

TV Close-Up: Jerry Springer

by Eirik_Knutzen

"I don't have any talent, and I'm not being modest - I don't sing, I don't dance - so I think many of the contestants on 'America's Got Talent' can relate to me," laughed Jerry Springer, smooth and comfortable in Hollywood.

JERRY SPRINGER - Jerry Springer's strengths as the host of 'America's Got Talent' were refined during his 17 years in syndication with 'The Jerry Springer Show.' With him are 'Today' show's Natalie Morales and Ann Curry. CNS Photo courtesy of Heidi Gutman/NBC. His strengths as the host of the three-ring circus known as "America's Got Talent" were refined during his 17 years (and counting) in syndication with "The Jerry Springer Show" by instructing security guards to break up the fisticuffs of love triangles composed of obese, tattooed and toothless individuals of all genders.

"The judges (cheeseburger lover David Hasselhoff, professional English rocker wife Sharon Osbourne and an obnoxious Brit known as Piers Morgan) will be tough on them, so I'm there to make everyone really feel good, like a confidence builder," he explained. "I like to think I'm nice guy and fairly bright with a sense of humor; never an elitist, I'm always known as Jerry, not Mr. Springer."

And the 63-year-old gazillionaire is there primarily because he's having fun introducing incredibly good singers, dancers, plate spinners, jugglers, left-handed Volvo mechanics, arc welders and badly trained seals. The "professional" judges on the "Talent" panel weed out the bottom feeders until the semifinal episodes when TV viewers take over the voting to determine who stumbles away with the \$1 million grand prize.

With more than three decades of show-business experience, the intrepid lawyer, talk show host, movie actor, TV personality, author, ballroom dancer, country recording artist and former mayor of Cincinnati is not surprised that "America's Got Talent" roared out of the gate on June 5 as the top-rated show in the U.S. The veteran performer has pretty much seen it all, including the show's "Houdini-like guy" who wrapped himself in massive chains and sturdy locks before submerging himself in a large washing machine. While twirling in soap and water, the man freed himself with some difficulty and made history by appearing in the cleanest show Springer has ever taken part in.

Intrigued, Springer immediately asked the washing machine jockey why he had worked up such a bizarre act.

"The man replied that he had always been fascinated with magic and the setting immediately grabbed people's attention. He wants to be a professional entertainer doing a heavy load in Las Vegas twice a day, six days a week. Who am I to argue with reason?"

The son of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany who escaped to England moments before they were swept up in the Holocaust, Springer was born in London's East Finchley tube station (also used as a bomb shelter during World War II) during a Luftwaffe bombing raid on Feb. 13, 1944. Five years later, the family emigrated to the United States and set up shop in Queens.

A terrific student, he went on to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1965 from Tulane University and a Juris Doctor (law) degree from Northwestern University in 1968. He served as a presidential campaign aide to Robert Kennedy until the assassination, then joined a Cincinnati law firm. Springer failed a run for Congress in 1970, but was elected to Cincinnati's city council a year later.

No stranger to controversy and scandal, Springer was strongly encouraged to resign from the City Council in 1974 when police raiding a massage parlor in Fort Wright, Ky., discovered a personal check he had written to the establishment for "services" rendered. He admitted to a momentary lapse of judgment at a subsequent press conference, which probably helped him regain the political seat in 1975. In 1977, the City Council appointed him to serve one year as mayor.

Keeping his nose clean for quite a while, Springer was still the mayor of Cincinnati when local rock station WEBN-FM started airing his political commentaries under the title of "The Springer Memorandum." It caught on, and he eventually made the transition from City Hall to local NBC affiliate WLWT-TV as a reporter, commentator, news anchor and managing editor from 1982 to 1993. He held responsible broadcast news positions until well after the 1991 launch of "The Jerry Springer Show" in syndication.

Originally a highbrow political chat program, ratings demanded that it soon deteriorate to a lowbrow format featuring redneck prostitution, adultery, homosexuality, cross-dressing, dressing down and no dressing at all.

Sarasota, Fla., remains his primary home, but he maintains digs in states ranging from Illinois to California. For reasons of his own, Springer refuses to talk about his family - "I'm married (presumably to Micki Velton) and have a child (apparently a grown daughter, Katie), but keep my family out of the public eye."

It works as "The Jerry Springer Show" (now taped in Chicago) is still on the air 17 seasons later and is the reason why the glib, yet folksy television host's net worth is estimated at some \$500 million by the show-biz press.

"Other people work as hard as I do, but don't get the benefit I do," he said. "I've had absurd luck in life."

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