

POINTS OF VIEW

# Trip to see Letterman makes Top 10 list

**W**hat is about television that seems so magical even to people who have watched it all their lives?

That was the rhetorical question I asked after traveling some 1,300 miles in a two-day period... all for the privilege of spending a lot of money, fighting some of the world's worst traffic, in a city where seemingly everybody smokes and walks against the light in an obvious death wish... all to be an audience member of the "Late Show with David Letterman."

My wife, Susan, meant to surprise me (and she did!) by ordering the tickets so that we could see the show on a Friday night as part of a weekend in New York City. Maybe we'd go to the museums, stroll through Central Park and see the sights while we were at it. The tickets were for a Wednesday. OK, we'll get a cheap flight in one day with the round trip coming back the next. It would be sort of an adventure. But finding a cheap, round-trip air ticket to New York that didn't go through Atlanta, Chicago and some lesser-known hubs was more than an adventure. But we didn't hesitate.

"We'll just have to drive," we agreed. So there we were, in the middle of the night, fending off semis with three trailers that looked like buildings moving in excess of 70 mph. And we in our little Honda Civic. Then there were those rest stops. Ah, it's easy to see how they can charge for the privilege of driving on that storied stretch of road.

**Big town traffic**  
Undaunted, we crossed over into Manhattan on the George Washington Bridge in late morning and found a different sort of adventure awaiting us — driving in New York City.

As we drove on a three-lane, one-way street (56th) toward Park Avenue and our hotel, we suddenly realized why at least two out of three cars on the island were large aggressive cabs with drivers who hailed from countries where the first person on the goat path has the right of way.

"Sue, I think that truck in the middle of the street is parked," I'd offer. "No, it can't be," she'd reply. It was. In fact, delivery trucks, cars, vans and cabs park in any lane at any time.



Bill Coutant

And if someone protests, the answer is swift and predictable — an extended middle finger and an unmistakable directive. How kind to say it and sign it, just in case the person on the other end was hearing- or sight-impaired.

Although tired after our night of driving (we took turns napping), we were happy to get to our room at the Waldorf Astoria and get a shower.

After a walk in the mild (mid-70s) June day through Central Park, up Park Avenue and down Madison, we were ready to get our seating assignments for the show, which is taped at 5:30 p.m.

**Mujibur's on duty**

But while we were in the neighborhood, we decided to check out the Hello to Delhi, to see if Rupert was around. If you've seen David Letterman often enough, you become familiar with his celebrated neighbors. No Rupert. So it was on to K&L's Rock America Inc., better known as the souvenir shop run by Dave's sometimes sidekicks Mujibur and Sirajul.

The celebrated pair from Bangladesh are part of the "Late Show" family. And as luck would have it, Mujibur was on hand to talk about the show, shake my hand and then, as we were perusing the T-shirts, encourage me to get my ticket assignment.

"You can come back later," he said, motioning us to the theater. Mujibur was nice as pie, seemingly enjoying his celebrity status — as well as the financial rewards that come with that fame.

After getting a line number we came back at 4 p.m. to line up for the show. That's when I discovered that few David Letterman fans who have come this far are casual.

"He rarely has good guests on Wednesday," assured Brian, a Dave



Broadway Bill: Observer Reporter Bill Coutant, in New York for the David Letterman show, mugs for the camera outside the theater on Broadway.

fan from Philadelphia who was just behind us.

In fact Brian seemed to know the exact time at which the second guest appears, who all the cameramen were and details that I would never have thought to ask about. Mercifully, we were ushered in the Ed Sullivan Theater.

The theater is smaller than it appears to be on TV, with only room enough for about 420 audience members.

But once you're inside the theater, the atmosphere is energized. The lower numbered tickets mean you sit closer to the stage. For many, this means their face on camera, or in rare instances, 15 seconds of fame if Dave talks to them. Today, the trick of wearing a goofy hat to get on camera didn't work, but the old reliable Ball State sweat shirts did.

**'Warm' reception**

Dave comes out for about two minutes before the show and talks to the audience. With the wind chill in the theater at about 50 degrees, the audience is happy to applaud to keep warm.

And the band? Paul Shaffer, Anton and the gang really rock the place, especially, it seems, during the breaks as Dave is surrounded by a producer, di-

rector and other folks to discuss I-don't-know-what.

We attended the June 21 show in which Dave handed out frozen park treats — "hamsicles" — and beach balls to kick off the summer.

But during the interviews, audience members see no more of Dave than viewers at home, because sound, light, camera equipment and technicians surround Dave.

Other than that, the mood is strictly festive. And after Tony Bennett ended the show with an upbeat song, the audience went out singing, with beach balls and hamsicles in hand.

It was early. So off we trudged, looking like the American Gothic farm couple beamed down to the crowd.

We had thought we'd take a cab after the Letterman taping to the Empire State Building. But while we had been stuck in traffic earlier, I noticed the price for a cab ride, including "20 cents per minute while stopped," and "20 I'm no math whiz, but the meaning was unmistakable.

"Let's walk."  
**Aw, no hamsicles**  
For the first and last time in New York City, we found few people crowd-

ing us as we headed to 34th Street and the building made more famous in "King Kong."

After a wonderful supper in a great Italian restaurant near our hotel, we took in our show — six hours later — right after Bernie Smilovitz, formerly of Detroit TV fame, delivered the Devilish hockey news (Ugh!).

If you looked carefully, you might have seen someone in a Western Michigan sweat shirt (I didn't have any-thing with Grand Rapids — site of the home office) groping toward the hamsicles or the camera.

Next morning we decided to end any hope of eliminating our credit card balance by ordering room service breakfast.

Now came the decision. We could leave now and arrive home by about midnight, regretting forever that we had not seen much during our brief stay. Or, we could see the Green Lady (Statue of Liberty) and Ellis Island and wind up tired at work the next day. Sorry, boss, but what could I do?

It cost a lot, those free tickets to David Letterman. But for a couple of out-of-towners, it made our Top 10 list of places to visit.

Bill Coutant, a Farmington resident, is a reporter for the Farmington Observer.

# If theocratic babble reigns, value of diplomas will suffer

**L**et's put the public schools debate into perspective.

In 1994 we argued over money. Voters approved a cut in school property taxes and an increase in the sales tax. Essentially, the state took over fiscal responsibility, as the Michigan Constitution says it should. Most school districts than we can imagine were saved from bankruptcy.

In 1995 we're debating what's taught and to whose standards. It's easier to grasp the ideas if we put names on them. Let's take the two most visible members of the State Board of Education:

First, Dorothy Beardmore, R-Rochester. The tall, white-haired lady served on her local school board, then the Oakland Intermediate Board, and is in her second term on the State Board. She's moderate to conservative.

With two colleagues, Beardmore in the mid-1980s began prodding the board to do what it was supposed to do for three-quarters of a century: Lead, supervise, plan and coordinate all public education. The Beardmore team pushed for new testing standards, state-endorsed diplomas, curriculum goals (not bureaucratic credit requirements), and so on. They got a lot of their ideas from job providers in industry, utilities, finance and commerce.

Out of nowhere, Beardmore was challenged in the 1992 GOP state convention by the old Pat Robertson crew and barely survived. The Robertson Religious Right types are death on state standards, curriculum goals (particularly genetics and evolution), teamwork and analytical thinking. Their thing is obedience to parents — and parental following of the local preacher.

Second, W. Clark Durant, R-Grosse Pointe. Once famous for bow ties and suspenders, Durant is a lawyer who places ideology over facts. His post-school education experience is confined to some work for Hillsdale College, a hotbed of abolitionism in the 10th Century, now known chiefly for its eccentric, anti-federal posturing. He had no background in public school board work at either the local, intermediate or community college level prior to being elected to the State Board.

Durant was a Jack Kemp type in 1988, not a Robertson Bible-thumper. But the badly outnumbered Kemples got into the political bed with the Robertson folks to block George Bush's nomination. Durant isn't a Religious Right type himself though he has a lot in com-



Tim Richard

mon with the RR.

Durant's father, Dick, was once a John Birch-er and a frequent boill on the broadcast of Gov. William G. Milliken, the moderate gentleman who led the state 14 years. There are those who suggest Clark Durant is racist or anti-Semitic. I do not share that suspicion.

In the latest State Board of Education machinations, Durant is playing to the Yahoos. His ideas boil down to allowing school buildings to opt out of school district governance and allowing districts to go "home rule" and be rid of state tests, curricula goals, democratic elections and all the other encumbrances that the Religious Rights finds so intolerable. Of course, the new systems would continue to get state money. Of course.

The Religious Right, though relatively successful in the Republican Party, isn't doing particularly well in its effort to take over school boards. The more it is exposed, the wilder it looks to mainstream voters.

But with "home rule" and the opt-out features, one or two congregations could get hold of school buildings and money and do their thing — rote learning, mandatory voluntary school prayer, religious creationism, and so on.

What Durant is pushing for is to let the fundamentalists do their thing without bothering to lose a bunch of court battles. Most readers of this newspaper are unlikely to buy into such theocratic babble.

Unfortunately, if he succeeds and some backwaters of Michigan opt for colonial schooling, it will cheapen the value of high school diplomas for all the other young Americans.

Tim Richard reports on the local implications of state and regional events. His Touch-Tone voice mail number is (313) 263-2047 ext 1881.

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