

There's Lia on the stage, leaning forward in her seat, telling Jerry Springer all about the other woman. "I can't stand this bitch. She's trash, and she's filthy, and I want to kick her ass and tell her to leave Jeff alone," Lia says, smiling proudly. This is the moment she's been waiting for. See, Lia had this problem. Her man loved her all right; he said so. Plus, he wanted to see her every single day, Lia insists, slapping the back of one hand against the palm of the other. *Ev-ry sin-gle day. Okay?* The thing was, there was this woman—one he lived with. This woman, Gina, didn't even know that her man was fiending for Lia. It made Lia crazy. So one day Lia's at home watching television. The *Jerry Springer Show*. And on comes one of those 800-96-JERRY plugs about "Are You in a Relationship With Someone Who's in a Relationship With Someone Else, and You Just Want Everything Out in the Open?" Lia considers her situation, picks up the phone, and calls. There was a time when a woman like Lia could do little else but fling herself in front of a train or take to her bed and waste away. But now there's *Springer*. With Jerry's help, Lia

While Oprah, Rosie, and Ricki have moved toward kinder, gentler talk show fare, Jerry Springer is taking daytime TV to freakish extremes—and winning. In Springer's world, it doesn't matter if you're black or white, as long as you know how to fight

JERRY'S KIDS

knew she could work things out.

Right now, Jerry Springer has the hottest talk show on the air. He's won himself a nation of fans—from snooty L.A. socialites to brothers in Brooklyn barbershops—and boosted his ratings 132 percent in the past year. He has surpassed Ricki and Rosie—jumping to No. 2 in daytime talk—and some weeks, in certain cities, he even beats out Oprah. Jerry also has a mail-order video, *Jerry Springer Show: Too Hot for TV*, a collection of the program's most titillating outtakes (see sidebar, page 88). The video, currently the most coveted bootleg on the street, has become the featured entertainment at "Springer parties" across the country and is expected to sell more than a million copies.

The secret to Jerry's success are his guests. Other than the few actors who have slipped through the cracks (usually to get a clip for their résumé reel), the producers insist that these are "actual real people." The show does background checks on the guests and requires them to sign a release that holds them liable if they're not telling the truth. "You know," says Jerry, "we can tell if people are faking. There've been times I've said, I don't believe you; you're off the show."

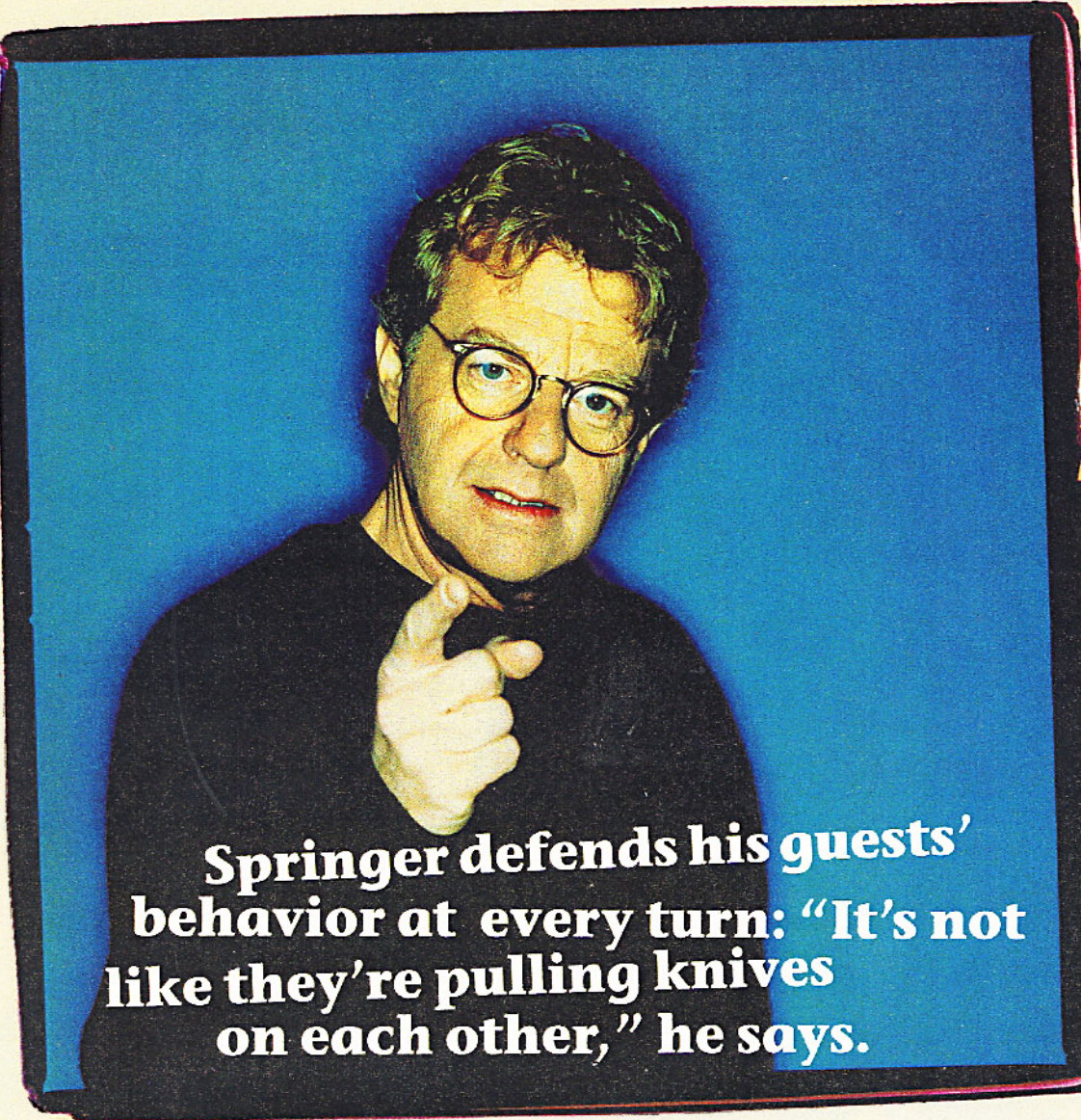
Besides, who needs actors when every week more than 3,000 viewers call

the show with a secret to share, a relationship to break up, a love they can't deny. It's not like these people can't confront or confess in the privacy of their own home. It's just that on *Springer*, bursts of wigged-out emotion are cause for celebration. Not only does Jerry provide a forum for acting out, he also offers an incentive: What you do on his show is retribution free. Slap your cheating man in private and you're gonna get a beatdown. Clock him on *Springer* and you get a) wild applause and b) four security guys to keep that man from hitting you back. It's a televised riot that has an average of six million viewers a day mesmerized. We can't believe what we're seeing, and we can't turn it off.

Jerry wasn't always this hot. A few years ago there were 23 talk shows in production. Everyone from *Cosby* kid Tempestt Bledsoe to *The Partridge Family*'s Danny Bonaduce had a gig. With Richard Bey featuring half-naked mud wrestling guests, Jerry wasn't even the most outrageous. Everything changed, however, after March '95, when *Jenny Jones* guest Jonathan Schmitz of Pontiac, Michigan shot Scott Amedure after Scott "humiliated" Jon with a televised profession of love. There was a huge conservative backlash led by former education secretary Bill Bennett, who called talk shows "a

By Jeannine Amber.

Photographs by Kurt Gerber



Springer defends his guests' behavior at every turn: "It's not like they're pulling knives on each other," he says.

parade of pathologies and dysfunctions." The combination of criticism and an oversaturated market hit talk shows hard: Advertisers fled, ratings fell, shows got canceled, and those who remained tried to clean up their act. Now, Oprah, Rosie, and Ricki are scrambling to outdo one another with kinder, gentler talk: more makeovers, better celebrities, more happy-happy. But not Jerry. His show just keeps getting more insane.

People like New York hip hop DJs Ed Lover and Dr. Dre are such big fans that Jerry had them on to meet their favorite guests. "We love the fact that he's so real," says Dre. "He'll have three or four different women dating the same man, living in the same town, under the same roof, all finding out about each other. Where else can you find that good stuff but on *Jerry*?" Others like veteran news anchor Carol Marin are thoroughly disgusted. Marin resigned from WMAQ-TV last April after it was announced that Jerry had been hired as a commentator. (Jerry quit after only one show.)

No one knows exactly what Jerry's up to. Every week he trots out a motley crew of working-class and welfare guests and invites them to hash out their most intimate conflicts: one guy is sleeping with his brother's 18-year-old wife; two women are pregnant by the same man; some girl stole her mother's boyfriend, and on and on. There may be a twist—like the woman weighs 600 pounds or the guy is a nudist—but the driving force behind every show is always the same: intense confrontation fueled by betrayal, love, envy, and wrath. Add studio lights and a crazed audience, and inevitably a guest's passion floweth over—someone gets smacked or punched or full-body tackled across the stage. The question is, Is Jerry exploiting his guests or simply giving real people their 15 minutes of fame?

Jerry Springer, 54, has three expressions: finger-on-the-face perplexed, furrowed-

brow confused, and shoulder-shrugging bemused. The first two he does when pandemonium breaks out on his show; the last is reserved for when he's talking about it. "We're the flavor of the week, and it's a very outrageous show, and that's all it is," he says, sitting behind a big, brown, wooden desk in a second-floor office in Chicago's NBC tower. Outside is an icy Lake Michigan; inside is a collection of baseball memorabilia—autographed balls from Yogi Berra and Whitey Ford, and framed posters of Mickey Mantle. "We're a comedy show," he laughs. "We're not a talk show." He dismisses the whole subject with a wave of the hand, like it's really not that deep. And Jerry knows deep. Before he got into the talk show biz he was actually a very serious guy: the mayor of Cincinnati and an award-winning journalist.

He shrugs and smiles. "This is just how I make a living. What's interesting, though, is that in all my jobs, my constituency has been the same. I mean, it's always been the people who don't have the power. I find that a lot of these people, they may not have all gone to Harvard, but they're awfully honest. It's so refreshing when you go from here to some hoity-toity cocktail party where everyone's lying all the time. So part of my enjoyment in the show is that it's antiestablish-

ment, which has [always] been my politics."

With his self-effacing brand of TV slickness, it's hard to tell if Jerry's feeding you a line. He sounds sincere, but the guy makes his living refereeing a freak show. Calling this consistent with any politics, let alone progressive ones, seems, well, absurd. Still, Jerry doesn't miss a beat, defending the outrageous behavior of his guests at every turn. "It's not like they're pulling knives on each other," he says. And better yet: "Mostly they jump up, and the chair goes flying. They're not literally picking up the chairs and throwing them."

But Jer, that is so not true! Chairs, stools, shoes, turkey drumsticks—all manner of objects have flown across the stage of the *Jerry Springer Show*. Clothes get pulled off, hair ripped out, people get scratched, bit, and stomped on. Even Lia, who looked so sweet and calm backstage after the show with that shy smile and those little-girl dimples, got up and *Boooff! Bam!* in the face of the woman who was living with her man. "I had her hair," she boasts. "When I pulled her hair out, I threw it up in the wind, and it fell on the stage. It was a big ball of hair on the stage."

And who can blame her? Certainly not Jerry. "I can see why they get that angry, after what they're being told," he says. "If a professor from Harvard comes home and finds his wife in bed with the next-door neighbor, he wouldn't say, 'Forsooth, with whom art thou copulating?' No. He'd say, 'What the...!' And he'd start screaming and yelling like any other person would. So

I understand [the guests' reactions]. I would choose a different way to express it, but that's because my life of privilege has given me these ways to react."

Anyway, Lia says it wasn't like she was *planning* to fight. It's just that before the show she got amped. Sitting in the greenroom, talking to the producers, Lia got all worked up.

There are six producers who work on the *Jerry Springer Show*, most of them under 30, and half of them women who say things like, "I really like to help the guests come to a resolution." And then there's Chris. He's new, a good-looking blond kid from Canada. To hear him tell it, working with the guests is like coordinating a 21-gun salute with a bunch of loose cannons. Like this one time: A guy and girl scheduled to be on two different segments of a show met each other at the hotel and hooked up. So when the guy's girlfriend comes on the show the next day to confront her boyfriend about his past cheating, she instead goes right for this first girl and decks her. *Boom!* Girl lands on the floor. Nobody—not even the producers or Jerry—knew what the hell was going on. Another time a guy was wandering around before the show, and someone threw him into the lake. Constantly, guests cancel, miss their flights, don't show up. Sometimes a whole segment's worth of people will crap out at the last minute. "You've got wild stories, you've got wild people, and you're trying to bring them all the way to Chicago," says Chris. "It's just crazy."

Part of the problem is that Jerry's guests are regular folks with real issues: work conflicts, babysitters flaking on them, and, of course, whatever drama brought them here in the first place. So if the *Springer* staff manage to get the guests, through hell and high water, all the way to the show, the last thing they want is a dud onstage. They want passion; they want emotion. That's why when Chris meets with his guests in the greenroom before the show, he tells them the "Limo Driver Story":

There's this guy, owns the car company that takes guests back to the airport. He can't help but notice the way they sit in the back kicking themselves: "Why didn't I say that? Why didn't I say this?" Now, you don't want to be one of those people, do you? You've only got this one chance. You got to get out there and get it all off your chest.

Laura Grindstaff, an assistant professor at U. Penn's Annenberg School for Communication, who spent a year working at two "Jerry-like" talk shows, says producers will routinely appeal to everything from a guest's self-interest ("You'll feel better") to their sense of



Jerry Springer's Greatest Hits

Jerry Springer wasn't the first daytime talk show host to feature brawling guests. In 1988, Geraldo got his nose broken when white supremacists went buckwild on his stage, and the same year Morton Downey Jr. looked on as Al Sharpton and Roy Innis threw down. But back then, fights were not only rare and unexpected, they were political in nature. Jerry's show, on the other hand, is a carnival of chaos built around good old-fashioned interpersonal conflict: husbands and wives, children and parents, teenage hookers and preop transsexuals. After watching the best-selling video compilation, *Jerry Springer Show: Too Hot for TV* (call 800-653-6318 to purchase), and dozens of other episodes, we've come up with a list of the show's finest moments—the ones that prove you don't need Oprah's Book Club if you just need to club someone.

James Hannaham

Love Me for Who I Am!

The Beef: Hilary, a preop transsexual about to go under the knife, defies his conservative sister.
Them's Fightin' Words: Hilary: This slut doesn't know I could tell her the length of her boyfriends' cocks!
Duration of fight: Eleven seconds.
Winner: Hilary, who retains his wig despite a violent tug.

My Sister Stole My Husband!

The Beef: Eldon is sleeping with Lisa's sister Gina, who is married to Greg. Eldon wants to beat Greg up.
Them's Fightin' Words: Jerry: Gina, you're married.
 Gina: Yes.
 Eldon: To the little dickhead.
Duration: Nineteen seconds.
Winner: Lisa, for slapping Gina while the security guards weren't looking.



Holiday Hell With My Feuding Family!

The Beef: A family food fight erupts because a fat woman's aunt had an affair with her mother's husband.
Them's Fightin' Words: Fat woman: I'm not losing weight for you!
Duration: Twenty seconds.
Winner: The fat woman, who throws the first mashed potato, ends up with it in her hair, and still does a little victory dance.

I'm Pregnant by Your Man!

The Beef: Alisha and Yvonne are both pregnant by Jason. Jerry wonders if they'll get along.

Them's Fightin' Words: Alisha: Don't be jealous!
Duration: Thirteen seconds.
Winner: Yvonne, who jogs from backstage like a heavy weight and later hits Alisha with a shoe and a chair.



I Want My Wife Back!

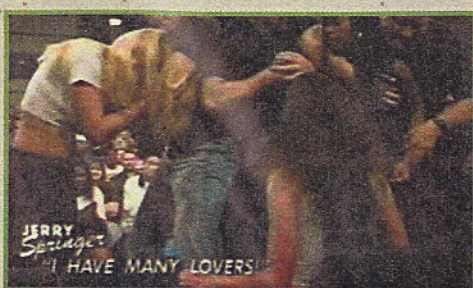
The Beef: Dina's husband and her lover are fighting over her.
Them's Fightin' Words: Lover: Don't tell me what the fuck to do!
Duration: Twenty-one seconds.
Winner: The security guys, who pile on top of one another comically after they've stopped the fight.

I'm Proud to Be a Racist!

The Beef: An old American standard: Klansmen vs. Black Folks.
Them's Fightin' Words: KKK Trash: Sit your fuckin' ass down, nigger!

Duration: Four seconds physical, 20 seconds verbal.

Winner: Jerry Springer, who's nowhere to be seen during the proceedings. Perhaps he went to the bank.



I Have Many Lovers!

The Beef: Lesbian lovers Rhonda and Lavette have been involved for a year. Then Rhonda met Georgia and felt her two lovers should meet in front of the nation.
Them's Fightin' Words: Rhonda: I met a woman...
Duration: Twenty-one seconds.
Winner: Lavette, for her viselike grip on Georgia's flowing blond locks.

justice ("You can't let him treat you like this") to ensure that they deliver the goods. Still, Jerry's producers insist they are neither taking advantage of their guests' desperate situations nor responsible for the mayhem onstage. The guests, they explain, are warned of potential humiliation. Before anyone goes on the show, they have to sign off on a list of possible "surprises": *Your girlfriend might a) be dating your brother b) be dating your sister c) really be a man.* And after the show, the guests are separated and calmed down to defuse any lingering tension. Plus, as one producer after another says, "It's not like they don't know what they're getting into. This isn't CNN."

Grindstaff says the guests understand that if they're going to be on the show, they're expected to act a little crazy. She calls it "the price of admission." In return they get an opportunity to engage in safe, moderated confrontation, a trip to Chicago, and 42.5 minutes of all-eyes-on-me fame. "Many of the people who go on talk shows don't have an arena on television," says Grindstaff. "That's one of the reasons they find it appealing. They don't have anywhere else to go. Like the rest of us, they want some sort of recognition, some place for expression, some place for acknowledgment." Other guests, she adds, who live in the absence of therapy, counseling, and support groups, "really do orient toward the show as a way of dealing with an issue. Not necessarily in a positive or progressive way—but there you have it."

That's why Lia came to Chicago: to deal with things, to confront her man, to get him to choose. But the way things went down, Lia got played. First it was just Lia onstage saying her piece about hating this trashy, filthy woman. Then Lia jumped the girl, pulled out her hair, threw it to the wind. Then Jeff, the object of Lia's affection, joined the two ladies. But instead of sitting with Lia, he's all cuddly with Gina, the woman he lives with, holding her hand and pointing his thumb in Lia's direction. "I told her [this would end one day]," he says, smirking. "She just being stupid." Then he turns to Lia and says, "This is going to be on national television, so all of your little friends will know it's over. So leave me alone." And Lia, separated from the happy couple by an empty chair, just smiles a plastic smile—'cause what else can she do?

When Springer first aired, back in '91, the show was nothing like it is today. It was a sober affair with important guests like Jesse Jackson. And it was right up Jerry's alley. In the '60s, New York-raised Springer organized civil rights and antiwar demonstrations, went to law school, and worked for Bobby Kennedy. In 1970, the day after four students were killed at Kent State, 25-year-old Jerry ran for the U.S. Congress and won the primary on an antiwar platform. He became a Cincinnati councilman, and although he got caught writing a personal check to a hooker in '74, the people loved him so much they elected him mayor. In '82, Jerry turned to television and won seven Emmys as a local newscaster. Then, in the early '90s, Jerry was given his talk show. Everyone expected him to be the next Phil Donahue. However, Jerry says the role didn't feel right. "It was hard for me to take talk shows seriously. I felt uncomfortable faking a furrowed brow. I had a hard time going around telling people it's important that they watch our show because we want to help. It's dishonest."

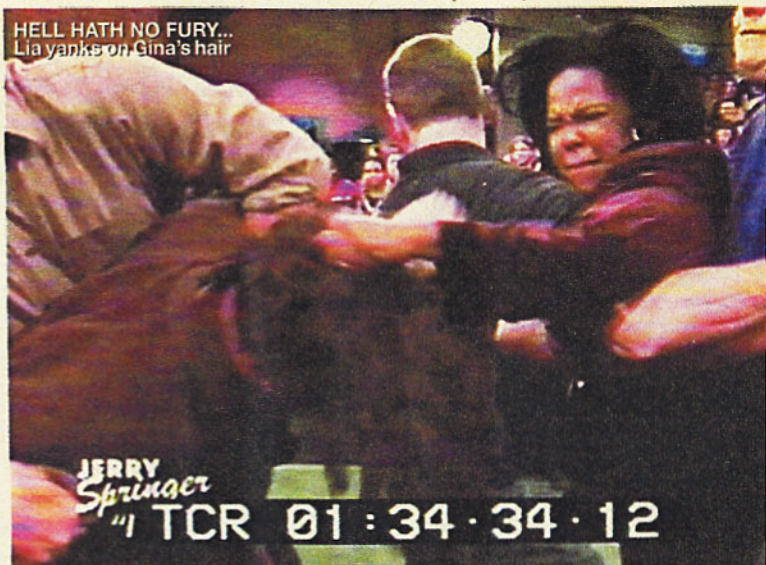
Besides, nobody was watching Jerry's show back then, adds Richard Dominick, a burly, feet-on-the-desk guy who was one of the producers at the time. But Dominick noticed that every time they did something a little freaky, like bringing on the guy who hammered nails in his nose, the ratings shot up. So when

Dominick was promoted to executive producer, in '94, he had one directive for his staff: "I told the producers, If it's not interesting with the sound off, don't bring it to me." On came the stripping housewives, the dueling couples, and the fights. At first Multimedia, the company that owned the show, kept insisting that Dominick edit things out. But then the show was sold to Universal in '96, and Dominick was finally given the green light. He puffs on his cigar. "Now," he says, "you're getting to see it in all its glory."

Ah, yes, the glory. Glory be the fights, the confrontations, the comedic high drama. And *good gracious* glory be all of Jerry's guests. The way they yell and scream and leap out of their chairs to make a point. They defy all standards of polite discourse, and depending on how you look at it, putting these folks on television is either crass exploitation or an act of egalitarian goodwill. Maybe both.

"It's tragic," says Jeff Jarvis, a former critic at *TV Guide*, "the way they get all these people to come on the show and make asses of themselves so we can laugh at them, ridicule them, or at least feel like we are better than them."

Jerry says there's no reason anyone should feel like they're better than the folks on his show. He certainly doesn't—"not by a long shot." In fact, Jerry has a very rosy vision of his guests. "When Judgment Day comes, put me on



They've all been asked to give up their "pepper spray, mace, box cutters, and small knives" at the front door, and are now getting instructions from Todd, the stage manager, on how to act. He tells them they get four responses: *Ohhh* (astonished), *Awww* (sad, confused), *Booo* (disapproval), and wild

go. Like, where does she think she is? This is *our* space."

On Jerry's show, issues of class, gender, and race are both omnipresent and irrelevant at the same time. Interracial couples, big ol' sissy queens, uneducated brothers, abused women, welfare-collecting white boys, and transsexuals exude and emote onstage with nary a reference to their "marginalized status." It's the universal matters of the heart—the stuff of good cries and good fights—that get pushed to the foreground. "It's all about the interpersonal, emotional stuff," says Gamson. "The bigger social conflicts [that used to get debated on talk shows] seem like nonissues all of a sudden." Jerry's show is the great equalizer, ignoring class and racial lines and drawing us together in one comedic, communal, cathartic release—the Brawl. And we love it.

The audience for the taping of Springer's "I Want Your Lover" episode is a healthy cross section of America: black college kids who drove three hours from Peoria, Illinois to get here; a young white guy whose mother tapes "every single one of Jerry's shows"; and a smiling pack of blond, middle-aged women.

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the side of the people with the shorter résumés but the more honest hearts," he says. "The suits may have better education, but that doesn't make them morally superior."

That's easy to say, but Jerry's show depends on the truism that Americans love to make fun of poor folk. It's been a staple of television comedy for years. Shows like *The Honeymooners*, *All in the Family*, and *Sanford and Son* have all held up stereotypes of working-class people, and we've laughed and laughed. Only on *Jerry*, it's real people who've become the butt of the jokes. Not that the producers force anyone onstage; it's just that everyone knows that unless a regular Joe robs a bank or kills someone, he has no place on television.

That's not to say Jerry's guests are simply prostituting themselves to be on the tube. Many of them are using Jerry's show not only as a form of radical group therapy but also as a way to define a space of their own on TV. And it's clear to the audience whom the space belongs to, says Joshua Gamson, assistant professor of sociology at Yale and author of *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity* (University of Chicago Press, 1998). Recently, Gamson took his Yale class to a taping of *Ricki Lake*. One of the students got upset by something that the warm-up comic said. "[She] said that the comic's remarks were really misogynistic," recalls Gamson. "Another woman in the audience [pointed at the Yale student] and said, 'She's got to

applause. "And there's none of *this*," Todd says, pumping his palms at the ceiling. "You can't hear this [*he pumps again*] on TV." Someone wants to know what the show's about, and Todd answers all singsongy, "I can promise you, it's not a reunion, and it's not a makeover." The crowd go nuts. They didn't come for nice; they came for action.

"I Want Your Lover" features six segments, 10 guests, and nine different fights. One slightly chubby brunette, unable to contain herself, rushes the stage, fists flying. Seconds later, two scuffles erupt simultaneously: The women onstage tear at one another's clothes; the men downstage knock over part of the set. The audience members are spellbound, covering their mouths in giddy astonishment, jumping out of their seats, roaring applause. They are more than satisfied. And so, apparently, is Lia.

Despite the fact that her man picked the other girl, that her hair got messed, that her shirt came half off, and that, probably, when the show airs, someone at home will laugh at her, Lia is pleased. "I wanted her to find out everything," she keeps saying. And now that she has, Lia says "I'm glad." Clearly, obsession drove her to it. That pain in her heart and that loop in her head that just wouldn't stop. In another time, Lia might have paced the moors, howled at the moon, or plunged a knife in her breast. But for now, all Lia has are Jerry, the bright studio lights, and a chance to smack the bitch who has her man. ■