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Oh, woe! No O

Why did the prospect of Oprah's presence - now dashed - create such a frisson in Philadelphia? She is that very rare celebrity who inspires trust.

By Tirdad Derakhshani

Inquirer Staff Writer

Anguish abounds at the Gossip Compound. Teeth gnash.

Oprah Winfrey isn't coming.

And we were all set to break out the best bunting.

On Tuesday, the Queen of Daytime TV settled the highly publicized defamation lawsuit filed against her in U.S. District Court in Philly by **Lerato Nomvuyo Mzamane**, former headmistress of the Big O's school for girls in South Africa.

The Undisclosed Settlement means that Oprah's expected two-week-long starring role in a Philly courtroom has been canceled.

We are beside ourselves: "SideShow" will miss the sideshow.

So many nights we've spent sleepless, fantasizing about the prospect of the Big O leading a Mummers-style parade down Broad Street, followed by a cadre of lawyers, handmaidens (including BFF **Gayle King**), and a phalanx of paparazzi, reporters, gossipmongers - not to mention crazed fans.

The dollars from visiting journos alone could have wrenched the city out of its economic crisis.

"The media turnout! It will be amazing. There's nothing like covering Oprah," enthused *Entertainment Tonight* correspondent Kevin Frazier, speaking by phone just hours before Oprah broke Philly's heart. (And he was so excited about coming to Philly.) "Think of who is the most popular person in the world - she's coming."

Forget the media, Frazier added; the thing that should concern us is **the Fans**.

"Thousands and thousands of fans will come just to catch a glimpse of her. . . . Expect them to sit out and do the most crazy things, the most amazing things."

Amid all the anticipation, we never stopped to ask the obvious: Why is Oprah so darn important?

Oprah, who has been dubbed the Pope of the New Age, is very much like a pope - people implicitly trust her.

Everyone knows celebrities spin the truth. They make public appearances because they've got a personal story - and a movie, CD, or book - to sell.

For the most part, TV hosts and journos - themselves celebs - play along. **Jay Leno**, **David Letterman**, **Barbara Walters**, and even news pro **Katie Couric** don't exactly subject **George Clooney** or **Angelina Jolie** to hard-hitting questions.

Oprah is different.

In a very real way, Oprah isn't a celebrity after all. Not to get all postmodern, but she's a meta-celeb.

"Everyone knows [Oprah] is the gold standard of approval," for all other celebs and wannabe celebs, *ET*'s Frazier said.

We expect her to do right by us, to steer us in the right direction in life whether it comes to diet plans or ultimate questions about life, death, and the hereafter.

"There's something qualitatively different about Oprah's celebrity than other" celebs, says **David Schmid**, author of *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture*.

"When her book club took off, I thought, 'OK, here we have someone who isn't just reflecting the culture, but actively shaping it.' "

In the public imagination, she is a truth-teller, a filter between us - the vulnerable, badly informed, gullible, consumerist public - and the stuff everyone else wants to sell us.

Schmid, who teaches English at the University of Buffalo, said that in a society where the public discussion is often shaped by celebrity chatter, Oprah stands out as the arbiter of truth.

"Theoretically speaking, Congress should be our deliberative public sphere" where we discuss the public good, he says. In reality, it's "the TV studio, and Oprah is in charge."

She showed us she cares about truth when she berated writer **James Frey** in 2006 for passing off his "memoir" *A Million Little Pieces* as a true story. "She stood up for the principle of truth," says Schmid.

And we listen to her: In January, Oprah topped the annual Harris Poll as America's fave TV personality. (Fox News' **Glenn Beck** came in second.) We care so much, even now we are

grieving for her gabshow, which Oprah plans to kill after 25 years.

If Oprah is a brand, its name is Moral Principle or Beneficence. (How many cars has she bestowed on her audience?)

Why else, asked Fox News' **Greta Van Susteren**, would the Big O allow this recent lawsuit to play out for so long?

"It looks very much like the principle matters to her - that she doesn't like what this charge [of defamation] says about her reputation. She's indignant," the host of *On the Record* said hours before Oprah's settlement was announced.

But Oprah - our public champion - did settle.

"For someone like Oprah Winfrey who is really like untouchable, any public court at all can only do harm," says crisis PR expert **Ronn Torossian**, CEO of 5W Public Relations.

"A trial like this has very high stakes and very high risks," including the possibility of embarrassing disclosures about Oprah's life or character, he said.

Could it be that Oprah is mortal, fallible - human - after all?

Contact staff writer Tirdad Derakhshani at 215-854-2736 or tirdad@phillynews.com.

Staff writer John Timpane contributed to this story.

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The image shows a silver laptop on a white surface. The laptop screen displays a goldfish jumping out of a pool of blue water. To the right of the laptop is a clear glass fishbowl, also containing blue water, with a splash of water rising from it. The background is white.