

Colbert Hosting "Late Show" Raises Questions

News

Posted by : Randy

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NEW YORK (AP) -- With the announcement that Stephen Colbert will be the new host of CBS' "Late Show," his fans likely feel a clash of emotions:



- Happiness that their hero has landed a sweet promotion.
- Regret that he's leaving his Comedy Central post.
- Uncertainty over who the Stephen Colbert hosting "Late Show" will be.

For nine years on "The Colbert Report," he has reigned as the founding father of Colbert Nation. He has won four Emmys, two Peabody awards and a stake in the national conversation. He hasn't just satirized politics and culture, he has rolled up his sleeves to organize a "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear" on Washington's National Mall with his Comedy Central colleague Jon Stewart, and to create a super PAC to draw attention to the tyranny of money on elections.

And he has done it all behind a mask - the mask of "Stephen Colbert," a pompous, clueless conservative pundit who, to his admirers, seems a funhouse version of a Fox News Channel star.

He will leave "Stephen Colbert" behind when he heads to CBS sometime in 2015, taking over for the retiring David Letterman (who has not yet specified an exit date).

But in lieu of "Stephen Colbert," who will Colbert offer up to his audience instead? Who is behind the "Stephen Colbert" mask?

Even Colbert isn't sure - or, if he is, he declines to say.

"I won't be doing the new show in character," explained Colbert in a statement on Thursday. "So we'll all get to find out how much of him was me."

As a performer who began with the Second City improv troupe, then starred in the brilliant sketch comedy series "Exit 57" and the screwball spoof "Strangers with Candy," Colbert is hardly a one-trick pony. But his genius has been largely exhibited, and his reputation sealed, through the "Stephen Colbert" persona he has played to perfection on "The Colbert Report" since its debut in 2005, and for eight years before that as a bloviating "correspondent" on the Stewart-hosted "Daily Show."

Through it all, he stays in character - the "Stephen Colbert" character - with only a twinkle in his eye to let his audience know HE knows that most of what he utters is purposely dimwitted or wrong. He wrings larger meaning from nearly everything he does, illuminating it with self-contained mockery.

For nearly two decades, he has not only sustained but fortified this identity, giving it a full-bodied life of its own. It's quite an act.

Now he's decided to move on. (Comedy Central said he'll end "The Colbert Report" in eight months.)

Stewart voiced congratulations on Thursday's "The Daily Show": "The exciting news today is, I no longer need a cable subscription for the privilege of watching Stephen Colbert."

In a statement, Letterman endorsed him: "I'm very excited for him, and I'm flattered that CBS chose him. I also happen to know they wanted another guy with glasses."

Then on his show, Colbert reciprocated, saying Letterman "has influenced every host who came after him, and even a few who came before him - he's THAT good."

"And I gotta tell you," Colbert added, drawing cheers and applause, "I do not envy whoever they try to put in that chair."

But Colbert Nation can be pardoned for greeting the news with a measure of sadness. The Comedy Central show that Colbert masterminded is not only unique among current TV fare, but is likely unique in television history. In exchange, he is casting his lot with a 60-year-old desk-and-couch genre whose conventions its hosts defy at their peril. (Arguably the last attempt to revolutionize the late-night-talk hour was "The Wilton North Report" on Fox in 1987, which was absolutely terrible and flared out in less than a month).

Some will carp that Colbert is yet another white male with a hosting job.

And what about his age? Depending on when he signs on, he will be 50 or 51 (in other words, outside the "demo"). Meanwhile, his main rivals will still be in the bloom of youth: NBC's "Tonight Show" host, Jimmy Fallon, will be 40 or 41; the host of ABC's "Jimmy Kimmel Live" will be 47 or 48.

Besides, what political baggage will Colbert bring to CBS, even as he ditches his "Stephen Colbert" role?

On Tuesday, Fox News host Bill O'Reilly (more than anyone the inspiration for "Stephen Colbert") tore into Colbert, branding him "one of the biggest mouthpieces for the progressive movement, ... playing exclusively to other believers."

And, just hours after Colbert was named the new "Late Show" host, conservative commentator Rush Limbaugh was growling that "CBS has just declared war on the heartland of America."

"No longer is comedy going to be a covert assault on traditional American values (and) conservatives," he went on. "Now it's just wide open."

That may be a premature assessment. O'Reilly may place Colbert in the ranks of "ideological fanatics." But ideology has never been at home on major late-night talk shows, which traditionally shoot for reassurance and diversion. What do such constraints mean for Colbert, and for viewers who dote on what he does as "Stephen Colbert"?

Uncertainties abound concerning Colbert's new assignment. Unknowns include creative elements of his new show, and even where it will be based. CBS said such details would be shared later on.

But while his fans wait, they know enough to take solace in one overriding fact: They should never underestimate him.

So RIP, "Stephen Colbert," if that's how it's got to be. The Stephen Colbert viewers meet on "Late Show" next year could well be someone they like just as much. Or even more.