

Richard Quest

How a loud Brit with scary teeth became the model for what a TV newsman should be.

THE FIRST THING THAT HITS YOU, LIKE A SPLASH OF ice water in the face, is the voice. Packed with those elongated vowel sounds the British are so good at, it crows about the Dow Jones and the Nikkei Index with the gravelly fervor of a king beckoning knights to crusade. Next you notice the jawbone: fit for an ass, according to one of his less kind critics. And those teeth, giant alabaster slabs that provide a robust demonstration that British dentistry is making progress. ¶ Then, while you are still absorbing the sights and sounds of Richard Quest, he'll dive headfirst into one of his routines. Reporting on the floods that devastated parts of the Midwest in 1993, he hobbled down the main street of Davenport, Iowa, in a



rowboat. "This used to be a road!" he brayed. "Now it's row, row, row your boat!" For a story about a woman who smuggled her boyfriend across the Italian border in her luggage, Quest climbed into a trunk and pulled down the lid. Then there was the segment about the Royal Opera House selling its costumes, which ended with Quest flouncing down a staircase in a fairy outfit, merrily flapping his wings. "Stunning bad taste on my part," he says. "The boss was very upset."

"We told him not to do it again," Rena Golden, head of CNN International, confirms.

But if CNN has had second thoughts about plucking Quest from the BBC in 2001, it hasn't been evident to viewers at home. The network has cast him as everything from a business correspondent with a goof factor to a serious newsman who anchored coverage of the pope's funeral. This year has seen him leapfrog to the front of the anchor queue as host of his own show, called, in a stroke of ego-boosting genius, *Quest*. ("I think that was my idea," he says.) Each episode is constructed around a single topic—comedy and beauty were early entries—and packaged with celebrity guests and "Questy-isms," his name (again) for segments that feature him bathing in the glory of his own eccentricity. His performative brand of reporting defies everything we've come to expect from news anchors, who used Hurricane Katrina to explore their capacities for I-feel-your-pain emo-journalism. Quest laughs at himself but has yet to cry, and this may be his greatest gift to his audience.

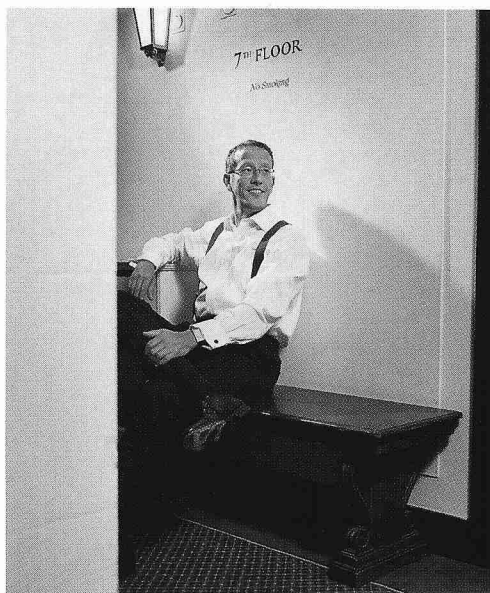
WHEN I ARRIVE AT SOHO HOUSE, THE PERSISTENTLY fashionable media watering hole in London where Quest has agreed to meet for lunch, he's posing for a photo with a trio of beaming Nigerian businessmen. "You wouldn't believe how big he is in Asia and Africa," Golden had told me. It's precisely his brazen, gesticulatory on-air presence that has made him so recognizable overseas. CNN's is a muted voice in the U.K., however, and Quest, still decked out in the trademark gray suit and suspenders he wore on the morning's broadcast, barely gets the once-over from his own countrymen.

After settling down at our table, Quest, who's 43, explains that he learned to leverage his personality years before he found journalism. Born in Liverpool, the grandchild of Russian Jewish immigrants, Quest trained as a barrister—one of the bewigged lawyers who perform for British juries. "I've always understood that there has to be an element of showmanship about the whole thing," he says. "I'm not sure I'd call it a style. I firmly believe that you can't put something on

When you're on air, it is an exaggerated version of what you are really like."

Quest soon found that TV news suited his fidgety soul better than the legal system did. He spent 12 years covering Wall Street for the BBC, filing dispatches on hard-news stories like the Ivan Boesky case and the demise of Drexel Burnham Lambert. (To this day, he retains an ability to ad-lib intelligently without a teleprompter, a boast not every anchor can make.) At the same time, he was cultivating his reputation for eccentric delivery.

"We did a program on international trade from Denver, Colorado, when the G7 turned into the G8—



an important summit," recalls Paddy O'Connell, the BBC newsman who produced the segment. "It began with him in a horse-drawn carriage and ended with him on a mechanical rodeo bull lifting his hat and saying 'That's alllllll from Denver!' Our boss at the time dared to suggest to us that it might be a bit busy."

A help-wanted ad in the *Guardian* led to the job at CNN. His new employers were so delighted to land him that they put up a billboard with an image of his equine grin right outside the BBC's headquarters in West London. For a man who'd felt underappreciated for years, it was a satisfying kiss-off to jealous ex-colleagues: "Some of them clearly thought, 'Christ, CNN could have had anybody. Why'd they pick him?'"

Quest's bosses have always known that he stands out from his well-groomed counterparts. A broadcast risk-taker, he's prone to pushing the barriers of good taste. "Shut up, Quest," his producers bark into the earpiece on such occasions. Quest is undaunted. *Embarrassment* is not a word that crops up

often in his conversations. "He's learned not to take himself seriously," O'Connell says. "But he always takes the material very seriously. It's precisely because he respects the material so much that he gets away with slapping a giant cowboy hat on it."

Resistance can be strong from people who just don't get him, however. All through lunch, he can't stop fiddling with his BlackBerry, scanning messages from fans and detractors alike. "Some of them are offensive," he says. "'Please remove Mr. Quest from my screen.' That was one. 'Sir, your black polka-dot tie doesn't match your pin-striped suit.' This is a lovely one: 'Please tell the skinny Limey bastard who wears the glasses to stop smoking dope before the show.' People write such rude things. They keep writing to me. 'Richard's coffee cup is way over in his co-anchor's desk space!'"

In an impressive display of self-flagellation, Quest not only reads all the e-mails that come to CNN with his name on the subject line but also answers them.

VISION QUEST: THE NEWSMAN REPORTED ON AN ECONOMIC SUMMIT WHILE RIDING A MECHANICAL BULL.

"PLEASE TELL THE SKINNY LIMEY BASTARD TO STOP SMOKING DOPE BEFORE THE SHOW," ONE VIEWER WROTE.

"And it hurts!" he says. "I think the ones who hate me are shocked that I write. One wrote back to me, brilliantly. He said, 'Dear Mr. Quest, you are a class act to reply. I still can't stand you.'"

He will also tell you that his supporters can be every bit as vocal. When an early episode of *Quest* went off without a single Questy-ism, his fans noisily complained. "I felt like saying, 'What the hell do you want?'" he shouts. His arms wave like pythons fighting their way out of a burlap sack. "I don't have to crack walnuts with my teeth every time!"

As the host of his own show, Quest mingles with the likes of George Clooney, Bono, and Angelina Jolie, which seems to impress even him.

"Hey, I have spent 20 years to get here! I rather like being recognized! I'm damned if I'm going to be 'Oh, woe is me!'" He strikes a melodramatic pose with hand on forehead. "Sorry if that sounds awful, but I've worked bloody hard."

And with that, Richard Quest disappears down an escalator into London's subway system. No one looks in his direction. ■