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Man out of Time

Jesse's cable disconnection

by Mike Mosedale



Putting the boob in boob tube

On the night of September 12, those still paying close attention to the professional fortunes of Jesse Ventura bore witness to an odd, vaguely embarrassing spectacle. Ventura was appearing on the HBO program *Real Time*, the current events gabfest hosted by comedian Bill Maher. On its face, this was an ideal opportunity for Ventura to hone his television chops in preparation for the debut of his long-delayed MSNBC show, *Jesse Ventura's America*.

For the occasion, the former governor wore a beige fringed leather coat. It was reminiscent of the flamboyant outfit he donned while crooning with the late Warren Zevon at his inauguration back in 1999. But the effect was hardly the same. The governor who got over as "one of us" looked more like a well-to-do Harley enthusiast on the annual pilgrimage to Sturgis.

But there was something more foreboding about his appearance on *Real Time*. Ventura seemed like a pitcher who lost his fastball or, perhaps more aptly, a singer who lost his pitch. His first joke--"I'm not running for governor of California. As much as they've asked me to, the answer is no"--fell flat. So did the follow-up crack. Aside from a smattering of applause for his comments on the Iraq war (sending 18-year-olds into combat situations is child abuse) and the drug war (call it off), Jesse did not get over.

His guest shot reached its nadir when Ventura decided to joust with Paul Krugman, the Princeton economist and renowned New York Times columnist. Ventura derided Krugman, taunting him as "Mr. Economist" before launching into a rant about agriculture subsidies that confused the notion of price supports (price *floors* for crops, in other words) with government-set limits on price *ceilings*. Eventually the reserved and gracious Krugman dropped his head into his hands and started giggling. "I'm sorry," he said, "I'm just losing it here." Meanwhile, on the show's web discussion board, the sole Ventura thread bore the subject line: "Is Jesse an idiot?"

Since shortly after last February's announcement that Ventura had signed with the struggling cable news network MSNBC, the show has been the subject of all manner of rumor--and delay after delay. Initially, MSNBC brass attributed the slow unrolling to the war with Iraq. An awkward time to roll out a new show, the flaks explained.

By spring, Ventura was a sometime-pinch-hitter on the network, at first contributing occasional "Homeland Terror Watch" segments in which Ventura responded to viewers' concerns about homeland security in their own communities. Next it was Jesse's "Hero of the Week." Neither connected. Both segments have since been discontinued.

Practically from the moment the network began taping pilots for Ventura's show this summer, rumors of total failure began to circulate. In a mid-August interview with *The New York Times*, MSNBC president Erik Sorenson revealed that the network had tried at least 12 different formats for the Ventura show, including one in which Ventura

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would elicit "commentary from his guests while an attractive woman served up different topics." That, too, didn't seem to work.

In the same interview with the Times, Sorenson made another, even more telling announcement: Ventura's show--originally conceived as weeknight prime-time mainstay--would air only once a week. Both Ventura and the network spun this as an opportunity for Jesse to be Jesse.

But the Saturday evening slot that he was to be given is a notorious graveyard (the very same graveyard where Ventura failed in his previous TV gig, as a color commentator for the XFL). A few weeks after Sorenson's announcement, a freelance television producer named Peter Schapel posted the following on the TV trade website *Correspondences.org*: "After 10 million dollars and more than six months of work, those behind the new Jesse Ventura talk show are calling it quits." Schapel didn't supply much in the way of details. He now says he got the news directly from two members of the freelance production crew, whom he declined to identify. According to MSNBC spokesman Jeremy Gaines, Ventura's show is still a go. Gaines said it will probably debut sometime in October, though no firm date has been established and no announcements have been made.

Whether the show ultimately appears or not, it seems evident now that Jesse's post-gubernatorial career is not everything he envisioned. Why?

David Schultz, a professor in government and public administration at Hamline University, has followed Ventura's career closely--and, with a graduate student, promulgated the term "politainer" to describe Ventura's peculiar status on the cultural landscape. Schultz postulates that the core of Ventura's appeal at the height of his popularity was predicated on the widespread feeling that government was irrelevant at best and deserving of our contempt at worst.

In the post 9/11 world, Schultz contends, lots of people may still have contempt for the government, but very few regard it as irrelevant. And, says Schultz, there is the matter of Ventura's most evident quality: his conspicuous and unswerving self-involvement. Though times have changed, Ventura's shtick really has not adapted or broadened. Consider his shopworn, received-wisdom reading of the two-party system, which is that the Democrats and Republicans represent extremes of liberalism and conservatism when what's really needed is sensible centrists like him. To most observers--those who are not Limbaugh/Coulter acolytes, that is--the more common criticism is that they are entirely too much alike.

On a more fundamental level, critics like Schultz doubt whether Jesse is really made for TV. As a talk-radio host, Ventura followed what Schultz refers to as the classic rant-and-rave format. "But ranting and raving on the radio is different than hosting a TV show, where you have to do your homework and you have to be interested in your guests. I don't think Ventura wants to do his homework."

Even those who are more optimistic about Ventura's prospects acknowledge that he is weak as an interviewer. "There's no doubt that Jesse's a better interviewee than interviewer. And I think some of that is what they're grappling with. I think they're trying way too hard to make this into some sort of *Meet the Press* meets [*American*] *Gladiators*," says Bill Hillsman, the celebrated political ad consultant whose work helped elect Ventura in '98. "Whether it's going to work, I don't know until I see the format. I don't think the weakness in this is him. I think the weakness is what they're trying to make him do."

Schultz, however, is more inclined to the view that Jesse Ventura is all played out. "Every good star knows that they have to keep reinventing themselves to stay current. Jesse has never figured that out," Schultz offers. He likens Ventura's predicament to that of the silent film star in the Hollywood classic *Sunset Boulevard*. "He's always hoping that someone will come back for another shoot, ready for his close-up," Schultz says. "I think his career as both a politician and an entertainer are coming to an end. But I don't know that he realizes that."

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