

## And Now, Just the News: A Week in the Life of *A Daily Show*

By: Nick Marx

Though the writers' strike is over, its true impact will not come into focus until enough time has passed to grant us the proper hindsight. When that time comes, the majority of the viewing public will surely have forgotten their fleeting affair with the revamped *American Gladiators*. But to those in media studies, the strike now provides a small window to the inner workings of a process—production—we are often loath to study with the same verve as we do its result. In many cases on television, the strike blurred the line between production and exhibition, and nowhere was this more apparent than in late-night comedy and variety programs that air daily. Exacerbating the universal joylessness of the strike was the return of such daily programs in transmogrified form—forms that looked familiar but didn't quite scratch our itch for the expected commentary on contemporaneous goings-on. Indeed, fewer subsets of the WGA and the television landscape were hit harder than—or at least publicized as much as—late-night comedy writers and programs. But while everyone from Letterman to Leno to Conan shuffled back onstage mid-strike bearing battle scars to varying degrees, no one seemed to be as defiantly oblivious to the strike's menace as was host Jon Stewart of *A Daily Show*.

Wait, this isn't another article from a young liberal hoping to squeeze a chapter out of his infatuation with the show's high-concept blend of information and entertainment ("Informatiation?" "Entertainment?" Oh well, I'm sure someone will coin a word for it soon). Instead, I submit that a snapshot of the show without its writers is useful in interrogating and problematizing its supposedly transgressive blend of news, politics, and comedy. Scholars such as Jeffrey Jones and Geoffrey Baym have argued illustratively on behalf of *The Daily Show's* potential to open new spaces for political dialogue and to engender alternative modes of political journalism.<sup>1</sup> Discourses of comedy and politics have been characterized as inextricable in such studies, and rightfully so. While I do not wish to refute their work, I believe that the strike partly disentangled *The Daily Show's* web of signification and temporarily transformed much of its subversive satire into performative spectacle.

In the tradition of self-serving television scholars everywhere, I've selected a small sample for review and isolated only the moments that best support my argument. The episodes discussed below are taken from the week of February 4-7, 2008, and largely cover the run up to, and aftermath of, the presidential primaries' "Super Tuesday." When *The Daily Show* returned to Comedy Central mid-strike on January 7, 2008, it did so as *A Daily Show* in tribute to their striking writers.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps paradoxically, three weeks into its run *A Daily Show* found its viewership in the coveted 18-34 demographic up nearly 17 per cent from the same period the previous year.<sup>3</sup> This was in stark contrast to nearly all other broadcast late-night comedy programs, whose ratings were down across the board. Like its late-night brethren, though, *A Daily Show* was made to return without its writing staff, and the program took on a character distinct from that of its pre-strike form. The analyses below are chiefly concerned with exploring the nature of that new character and its ramifications for what audiences have come to expect from *The Daily Show*.

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### ***A Daily Show: Monday, February 4, 2008***

The show leads with the story of the recent Super Bowl's record-breaking ratings, and Stewart begins by playing up the rivalry between New York and Boston. This, of course, is nothing new for the program, as the host frequently engages in a bit of pre-segment pandering at the top of each show. But with *A Daily Show* now nearing its second writer-less month, it is apparent that Stewart has been given free reign to banter as long as he pleases before making his customary turn to the center camera to begin the first news item. Just as he is about to begin a wrap-up of his discussion of the Super Bowl commercials, however, Stephen Colbert enters, and they discuss their (manufactured) feud with Conan O'Brien over who "created" GOP presidential-hopeful Mike Huckabee.

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The three-way fight (the details of which are too silly to enumerate here) among Stewart, Colbert, and O'Brien is, on the one hand, exemplary of the sort of televisual time-killer that was relied upon by late-night shows during the strike. On the other hand, it is just the sort of diversion that undermines *The Daily Show's* presumptive role as both court jester and newsman (not simply because of the fight's focus on the former). That same pairing could also characterize the relationship between Stewart and Colbert. Colbert's performance of the blustery, O'Reilly-esque pundit is encoded as much more conventionally parodic than is Stewart's "persona." Consequently, Colbert depends upon physical and imitative humor—the emphatic jabbing of his pen, the faux-inflexion of gravitas—in the absence of written material.

Before and after the writers' strike, Stewart largely delivered the news-as-humor just as written, relying mainly on the juxtaposition of images and sound-bites rather than hammy commentary. With the entrance of Colbert and O'Brien for a ploy largely intended to fill the time left by the strike-induced lack of structured news commentary, the performative takes precedence (for Stewart) at the expense of satire. Throughout the fight segments, Stewart is visibly addled, mugging frantically while Colbert and O'Brien deliberately antagonize one another. Indeed, the feud momentarily and purposefully distracts us from the program's usual flow of satire, just as the pre-strike *The Daily Show* frequently featured such ruptures before returning to the news. But in the strike-hampered *A Daily Show*, the effect of the fight does not simply subside. Instead, it sets the tone for a week of uneasy commingling of slapstick and seriousness.

### ***A Daily Show: Tuesday and Wednesday, February 5-6, 2008***

After spilling over to the Monday evening shows of Colbert and O'Brien, the fight leads *A Daily Show* the next day, with Stewart asking, "Did we settle our dispute? I don't know. Depends on how long the strike goes." The first news item is a montage of the cable news networks' hyperbolic "Super Tuesday" coverage, which finishes with MSNBC's inexplicably fiery *Godzilla*-themed promo. We next see a panicked Stewart jumping from his seat and spraying a

fire extinguisher everywhere. He takes some time to recover from the gag before touching on Sen. Edward Kennedy's endorsement of Barack Obama, referring to the former in a curious still-frame as a "retired lesbian gym teacher." When the crack receives a lukewarm reception, Stewart ad-libs a directive from the control room to "let this go" before reaching for the fire extinguisher again in an attempt to revive the crowd. It is not the gags themselves that necessarily point to *A Daily Show's* rupture of the intertwined discourses of politics and comedy (indeed, one might easily imagine either gag being written into *The Daily Show*), but Stewart's exaggerated and reflexive performance of them. In an interview later in the show, Fox News' Chris Wallace and Stewart playfully debate the merits of adding Bush advisor Karl Rove to the Fox News staff. When the pace of the discussion lags, however, Stewart self-consciously lifts it out of the realm of political satire and into the purely comedic by threatening to reach for the fire extinguisher again.

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When asked in interviews about *The Daily Show's* politics, Stewart's typically evasive answer is that the show is nothing more than a comedy program, but *A Daily Show's* scattershot flow makes it clear that the writing staff plays a major role in holding this purely comedic impulse in check by grounding that comedy in contemporaneous political context.<sup>5</sup> Without such context, the comedy becomes targetless and no longer requires viewers to make the mental connections between text and target text/ideology crucial to parody and satire. Instead, the meaning of the amorphous comedy of *A Daily Show* is anchored in its immediate articulation, one governed by the conventions of improvisation and performance. When, following a clip of GOP presidential-hopeful Mitt Romney discussing money, Stewart asks with faux-Italian inflexion "Why not just give it to us?", the accent neutralizes any potential reading of the joke as commentary on the income gap or campaign finance. Instead, its mannered delivery encodes it as pure rupture without any clear target, a tacked-on absurdity to the already-absurd proceedings of the primaries.

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A similar emphasis on comedic performance rather than content or message can be seen later in the same episode of Wednesday the 6<sup>th</sup>. At the end of a surreal series of proclamations by various cable newsmen touting the supremacy of their respective news-teams, Fox News's Brit Hume declares his network's crew to be "best political team ever." Stewart muses that Hume has overlooked a fictional 19<sup>th</sup>-century news-team, whose sepia-tinged image we see as Stewart re-enacts the team's telegraphed coverage of the Lincoln assassination: "Lincoln being shot. Stop. Stop shooting Lincoln. Stop." Again, the punchline is strangely disembodied from the subject matter at hand and the joke functions more as formal play than a satire of journalistic pomp.

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***A Daily Show: Thursday, February 7, 2007***

It might be tempting to conclude that improvisation, with its foundations in the physicality and immediacy of reaction and performance, simply is not conducive to the structured flow of political satire. However, we find the same disruptive formal play in edited segments of *A Daily Show* as well. Wednesday's show, for example, featured a segment of all *The Daily Show* correspondents brusquely taking to the streets in a satire of news networks' suspect reliance on polling. What follows is not a sending-up of polling culture, but a series of sight gags and censored expletives. Samantha Bee chases an interviewee down the street while bemoaning her pregnancy. Jason Jones scrambles in and out of the news van at a stoplight to land a quick sound-bite. Rob Riggle threatens a man with violence if he changes his vote. The segment ignores questions raised by Hillary Clinton's "surprise" victory in the New Hampshire primary (what is the relationship between news media and pollsters? Why was their information unreliable?) in favor of the mild chuckles garnered by a couple of dirty words.

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Thursday's episode makes additional use of language-as-spectacle strategies in lieu of cogent commentary. Jones, in an editorial about Romney, chalks up the Republican's exit from the primary race to his being "a douchebag." To a certain extent, Jones' comment might be read as mimicking the breezy, informal language of the presumptive *Daily Show* viewer. But when pressed by Stewart for more on this characterization of Romney, Jones glibly repeats the epithet until it loses any subversive charge and devolves into vacuous formal play.

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Jones' piece is also preceded by a clip of Romney likening support of Democratic nominees to support of terrorism. Stewart, appropriately, responds to the clip with the following ode: "Normally we have all our writers, we've got a big room of people kicking that sound-bite around, but right now it's just me, so let me just—if I can very quickly whip something up right here—ohh, ooh ohh. I got something—fuck you!"

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*The Daily Show*'s month-long flirtation with improvised political comedy, while strained and uneven, exposed the program's complicated discursive lineage. In focusing on its trailblazing blend of news, politics, and comedy, we must not discount the element common to all three—performance—and its role in stirring such a strange brew. As the writer-less *A Daily Show* proved, even the inexorable march of change is slowed by the occasional pratfall.

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<sup>1</sup> See Jones, Jeffrey P. *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, as well as Geoffrey Baym, "The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism." *Political Communication*, 22: 259-276.

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<sup>2</sup> These “two programs” are distinguished accordingly in the analyses below.

<sup>3</sup> Downey, Kevin. “Hefty Bounces for Stewart and Colbert.” Media Life. 29 January 2008. 9 February 2008  
<[http://www.medialifemagazine.com/artman2/publish/Cable\\_20/Hefty\\_bounces\\_for\\_Stewart\\_and\\_Colbert.asp](http://www.medialifemagazine.com/artman2/publish/Cable_20/Hefty_bounces_for_Stewart_and_Colbert.asp)>.

<sup>5</sup> See Stewart’s October 15, 2004 appearance on CNN’s *Crossfire*, among others.