

Elstner gets taste of show biz as clown

By Larry O'Connor
staff writer

Many comedians say they were class clowns. But Chas Elstner can boast of being a real clown.

In fact, the Chicago-raised comedian attended Ringling Brothers and Barnum Bailey's Clown School for three months in Venice, Fla. He even toured with the "Greatest Show on Earth" for awhile before moving on to the comedy stage.

And if P.T. Barnum himself said there was a sucker born every minute, the same might be said for sore feet. The 16-hour, six-day a week gruel was a hearty introduction to the world of show business.

"I'm out on the road now, and I hear guys being on the road two months at a time and complaining," said Elstner, who will appear Wednesday through Saturday, Feb. 22-25, at Joey's Comedy Club in Livonia. "I say, 'This is peanuts.'"

After 11 years of doing stand-up comedy, things are starting to crack open for Elstner. He's appeared on the Arts & Entertainment Network's "Good Time Cafe," the syndicated "An Evening at the Improv" and Showtime's "Comedy Network."

ON THE DAY of the interview, Elstner was preparing for an audition on "The Tonight Show" with Johnny Carson. It would be the third or fourth time he's tried out for the show. But, he added, some of today's better known jesters needed seven or eight tryouts before they were discovered on what is the comedy



Chas Elstner can boast of being a real clown. He attended Ringling Brothers and Barnum Bailey's Clown School for three months in Venice, Fla., and even toured with the circus for awhile.

equivalent to the corner drugstore.

Elstner, 30, refuses to quit.

That's not to say he hasn't thought about it. But there's always been someone there to give him a push.

"In this business you're always asking, 'Why am I doing this to myself?'" said Elstner, who lives in Los Angeles. "This is so hard. Not so much being on stage, but the business of it."

Frequently, Elstner would give himself a month. If things didn't get

better, he'd give up comedy.

Then after one show, a person came up to him and told him to stick with it. The person was George Carlin.

Again three years ago, when Elstner was about to call it quits, he received a phone call. Apparently, some hotshot comedian was going to be a regular on "Saturday Night Live." The Improv in Los Angeles asked Elstner to replace Dana ("The Church Lady") Carvey, who left for "Saturday Night Live."

Since then, Elstner hasn't looked back.

DOUBTS HAVE been replaced by determination. He's following through on a goal he's had from the first time he walked into The Improv in New York.

Instead of learning other comedians' styles, Elstner studied the profession. He found that Bill Cosby learned psychology, Steve Martin delved into philosophy and Charlie Chaplin practiced ballet.

Elstner took courses in those subjects at the University of Hawaii and a business class for good measure.

"I noticed most of them make it between the age of 30 and 32," said Elstner, who is at that age. "At 18, I said I have a lot of time to learn and to make mistakes."

At 19, Elstner started out performing at a coffee house near the campus. From there, he honed his act down to a science.

Elstner's act has developed into four different phases — his childhood years, his philosophy on life, stresses of life and being a man.

Through the years on stage, Elstner found that his experience as a clown was not all for naught.

"I think what it did was after doing 800 shows a year we teach me doing something over and over again, you have to find out how to make it interesting enough to make it sound brand new," he said.

Chas Elstner will perform on Wednesday through Saturday, Feb. 22-25, at Joey's Comedy Club, 36071 Plymouth, Livonia. For information, call 261-0555.

Belzer loads up on the chuckles for 'Bush & Co.'

By Larry O'Connor
staff writer

A presidential honeymoon period observed by comedians? Sure, especially if you're Richard Belzer.

And the politically observant humorist, somewhat like the media and Congress, is sizing up the Bush presidency in its infancy to see what it will bring in terms of material. As a source of laughs, President Bush has a tough act to follow.

"I think Reagan was easier to do jokes about than Bush will be," said Belzer, who will perform Wednesday through Saturday at Chaplin's in Fraser. "Everything is in limbo right now. Every one is trying to be nice and not face up to the reality of the mess Reagan left the country in."

Quayle is one of the funniest creations in God's creation. He's a big, slow moving target. "Bush is a hard one to figure out. He's gone through so many personality changes. He went from being a wimp to Superman. I was hard on him during the campaign. I guess people have short memories."

What's that saying on never talking about politics and religion? Belzer violates that with regularity. Those who make news are targets for his barbs — political, religious or otherwise.

The headliner's material is what he gleams from the headlines. Belzer reads five newspapers a day, including the New York Times, Washington Post and USA Today ("Not for intellectual stimulation," he said of the latter).



Richard Belzer is somewhat like the media and Congress. He's sizing up the Bush presidency in its infancy to see what it will bring in terms of material.

THE BRIDGEPORT, Conn., native worked as a reporter for a couple of years before launching his comedic career. So with good reason, Belzer fancies himself as a stand-up journalist.

Some have labeled Belzer as a modern-day Lenny Bruce. "Except I'm still alive," he said.

Nonetheless, he's patented a sarcastic brand of humor that has

earned him accolades from the top comedians of our time. Said the late John Belushi, "The best I've ever seen working directly with an audience." Added Robin Williams, "Wonderful when he's on the edge. The Marquis de Sade as a gameshow host."

Part of the Belzer success is said to be his spontaneity. He's been noted as one of the few comedians whose routine changes right to night. Often preferring the quiet setting of small clubs, audiences have been known to become involved. Sometimes Belzer is considered harsh, although reports lately have him mellowing a bit.

"I've been accused of being easier on the audience, but I think that's not necessarily true," Belzer said. "Perhaps I haven't been concentrating on the audience as much because I've had more on my mind. I still talk to the audience quite a bit."

COMEDY IS not Belzer's only vice. He's also an actor, appearing in such films as "The Groove Tube," "Author, Author," "Fame," "Night Shift" and "Scarface."

Belzer also hosted a live talk show, "Hot Properties," on Lifetime Cable Network. His encounter with wrestler Hulk Hogan on the show landed him in the hospital. He is suing the Hulkster for \$5 million.

His breakthrough into comedy, though, came through television appearances. He was a guest on "The Tonight Show," "Late Night With David Letterman" and "Saturday Night Live."

And speaking of SNL, Dennis Miller on that show has a similar, cocky style of politically observational comedy.

"I don't want to fuel the fires of that," Belzer said. "People can draw their own conclusions."

Richard Belzer will appear Wednesday through Saturday, Feb. 22-25, at Chaplin's Comedy Club, 34244 Groesbeck Hwy., Fraser. For reservations, call 792-1902.

COMEDY CLUBS

Here are some listings of comedy clubs in our area. To let us know who is appearing at your club, send us the information: Comedy Listings, Observer & Eccentric, 38251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150.

• BEA'S KITCHEN

Rob Lederman, Arturo Shelton, and Downtown Tony Brown will appear Friday and Saturday, Feb. 24-25, at Bea's Comedy Kitchen, 541 Larned, Detroit. Showtimes are at 8:30 p.m. and 10:45 p.m. For reservations, 961-2581.

• COMEDY SPORTZ

Comedy Sports at the Heidelberg will have improvisational comedy at 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. The club is at 215 N. Main, Ann Arbor. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. For reservations, call 955-8888.

• HOLLY HOTEL

Jef Brannen, Ken Brown and Mi-

chael Bonner will perform Thursday through Saturday, Feb. 23-25, at the Historic Holly Hotel, 110 Battle Alley, Holly. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. Thursday, 8:30 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. Friday and 8:30 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. Saturday. For reservations, call 634-1891.

• JOEY'S

Chas Elstner will appear Wednesday through Saturday, Feb. 22-25, at Joey's Comedy Club, 36071 Plymouth Road, Livonia. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday and 8 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. No smoking night is Thursday. For information, call 261-0555.

• LOONEY BIN

Huben Ruben will perform on Friday and Saturday, Feb. 24-25, at the Looney Bin Comedy Club, The Wolverine Lounge, 1655 Gengary, Walled Lake. Showtimes are 9 p.m. Friday and 8 p.m. and 10 p.m. Saturday. Also appearing will be Mike Connell and Keith Ruff. For information, call 669-9374.

• MAINSTREET

Wayne Cotter will appear at 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. on Friday through Sunday, Feb. 24-26, at MainStreet Comedy Showcase, 314 E. Liberty, Ann Arbor. For reservations, call 956-9080.

• COMEDY CASTLE

Jeff Harder will appear Tuesday through Saturday, Feb. 21-25, at Mark Ridley's Comedy Castle, 2593

Woodward, Berkley. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday and 8:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. For reservations, call 542-9990.

• PROCK'S

Bob Posche will appear on Friday and Saturday, Feb. 24-25, at Prock's Comedy Show Room, 1019 W. Maple, Clawson. Showtimes are 8 p.m. and 10:45 p.m. For reservations, call 280-2826.

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