

Diversions . . . with M.V. Moorhead

Fallon's 'fuzzy' persona could be exactly what 'Tonight Show' needed

“Thank you...” For me, the funniest thing about Jimmy Fallon is his inflection of those two words, in his recurring “Thank You Note” segment on Late Night.

If you watched the show Friday nights, you’ve seen the shtick: To the accompaniment of a poignant piano theme, Fallon takes a few minutes before the first guest segment to catch up on his thank you notes, speaking them out loud as he writes them on cards (which he doesn’t take the time to seal).

They’re often addressed not to individual people but to inanimate objects and concepts, as in:

“Thank you, cotton candy, for making my grandmother’s hair look delicious.”

“Thank you, microbreweries, for making my alcoholism seem like a neat hobby.”

Clever as many of these are—two volumes of them have been

published—I think it’s less the quips than Fallon’s presentation that makes them funny: his soft, lost-in-thought murmur, and the sense of spiritual cleansing provided by the music.

Born in Brooklyn but raised in upstate New York, Fallon was a Saturday Night Live nut from early childhood. He broke onto that show in 1998 in his mid-20s, with his gift for impressions, especially of musicians.

By 2000 he was the co-anchor, with Tina Fey, of SNL’s “Weekend Update” segment.

He acted in a few movies, notably *Almost Famous*, Woody Allen’s *Anything Else* and the miserable action-comedy *Taxi*, without making much of an impression, before being tapped to take over for Conan O’Brien on Late Night when O’Brien, in turn, left to take over Jay Leno’s Tonight Show for what turned out to be a painfully short tenure.

NBC returned the antsy Leno to

the host’s chair, and Conan was exiled to TBS, where he remains.

Fallon, however, settled in nicely in the Late Night slot, with his thank-you notes and his good-natured musical parodies. Now, after Leno’s teary-eyed farewell earlier this month, and some time off for the first week of the Olympics, Fallon became the sixth host of The Tonight Show (or maybe the seventh, if you count Leno twice) on Feb. 17.

It’s hard to say this early in the game, but I think it could be a good fit.

Although Leno had some fine bits—his “headlines” routine, especially—I was never able to warm up to him as the great Carson’s successor. Leno, with his prickly, nettled persona, was one of the best American stand-ups ever back in the ‘80s, but he grotesquely softened and dumbed-down his act for The Tonight Show—there was always something unctuous and wheedling and pitifully desperate not to offend about him.

And ill-treated though he was, it must be admitted that somehow O’Brien’s aggressive brilliance didn’t quite fit the classic flavor of that show either.

Fallon, on the other hand, has always used a soft, fuzzy persona, an amiable vagueness. Talented though he is, you wouldn’t think to use the word “brilliant” in connection with him. I don’t mean to suggest that he isn’t highly intelligent, only that his appeal as a performer derives more from his likability than from his intelligence or wit.

He’s unlikely to replace Carson—nobody’s liable to do that—but unlike Leno or O’Brien, he has no need to dumb down his humor to be easy for the mainstream audience to take. Put bluntly, he doesn’t need to sell out to succeed.

And he says he isn’t going to. “I’m not going to change anything,” he’s reportedly said. “It’s more eyeballs watching, but it’s the same show.”

Based on his first show, he seems to be keeping his word. After a brief prologue in which he acknowledged the past hosts and touchingly introduced his parents and explained what The Tonight Show meant to him as a kid, he went back behind the curtain and then re-emerged to do a more or less business-as-usual show.

The guests were perhaps bigger-name than usual, and a gag early on allowed for a parade of really big-name cameos, but the loose style—a silly

dance skit with Will Smith; a lovely acoustic number by U2—was the same that he’s been using for years, an hour later.

Would that Leno had had the same confidence.

‘Little House’ due on Marcos stage

Such memorable do-wop songs as “Suddenly Seymour” and “Skid Row” will come to life in a stage presentation of “Little Shop of Horrors,” 7 p.m. Wednesday, March 5, through Saturday, March 8, at Marcos de Niza High School.

Tickets, \$10 for adults and \$5 for students and adults 60-plus, are available at the Marcos bookstore, 6000 S. Lakeshore Drive, Tempe, or by mail at mdnchoirdrama.org. Tickets will also be available at the door the night of the shows, while they last.

The show is directed by Marcos drama instructor Patrick McChesney.

Sondheim’s ‘Into the Woods’ at MCC

Mesa Community College’s Act I Musical Productions presentation of Stephen Sondheim’s *Into the Woods* opens Feb. 27 at the Southern and Dobson campus.

Director Jere Van Patten said the show is a fun yet dark, musical that warns people to be careful what they wish for, because they just might get it.

“Into the Woods is what you get when you take all of your favorite fairytale characters and throw them into one place under the genius of Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine,” Van Patten said.

“This is a creative take on the stories we all grew up with that audiences of all ages will relate to and enjoy.”

The production runs Feb. 27 – March 8 in the MCC Theatre, 1833 W. Southern Avenue, Mesa.

For ticket information, call the MCC Box Office at 480-461-7172 or choose seats online at www.ezticketlive.com/mcc.

Into the Woods is rated PG and recommended for audiences over 8 years old. Note that strobe lights, smoke, haze, and other special effects are used in this production.

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