



Phil Johnson Wants to Tell You “A Jewish Joke”

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It's a bit of Borscht Belt, laced with a little strychnine; a play about a funnyman who's faced with a not-so-funny crisis of conscience. Phil Johnson, a beloved local comic, writer and musical theater maven, realized early on that, like generations of Jewish jokesters, his humor helped him through a lot of tough times.

“I just loved the broad Borscht Belt comedians,” he says, “and also the sly, smart ones like Woody Allen. They had a great way of dealing with adversity, and I adopted that. I'd love to be reborn as Jackie Mason!”

Instead of waiting for that wish to come true, Johnson teamed up with Marni Freedman and wrote “A Jewish Joke,” a one-man tour de force he'll perform as part of the 23rd annual Lipinsky Family San Diego Jewish Arts Festival (June 20-21 at North Coast Repertory Theatre in Solana Beach).

It all began with the character, who was based on Seth Krosner's Uncle

Bernie (Krosner is Johnson's husband). "He was the funniest, driest little guy," Johnson says. "You asked him how he was and he'd answer, 'I could be worse. I could be having a heart attack.'"

Cue the rimshot. Ba-da-bing.

The fictional Bernie Lutz is a composite of Johnson's comic heroes, but he confides that, "Bernie is me." Johnson's character Lutz was named in tribute to Uncle Bernie (who died four years ago), but he's a very different animal, one Johnson personally relates to.

"He's a bit of a nebbish, and a reluctant hero. When I was creating him, I needed something big for him to be up against." What he settled on was the Red Scare of the 1950s.

"David Ellenstein [artistic director of North Coast Repertory Theatre, who directs Johnson's show] was a huge influence in guiding me. So was Marni, who'd been my writing coach for several years. She taught me the importance of the theater dictum, 'Show; don't tell.' Don't spell it all out. Add more suspense. All that was great in shaping the play."

In addition, Marni provided a wonderful resource: her former instructor at UCLA was Abe Polonsky, an Academy Award-nominated screenwriter who was blacklisted by the Hollywood movie studios in the 1950s. He died in 1999, but the connection to his experience was enormously helpful for Phil, and served as a springboard for the play's inner conflict. In that era, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), anticipating the "investigations" of Senator Joseph McCarthy, chose Hollywood for the start of its Red-baiting onslaught. As many see it, the hearings that took place in the late-'40s to mid-'50s were as much about anti-Semitism as anti-Communism.

As an example, the first segment of the Hollywood blacklist, issued in 1947 and known as the "Hollywood Ten," included six Jews. That was an important impetus for Johnson in shaping Bernie, in addition to the knowledge that most of Hollywood's Jews had concealed their history and religion. Bernie is a writer and collector of jokes, keeping them in a recipe box. He punctuates his narration by pulling a card from the file, diffusing the tension with a zinger.

"At the beginning of the play," Johnson explains, "he doesn't really stand for

anything. He doesn't really think he has principles; he just wants to succeed as a comic writer in Hollywood. His Jewish sensibility and humor are used pragmatically. "He's a crotchety guy who can be unpleasant, but he has a hilarious sense of humor. Hidden underneath, though, he's really a softy who cares a lot."

The situation Johnson has created for Bernie is "his awakening to what's going on around him. He had tried to pass as a non-Jew, to wiggle his way in this world. He finally has to step up and acknowledge who he is, and take a stand." When we meet Bernie, he's on the verge of success. Tonight is the big movie premiere that will make him and his partner, Morris, a "name" in Hollywood. That's all he ever wanted.

But that afternoon, MGM chief Louis B. Mayer calls and asks Bernie to testify against Morris, who was found to be a Communist organizer. Bernie didn't know anything about it. He can't believe Morris would put their work in jeopardy like that. Will he give Morris up? Will he confront his Jewishness and his morality? Will he turn his friend in for the sake of his comfort and success? This is the crisis of the play.

"I'd like to think," says Johnson, "that when the going gets tough, I'd make the best decision I can, for my friends, for the world." You'll have to see "A Jewish Joke" to find out how Bernie deals with his dilemma.

Finding the fun in dysfunctional

Meanwhile, back in his childhood, Johnson admits, "comedy began as self-defense, a way of making lemonade," he says of his Chicago upbringing in an Irish-Catholic family ("I'm an atheist," he avers). "My house was Bleak House. A very depressive environment. The stories of someone's illness were the hits of the evening. That's actually very Jewish, isn't it? So is the guilt. I constantly find parallels. "In that environment, it was hard to keep my own sense together," Johnson recalls. "I was always the one who tried to suggest something positive, to keep the darkness at bay. I used humor and sarcasm as a defense mechanism."

His mother had been "very creative, artistic and liberal. She just didn't know how to express or channel that. My sister and I were the Grumblers, always making side-jokes. We were very funny together." Johnson went on to use his humor and his capacious talent to catapult him to Broadway, where he appeared in "Les Misérables," and continued with the show on tour. He was in the Canadian production of "Sunset Boulevard" and the first national

company of “Miss Saigon.” But first, he attended the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, majoring in architecture, with a minor in theater. After graduation, he worked as an architect, but still made time to perform in shows.

In the late 1980s, his mother opened a restaurant/cabaret, where Johnson and his sister performed in “a three-person comedy/musical group, kind of like Manhattan Transfer.” When the restaurant failed three and a half years later, Johnson started auditioning, and snagged his first Broadway tour.

Around that time, he met Krosner, a nice Jewish doctor (now a trauma surgeon at Scripps Mercy Hospital). “He was my good-luck charm,” Phil says. “Our relationship was the best thing I had in my life.” So, he quit the Broadway/road-tour rat-race and moved to San Diego to do comedy, act and write. Fortunately, Krosner is a huge theater fan.

“He’s like Mama Rose,” Phil quips, citing the ultimate theatre mom in “Gypsy.” “He wants to know everything about acting. He remembers every line in every show. He thinks the work we do is as important as the work he does!” While Johnson maintains an active performing life (in musicals and stand-up comedy, regularly hosting “Casa del Haha,” his sketch show, and writing plays like “Withering Heights”), Krosner puts his energy into the Jewish community. He’s President of the Center for Jewish Culture at the Lawrence Family JCC and he serves on the boards of many Jewish and performing arts organizations.

Their sprawling Uptown home (which Johnson re-designed) is frequently used “to give back to the community,” made available for political, theatrical and Jewish fundraising events. They also spend a good deal of time helping to raise 7 year-old Truman, who has four parents (Krosner is his biological father; Truman lives nearby with his two moms). The kid, says Johnson, is pretty funny. “I know you want me to be happy,” Johnson reports that Truman said, in a Woody Allen deadpan. “But it’s just not my style.” “He’s a wonderful addition to our lives,” Johnson says.

They walk Truman to school every day, and Krosner also brings him to Torah School at Tifereth Israel (where Seth served as president for three years). Johnson may not have the liturgical background, but he knows all the holiday songs, he participates in weekly Shabbat dinners, he does Purim *shpils*, performs at the shul, and has helped Krosner keep kosher for 25 years (they even have a separate dishwasher for Passover).

Moving on, personally and artistically

“What’s important to me at this stage of my life,” Johnson says, “is to play people I care about, and to reach out with characters and work that’s important. “I always remember something David Ellenstein told me, about liking to put on plays that the audience can take home with them. “I’ve always been drawn to underdogs, to stories about people who make you wonder, Do they deserve a second chance?”

“In this play, I want the audience to see the gift, the spirit, that someone like Bernie possesses. He has comedy in his veins. He uses what he has, to deal with a serious situation.” The play is already getting bookings elsewhere around the country. Johnson is sure it can resonate beyond Jews, through its history and art. “My goal,” he says, “is to put characters who mean something to me out into the world to affect other people.”

And that’s no joke.