

October 3, 2009

David Letterman laughs off flings, but will it work?

By Matea Gold and Scott Collins LOS ANGELES TIMES

NEW YORK — David Letterman has milked plenty of sex scandals for laughs. But it remains to be seen whether the CBS comic's admission Thursday that he had sexual liaisons with female employees while he was involved with his now-wife, the mother of his 5-year-old son, will fade away with a few late-night punch lines.

While Letterman focused on his role as the victim of a would-be extortionist who demanded \$2 million to keep the details of his affairs secret, the episode sparked impassioned discussion Friday about sex in the workplace and hypocrisy.

After years of mocking other public figures for their sexual indiscretions, Letterman, 62, is now facing scrutiny for behavior that is verboten in many workplaces. Conservative critics, in particular, expressed disgust with the comedian, whose frequent potshots at former GOP vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin — including a crude joke he made in June about one of her daughters — have infuriated many on the right.

"There is irony here," commentator Michelle Malkin said on the Fox News morning show *Fox* & *Friends*. "It's hard not to have a smidge of schadenfreude for somebody who's shown contempt for women in public, in his monologues continuously and repeatedly, especially over the campaign, and how he's treated Sarah Palin and her family."

Analysts said that they don't expect the revelations about his personal behavior to prompt many viewers to abandon him.

"Dave's true audience is cynical," said Kathy Sharpe, chief executive of the New York-based marketing company Sharpe Partners. "They may be a little disappointed, like, 'Dave, how can you be so dumb?' ... But they'll still watch."

In fact, by confronting the matter himself on the air, Letterman may have largely contained the damage, said John Rash, a TV programming analyst for the Minneapolis-based ad company Campbell Mithun.

"It makes him an even more compelling character," he said. "Despite the circumstances, it actually humanizes him, which is different than his often icy image."

Indeed, most of the focus Friday remained on bizarre actions by the alleged extortionist, Robert Joel Halderman, a veteran producer at the CBS newsmagazine *48 Hours Mystery*, who left Letterman a letter and a proposed screenplay in the back seat of his car early the morning of Sept. 9, threatening to write a movie exposing the comic's affairs. After attempting to cash a fake check for \$2 million given to him by Letterman's attorney, Halderman was arrested Thursday afternoon outside the CBS News offices on West 57th Street. He pleaded not guilty Friday to one count of attempted grand larceny in the first degree, a crime punishable by 5 to 15 years in prison. He has been suspended from CBS.

Many were taken aback by the casual tone Letterman used to describe his sexual relationships with female employees. While saying that he felt "menaced" by Halderman during an extraordinary 10-

minute-long segment on Thursday's show, the comic did not express any contrition for cheating on Regina Lasko, whom he dated for 23 years before their marriage in March.

"I have had sex with women who worked on this show," he told the audience matter-of-factly. "And would it be embarrassing if it were made public? Perhaps it would. Especially for the women."

No apology offered

Coming on the heels of apologetic confessions of infidelity by politicians such as South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford, U.S. Sen. John Ensign of Nevada and former presidential candidate John Edwards, Letterman's decision not to offer a mea culpa was striking, said Elayne Rapping, a professor of American studies at the University at Buffalo who specializes in media and popular culture.

"There are so many of these scandals, and they all show at least some apology or embarrassment, and this guy decided to control the damage by making it into a joke," she said. "I was actually quite astonished. I would hope that he would be in some way brought to his senses. He seemed ignorant of the issue of sexual harassment. These women worked for him."

A spokesman for Worldwide Pants, Letterman's production company, said the company's sexual harassment policy does not prohibit sexual relationships between managers and employees.