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Lily Tomlin to perform 1st show for Central Illinois

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By Dan Craft | dcraft@pantagraph.com | Posted: Thursday, June 10, 2010 7:00 am | No Comments Posted

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[Buy this photo](#) Lily Tomlin will bring "An Evening with Lily Tomlin" 7 p.m. Sunday to the University of Illinois at Springfield Sangamon Auditorium, Springfield.

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SPRINGFIELD -- It's taken more than 40 years for Edith Ann and Ernestine and Judith Beasley and Sister Boogie Woman to find their way to Central Illinois.

But here they come, en masse, to Springfield's Sangamon Auditorium this weekend, along with their manager, Lily Tomlin.

And that's the truth.

(Insert big fat raspberry here.) (Insert even bigger rocking chair here.)

"I don't know," she begins in an interview almost as entertainingly anecdotal as one of her Tony/Emmy-winning one-woman shows. "Do you think enough people will still care after all these years?"

Is she kidding? One of comedy's Supreme Beings not cared about?

The interviewer advises her that the big stretch of flyover country south of Chicago has been patiently awaiting her arrival for four decades -- ever since that long-ago moment when she, in the guise of a control-freak phone operator named Ernestine, first snorted, "one-rinky dinky, two rinky dinkies."

That epiphany occurred in December 1969 as she joined the trend-setting, anything-goes TV series, "Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In."

She reminds us that she, in fact, has deep Midwestern roots -- not only per her home town of Detroit, but also via Kentucky ("where I spent every summer with relatives") and St. Louis.

And those roots are partly responsible for her overdue arrival here.

"My cousin is getting married in Indianapolis," she begins, "and I said, 'oh, let's go to Springfield ... Springfield ... that sounds like such an idyllic town ... Springfield."

"Truthfully, it's kind of exciting," she admits. "This is very different from going through the same city every two years. To play a city I've never gone to before, that has a kind of excitement ... it's sort of like a new audience, and, of course, it's a little scary, too."

She flashes back to her Midwest past where it all began and, at heart, continues.

"I've always had an act, you know, literally, since I was a kid performing on the back porch in Detroit," she says.

She chalks up her ability to conjure characters like prim housewife Judith Beasley, demonic moppet Edith Ann and common-sense bag lady Trudy to those origins.

"We lived in a big old apartment house in a predominantly black neighborhood filled with a lot of roughneck Southerners who came up to Detroit to work, retired, lived on fixed incomes and couldn't move away," she recalls.

"Most of them were in their 60s through 80s. Two of my favorite people in the building were a teacher who taught French and language arts in a private school, and Mrs. Rupert, a botanist."

Little could the French teacher and the botanist have known at the time that elements of their personae would begin to surface in those characters percolating in the mind of little Mary Jean "Lily" Tomlin out on the back porch.

"I'd sit on the porch in the rocking chair and converse with these old neighbors," she remembers, hence the source of that giant rocking chair prop that became the signature environment of her fictional counterpart, little Edith Ann.

When Edith Ann later broke away from the rocking chair and starred in her own animated TV specials, Tomlin's apartment house origins again provided the eclectic fodder: "I made her the middle child between my brother and me, and she came from a blue-collar family, and her father was working in a stealth bomber factory. And her mother became a security guard at the airport."

Not her own parents, exactly, but still a piece with her upbringing.

Indeed, as she describes it, her colorful childhood sounds like something that sprung full-blown out of Damon Runyon and "Little Miss Marker."

"At age 3 or 4, my dad always took me to the bar with him," she recalls. "He was really proud and delighted that this was his kid, and we'd sit around the bar singing 'Shoe Fly Don't Bother Me' and those old songs."

Then, after group singing at the bar, it was off to the races to bet on horses, not to mention pay a visit to the back room where the bookies were.

"We didn't have a car," Tomlin recalls, "so Dad would give some 20-year-old kid the money to drive us there. Dad always had a big wad of money in his pocket."

In a scene right out of "Little Miss Marker," Tomlin would be dispatched to place bets "because by the time I was 14 I looked old enough to go the window and buy a ticket -- in the '50s, girls looked much older, you know."

She adds, "He generally lost, and I knew he would lose, and that was very terrifying."

Because of that, she only pretended to place the bets so that when the horse did lose, "I was able to give the money back to him."

Not to mention extract elements of these life experiences for her future comedy creations, all rooted in astutely observed character quirks.

And that's the truth.

Speaking of which, Edith Ann's trademark raspberry ("And that's the truth -- phtuthhhhhth!") was an evolutionary trait derived "from the kind of speech impediment lots of children have because they don't have control of their tongues yet -- the tongues are too big for their mouths, and they have to grow into them."

One little girl she knew "had that impediment, and it was glorious!"

Forty years and hundreds of bushels of raspberries later, it remains so, not only for Lily and Edith Ann, but also for us.

At a glance

What: "An Evening with Lily Tomlin"

Where: 7 p.m. Sunday

When: U of I at Springfield Sangamon Auditorium, Springfield

Tickets: \$40 to \$65

Box office: 800-207-6960

Lilies of the field

In the field of character sketch comedy, few comedienne have a richer repertoire than Lily Tomlin, coming Sunday to Springfield's Sangamon Auditorium. See if you can match the following quotes with the proper classic character:

Quotes

- 1.) "One ringy-dingy ... two ringy-dingies ..."
- 2.) "You say 'but does it kill romance?' And I say, 'what doesn't?'"
- 3.) "Hello? Hello? Hello?"
- 4.) " ... and that's the truth!"
- 5.) "Boogie takes the question marks outta yer eyes, puts little exclamation marks in they place. Are ya on my beam?"
- 6.) "(snort, giggle, snort)"
- 7.) "At an amusement park, a little kid asked me if I was a ride. Ha!"
- 8.) "Lines, lines, go away, pay a visit to Doris Day."
- 9.) "Is this the party to whom I am speaking?"
- 10.) "There are some things you can make so cleverly that it is virtually impossible for anyone to tell if you have talent or not."
- 11.) "You are not dealing with just anyone's fool. I am a high school graduate."
- 12.) "There's so much plastic in this culture that vinyl leopard skin is becoming an endangered synthetic."
- 13.) "A gracious hello!"
- 14.) "Reality is nothing but a collective hunch."
- 15.) "(raspberry)!"

Characters

- A. Crystal (world's only hang-gliding quadriplegic)
- B. Edith Ann (5.5-year-old devil child prone to feigning pregnancy with doll under dress)
- C. Ernestine (churlish telephone operator prone to puckered lips and nasal outbursts)
- D. Judith Beasley (THE perfect housewife)
- E. Lupe (world's eldest beautician)

- F. Sister Boogie Woman (Southern blues revivalist par excellence)
- G. Trudy (bag lady without peer)

Answers

1. C; 2.D; 3. C.; 4. B; 5. F; 6. C; 7. A.; 8. E; 9. C; 10. D; 11. C.; 12. D; 13. C; 14. G; 15. B

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