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ARTS AND LEISURE DESK

Paar to Leno, J.F.K. to J.F.K.

By FRANK RICH (NYT) 1825 words

TO survey the progress of America's political culture over four decades, you need rerun only two TV shows, each starring a Massachusetts Democrat with the initials J.F.K.

On June 16, 1960, Senator John Fitzgerald Kennedy, in a natty suit, sat next to the brilliant and much-mourned Jack Paar on NBC's "Tonight Show" and fielded more than 30 minutes' worth of questions from his host, the droll comedian Peggy Cass and the New York studio audience. The subjects were the U-2 incident, the failed Soviet summit, Cuba and "the Catholic question." Mr. Paar tried to elicit a laugh only once, asking the senator to recall amusing anecdotes from the primary campaign trail. Kennedy was stumped, and when his one example ("I was made an honorary Indian") landed with a thud, the two men scampered back for safety to the cold war.

On Nov. 11, 2003, Senator John Forbes Kerry appeared on the same NBC show, now presided over by Jay Leno from Burbank. But instead of strolling onstage in his senatorial uniform, the candidate arrived, via Harley-Davidson, attired in a brown leather jacket, black boots, a denim shirt and jeans. Mr. Kerry fielded a few questions about his then-lagging campaign, but that was secondary to his comic "material." The candidate mused that the show's other guest, the puppet Triumph the Insult Comic Dog, might be his pick as a ticket mate and quipped, "Can you imagine Triumph debating Dick Cheney?"

Well, you had to be there. Mr. Kerry doing comedy is cognitive dissonance run amok. Though the senator does ride a Harley-Davidson in real life (it was a less proletarian Ducati before the campaign), his entire performance reeked of phoniness. A dour Boston Brahmin was trying to pass himself off as a wisecracking biker. And he was doing so after having given an interview (to Julia Reed of Vogue) criticizing President Bush's handlers for identical theatrics: "They put him in a brown jacket and jeans and get him to move some hay or drive a truck, and all of a sudden he's the Marlboro Man."

But if the late-night TV performance intended to reveal the "authentic," non-Washington John Kerry was inauthenticity incarnate, Kennedy's "Tonight Show" turn of 11 election cycles earlier was nearly as bogus. By the standards of 1960, a presidential candidate's appearance on an entertainment program was considered a bit shocking; no politician had done it before. In his introduction, Mr. Paar felt it necessary to prep the audience at length. After noting that the host of NBC's "Meet the Press," Lawrence Spivak, did his job "very well," he added: "I have noticed if you watch political programs, they ask political questions and the answers are political. . . . When it's all over, no one's said anything. In this relaxed atmosphere of the 'Tonight Show' you meet people who aren't on guard and not as tense and perhaps not as political."

Or so he wished. Though Paar was as charming and human and witty as ever (especially when he had to interrupt his guest to hawk such sponsors as Lip Quick and ReaLemon), Kennedy responded with fat paragraphs of well-

practiced stump boilerplate. Paar would later commend the candidate for his "very brave and courageous" act of appearing on a show where "anything can happen," but the candidate made sure nothing would happen. He still didn't have the nomination locked up and his political agenda was not to appear too young. So he offered a phony persona that was exactly the inverse of Kerry's act 43 years later: he suppressed his natural wit and youthfulness to make himself seem as stolid and humorless as his opponent, Richard Nixon. In the debates yet to come Kennedy would prove far more up-to-speed than Nixon about how to manipulate the still young medium of TV. (He didn't hang with the Rat Pack for nothing.) The character he presented, however fictionalized, was golden. But whether we ever saw the "real" Kennedy in his public persona remains a subject of historical debate.

The playacting that was still a novelty in 1960 is the meat of the presidential campaign today, but its rise in importance is relatively recent. After Kennedy's Paar appearance, network executives predicted that such guest shots on entertainment programs would be rare. It was "highly unlikely the candidates will be popping up on such telecasts as 'This Is Your Life,' " The New York Times reported. Nixon would soon appear with Paar, but it took two more presidential elections for him to pop up on "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In" and say "Sock it to me!" Ronald Reagan didn't have to bother with such antics; he had been there, done that as a professional before entering politics. ("Bedtime for Bonzo" was directed by Freddy De Cordova, later the producer of Johnny Carson's "Tonight Show.") It wasn't until 1992 that the last barrier was breached: Bill Clinton donned Blues Brothers shades to play the saxophone on "The Arsenio Hall Show" and talked about his underwear on MTV. Even then his opponent, the pop-culture-challenged first president Bush, barely mustered a media counterattack, settling for "Larry King Live" and an embittered last-minute MTV interview.

Only in 2000 did the campaign become full-fledged performance art. George W. Bush turned up on "Live With Regis" in a gag costume (a wardrobe matching Mr. Philbin's) and made a tasteless joke on Letterman about his host's open-heart surgery. Joe Lieberman sang "My Way" on Conan O'Brien. Both Mr. Bush and Al Gore paid their respects to Oprah, who, like Paar, told her audience that she wanted to break down "this wall that exists between the people and the authentic part of the candidate." Again like Paar, she failed. Every candidate now arrives on an entertainment program with an "unguarded" persona that is as carefully contrived as the wonk persona served up in venues labeled News.

You can see this cultural shift in embryo in the prescient Robert Altman-Garry Trudeau HBO series "Tanner '88," now being rerun by the Sundance Channel. As a fictional Democratic candidate (Michael Murphy) competes in the primaries against Michael Dukakis and Gary Hart, he seems no more or less synthetic than the actual politicians who do cameos as "themselves" in the show (Bruce Babbitt, Bob Dole). He certainly seems more genuine than Mr. Dukakis, who was destined to seal his own TV doom by posing for the cameras in a tank (a self-inflicted blunder that may have found its equal in George W. Bush's "Top Gun" flyboy stunt, a blistering Democratic ad campaign in waiting). The fictional Tanner's campaign slogan, not so incidentally, was "For Real" -- now echoed by such '04 real-life candidates as Mr. Kerry ("The Real Deal") and John Edwards ("Real Solutions for America"). Politics has redefined the word real as fully as reality TV has. Its new definition is fake.

So why pretend otherwise? For all the talk about the necessity of plumbing presidential character in the post-Clinton era, we must remember that we are dealing with fictional characters, not actual character, and adjust our judgments accordingly. The sole exception this year may have been Howard Dean, whose campaign's brilliant use of the Internet led it to neglect the creation of a telegenic persona until it was too late and TV created a devastating one for him. In a year in which the likely presidential opponents, both wealthy Yale-educated scions of patrician New England families, will adopt the manners, costumes and vehicles of what they take to be the Nascar demographic, their masquerade as ordinary guys will tell us no more than their rhetorical dodging and weaving before today's Lawrence Spivak, Tim Russert.

This is true even when the candidates appear on the smartest and least canned late-night TV show of the bunch, Jon Stewart's "Daily Show." Ben Karlin, its executive producer, says: "There's almost nothing genuine about a politician appearing on our show, including those we like. We're being used to bring them some associative hipness -- so they can say, look at us, our guy can laugh at himself. We have no illusions about it. We're just another part of the media strategy." Indeed, such a media strategy could be seen most clearly at work after the Dean "scream," when the candidate immediately made himself available to do a self-deprecating "Top Ten" list on Letterman, if

only with the hope that that new tape loop might replace the one of his Iowa yelp on cable and network news. (It was not to be; Dr. Dean trying to be funny was not as funny as Dr. Dean's improvised Iowa peroration.)

On "The Daily Show," Mr. Karlin was particularly surprised by the lackluster performance of Dennis Kucinich, who, as the most outspoken of the Democratic candidates, might have been expected to show some human spontaneity in a comedy format. Instead he clammed up. Does anyone even flirt with being real? I asked. Mr. Karlin's favorite political guests of late are Joe Biden ("the most impressive . . . he improves his image without demeaning himself"), Bob Dole ("pretty candid") and John McCain ("who smiles through clenched teeth so you know what he's really saying even when he toes the party line"). What all these men have in common, of course, is that none of them is currently running for president.

Neither George Bush nor John Kerry has appeared with Jon Stewart, though Mr. Kerry, the only Democratic contender not yet to do so, is expected to turn up. But if a Bush-Kerry race it is, this is going to be a tough slog in a campaign universe in which dozens of Jack Paars, not merely one, are eager for the candidates to come on and perform their well-rehearsed simulations of reality. Neither man is a TV natural, with or without Botox, no matter what boots they're wearing. The only presidential candidate in either party this year who is comfortable with a contrived TV persona has past show business experience, as Ronald Reagan did: Al Sharpton was a road manager for James Brown.

But would-be presidents have no choice but to get with the program. For all the lip-service paid to authenticity, many voters have come to prefer a show to the naked truth. Contemplating Jack Paar's invitations to Kennedy and Nixon in 1960, the Times columnist James Reston wrote that it was "not quite clear" why "these two deadly serious and tense young men want to prove they are funny and relaxed."It's clear now. Tip O'Neill's old saw that "all politics is local" is defunct on the national stage. In its place is another adage attributed to an equally wise man, George Burns: if you can fake sincerity, you've got it made.

CAPTIONS: Photos: Playacting: Jack Paar and John F. Kennedy in 1960, left, and Jay Leno and John F. Kerry in 2003. (Photo by Kevin Winter/Getty Images); (Photo by Reuters)(pg. 22)

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