

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Kamala Harris Produced the Show She Wanted

In Tuesday's debate, the vice president made herself the studio audience for a cringe comedy starring her opponent.



On Tuesday night, Donald Trump and Kamala Harris had their first and perhaps only presidential debate. Credit...Kenny Holston/The New York Times

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At the ABC presidential debate, Kamala Harris had a programming challenge. Working against an experienced reality-TV professional, a savant of live broadcasts, she had to pull off a successful reboot of Democrats' least-favorite TV show of the 2024 season: the June debate that saw the self-immolation of President Biden.

There were some hurdles. The same rules in place on CNN in June still held. There was no studio audience, and each candidate's microphone would be turned off when the other was speaking. When Mr. Biden was still running, these guardrails were meant to avoid the dumpster fire of cross-talk and shouting that marked [the first 2020 debate](#). But that would frustrate Ms. Harris's campaign goal, which was to encourage Mr. Trump to be his own worst enemy.

So she, and whoever prepared her for Tuesday's showdown, did what prime-time producers have done since TV's early days: They worked within the constraints of the medium to produce the show they wanted.

If Mr. Trump could not bluster and shout over her, she would need to get him to melt down on his own time. If he could not stalk her onstage, as he did with Hillary Clinton in 2016, she would have to use the staging and the split-screen to create a dominance contest on her own terms.

It began before the first question was asked. Ms. Harris crossed the stage toward Mr. Trump and offered her hand. The handshake was a small exercise of control, designed to be seen by a prime-time audience: She was the active party, initiating the encounter, and he the reactive one, accepting. She introduced herself — “Kamala Harris” — as if to anticipate his habit of [mispronouncing her first name](#). Visually, she made herself the focus of attention, the protagonist of the drama.

Then she set about making Mr. Trump into the antagonist she wanted, needling and baiting him, pulling his levers and pushing his buttons.

If ABC would not turn off the mute button — though it did, eventually, allow some cross-talk as the debate grew heated — then Ms. Harris needed to unmute her opponent herself, which she did with a series of taunts microtargeted at his nerve centers of ego.

Early on, she laced him with a description of crowd members leaving his rallies out of “[exhaustion and boredom](#),” hitting the former NBC prime-time star where it hurts — in the audience. Vladimir Putin, she told Mr. Trump, “would eat you for lunch.” She even turned his “Apprentice” catchphrase against him: “Donald Trump was fired by 81 million people.”

Mr. Trump — who spent a relatively disciplined June debate letting Mr. Biden do himself in — swam straight for the chum. Maybe the most memorable rant of the night came when he veered into a false, xenophobic Facebook rumor, [elevated by his campaign](#), that Haitian immigrants in Ohio were killing household pets for food. His words were ... curious. But the TV split-screen was maybe even more telling. As Mr. Trump grew more and more agitated, Ms. Harris turned toward him with [an incredulous smile](#) that grew into a can-you-believe-this laugh.

The content matters in a TV debate, but the images often say more, especially when someone's microphone is off. And the two candidates' affects were very different.

When not in prosecutor mode, Ms. Harris wore [a bemused half smile](#). Her go-to posture was a hand held to her chin in a “Do go on!” gesture. She made herself the studio audience for a cringe comedy starring her opponent. Mr. Trump was combative and angry, karate-chopping and finger-stabbing the air when speaking, heavy-lidded and glowering when quiet.

Before the debate, pundits and analysts had drawn up a long must-do list for Ms. Harris, reflecting the usual needs of a new nominee and the specific Catch-22s of female candidates in American elections. She needed to communicate plans but not seem overprepared; be presidential but personable; attack but do it cheerfully. (She also needed to convey strength against a taller man who likes to use his bulk to [loom onstage](#); here, the split-screen helped her, rendering them equal.)

As for Mr. Trump, he showed that he's still most engaged on the attack, when he could keep himself on message. And he took up more of the speaking time, partly because of the amount of time he spent being [fact-checked](#) by the moderators, David Muir and Linsey Davis. (Mr. Trump contended that he saw the dog-eating claims "on television.")

In today's digital media, of course, the debate doesn't happen only on debate night; it plays out in what gets clipped on TV news and memed on social platforms. John Dickerson on CBS guessed that Mr. Trump "will be on the wrong side of the replays." But maybe the most potent judgment came on Fox News, Mr. Trump's usual corner of support. Ms. Harris, said Brit Hume, was "a different person from the absolute dunderhead many of us thought she was" — the Fox equivalent of a love letter.

How could Mr. Trump be bested in his natural medium, TV? He is a reality star who knows how to study camera angles and lighting, but he is not an actor. He can lie and perform, but he cannot *not* be himself, and he cannot or will not master his emotions when he feels them. In the spirit of reality TV, he lets it all hang out, and Ms. Harris set him up to hang himself.

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