



JON FRIEDMAN'S MEDIA WEB

## **PBS' Tavis Smiley is a populist Charlie Rose**

By Jon Friedman, MarketWatch

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**NEW YORK (MarketWatch) -- One of the mysteries of television is why PBS' Tavis Smiley continues to fly below the radar. He has an easy charm and a keen curiosity, and deserves to be better known.**

Smiley follows Charlie Rose's respected talk show, which has a much bigger reputation. But Smiley shouldn't be regarded as second-string to Rose.

In fact, you could say that Smiley has emerged on TV as a populist version of Rose. While Rose tends to attract ambassadors and Nobel Prize winners by the bushel, Smiley probes less formal -- though no less compelling -- subjects. And he does so every bit as thoughtfully as his more famous PBS colleague.

Smiley does many things that I appreciate in a TV interviewer. He allows his guests to speak their minds and doesn't cut them off mid-sentence so he can intrude by presenting his opinions. You can almost see the relief on their faces when they can veer off on a tangent and not worry about getting yanked back by Smiley.

These qualities were on display in a typical show recently when Smiley interviewed separately author and founder of the Skeptics Society Michael Shermer and actress Amy Ryan. You couldn't hope to see two more different guests on the same talk show.

To call Shermer's opinions unorthodox is an understatement, especially when he launches into a discussion about his "Google theory of peace," as he did on Smiley's show. When Smiley heard Shermer talking, he looked quizzical but didn't patronize his guest.

Smiley revealed a lot of his philosophy when he told Shermer at one point: "I'm not convinced as yet ...of your point. I'll let you explain it."

Another interviewer might have seized the moment to make fun of his guest. Smiley didn't want to pick a fight. He wanted to understand the logic.

### **The human touch**

Smiley shifted gears gracefully when he started chatting with Ryan, who distinguished herself in the recent movie "Gone Baby Gone." And "chatting" is the appropriate term. Smiley has a playful side which he reveals when he speaks with entertainment figures.

"Gone Baby Gone," a movie about two Boston area police detectives investigating a little girl's kidnapping, has lifted Ryan's profile significantly (she was nominated for an Oscar in the Best

Supporting Actress category off that performance). Smiley seemed to pick up on her happy amazement at hitting the big time after a career of working toward that goal.

It was clear that Ryan was practically pinching herself. Smiley could have acted like a world-weary host facing yet another flavor-of-the-month actor. But he genuinely seemed to get a charge out of listening to Ryan enjoy her success.

"How does it feel ... has it sunken in yet?" he asked her.

The approach works because it gets people to tell you what they're really thinking, not the safe answer that their publicists hope to hear. My favorite moment occurred when Ryan talked about acting with Ed Harris, who is known for playing menacing characters in movies. "You don't feel intimidated?" Smiley asked her impishly.

"Oh, absolutely!" Ryan declared, not worried that she might come across as a wimp. It's fun for the audience when a celebrity can laugh at himself or herself.

Last week, Smiley interviewed political theorist and author Benjamin Barber on his idea that companies "turn adults into grasping youngsters." It might sound like mumbo-jumbo to some viewers, but again, Smiley didn't condescend to Barber's unusual opinions.

He wasn't embarrassed to gush over Michael McDonald, the former Doobie Brothers vocalist. It was fun to watch McDonald patiently answer Smiley's questions, which approximated the kinds of subjects that any fan watching at home might bring up. "The screaming and yelling (at concerts) must get crazy!" Tavis suggested with a smile.

As Smiley is fond of saying to close his show, keep the faith.

**MEDIA WEB QUESTION OF THE DAY:** What do you like or dislike about Tavis Smiley's television show?

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