ms. Glynn have a 14-year-old daughter) from a blue-collar family, with no college degree and a fondness for sports. But underneath the aw-shucks demeanor beats what one critic called "a genetically subversive heart."

Mr. Moore's subversiveness takes the form of thumling the nose at the bosses, and

he was to that manner born. "My uncle was in the sit-down strike in Flint that founded the U.A.W.," he says, referring to the United Auto Workers' 1937 strike. "I think that generation, if they could see what goes on now, would be very disappointed."

He is certainly disappointed in his generation, which took part in civil rights and Vietnam War protests but faded into arm-chair liberalism. "To the disenfranchised, angry, alienated, unemployed worker in Michigan, what are the Democrats, the liberals, offering?" Mr. Moore asked. "Newt Gingrich, and people like the Michigan militia, they have something to offer. It's the wrong thing, but it's something people can grab on to."

He believes that his social contribution is to goad people into taking part in a search for solutions. "If we are active and involved, we'll find our way, but if we detach, we're going to be in a lot of trouble," Mr. Moore said. "So I want this show to get people riled up, to get them juiced, to motivate people to get involved, and not just sit around. If they can see a guy like me, without a college education, from Flint, Mich., walk into the headquarters of some big corporation, or into the halls of Congress, and challenge some people, maybe people will say, 'Hey, maybe I can do something like that.'"

**N**OT MANY PEOPLE, HOW ever, would send Crackers the Corporate Crime Chicken to ask New York Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani serious questions about tax breaks and unemployment. And some television critics have complained that such sophomoric stunts undermine whatever serious purpose Mr. Moore has in mind. He disagrees.

"Humor can be more devastating than some formal white paper," he said. "There's a time when you can't be entertained and there's a time when you can laugh, and you can't do both. That's my point about the top 10 shows on the Nielsen ratings: you have to do both. And people will do that. I don't have that attitude, that looking down on the American people like they're all a bunch of dopes."

He paused, and the gleam was back in his eyes. "That's not to say there aren't a good 50 or 60,000 dopes," he said, yukking gently, "because there are."

### Man on the Street

Michael Moore, creator of "TV Nation"—

"Humor can be more devastating than some formal white paper."

