



PHOTO BY PHIL PROVENCIO

Richard Lewis: The gypsy remains

With 45 years in the spotlight, the tireless comedian reflects on his life in comedy and recovery

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

A lot has changed since Richard Lewis first hit the comedy scene in 1971, but Lewis's onstage persona has stayed point-on: neurotic, obsessive and cathartically using fodder from his life on the analyst's couch. Performance as therapy. Therapy as performance.

Lewis spent many years ignoring, and then facing his multiple drug and alcohol addictions. Now, almost 20 years sober, Lewis says he still has to take it one day at a time. But there has always been one addiction that has served him well: Performing before live audiences. In addition to his success in film and television, he has spent the past four decades of touring the comedy circuit and currently enjoys the role of — well, essentially himself — in the wildly popular HBO series “Curb Your Enthusiasm.”

Last year, Lewis took a much needed and doctor-ordered vacation, a six-month break from comedy touring after 45 years.

He is back on the road, and he will appear in two shows on each night, Friday, Feb. 21 and Saturday, Feb. 22 at Helium Comedy

Club in Portland.

Sue Zalokar: *Why stand-up?*

Richard Lewis: Comedy is a boon to my psyche. I don't go on stage ranting and talking about stuff like (the work) Street Roots does. I do know this: it seems like those who don't need help, get more help. Maybe it's just the nature of the beast. Maybe it's just the way people are. It takes more than a handful of Nobel Peace Prize winners to change society's viewpoints.

S.Z.: *You have often made reference to hard times or lean times in your past. What were those times like for you?*

R.L.: I never went into the arts to make any money. I went into the arts because I was on a mission to express myself. Most artists will tell you that. Then when the money comes, I never thought about how much I wanted to make. I just thought about my next show, but I always wanted to pay the bills.

I felt like a millionaire, every night, exhausted after two or three part time jobs,

living in shitholes. My father had died right after I graduated Ohio State and never saw me perform. And my brother and sister were much older than me and they weren't around. My mother, she had all sorts of stuff — things that didn't make us great friends, to put it mildly. So I really was sort of tethered to no one and really had no support.

Understandably, it made it easier for me to latch onto drugs and alcohol. I've been sober almost 20 years. One day at a time. It's really true.

S.Z.: *Can you speak to the challenges of being an addict in recovery?*

R.L.: I've stayed away from those drugs. But I have buried a lot of friends. Addicts are wired in a really bizarre way and it doesn't have to be meth or heroin — which is really just becoming insane. People who are obese are addicts. People who smoke cigarettes are addicts. You can be addicted to anything.

S.Z.: *How has the comedy business changed?*

R.L.: I've been a comedian for 45 years. Back then there were only really about 100 comedians and I would say only about 10 or 15 of us were doing better than the other 85: Crystal and Leno and me and Kaufman and Freddie Prince and Elayne Boosler and a handful of others. You know, we were the ones who got the first breaks. Then Jimmy Walker got the series and it was all pretty trippy. Freddy got a series. We felt like dreamers.

I remember, a great comedian, Robert Klein, called us gypsies because most of us didn't come from show business. Here we were: working for free, hanging out in the Village, hanging out in downtown Manhattan, always going out and eating and drinking and talking about each other's work. It was like a real sisterhood/brotherhood. And then there was the comedy boom and there were a half a million comedians. Which is fine with me, but the only downside with that is the vast majority were so derivative that you had to really think about who you were going to spend time with at a club or on TV. It got increasingly difficult. Those people — not just the masters like Lenny and Pryor and Shelley Berman and Jonathan Winters and Mel Brooks and those people — they were driven only to be funny. Nothing else mattered.

Of course a lot of my life went south because of that. I didn't have much balance. I never went insane and I am not in the street, thank God. I still have my home and I married a wonderful woman many years ago — my first marriage — we've been together for 15 years. So I've dodged huge bullets. I'm in my mid 60s. When I started, all of these really famous, iconic comedians were in their late 40s who I used to watch on TV. And they were fans of mine. It tripped me out. It also gave me tremendous incentive — as broke as I was — to keep going up. I felt like a true artist. This is what an artist does.

S.Z.: *Have the audiences changed, too?*

R.L.: In an odd way, because of “Curb,” I've got three generations coming to my shows whether it's at Helium in Portland or in a concert hall. The demographic: There will be a 13-year-old and then there will be a guy on a gurney saying, “I wanted to see you before I die.”

Louis C.K. actually flew me and a couple of other comedians out to do sets because we had influenced him when he was playing Chicago Theater. And it was very sweet of him. It was a sort of a lovely surprise for the audience as well.

There are a whole load of amazingly great young comics now: Sarah (Silverman) and Jeffrey Ross and comics in their 30s and 40s. The thing is, they are fans of mine. I know this because I'm friends with them. It really makes me feel cool. I'm grateful that I don't have any health issues — at least today — except being old and aging.

I was best friends with Jonathan Winters. He was like a father to me. And there was Phyllis Diller. They both died very late in life, but to be able to hang with them for a decade. ... I really had the best mother and father — surrogate — that I could possibly have. All of the great comedians from Pryor to Carlin — all of them. I know them, I knew them. Some of them have passed away, some of them are still alive. I hang out with them and with the younger generation.

So I really feel pretty fortunate, because whatever I do on stage — and I'm not sure, I don't have an act — but whatever the hell I'm doing, it's one thing with an audience. I never wanted to be liked by everybody because I don't like people who are. It's very commercial. I'd rather be a little more on the edge and I am. So people will either really go, “Wow! I dig him.” Or they'll go, “What the fuck is he talking about?”

S.Z.: *You talk about music a lot.*

R.L.: On the rock-n-roll side of things, music has always been a mantra for me

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