

**Show Time** | We had Oscar, and he messed up. It's time for a new local hero to boost our national self-esteem on the global stage, and Trevor Noah could be it — once he settles into his role as one of TV's most scrutinised hosts



# Don't you dare mess this up – we need you badly, Trev

REBECCA DAVIS

DID you notice a sound like a strong gust of wind blowing through South Africa on Tuesday evening? That was the collective exhale of a nation watching Trevor Noah's debut performance on *The Daily Show* from the night before, and realising that he was going to pull it off.

No pressure, Trev, but South Africa needs you to do well on *The Daily Show*. Noah's performance now seems inextricably linked to our national self-esteem. He is our new Good Thing. We had Oscar, and he messed up. When it comes to Noah, there is a sense of a powerful tide of collective hope and goodwill emanating from his homeland.

The parliamentary portfolio committee on arts and culture released a slightly breathless statement describing his first show as "a celebration of all that is good about South Africa". To be heard or seen publicly criticising Noah now is akin to an act of treason, as if you are just reflexively opposed to the idea of South African success on a global stage.

That's why Noah's first show was a relief, to a country accustomed to bad news. He did it. Taken on its own merits, his first outing was engaging, smart, and entertaining. The problem is that *The Daily Show* will never be taken on its own merits. It will be perpetually compared to its golden age under the stewardship of Jon Stewart.

Stewart occupied a place in the

imagination of — in particular — left-wing Americans that is hard to overstate: as a kind of moral and political conscience. By the end of his 16-year tenure, he was one of the most powerful men in America. A 2014 survey for the Public Religion Research Institute found that 17% of liberals trusted *The Daily Show* as the most accurate news source, as compared with the 16% who ranked CNN higher.

As has been endlessly said, Noah has enormous shoes to fill, and nobody knows that better than Noah himself.

A fair amount of Noah's first show was spent giving the obligatory cap-doffing to Stewart — no doubt also a canny strategy for winning over Stewart fans.

In contrast to the 52-year-old Jewish New Yorker, Noah is playing off a self-deprecating presentation of himself as "the young kid from Africa". In his third show, he sent up the notion of the backward African by asking why Americans let the "baby lions" — cats — "s\*\*t in the sandbox in your bathrooms". In his inaugural appearance, he referenced his background as the "dusty streets of South Africa", and waxed lyrical about inside toilets.

Someone who comes from poverty, as Noah does, is allowed to make these jokes. But they've left more than one American commentator feeling somehow wrong-footed.

"Is he mocking himself and South African poverty, or are the other writers [on the show] doing it?" asked the New Yorker's Sarah Larson. "And when we laugh, what are we laughing at?"

An ambiguous note was also struck in Noah's introductory sequence when he introduced himself



ALL RIGHT ON THE NIGHT: US comedian Kevin Hart was the guest on Trevor Noah's debut show



FRESH HEIR: Jon Stewart and Trevor Noah Picture: REUTERS

## Keeping the water out on Noah's ark

GABI MBELE

THE question on everyone's lips in the US is — will Trevor Noah fill Jon Stewart's boots?

Although Noah received mixed reviews on his new job after succeeding Stewart — who hosted the show for 16 years — he was applauded mostly for stepping up to what *Vanity Fair* magazine called "the toughest act to follow in all of show business".

Entertainment columnist Richard Lawson wrote on the US magazine's website: "Trevor Noah was tasked with something impossible to nail on the first try."

"Forget the controversy surrounding old tweets and stand-up bits of his that resurfaced when he was named Stewart's successor... you just can't follow Jon Stewart."

The Washington Post asked what Americans were so afraid of — it felt Noah's debut was "seemingly smooth". The New Yorker's Sarah Larson praised Noah for his first effort, but warned him and the show's writers that they "should work extra hard to earn our trust. That means, basically, be funny, but don't be an asshole. Don't say it's not ideal to have a black stepdad... lay off the bitches and the mitches."

But Noah can still count on the support of his local fans, who saw the show a day after it aired in the US.

"@Trevornoah congrats on a great @TheDailyShow debut. @KevinHartreal was a top-notch guest! Looking forward to his SA tour. #ProudlySA," tweeted Joubert Botha.

Another fan, Dimakatso Mokoena wrote: "Anyways @Trevornoah thank you for reminding us that if you really want it you gotta work for it. What a stellar first show!!!!!"

as *The Daily Show*'s new stepdad — and black, "which isn't ideal". Was he poking fun at the show's more conservative viewers?

The question of how much of the content is Noah's, and how much is the show's regular writers, is one that will doubtless continue to exercise *The Daily Show* nerds. For all the talk that the introduction of Noah would bring a fresh, young, international perspective, the feel of the first week's shows was deeply familiar. If we're going to see a radical new direction, Noah is certainly easing us into it.

Many TV critics have written off the sense that Noah has been play-

His schtick has been amazingly assured for a young man thrown into a gig of this magnitude

ing it safe in the first few shows. But in a way, he's living more dangerously than ever. While he's leaving the racial stereotypes out of it for now, he's swearing — a change of pace for a comedian known in South Africa for "clean" routines. His few attempts at real edginess on the show thus far have fallen flat. A joke about how a nightclub based on the US Congress would be terrible because "everyone has Aids" (a pun on "aides") was both wantonly cruel and unfunny. Similarly, a quip about crack "taking down" Whitney Houston failed to land with the audience.

These examples are exceptions. For most of his first week, Noah has come across as extremely charming and affable. Perhaps too affable, in fact: constantly laughing and grinning with delight, whereas one of Stewart's trademarks was exaggerated looks of horror and disgust at

the world's awfulness. Maybe it's a nervous tic on Noah's part so far. Although his overall schtick has been amazingly assured for a young man suddenly thrown into a gig of this magnitude, there have been times when his nerves have shown.

Interviewing New Jersey governor Chris Christie, who has a well-documented weight problem, Noah said that he'd seen him wearing shorts during summer. "I will never remember that," Noah added. He meant to say he would never forget it, of course, and he quickly corrected it, but the comic moment had passed. These hiccups will be a thing of the past when Noah settles into his role.

It must be said that Noah's live interviews have been the weakest segments of his shows.

Christie emerged looking almost as funny and likeable as Noah, which is quite something for a Republican who has been embroiled in a series of scandals.

Noah merely provided Christie with a platform to regurgitate policy, and one was left wondering what Stewart would have done with the same material. Noah's first-night interview with comedian Kevin Hart came off as little more than an ad for Hart's world tour; Noah also didn't seem to know how to respond to Hart's gift of ties.

Here's another problem: the relatively mediocre profile of Noah's guests so far. His late-night rivals are pulling in names like Donald Trump and Michelle Obama.

Noah's guest bookers need to up their game.

Noah's has been one of the most scrutinised debuts in the history of TV, and there's little that seems enviable about that position. Under the circumstances, he is indeed "nailing it", as so many South African news outlets trumpeted this week — and he'll only get better. No pressure, Trev, but we're rooting for you back home.

### Laughing all the way to bank

ENTERTAINMENT experts pegged Trevor Noah's income before he took over *The Daily Show* in the region of a healthy R150 000 a month — but his new gig is estimated to be bringing him \$10-million (about R138-million) a year.

Comic management service Whacked's Taffia Keight said local comedians earned

anything from R5 000 to R40 000 per show.

According to TIME magazine last month, US comedy show hosts can pocket up to \$30-million a year. Noah's predecessor, Jon Stewart, was one of the top earners.

The *Tonight Show*'s Jimmy Fallon and Conan O'Brien made \$12-million. — Gabi Mbele

Picture: AFP

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