

Frankly Conan

O'Brien on the Emmys, his new baby and missing Andy

By MICHAEL GILTZ

MAYBE now Conan O'Brien can relax.

After the rockiest start in late-night TV history, O'Brien has gone from the can't-do kid to the critics' darling to — dare we say it — an institution.

Want proof? He's got a prime-time special Sunday night on NBC celebrating 10 years of "Late Night with Conan O'Brien."

"Regis was on the show once and I was talking to him backstage and he asked me how it was going," said the 40-year-old O'Brien.

"I made the mistake of telling Regis, 'Oh, it's hard work!'"

"He just looked at me like,

'What are you talking about, kid? I've been doing this 35 years. I was with Joey Bishop! What are you talking about, you baby?'"

He's no baby, but behaving like "a giddy kid who gets to do a talk show" is part of O'Brien's charm.

He milks humor out of hissing at viewers, licking his eyebrows to primp when a sexy guest is on or just jumping off camera when the mood strikes him.

Now he gets the validation of being nominated for an Emmy alongside Letterman, Leno, "Saturday Night Live" and "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart."

"I was very fortunate to win a [writing] Emmy when I was at 'Saturday Night Live,'" said O'Brien, who adds that it's a lot easier to lose to someone you respect.

"And I was pretty young. I was about 25 when I won an Emmy. I had a great education in how little it changes your life. It's a very nice bowling trophy.

"It's nice, because it's in my mom and dad's house and they have it up on the mantle. And every now and then at Christmas time I look over and there it is — next to a statue of Jesus."

For O'Brien and his fans, the major turning point in the history of his show remains the departure of Andy Richter, who will appear on the anniversary special and makes guest appear-

ances every once in a while.

"I was morbidly depressed about Andy leaving," O'Brien admitted, "just because it worked and so few things in television work."

"I thought, 'I don't want to say goodbye to this guy. I love this guy. He makes it fun to come into the office.'"

"But when he left I did sort of feel like they took my last training wheel away, you know what I mean? And it did force me to shake up the show."

Another thing that is going to be shaken up is his home life. O'Brien and his wife are expecting their first child in five weeks.

"It used to be, in the '50s, the guy would be in the other room, smoking a cigar, wearing a fedora. But apparently those days are over," he said.

"So I'll be in the delivery room. But I'll probably be holding my wife's hand and with the other hand I'll be talking on the cell phone to my agent. 'Those bastards! Tell them to double it or I'm out!'"

And they've kept the sex of the child a surprise for themselves.

"It's like Elvis on 'Ed Sullivan.' When they do the sonogram, we keep saying, 'Just shoot from the waist up.'"

Suggest that the move to 11:30 is the next logical step and O'Brien insists this isn't what he wants to do for the rest of his life.

"I really feel like one day you could call me and say, 'How's it going?' and I could say, 'You know what? It hit me this morning that I can't do this anymore. I was sitting there talking to Shia LaBeouf and something snapped in my head and I started trying to strangle him.'"

What would he do? Write a book.

He'd love to do comic essays like Woody Allen's "Without Feathers."

"Or else a funny novel if I could manage it. Or else just writing about what happened to me in show business — if I can remember half of it."

