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Joan Rivers

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Joan Rivers:



An Actress in Comedian's Clothing

By Deborah Behrens

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DON'T DRAG JOAN RIVERS down memory lane. She couldn't care less. Carson? Her seven-year-old grandson doesn't know who he is. Comedy icon? Please. She can still take you with one hand behind her back. Retire? She'd rather die on a stool in Las Vegas. Literally.

"But not until 31 minutes into the act because you don't get paid unless you've done more than half," laughs the caustic doyenne of stage and red carpet insult. "I said to Melissa don't pick up the body until 31 and a half minutes have passed."

At 74, Rivers has swapped her Geritol drip for a Red Bull buzz. While others in her set seem content to perfect their fairway chip shot, Rivers is busy preparing the world premiere of her third full length play *Joan Rivers: A Work in Progress* by a Life in Progress at the Geffen Playhouse opening Feb. 13. Or performing to sold out twentysomething audiences at her bi-weekly Wednesday night gigs at Chris Noth's club The Cutting Room in Manhattan's Flatiron District. Not to mention jet-setting to London to do a royal variety show for the Queen or dine with Prince Charles and Camilla.

"That's why I find I don't fit in at all with friends of mine who are in their third acts," Rivers admits. "They're retired and they go to Palm Beach in the winter and the Hamptons in the summer. How *fucking boring* can your life get? I don't want to sit with you. We have nothing to say to each other. I don't play golf."

"They ask me, so what are you doing, Joan? Well, I'm flying over to England, then I'm going up to Toronto, coming back and doing my play and when that's finished I'm going to The Cutting Room and they stare at me like...you're crazy. You don't want to go to Le Cirque for dinner?"

The answer is no. She'd rather be entertaining a live audience. People forget that long before Rivers hosted Emmy-winning talk shows, dished celebrity fashion or hawked jewelry on QVC, she earned her storied career the old fashioned way—on stage, one night at a time. Club by club and joke by joke, she perfected her neurotic brand of acid comedy, pushed past the barriers of male bias and paved her own path to television, movies, books and her childhood dream, Broadway.

Rivers made her Broadway debut in 1972 in *Fun City*, a comedy she co-wrote with her late husband Edgar Rosenberg and Lester Colodny. In 1988, she stepped into Neil Simon's *Broadway Bound* as the second replacement for Linda Lavin.

Six years later, she garnered a Tony nomination for Lead Actress playing Lenny Bruce's mother in 1994's *Sally Marr...and Her Escorts* which she co-wrote with Erin Sanders and Lonny Price. Rivers lost to Diana Rigg in *Medea* "who did a lot of eye gouging and stuff."

The *Joan Rivers Theatre Project* marks the comedian's first return to the Los Angeles stage since 2003 when she brought her internationally acclaimed one woman show *Broke and Alone* to the Canon Theatre. The impetus for the piece was an invitation to perform at the Edinburgh Fringe Fest the year before. Unbeknownst to Rivers at the time, the request would spark a creative re-birth which would lead her back to nightclubs and ultimately to the Geffen.

Cutting Edge

TALKING TO RIVERS ON THE PHONE is like listening to your favorite comedy album with an old friend. It makes you appreciate just how astute her humor really is. Without the infamous plastic surgery and her hallmark body gestures to distract, she is a sharp, funny and surprisingly candid commentator on life's harsh realities who is only too keenly aware of the public's fickle bias towards youth.

"Make sure you say she sounded very young and very sexual," laughs Rivers. "Talking to me in black underwear." She admits to wearing a QVC bathrobe while sitting in the library of her Manhattan apartment, a vision which somehow seems utterly apropos considering much of her wealth comes from selling her popular jewelry, beauty and perfume lines on the cable shopping network.

"As I say in my nightclub act, the only nice thing about age is that I can say what I want to," she acknowledges. "What are you going to do, fire me? I've been fired. Are you going to walk out? People have walked out before. There's nothing you can do to me anymore. I've been broke three times. What can you do? Nothing. It's a wonderful sense of freedom."

"Laurence Olivier once said to me, 'I go on stage and I say this is my space.' Isn't that great? So I go on stage now and I know, this is my space."

Her renewed sense of creative freedom began five years ago when the 2002 Edinburgh Fringe Fest invitation arrived. Synchronistically, Rivers had just broken up with a long time beau and while still deeply involved with QVC and red carpet coverage, she was ready to return to her comedy roots—performing in intimate clubs. To prepare new material for the festival, she booked

"Snapping out her lines, weaving and bobbing around the stage like a pug in the last throes of brain damage, she is an unindexed handbook on how to be neurotic about practically everything."

TIME, October 21, 1966

“Actors act. It’s that simple. If you’re not in a movie, be in a play. Go do it. There’s nothing like it.”

herself at Fez in Manhattan and quickly rediscovered the joy of spontaneously saying whatever outrageous thing came into her head without the censorship constraints of television or large concert venues. Something she says she first experienced at Chicago’s Second City in 1961.

“It all comes out of the right to improvise on stage,” she explains. “This is what Second City gave us. And that changed my life. They always say to me what was the one life changing experience? Was it Carson? Well of course it was Carson and what Carson said on the air that night that changed my life. But Second City gave me permission to say what I thought was funny. To say it as you think of it. That’s what kept me going all these many many years.”

Broke and Alone became the sensation of Edinburgh. The Scotsman reviewer reported “Watching Joan Rivers made me want to have children just so that one day I could tell them about the night I saw her. She has a commitment to entertaining that is breathtaking. I will remember the hour all of my life.”

Rivers booked the show at London’s The Theatre Royal, Haymarket in 2003 and got reviews a 25 year-old aspiring comedian would salivate over. Dominic Cavendish of *The Daily Telegraph* commented, “This is a stand-up show that for sheer vivacity and bitchy chutzpah makes most comics half her age look frankly moribund.” In *The Guardian* Rupert Smith remarked, “She is so far ahead of the game—besides inspiring most decent comics—that comparisons are pointless.”

It earned her a new generation of fans both in the UK and at home. College kids and young singles who know her only from her red carpet and fashion commentaries now flock to her nightclub gigs. Older Jewish women and gay devotees fill seats too but Rivers warns she is not here to serve up old standards.

“As they get older, people get very set,” she notes. “I always say we’re not going down memory lane here tonight. This isn’t going to be a wonderful old reunion. This is going to be as raw as we can get because that’s where I’m at. I certainly think I’m right up there with the time I live in. Whereas if I was still doing the jokes I was doing in 1971, you’d say oh aren’t those sweet? That’s why some comics look behind.”

Rivers believes those more established comedy performers get taken for granted by the public and media. “That’s why I went back over to

England where I was brand new,” she admits. “There I’m the hot girl in town. Over here it’s like, oh Joan Rivers. They expect you to be funny. It’s a wonderful comfort but if you weren’t funny, they’d be shocked. Instead of oh my god I saw this lady on television and she was so funny!”

Just don’t call her a comedy icon. It implies she’s not in the game.

“I’ll take anybody, anybody!” Rivers retorts. “I’ll go up against anybody with one hand behind my back. I would never have said that in my 60s even. I can still take you with one hand behind my back.”

Ageism

IT’S NO COINCIDENCE then that River’s new play is about conquering ageism at every stage of life. In 2003, just as her club and concert acts were drawing a new generation of international followers, Rivers found her renewed fearlessness put to the test backstage before a red carpet broadcast. The incident acted as a catalyst to put pen to pad and started her on a four-year autobiographical journey towards crafting her third theatrical piece as a playwright.

According to press notes, *The Joan Rivers Theatre Project* is “set immediately before a big awards pre-show. Rivers uses her dressing room (B, not A), her cheese plate (puny, not plentiful) and her producer (the bigwig’s nephew, not the bigwig) as impetus for an introspective look at aging, going through life’s ups and downs and being a woman in Hollywood.”

“It’s about starting again,” says Rivers. “Moving forward. It’s about ageism and age and what our business does to age. What our society does. It’s not about theatre people. It takes place in a dressing room but it’s about what everybody faces going through life.”

Co-written with Douglass Bernstein and Denis Markel, the four character piece was workshopped last August at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco under the direction of Mark Rucker. Critics raved both about the sold out show and River’s caustic post-curtain sets at the Plush Room.

“I got very nervous about it,” she admits. “So I picked San Francisco on Labor Day weekend. You can’t get further from New York and nobody’s around Labor Day. It worked out so well you want to kill yourself!” She laughs. “People were sitting on the stairs. It was fire marshal time, which is great. Several people came to see it unbeknownst to me because I didn’t want anyone to come. Of course, once it’s a hit in quotes, you’re killing yourself that nobody’s coming.”

Geffen Playhouse Literary Manager Amy Levinson Millán caught the last matinee and immediately offered to bring it to LA. Bart DeLorenzo is slated

to direct the world premiere. Rivers plans to duplicate her successful Bay Area formula by performing her stand up at a local Westside club following the show's weekend performances.

Having a play set backstage at a major awards show performed at a theatre whose Producing Director Gil Cates has helmed more Oscar broadcasts than anyone (12), and who is currently slated to produce the 80th Academy Awards ceremonies in 2008, would appear an ironic case of art imitating life. Rivers says Cates understood immediately what her piece is trying to say.

"Gil said, 'You always start back in a dirty dressing room,'" she explains. "I'm tapping into this whole age thing which is the final mountain. Boy, it hits you when you're 28, in your 30s, your 40s and certainly when you're my age. I think that's what's new about this. Nobody has dared to tell this before. It's such bullshit about what's being told. Jack Benny once told me, 'No matter how big you get, you always walk through the kitchen.'"

Rivers warns that people coming to the show who expect to see her stand up act or get a career retrospective will be disappointed. "It's not my life. I said it in the play notes at the Magic Theatre and I'll probably say it again at the Geffen. If you want to know about Miss Rivers, go Google her."

Still, when asked how hers compares to recent autobiographical shows by her pal Elaine Stritch or Billy Crystal, Rivers jokes, "Mine is not as deep. My play is for shallow people. If you're shallow, you will have a good time. I don't want them to learn. I want people to walk out and say what a good evening that was."

Broadway Baby

SO WHY WRITE A PLAY when you could just as easily work ageism into your act? Rivers says her whole life has been about the theatre. An avid attendee, she regularly blogs about it on her website, www.joanrivers.com, promoting Off Broadway shows like Horton Foote's *Dividing the Estate* or Adam Bock's *The Receptionist* ("staggeringly good") while offering up opening night dish on such Broadway favorites as *Young Frankenstein*.

"The first time I could put two sentences together it was all about being an actress," she notes. "It was all about theatre. My mother, god bless her, took me to everything. South Pacific, *Brigadoon*, *Oklahoma!*, children's theatre at the Academy of Music in Brooklyn. I was taken to a musical called *Where's Charley?* starring Ray Bolger. He took kids after the matinees and gave them a tour on stage. That was it for me.

"So it's never been anything for me but that I'm an actress who happens to be making her living as a comedian!"

Rivers says performing at the Morosco Theatre in her first Broadway show *Fun City* in 1972 was the fulfillment of that childhood dream.

"To be in a theatre you had gone to as a child?" she exclaims. "My dream as I came out of the subway with my mother was that one day I was going to be in the theatre. To this day to go back stage still kills me. I went to see Bill Pullman the other night in the new Edward Albee play. I always say if they let you back to say hello, it's like being taken into the temple." She laughs. "It's like being one of the vestal virgins. Absolutely going back to Greece. It's magical."

"The first time I could put two sentences together it was all about being an actress. So it's never been anything for me but that I'm an actress who happens to be making her living as a comedian!"

To Rivers, live performance is truly the only fountain of youth elixir. "How can you be tired when you love what you're doing? I used to come off Sally so excited and so happy with it and people would say, aren't you tired? I'd say no! Let's have dinner."

She urges all actors to return to the boards when they're not making money in other mediums. "Read Michael Caine's book," she says. "It's a little master class. Actors act. It's that simple. If you're not in a movie, be in a play. Go do it. There's nothing like it. I adore film and I adore television but there's nothing like human people all sharing the moment. Unless some son-of-a-bitch coughs."

Curtain Call

So what's left for Rivers to do?

"Oh my god!" she exclaims. "First of all, I've never been in a series. I want to be Doris Roberts when I grow up. That's number one. I'd love to be third banana down somewhere and just come in and be bitchy or funny or quirky. I'd never been in a movie. I've done little bitty bits. Never since *The Swimmer* have I really had a part in a movie that I didn't play myself. Then there's a whole series of books I want to write. Mystery stories. It goes on and on. So many things I have to still do. And that's what gets me up every morning and makes me crazy when I have more than two days off at a time.

"People always say to me when are you going to retire? Retire and do what? Tell my mailman jokes? I'd rather go out and tell everybody jokes." ■

JOAN RIVERS: A WORK IN PROGRESS BY A LIFE IN PROGRESS

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