

Richard Jeni: Perseverance pays off with laughs

By Rebecca Haynes
staff writer

Someone recently described him as a cross between Robin Williams and Mickey Rourke, and comedian Richard Jeni agrees with the assessment.

"I'm definitely this kind of New Yorker, wise guy type of act," he said during a recent telephone interview. "And I do have an upbeat energy."

You could probably say Jeni started doing standup when he was 12. His father was a big comedy fan and Jeni used to listen to his not-too-clean comedy albums when no one was home, memorizing the jokes.

"I think like most comedians, I used it as a means of getting accepted. When I was 13, I wanted to hang around with guys who were 17 or 18 and I'd repeat the routines I'd heard on my dad's records and they liked it so they let me stay."

He remembers being attracted at that age to the whole aura that surrounded the vision of the smoky nightclub, open way past his bedtime.

But he never thought of making a career out of comedy. The Brooklyn native managed to maintain a 3.9 grade point average and then graduated with honors in political science and economics from Hunter College in New York.

"I THINK that's one of the things that really works for me on stage. People are thinking, 'Here is somebody who in appearance and manner shouldn't be a very thoughtful person.'"

The fact that I can dig deep with the concepts is something you wouldn't expect."

And although he held several positions in public relations, he was always doing something that got him fired, the comedian said.

"The thought of doing comedy was so far-fetched that I didn't know how to begin to even think of it. So every job I had I screwed up."

"I think I was subconsciously trying to set in motion the circumstances that made it OK to try the comedy thing. That way I could say I tried to be a regular person but it didn't work out."

THE FIRST year or two in the business, which for Jeni began in 1981, were very difficult.

"I did amateur nights for about a year. There's no way to learn it without going up and putting yourself on the line."

"There's no how to be funny school, so you have to learn everything, how to walk and talk. It's a slow process and in most jobs you get to be in a sheltered environment when you're first starting."

"I think I was on the verge of quitting every day. But I had in my mind that I had no place to go."

AND HIS perseverance paid off. His prestige in the comedy industry has climbed steadily since then.

Gone are the nights of performing in small, no-name clubs. He now headlines on an international circuit, including large concert halls, and is continuing a successful relationship with cable's Showtime.

His 1989 special on that network, "Richard Jeni: The Boy From New York City," won him an ACE award nomination. So he undertook a more ambitious one-hour special, "Richard Jeni 2: Crazy From the Heat," which began airing on Showtime this year.

JENI TAKES exaggeration to an extreme, painting absurd pictures about family life and other situations with which people can easily identify.

"You have to find a sentiment that's shared. You have to be on common ground for comedy, so I'm always looking for something people tend to feel a certain way about."

"Most jokes are a distortion of reality, so you have to understand the real situation before you can laugh at the distortion. The more firmly rooted the concept is, the sharper the joke will be."

JENI ATTRIBUTES his standup personality to a combination of traits he inherited from his parents.

"My father was funny, but in a very sarcastic way. And my mother wasn't particularly funny but she's the type of person who loves a good party."

And although his parents are the target of several of his most popular routines, he said they take it all in stride.

"They like it, and the fact that I bought my mother a car for Christmas helped," he said, laughing. "My family is kind of a star-struck group. They'll sit around and talk about

movie stars like they know them personally."

JENI DOESN'T consider himself to be particularly funny when he's not on stage.

"Comedy is a lot more cold-blooded than it looks. The trick is to make it look spontaneous."

"Most people laugh the hardest at things that just happen to them when they're not expecting it. But with this, people are told that at 8:30 tonight the funniness will begin. You have to make the routines look spontaneous, like they're just happening for the first time even though you've rehearsed every line and movement."

AND ALTHOUGH he says he always includes new material in his road act, the audience will still see some of the routines he considers his best.

"I have found that usually people do want to see a certain amount of material from the (Showtime) show. So I try to sandwich the new stuff in between the stuff I know already works."

And what can Detroiters expect during his upcoming performances at The Comedy Castle? Jeni replied, chuckling, "I plan on getting naked and spontaneously combusting."

Richard Jeni will appear Thursday-Saturday, March 7-9, at Mark Rodley's Comedy Castle, 200 E. Fourth St., Royal Oak. Showtimes are 8:30 p.m. Thursday and 9:30 and 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Call 542-6900 for reservations or more information.



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Mickey Rourke, a "kind of New Yorker, wise guy type."

COMEDY CLUBS

Here are listings of some comedy clubs in our area. To let us know who is appearing at your club, send the information to: Comedy Listings, Observer & Eccentric, Newspapers, 36251 Schoudercraft, Livonia 48150.

• CHAPLIN'S EAST

Steve Seagren will appear Tuesday through Saturday, March 5-9, at Chaplin's East, 34244 Groesbeck, Fraser. Show times are 8:30 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, 8:30 and 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. For reservations, call 792-1202.

• CHAPLIN'S PLYMOUTH

David Klein will appear Wednesday-Saturday, March 6-9, at Chaplin's Plymouth, 14707 Northville. Show times are 8:30 Wednesday and Thursday, 8:30 and 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. For information, call 451-4680.

• MAINSTREET

Stunt Johnson Theater will per-

form Wednesday-Saturday, March 6-9, at MainStreet Comedy Showcase, 314 E. Liberty, Ann Arbor. Show times are 8:30 and 11 p.m. Friday and 7, 9 and 11 p.m. Saturday. For information, call 996-5080.

• COMEDY CASTLE

Norma Zager will perform Tuesday-Wednesday, March 5-6, and Rich Jeni will perform Thursday-Saturday, March 7-9, at the Comedy Castle, 269 E. Fourth, Royal Oak. Show times are 8:30 Monday through Thursday and 8:30 and 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. For reservations, call 542-9960.

• BEA'S COMEDY CLUB

Downtown Tony Brown, Efflitt Branch and Mary Welch will perform Friday-Saturday, March 8-9, at Bea's Comedy Club, 541 Larned, Detroit. Show times are 8:30 and 11 p.m. For information, call 961-2581.

• HOLLY HOTEL

Danny Ballard will appear along

with Steve Billnitzer and Gary George Thursday through Saturday, March 7-9, at Holly Hotel, 110 Battle Alley, Holly. For reservations, call 634-1851.

• LAUGHTER HOURS

Mark Tripp and Dave Dorsett will perform Wednesday, March 6, at Hurley's in Northfield Hilton, 5600 Crooks Road, at 174 Troy. For information, call 879-2100.

• JOEY'S LIVONIA

Mark Eubanks will perform along with Steve Mitchell and Don Terregina Wednesday-Saturday, March 6-9, at Joey's Comedy Club, Plymouth Road between Wayne and Levan roads, Livonia. Show times are 8:30 p.m. Wednesday, 9 p.m. Thursday and Friday and 8:30 and 10:30 p.m. Saturday. For information, call 261-0555.

• JOEY'S ALLEN PARK

Dr. Ginn will perform Wednesday-Saturday, March 6-9, at Joey's

Comedy Club and Sports Emporium, 15246 Southfield Road, Allen Park. Show times are 8:30 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday and 8 and 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. For information, call 392-2041.

• JOEY'S AT THE ROXY

Joe Dehon will perform with Keith Ruff and Derek Turner Wednesday-Saturday, March 6-9, at The Roxy, Haggerty Road near I-94, Belleville. For information, call 695-1829.

• MISS KITT'S

Scott Shaw will perform with Keith Ruff Thursday-Saturday, March 7-9, at Miss Kitty's Comedy Club, Long Branch, 595 N. Lapeer Road, Oxford. For information, call 628-8500.

• LOONEY BIN

Krik Noland will perform with guests Don Dubois and Phil Burbig. For information, call 362-1522, at the Looney Bin Comedy Club, 1655 Glen-

way, Walled Lake. For information, call 669-9374.

• DUFFY'S

Bob Pouch Comedy Show will per-

form at 6 p.m. and 11 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays at Duffy's, 8635 Cowley Lake Road, Union Lake. Admission is \$7. For information, call 363-9469.

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