

THE TV SHOW THAT BECAME A MOVIE

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Mondo Video is one TV show you'll never see on TV. You will, however, be able to catch it at the movies. Featuring *Saturday Night Live's* now ready-for-Vegas players, *Mondo Video* is the brainchild of former *SNL* writer Michael O'Donoghue.

O'Donoghue's opus was designed to offend, so it's really no mystery that NBC's top censor vowed the show would air "over my dead body." The subversive tone of *Mondo Video* is set by the disclaimer at the beginning of the show: WARNING: THE FILM YOU'RE ABOUT TO SEE IS SHOCKING AND REPUGNANT BEYOND BELIEF. IT CONTAINS SCENES OF DISTURBING SEXUAL PRACTICES AND MINDLESS VIOLENCE. IF OLD PEOPLE WITH A HEART CONDITION ARE WATCHING, OR PERSONS UNDER PSYCHIATRIC CARE, BRING THEM UP CLOSE SO THEY WON'T MISS ANYTHING.

In the next 70 minutes the videotaped show hosted by Mr. Mike, Michael O'Donoghue's *Saturday Night Live* sinister on-the-air persona, sets new records in tastelessness. There's a segment called "Celebrity Deformities" in which Dan Aykroyd displays his webbed toes (they're for real) and declares he's a mutant. There's "Celebrities Like Creeps." There's "Christmas On Other Planets," a film clip of an alien smashing light bulbs that would have made Ernie Kovacs envious. "Cafe American," a French restaurant where Americans are served on a tablecloth *flambe*, is as snobbishly silly as anything Monty Python could concoct. It all adds up to an adventurous, experimental, precedent-shattering show with the same growing pains as the first episodes of *Saturday Night Live* and none of the inertia that has set in at *SNL* since O'Donoghue left the show as head writer a year ago.

"I got sick of live television," explains O'Donoghue, sitting in his office behind a 1940s desk in the sweltering summer heat of the Brill Building. "I wanted to do things you can only do on location with videotape. I wanted to get TV comedy out on the streets. I was frustrated doing *Saturday Night Live*."

"I had the idea for *Mondo*, says O'Donoghue, "after I'd just finished acting in *Manhattan*, *Mondo Cane* and all those Italian *Mondo* documentaries were so accessible and so sleazy. *Mondo Video* offered a loose format in which we could do anything we wanted."

O'Donoghue produced, directed and wrote the show, collaborating with the same group of writers he headed at *Saturday Night Live*. "We didn't set out to shock the network. We just wanted to take television in a different direction. This was going to be a pilot for a wholeseries of late-night specials: *The Good, the Bad and the Mondo*, *Make Mine Mondo*, *Key Mondo*."

"Before we shot *Mondo* NBC gave us line-by-line approval of the script. We went ahead and shot it last November. When we showed it to the network censors, they started telling us about all the cuts we'd have to make. We would have had to cut out nearly a third of the show!"

"Everything we did had a precedent on network television," he insists. "On *Roots* they showed bare tit, but that was acceptable because it was *Roots*. There's such a double-standard. The censors told us we couldn't have any 'melon breasts' on our show and we'd have to take out all the native dancers, except one segment where Pat Nixon is watching. That made it all right, it seems okay to be serious about breasts, but you can't have fun with them."

"The strike zone is so arbitrary in television. Censors don't decide on the basis of morality but out of fear over how many people are going to write in to complain."

O'Donoghue says he was willing to accommodate the censors on *Mondo Video*. "I asked, 'What if I take out the things you want?' They then had more they wanted out. No one formally refused to put the show on the air. We even had a sponsor for it. But NBC was afraid of getting nailed. One day I read in the *Washington Post* that the NBC head censor had said *Mondo* would only be broadcast over his dead body."

Despite his difficulties, O'Donoghue is not bitter. "The censors were generally quite civilized. The problem is with television itself. No one is willing to take chances. Late-night TV is the place to experiment, but no one is thinking ahead because programming executives last only three years in their jobs."

The irony is that *Mondo Video* will now be shown on movie screens through the efforts of Paul Klein, former head of programming at NBC. Klein, who had approved *Mondo Video* while still at the network, decided to promote its theatrical release after leaving NBC last spring. NBC, which financed the production, is selling the show to O'Donoghue and Klein for its \$300,000 cost, the amount to come out of theatrical revenues.