

Excerpted from LADIES WHO PUNCH: The Explosive Inside Story of "The View" by Ramin Setoodeh. © copyright 2019 by the author and reprinted by permission of Thomas Dunne Books, an imprint of St. Martin's Press.

*This chapter is set in 2014, following Barbara Walters' retirement, when Rosie O'Donnell returns to "The View" to be with Whoopi Goldberg.*

The first clue that Rosie and Whoopi wouldn't be compatible as co-workers dated back to 2009. Whoopi had made the controversial argument on *The View* that Roman Polanski hadn't committed "*rape rape*," about the 1977 criminal case involving the film director's sex acts with a thirteen-year-old girl. Rosie, who wasn't on TV at the time, couldn't let such an egregious claim go unchecked. During a radio interview on *Howard Stern*, Rosie unleashed on Whoopi. "I said, 'That's ridiculous!'" Rosie recalled. "'I'm very anti-Roman Polanski and anti-Woody Allen. I'm not for people who rape children. It's a pretty clear line for me.'"

Whoopi, who was stung by the criticism, sent Rosie a note. "It was a very angry letter," Rosie said. "And I wrote back to her and I said, 'You can't change your idols, and you will always be one to me. I'm sorry if that hurt your feelings. I have different feelings about it than you. And I stand up for what I believe, but I'll never be against you, Whoopi Goldberg.'" Rosie meant that, theoretically. But all bets were off once she returned to *The View*.

On her original tour of duty, Rosie had at least pretended that she was going to be everybody's friend. This time, in 2014, she had her guard up. When Rosie reintroduced herself to the staff that summer, she looked detached, speaking slowly and deliberately, like the headmaster of a boarding school. It was a defense mechanism because she hadn't been given control over Barbara Walters's kingdom yet. As she pontificated about Season 18, Rosie made it sound as if she were the new executive producer, right in front of the man who actually held that role (not that Bill Wolff had the chutzpah to tell her to back down). That day, Rosie sputtered off a jumble of ideas about how the show would be smarter, focus more on news, and educate viewers. One part of her speech revealed just how much control she desired. "It's our jobs," Rosie said, "to make Whoopi better."

The room went silent. In the seven years that Whoopi had been on *The View*, nobody had needed to—or, frankly, had the courage to—give her notes.

“We’re not going to do to Whoopi what we did to Barbara,” Rosie continued. That made it worse. Rosie was suggesting that Whoopi (at only fifty-eight) was approaching her expiration date, and that it was their responsibility to cover for her until she left, which wouldn’t be too far off in the future.

Rosie’s words baffled the staff. They couldn’t tell if she was speculating about what she’d like to have happen, or if she was working off actual information from the network. One of the producers texted Whoopi, telling her that she needed to get to the office quickly. When she arrived a little bit later, she and Rosie had an awkward exchange. “What’s going on here?” Whoopi asked. Rosie realized that someone had tipped off Whoopi, which led Rosie to believe that the producers were out to get her. She stayed withdrawn in her interactions.

Rosie saw Whoopi as part of her restoration project because Rosie blamed her for the stodginess associated with *The View* in its later seasons. Rosie tried to get Whoopi to not wear an earpiece, which was a strange direction—Whoopi needed one to communicate with the control room.

“I never wanted to take the show away from her,” Rosie told me. “For years, she sat there and said nothing. She was nearly not even present. She would hold the cards and never ask a question to a guest. It was quite obvious she was getting a paycheck and nothing else. I wanted to raise the level of the show, and therefore, her as well.”

Most of the veteran producers knew that Rosie and Whoopi would never survive at the same table. The staff didn’t understand why Anne Sweeney and her daytime team thought this pairing would last, especially given Rosie’s history on the show. But as bad as Rosie’s eruptions had been with Barbara or Elisabeth Hasselbeck, this turned out to be much worse. It would soon come to be known as a fact among even ABC loyalists that working at *The View* was total hell.

The Season 18 premiere episode earned 3.9 million viewers, its highest ratings in eight years, as a result of the curiosity about Rosie’s return to daytime TV. In a few days, those numbers swiftly dropped, after it became obvious that the show without Barbara had become a shadow of itself in its glory days. It felt as if the four cohosts were on different planets. Nicolle Wallace, who still kept her other job as a pundit on MSNBC’s *Morning Joe*, relished wonky policy discussions. Rosie Perez wanted to talk about sports, making *The View* seem more like a product from ESPN. And Rosie looked defeated. With Whoopi as the moderator, she felt censored and restrained. Instead of entertaining America with her quick takes on news stories and her biting jokes, she kept flashing a death stare at Whoopi for interrupting her. “Some people would say, ‘What’s going on with you and Whoopi?’” Rosie recalled. “I was, like, ‘Are you watching the show! It’s pretty much right there.’ I have no desire for a public feud.”

One of Rosie's many mandates was to start the morning meeting a half hour earlier, at 8:30 a.m., to allow a jump start on preparing for the show. Whoopi, who took a car from her home in New Jersey, insisted that the meeting stay at the regular time of 9:00 a.m., since two hours had always been sufficient time to figure things out. ("There was no chance that Whoopi was getting there at eight thirty," said one producer, laughing.) Rosie, who also commuted from New Jersey, took Whoopi's objection as proof that she wasn't invested in fixing the show. As a compromise, Wolff tried to start the meeting at 8:45 a.m. "She was late the first time," recalled Rosie, who made a sarcastic aside to the staff about Whoopi's tardiness.

"I don't think she was interested at all," Rosie said about how Whoopi responded to Rosie's ideas. "We have different ways of treating our employment."