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Daytime Update: Ellen Degeneres, Sharon Osbourne and Wayne Brady

By ED MARTIN
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OCTOBER 9, 2003 — With apologies to Dr. Phil, Ellen Degeneres may be the best thing to hit daytime since Rosie O'Donnell. Daytime is a daypart in constant need of bright new stars, and Degeneres more than meets the demands of the job. She's funny and charming enough to invite daily viewing and she's laid back enough not to wear out her welcome.

But this is guarded praise, because Degeneres' show is a relatively generic production and it isn't as uniquely wonderful as its host. Infused on every level, from its set to its band to its guests, with unbridled enthusiasm for Broadway and pop culture, O'Donnell's show was a dynamic extension of its star (at least until its star began to uncomfortably use her show as an outlet for her emotions). Degeneres' show, however, does little to support or define her. It's not at all bad, but it should be terrific, and it's not.

Can Anyone Fill The O'Donnell Void?

Comparisons to O'Donnell's show are inevitable, because Rosie was the last entertainer to take on the daytime talk challenge and successfully run with it. Others have tried. Caroline Rhea essentially inherited O'Donnell's show after Rosie bolted, but failed to maintain her predecessor's magic. Wayne Brady's daytime talk series is now in its second season but remains an unremarkable exercise despite Emmy wins last May for both the show and its talented host.

Part of the problem for both Degeneres and Brady is that their shows are taped in Los Angeles, and all West Coast-based daytime talk shows tend to seem somewhat stale and airless, like day old bread. How

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could they not, when so much of the daytime programming around them is fresh and buzzing with the excitement of live television — on the networks, in syndication and on cable? Degeneres' fake-Emmy commentary during her monologue on the day after the awards was particularly difficult to listen to. That's what happens when talk shows are taped a day or three ahead.

Immediacy Is The Expectation, Not The Exception

There is simply nothing like the energy and spontaneity of live programming, not to mention the feeling of a shared viewing experience, which still carries great weight in this era of invasive technology, massive media and instant communication. Immediacy is the expectation, not the exception. Just consider the giddy crowds that gather every day outside the studios of ABC's "Good Morning, America," NBC's "Today" and MTV's "Total Request Live."

Viewers in the New York area have numerous live programming choices weekday mornings beyond the early local news shows that are now available in virtually every major market. They can see everything as it hap-

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"Trading Spaces" Clobbers the Broadcasters

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OCTOBER 9, 2003 — Last week this column noted that basic cable was collectively holding its own opposite the full brunt of the opening weeks of the 2003-04 broadcast season, and that the FX series "Nip/Tuck" delivered an award-worthy episode of uncommon power that provided an unexpected creative challenge to broadcasters during this critical time.

TLC's Highest Rated Program Ever

Continuing with this theme, there has since been more positive news to report for cable, and it comes at the further expense of broadcast. TLC enjoyed its highest rated program

ever among households and all key demographics last Sunday with the "Trading Spaces" special, "Trading Spaces 100 Grand." TLC didn't simply break its own records; it clobbered several of its direct broadcast competitors and outdistanced dozens of first run broadcast series in the weekly Nielsen rankings.

Meanwhile, the addictive MTV reality series "Newlyweds: Nick & Jessica," the very definition of guilty pleasure programming, continues to climb in the ratings on Tuesday nights opposite all new fare on the broadcast nets, including the mighty "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit" on NBC.

If this pattern holds, this will truly be a broadcast season unlike any other. □

Daytime Update

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pens, including the networks' big-ticket morning news and entertainment franchises, the syndicated "Living It Up! With Ali & Jack" and "Live With Regis and Kelly" and ABC's "The View." They are all interesting to watch with some regularity (even the struggling "Ali & Jack") simply because they're happening in the moment. By contrast, the day old Degeneres and Brady shows unflatteringly stand out against this backdrop of modern media excitement, no matter how hard working their hosts. Indeed, this might explain why there has never been a long-running, successful national daytime talk show produced in Los Angeles. It also explains why Brady's show this week has been uncharacteristically terrific: It's airing live from Orlando. Brady should travel more often.

Ryan Seacrest Gets It

At least one Los Angeles based daytime talk personality seems to understand the effectiveness of live television, perhaps because he also hosts a live successful prime time program and a live daily radio show. Ryan Seacrest of Fox' "American Idol" told *JMER* last July that when his syndicated daily talk and entertainment show begins early next year, it should air live in most markets. It will be cleared as a late afternoon entry in the east, allowing for a live midday telecast from the west.

New York based daytime talk shows have another advantage, which is largely the result of converting lemons to lemonade. Unlike those of their Los Angeles counterparts and competitors, the studios and sets of New York talkers are intimate due to space restrictions in smallish studios. But this seems to work to huge advantage in promoting a sense of immediacy that is absent elsewhere. Jay Leno had what Oprah Winfrey might call "a light bulb moment" ten years ago when he brought his late night NBC talk show to New York for a week and taped it in a studio that seemed cramped when compared to his spacious work environment in Burbank. When Leno returned to Los Angeles he immediately ordered a redesign for his entire studio, with the primary mandate that the front rows of the studio audience be brought closer to his stage, within touching distance. Leno's changes brought renewed energy to "The Tonight Show" that had been missing following the departure of Johnny Carson, and its ratings began to climb. (Like David Letterman's late night program on CBS, Leno's show tapes late in the afternoon on the day it airs, bringing the viewing experience and the topicality of the conversations as close to the live experience as possible.)

Memories of Daytime Duds

Degeneres is somewhat disadvantaged by her cavernous studio (or one that looks so on television), which sometimes dwarfs her otherwise large personality, and by an oddly sterile set devoid of character. Her surround-

Sharon Osbourne is breaking the traditional mold into which most talk show hosts attempt to squeeze themselves.

ings overall evoke alarming memories of the daytime talk duds hosted by Marilu Henner and Suzanne Somers, and "The Other Half," the lame male version of "The View" hosted by Dick Clark, Mario Lopez and Danny Bonaduce. A band, rather than a DJ, might help fill the space, a task that is a lot to ask of one person and is left solely to Degeneres. Maybe that's why she frequently pulls uninteresting production assistants on camera and tries to joke around with them.

This is not intended to be a negative review, just a helpful one. Degeneres has stated that she would like her show to run for 15 years, and there is no good reason why it shouldn't. It can never be live, but it can certainly be made lively.

Sharon Osbourne Rocks

Interestingly, another high-profile new daytime talk series that is also taped in Los Angeles is largely clearing that hurdle, albeit with much less fanfare. Sharon Osbourne's funky talk show works because it is so unlike any other talk show in its daypart. Her studio isn't oversized, but her set is lovingly over-cluttered with ornate household furnishings and decorations. The result is a warm, cozy, relaxing atmosphere in which there is always something to stimulate the eye, a key element of successful television production.

Osbourne herself is breaking the traditional mold into which most talk show hosts attempt to squeeze themselves. One minute she's flighty, the next intensely focused on her guest. Whether she is scampering around her set, chatting up the studio audience or curling up on the couch with a celebrity, talking as if the two were unwinding in one of the Osbournes' homes, she is never less than intriguing. In fact, Osbourne and her show are both so unusual that the Los Angeles disadvantage doesn't even come to mind. The show seems to be taking place in a world of its own where timeliness and topicality don't necessarily apply.

Osbourne's show in New York airs daily at 1 p.m., an odd time for a series featuring a personality so closely associated with MTV's young audience, most of which, presumably, is in school at that time. A time period later in the afternoon might make more sense. Of course, it would also allow for the possibility of live telecasts from the west, but in this very rare circumstance that doesn't seem at all necessary. □