That Conan O'Brien, He's No Johnny Carson

Rash Report: But He Needn't Be Leno, Either

By John Rash

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MINNEAPOLIS (AdAge.com) -- Conan O'Brien began his historic first "Tonight Show" with a long video skit about him running across the country in order to start his new gig in L.A. Let's hope he knows how to get back.

Because based on his first night, he seemed to shed his Boston-bred, New York-sharpened, sardonic sensibility and gone Hollywood, right down to a skit at Universal Studios. Some of that can be chalked up to understandable opening-night jitters, as well as reacting to a literal and figurative bigger stage, given his new set and new 11:30 p.m. time slot.

But some of Conan's change in TV tonality seemed to be a reflection that "The Tonight Show" brings a set of expectations unique not only to late night but the medium itself. Even after 17 years, for example, many assessments of Jay Leno began with "Well, he's no Johnny Carson."

Carson, of course, is the standard on which all late-night hosts outside of Ted Koppel are judged. But he proved that geography isn't destiny. Born in Corning, Iowa, Carson was anything but corny and instead
grew to embody California cool during a time when the state stole much of the pop-culture gravity from Gotham.

Leno, conversely, belied his Boston background to become the mainstream, Main Street host who seemed more at home in Nebraska, the state to which Carson moved during his formative teen years. The adaptable Leno was adopted by regular folk over David Letterman, whose independence (or insolence) from his Indianapolis background made him seem to be the one who grew up on the East Coast.

That led Leno to dominate demographically by 27% in the ad-centric 18-to-49 demographic ("The Tonight Show" delivered a 1.4/6 average rating and share this season, above Letterman's "Late Show" average of 1.1/4). The gap was even wider among total viewers, as Leno's 1.8/8 was 38% higher than the 1.3/6 for Letterman.

Based on Monday's premiere rating, maybe Conan had reason to be nervous, as the curiosity factor was high. TVWeek's Joseph Adalian reports, "O'Brien's debut notched a 7.1 rating/17 share in Nielsen's 56 overnight metered markets, the best Monday metered markets for the 'Tonight' franchise in four years. 'Tonight' outdrew 'Late Show' (2.8/7) by a wide margin, and beat the combined average of the CBS broadcast and a repeat of ABC's 'Nightline' (2.7/6)/'Jimmy Kimmel Live' (1.2/4) by 154%, NBC said.

"Compared to what 'Tonight' had been averaging in the most recent quarter, O'Brien boosted ratings by 82%. He also improved on his final edition of 'Late Night' (2.6/8) by 173%.

"Overall, NBC said O'Brien's debut gave 'Tonight' its seventh-highest Monday overnight ratings since Jay Leno arrived in 1992. It also boosted 'Late Night With Jimmy Fallon' (2.5/9) to its best overnight numbers ever."

Adalian adds that night two "averaged a still-strong 5.0 rating/12 share in metered market overnight Nielsen ratings. That's the highest Tuesday overnight for 'Tonight' since Feb. 27, 2007, and 28% better than what Jay Leno had been averaging on Wednesdays during the last three months. It was also good enough to out rate 'Late Show with David Letterman' (3.0/7, up a tad from Monday) and 'Jimmy Kimmel Live' (1.2/4, flat night-to-night)."

Of course, soon the media-manufactured hype will subside, and "The Tonight Show" will have keen competition from "Late Show With David Letterman." And David Letterman may actually have an edge, if only because he is the established host in the daypart and CBS is so much stronger in prime time than NBC.

But Conan should forget all that and remember the quirky comedy that made him a star in the first place. Indeed, for TV shows, it's demography, not geography, that's destiny. And Conan's connection with younger viewers -- who appreciate making the ironic iconic and just want to be in on the joke -- is why NBC passed the "Tonight" torch to him in the first place.

And while it might make a good bit, he needn't run back cross-country to retrieve what made him -- and his show -- so unique. Unlike the skit's keys to "The Tonight Show," he took it with him.
WHAT TO WATCH:
Wednesday: After wasting the first hour of prime time with a reality show featuring the wife of an impeached governor, NBC turns to an elected president with part two of Brian Williams' "Inside the Obama White House."
Thursday: The NBA Finals tip off on ABC, as the Orlando Magic take on the Los Angeles Lakers.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR:
NBC News' "Inside the Obama White House" won its time slot with a 2.6/7, but will viewers vote for part two tonight?

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NOTE: All ratings based on adults 18-49. A share is a percentage of adults 18-49 who have their TV sets on at a given time. A rating is a percentage of all adults 18-49, whether or not their sets are turned on. For example, a 1.0 rating is 1% of the total U.S. adults 18-49 population with TVs. Ratings quoted in this column are based on live-plus-same-day unless otherwise noted. (Many ad deals have been negotiated on the basis of commercial-minute, live-plus-three-days viewing.)

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