

A Franken Honest Exchange; Lateline' Star Defends Show, Talks About his Presidential Fantasies

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Al Franken takes off his sneakers and massages his toes through thick white socks. It has been a rough day on the book-tour circuit. Irritating airport delays left no time to check into the hotel, meaning quick hustles to interviews and a personal appearance with barely time for a bathroom break.

Sounds a little like the joy of rustling up votes in New Hampshire, which Franken parodies in his new book "Why Not Me?," his send-up about a man a lot like himself who runs for president.

It's been kind of rough over at NBC as well, where his show "Lateline," a satire of a news analysis program not unlike "Nightline," was on the air for a short time last year, was taken off and is back on again in a lousy time slot.

Franken gives his toes an extra-hard tug when he talks about that. "I take issue with where we were put into the schedule," he says, being placed opposite "Drew Carey" and the new, highly rated "60 Minutes II" on Wednesday nights.

He plays Al Freundlich, the "Lateline" office doofus and chief correspondent, who is unaware that all eyes roll when he walks into a room. Guest appearances by real politicians and wonks, such as William F. Buckley Jr., Ralph Nader, Richard Gephardt and former Labor Secretary Robert Reich, sharpen the parody.

The cast includes Miguel Ferrer as Vic Karp, the acerbic executive producer; Megyn Price as Gale, Freundlich's put-upon producer; and Robert Foxworth as Pearce McKenzie, the vain, surgically enhanced anchor, a man of little news judgment and many mistresses.

Ted Koppel's suggestion? "Give him more mistresses," Franken remembers the "Nightline" newsman saying during one of their meetings.

Franken, a political junkie, has been asked many times if he would ever consider a political career himself. "It's a fantasy only," he says. "I'm a very indecisive person. I'd be a terrible politician."

Al Franken the candidate of "Why Not Me?" spent his college years at Harvard avoiding Vietnam, inhaled plenty, got married, had a couple of kids, spent 15 years as a writer-producer-performer on "Saturday Night Live," wrote a best-

selling book about Rush Limbaugh, covered presidential conventions for cable television and -- here's where reality ends -- won the presidency in 2000. His platform? Eliminate ATM fees.

The candidate and his hookers crisscross the heartland. From the candidate's diary: "March 31, 1999: People in New Hampshire incredibly stupid. Visited grotesque old lady and man who wanted to talk about Medicare but had lost dentures. Yuck! Think woman will vote for me; man on fence."

"May 7, 1999: . . . Still depressed. Want to keep hooker for extra day."

"June 24, 1999: ATM Fees Blue Band rocked as always. Then I was celebrity guest caller at Bingo Bash at senior citizens' center. Tell you one thing. No matter what state you're in, Bingo really brings out the S.P. (stupid people)."

He and his Jewish running mate win the election in a landslide over former House Speaker Newt Gingrich. Franken takes the oath of office on Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's tattered family Talmud.

But President Franken is a disgrace to the office -- a womanizer and a boozier, he is found to suffer from chronic fatigue syndrome and bipolar episodes and launches an unfortunate attack on Nelson Mandela, whose spleen he ruptures. Then there's the aborted attempt to personally assassinate Saddam Hussein. It all comes out in the hearings held by the Joint Congressional Committee to Investigate the President's Mood Swings.

President Franken's rise and fall are meticulously chronicled in the style of Bob Woodward, whom Franken imagines doing the over blown analysis of the Franken presidency in his book "The Void."

"Dialogue and quotations have been re-created based on what I think the participants probably said," Franken writes. "Weather conditions were obtained from my editor's neighbor's son, Paul Zervos, a 33-year-old idiot savant, who can remember the weather conditions for every hour of every day of his life even though he is unable to dress himself without assistance."

Franken the author is a 47-year-old Jewish intellectual Democratic liberal with a wide knowledge of the American political scene, both as an observer and an insider. He is a popular speaker at White House correspondents' dinners; he's been to the White House for tea.

At a reading at Book Passage, a woman asks Franken, "When do you think Hillary will leave Bill?" The audience is expecting a funny answer, but Franken turns serious. "They are soul mates in many ways," he says. "They are both policy wonks, political animals, two of the smartest people I know, and they love each other. I believe in marriage (Franken has been married for 22 years; he and

his wife, Franni, who appears on the cover of his book with him as President Franken takes the oath of office, have a 17-year-old daughter and a 14-year-old son.) I think they should stay together."

Privately, he added that Hillary is a hoot. "She's got a goofy, silly side to her that is not usually seen," says Franken. "I'd love to have her on the show."

Critics have been mostly kind to "Lateline," with the notable exception of Caryn James of the New York Times, who wondered why the show wasn't more topical. Franken stops kneading his toes for a second when the subject arises. His voice sharpens.

"What kills me is we have been criticized by some prominent TV writers, like Caryn James of the New York Times, for example, who apparently doesn't understand how TV works. That sitcoms are shot in advance. The combination of getting on a high horse and being so ignorant of how it all works is quite a combo."

While the Al Franken of "Why Not Me?" represents the "a--" side of himself, the Al Freundlich of "Lateline" is the "idealistic, clueless part of myself," Franken says. "He also reminds me of a lot of people in the Washington press corps," he says, smiling. No names were revealed.

Franken, a sharply funny man, is also a man of sharply biting opinions when he feels put upon. About ABC's "Sports Night," a new show that is also about the inner workings of a TV show, and the new critical darling, Franken is dismissive.

"I have a theory," he says. "To be funny, you have to try. I've had some success in comedy. I think I have some idea of what people will like. It's not that big a mystery to make people laugh. That's the difference between us and them."

A "Lateline" appearance by one particularly well-known TV news correspondent would guarantee laughs, he says.

"Everything about Sam Donaldson is funny," Franken says, cracking up at the thought and lacing up his sneakers.