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## INSIGHT

# Moses Znaimer's second act

Znaimer's CITY-TV foretold the future, when media are everywhere. Think for a second and his less-cool revelation – that older people have lives – seems as prescient.

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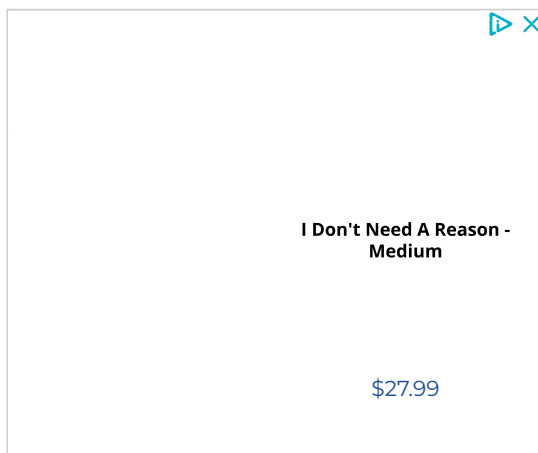
Moses Znaimer is rediscovering that visionaries exist only at the bottom or the top. In the middle, where he's living right now, they're better described as pitchmen.

Znaimer is in the midst of reconstructing the empire that was pulled from underneath him at CITY-TV. His downfall in that instance was a failure to control the means of production through ownership.

Three weeks ago, he added a small boutique of television channels – including the flagship religious service Vision TV – to his growing Zoomer lifestyle and media brand.

"Everyone who knows Moses knew he was going to find his way back into television," says Ross Mayot, one of the many lieutenants drawn back to Znaimer from other jobs.

This time, Znaimer is also a major stakeholder, rather than just the guy at the top of the flow chart.



There is some irony in the idea of a man who pioneered the broadcasting of soft-core porn now programming our nationally televised discussion of faith ("How tedious," Znaimer purrs at the thought of that sort of criticism).

But Znaimer, armed with his arsenal of aphorisms, has always seemed more comfortable speaking from the pulpit than grinding in the moshpit of pop culture. In a curious way, Vision fits him.

Sadly, there's more to this than grand plans. There is also the ugly business of money.

That's why Znaimer is here at the lakeside Boulevard Club, slotted in between a management pep rally and the buffet lunch. He's trying to convince a roomful of Procter & Gamble reps that people over 55 still count.

His presentation is in the form of a video, a slick presentation of stats demonstrating how much money the aging have (a lot) and how largely they figure in the plans of advertisers (a very little)

figure in the plans of advertisers (a very nice).

Afterward, Znaimer embellishes his pitch with a Q and A session. As is his monkish habit, he has on the same outfit he wears every day – muted suit, custom white shirt with oversize mother of pearl buttons and low-rise cowboy boots imported from Texas.

The room is still. The audience is polite and doubtful.

Znaimer begins his remarks in a familiar arch style, the verbal equivalent of anti-lock brakes. All of his sentences seem to stutter. To. Their. Conclusion.

But the 200 mostly 30-something audience is immune to his abundant charms. They laugh in the right places, but as if they're humouring a slight out-of-it uncle at Thanksgiving dinner.

The mood infuses Znaimer's answers with an acid edge. He parries the doubters easily, but when someone wonders about the point of chasing an older customer already set in his or her ways, Znaimer's hackles rise.

He trots out a sneering analogy – one he's used repeatedly – the youthful perception that the elderly sit around "collecting pension cheques so that they can go out and buy dog food."

"How the f--- does that happen?" Znaimer says, causing a few heads in the audience to snap back. "I've got big news for you. I've got the money. I've got the money and I've got the girls."

The tone is light. He chuckles as he says it. The audience laughs nervously in return. Later, Znaimer will call the exchange "thesis and antithesis." Whatever. It's a verbal spanking by any measure.

It's not terribly pious. But Znaimer hasn't ever really been a fan of the quiet satisfaction of polite observance. He's always been more interested in the dangerous thrill of conversion.

Moses Znaimer does not know exactly how old he is. He is 66-ish. He has a date on a piece of paper but, as Znaimer puts it, "at that time, during the war, people concocted papers, they bought papers, they made up papers."

So the Znaimer family never settled on a day.

"People would ask my mom, 'When was Moses born?' She'd say, 'It was wartime.' 'Was it summer, winter?' And she'd say, 'It was wartime.'"

Znaimer has never celebrated birthdays, neither his own nor anyone else's.

"People get fixated by counting. We get older by counting," Znaimer says. "I never understood the point."

His parents harrowing experiences during World War II initially plotted a great deal of Znaimer's direction.

Aron and Chaja Znaimer met while running eastward from the Nazis. He was a Latvian; she was a Pole. Family lore has it that Chaja singled Aron out after she heard him whistling a Yiddish tune during a ferry crossing.

By the time Znaimer was born – in Tajikistan during 1942 – the pair were trying to stay a step ahead of Soviet authorities. At one point, Chaja bribed Aron out of jail on trumped-up charges of theft. They slept through an escape attempt to Afghanistan. All their co-conspirators were caught and killed.

Eventually, posing as Polish refugees, the Znaimers made their way to a post-war German displaced persons camp. Young Moses, who spoke Russian, was told to forget his birth language in case he might accidentally unmask his family.

In 1948, they secured passage to Montreal, ending up in an apartment on Saint-Urbain St.

The language of use in the Znaimer home was Yiddish. Or a sort of Yiddish.

"My father grew up speaking German, but he no longer wanted to for ideological reasons," said Znaimer's younger sister, the journalist Libby Znaimer. "So his version of Yiddish was a lot of German."

Aron worked in the clothing business, Chaja worked as a waitress. Money was tight. But despite the straitened circumstances, all three of the Znaimer children – Moses, Libby and Sam – attended a Hebrew parochial school until the end of high school.

"We got a very extensive religious education. That was enormously important to our parents," says Libby.

The Znaimers were not regulars at the local Synagogue. But inside the family, Jewish identity was paramount.

"My father was determined that Mr. Hitler would not be allowed his victory," says Moses. "But he was not observant . . . He was more concerned, and I am too, with the peoplehood, the tribe, the cultural traditions."

"We were both born Jewish, but neither of us believe in organized religion," says Marilyn Lightstone, the artist who has been Znaimer's longtime companion. Earthy and exceedingly warm, Lightstone appears to be Znaimer's perfectly suited opposite. "I think what Moses is doing is almost rabbinic, almost Talmudic. The purpose of being Jewish is to save the world, to make it a better place. If (Moses) is Jewish in any way, it's that."

At 25, Znaimer was a wunderkind producer at CBC. By 30, he was running CITY-TV.

For a generation of Torontonians, Znaimer designed the delivery mechanism for media's tastiest empty calories. MuchMusic. Fashion Television. The shaky cam.

By 2003, he was forced out of City, the fief he'd built, but never fully controlled.

Since kicking off the Zoomer concept in 2005 – reaching out to an underserved, wealthy clientele of Boomers being pushed to the cultural margins – he's working it backwards. It started with radio, a magazine and web portals. TV is the last niece to be added.

The \$25 million Vision package – which includes the flagship station, a stake in One: The Mind, Body and Spirit channel and a pair of local religious channels in Winnipeg and Vancouver – brings with it access to something in the neighbourhood of 10 million households. It also comes freighted with a reputation for airing the sort of well-meaning, unwatchable television Znaimer always avoided making.

Znaimer is uncomfortable about talking programming specifics in advance of regulatory approval from the CRTC, which is months away. Mayot, a former TVO exec who worked with Znaimer in educational television, says the plan is to remove the sermons and massage the message.

"It will be about spiritualism in a not very religious sense. It's about purpose. What is my purpose in life? I think that's the natural fit for us," Mayot says.

It would seem that Znaimer has made a half circle, professionally. CITY-TV glorified a transitory, right-here-right-now culture. Now it's about the ever-after. Has Moses Znaimer forsaken the profane for the sacred?

"Yes, there's a certain rhythm to it, one that may be visible in hindsight," Znaimer says, rolling the idea over in his mind. "There were (other channels) I could have acquired, but something has led me here. Part of it is opportunity, happenstance. But you may be right."

If there's a change happening here, it shouldn't be confused with a softening. Znaimer's most vivid personality tic is still his aggressive sexuality.

At the opening of a new museum devoted to Znaimer's passion for television sets, one of the speakers – a 50-something woman – felt compelled to mention that her warm relationship with Znaimer is "purely platonic." That drew a small smile from Znaimer and knowing titters from his friends.

Sitting in his boardroom recently, Znaimer called out to one of his female staff, announcing that there are now more centenarians than at any other time in history.

"I guess I'll have to start dating 100 year olds," she shot back.

"And he'll still be banging you into the ground!" Znaimer whooped.

With his thinning hair pulled back into a small ponytail and the vulpine leer he flashes after such naughty jokes, Znaimer resembles Jack Nicholson's portrayal of a voluptuary Satan in the *Witches of Eastwick*.

That libidinous streak is central to the Zoomer ethos. And if Znaimer's style bothers some of Vision's current viewers?

"I think 99 per cent of (them) have no knowledge of me, let alone care about me. There are some professionals, people with vested interest, who might have opinions," Znaimer shrugs. "As my pal Leonard (Cohen) used to say, it doesn't matter what or who you worship, as long as you get down on your knees."

It's probably not taking the analogy too far to say that Znaimer's image of Godhead rests somewhere in mass media, and the television set in particular.

"I know you're going to hold this against me, but that's why all religions are, at some level, at war with show business," Znaimer says. "Before the advent of show business, where could you get a good show? Once a week, good music, guys wearing costumes, incense ... I think I can act as a useful bridge between these two worlds."

Perhaps. But in the end, it comes down to the most basic spiritual need of all.

"It's a question of existence," says Mayot. "If you don't exist on television, you live in the shadows."

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