

The Washington Post

SUNDAY

Arts

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 1994

The
Next
OprahRicki Lake Talks Her
Way Into the Hearts
Of TwentysomethingsBy Paula Span
Washington Post Staff Writer

NEW YORK

The studio audience at "Ricki Lake" is applauding warmly, but that's not enough for the producer who's leading the pre-taping warm-up. "You guys sound like you're on the Maury Povich show!" he scolds. "I know you know how loud the Ricki Lake show should be." He cues the young audience again—most look to be in their late teens and twenties—and the response escalates from applause to whoops, shrieks and stomps.

The producer looks pleased. On with the taping. Today's topic: "My Girlfriend Hates My Baby's Mother."

"Ricki Lake" is the talk show that doesn't look or sound like Phil's or Sally's. It's speedier, noisier, younger and more contentious. It's also the fastest-growing TV talk show in the history of the genre, tripling its audience in the year since it was launched, passing Maury, Geraldo and almost everyone else in the ratings. Only Queen Oprah now has more viewers—and more of the particular viewers advertisers lust for—than this 25-year-old novice.

"It's been a fairy tale, a whirlwind," says Lake between taping sessions for her second season, which begins tomorrow. Last fall, "I was just hoping we'd do well enough to be asked back for another year. . . . I signed a one-year lease, because I didn't know if I'd be staying."

But because television is a monkey-see kind of business, the show's trajectory means more than loot and limos for a young woman previously best known as the teen star of the John Waters film "Hairspray." It means that the talk world is going through one of its periodic transmogrifications. Television syndicators are already lining up a flock of other post-adolescent hostesses, like Melissa Rivers (daughter of Joan) and Carnie Wilson (onetime pop sensation). Current shows, meanwhile, are appropriating elements from "Ricki Lake" in attempts to grow speedier, younger—and more popular.

"They'll steal the personality next year," predicts Jim Curtin, who monitors syndicated programming for HRP Inc., a "rep" firm that sells ad time. "They'll steal the format this year."

The format was the brainchild of Garth Ancier, first programming chief of the Fox network and architect of its strategy of "aging down" standard formulas to appeal to younger viewers. ("Beverly Hills, 90210" is an aged-down "Dallas," for instance.) Two years ago Ancier and his co-executive producer, "Donahue" veteran Gail Steinberg, saw an opening for an aged-down talk show. "Everyone assumed that talk appealed to viewers 50 and older," Ancier says. "When people develop a rule like that, I love to see if we can mess with it."

Demographics matter more in this arena than the total number of viewers a show pulls. Advertisers want to buy time on shows with younger audiences, specifically women 18 to 49. Women are desirable because they buy more of almost everything—except cars, tires, batteries and beer—than men. Younger women are desirable because they haven't yet established their purchasing patterns. "Trying to convince a 50-year-old woman who's been buying Brillo for 30 years to switch to SOS is difficult," Curtin explains. "The 20-year-old is more open to persuasion."

Once they'd hatched their aged-down idea, Steinberg and Ancier began a bi-coastal search for a youthful host, interviewing nearly 100 actors (Rae Dawn Chong was a finalist), local talk hosts and journalists. One model, a serious contender, was deemed "too aloof," a record company executive "too cynical." These are not observations anyone, in the business or watching at home, would apply to Ricki Lake.

Lake chatting in her closet-size office is only slightly less bouncy than Lake on the air. "I really, really love going out and talking to those 200 people [in the audience], having that rapport with them, bantering, talking about what's happenin', about the new episode of 'Melrose Place,'" she says.

It probably helps that Lake, who dropped out of college to join Waters's strange repertory company, has already experienced her share of life's bruises. She's endured the travails of overweight teenagers (her weight reached 250 pounds at one point, but she's battled down to half that). She has seen a precociously launched career—which included other Waters films and a role in the TV series "China Beach"—suddenly falter. By the time she auditioned for Ancier, she'd actually lost a pricey home in the Hollywood

See LAKE, G7, Col. 1



Talking to Her Generation

LAKE, From G6

Hills ("the most expensive learning experience I've ever had") and was sinking into debt.

This past year, however, brought both personal and professional triumphs: As her show was getting knockout Niensens, she met and married "my soul mate," artist and illustrator Rob Sussman. They're moving to a "gorgeous" new apartment this week.

"She's very approachable and human. She's not overly glamorous," assesses John von Soosten, senior vice president of Katz National Television, another "rep" firm. "She's had her problems, like Oprah. . . . I think women, the primary viewers of these shows, respond to that."

Still, only part of the success of "Ricki Lake," the show, is due to Ricki Lake, the host. In keeping with the supposedly shorter attention span of its young viewers, the broadcast moves. New guests are introduced after nearly every commercial break, frequently popping out of doors or up from the audience with revelations or confrontations.

"Donahue" often starts the hour with six guests arranged on the set, and those six guests stay there for the whole show," Steinberg says. "We're constantly introducing new elements."

A more demonstrative and diverse audience (the staff scans ticket requests for Zip codes to ensure a healthy representation of blacks and Latinos) is also part of the package. "They're outspoken, at times irate, and they want to be heard," Lake says of the crowd. "Sometimes they're a little rude. I don't like when they boo; I'm constantly saying, 'Hey, c'mon, be fair,



A sure sign of success for Ricki Lake: Her talk show has inspired imitators.

let's hear what they have to say.'

And then there are the show's topics. "I Let Him Cheat Because I Got Fat." "I Refuse to Date My Own Race." "Sorry! But You're Not the Father of My Child!"

Three days out of five, the theme is relationships—young relationships.

about violence becomes "I Love You So I Want You to Carry a Gun."

The broadcast parades so many sagas before the cameras in each show that no one gets more than a few minutes to tell what can be a complicated story. This may diminish the show's educational value, but it certainly ups the entertainment quotient.

"Do you wanna meet this guy who kicks her out of the house?" Ricki asked on the broadcast called "Girlfriend, He's Just Using You!" The audience roared, "YEAHHHHH!" Out came Jeff, who complained that his girlfriend, Amber, center stage, had been lying about her whereabouts, forcing him to evict her repeatedly in the middle of the night. "Maybe it is true that she shouldn't have lied to you, but is it true that you slept with her mom?" Ricki countered.

At the end of each broadcast, Lake looks into the camera and delivers a sincere little homily like this one: "Everyone deserves to be treated with love and respect. So if someone in your life is using you, maybe you don't need them in your life at all."

And danged if the formula isn't working. "Ricki Lake" has added 58 stations (current total: 208) since its debut and climbed from a 1.9 rating its first month to a summer peak of 5.7 (which may ease a bit as young viewers head back to school). More critically, it's consistently second among women 18-34 and 18-49.

Nielsen figures compiled by Warner Bros., busily plotting its own aged-down talker, show virtually all the established chatfests losing ground in the latter demographic over the past three years. Oprah's ratings among women 18 to 49 are down 19 percent; Phil's down 36 percent; Sally's down 24 percent. The talk shows on the rise among young women are Warner Bros.' own "Jenny Jones," hitting its stride after two rocky years, "The Montel Williams Show" and "Ricki Lake." Put another

way, only half the women watching Sally and Oprah are under 50, compared with nearly three-quarters of Ricki's female audience.

"A whole new young group of talk show viewers is starting to take over and dominate the business," says Dick Robertson, president of Warner Bros. Domestic Television Distribution. "One thing you can count on: When something's successful, people will do variations on the theme."

Warner Bros.' variation will be hosted by ex-Wilson Phillips singer (and Beach Boy daughter) Carnie Wilson. MCA is working with Melissa Rivers. Columbia, which distributes "Ricki Lake," is also talking to Tempestt Bledsoe, who was the middle "Cosby" daughter.

None of those shows can be on the air before the fall of 1995. In the interim, however, "Ricki Lake's" producers say they're seeing other shows borrow their "delayed introductions," back-

stage cameras and other techniques. "A 'Donahue' or a 'Regis and Kathie Lee' has less reason to change, and they risk losing their core audiences built up over many years," says Curtin of HRP. "But those on the cusp, at risk, will try to freshen up the product and learn the lessons of 'Ricki Lake.'"

Lake, about to turn 26, is learning a few lessons herself. As "an unemployed actress living in L.A.," she used to watch Oprah Winfrey faithfully. Now, Winfrey "calls me back, she gives me advice, she's been more than generous and kind," Lake says gratefully. "I really want to talk to her about how she turned a little local talk show into an empire."

One way is that Oprah's own company produces her show, it's pointed out.

"Give me a couple of years," is Lake's response. "My wheels are turning."