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Former 'Talk Soup' host Henson stars in new show

Comic John Henson aims to keep the 'Talk Soup' feel by having fun with the crew of his new Spike TV show

By Steven Neuman
Freelance Reporter

When an on-screen personality of a television show puts his or her name in the title, disaster may ensue. A bad review and your reputation could be tarnished forever.

Given this, John Henson, host of "The John Henson Project," has defiantly put himself in the line of fire.

That's a hard place to stand considering that most of the time Henson's

TELEVISION REVIEW

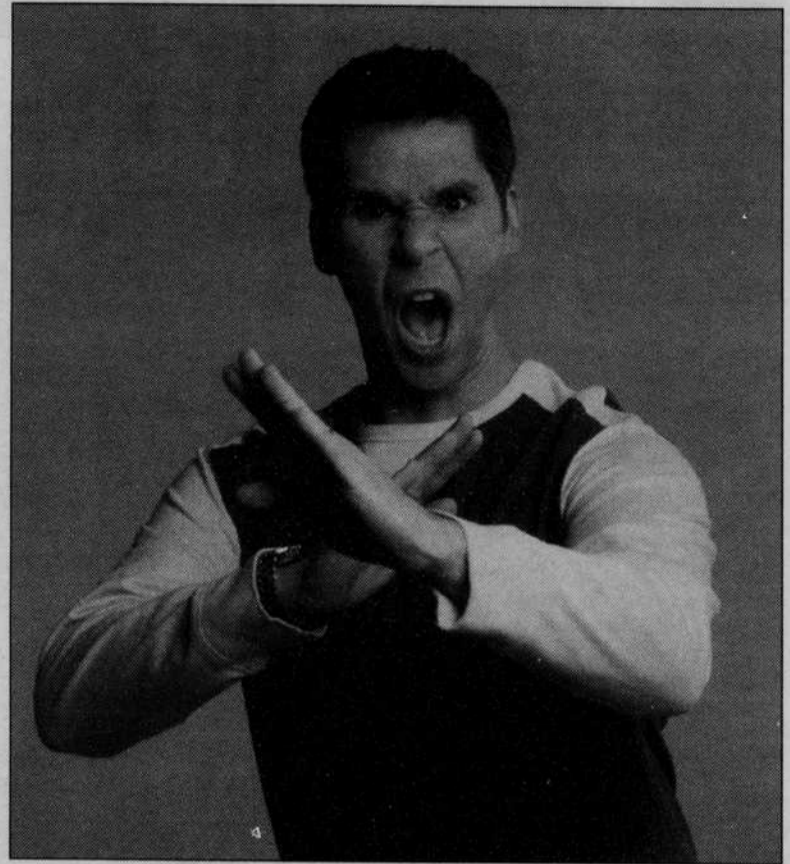
"Project" is either brilliantly funny or horridly bad. Still, his charming persona is extremely likable, and more than anything, "The John Henson Project" feels promising.

Henson is best known from his work on E!'s "Talk Soup" program. After Greg Kinnear left the show in 1995, Henson replaced the popular host of an already established hit and reinvented the show with his own flair. Henson's "Talk Soup" roots are prominently displayed in his new "Project" — the writing staff boasts many of the same writers, and the "man talking to a camera" dynamic still survives.

Henson said he was unafraid to break new ground, making his own comedy rather than stringing jokes off the clip-based format of his previous show.

"Talk Soup" was very limited in scope — it only dealt with the talk shows," he said. "This show is skewering all of pop culture from a male point of view, so it's a much broader spectrum to be dealing with creatively."

Henson first hooked up with Spike TV when he taped a segment for the short-lived "The Conspiracy Zone with Kevin Nealon" back when it was still known as TNN. Executives from the



Courtesy

In "The John Henson Project," Henson graduates to a more experimental show.

network approached him last spring with a proposal for his own show.

"The hardest thing in this business that I've found is trying to find an outlet that wants you to do exactly what it is that you want to do. Usually, they want to do X and you want to do Y and you find a compromise," Henson said. "This is the first time since 'Talk Soup' that I've really been able to do whatever I wanted to do creatively, and it's a lot of fun," he said."

In many ways, Henson's show is like "The Daily Show" without the politics. He looks through a male-centric comedic lens upon the world of news, sports and other topical happenings in a series of different studio segments broken up by clips of sketch-style comedy bits. However, unlike "The Daily Show," Henson doesn't try to play the faux-newsman card.

Because "Project" is airing on the testosterone-targeted Spike TV, the show is obligated to employ Maxim-esque women in scantily clad outfits. In terms of humor content, such in-studio segments seem to beg for a bullet to put them out of their misery. A 30-second fashion show of models wearing men's work uniforms was 29 seconds too long.

However, Henson has two strongholds where his apparent stiffness melts away to reveal sparkling comedy: his weekly wrap-up of news, and his outings into the real world. His excursions to strange conferences and events, such as a Los Angeles auto show or a local gun show, proves he is funny when he lets his guard down.

In these bizarre locales are the moments of the dark comedy that Henson finally seems comfortable with.

However, the show is readjusting as it goes and it seems to be on a good learning curve, slowly fazing out this shlocky sthick in favor of a smarter style. The newest episodes seem to have tightened up considerably, trimming the lame recycled "Man Show" humor and stock jokes. Henson, like many before him (Conan O'Brien comes to mind), seems to be taking time to warm-up to the gig.

"My hope is that as the show moves forward and progresses that each week, it gets a little funnier, a little more unique, and at its best you think to yourself, 'If I like watching that, then I have to watch this show because these are the only guys doing that.'"

Henson said the one thing he tried to preserve from his "Talk Soup" days was the sense of fun the writers and the crew were having on the set.

"That's our attitude: If it makes us laugh, it should make the audience laugh. I wanted it to feel like a group of friends who were making a TV show, instead of this cold, distant, TV professional," he said.

"We're just a bunch of guys that someone was dumb enough to give a half hour of TV to, and this is what we're going to do to amuse ourselves until someone comes to their senses and fires us."

"The John Henson Project" airs Sunday nights at 11 p.m. on Spike TV.

Steven Neuman is a freelance reporter for the Emerald.

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