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NETWORK
PROGRAM The Oprah Winfrey Show

Interview: < Jay Leno: The Tonight Show Fiasco >

HOST: Oprah Winfrey

Executive Producer: Sheri Salata

JAY LENO: THE TONIGHT SHOW FIASCO - LIVE

[GRAPHICS: OPRAH]

ANNOUNCER: Today, all new.

OPRAH WINFREY, HOST: The Tonight Show fiasco. I'm sitting down with Jay Leno in his studio to hear his side of the story. When they asked you to go back, did you ever think. "I'm taking away Conan's dream?" America has taken sides and a lot of people are not on your side. Did you ever ask yourself well, am I being selfish? Do you think you can be number one again?

ANNOUNCER: The exclusive.

JAY LENO: This whole thing was a huge mess.

ANNOUNCER: Next.

[GRAPHICS: OPRAH]

WINFREY: Come on out, Jay. Hey.

[GRAPHICS: "THE JAY LENO SHOW" SET BURBANK, CA]

Mr. LENO: Hey, doll. Hey, doll

WINFREY: How are you?

Mr. LENO: How are you? You look beautiful.

WINFREY: Thank you. Well, thanks for letting me come to talk to you.

Mr. LENO: Well, thanks for coming. I appreciate it.

WINFREY: Yeah. I'm glad to be here, because you seem to be the man everybody's talking about.

Mr. LENO: Lucky me.

WINFREY: Or at least one of them.

Mr. LENO: Yeah, yeah.

[BEGIN VIDEO CLIP]

WINFREY: It's the late night controversy that seems to have everybody riled up, Jay versus Conan.

KATE, 23: I think that Jay Leno's taking back what's rightfully his.

ANDREA, 29: I think the fact that Jay Leno's choosing not to retire shows that he's not really a very caring person.

WINFREY: It all started five years ago when Jay says NBC came to him and asked him to give up his number one rated "Tonight Show" to make room for Conan O'Brien to become host in 2009.

[GRAPHICS: THE TONIGHT SHOW WITH JAY LENO SEPTEMBER 27, 2004]

Mr. LENO: This show is like a dynasty, you hold it and then you hand it off to the next person. So right now here it is, Conan, it's yours. See you in five years, buddy. Okay.

WINFREY: Last May, Jay passed the torch as planned.

CONAN O'BRIEN: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to "The Tonight Show with Conan O'Brien." Thank you.

WINFREY: In an unprecedented move, NBC decided to keep Jay on the air and gave him the coveted 10:00 p.m. Primetime slot five nights a week.

[GRAPHICS: SEPTEMBER 14, 2009]

WINFREY: In September, "The Jay Leno Show" launched. After a strong start, ratings for both shows slide and rumors swirled that "The Jay Leno Show" was about to get canceled.

Mr. LENO: I don't think there's any truth to the rumors. See, it's always been my experience NBC only cancels you when you're in first place, so we're fine.

WINFREY: NBC then came up with a new plan--move Jay to 11:35 and push Conan back a half-hour to 12:05.

Mr. O'BRIEN: NBC has finally come up with an exciting new idea. They want me to follow Jay Leno.

WINFREY: Jay accepted the offer. That's when the war of the words began.

Mr. O'BRIEN: And I just want to say to the kids out there watching, you can do anything you want in life. Yeah. Yeah, unless Jay Leno wants to do it, too.

WINFREY: In the end, Conan turned down the deal and took a \$45 million buyout. Last Friday night, Conan said goodbye.

[GRAPHICS: THE TONIGHT SHOW WITH CONAN O'BRIEN JANUARY 22, 2010]

Mr. O'BRIEN: Ladies and gentlemen, we have exactly one hour to steal every single item in this studio.

WINFREY: And Jay is coming back to host "The Tonight Show."

[END VIDEO CLIP]

WINFREY: Okay. So let's go back to five years ago when it was first announced to us, the public, that you were going to be leaving "The Tonight Show." How did that come about?

Mr. LENO: I was in my office and one of the executives came and said, "Listen, you know, Conan's getting offers from the other networks. We don't want to lose him. We want to give him the show, and we're asking you to leave, essentially." And that was pretty shocking.

WINFREY: This is 2004?

Mr. LENO: This is 2004, yeah.

WINFREY: Had there been a prior discussion that at some point, you would hand the show over to Conan or that...

Mr. LENO: No.

WINFREY: ...you'd have the show for a while?

Mr. LENO: I assumed that...

WINFREY: That the franchise would be handed over?

Mr. LENO: I assumed that as long as you're keeping something number one, you remain number one. And then when you start to slip or indications that you're slipping, that's when you step down.

WINFREY: When they came into your office, they, NBC executives, come to your office, your show is number one in nighttime and tell you that you're going to be moving out in five years, what is your first reaction to that?

Mr. LENO: It broke my heart. It really did. I was devastated. This is the job that I always wanted and it was the only job that ever mattered in show business to me. It's the job every comic aspires to. And it was just like, "What's--why--what is it?" "Well, we're getting pressure here and Conan's people want to make this announcement and to make sure you do leave we want to announce it right now, you know, prior to the five years." And I said, "Can we at least wait and as I said the other night on my show, couldn't we wait until I'm number two and then say, okay, he dropped to number two, that's the reason we're moving you."

WINFREY: So in your mind this happened or that move happened, because Conan wanted that spot?

Mr. LENO: Yeah.

WINFREY: And...

Mr. LENO: Well, what happened was Conan's contract was up and ABC I think and some other networks were making overtures.

WINFREY: To Conan.

Mr. LENO: NBC didn't want to lose him.

WINFREY: So they asked you to move out in order to make room for Conan to promise Conan "The Tonight Show" slot.

Mr. LENO: Right. Right.

WINFREY: Even though your show was number one at the time?

Mr. LENO: Mm-hmm.

WINFREY: So that broke your heart?

Mr. LENO: Yeah, it really did. I mean it was--I was devastated. I'm not a person who carries my emotions on the sleeve, but you know something? I'm happy with what I had, it was a tremendous success up to that point, I'm going to do the best I can to keep it number one for the next five years.

WINFREY: Okay. So were you planning at the end of that five-year period, 2009, you were--what were you going to do?

Mr. LENO: Well, I did tell a white lie on the air, I said I'm going to retire. It just made it easier that way. But I assumed I would find a job in show business somewhere. If I kept "The Tonight Show" number one...

WINFREY: Did you think you'd go to another network?

Mr. LENO: I assumed that's what would happen, yeah.

WINFREY: Mm-hmm. So at what point did the NBC executives come to you and say, "We want you to do your show in prime time?"

Mr. LENO: Well, the fly in the ointment was, uh-oh, we were number one right up until the day we left. In fact, they had me leave seven months early before my contract was up because this would preclude me from going somewhere. And plus, I have 175 people that work for me. So I thought well, the best way to keep things smooth was NBC came up with this 10:00 idea, and you know, I said...

WINFREY: When did they come up with the 10:00 idea?

Mr. LENO: I guess it was in the fall of 2008. And they had their charts and the graphs. "Well, you see people would love to see you at this time." They had all these things about why it might work at 10:00. And I said, "Well, can I keep my same staff? Can we keep--maybe take a month and a half off or so and then bring everybody back in a smooth transition?" And they said, "Yeah, we can do that." I said, "Okay, let's try it."

WINFREY: So this was your option, moving to prime time rather than going to another network or going through looking for another job...

Mr. LENO: Well, going to another network, boy, it's a lot of work. I mean you don't know where you're going, you don't know who you're dealing with. I've been at this network since 1984 in one form or another. I know the lighting guys, I know what lighting guys I want, I know the makeup--I just know--I'm comfortable here. I'm not someone who jumps around.

WINFREY: Did you not feel disrespected by the NBC executives?

Mr. LENO: Oh, yeah, I most certainly did.

WINFREY: So was it against your better judgment to do the prime time show?

Mr. LENO: Well, I chose to do it, so I take full responsibility.

WINFREY: And did you do it because is there part of you that finds it hard to say goodbye to television?

Mr. LENO: I did it because it's an interesting challenge.

WINFREY: How did you feel as the date was approaching for you to say your final goodbye on "The Tonight Show?" How difficult was that last night?

Mr. LENO: It was difficult, you know. You know, paradise is the ability to know you're in it before you're cast out of it, and that's the way I look at life. You know, it's like being married. I go, oh, that girl's cute, oh, boy, no, no, that would be trouble. So I go home and I see my wife and I go, okay, I know what paradise is, okay, and I'm living in it. And it's the same thing with this. Every day coming to work here was paradise. It's a wonderful staff, great people to work with, it was a lot of fun, and the days just rolled by. It wasn't one of these things where, "Oh, this is horrible. I'm nervous, I hate it." It was just the most wonderful experience of my life.

WINFREY: Doing "The Tonight Show?"

Mr. LENO: Yeah. The greatest.

WINFREY: So saying goodbye that night was really difficult?

Mr. LENO: Yeah, it was tough. That was tough. And it was fun because I'd say 60% to 70% of my staff had never worked in TV before and they were all single, most of them, and it was fun to watch different staff members intermarry and have children, and that's when we brought those kids out, the 64 kids that came out at the end. That was so much fun for me.

WINFREY: Yeah, because the show becomes a family.

Mr. LENO: It really does. I'm not one--because usually when an employer says we're a family here, that means they want to pay you minimum wage, put your picture on the wall once a month. But it really was like a family. And it was fun. And the idea of being able to keep all those people together and try something at 10:00, okay, let's do it.

[GRAPHICS: COMING UP]

WINFREY: Coming up, a lot of people are not on your side. Do you see in any way how you've been selfish?

Mr. LENO: Well...

WINFREY: And later, do you feel any personal responsibility for Conan's disappointment?

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

[BEGIN VIDEO CLIP]

WINFREY: Last Friday night, Conan O'Brien left "The Tonight Show" after a short seven months.

[GRAPHICS: THE TONIGHT SHOW WITH CONAN O'BRIEN JANUARY 22, 2010]

Mr. O'BRIEN: Walking away from "The Tonight Show" is the hardest thing I've ever had to do.

WINFREY: After canceling his prime time show, NBC is now moving Jay Leno back to his old job. America seems to be taking this personally.

ASHISH, 31: The fans are suffering, the viewers are suffering.

DAVID, 44: Conan didn't get a chance to do anything. Seven months was not enough.

PAT, 58: I think it's been very bad management on the part of NBC.

WINFREY: Some people are calling Jay selfish, while others say Conan just can't cut it.

[END VIDEO CLIP]

WINFREY: Did you think that Conan had what it took to take over "The Tonight Show?"

Mr. LENO: Yeah, I think he did. Yeah. He followed me successfully for 16 years and was number one, and we were number one, and it was a good team. I mean, even though that situation happened in 2004, Conan and I talked, and this was a network decision. This is what the network wanted.

WINFREY: Were you friends? Were you and Conan friends?

Mr. LENO: Oh, yes, very much.

WINFREY: So you and Conan talked after that first announcement.

Mr. LENO: Yeah, we talked many times after that. Because you know, the odd thing about this is there's only a half a dozen people in the United States that know what this experience is, and you can really only share it with them.

WINFREY: So you bore no hard feelings towards him even though...

Mr. LENO: No, not at all. Not at all.

WINFREY: ...he was going to be taking over your spot?

Mr. LENO: No, not at all. Because I took over the spot from someone else as well. I mean, he was my last guest. You know, I wished him luck and asked the audience to please watch and tune in.

WINFREY: And meant well by it?

Mr. LENO: Oh, very much so, yeah.

WINFREY: Okay. So the other question is going to the prime time show, did that sort of make up for losing "The Tonight Show?"

Mr. LENO: Yeah, in a way it did. There's nothing like that. I mean you're going into uncharted territory, actually, and it's a lot more competitive. You know, when you're on late night, I know I'm against Dave every night.

WINFREY: Right.

Mr. LENO: And I know if he has Oprah on that night.

WINFREY: And you were beating Dave.

Mr. LENO: Yeah. And I know if he has Oprah that night, I'm in trouble. But I know he's got so-and-so, I know I'm okay. So we could book against it, you know, to try and book against the CSI 'evil twin' episode, that's going to be very hard to do.

WINFREY: And was it true--I had heard this--that there were other networks who wanted you to fail and therefore weren't allowing their people...

Mr. LENO: Of course the other guys want you to fail. The unusual thing was they actually boycotted us. And they actually said that in the trades, that it was a calculated effort...

WINFREY: To not send their people?

Mr. LENO: ...to keep their guests off our show. But I get that. That's fine. That's not an excuse for why the show failed. It's just another level of competition that did not exist.

WINFREY: So it made it more difficult to do, yes.

Mr. LENO: Oh, way more. Oh, yeah. Way more difficult.

WINFREY: Way more difficult?

Mr. LENO: Oh, yeah, yeah. "Please welcome the animals from the San Diego Zoo, ladies and gentlemen." You know, I mean, it's hard to get those stars.

WINFREY: Yeah. So that first night after that, you're heralded as the future of television.

Mr. LENO: Well, that's not necessarily a good thing, but yeah.

WINFREY: Did you read this article?

Mr. LENO: I did read the article. Yes, surprisingly I did read the article.

WINFREY: Okay. Did you believe that article?

Mr. LENO: I thought it was a fair, yeah.

WINFREY: Okay. Then did you read this article?

Mr. LENO: Yeah, that's another one. Yeah.

WINFREY: Four months later.

Mr. LENO: Yeah. You know, I think in show business, you try not to believe the good stuff and you try not to believe the bad stuff. The truth always lies somewhere in the middle.

WINFREY: Yeah.

Mr. LENO: Yeah.

WINFREY: Okay. Why do you think the show failed?

Mr. LENO: Well, I think the show failed, because it was basically a late night talk show at 10:00. I mean, you're competing against dramas that are \$3 million to \$6 million an episode.

WINFREY: When the numbers started to drop, was your ego bruised by that? Because you're used to being number one.

Mr. LENO: I wouldn't say my ego was bruised. I felt bad for everybody on the show and I felt bad for our affiliates. A couple weeks ago I called the head of the affiliate board and I said listen, they're the ones that canceled us, and I said, "I'm sorry I let you guys down. I mean, you guys supported us, you went along with the decision. I'm sorry our show wasn't successful for you."

WINFREY: Because if it had worked, it would have saved millions of dollars.

Mr. LENO: Yeah. Yeah. Actually, the odd thing is, it was making money for the network, it wasn't for the affiliates.

WINFREY: The other side of that, many people say that your going into prime time five nights a week, it took away thousands of jobs from other people who would have been working on dramas...

Mr. LENO: I've got to admit, that was not something I even realized until we went on the air. But they're not wrong. I have to admit, that one did catch me. We were on the air when I realized, wow, I have to admit, that one I didn't know about that.

WINFREY: Because you weren't thinking about...

Mr. LENO: No, I wasn't thinking about that at the time.

WINFREY: ...the shows that would have been on had you not been on.

Mr. LENO: Right. Right.

WINFREY: Do you think you weren't given enough time to build an audience?

Mr. LENO: No, I was given enough time. You know, I got it. I mean, I'm a big boy. It didn't work. You know, it's a TV show that got canceled. I'm actually surprised that this got this much attention and it made me laugh when I would open the paper and for the last six months I've been in the paper every day. Every day, I'm almost on the front page. And it just sort of makes me laugh and I'm on there for not sexual innuendos or drunk driving. I'm on there because of a TV show. And it just sort of--I chuckle to myself a little bit about that.

WINFREY: Well, part of the reason I think that you're on there because, and it's so fascinating to me, that America has taken sides, and a lot of people are not on your side...

Mr. LENO: Yeah, I understand that.

WINFREY: And they're not on your side because they think that you've been selfish in this. Do you see in any way how you've been selfish? They think that you took the job away from Conan.

Mr. LENO: Well, it all comes down to numbers in show business. If you're getting the ratings--I mean, think of this. This is almost a perfect storm of bad things happening. You have two hit shows, "The Tonight Show" number one, "Conan" number one. You move them both to another situation, and what are the odds that both would do extremely poorly? Now, if Conan's numbers had been a little bit higher, it wouldn't even be an issue, but in show business, there's always somebody waiting in the wings.

WINFREY: Had Conan's numbers been higher, you'd have never been asked to go back to take the time slot?

Mr. LENO: I never expected this to happen. People think you're behind the scenes pulling strings. There's no strings to pull. I have a show that's been canceled. So why would I have any power to go, oh, I want that? What happened was NBC came to me and they said, "Look, your show was down 14%, Conan's show was down 49%. We have a plan. We want to keep you both" because I asked, I said, "Can I be released from my contract?" And they said no.

WINFREY: This was your contract on the prime time show?

Mr. LENO: On the prime time show.

WINFREY: When did you ask that, Jay?

Mr. LENO: I asked maybe a day after we got canceled. And I said, "Well, can I move on?" "No, you're still a valuable asset." I said, "You fired me twice, how valuable can I be as an asset?" "Oh, no, we want to keep you." I said okay. And they said, "Here's our plan..."

WINFREY: Okay. Okay. Stop right there. Why didn't you then just say, "All right, you fired me twice. I'm out of here, guys?" Because that seems like the ultimate in disrespect to me.

Mr. LENO: No. I got fired this time because my show did not perform. Makes perfect sense to me. My show was not winning its time period. That's a perfectly valid reason to go...

WINFREY: "You're out of here."

Mr. LENO: "Pack your bags."

WINFREY: So at the time that they told you that your show is canceled, the prime time show is canceled, did they offer you in the same breath an opportunity to go back to "The Tonight Show?"

Mr. LENO: No. What they said was, "Here's our plan. We'd like you to do a half-hour at 11:35 and Conan would do an hour at 12:05." And I said, "Conan keeps

"The Tonight Show" and all the, you know, glitter and star power that goes with it?" And they said yeah. I said okay. I said, "That's okay for me."

WINFREY: So what's your show going to be called? What's the 11:30 show?

Mr. LENO: ...it would still be "The Jay Leno Show," and I would do a monologue and maybe one comedy piece. And I thought, "Okay, I'll do a half-hour at 11:30 and Conan an hour." And I remember saying to one of the executives, "Do you think Conan will go for that?" "Oh, yeah. Yeah. That's not a problem. We are 75% sure Conan will take this deal." I said okay. We shake hands. Again, I'm not a big contract guy. We shake hands. "I'll do a half-hour, Conan does an hour. Let's see what happens."

WINFREY: Was there any part of you that thought, "You know, let me think about this. Let me have a conversation with Conan. Let me see if Conan wants to take the hour?" Was there any part of you that thought, "You know what? I've already done that enough let's move on."

Mr. LENO: Actually, it wasn't my place to call Conan and say, you know, they made this offer to me, and I said, "Do you think Conan will go for this?" and they said, "We'll ask him tomorrow." I said, "Okay, let me know what happens." And then the next thing you know, I guess Conan had his article in the paper and that was that.

WINFREY: Yeah. Conan said he thought it would be destructive to the franchise and that if he took that spot...

Mr. LENO: Well, if you look at what the ratings were, it was already destructive to the franchise.

WINFREY: Mm-hmm. But he said that he did not want to take the hour at 12:05...

Mr. LENO: Well, there was no discussion on it. You know, the last discussion I had was it looks like he was going to go for it, and then he publicly said no. And by that time, it had pretty much hit the fan and everything was all over the place and there wasn't a lot of talking going on.

WINFREY: But then it got ugly. We'll be right back.

[GRAPHICS: COMING UP]

WINFREY: Coming up, have you talked to Conan in person? And later...

Mr. LENO: I would spend a lot of time just thinking about it, going, "I think I'm a good guy. Am I not a good guy?"

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

WINFREY: You've made a living making jokes about other people.

Mr. LENO: Mm-hmm.

WINFREY: During their difficult times.

Mr. LENO: Right, right.

WINFREY: So did you--you thought you were fair game?

Mr. LENO: Right.

WINFREY: Even for Jimmy Kimmel when Jimmy Kimmel was on?

Mr. LENO: Again, I had Jimmy Kimmel on my show, and yeah, I got sucker punched.

[BEGIN VIDEO CLIP]

[GRAPHICS: THE JAY LENO SHOW JANUARY 14, 2010]

Mr. LENO: You're known for pranks. What's the best prank you ever pulled?

JIMMY KIMMEL: I think the best prank I ever pulled was I told a guy that five years from now, I'm going to give you my show, and then when the five years came, I gave it to him and then I took it back almost instantly.

Mr. LENO: Ah.

Mr. KIMMEL: Conan and I have children. All you have to take care of is cars.

Mr. LENO: That's right.

Mr. KIMMEL: I mean, we have lives to lead here. You've got \$800 million. For god sakes, leave our shows alone.

[LAUGHTER]

[END VIDEO CLIP]

Mr. LENO: It's my show. I could have edited it. But I said, no, no, put it out there. I walked into it.

WINFREY: Did you know he was going that far?

Mr. LENO: No, no, I didn't. No, I didn't.

WINFREY: Yeah, the jokes about the cars...

Mr. LENO: But that's okay, that's okay. I got sucker punched. But, you know, when you get sucker punched, you just get right back up again. You don't whine and complain and say, "I'm going to take that out, he said something bad about me." That's all right.

WINFREY: Have you talked to Conan in person throughout all this?

Mr. LENO: No, I haven't.

WINFREY: Did you want to pick up the phone?

Mr. LENO: Yeah, but it didn't seem appropriate.

WINFREY: Why?

Mr. LENO: I don't know. I think let things cool down and maybe we'll talk, you know.

WINFREY: Were any of the things that he said about you hurtful?

Mr. LENO: No, they were jokes. And that's okay. I mean...

WINFREY: So jokes don't hurt you?

Mr. LENO: It's what we do, you know. You can't--it's like being a fighter and say when you got punched in the head, did it hurt? Well, yeah, but you're a fighter, that's what you do.

WINFREY: So when you, in the privacy of your own thoughts in your own home, you go home with Mavis at the end of the day you don't say, "You know, I thought that was kind of rotten or I thought that went a little too far?"

Mr. LENO: Well, you know the odd thing is it's all your conscience. If you think you played a role in it somehow, then you get a guilty conscience and then you feel bad, but nowhere in my wildest dreams did I think that they would ask me to go back. It just didn't seem plausible.

WINFREY: So when they asked you to go back, did you ever at any time think, "Well, if I go back, I'm taking away Conan's dream?"

Mr. LENO: No, because again, this is an affiliate decision. The affiliates felt the ratings were low. This was the first time in the 60-year history of "The Tonight Show" that "The Tonight Show" would have lost money and that's what it comes down to. It's really just a matter of dollars and cents. If the numbers had been there, they wouldn't have asked me. And they only asked me after Conan turned down moving it back half an hour.

WINFREY: After Conan turned down moving it back a half an hour?

Mr. LENO: I was ready to do the half-hour and he could keep "The Tonight Show." That was fine with me.

WINFREY: So no part of you thought, "Enough already, I've done it?"

Mr. LENO: You know, if you're a gunfighter, you like to die in the street.

WINFREY: [laugh] I don't know. I'm a gunfighter. I might like to die at home in the comfort...

Mr. LENO: No, you're not, you're a gunfighter. Oprah, you still are--how many times are you going to retire.

WINFREY: No. I am...

Mr. LENO: You're still on.

WINFREY: I'm telling you what...

Mr. LENO: You'll be there, baby.

WINFREY: No, no. I am just saying this. I am asking this question--I am asking this question...

Mr. LENO: You and I will go down together.

WINFREY: No.

Mr. LENO: You and I will hold hands and walk out into the sunset together.

WINFREY: I'm asking...

Mr. LENO: You're not going anywhere, I'm not going anywhere.

WINFREY: Yes, I am. I'm asking you this question as somebody...

Mr. LENO: Go ahead.

WINFREY: ...who has made a decision that for this show, "The Oprah Winfrey Show," as it is, done with that. Twenty-five years, done with that.

Mr. LENO: We'll see.

WINFREY: You don't believe that.

Mr. LENO: I believe you believe it.

WINFREY: Okay. No. So I'm saying, having made that decision, I understand that coming to grips with--and this is the real question here...

Mr. LENO: Yeah.

WINFREY: ...who am I without a television show when I've had a television show for 25 years? Who are you without a television show?

Mr. LENO: Oh, first of all.

WINFREY: Because you've had a television show for 17 years.

Mr. LENO: I'm a standup comedian who happens to have a television show. I mean, this is the thing people have asked me for years, and I always tell them I live on the money I make as a standup comedian. The money I make on television I bank and I have a little foundation. I don't touch it. I live on the money I make--I consider myself a standup comedian, because I consider TV to be so volatile. You never know when you'll have a job.

[GRAPHICS: COMING UP]

WINFREY: Coming up, I thought that was beneath you, actually. Why did you step into that?

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

WINFREY: Do you feel any personal responsibility for Conan's disappointment?

Mr. LENO: No. It had nothing to do with me.

WINFREY: Mm-hmm.

Mr. LENO: I mean, as I say, there's always someone waiting in the wings in this business to take your job. If you're not doing the numbers, they move on. It's pretty simple.

WINFREY: When you go back to the "The Tonight Show" do you think about rebuilding that audience and how you're going to do that?

Mr. LENO: Very much so. Yeah, very much so. It's on my mind every day.

WINFREY: Yes. And how will you do that?

Mr. LENO: I think you do it by doing the work. You find out what the elements are that worked on the show and you try to bring those elements to it. But it's really the idea of servicing the audience. You know, the reason I work a lot around the road is you tell a joke, if a joke works in Boston and Oklahoma City and Des Moines, Iowa, and L.A., it will work on TV. I would never call President Bush dumb. I would always say, "You know, I like President Bush. I don't think he understands the situation." And then you do the zinger joke. And then I would watch other comedians go out and go, "You know, President Bush is a big jerk." Well, now you've lost half the crowd just by being disrespectful and it's a matter of that fine balance.

WINFREY: Okay. Talking about fine balance, do you think that your fellow comedians lost the fine balance and that, perhaps, maybe you did too because letterman called you "I think the big jawed Leno, I think should just walk away."

Mr. LENO: Ooh.

WINFREY: And you hit back by talking about his infidelity.

Mr. LENO: Well, I did a joke about that, yeah.

WINFREY: Yes. And then the audience went ooh.

Mr. LENO: But it was a good joke.

[BEGIN VIDEO CLIP]

[GRAPHICS: THE JAY LENO SHOW JANUARY 20, 2010]

Mr. LENO: Letterman's been hammering me every night. Oh, going after me. Hey, Kevin, do you know what's the best way to get Letterman to ignore you?

KEVIN EUBANKS: What's that?

Mr. LENO: Marry him. Okay? That's the best way. He will not bother you. He won't look you in the eye. No problem at all.

[END VIDEO CLIP]

Mr. LENO: Did you laugh when you heard it?

WINFREY: No, I did not. No, I did not laugh.

Mr. LENO: You're laughing now. Ah?

WINFREY: No, I thought, whoa. You know what? I thought that was beneath you, actually. I thought why did you step into that?

Mr. LENO: But how many jokes like that have I done? One. I did one joke in the middle of the week and I never did another one, because I said, there, I had a cheap shot thrown at me, I threw one cheap shot back and I moved on.

WINFREY: So you thought one cheap shot deserved another?

Mr. LENO: Yeah, it's okay.

WINFREY: Do you feel you're being unfairly portrayed by the media?

Mr. LENO: Yeah, I think so. I think so. But I think you have to look for a bad guy. I mean, I think it's funny they have a picture of me and Roman Polanski. Somehow, these are quite similar, you know. You had a TV show, he had sex with a 13-year-old girl with Quaaludes. Eh, that's about equal. Yeah.

WINFREY: Okay. So you've always been portrayed as the good guy.

Mr. LENO: Yeah, I guess so.

WINFREY: Yeah. And now you're being made to look like the bad guy?

Mr. LENO: It's big-time wrestling, yeah.

WINFREY: Do you feel that's unfair?

Mr. LENO: Yeah, I think it's a little unfair and I'm going to work hard to try and rehabilitate that image.

WINFREY: Do you think now that that has happened, you will be able to revive, rehabilitate "The Tonight Show?"

Mr. LENO: I hope so. I think so. Yeah. And I hope Conan gets a job somewhere else. I hope he gets on at Fox or somewhere and we all compete together. "Ooh, Conan's back on," and it raises the level of interest. And you know what happens? The best one wins. Maybe I'll get my butt kicked, maybe we'll win.

WINFREY: Mm-hmm. Does your gut ever tell you to--that the right thing to do would have been to say no to NBC's offer to go back? No part of you thought that?

Mr. LENO: No.

WINFREY: Was there part of you that thought let me just take--because you said to me earlier, you said just let me out of my contract. So when you said that, there was a part of you that thought just let me go.

Mr. LENO: Yeah, let me go and I'll ...

WINFREY: Take the check?

Mr. LENO: Well, I'll take my show somewhere else.

WINFREY: Mm-hmm. And now that this is sort of now settled itself, Conan's gone, you're going back March 1st...

Mr. LENO: Yeah.

WINFREY: Are you looking forward to that or is there part of you ...

Mr. LENO: Very much so. I think it will be fun.

WINFREY: So you're saying it wasn't your job then to think about, "Well, what's the other guy who has this job going to do?"

Mr. LENO: No. That wasn't my decision.

WINFREY: Do you think NBC could have done something differently to make this a win-win for everyone?

Mr. LENO: Anything they did would have been better than this. Anything. Anything they did. If they'd come in and shot everybody, I mean, it would have been people murdered, but at least it would have been a two-day story. I mean, yes. NBC could not have handled it worse, from 2004 onward, this whole thing was a huge, a huge mess, yeah.

WINFREY: So what would you have wanted them to have done?

Mr. LENO: I thought, "Okay, they'll cut me down to two days, three days a week."

WINFREY: Is this the prime time show?

Mr. LENO: The prime time show. Never saw this coming. Came totally out of the blue.

WINFREY: That you're canceled?

Mr. LENO: No, no. That we would be asked to go back to "The Tonight Show."

WINFREY: To go back.

Mr. LENO: Because it wasn't even like I got canceled and I said, "Oh, well. Okay." And the next thing I know--what? Because you know, the interesting thing was we took all the attention off of "The Tonight Show" in terms of publicity and how they were doing. I think if our show hadn't been on, the story would have been the ratings of the "Tonight Show." But since our ratings were bad, we were the focus. So consequently they were kind of under the radar press-wise in terms of how it was doing. So I think that we got--and then when we got canceled--I mean I know it wasn't doing that well, but I had no idea that it had come to that. Nobody had said anything.

[GRAPHICS: COMING UP]

WINFREY: Coming up, were you embarrassed at all about how this all transpired? Do you think you can be number one again?

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

[BEGIN VIDEO CLIP]

Mr. O'BRIEN: Every comedian, every comedian dreams of hosting "The Tonight Show." And for seven months I got to do it, and I did it my way with people I love. I do not regret one second of anything that was done here. So to all the people watching, I can never, ever thank you enough for the kindness to me. I'll think about it for the rest of my life. And all I ask is one thing, and this is-

-I'm asking this particularly of young people that watch, please do not be cynical. I hate cynicism. For the record, it's my least favorite quality. It doesn't lead anywhere. Nobody in life gets exactly what they thought they were going to get, but if you work really hard and you're kind, amazing things will happen. I'm telling you, amazing things will happen. I'm telling you.

[END VIDEO CLIP]

WINFREY: Did you watch Conan's final show?

Mr. LENO: Yeah.

WINFREY: What did you think?

Mr. LENO: Great show. Good performer and good comic and a good guy. There's no animosity there.

WINFREY: What did you feel about what he said in his goodbye about every comedian's dream of hosting "The Tonight Show?"

Mr. LENO: Same thing I felt.

WINFREY: Now that you and your staff are going to be back on "The Tonight Show" starting March 1, do you feel that it's going to be humbling to go back or ...

Mr. LENO: Yeah, I think we've got our work cut out for us. I think we have a lot of work to do. I think there's a lot of damage control that has to be done. You know, the only way you can fix these things is to try and do good shows, not be bitter, not be angry or upset about whatever, and just try to do the best shows you can. That's really the only answer.

WINFREY: You know, you're really good at making jokes about things, but were you embarrassed at all about how this all transpired?

Mr. LENO: Yeah, it's hugely embarrassing. You know, not that I'm glad my parents are gone, I don't mean it that way, but I'm like the last one left, so I don't have to explain to the relatives how all this works.

WINFREY: But in your personal moments, did you--you said your heart was broken.

Mr. LENO: Yeah.

WINFREY: So how does that show itself with you? Do you go for a ride in one of your cars, do you ...

Mr. LENO: You know, I always thought that you're doing the right thing. I always felt I was doing the right thing. You know, how can you do the right thing and just have it go so wrong? Maybe I'm not doing the right thing, I would say. Maybe I'm doing something wrong, that this many people are angry and upset over a television show. I mean I had a show, my show got canceled. They weren't happy with the other guy's show. They said we want you to go back. I said okay. And this seemed to make a lot of people really upset and I go, "Well, who wouldn't take that job, though? Who wouldn't do that?" And it was really agonizing.

Mr. LENO: And I would spend a lot of time just thinking about it, going I think I'm a good guy. Am I not a good guy? Maybe I'm just one of these guys who thinks

I see everything with rose-colored glasses and the world is falling around you. Yeah, it was a real agonizing time.

WINFREY: Did you ever ask yourself, "Well, am I being selfish?"

Mr. LENO: Sure. Yeah, you ask yourself that every day.

WINFREY: And your answer was, is?

Mr. LENO: I don't think so. I don't think so. I mean I like the job, I like all that goes with it, I fight for the people that work here, I fight to keep the jobs here. Okay. Is that selfish? Maybe it is because it's self-aggrandizing, maybe it's because it's pumping me up.

WINFREY: Do you think celebrities will come on your show or refuse it?

Mr. LENO: No, I think they will. I think they will. I don't know why they would refuse. Based on what? What would the reason that you would refuse?

WINFREY: Because you're taking sides.

Mr. LENO: Well, I guess so. I mean if a star, is up for a movie and they don't get it and another star gets--I mean, do you not like that person? I don't know.

WINFREY: Do you think you can be number one again?

Mr. LENO: I don't know. I mean, you work hard and you try and it's sort of a marathon and you do the best you can.

WINFREY: How has this experience changed you?

Mr. LENO: How has it changed me? Well, as I said, it makes you look a little more inward as to what--I look at other people, other celebrities that have had problems, and you kind of understand what they go through, and you go, "Oh, I see what it's like to be on the other side, you know." You begin to understand. Well, how has it affected you? Has it affected your opinion of me?

WINFREY: This is what I think--I think--one of the reasons why I wanted to do the interview is because I'm really surprised that so many people are against you, because I think that people don't understand the way television works.

Mr. LENO: Right.

WINFREY: And I think that honestly, if people--I could understand people thinking you were selfish if you owned the show and controlled the show.

Mr. LENO: Right.

WINFREY: It's a little surprising to me that people think that you stole the show, when in fact, it wasn't your show to steal.

Mr. LENO: Right.

WINFREY: It's owned by NBC.

Mr. LENO: You know, it's the reason I never wanted to own the show. It's the same reason I don't ever want ...

WINFREY: Well, owning the show is pretty good too, I have to say.

Mr. LENO: It is good. But you know something? It's the same reason I don't want to own rental property. I don't want to be a landlord.

WINFREY: You don't?

Mr. LENO: I like to come to work. I love being a highly paid employee.

[GRAPHICS: COMING UP]

WINFREY: Coming up--is there a part of you that feels that you should have just retired? Did you feel bad for Conan at any point?

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

WINFREY: We asked viewers to weigh in on the Jay versus Conan controversy. About 80,000 of you responded to our Oprah.com poll. When asked whose side are you on, Jay's or Conan's, a staggering 96% of you said Conan. And 94% of you believe Jay should not go back to "The Tonight Show."

WINFREY: Honestly, you know, we're not like friends talking all the time but I think over the years we've developed a friendly relationship. So many people were against you. We did an Oprah.com poll, and there were so many people who were on Conan's side, that I started asking like do I have it wrong? Am I missing something here? Because the way I understood it is the way that you've explained it.

Mr. LENO: Right, right.

WINFREY: So the fact that so many people seem to feel that you are being the selfish guy...

Mr. LENO: Right.

WINFREY: ...who--that's why I'm asking you the questions, who stole Conan's dream? That's why I keep, you know, hammering on is there a part of you that feels that you should have just retired?

Mr. LENO: Well, like I say, to me, being retired seemed like the selfish thing to do.

WINFREY: Why?

Mr. LENO: You walk out and say to the 170 people that work here, "Listen, I don't want to get my reputation ruined, I don't want anybody talking bad about me. So I've got enough money, I'm going to leave. You people can all fend for yourself." I mean to me, it's sort of a team effort. Everybody's in it here together, and as long I'm working, they're working and that seems to make sense to me. Is it a little selfish in that I still like being on TV? Oh, sure. But, you know, the minute you can't do the job, they do tap you on the shoulder and tell you to leave. I mean, nobody is around who can't do the job because you're gone, you're gone in a half a second.

WINFREY: Did you feel bad for Conan at any point?

Mr. LENO: I did, I felt really bad for Conan. I think it's unfair, but TV is not fair. I thought it was unfair for me.

WINFREY: You felt that for Conan, but you didn't think you caused--you were the reason ...

Mr. LENO: No, I wasn't the reason. The reason was the ratings.

WINFREY: Mm-hmm. Do you have regrets?

Mr. LENO: Oh, yeah, I do have regrets. I regret that it wasn't handled better. I'm just not sure what I could have done differently.

WINFREY: Lots of people say you could have walked away.

Mr. LENO: Again, by walking away, that is an ego decision. That is me going, "No, goodbye, everybody, you know something? I'm fed up with this. You-all fend for yourselves. Good luck finding jobs, I'm out of here. To me, that's the ego decision, not the other one.

WINFREY: Is it, really?

Mr. LENO: Oh, yeah, I think so, I think so. Like ...

WINFREY: How is it an ego decision for you to say I've done it, I've done "The Tonight Show," I've tried it prime time, that didn't work. Thank you, NBC. I'll take my paycheck and go."

Mr. LENO: If I was going to do it that way I would say maybe after these two years of being on the air, I would tell my staff, "One year from today, it's over, guys."

WINFREY: But you could have done what--do you think now you could have done what Conan did? When they came in and said your prime time show's canceled, you say okay, you owe me two years, because that's what you said at the beginning.

Mr. LENO: Right, right.

WINFREY: You were guaranteed at least a year.

Mr. LENO: Right.

WINFREY: Two years if you were successful.

Mr. LENO: Right.

WINFREY: Pay me out, pay out my staff. You could have done that.

Mr. LENO: I could have done that, but I didn't. They offered me my old job back.

WINFREY: Right, I get that.

Mr. LENO: Which is the dream job. I said okay.

WINFREY: Is there a bigger lesson in all of this?

Mr. LENO: The key is not to be bitter and I think Conan said it best when he said don't be cynical.

WINFREY: Mm-hmm. And yet you said earlier you haven't called him?

Mr. LENO: It's not the right time, because I'm not sure what I would say right now. Let some time pass and I would hope we can talk again.

WINFREY: Will you have him on your show?

Mr. LENO: I would love to. I don't know whether he would do it or not. I think he will have a successful show on Fox or somewhere else.

WINFREY: Wherever he goes.

Mr. LENO: And then we will all compete again and may the best man win.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

WINFREY: So we're live in Chicago. I'm with a cold and a cough drop. That was Jay's side of the story and really I want to say I appreciate you talking to me, Jay. And just so you all know, we reached out to Conan's people for an interview, and they told us that it's not the right time. So, Conan, the offer still stands. When you are ready, I have a seat for you. So as we saw earlier, people were very pro-Conan in our Oprah.com poll, so when we go off the air in a few seconds, I'm going to hang out with this audience and we're going to find out how they feel about this late night fiasco. And we'll put it up on the homepage of Oprah.com. For those of you in Chicago, you can see it this afternoon, because as you know, we're live at 9:00 in Chicago. So starting at 4:00, everybody else, log on right after the show airs in your town and you can see what the audience has to say. And while you're on our website, please take our No Phone Zone pledge and help us to stop this insanity of texting and talking on the phone while driving. I'll see you on Oprah.com, everybody.

[APPLAUSE]

[END OF TAPE]