

Richard Lewis looks back at his dark comic turns in 'Bundle of Nerves'



Comedian Richard Lewis has a two-disc DVD set coming out, "Bundle of Nerves," which includes "Magical Misery Tour" and "Diary of a Young Comic." (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

By **SUSAN KING**

SEPTEMBER 3, 2014, 6:00 AM

Funnyman Richard Lewis didn't become a comic because he wanted to be a celebrity or even because he wanted to make people laugh.

"I went into this for psychological reasons," said Lewis, who was nicknamed the Prince of Pain for his self-deprecating humor.

"My family — it wasn't an abusive family — they meant well, but they were in their own world," noted Lewis, who wore his customary black pants and shirt during a recent interview.

"My father died so young, my sister had four kids before I was 19 and my brother was off in the Village reading 'Howl' on the street corners. I am [home] with my mother, and that slowly disintegrated. I was tethered to no one, really."

Lewis quickly found a new family performing at New York's Improv. "I was 23, and all sorts of people were coming in and out and watching me, like Steve Allen and Bette Midler. David

Brenner certainly took me under his wing. To drive home to my little dump in New Jersey often knowing that Steve Allen said, 'You got it,' that validation kept me going in a big, big way."

Of course, Lewis became a celebrity due to his neurotically perceptive comedy routines, which hover in the realm of performance art. Watching his stand-up is like sitting in on a very funny and often dark therapy session.

Lewis also has had success in TV series ("Anything but Love," "Curb Your Enthusiasm") and appeared in such films as Mel Brooks' 1993 comedy "Robin Hood: Men in Tights" and the 1995 drama "Drunks."

His two-disc DVD set "Richard Lewis: Bundle of Nerves" is being released this week. Lewis filmed new introductions for the set, which features his 1997 HBO comedy special "Magical Misery Tour," taped at the famed Bottom Line in Greenwich Village; the cult 1979 TV movie "Diary of a Young Comic"; "Drunks," in which he plays a recovering alcoholic; and the new documentary "House of a Lifetime."

A time capsule of the L.A. comedy scene in the 1970s, "Diary of a Young Comic" casts Lewis as a fictionalized version of himself — a young New York comic who comes out to Los Angeles to seek his fame and fortune. "Magical Misery Tour" was his first major comedic special since he became sober, and he was sober less than a year when he made "Drunks." "That's why I wanted those in the set," he said. "They were things that are important to me."

He's also appearing in Peter Bogdanovich's screwball comedy "She's Funny That Way," which just received mixed reviews at the Venice Film Festival. "I play a really moronic father living in Queens, and Cybill Shepherd is my equally moronic hard-nosed wife," said Lewis.

Though he may say he's the same on stage as he is off, Lewis is actually more low-key than his hyperkinetic stage persona. Lewis, now 67 and sober for 20 years, has been happily married for nearly a decade to Joyce Lapinsky.

Lewis is in the midst of "deconstructing" the three-story Hollywood Hills home he's owned for about 25 years. It's filled with his collection of photos, props, posters and other memorabilia.

"I am actually going to give some things to charity," he said. "George Carlin used to say, rest his soul, it's just stuff. It was my house. My wife ultimately moved into it. She deserves something that is more comforting. Maybe a one-floor ranch house, more traditional with a backyard, so the little rescue dog can run around."

Though Lewis turned on the charm during the interview, he acknowledged he had been in a "terrible funk" lately dealing with the death of Robin Williams, whom he had known since his stand-up days, as well as "all the horrors in the world."

"I felt so sunk, not just me, but most people. So I had to do a lot of work to get out of it. I'm

feeling much calmer now."

Brooks, a comedy icon who inspired generations of performers, believes that Lewis is cut from very different cloth compared with Williams. "Lewis expresses his melancholy. Robin never did. Robin never let you in on his other world. Richard makes a living letting you in on his other world. I am not worried about him."

Lewis, Brooks added, "is a bit of a genius. He complains a lot, but he doesn't mean much of it. The wonderful thing about him was his devotion to talent. He was devoted to Sid Caesar before he passed."

For the last two years, Lewis has been touring — "two weeks out and two weeks in" — and recently completed the darkly comedic new book "Reflections From Hell" with his longtime friend, artist Carl Nicholas Titolo, supplying the illustrations. The book will be published next year.

Titolo, Lewis said, "paints the way my mind works. And Larry David wrote a magnificent preface."

Lewis is doing two nights next week at Caroline's comedy club in New York, but he's eager to take a break from the road and stay home for six months.

"It's too much for me now. My heart tells me I just need an edgy supporting role, dramatic or otherwise."

It was just the kind of role he had in David's long-running HBO series, "Curb Your Enthusiasm," in which Lewis played a somewhat exaggerated version of himself in more than 20 episodes. Lewis and David have been close friends since the 1970s, though they encountered each other at summer camp as kids. "We despised each other," Lewis said, laughing.

They recently discovered they actually "met" far earlier than that. "I was a cesarean and a preemie," Lewis said. "I was born June 29 and I stayed in the Brooklyn Jewish Hospital four or five days. He was born three days later. We were in the same ward together."

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