

MR. TELEVISION

Uncle Miltie would do anything for a laugh. He jumped onstage in outlandish costumes—sometimes in drag. He would have pies and powder puffs and buckets of water thrown into his face. He would fall over face down—hard—or backward, like a piece of wood. He would tell jokes that ranged from the obvious to the ridiculous, and when a joke died, he would mug, cajole, milk, or beg the audience until they laughed. As an entertainer, he wanted to please, so much so that he

gave his all. You had to love him. He insisted on it.

Berle had been one of the guest hosts of the *Texaco Star Theater* when it began in the spring of 1948, and he took over as permanent host beginning with the fall premiere. He was an immediate hit—literally the reason many families decided to buy a television set. He became known as “Mr. Television” because he dominated the small screen in his era, but the moniker stuck because he was an innovator—one of the first comedians to really understand how to use the medium.

Early television audiences had never seen anything like *Texaco Star Theater* before, even if they had seen Berle on Broadway or the vaudeville stage. From the moment the Texaco Service Men launched into the opening jingle (“Oh, we’re the men from Texaco”) to the end of the show (when he sang his theme song, “Near You”), Uncle Miltie worked tirelessly to entertain, bringing



a frantic and infectious energy to the screen. He was perfect for the earliest days of television: his highly visual, over-the-top, relentlessly loud style was just what people wanted to see and laugh at on the small screens of the era, with a living room full of guests. *Variety* magazine came up with the term “vaudeo”—vaudeville meets video—to describe Berle’s style.

No one appreciated Milton Berle’s comic genius more than NBC programming chief Pat Weaver. In his memoir, *The Best Seat in the House*, Weaver recalls: “For all Berle’s wild costumes and crazy stuff, his main focus was on the comedy lines. No one, not even Henny Youngman or Morey Amsterdam, could top Milton with one-liners.” Weaver also knew he would be unable to carry out his innovative programming plans for the network without the revenue Berle was bringing in.

One week in 1949, Berle appeared simultaneously on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*. (For *Newsweek*, he dressed up as Carmen Miranda.) To keep the competition from luring

Berle away from NBC, Weaver signed him to a thirty-year contract in 1951 at \$200,000 a year, whether he worked or not.

Polling data indicated there were Tuesday nights when virtually every TV set in the country was tuned to Uncle Miltie—a ratings phenomenon never to be repeated. Partly due to his immense popularity, TV set ownership exploded: The NBC Research Department estimated there to be only 175,000 sets at the start of 1948, with the number passing one million before the end of the year. David Sarnoff called Milton Berle and Howdy Doody his best salesmen for those early RCA television receivers—and there is little doubt that they were.

Not only did Milton Berle sell TV sets, he sold television itself as a medium. After 1948, there could be no doubt in the minds of sponsors, networks, and Wall Street magnates that this new medium was going to be big. How big remained to be seen.



Berle was a physical comic who cut his teeth on pratfalls and stunts in vaudeville. He appeared as a child actor in *The Perils of Pauline* in 1914 and worked his way up the marquees on the RKO and Loews circuits. By 1943, he was the first star of the *Ziegfeld Follies* to have his name above the title. Despite his ability to deliver a joke with the best of them, he wasn’t a big hit on radio, simply because audiences couldn’t see him. But by the time television arrived, Berle was fully prepared to make this visual medium his own.

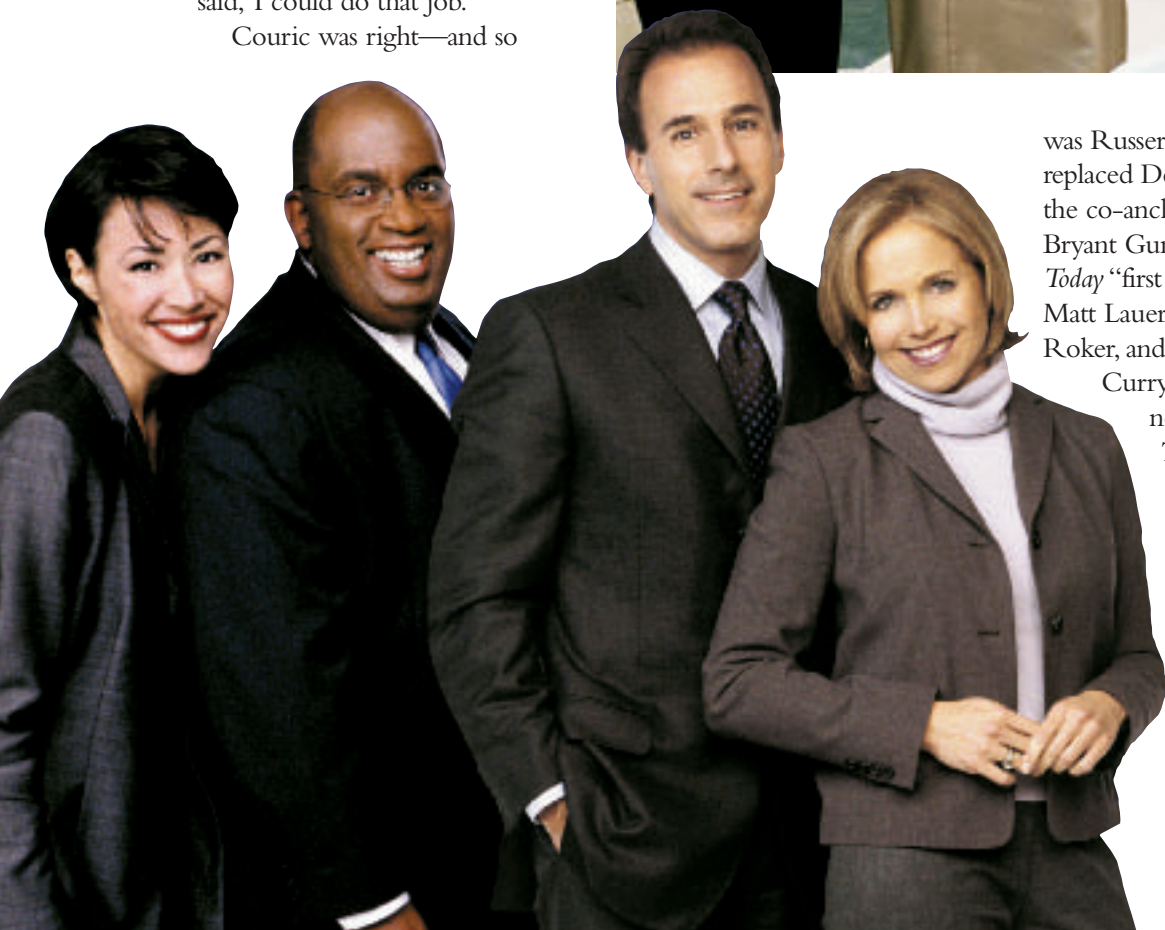
“Do married men live longer than single men, or does it just seem longer?” — MILTON BERLE



THIS IS *TODAY*, ON NBC

In 1990, Katherine Couric—who would soon be known by one and all as “Katie”—was offered the job of national correspondent on the *Today* show. It was a turbulent time for the program, and Couric, who had the Pentagon beat at the time, asked her then-boss at NBC’s Washington bureau—Tim Russert—about the wisdom of making the move. Russert replied that he thought the producers would soon be asking her to take on a different job: that of co-host. “Couric said, ‘Wow,’ ” remembers Russert. “And then she got up from her chair, went to the doorway, turned around and said, ‘I could do that job.’ ”

Couric was right—and so



was Russert. In 1991, she replaced Deborah Norville in the co-anchor seat next to Bryant Gumbel. Since then, the *Today* “first family”—Couric, Matt Lauer, weather reporter Al Roker, and news anchor Ann Curry—has taken the now-half-century-old *Today* to heights barely imaginable by David Sarnoff, Pat Weaver, or even Barbara Walters. More than six million Americans start their day with the program,

which currently has the longest winning streak (more than 300 consecutive weeks, dating back to 1995) in the history of morning television.

The show’s success reflects the talents of executive producer Jeff Zucker, who had an unparalleled knack for anticipating the “water-cooler” topic of the day. (Zucker now serves as president of NBC Entertainment, with former *NBC Nightly News* executive producer Jonathan Wald filling his slot at *Today*.)

Also playing a big role is Studio 1A, the show’s “Window on the World.” Since 1994, this



widely imitated, but never matched, phenomenon has attracted hundreds of thousands of fans a year to the corner of 49th and Rockefeller Plaza in Manhattan.

After getting used to the new job (“I didn’t even know how to turn the page to match my copy to what was happening on the teleprompter”), Couric triumphed early on during a Barbara Bush–led live tour of the White House in 1992.

When President Bush wandered by for what he thought would be a brief, pleasant hello, Couric initiated an impromptu interview. “There were a lot of things to talk to him about, and I was able to get him into my web, if you will. Afterwards I thought, wow, that was good television, and I didn’t completely blow it! I didn’t become so flustered that I wasn’t able to ask legitimate news questions and get some important answers.”

Matt Lauer—who began as *Today’s* news anchor in 1994 and replaced Bryant Gumbel in 1997—had a similar journalistic coup. In his January 27, 1998, interview with Hillary Clinton, the First Lady made the highly publicized claim that her husband was the victim of a “vast right-wing conspiracy.” By then, it was obvious Lauer had mastered the *Today* host requirements: knowing when to push, knowing when to lay

back, presenting (often making) the morning’s news in a calm, friendly yet precise manner.

Lauer understands *Today* still has a role quite similar to what Pat Weaver imagined for it in the early fifties. “We keep in the back of our minds that people are not sitting around glued to the television for three hours a morning,” he says. “The idea is for *Today* to be a companion in your room, so you can do the things you need to do, and then turn to us when something catches your attention.”

Couric adds, “*Today* gives people a good understanding every day they wake up that the world is still around, that life is still going on, and that there are important things happening we need to understand. The show is much greater than the sum of its parts because of its longevity, because it has such a great tradition behind it.”



(Opposite, top) Katie Couric and Matt Lauer toast Jennifer Larou and Jeffrey Scott, the winners of the “*Today* Throws a Wedding” contest on September 5, 2001. (Top) Couric interviews Ross Perot at his political apogee in a two-hour special interview in June 1992. (Bottom, left to right) Couric and Lauer in Studio 1A; Lauer in Sydney, Australia, during *Today’s* coverage of the XXVII Olympiad in September 2000; Couric with Michael Shoels and Craig Scott, two days after the shootings at Columbine High School (Couric: “Many people have this energy to get their story out in terribly tragic times. My job is to make those people feel as comfortable as they possibly can.”); Lauer interviews George W. Bush in the Oval Office, April 26, 2001.



THE PERSONAL DRAMA OF POLITICS

In 1999, any sensible pollster would have recommended against producing an ensemble show about politics and the White House. At the time, public cynicism toward government abounded. Yet when John Wells, *ER*'s executive producer, asked Aaron Sorkin, "What have you got?" over

lunch, Sorkin decided on the spot to make a pitch: "What about the White House?" So with Thomas Schlamme, who at the time was co-executive-producing ABC's *Sports Night* with Sorkin, they took their idea to the networks.

Apparently NBC West Coast President Scott Sassa wasn't a pollster either. Although few

others thought a political show would work, Sassa encouraged the trio to make a pilot. After two years, *The West Wing* stands as a critical and ratings success, having garnered a record-breaking nine Emmys in its first season and eight more in its second, including Outstanding Drama Series both times.

The West Wing gives viewers

a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the Oval Office as seen through the eyes of its eclectic group of frenzied staffers and the devoted First Family. Far from being the jaundiced, cynical group of common public perception, the White House staff is passionate, dedicated, and out to do the best they can under trying circumstances.



The producers think of *The West Wing* as, in effect, a family drama. Like a family, the staff spends many hours together, while President Josiah “Jed” Bartlet (Martin Sheen) rules as the undisputed patriarch and moral compass. “After all,” says Sorkin, “the show takes place in a house.”

Sorkin, Wells, and Schlamme give credit to Steven Bochco (*Hill Street Blues* and *L.A. Law*) for opening network doors to shows like *St. Elsewhere*, *ER*, and *The West Wing*, which focus on

many small dilemmas of life at a time, rather than just one large one.

“The premise of *The West Wing* starts with the belief that people want to be challenged,” says Schlamme. “We want viewers to understand the moral complexities of life these people face. But more importantly, we want them to see that people can actually hold two emotions at one time; that issues don’t have to be black or white, right or wrong. It’s usually more complicated.”

The West Wing’s probing exploration of humanity was well-exemplified by the “In Excelsis Deo” episode during the series’ first season. As Christmas Eve approaches, President Bartlet sneaks out of the White House for some last-minute Christmas shopping, while his communications director Toby Ziegler (Richard Schiff) learns more about a forgotten Korean War hero who died alone on the district’s cold streets—wearing a coat that Toby once donated to charity. As the nation’s capital is draped in its own mantle of snow, and people scurry about while occupied with holiday matters, Toby quietly arranges for a touching and proper military send-off for the castoff veteran.

The West Wing’s success has reaffirmed the connection between television and viewers. In the summer of 2001, a survey revealed that America’s view of politicians had dramatically changed over the previous years. It cited *The West Wing* as the primary reason for the shift.

(Opposite) The ensemble cast; (left to right) Presidential Aide Charlie Young (Dulé Hill); Deputy Communications Director Sam Seaborn (Emmy nominee Rob Lowe); Press Secretary C. J. Cregg (Emmy winner Allison Janney); President Josiah Bartlet (Emmy nominee Martin Sheen); Communications Director Toby Ziegler (Emmy winner Richard Schiff); First Lady Abby Bartlet (Emmy nominee Stockard Channing); Chief of Staff Leo McGarry (Emmy nominee John Spencer); Deputy Chief assistant Donna Moss (Janel Moloney); Deputy Chief Josh Lyman (Emmy winner Bradley Whitford).

(Left) In the final moments of the second season, President Bartlet stands in church after the funeral service for his beloved assistant and angrily challenges God. (Below, left to right) Lyman and McGarry at the White House; Ziegler at a rally for the President; Seaborn and Cregg at one of their many meetings.

