

BARRY DILLER

Barry Diller has much in common with the Shoemaker-Levy Comet that recently slammed into Jupiter. They both collided spectacularly with existing worlds, leaving them forever changed.

Among the worlds changed by Diller:

- The Fox Broadcasting Company which Diller, as chairman and chief executive officer, took from experiment to fourth network, along the way generating the hit programs: *Married... With Children*, *The Tracey Ullman Show*, *In Living Color*, *The Simpsons*, *Beverly Hills 90210*.
- Paramount Television, where as chairman and CEO, Diller presided over such acclaimed endeavors as: *The Winds of War* miniseries, *Happy Days*, *Cheers*, *Entertainment Tonight*, the *Shogun* miniseries, *Mork & Mindy*, *Solid Gold*.
- ABC Television, where he invented nothing less than the Movie of the Week, and the miniseries (in the late '60s, he was vice-president of programming, and later, prime-time television.)
- Paramount Pictures, where during Diller's reign as chairman and CEO, a stunning array of household-word movies appeared, including: *Saturday Night Fever*, *Airplane!*, *48 Hours*, *An Officer and a Gentleman*, *Grease*, *Ordinary People*, *Trading Places*, *Terms of Endearment*, *Star Trek* (and two sequels), etc.
- Twentieth Century Fox, where during his term as chairman and CEO, another stunning array of

household-word movies appeared, including: *Aliens*, *Die Hard (I & II)*, *Barton Fink*, *The Commitments*, *Broadcast News*, *Edward Scissorhands*, *Working Girl*, *Home Alone*, etc.

- QVC, a home shopping network whose letters stand for "Quality, Value and Convenience," which under his steerage has been transformed into one of the most powerful and successful experiments in modern television.

How does he do it? Soothsayers? Careful calculation? Conferring with experts? Demographic research? Voodoo? Dionne Warwick's Psychic Friends? Shirley MacLaine?

The answer is deceptively simple, yet perhaps more remarkable than any of the foregoing possibilities. Diller's done it all with instinct and judgment. It's almost anachronistic — a leader who eschews polls and marketing studies. He is famous — notorious, some might say — for making decisions heedless of demographics. An innovator and a hunch-follower, Diller is one of those immutable forces in the entertainment business who just can't seem to help causing things to happen. Successful things.

The story of Barry Diller's rise is reminiscent of Robert Morse's in *How*

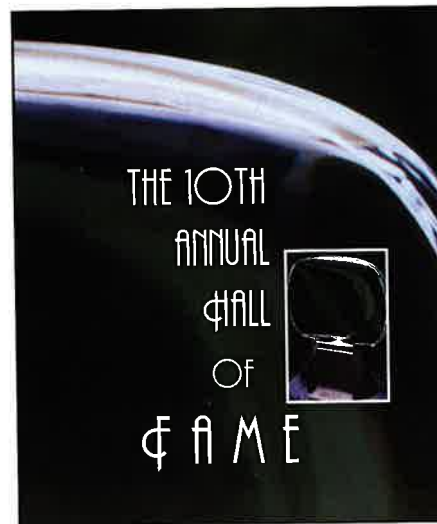
To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying. Both started out in mailrooms — Diller at the William Morris agency, where he borrowed and devoured every file of every client, in the process getting a terrific education on the ins-and-outs of Hollywood dealing (a circumstance he now refers to as his "university.") As he once told an interviewer, "It took me about a week and a half to read Elvis Presley's file. I wasn't interested in what Elvis was doing. I enjoyed dissecting it — why was he doing this and what was the reason for that? The files for Elvis were about six feet high."

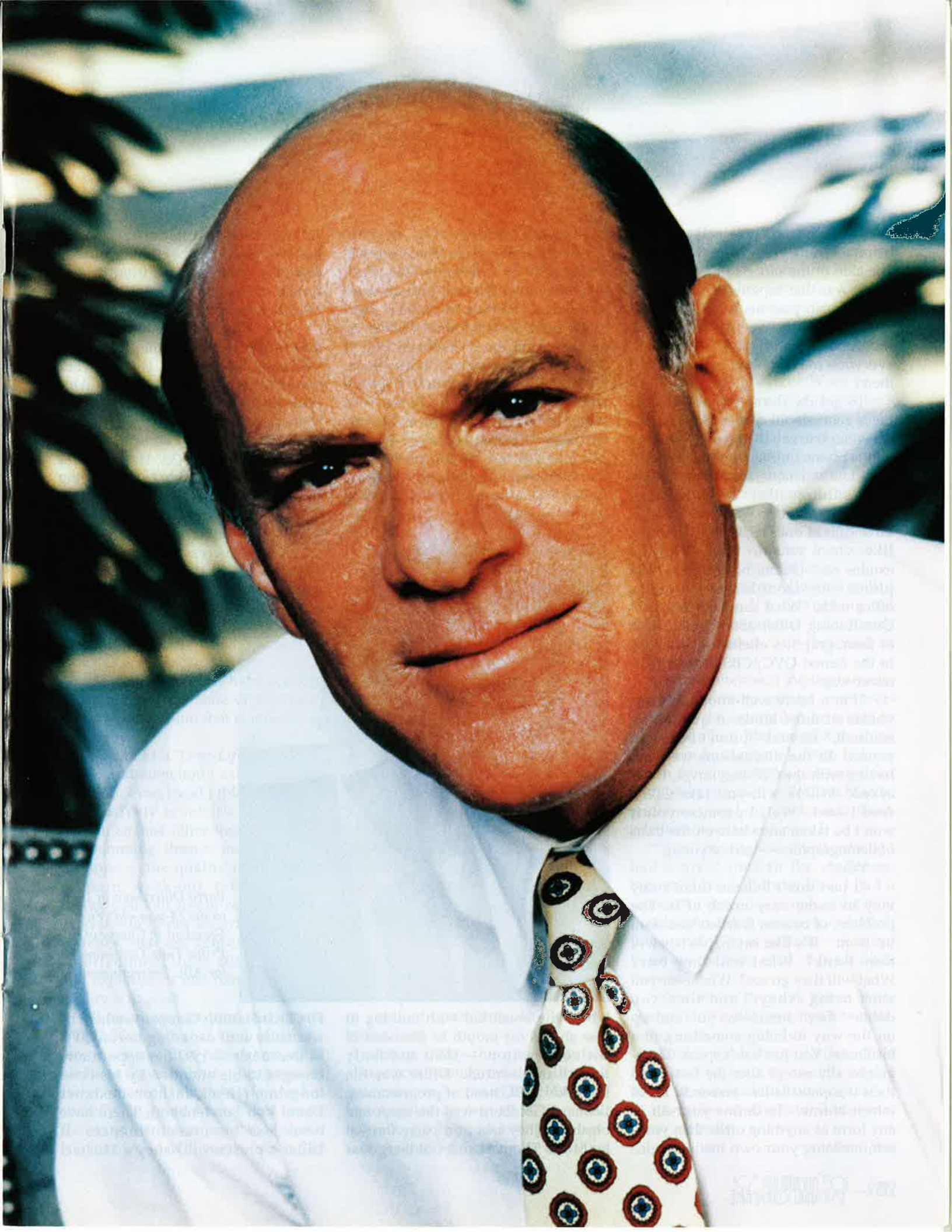
Curiosity, not some all-consuming drive, was Diller's motivator. Incredibly, he was aware of no overriding career ambition at the time.

Consider his comments from a recent speech concerning his days as a 23-year-old assistant to the head of programming at ABC: "I'd work for this talented guy and as he grew I'd follow him, happily making everything neat and clean so that the *creative types* could thrive."

Amazingly, Diller never thought of himself

as one of those "creative types." Until, that is, his boss happened to ask his opinion of a script for a new show. Diller was diplomatic at first, hedging, then finally admitted that he out-





and-out “hated” the script. The response? His boss “wiped me from one side of the office to the other” — but it was that experience that taught him to push past his sense of limitations. The script he had denounced, incidentally, was *M*A*S*H*. (Well, everyone makes a bad call now and then.)

To get the flavor of what Diller’s life is generally like these days, maybe it’s enough to say that getting the man on the phone uninterrupted is miraculous. His assistants are forever telling callers things like, “Well, he’s not where I thought he was,” or “He’s on three calls at once right now,” and the like. Once you do reach him, he exudes easy charm, beginning a brief phone chat from his Los Angeles office with, “What can I do to help?” Questioning Diller about his disdain of demographics elicited a reference to the famed QVC/CBS merger-that-never-was:

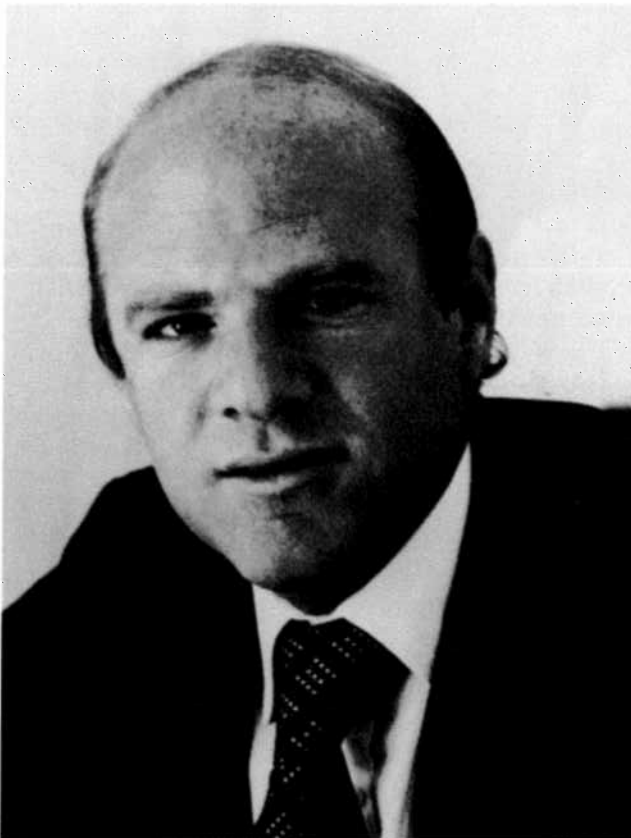
“I’m a fairly well-known nonadvocate of most kinds of qualitative research,” he said. “I don’t believe it works. In the discussions we were having with the CBS executives, I was asked, ‘Where will you take CBS?’ And I said, ‘Well I promise you it won’t be taken anywhere on the basis of demographics — old or young.’”

Why?

“I just don’t believe there’s any way to make very much of it. The problem, of course, is when you do it up front. It’s like saying, What will they think? What will they buy? What will they go see? Whenever you start using “they,” and then you define “they” somehow, you end up on the way to being something of a birdbrain. You just can’t speak demographically except after the fact. And then it’s *quantitative* research, all of which is fine. To define yourself in any form as anything other than yourself, meaning your own instincts, etc.,

is a hopeless exercise.”

Born in San Francisco in 1942, Diller grew up in Beverly Hills, back when Beverly Hills had a small town sense of community. His father, a real estate developer, became wealthy by getting in on the post-World War II Southern California tract house boon. At 19, Diller dropped out of UCLA where he was painfully bored, and went to work at William Morris through the influence of Danny Thomas, father of his childhood friend, Marlo. His jump to ABC happened like a scene from the movie



Barry Diller, seen in 1974 as the 24-year-old Vice President in Charge of Prime Time Television for ABC Entertainment.

so impressed that he hired Diller as his assistant. His beginning duties? Buying movie packages from studios (in the process, making deals that ran into the tens of millions).

After the colossal success of the movie-of-the-week format (one year, ABC shot 50 of them), Diller’s work caught the eye of the late Charles Bluhdorn, founder of Paramount’s then-parent company, Gulf & Western. Diller was hired to run the show in 1974, at age 32. He stayed for 10 years before quitting to join lagging Twentieth Century Fox, which under

Diller’s guidance produced a string of popular successes. From there it was the formation of the

where the brash kid with nothing to lose shoots his mouth to the head of the corporation — then suddenly finds himself hired. Diller was the brash kid; ABC head of programming Leonard Goldberg was the corporate bigshot. They met at a party thrown by Marlo Thomas, and Goldberg was

Fox Broadcasting Company, where he was chief until departing to run QVC in December of 1992 (an opportunity brought to his attention by his close longtime friend, fashion designer Diane Von Furstenberg). There have been less obvious influences of Diller’s presence: Disney’s Michael

Eisner and Jeffrey Katzenberg were both hired by the man (at ABC and Paramount). His emergence over the years has driven inter-studio and inter-network competition into new realms.

Predictably, Diller's reputation is the source of endless mythologizing by the media, and varies depending on which part of the proverbial pachyderm you're touching. It's not all pretty stuff, of course. Magazine articles routinely gossip about the perception of him as "a pit bull," sprinkled among adjectives like "brilliant" and "charming." Does the owner of this heavy mantle have an opinion about this?

"No, I mean I try not to," he said, with a trace of distaste. "I don't want to know. I mean, I think being overly self-aware is really dangerous. The best thing you can do is ignore it as much as possible."

He does, however, have a ready opinion about the state of television today — an opinion that is unfashionably upbeat:

"I was at a *Time-Life* lunch last week, and somebody asked me that question. And I said I think television qualitatively is terrific. Pound for pound, against other forms of fiction programming: theater, movies, books, for sure — the quality of television week-in, week-out, the number of series you can name really easily, even if you're not an avid television watcher, that are genuine first-rate entertainment done with true care and expertise, is just remarkable. Its quality is so good.

"I mean, any medium that can do *NYPD Blue* with that kind of consistency, it's just first-rate drama, as is *Northern Exposure* in its quirkiness, or *Picket Fences* or *Law and Order*. And in comedy, anybody who makes fun of *Roseanne* has never seen that show. It's just wonderful work. As is *The*

Simpsons, as is *Murphy Brown*, and it just goes on and on. That says a lot, and if you look at it against the general quality of motion pictures, certainly what is left of original theater, certainly journalism writing, books, fiction — it's remarkable."

His own greatest television contributions? The things that landed him in the Hall of Fame? ("What a nice thing, but for sure I don't feel qualified enough.") Not surprisingly, he cites the creation of the movie-of-the-week and the miniseries (the first was Leon Uris' *QB VII*, followed by *Rich Man, Poor Man* and *Roots*). Beyond that, the things he's found most rewarding are merely the "things that didn't exist before." Like Fox Television? "Of course, doing Fox, which also people said would never happen, is very gratifying." Or, as he expressed it more bluntly in a recent speech, "the man who owned CBS was quoted saying he 'wouldn't give a plugged nickel for Fox.' Two years later, Fox made \$70 million and CBS lost a couple of hundred million."

Diller is the kind of guy who spends little time looking back. It seems that he makes little accommodation for second-guessing himself, let alone regretting anything. The fact that he passed up, to choose a random example, making *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* doesn't faze him.

"I absolutely have always believed that it doesn't matter what anyone else does," he said. "It doesn't matter what the smart guy did that you *didn't* do. It only matters what *you* do. And if you spend a minute thinking about it, you just waste time. In the worst kind of way."

Barry Diller the non-executive also abhors wasting time. Dividing his time between homes in New York and Los Angeles, he said he is "constantly" riding a bike, climbing a mountain, swimming, boating — anything

that requires being active out-of-doors. Then there is his fondness for cards, or perhaps more precisely, for the friends he has joined in a single running poker game over the past decade: Johnny Carson, Dan Melnick, Steve Martin, Carl Reiner, Neil Simon. What kind of poker player is he? Ruthless? Sphinx-like? Word is, as *Los Angeles Magazine* put it, "Diller's play is notable only for its aggressiveness," purporting that he only stays in the game after it's clear he has no reasonable possibility of winning, waiting to see if an opponent is bluffing. The magazine further pregnantly asserted that this offers insight into Diller's manner of doing business. It elicits a chuckle from Diller:

"Steve Martin usually does well. I laugh, mostly. If I'm laughing too hard, I can't concentrate. I don't really want to, either. It's that kind of poker game."

A final, whimsical inquiry is made. Does his enormous success ever overwhelm to the extent that he wants to walk away from the complex machine his career has become? Does he ever yearn for the simple, pre-ambition days of sorting mail in William Morris, and sneaking long peeks into those celebrity files day and night?

"No," he laughed. "Well, *actually* I had a great time in the mailroom because I read all those files. I had a wonderful time. I was one of the only people who didn't want to leave! Well, yes, I would like to go back — if in fact there was more to read. I don't think there is."

You mean because times have changed? The files just aren't as interesting as they used to be?

"No," said Barry Diller, "it's because I've read so *much*. I wish I could start to read it all over again."

A rather sentimental admission for a "pit bull."

— Rip Rense