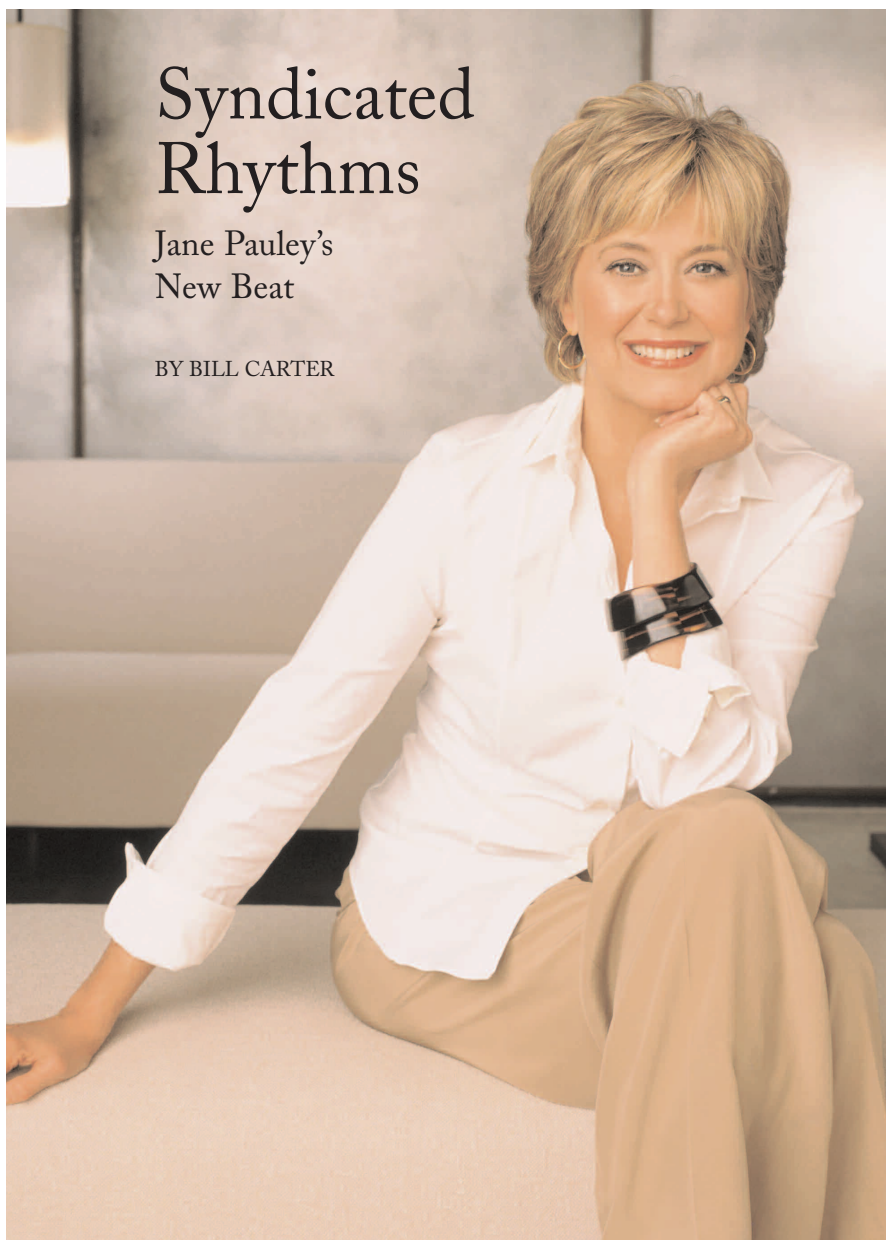


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Super-Size Expectations for a Life-Size Star



Syndicated Rhythms

Jane Pauley's
New Beat

BY BILL CARTER

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FOR almost three decades, Jane Pauley was one of the most important people at NBC News, first as the co-anchor of its powerhouse morning franchise, “Today,” and then as co-anchor of its highly rated newsmagazine show, “Dateline NBC.” But now, as many executives of the newly expanded NBC Universal see it, Ms. Pauley has moved beyond the status of V.I.P. – all the way to V.I.A. Today she is looked upon as a very important asset.

Such is the potential of a nationally syndicated talk show, the arena that Ms. Pauley enters this week (at 11 a.m. weekdays on Channel 4 in New York). A company that lands a long-running hit daily show, like “Dr. Phil” or “Ellen” or – in the dream of dreams – “Oprah,” gains the key to a temple of gold.

“There is no priority greater for the company in the next year than the Jane Pauley syndicated show,” said Jeff Zucker, the president of NBC Universal Television Group.

How’s that for pressure? Ms. Pauley, as has always been her nature, plays it cool. “I am coming in without expectations,” she said in a recent telephone interview from her office in New York, where the show will be taped. “I’m just going to try to make it a good show.”

In this context the word “good” cuts

more than one way. Ms. Pauley knows there are successful syndicated talk shows that she would not consider “good shows.” Those would be the ones in which a guest might be encouraged to describe an extramarital affair and submit to a paternity test to see if he is truly the father of the child in question.

No one could imagine Jane Pauley, who has enjoyed one of the most wholesome images of any television figure of the past generation, being the host of a show like that. Certainly Ms. Pauley never did.

“The shows I could imagine being like are ‘Oprah’ and ‘Ellen,’” she said.

But Ms. Pauley brings something to her new show that neither of those hosts do – a background in television news. Interestingly, she expects that to affect her show more in terms of what she won’t do than what she will do. For example, Bill Clinton may be considered one of the prize guests for any daily syndicated talk show (Oprah scored big ratings when she had the former president on). But asked if she would like to have him on her show, Ms. Pauley said, “I would probably not.”

The reason: “I want to keep the show a politics-free zone.”

This goes back to her background in news. “Oprah does not have a news background,” she said. “Frankly, because of my news background I have a naturally built-in sense of fairness. I would not do one-half a political story without doing the other half. Oprah’s not constrained by that.”

That leaves the question of what kind of show she would like to do. The answer is essentially that Ms. Pauley, who is 53, will do issues of interest to

her – because she is confident they will be of interest to the audience she is trying to reach. “Whatever we do,” she said, “I think it is going to have to do with women about my age or a little less. Thirty-five and up. Grown-up women.”

One example she mentioned has to do with her growing personal interest in what she called “design psychology.” That could be a theme of several shows, she said, beginning with one that would bring in designers to talk about how to decorate her new office.

Ms. Pauley has always had an unusually close connection to women watching television, although she said that never in all her years at NBC had she been privy to any research about her appeal to viewers – research she was sure NBC was conducting all the time.

But before committing to “The Jane Pauley Show,” NBC executives invested in more extensive research, which they did share with her. “The two words they said people most used to describe me were authenticity and genuineness,” she said.

That is how it has always been with Ms. Pauley, who has somehow managed to be on television for 27 years without ever earning a reputation as unapproachable.

“I don’t have to be told that I don’t have a fabulous persona,” Ms. Pauley said. “I think of myself as life-sized.” This is both figurative and literal, she continued: “I’m about 5-foot-4 1/2. I think that is the size of the average American woman. I’m looking to make this a life-sized show.”

Those life-size qualities were exactly what made Ed Wilson, president of Fox television network but previously at NBC, decide to pitch Ms. Pauley a

year ago about jumping into the daytime talk game – only days after she declared she was quitting NBC.

“I just believed strongly in her doing this kind of show,” Mr. Wilson said. “She just relates to people, and that is a very special quality.”

Ms. Pauley, who had surprised many with her sudden decision to give up her career at NBC News, said at the time that her immediate goal was to write a book she had been thinking about for a long time – and then perhaps to start thinking about doing something in television again. But the idea of a talk show proved too intriguing. “I thought I was leaving the building, and then I turned around and came right back,” she said.

Not before she finished that book, however. “Skywriting: A Life Out of the Blue,” a memoir of her life growing up in Indiana, her extraordinary career in television and her recent struggle with bipolar disorder, was published this month by Random House.

Now she is concentrating on “The Jane Pauley Show,” along with Michael Weisman, its executive producer. Mr. Weisman gave up a stellar career producing some of the biggest events in sports (among them the 2004 Olympics for NBC and last year’s spectacular coverage of postseason baseball for Fox) to take on the project – another indication of just how important the show is to NBC.

“We have to find 180 ideas for shows each year,” Ms. Pauley said. “That’s pretty daunting, but I think it’s doable.” It’s a whole new career, she acknowledged, but that is what she was looking for when she left NBC News – a second act.