

From 'SNL' Annoying Man

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

Jon Lovitz was part of an iconic "Saturday Night Live Cast" in the late '80s that included Phil Hartman, Jan Hooks, Dana Carvey, Mike Myers, Dennis Miller and Kevin Nealon. He created what might be some of the most memorable skits and characters in the show's 40-year history (think: pathological liar Tommy Flanagan, "Yeah ... that's the ticket").

After leaving the "SNL" cast, Lovitz went on to work in most every aspect of writing and performing over the past 25 years.

The young comedian who spent time poring over the work of Woody Allen and Neil Simon would one day work with both idols; star in film, television and Broadway plays; and sing at Carnegie Hall — more than once. If there are six degrees of Kevin Bacon, I think there are five degrees of separation from Jon Lovitz.

These days, Lovitz is doing what he loves most: standup. He will be at the Helium Comedy Club in Portland this weekend, playing shows Thursday through Saturday night, June 4-6.

Sue Zalokar: How did you get to be so funny?

Jon Lovitz: (laughter) My first thought about it was I slept over at my friend Michael's house — I was like 5. I couldn't go to sleep, and I was just lying there, staring, trying to go to sleep. And all of a sudden, my friend sat up in bed and made this face and laid back down. I said, "What was that?" And then he did it again, and I just started laughing.

He kept doing it, and I was crying, laughing. I remember then thinking, "I want to be funny like Michael."

My parents also have a great sense of humor; they're very funny. My grandfather, whom I was very close to, he was very funny. I just always liked being around funny people.

S.Z.: In your opinion, what makes a good comedian?

J.L.: There are people who have funny material, but they are also funny people. They can make you laugh with a look. They don't have to say anything, you know. It's not what they say; it's how they say it.

S.Z.: You were a part of the "Saturday Night Live" cast for five years (1985-1990), and during that time, you created some of the most memorable and inventive characters in the show's history. What was that time like for you?

J.L.: Oh, thank you. It was amazing. I never could believe I was on the show, and it was very exciting. At the same time, it was very competitive, and it was very hard work — like 80 hours a week.

It's a tough show to do. The writers are writing sketches and you're writing sketches and you have maybe 30 to 40 sketches; they pick 14, and eight make it on the air.

I loved the job, I didn't want to leave the show, but I got a chance to do a movie. I would have had to miss the first two shows of my sixth season, and they couldn't work around it. But I would be in New York and ("SNL") would call me and say, "Oh you're in New York? Come do a show."

S.Z.: Was the movie "A League of Their Own"?

J.L.: No. It was "Mom and Dad Save the World." It ended up (not going much of anywhere). You just never know.

I was in the movie "Big," and nobody thought it would be a hit. I remember Penny Marshall showed me 45 minutes of footage. I told her I thought the film would be really successful.

She asked why, and I told her the stories are unimportant. It was the idea of what would logically happen if a kid became 30 years old. You just never know.

S.Z.: You've said: "I don't do characters from 'SNL.' I'm just funny as myself" ...

J.L.: I wasn't saying that as a compliment to myself. I was saying, "I don't do characters because I tried it, and it didn't work." It's just me being funny as myself.

S.Z.: It's OK. You can compliment yourself. It must get old — people walking up to you and saying, "That's the ticket."

J.L.: No. It's flattering. It still blows me away that people remember it and do it.

S.Z.: A morbid joke, part of "Saturday Night Live's" 40th anniversary show in February was the implication that you, who are very much alive, had passed away ...

J.L.: I was thrilled to be there. When I heard the joke, I started laughing. They always do these dark, edgy jokes, and this time I was the butt of the joke. I didn't mind. I have no problem laughing at myself. That is the kind of humor the show is known for.

S.Z.: Sadly, Jan Hooks did pass away in October of last year. Do you have a particular memory of Jan that would best emulate her comedy style?

J.L.: I was shocked. I didn't know she was sick. It was very sad.

I worked with Jan on a show a year before "SNL" called "Twenty-Nine Minutes," a sketch show on the Playboy Channel.

Jan came on to "SNL" in my second year, and that group for the next four years, we all decided to be really funny — not be broad and do characters, play them really well and be funny, not just do caricatures. And I

would say that was her style.

She was a great comedic actress. Often, if you look at the lines, they're not really funny, but it's the way you play it. You have to make a believable character and be funny at the same time.

But then when you do it like that, people think you are just naturally funny. I'm funny, but there is a lot of work that goes into it.

It's like learning a classical piece on the piano; you have to break it down.

S.Z.: You're a music lover ... you play and sing. Did you take piano lessons as a kid?

J.L.: Yes. I did from when I was 8 to 13. I just kept playing. I was a much better player when I was 13.

"I'm funny, but there is a lot of work that goes into it. It's like learning a classical piece on the piano; you have to break it down."

JON LOVITZ

to showbiz Renaissance performer

Jon Lovitz, who will play Portland in June, discusses comedy, mental health and the funny topic of Israel

S.Z.: A common saying is "Laughter is the best medicine." In my experience, this is so true. But many of the greatest comedians have suffered with their own mental health issues or that of those around them, including addiction ...

J.L.: Millions of people suffer from being bipolar. It is a human condition that a lot of people have. Almost every drug addict, they all say that they are self-medicating. Self-medicating what? Usually it is from dealing with (past) traumas or they are bipolar. And then someone tries a drug and they become addicted, not because they are weak, but drugs, like heroin, it physically alters your brain chemistry and you are addicted to it no matter who you are.

S.Z.: What did you think when you heard that Robin Williams had taken his life?

J.L.: I didn't realize he had Parkinson's or any of that. I knew him, and I was very upset, very sad. He was a really great guy.

I met him when I was in college, before he was famous. I did this sketch for this solar energy day. He was next, and he told me to introduce him — in a specific, quirky way — and I did. He was hilarious! And I was like, "Who is this guy?"

I talked to him after the show, and I asked him, "Do people come up to you and ask, why aren't you ever serious?" He said, "Yes." I asked him, "What do you say to them?" And he said, "Why aren't you ever funny?"

I've known him since, over the years. It was very tragic.

The thing about comedians all being miserable? Really, it's not true. People have issues.

He was on medication for stuff. I don't know the facts. He was just getting worse and worse. It's a real tragedy. He was such a nice guy. A very warm human being.

He was so huge because there was no one like him. He was magical — like a leprechaun almost ...

S.Z.: (busts out laughing) I think he'd like that.

J.L.: He'd laugh at that probably. He was a wonderful, magical human being and very lovable. And of course (his death) is so tragic because he made everybody so happy ... and you find out he was obviously so miserable that he took his own life.

S.Z.: I live in a Death with Dignity state (Oregon), and here, if you have a terminal illness, you can petition your doctor to end your own life clinically.

J.L.: I think that's a good thing. I worked at a hospital, and I would see people dying of cancer,

and it was just awful. They just waste away into a skeleton, and it is a horrible thing. What's the point?

I don't see anything wrong with it. I mean, we put our pets to sleep so they aren't tortured in their last days. Why wouldn't we do the same thing for ourselves? It's humane. It's not inhumane.

S.Z.: It's closely regulated too. You can't just walk into a doctor's office and say, "Well, this is it."

J.L.: If somebody is terminally ill, and they choose to skip the deteriorate-into-nothing phase, I think they have that right.

S.Z.: What were you doing working in a hospital?

J.L.: Oh. My father was a doctor so I had a job when I was 19 in the summer.

Dr. Jack Keorkian. They called him Dr. Death, but that was wrong. What he was doing was kind, and they turned him into some crazy evil doctor. He just brought it out in the open — what other doctors were doing (and not talking about). No doctor could come out and support him because they would lose their license.

S.Z.: You've starred on Broadway and sung at Carnegie Hall. You've done standup, voice, radio, theater, film. Then there is the performance side and the writing side. Is there a genre you would like to explore that you haven't yet?

J.L.: No, I have kind of done all of them. But I would like to do more of each. I'm not like, "Oh I'm done, I'm satisfied."

I like writing and performing my own material. I'm into singing. I'd like to keep just getting better at everything.

I did Broadway. I found that after two months, that was enough.

I like variety. It's exciting, but then, this woman — they give you a make-up and hair person — we did a matinee and then again at night; I looked at her and I said, "Didn't we just do this?" Like I was kidding and she said, "Yep. That's the great secret of Broadway — every day is like Groundhog Day."

S.Z.: If you had your druthers, which of the lot would you say is the most rewarding or fulfilling for you?

J.L.: I like doing standup because when I get bored, I can just change it. It's up to me. Standup kind of combines everything.

S.Z.: You're Jewish. What did you think of Benjamin Netanyahu's speech to U.S. Congress in March?

J.L.: I'll tell you, when Obama said go back to the '67 border, I was watching that.

I was also in Israel in 1978, visiting my cousin, and he told me, if we give up the West Bank, Israel's 9 miles wide, they can cut it in half and then drive us into the sea — literally — you can't defend it.

So when President Obama says we should go back to those borders — by the way, I voted for President Obama — I said, "What are you talking about? Israel would be cut in half." So the next day, Netanyahu went on TV and said the same thing.

So I'm thinking, how do I know this and President Obama doesn't? I know it cause my cousin told me. Over 35 years ago. How does he not know this?

I don't care how you feel about Jewish people. The fact is we give (Israel) money because they are a democracy in the Middle East where all the oil is. It's an army based in the Middle East. Whether you like Jews or not, that's what that is.

S.Z.: Can you like Jews and not support Israel?

J.L.: Yeah, you can. But then I would say, Do you know how it came into existence?

People think Israel just took the land. No. They bought the land. The land they bought was sand. There was nothing there. They had to buy it from Arab landowners. Golda Meir was an American teacher, and she raised all this money to buy a homeland because the Jews had just been almost completely massacred in Europe — almost into nonexistence. Three million Polish Jews were all gone. The (remaining folks) need a homeland, so they bought it.

Now, did they take the last bank of the Gaza? Yeah. They did. They were in a war, and they fought back.

Then those countries are saying, we want that land back. And Israel says, "Do you recognize our right to exist?" And they're like, "No. No, we do not recognize your right to exist." They want to get rid of them completely.

When they left Gaza, they said if we leave, you'll come in and bomb us, and they say, "No, we won't." And they left and Hamas came in and they bombed them. Do I think Palestinians are people and they should have a country? Well, yeah. But they want the exact same land that Israel has.

Is Israel 100 percent correct? No. I'm sure they have done stuff that's not good. You have to look at all sides. One of my good friends is from Israel and she said, "Yeah. It is bad for the Palestinians there." They are treated as second-class citizens.

I've met Israelis who think that Israel is wrong. They don't like Netanyahu ...

I think Netanyahu is great, but when he said, "No, I don't want a Palestinian state," do I think he meant it? No. I don't think he meant it. He was trying to get votes. To win (the election).

Politicians only bring up the things that they have points to win the argument, like in a debate.

The main problem is called narcissistic personality disorder. That's the problem: people who want to have power over other people.

S.Z.: It is disturbing ...

J.L.: I've never been that way, ever. I talk about it in my act. To me, there is nice people, and there's jerks.