

Surly Riser

Chris Elliott is not bad. Really

Here in NBC studio 6A, David Letterman has just cut another "Late Night" guest into sushi. The victim, a hapless turbaned astrologer/psychic named Ostaro, shambles backstage. Still reeling from Letterman's skeptical onslaught, he's met by glad-handing "Late Night" staffers who all try to reassure him that he did wonderfully well. All, that is, except for the slightly geeky guy in the corner who smells blood. Outfitted in a torpedo-size pompadour wig, "Late Night" writer/performer Chris Elliott seems to be immersed in chatter with another guest. But as the dazed seer passes by, Elliott turns smoothly and grins unctuously. "Hi, Ostaro," he purrs with flawless showbiz insincerity, "I'm a big fan of yours."

Zingg! Score another overkill for Chris Elliott, the second banana with bite. In many ways, Elliott is David Letterman's evil twin, playing on the outer fringes of his boss's persona. Elliott possesses a surfeit of the smart-ass, hip manner that marks the show, its host and its cabal of white, male, largely Ivy-educated writers. Elliott has steadily built a following through offbeat, often surly characters who puncture the assumptions of TV—not just brainless sitcoms but "Late Night" itself. And now he's moving beyond the five-minute limits of "Late Night" with a coming 30-minute cable special that is all Elliott.

Elliott started on "Late Night" at the bottom, as a runner, working his way up to production assistant. "Basically, I was in charge of stupid pet tricks," he recalls. He also helped set up



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Part charmer, part wise guy: In his 'Late Night' office at NBC

remote segments and quickly came to the boss's attention. When Letterman would ask Elliott to do a small favor, such as getting him a cup of coffee, the putative gofer would respond, "Yeah, I'll do that for you, Dave... [squint]... when hell freezes over."

Instead of firing him, Letterman laughed. And, when Lorne Michaels hired away a handful of Letterman writers for his fleeting "New Show" in 1983, Elliott seized his chance—and the screen.

First came the now infamous parodies of TV's running characters, from the Fugitive Guy to the Guy Under the Seats; then Elliott took on "Late Night" regulars like comedian Jay Leno and sportscaster Marv Albert with his wicked impressions.

The secret of Elliott's excess is that he knows bad can be good. He was the first natural performer among the writers, says head writer Steve O'Donnell. "The other writers might get a kick out of being on camera, but they know that they basically look like bland college grads." Elliott always plays a pathetic yet funny low-talent spotlight seeker—in O'Donnell's words, "sort of a mock *artiste* with a Wagnerian ego, but a neurotic Wagnerian ego." He's an '80s Lucy Ricardo, with an edge. And Letterman is still laughing. "He'll shake his head," says O'Donnell, "and say, 'Boy—this guy doesn't care *how* bad he makes himself look'."

Elliott parlays all the attitudes of his brief "Late Night" bits into a very funny show, "Action Family," this month on Cinemax. The program spoofs detective and sitcom genres, leaving no cliché unturned, from the dotty wife who burns the pot roast to the knockout punch that sends a combatant sprawling over the hood of a car. The best laughs result when the worlds collide: when Elliott gets home, he swaps his blinding, big-labeled polyester crime-fighter ensemble for a comfy sweater and gives his pistol to his youngest daughter, cooing, "Princess, it's *your* turn to clean daddy's gun!" Even the theme song is funny: cutesy voices sing that at home there's plenty of love, "But when things get tough / Love isn't the answer / Crime is a cancer / Let's blow it away."

Off the set, Elliott is not quite off the set. In life, as on screen, he mixes the charmer and the wise guy. One minute he's utterly winning, saying hello to each employee at his usual eatery just like a regular guy; the next he's sniping at a reporter who takes too long



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'Yeah, I'll do that for you, Dave': With Letterman in a mime field