

PEOPLE

Jerry Stiller: Still Making People Laugh

By Gerard Raymond

"Ich bin ein Westsider," said Jerry Stiller proudly as he relaxed recently at Teachers Too on 81st and Broadway after a performance of *Much Ado About Nothing* in Central Park's Delacorte Theater. "I always wanted to live on the West Side," said the Brooklyn-born actor. "As a kid I lived in 11 neighborhoods in 13 years and my big dream in life was to live on Riverside Drive." Stiller's dream came true about 20 years ago and there is no doubt he is a quintessential Westsider.

In the recent New York Shakespeare Festival production of *Much Ado*, Stiller plays Dogberry, one of Shakespeare's best-known comic roles. A pompous, strutting constable with a penchant for malapropisms and bad puns, Dogberry was a wonderful opportunity for Stiller. Acting in the Park "is always a test, but it is a wonderful test," he said. "You have to be intimate and expansive at the same time. You deal with the elements and whatever is going on that night. It could be a full moon, an airplane flying overhead, or people who are somehow watching the show from behind you instead of in front of you and who are hollering your lines back at you. It creates a new level of reality for you—one that you never thought you had to deal with."

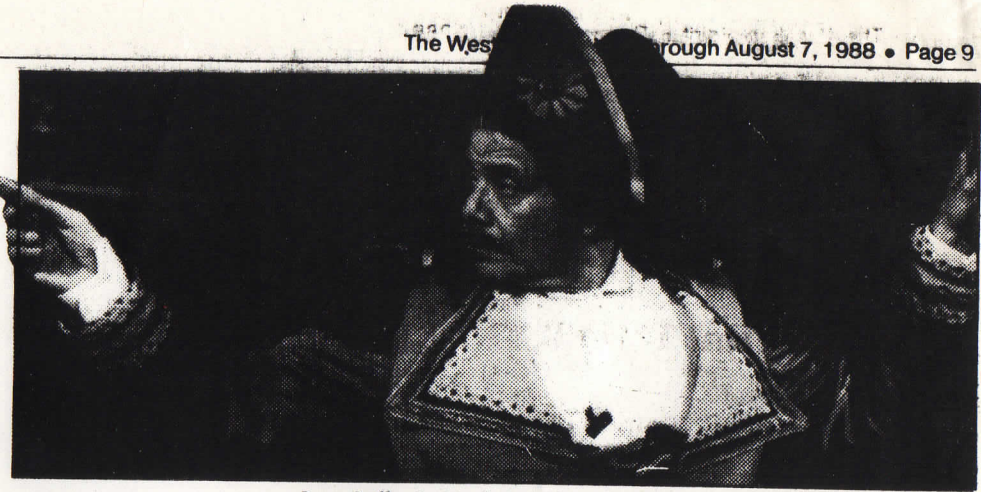
It was in Central Park and through Joseph Papp's Shakespeare Festival that Stiller and his wife Anne Meara got their first acting jobs together. Four years after they married they performed together in the 1957 production of *Romeo and Juliet*. "I told Joe, you can't hire me without hiring Anne and he was very nice about it," said Stiller, who explained that they were phy-

sically mismatched and hence were never given a chance to play opposite each other. "Anne was always too tall to be the ingenue and too young to be the leading lady. I was a little too short and a little stocky in my build and they always used to say that someday I would be a character actor. So we had to ferret our way through."

Out of what he describes as a "need to hang together" Stiller and Meara discovered that they "were very good at creating funny material" and found themselves working in improvisational theater. From a small beginning at a club in the Village and a record-breaking engagement at the Blue Angel, the comedy team of Stiller and Meara evolved. After Ed Sullivan saw them and put them on TV they became nationally known, playing the club circuits all across the country.

Then they discovered a new medium of expression. "When commercials became popular and somehow or other we were lucky enough to find our way into this field, radio became a part of our work. This was an oddity because no one ever thought that comedy would be an appropriate way to sell a product," he said. They can take much credit for propelling Blue Nun wine out of obscurity on the basis of their highly popular commercials. "Who would ever dream that those things would be incremental in your life. It's a little like studying to be a concert violinist and finding that people love you for the harmonica!" Stiller said. But he has no regrets about this turn in their careers because "they were classy commercials and a lot of fun and they paid a lot of rent."

The Stiller and Meara act came to an end when the couple decided they wanted to



Jerry Stiller in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

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raise a family. "The kids were a sort of balance for us and what happened was that they created another kind of reality," said Stiller. "Actors sometimes feel that the only thing that they can do every night is go out in front of an audience. But there is more to it. I mean you can go out in front of an audience, but to have a family gives you an extension to what you are as a human being. We were very fortunate. The kids brought us great joy and great luck and we started using that in our work." Their two children, Ben and Amy, are currently pursuing acting careers of their own.

Stiller's kids were responsible for his most recent film role. He read the script of *Hairspray* and liked it but then turned to his children for their opinion, "because they are the generation who know more about what's going on than I do." Their reply was "you've got to do a movie with Divine, Dad!"

"I had no idea," said Stiller, "that the film would have the acclaim that it had. Suddenly I was in Baltimore working with Divine and John Waters playing the owner of a Joke Shop. That kind of role really appealed to me because I got to do all the

insanities that I couldn't do in real life. It was one of those wacky things." Stiller played Divine's husband in the movie and is full of praise for the late actor. "He was a very magnanimous person and very funny," he said.

Although Stiller said he would like to do more films, he turned down a film offer in order to play Dogberry in Central Park. "I just decided that it was better to do this at this time," he said.

Stiller will soon appear in a television series called *Tattigers* which is set in a New York restaurant. The series is scheduled to begin shooting as soon as the writers' strike is resolved.

Notwithstanding more dramatic aspirations, Stiller admits that comedy gives him the greatest enjoyment. "When I am doing it right, if I get the audience to react, I feel fulfilled. If you can get 2000 people to laugh at what you are doing, it's a joyful experience that cannot be measured. For me it's a release," he said. "I hate to say it's like sex because my wife will be very insulted! But you can equate it with that kind of pleasure. It's as pleasurable as anything you can ever have in your life." ☆