

Half the Weight and on the Rise



Keith Meyers/The New York Times

Ricki Lake, still cheerful but no longer chubby, is the host of a daytime talk show that recently gained in the ratings.

By DEGEN PENER

AMERICA'S most pleasingly plump, cheerfully chubby young actress is no longer living with euphemisms. When Ricki Lake made her movie debut almost six years ago in John Waters's "Hairspray," those were the kinds of phrases people used to describe her. Back then, while just 19 years old and 5 feet 4 inches tall, she weighed 200 pounds. Her role — a sweet, overweight girl-next-door who lands a spot on a Baltimore television dance program — won her a quick and early dose of fame.

Today, she probably wouldn't get the part. Ms. Lake, since topping out at somewhere over 250 pounds, has a new, retooled celebrity body, having shed more than 115 pounds over the last two and a half years.

"I was happy then," Ms. Lake said, over a rather light dinner recently at Mike's American Bar and Grill, a quirky Tex-Mex restaurant on 10th Avenue near 46th Street. "I'm just happier now. Clearly so much happier now that I can fit in this booth and not feel uncomfortable."

"Some people say I've sold out, you know. I was this role model for heavy people. But the thing is, I never set out to be a role model at all, and I don't set out to be one now. I won't preach to anyone and tell them how to lose weight. I don't know any better than the next person."

Ms. Lake does not mind discussing the weight, but that's not why she came to dinner. For while she may no longer be fat, she's also not just an actress. Since Sept. 13, she has been the host of "Ricki Lake," one of the latest entrants in the growing group of daytime syndicated talk shows. Three new syndicated shows made debuts in the fall, bringing the number of daytime talk shows to roughly 20.

"Ricki Lake," on WWOR-TV, Channel 9, in New York at noon and 5 P.M., covers the usual gabfest turf: sibling strife,

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surprise marriage proposals, interracial dating and makeovers galore.

But Ms. Lake, who is now all of 25, has just broken away from the pack of newcomers. In October her show's Nielsen rating among women 18 to 34 was double that of two other new syndicated shows, "Bertice Berry" and "Les Brown."

Ms. Lake is candid, open and empathetic — though, of course, those are the prerequisites for being a talk-show host.

Her improved ratings — with a significant jump in recent weeks — can be attributed to other traits. She's a bit nutty, she has a certain hipness that can easily irk people over 30, and most of all, she's bold.

Bold? For starters, Ms. Lake showed up for dinner wearing no makeup, fully aware that she was to be photographed. Not much later, she made it clear that she's not afraid to criticize the competition. "I wouldn't go on 'Geraldo,'" she said. "He scares me. He's too accusatory and too meddling."

Even more shocking, just a few minutes after she gingerly began eating her fettuccine with white beans, tomato sauce and garlic, she broke what would seem to be a cardinal rule in the entertainment world: don't contradict your own news releases.

The publicity agents for her show have made much of the story that Ms. Lake appeared on "Oprah Winfrey" a few years ago and talked of having her own show one day. The truth is that it never was a deeply held ambition.

"Everyone is blowing this story

well out of proportion," she said. "I was on Oprah's show after 'Hairspray.' This was before she lost any weight. She was heavy and I was heavy, and for some reason I related to her. I don't know what it was, but I told her that I wanted to be the white Oprah. I was a big fan and I thought I'd tell her, 'Boy, I wish I could be more like you.' They turned it into this whole, you know, 'I saw it back then; I knew.'"

Ms. Lake then proceeded to tell the real story of how she became a talk-show host, after having made nine movies, including "Cry-Baby" (another John Waters film), and having appeared in the television series "China Beach."

It all began with the demise of another talk show. In the spring of last year, Garth Ancier, a former president of entertainment for the Fox Broadcasting Company, and Gail Steinberg, a former producer of "Donahue" and "Geraldo," set out to create a talk show aimed at a 20- and 30-something audience.

The result was "Jane," a show whose host was Jane Pratt, then 29 and the editor in chief of Sassy magazine. After a test run on WNYW, Channel 5, in New York, the show wasn't renewed. Mr. Ancier, however, didn't give up on his idea. He simply started looking for a new host.

"They were throwing names around," Ms. Lake said. "They wanted to take the show national, and they wanted to find a younger host."

The producers narrowed down their lists. Then they interviewed their top choices, who included the model Veronica Webb and Melissa Rivers, the daughter of Joan Rivers. Ms. Lake, to her own surprise, wound up getting cast.

The offer couldn't have come at a better time. After "China Beach" was canceled, Ms. Lake had hit one of those proverbial dry periods in an actor's life. Negotiations to start a sitcom inspired by Mario Thomas's "That Girl" never went further than that. And just before she was contacted by Mr. Ancier, a part she felt she'd been promised in a television movie had fallen through.

"You're not just desperate because the part is perfect for you," Ms. Lake said. "You are desperate because you need to work. That's happened countless times in my career. I've been promised this job, I've been promised that job."

"And that's why when this talk show came around I was like, 'Yeah, yeah, sure, sure. I've heard this before, O.K.' So I went to the meeting and I knew it had to be sort of important because it was on the Fox lot in L.A. I just took it as a meeting and it turned into this."

So now Ms. Lake spends her days going over the usual talk-show fare: talking to mothers about their problem daughters, to women in the Ku Klux Klan, to men about sexual turn-ons and to women whose brothers claim they are too promiscuous. But with her own spin.

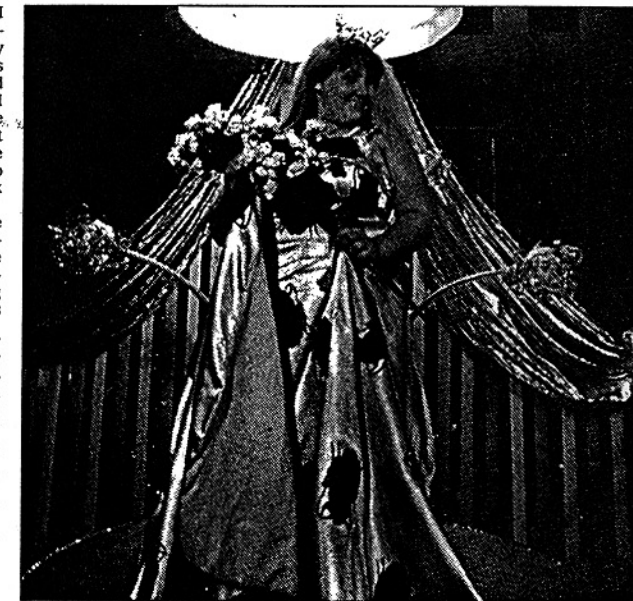
"Our show is funny," she said. "It's not exploitative. It's not crude. It's not freaks. We're offering a clearer alternative to people who want to watch talk shows but feel they can't relate to the shows on menopause or whatever — the older skewing issues."

Having started out wearing the

AT DINNER WITH

Ricki Lake

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Henny Garfunkel

Ricki Lake in the role of Tracy, a teen-ager who is crowned Miss Auto Show in the 1988 John Waters film "Hairspray."

A talk-show host at 25.

dress for the show the way she had chosen to dress for this dinner: in a long black sarong skirt, a black cardigan layered over a white one and her favorite pair of combat boots.

One of her biggest challenges is controlling the guests on each show's panel. "When you do a show like 'stay away from my black man,' the audience gets so riled up," said Ms. Lake, who recently took a very direct approach to the task.

"You have to talk one at a time," she continued. "In this case, the woman would not listen to me and it was to a point where it was, like, inexcusable. So I just went up on stage, I bent down in front of her and I pinched her on the leg. She shut up and I just said: 'Ma'am, I'm not going to tell you again. You have to be quiet.'"

It's also important for her to pinpoint the most opinionated people in the audience. "If I see two people, not that I'm playing favorites or anything, but if I see a young, white guy in the audience or I see a big, black woman, I'll go to her because she'll have the more outspoken comment 9 times out of 10," she said. "It makes the show."

It had been almost 40 minutes since her pasta had arrived, and Ms. Lake still hadn't finished it. When she finally let the waitress take it away, she steadfastly refused an offer of

works with a personal trainer who keeps track of her weight even though she says she has no interest in knowing the numbers. "I'm done and I'm being weighed tomorrow."

"Scales are not my friend. I'm not overweight now, but I truly do not know what I weigh. It's not so much losing weight now as it is toning my body." The trainer is relatively new in her life. Ms. Lake slimmed down the old-fashioned way, by changing her eating habits and by exercising.

If the talk show is a success, it could stay on the air for years. Ms. Lake, however, is committed to sticking with her acting, too. Early next year, "Serial Mom," her third movie with Mr. Waters, is due out. In it, she'll play the daughter of Kathleen Turner's character, a perfect mother who happens to be a serial killer.

When the movie is released, Ms. Lake is planning to invite Mr. Waters onto her show. He discovered her through a casting agent and gave her the role in "Hairspray," her first acting job. She talks to him once a week and calls him the closest thing she has to a mentor. When she moved to New York City from Los Angeles to do her talk show, Ms. Lake, who grew up in Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y., insisted her apartment be near the New York apartment of Mr. Waters. "I only looked in his three-block radius," she said.

But what does the director, who has a well-known and deeply ingrained hatred of television, think of Ms. Lake's latest project?

"Television just makes him crazy," Ms. Lake said. "It makes him insane. But he's been watching me. He said he's in shock. His jaw is just open. He can't believe that I'm doing a talk show. A lot of it for him is that