

# CALENDAR

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## A Talk Show for the Ages (That's 18-34)

■ **Television:** Ricki Lake's Emmy-nominated program has broken out of the pack by targeting young viewers.

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SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

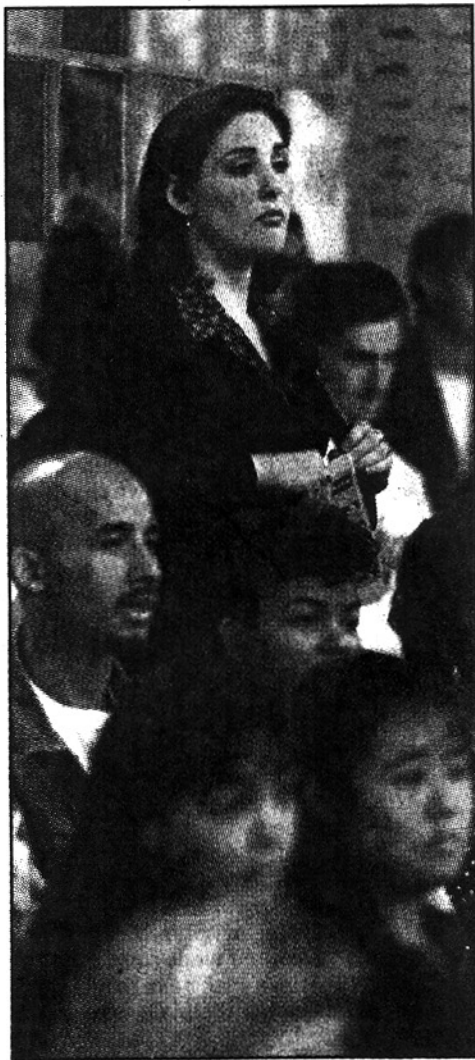
She took the job because she couldn't pay her rent. Soon, her biggest problem is likely to be which of her myriad vacation homes she feels like visiting during her summer break.

Ricki Lake is amazed at the success of her first-year talk show, which is touted by Columbia Pictures Television as the fastest-growing talk show ever.

Ratings for "The Ricki Lake Show" have more than doubled since its premiere last September and they are still rising. For the May sweeps that end today, her audience in this area is up nearly 20% from her strong February showing. Among women of all ages nationwide, she is second only to "The Oprah Winfrey Show," beating "Donahue," "Geraldo" and "Sally Jessy Raphael."

Not only is the show popular but, at least by the standards of daytime talk, it's also good—nominated for three awards at tonight's Daytime Emmy Awards, including

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ROBERT CLARK / For The Times

Host Ricki Lake: "The conflicts of real people are what people want to watch."

## LAKE

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best talk show and host.

All this for a program that rarely lets anyone over 30 on the set and mostly puts on people who have some intimate problem with their lover, mother, best friend or roommate and has them yell, scream and hash it out in front of millions. One Casanova explains why he cheats on his girlfriend while she sits next to him and squirms because she still wants him back. A young woman tells her boyfriend that the child he's helping to raise isn't really his. Another charmer sits beside his plump wife and complains that if she doesn't lose weight, he's going to dump her.

"The conflicts of real people are what people want to watch," Lake, 25, said in a telephone interview last week from New York, where she was about to tape her final show of the season. "They don't want to see a freak show. They don't want to see transsexual midgets. They want to see real people, and it's like getting a peek into the neighbor's back yard."

An actress before she agreed to host the pilot to earn rent money, Lake admits that she's sometimes amazed that people will appear and talk "about their wildly personal predicaments. I'm stunned when some guy just blurts out that he's cheated on his wife 37 times and she's sitting right there. But I think most people come on because they want to be famous for 15 minutes, and what better way to get people in their small hometown talking about them than to come on TV?"

The goal was to adapt the old talk-show format created by Phil Donahue to appeal to young adults. Garth Ancier, the former NBC and Fox programming executive who created the show, explained that just as Fox succeeded by targeting people between ages 18 and 34, he had a gut feeling that that same group liked talk shows but wasn't being served. All of the existing shows had hosts, guests and topics that were much older.

"What we're dealing with primarily is a lifestyle difference," Ancier said. "It's a less married population, more socially tolerant group, but one that is less intellectually interested in issues that don't directly affect them. They

are interested in things that do affect them like gun violence or racism, but not really in international or national issues that don't relate to their daily lives."

Although "Ricki Lake" does issues such as shoplifting, condoms, violence, drugs and teen pregnancy, it most often gives viewers young love relationships and all the accompanying grief.

Ancier and executive producer Gail Steinberg have tweaked the traditional talk-show format in other ways to give it a younger feel. "Ricki Lake" tends to be faster paced, with the host prodding the guests to the point of contention rather than permitting them to labor through their entire tale. The show's set is different—with several doors for surprise entrances—and its graphics have a contemporary feel.

Many installments also include a gimmick. Lake, for example, will open a "relationship court" where a young husband can charge his wife with being a nag, and then be sentenced by the judge to learning how to be a good friend to her. They'll conduct various dating game takeoffs—with mothers questioning prospective women for their sons, or three men who believe they are "God's gift to women" trying to impress a lithe New York model.

The meat of the show is conflict. Lake sometimes pulls surprises on the guests by bringing out people or information they weren't expecting—a ploy that has produced screams, speechlessness and tears.

The producers said they have no qualms about this tactic or the pain it might cause, explaining that every guest participates voluntarily and is forewarned that a surprise is planned. In addition, the show provides therapists to help guests deal with any emotional distress.

"We never say to someone that they are coming on to be reunited with their best friend from summer camp, and then surprise them with their girlfriend saying she's having an affair with his brother," Steinberg said. "We never want to take advantage of people. . . . We don't want to ruin people's lives, and a lot of times people thank us because they find that it really helped."

Lake, who starred in the John Waters' movies "Hairspray" and

"Serial Mom" and had a recurring role on the TV series "China Beach," is under contract to the talk show for another six years—which she said is fine for now. She said she can't see herself doing it for 25 years like Donahue, but then, she can't predict anything at this point because her life has been an absolute swirl the past few years. She lost more than 125 pounds before getting the talk show, she got married two months ago, she can't take the subway anymore without a big ruckus, she's about to be rich.

"I don't know what's going to happen, but I realize how lucky I am," Lake said. "And it feels excellent. I love the interaction with the audience. It's like I make 200 friends every single day and for some reason the audience is on my side. That's really what is so gratifying, is that all these people are nice to me. That was my goal from childhood—not to be the smartest or the best cheerleader, but simply to be liked by everyone."

■ "The Ricki Lake Show" airs weekdays at 5 p.m. on KCOP-TV Channel 13. "The 21st Daytime Emmy Awards" airs tonight at 9 on KABC Channel 7.