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Mouth piece

'Man of the Year' co-star Lewis Black's ranting earns raves BY MICHAEL GILTZ

Comedian Lewis Black, whose lid-boiling-off-the-pot fulminations on "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart" have been part of the Comedy Central show since Craig Kilborn hosted it in the mid-'90s, co-stars as a political speechwriter in the satire "Man of the Year," which opened Friday.

But something tells us he wouldn't have the temperament to do that job in the real world.

"I watched 'Meet the Press' this past Sunday," says Black in his staccato talk-show style, "and they had a debate [for a Senate seat]. I thought, you've got to be kidding! Those are the two best people? ... the Republican senator was an idiot! Then the Democrats come up with a woman who ... they might as well have put her in a nun's outfit! I was stunned! You can see why Al Franken might run. You watch these people and think, why not? At least Al's got a working intelligence!"

In "Man of the Year," written and directed by Barry Levinson ("Wag the Dog"), Robin Williams plays a political satirist — à la Stewart or Bill Maher — who impulsively runs for President,

then, thanks to grass-roots support and defective voting machines, wins. Black is the guy who puts words in Williams' mouth on the campaign trail, something the 58-year-old comic says he's been practicing for since high school, when he'd write campaign speeches for students running for student office (on both sides).

But acting is the new spin for him, something he'd never really pursued despite small roles in a handful of films and a degree from the Yale School of Drama. Yet he's got a clutch of films out this year, including the recent college goof "Accepted," "Man," the upcoming animated satire "Farce of the Penguins" and the holiday comedy "Unaccompanied Minors."



SPIN THE POLITICO Lewis Black (center) guides Robin Williams in "Man of the Year"

Black says newsmakers 'Give us punch lines now too!'

"They finally found me, I guess," jokes Black, who grew up in Maryland and now lives in Hell's Kitchen. "On a couple of movies, [my agent] would say,

'They're interested in you, but they're also talking to Eugene Levy.' Hey, I'd choose Eugene Levy. I'd even choose Eugene to play me!"

Black's ranting on the "Back in Black" segments for "The Daily Show" upped his visibility. But his 2005 book, "Nothing's Sacred," also helped, as did a Carnegie Hall show last year (it was captured for a CD, following comedy albums that included "The End of the Universe" and "Rules of Enragement").

Black thinks programs like Stewart's serve as a filter, helping people digest the

massive amounts of news that pour out every day and focus on what matters. He thinks when the news media fail to ask the tough questions, comedians now step in to ask them — in an often silly way.

"It used to be that [real life] gave us the setups, and guys like me would write the punch lines," Black says. "[Now] they give us the punch lines too. ... The joke is that now we really have to try and find the joke. They almost give us too much!"

Ask Black to look at the paper and decide what story makes him angriest, he studies the front page and then says, resigned, "It's a tie." But he admits that nothing beats venting for a living.

"I flip on CNN in the morning and go [crazy] for an hour," says Black. "It is a luxury — no matter what happens during the day, I'm then able to go onstage and just go nuts." ♦