

Sunday TV

Something about Maury

Three years ago, Maury Povich was lost in the muddle of Sallys, Rickis and Jennys. Then he suddenly re-invented himself as daytime's hippest oldster. For the first time, Maury talks about stuff even Connie Chung doesn't know.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Most syndicated talk shows are fading away — "Ricki Lake," "Jenny Jones," "Jerry Springer," "Sally Jessy Raphael," "The Rosie O'Donnell Show," even "Oprah."

They're all down significantly from their peak years. "Live with Regis" has enjoyed a bounce this season thanks to "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" in primetime and the unexpected bonus of picking a new co-host.

But only one show has been growing for two years — "Maury." "Maury Povich is the quietest success in syndication," says Marc Berman, TV analyst for Mediaweek magazine. "People don't really give him the attention he deserves."

Guests may lie about why they slept with their mom's boyfriend. But the numbers don't.

The ratings for "Maury" have been growing for two years. This year alone, he's up 9 percent.

In the last three years, "Maury" has gone from No. 7 among talk shows to No. 6 and now fourth.

In two consecutive weeks earlier this year, he's even ranked as high as No. 2 — behind the sainted Oprah — a remarkable accomplishment for a show that's basically been on the air in one form or another for 10 years.

In an era of reduced expectations ("Oprah" has lost a third of her audience since her peak years and most talk shows are happy just to not lose any ground), being "up" is a big deal.

"In this arena," says Berman, "for any show to be up any amount is great."

If Povich is bothered that he doesn't seem to get the credit for his flourishing hit, it doesn't show.

"Our viewers know it," Povich says. "The people who watch talk shows know it. That's who I care about the most."

"The press has been interested in other things: who Regis' co-host is gonna be, is Rosie going to stick around, that kind of stuff."

Besides, it's better to be a quiet success than a quiet failure.

"I'll tell you something," he laughs. "If I was a quiet failure you

wouldn't be calling me.

"The statistic that I'm most proud of is that of all the talk shows in the top tier, the median age of our viewers is second only to Jerry. The older I get, the younger my audience is."

To some, that's not the only link to "Springer." A simple reason for the success of "Maury" is that ties are out (the dresses more causally now) and paternity tests are in.

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But while everyone agrees his topics have become just as out-there as "Springer" — or anyone else — Povich doesn't see himself as stepping into the opening left by Springer when his show was ordered to tone down by its distributor, Barry Diller's USA Studio.

"I'm not stepping into a void," he says finally. "I think we bring in our own viewers. Although there are a bunch of talk shows, we are all different — and the viewers know that. They know the differences between me and Jerry and Jenny and Sally and Ricki and Rosie and Montel and things like that."



Back in the old days, when Maury was seen with long, grey hair, old clothes and old friends.

Berman at Mediaweek agrees. "Maury is not Jerry Springer," Berman says. "You have to remember, Springer is more of a comedy than a talk show. Springer is the king of dysfunction. Maury delves into it, but not at the same level Springer does."

In a more basic way, Povich has re-invented himself and his show.

He stopped doing a show for stay-at-home women and started doing a show aimed at kids.

He talks about finding a theme or a niche, a way to talk about the same naughty, intriguing topics that everyone tackles ("My 13 year old daughter dresses too sexy") in a new and distinctive way.

And he and executive producer Amy Rosenblum found that niche by filling a need: after years of laughing at hapless parents and their bratty kids, audiences were hungry for a show that would knock some sense into these people.

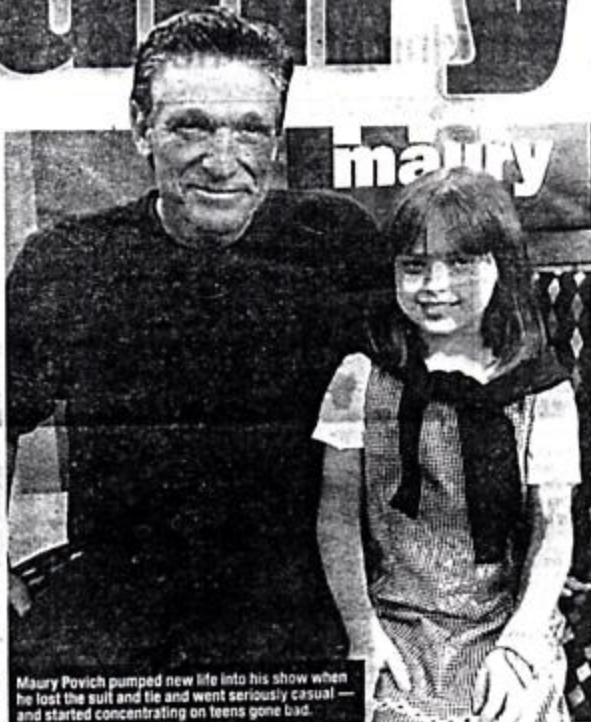
"We struck gold with the boot-camp shows," says Povich. Indeed, ratings jumped when "Maury" started talking stubborn kids who parents had given up on and giving them a military-style dressing down, complete with physical challenges and a no-nonsense leader named Dee West.

"Dee West's contribution has been huge," says Povich. "I can just tell from my studio audience. He's a huge star. When he comes out, you don't have to prompt anybody — they're on their feet clapping and applauding. It's like he's America's camp counselor."

While they've strategically pulled back from boot-camp episodes — before the appeal faded — West still shows up to wear the bejezus out of kids, talking them to graveyards and peep shows and implores to show what life is like on the streets.

"We don't bring resolution," says Povich, "but we try to at least point people in the right direction." Another difference? "Maury" constantly offers updates on guests from previous shows, giving a peak into what's happened to those kids six months and even a year or two down the road.

Povich was the first — and best



Maury Povich pumped new life into his show when he lost the suit and tie and went seriously casual — and started concentrating on teens gone bad.

— host of "A Current Affair," which he proudly calls one of the biggest hits in syndication history.

But things didn't look good for him a few years ago. His show was fading at Paramount because Povich had announced he was leaving to do a syndicated nightly newscast for DreamWorks with his wife Connie Chung.

That never came to pass, something Povich regrets mostly because he'd love to work with his wife professionally. "Just to see if the marriage could survive," he jokes, adding that he hopes at least a special or two is possible for them some-time in the future.

Paramount dropped him and the show was picked up by Diller's USA.

Then NBC had him host the game show "Twenty One," which debuted strongly but was cancelled quickly despite a decent performance.

"I regret that," says Povich. "I think the show was good enough to stay on the air. I just don't think NBC was fully committed at the time to competing against 'Millionaire.'"

But now, though Povich didn't expect to be working past 50, he's

past 60 and suddenly stronger than ever.

"He was never the No. 1 show," says Berman, "but he was always very consistent. He was kind of in the middle of the talk show arena."

"And when you're in the middle like that, it's easier to stay at that level than start at the top when there's only one place to go down."

"Paramount made a big mistake letting him go. They are kicking themselves."

"What have they done since he left? They had a show with Howie Mandel, they had a show with Martin Short, and now they're stuck with Dr. Laura."

"They could have had Maury for all these years and he certainly would have been bringing in more money. They kept Montel and his numbers are still respectable, but his numbers aren't up from last year."

And Povich knows how lucky he is to have struck gold twice.

"This show is the mother lode," he says. "I'm open to any ideas people have, but this show is the biggest thing I've got going. I don't want to take my eye off the ball. And this is the ball."