

Television

TRIBUNE ON LATE NIGHT: 'WE SHALL RETURN'

Despite demise of 'Dennis Miller Show,' company will keep eye open for another contender; Don Hacker says he'd be happy to corral Letterman for syndication

By Mike Freeman

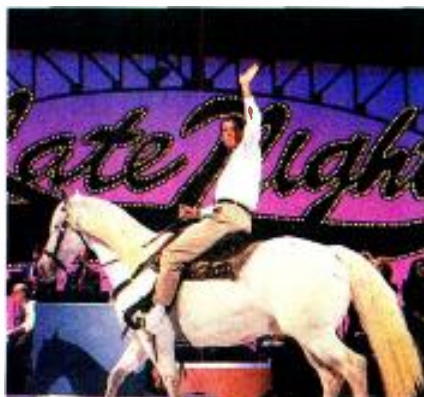
Apparently undaunted by the failure of Dennis Miller to crack late night (he's "outta there" as of Sept. 11, when repeat episodes end), Tribune Entertainment will not "shy away" from the late-night arena and appears, in fact, prepared to enter a possible bidding war for David Letterman, should the opportunity arise.

Meanwhile, on the daytime front, Tribune Entertainment Co. President Don Hacker told BROADCASTING that the company will launch a full national rollout of *The Faye Wattleton Show* in daytime in January 1993, possibly filling some vacancies left by TEC's cancellation of *Now It Can Be Told* earlier this season.

Since Jay Leno was first selected as the heir to NBC's *Tonight Show* over a year ago, Letterman's widely rumored dissatisfaction over his treatment by NBC has put a gleam in the eye of a number of programers who are anxious to take Leno and Arsenio head-on in the hotly competitive 10:30-11:30 p.m. time periods.

The subject of a possible Letterman initiative by Tribune was raised when Hacker suggested that the *Dennis Miller* set would be put in storage at Tribune-owned KTLA(TV) Los Angeles for "possible use at a later time." He then vowed, "We'll be back in late night in one form or another." Hacker would not say whether or not he had contacted Letterman or his agent, but it is widely reported that both are precluded from negotiating with syndication or network suitors until Letterman's contract expires in April 1993.

Hacker makes no secret, however, of his interest in the late, late night host. "I would be more than happy to put Letterman into syndication,"



When his NBC contract expires, David Letterman could be some syndicator's late-night knight on a white horse.

Hacker said enthusiastically. "He has proved himself to be a winner, a proven commodity in late night. I think his interest is to move up in time period to prove he can take on Jay [Leno] and Arsenio in head-to-head competition. However, I do think [Letterman] is

going to study all of his options carefully before making a decision to leave what has proven to be a strong post-*Tonight Show* time slot."

If Letterman should decide on the syndication route, some doubt remains as to the quality of independent (mostly UHF) stations that could be put together by Tribune or another distributor, not to mention trying to entice affiliates away from their network-supplied late-night fare. Hacker, however, countered that the Tribune-owned (VHF) independents in New York (WPIX(TV)), Los Angeles (KTLA) and Chicago (WGN-TV) would provide the sort of "springboard" to attract other "quality" independent and affiliate station groups.

(Tribune also has independents in Philadelphia [WPHL-TV], Denver [KWGN-TV], Atlanta [WGNX(TV)] and New Orleans [WGNO(TV)].)

Of course, as one New York rep source mused, Letterman could, in the

RYSHER/KUSHNER-LOCKE MERGER OFF

The expiration of a 45-day window on a letter of intent to merge Kushner-Locke Co. and Rysher Entertainment passed last week with both Los Angeles-based companies breaking off talks over a rumored disagreement over who would have clear authority over the combined entity. When the preliminary deal was struck (BROADCASTING, May 25, June 1), Kushner-Locke, a traditional supplier of network series and long-form product, proposed a stock swap valued at \$7.5 million-\$10 million to combine Rysher's distribution services with K-L's production capabilities.

"For us to remain independent, this may have been the best thing to happen to us," said Rysher President Keith Samples, who founded the syndication company a year and a half ago after leaving the top off-network sales post at Warner Bros. Domestic Television Distribution. "With a merger, you sometimes end up having one too many bosses," he added, without directly naming K-L co-chairmen Donald Kushner and Peter Locke. Kushner-Locke officials were unreachable for comment.

"When we sat down to put it all together, it just made more sense to take a deep breath and figure a way of doing business that is a little less all-inclusive," Sample concluded.

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