

● REALLY BIG SHOW

Conan

... keeps on running

By MICHAEL GILTZ

IN 1993, Conan O'Brien was the most belittled man on television. Not only was he learning how to be a talk-show host in front of millions — okay, thousands — of people, but his series faced cancellation on a daily basis. It wasn't too much of a stretch to imagine O'Brien finishing a show and then getting a call from the suits at NBC, who would tell him how unfunny he was. Then they'd say, "Okay, you can do another show tomorrow."

"That seems like an eternity ago," admits O'Brien, who celebrates his tenth year in late-night TV (and his first Emmy nomination for Best Talk Show) with a 90-minute prime-time special Sunday. Airing from the Beacon Theater, O'Brien promises clips featuring Triumph, the Insult Comic Dog, staring contests with former sidekick Andy Richter, In the Year 2000 and, of course, The Masturbating Bear.

Now that O'Brien is at the top of his game, booking special guests isn't a problem.

"Jack Black is coming by and he's planning to sing an operatic rock 'n' roll number about the history of the show," says the 40-year-old Massachusetts native. "Will Ferrell is going to do something outlandish. And we have a bunch of other possibilities, but we can't confirm them until a day or two before."

"But choosing exactly which clips to show has been difficult, thank God."

"The good news and the bad news is that we're cutting out really funny stuff to make it all fit. So I'll say something like, 'Well, when I created the boy band — we're going to have to cut that remote.' And people just start screaming and yelling. So you say, 'Okay, we'll leave that in, but we're going to have to cut when I learned how to be Santa Claus and went to Macy's.' And people start yelling and screaming. So you're in a good position because I think when we finally boil this down it's going to be really funny."

An even bigger relief is that the clips don't all come from the show's first few seasons.

"One of the things that's made me happy is that people's favorite moments come from the last two or three years," says O'Brien. "So that's a good sign. There's nothing worse than if we had looked at this and said, 'Gee, after '95 we pretty much were out of gas. We were never funny ever again.' And if anyone is going to feel that way, it would be me."

Still, despite his insecurities, O'Brien claims he doesn't obsess about the competition. "It doesn't help me to see what other people are doing because I feel like it clutters my mind," he says. "If I'm flipping channels and I happen upon Dave, I'll watch Dave for ten minutes. But then I'll watch 'G-String Divas,' to see what they're up to. Because I think that's important research. Over time, our show has gradually become an extension of my weird idiosyncratic sensibility and, for good or for ill, that's kind of what it should be."

Though O'Brien has his series working



In its early days, O'Brien's show was renewed on a daily basis.

the way he wants it to, he's also smart enough to know that, even after ten years, taking a lengthy vacation isn't a very good idea. Not with Bill Maher, Jon Stewart and Jimmy Kimmel and, of course, Jay Leno and David Letterman all over the airwaves.

"I wouldn't be scared to take two weeks off," says O'Brien. "The reality of the business is that these days it's hard to disappear for that long."

Speaking of ABC's Kimmel, did O'Brien

feel any empathy for the comic, who took more abuse for his talk-show debut than anyone since, well, Conan? Did he drop him a note and say, "Don't worry. They hated me when I started?"

"No," says O'Brien, with a laugh. "No one wrote me a note."

**The Conan O'Brien
Tenth Anniversary Special**
Sunday, 9:30 p.m., NBC