

TV Sunday

Ta-da!

Discovery's campy decorator

Chris Lowell

'makes Richard Simmons seem like Russell Crowe'

By MICHAEL GILTZ

SQUEEZING in an interview with Christopher Lowell — the campy king of how-to and the host of his own daily show on the Discovery channel — is no easy matter.

"My schedule is nuts!" laughs Lowell by telephone, who can be seen every day at noon and 3 p.m. in his hour-long series. "July 4th included a marathon of episodes — what's more American than being a fixer-upper? — and new episodes start airing in September."

Apparently, running an empire is a lot more difficult than whipping up a lamp made out of colanders, a little trick Lowell might perform on his show in a few minutes, then plug it in with a flourish and say, "Ta-da!"

That empire is growing because Lowell is the latest TV personality to assume larger-than-life status: He won a Daytime Emmy, has a book in its seventh printing called "Christopher Lowell's Seven Layers of Design," was animated on "South Park" and even spoofed on "Saturday Night Live."

People who think cooking involves TV dinners and a-microwave still know who Emeril Legasse is. People who wouldn't get within a mile of a crocodile know the Animal Planet's Steve Irwin. And soon, people who wouldn't dream of adding a little fringe to their lampshades will know Christopher Lowell.

And the show is just the beginning. Lowell also has his own dedicated boutique inside Burlington Coat Factory stores nationwide. Then, there's the furniture line, the magazine, and, of course, more TV shows.

"It's sort of 'The View' meets how-to," says Lowell about one project he's work-

ing on for Discovery. "I play the Barbara Walters role on it. I'm going to do beauty and fashion, not home."

And if that's not enough, Lowell will be coming to you live in concert.

"It's a combination of George Carlin, Christopher Lowell, and Leo Buscaglia," says Lowell, who plans to mix in skits and a little piano playing while he describes how to tap into your own creativity. "So they're devastated one moment and they're laughing their butts off in another moment." There's a little bit of "Tracey Takes On" — and it's a lot motivational.

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It's motivational because Lowell wants to spruce up your self-image as much as he wants to spruce up that drab living room. (White walls are his particular bete noir.)

Lowell was involved in the theater in the 70s (he had a minor backstage role on "Follies" and painted backdrops for the Met), did sculpture and artwork, and formed his own successful ad agency where he worked with many cosmetic companies by helping them re-image their products.

Then he saw the success of Martha Stewart and other how-to mavens and had a simple insight that has been the basis of his seven-year plan to take over (or is that make over?) the world.

"Nobody was addressing important elements like self-esteem," says Lowell.

"You've got to feel pretty darn good about yourself to get off a couch, get on a ladder and put color on your ceiling, you know?"

So his show is designed to be fun and easy to take.

"We don't show you how to do stuff step-by-step," says Lowell, who is 45. "It's going to bore the crap out of you and it's going to intimidate you. We give you a philosophy. Look how easy this is. Then if you want step-by-step instructions you can log online or go to our books or whatever."

One way to keep it light are the silly skits that often open the show, skits where Lowell dresses up in drag a la Scarlett O'Hara or Norma Desmond and camps it up even more than during the how-to sessions. How campy is he? As my friend Alisha put it, "He makes Richard Simmons seem like Russell Crowe."

Naturally, the executives at Discovery were doubtful that camp was the way to go.

"It was a fight right from the very beginning," admits Lowell, who is quieter and more focused in person than the exuberant host he plays on camera. "Discovery was sweating bullets. They didn't quite get it."

Lowell has spent his entire life exceeding the expectations of those around him. He grew up in Alaska and candidly ad-

mits to being a very shy, very lonely boy who spent most of his time in his room. (Naturally, he would decorate it elaborately, going from a Moroccan tent one week to another design the next.)

"I had one good parent and one bad one," says Lowell, who was very close to his mother (who died of cancer about 10 years ago) and not so close to his father, who was a Master Joiner carpenter and preacher. He has great respect for his father, says Lowell, and thinks perhaps his success can help them develop a new relationship.

Maybe that explains why someone who projects the image of being so happy and together dabbled with est (in its early days) and hasn't been in a relationship for 25 years.

"I'm an old fashioned guy," says Lowell. "I believe very, very heavily in relationships. But if I don't have the time to devote to it," his voice trails off. "What I've basically done is I've suspended all of those feelings and I put them into the people around me. It is satisfying to a point, certainly. And let me tell you, somebody would have to come along that was pretty amazing to catch my eye at this point in my life."

Just like comics who are sad offstage, Lowell may still be lonely but he helps millions of viewers feel empowered to change their lives.

"Rather than you having to go soul searching, we say, you know, 'Go shopping! Rearrange the furniture! Clean out the closet! Stop feeling sorry for yourself! Move on!"

"We've all had tough lives. Please, we all have our own stories. But that isn't going to help you today unless you can move on. If you can wallow in the past, you ought to be able to create the future."

No white walls!

That's the No. 1 decorating dictum of the Discovery Channel's Christopher Lowell, who describes his show as "The View' meets how-to."

