

## Letterman rebounds from a wintry year of discontent

BY SUZANNE GILL

"Don't forget this," says an unusually sincere David Letterman. "I know I'm the luckiest man on the planet." It's a side of the wisecracking talk-show host that many viewers noticed virtually for the first time during his farewell speech on the last "Late Night With David Letterman," Friday, June 25, on NBC.

Preparing to launch a new series, "Late Show With David Letterman" on CBS, Letterman, who held out for months for an earlier time slot and will now earn \$14 million a year, is lucky," he says, to be employed. When NBC named Jay Leno to replace Johnny Carson as host of "The Tonight Show," Letterman found himself at a turning point.

"At that point," he says, "honest to God, I thought that I was just going to have to leave and wouldn't have a job. And I'm very, very lucky to be in this situation."

"I always wanted to be considered as a candidate to have the job (as 'Tonight Show' host). And that never happened. So obviously that was disappointing to me."

"Now, as I guess time does for you, it kind of leads me to believe that things worked out for the bet-

ter. Through all of this, I've suffered no rancor. I've had a little remorse."

As for his new, five-day work week, Letterman observes, "Don't most Americans work five days? It's going to be a back-breaker, I know."

And what about that salary? Won't it put him at arm's length from his audience?

"Geez...I hope not," he replies. "I'm certainly not worth that kind of dough...It happens to be the marketplace." Unable to resist a straight line, he adds, "If that happens, I'll just, you know, buy a new audience!"

On the subject of guests, Letterman's top-10 list begins with Johnny Carson, who has not appeared on any talk show since his retirement from the genre in May 1992.

"I would love to have Johnny Carson on our show under any circumstances," he says. "That would be great for me. I kind of get almost embarrassed when I talk about Carson, because he meant so much to me in my life and my career."

"The first time I was on ('The Tonight Show'), it was like, you pull a \$5 bill out of your pocket and the next thing you know, you see Abe

Lincoln walking down the street. It was like, 'Oh, my god, it's Johnny Carson.' And it never stopped feeling that way."

Letterman admits he's sorry to be leaving Rockefeller Center behind in the move from NBC to CBS.

"It's easily one of the great, recognizable landmarks on the globe," he says. "It was exciting, it was convenient, it was glamorous. Everything about it was absolutely wonderful. And we're leaving that behind. But I think that we will be able to find a home for ourselves."

The new home for Letterman and his staff is CBS' Ed Sullivan Theater, which is being renovated for his use.

"I've been in there three or four times, and every time I go in there, I stay about eight minutes, and then all you see are big clouds of asbestos. And then I have to get out. I just think it might have been easier to renovate Ed Sullivan than the theater itself," he concludes, returning to his on-air form.

The biggest question, for both fans and lawyers, concerns the contract of the new Letterman show. A saber-rattling NBC has already laid claim to certain "intellectual property." Letterman's producers have conceded that character names (like Larry "Bud" Melman) and the billing for music director Paul Shaffer's World's Most Dangerous Band belong to NBC. The Top-10 Lists and Stupid Pet/Human Tricks are Letterman property, however.

All in all, Letterman, Shaffer and crew think of it as the same show, only earlier.

"I think all these questions will be answered, like, the first night or the first week," Letterman says. "I mean, it'll either seem very odd to see me an hour earlier, or it'll seem okay."

"You know, I see myself almost every hour of the day, and I think that's fine."

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