

Trenton to get sampling of a 'more mature' Robert Klein

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Robert Klein sometimes worries that his muse will leave him, that he'll wake up one day without the ability to make people laugh.

But it hasn't happened yet _ not during the stress of his nasty divorce in 1989 and not during the two years he spent hosting a weekly show on USA Network, despite the constant demand for new material.

"It's very, very difficult to quantify the creative urge. It comes in its own way," says Klein, 63, who has been doing standup, Broadway, TV and movies for the past 40 years. "I always say, 'I should do more homework and look at notes from the shows we've recorded,' but (ultimately) it just seems to happen." He certainly has the track record to

prove it.

Thirty years ago, Klein recorded the first-ever HBO comedy special. Just recently, he recorded his eighth and found that the jokes were still coming, seemingly out of nowhere.

"I don't sit and write it like George Carlin does," he says. "It's initially improvised _ my old Second City technique. There's going to be about 10 minutes that I improvised that will probably make the cut for the HBO special."

An audience in Trenton will get a sampling of some of that material when Klein appears in the city Friday, a month before the Dec. 3 premiere of the special and several months before all of Klein's HBO gigs are released for sale as a four-DVD set.

The comedian says he'll share the fresh jokes, along with others he's developed throughout the years, when he visits the Patriots Theater at the War Memorial.

He hopes his audience will enjoy what he describes as a rare show, since most of his gigs these days are for private audiences. For his part, he adds, he expects to have fun performing in the ornate, restored theater.

"I remember that theater from something we did there quite a while ago _ not in the 19th century," he jokes. "They don't build them like that anymore. People should come down and support the place because it's such a wonderful thing that it's still there and not a parking lot. And I'd love to see anyone who wants to come backstage _ I'm looking forward to it."

Like the theater, Klein's act will bring people back in time.

What doesn't come from years of developing routines in front of audiences _ "I wrote so much material 30, 35 years ago that I can still use today and no one will ever know; it's

underexposed," he says _ was generated in preparation for the HBO special named for his recent book, "The Amorous Busboy of Decatur Avenue: A Child of the Fifties Looks Back."

The book, which came out in June, walks readers through Klein's childhood in the Bronx and ends when he was 25 and just gaining the spotlight.

It talks about everything from his parents' overprotectiveness to his challenging of a strict teacher in grammar school to his summers as a busboy at a hotel in the Catskill Mountains and his romances there.

"I by no means kiss and tell," but instead write about a time "when such things were forbidden and rare, (which) made them so new and terrific," he says. "I managed to capture some of the awe of youth and coming of age, my first sexual experience."

Klein also writes about a less pleasant aspect of his youth _ the anti- Semitism he faced as a student at Alfred University in Alfred, N.Y., where he participated in drama programs but graduated with a bachelor's degree in political science and history _ "the proper preparation for comedy," he says.

"Four out of six fraternities took white Christians only, yet the administration would say, 'Boys, see every house before you decide,' " Klein recalls. "Jews, blacks and only recently Catholics were allowed in. I blame them for a very painful period _ my entire freshman year went down the tubes. Then, in sophomore year, I got in and became social chairman and a bigshot. I'm glad I got in, but I never forgot the hurt of it. Alfred continually tries to win me over and I won't give them a nickel, even though they've changed for years now."

The end of the book marks the beginning of Klein's life as an entertainer, which began with a year at Yale Drama School, followed by summer stock. In 1965, Klein joined the famous Chicago Second City troupe and embarked on what he still refers to as the most important year of his career.

"It was the greatest because I got a chance to practice great acting every night in set sketches _ we worked seven nights a week _ and then took suggestions from the audience for an improv session. So I got training in improv as well and that's still how I create my standup."

Other important lessons came when Klein worked as a young comic at the Improv, which was then on 44th Street in New York City, performing alongside the likes of Bette Midler and Richard Pryor.

But the most important aspect of that time was the mentorship Rodney Dangerfield offered him, Klein says.

"He was like my Yale Drama School for standup, because you can't learn that at grad school for drama," Klein says of Dangerfield. "He came up and said 'You were brilliant, but you've got to come here every night for three years.' He was just making a reputation for himself and he was brilliant, and I hung around with him."

It was around the same time that Klein _ who studied voice at Yale and then with his former wife Brenda Booser, a mezzo-soprano opera singer _ started doing Broadway shows.

In 1973, he recorded the first in a long sequence of comedy albums. He went on to star in the first "cheeseburger cheeseburger" sketch on "Saturday Night Live" with Dan Akroyd and John Belushi; to be in movies including "Hooper" and, more recently, "Two Weeks Notice" and "How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days"; to guest star in TV shows such as "Frasier" and "Mad About You" and have a three-year role on NBC's "Sisters"; and then to write his book.

Of all the work, though, Klein is still proudest of his standup, which he describes as "a high calling."

"I cut new paths for people and it's my bread and butter, after all," he says. "I think I'm a good entertainer. I don't sit on a stool. Standup has come to mean just standing there or

sitting there; I absorb the stage, take the stage."

After all these years, Klein adds, he hasn't changed his standards when it comes to what he will and won't say in front of an audience.

Preferring to remain "tasteful and intelligent," Klein admits he uses "a profane word now and again, just like a novelist would," but says "it's appalling the way the language is being torn apart by ignorance and reliance on profanity and bodily functions. There's no holding back. I love subtlety and I love silly things, too, but not general vulgarity."

He's always felt that way when it came to "working blue," he says, but other aspects of his act have changed over the years. Klein has taken to making fun of the aging process, he says, even entertaining audiences with a colonoscopy song.

"I'm just older," he says. "I'm more mature, more graceful and gracious; I'm more likeable now. I was a fresh kid and now I'm softer, and even though comedy is a hard-edged thing, I'm better at it."

Seeming to go hand in hand with that theme was a recent gig Klein did for a roomful of respiratory therapists; his aim was to promote awareness of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Klein has a touch of the condition that is also known as emphysema or chronic bronchitis, although he says it isn't bad enough to interfere with his singing or his daily activities.

"A drug company sent me around to legitimate medical organizations," he says of the gig for the therapists and other, similar ones. "I didn't have to promote a product, just make people aware of (the condition) and that there's help."

Amid all his successes, Klein admits he's suffered a few failures throughout the years,

including several TV sitcoms.

The experiences left him disillusioned, he says.

"I can't be in something where I don't invest my soul in it as well as my time," he says. "I lose perspective, probably, rooting on something that stinks, but I genuinely want it to succeed and care about it."

Klein has found an up side, though, to not having to live in Los Angeles, where sitcoms invariably seem to be taped _ or to accepting other long-term commitments, such as Broadway shows. It means he gets to stay at his homes in Westchester County and New York City with his college-age son, Allie, an environmental studies major and musician who will appear on Klein's HBO special playing Latin percussion.

"Having to be away from home is so lonely to me," says Klein, who describes his son as "all I have."

"I'm getting old and I like my comfort."

That doesn't mean the comedian isn't open to new kinds of projects.

Take, for instance, his book: Writing it was an experience different from any he's had in his career to date. It was quieter, he says, and offered less validation.

"It was a lot of lonely hours staring at the computer, which was mocking me with its hush," he says. "I'd like to invent software that will laugh occasionally, or show some life, like 'Good turn of words, Bob,' because in my verbal world and my standup world, I get automatic affirmation with laughs."

His survival of the tedious process may explain why he's so proud of the work.

"I would find sometimes that I'd look up and, God, I loved what I wrote," he says, "and then the next morning I read it and loved it, and it made the cut.

"I knew I could do it; I didn't know I could do it this well."

Robert Klein will appear Friday, 8 p.m., at Patriots Theater at the War Memorial, Trenton. Tickets are \$18-\$35. (609) 984-8400.

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