

“...AND THE HORSE YOU RODE IN ON!”

THE ED SULLIVAN THEATER, NEW YORK CITY

CBS STUDIO 50

A WEDNESDAY, MID-JULY, 2009, 5:00 P.M.



IT WAS ALMOST UNANIMOUS. Tracy and Melony urged Lena not to do it. Even Claude Masters put in his two cents: “Look what he said about Sarah Palin’s daughter. He’s a ruthless, sarcastic bastard. He’ll say anything for a laugh, even when it’s not funny at all. And the TV audience is always on his side.”

Melony added, “No matter what you say, he’ll twist it to make you look foolish.”

“I can handle myself,” Lena objected. “Don’t you have any faith in me by now?”

They were backstage at the Ed Sullivan Theater, minutes before taping of this evening’s *David Letterman Show*. Lena sat in the middle of the three pacing worry-warts, patiently absorbing their concern with a calm confidence. Only Jerry Calvin sat off to the side, expressionless and quiet.

“You don’t need this, Aunt Lena,” Tracy chimed in. “Your popularity is through the roof. Aren’t you doing exactly what your ‘Voices’ want? And so far, you’ve been wildly successful. Half of the worst congressmen in Washington have given up power or announced they won’t run for another term. Look at what you did to Flagg. The bastard is still in hiding! You and others are playing your parts in a grass roots movement that will throw most of the rest out in 2010. Why take the chance?”

“Because she’s got something up her sleeve,” Jerry broke in, finally joining the debate. “She’s a gambler, like me. Am I right?” He looked at Lena with raised eyebrows.

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained,” Lena replied with a sly smile.

As the Paul Shaffer CBS Orchestra commenced the show, Lena rose from her seat. She was wearing a sleek gray and wine-red combination that accented her attractive figure and carefully coiffed hair. Her demure serenity enhanced the confidence she felt. “How do I look, gang?”

“Like a lamb going to slaughter,” Tracy worried.

“Like my best friend on a date with the guillotine,” echoed Claude, ever the pessimist.

“Like my dad says,” Melony added, changing her tune and giving her father a hug. “You look like someone about to draw on an inside straight.”

A knock on the dressing room door interrupted, followed by a voice. “Two minutes, Ms. Mills. Please follow me to the curtain.”

Jerry opened the door and, as Lena brushed by him, he whispered in her ear, “Flatten the son of a bitch.”

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THE PRODUCER had argued she would bring a great boost to his ratings. David Letterman hesitated before giving the blessing to the interview. Lena Mills was unpredictable. That was *his* gig—being unpredictable. Her reputation was legendary: “Takes no prisoners; uncanny ability to know what you’re thinking; hits your weak spot; two-legged nitro”—all comments by television hosts who had weathered her searing wit. Yes, Letterman had hesitated, but only for a second. His haughty ego made the decision: *I’m the best. I’m bullet-proof, and no washed up former stripper is going to make a fool out of me.* “Book her,” he had ordered. “We’ll see who gets the last laugh.”

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LETTERMAN HAD COMPLETED the preliminaries—bantering with Shaffer and his band, a brief monologue with a few sarcastic political jabs, and a run-through of the evening’s light-hearted “Ten Stupid Pet Tricks” list. After a brief station break, the show resumed.

“Now, the one you have been waiting for,” the host announced. “I’ve never met this woman in person before, but I’m as intrigued as you are about our first guest. Let’s welcome Lena Mills, everyone.”

It was a setup. Shaffer’s band was at the ready, grinding out the theme to David Rose’s 1962 *The Stripper* in raunchy overdrive. Instead of a normal entrance, Lena made a reflex decision. Angling toward the host, arms on hips, she booty-bumped with the music and the drummer’s rim shots. The audience applauded with cat-calls, whistling and laughter.

Letterman leaned toward her for the standard Hollywood kiss, which Lena deflected to a simple handshake—the first indication she was in charge. At the last bump ending the song, she plopped down in the chair beside the host, waving to oversexed males in the audience who continued whistling.

She waited fifteen seconds before exclaiming, “Wow! You make a girl feel right at home, Dave. Last time I had a cheer like that, the joint burned down!” Shaffer’s drummer was alert and thwacked a “bada-boom” on his snare and bass drum.

Another round of cheers and cat-calls followed, as Letterman fumed inside. *Less than two minutes and she’s hijacking my show!*

Projecting his patented combination smile and sneer to the crowd, he opened with, “Well, I guess we picked the wrong song, didn’t we?” Letterman winked at the audience.

The joke fell flat. Everyone was still locked onto Lena, who rescued her host with a Marilyn Monroe breathy imitation, “Heaven’s no, Dave. It made me tingle—all over!” As she stood again, her hands outlined her hourglass figure, driving the audience to distraction again.

Cries of “LENA, LENA, LENA...” mixed with another ear-splitting cheer, lasting another thirty seconds. Letterman was helpless. He’d never seen a reaction this intense for any guest. But laughter was the lifeblood of the show, so he decided to go with the flow.

Relative calm resumed after another thirty seconds. *I haven’t even asked my first question*, the flustered host grouched to himself. He was anxious to put this presumptuous prick teaser in her place. It was, after all, his reason for inviting her.

Using his serious face, he leaned toward the guest and began with, “Ms. Mills...”

“Call me Lena, Dave,” she interrupted, adding to his anger.

“Okay...Lena,” he continued. “You’ve made quite a splash this year: predicting the stock market, the recession, your one-night stand as First Lady of Florida....”

A few hisses could be heard from the audience. Letterman was treading on dangerous turf. This was someone many in this crowd admired. *I better lighten up*, he chastised himself.

“It’s rumored that you had a hand in a few Washington politicians suddenly retiring,” Letterman followed, changing course.

Expecting sarcasm but angered by his bald-faced insult, a suddenly serious Lena stared blankly at the host, giving him her “I-dare-you-to-say-it” look.

“Some people think you’re a witch—that you can read minds.” Then Letterman boldly went where no man had gone before:

“Can you read mine?” he insinuated with a sardonic wink at his audience.

Without hesitating, Lena faced the audience and pouted, “Whatever you say, David Letterman, I will **not** sleep with you!”

It was bomb of epic proportion. Letterman sat back, stunned. His audience erupted with cheers and a standing ovation. The drummer hit a rim shot and cymbal crash, not realizing he had just committed employment suicide.

Lena realized she had won the battle, but couldn’t resist another parting shot across the bow. *I’m going to make short work of this asshole and leave*, she vowed. Raising both hands to calm the audience, she waited until the noise settled for her voice to be heard. Letterman, looking like a little boy caught by his mother with a dirty magazine under his bed, sat with his patented smile hiding a devastated ego, too helpless and confused to comment.

“One more thing, Dave,” Lena resumed, standing and looking down on the host. “Sarah Palin sends her regards. She’s in Alaska teaching her daughters how to field dress a talk show host.”

A chorus of “Oooooos and Aaaaaahs” accompanied another standing ovation. Lena Mills marched off the stage like a victorious gladiator, waving to her minions. With sweat pouring from his brow, David Letterman anxiously signaled his producer for a hard break.

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DISTRACTED BY THE UPROAR, no one noticed Jerry Calvin and his mini-cam recording the sequence from the dressing room monitor. That night, the CBS television audience was treated to an unexplained *David Letterman Show* mid-week rerun.

The next day, a *FOX News* nationwide audience was treated to the original sequence, which was then repeated throughout the day and aired by all the other major networks. Roger Ailes was ecstatic. Melony Major, his former employee, had given his network an exclusive coup! CBS lawyers sharpened their talons with a flurry of lawsuits but the damage was done.

David Letterman, the network's nighttime "Golden Boy", had been humiliated. A headline in the following day's *Wall Street Journal* said it all: "THE HOST IS TOAST!"