

## **MEL BROOKS AND COMEDY – A SERIOUS AFFAIR**

*By Susanne Wigforss*

**LOS ANGELES 1993 – MEL BROOKS GIVES A RARE INTERVIEW FOR TRANSWEDE MAGAZINE PRECEDING THE EUROPEAN RELEASE OF HIS LATEST FILM “ROBIN HOOD – MEN IN TIGHTS”.**

**How do you start an interview with a comedy legend such as Mel Brooks? You don't. He does. The minute we sit in his office at the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Studios, he takes charge. He grabs the tape recorder, presses the record button and, leaning over it, he thunders: “This is Mel Brooks testing a yellow, water resistant tape recorder number CFS-920L. **PLAYBACK!**” Having made sure that my equipment is working, and that he has created the proper chaos, he smiles and leans back in his chair. So he looks a little older, his hair is a little grayer, but he has the same boyish, irresistible charm that he had twenty years ago. He knows how to capture an audience from the start. We have only met him a few minutes ago, and we are already laughing.**

While the photographer is trying to capture Brooks clowning around the room with a suit of armor, playing the piano, and impersonating Hitler, I finally manage to catch his attention and ask him:

*“When did you first realize that you had the gift of making people laugh?”*

“When I was a baby. People would peer over my crib, look down and laugh hysterically. I don't know why they were laughing, but I was a funny looking baby, so I guess that was my mandate, to make people laugh. As a boy at school, I used to drive the teachers crazy, and it made the students laugh a lot.”

*“A heckler at an early age?”*

“Absolutely! I was a heckler, an actor, the crazy fellow in my class who played practical jokes. I would imitate every teacher we had. If they wore glasses, I would get glasses, if they had a funny walk I would do that, and if they had a funny accent I would imitate that.”

*“So you knew that you were born to be an entertainer?”*

“Yes, from when I was five or six years old.”

*“But you started as a drummer, not as an actor?”*

### **GREW UP IN BROOKLYN**

“Our family was very poor. I grew up in Brooklyn, New York. My father died when I was two, my brothers had to go to work at an early age, and my mother worked morning and night. Our rent was sixteen dollars a month, and sometimes we could not pay it. That's how bad it was. Well, I was

always interested in music, and my first instrument was the cheapest I could find. It was two sticks that I found in a fruit box. So I became a drummer.”

*“So, you must have had a feeling for rhythm?”*

“Oh, yes, I always had the feeling of the rhythm. I formed a band when I was only fourteen years old. It was called ‘Mel Brooks and his five wife beaters’”.

*“What a nice name...”*

“It wasn’t so bad. We were all fourteen or fifteen years old and not married, so it was still safe to say that.”

*“And you started to use your comic talent in the band?”*

“It started when Jackie, the comic, got sick one night and couldn’t perform. We were working in a small hotel in the ‘Borscht Belt’ (Russian-Jewish area) in Oryville, New York. The owner of the hotel asked me to take over. I knew all of Jackie’s jokes, so I just began doing his material. His first joke was:

‘I took this girl to a restaurant, and let me tell you, this girl was skinny. This girl was so skinny that when I took her into the restaurant, the waiter asked me: ‘Want to check your umbrella, Sir’? I was getting big laughs with Jackie’s material, and that’s how I knew I could make the transition from drumming to comedy. And I liked the attention. Then I started to write my own jokes.’”

*“It must have helped that as a musician you already had the ‘timing’, which is essential in comedy. A funny line is nothing without timing.”*

“You are exactly right! As a drummer you have to know where the downbeat is. It’s the same with telling jokes.”

*“But somehow you ended up writing for the radio and other people?”*

“Yes, I got the job from a saxophone player that I knew, Sid Caesar, a very talented man. We used to play together, and he remembered me being very funny in the band. After he left the Coast Guard and I left the Army, he called me and said that he was going to be doing a television show called ‘The Admiral Broadway Review’.” Sid wanted lots of material – but no jokes! He wanted character material.”

## **A JUNGLE BOY**

“There was a section of the show called ‘Nonentities in the news’. I thought of different characters that Sid could be interviewed as, and the first I came up with was a jungle boy living in New York. Now, how does he live, how does he make the transition from the jungle to the city? Sid was very strong, he could have been Tarzan. So I had the interviewer Carl Reiner say: ‘So what do you eat here? How do you survive?’ The Jungle boy said: ‘Go in park. Many pigeons. Pigeons slow. Jungle boy fast. Plenty pigeon to eat.’ Then Carl asked: ‘And what scares you Jungle boy, what are you afraid of?’ Jungle boy said: ‘Buick. Big, yellow Buick. Buick stronger than Jungle boy. Wait till Buick puts eyes

down. Punch Buick in grill. Buick die!’ So I made this crazy, stupid Jungle boy thing, and it became the first character that was a big hit.’

“Then I invented another character for Sid Caesar, which was the German Professor. He was an authority on everything! There was no question that he could not answer. And he had this wonderful, foolish, German accent.”

*“What was his name? Professor Besserwisser?”*

“No, he was always Ludwig von ... something. Ludwig von Mountain Climber, was one. Ludwig von Schlafen, the sleep expert, was the first expert I wrote for Sid. He says: ‘You must never go to sleep all together, then you’ll die. You got to go to sleep sections. First you say to the feet, drop off, and then the feet go to sleep. Then you say to knees, put your knee caps on, then you tell the belly to stop gurgling, then you say to the heart, you don’t go to sleep, you just take a nap. Then you say to the brain, okay brain, come on we’re going to sleep, there are lots of other girls, you’ll get another one.’ We did wonderfully with that character.”

## **COMEDY SHOW**

“After a while, the Admiral Broadway Review became The Show of Shows, and from a lovely little job making fifty dollars a week, it became an incredible back breaking chore, having to come up with eight comedy shows a week. Me and Woody Allen, Neil Simon, Larry Gelbart, Mel Tolkin, Lucille Kallen, Tony Webster, there were so many writers. All of us were fighting to come up with enough comedy material for a half hour live show a week. And live shows are very dangerous. Sometimes the dresser would put the wrong costume on Sid Caesar. Once he walked into a board meeting dressed in a Roman Toga, sandals and with leaves on his head. But Sid was brilliant, he yawned, stretched, and said: ‘I just got back from this crazy costume party, but I didn’t want to be late for the meeting, so let’s go on with it!’ The man was a genius. Then he used his costume in the sketch, beating the sandals on the table.

Well, during the Sid Caesar show, I got many ideas. One of them was the record that Carl Reiner and I made. It was called ‘The 2000 Year Old Man’. Carl and I used to entertain at parties after The Show on Saturday nights. One night he said to me: ‘I understand that you are over 2000 years old. How come you survived for so long?’ And I just had to ad lib to be this character. It went on from there with other characters. Most of the records are ad lib, and it worked. Rhino records is re-releasing all of the four records of the 2000 Year Old Man on CD’s after Christmas.

*“And from that it was natural to take a step into the movies?”*

## **LOVES GIRLS**

“No, I wanted to get back to performing! As I writer I wasn’t getting any girls! As a performer you can get all the girls you want. You know, when you’re on stage, you’ve already attracted someone’s attention. But when you’re a writer, you work behind the stage, and they have to get to know you to like you. That takes hours! Then I decided to concentrate on one girl. I married Anne Bancroft,

because she made money, and she brought the money home. It's always good to have a working wife. But I had no money, so I wasn't able to marry her at once. It was after I began writing for a television show called 'Get Smart', starring Don Adams. He was a very secret agent 86. I invented Get Smart with Buck Henry, another wonderful writer who wrote the screenplay 'The Graduate' for my wife. We weren't sure Get Smart would work, but it ran for six years!"

*"Is it true that the first time you met Anne you felt as if you were struck by lightning?"*

"Yes, and I was too short for her. During the year I was dating her I was raised up on my toes, or putting things in my shoes to give myself an extra inch or two, and I always used to stand behind her so she wouldn't notice. I was so afraid she would reject me. But I knew she was the woman I was going to marry. I fell hopelessly in love with Anne."

*"Although you were a performer, Anne gave you stage fright?"*

## **UNTIED MY TONGUE**

"Yes, I was so nervous to talk to her that I had to go to the emergency hospital to have my tongue untied. And they were very nice and understanding, and they untied my tongue."

*"'Untie my tongue' sounds like a title for one of your songs. But do you think that it's true that underneath every comedian or clown there is really a very deep and serious person, that you need to have the contrast of tragedy within you?"*

"That's a very good question. I'm sure that even the greatest comedian in the world is going to have a serious moment when he dies. He is going to realize that life is more tragical than it is comical. In the end it is. And that's why we need to laugh. Because life is very tragic, I think. We mortals know that we are only here for a short while."

*"Yes, I guess no one's going to get out of it alive..."*

"And we know everyone suffers pain. I got a couple of letters. I always get letters like that. But then I know it's a good picture if I get letters. After 'Blazing Saddles' where Mongo punches the horse, I got a lot of letters from animal protection organizations and such. I tried to explain that we never touched the horse for real, that it was just the camera angle."

## **HUMORIST IS THE JESTER**

*"You could have said that the horse hit him first".*

"Yes, or that the horse had said something very rude to him."

*"Do you think that humor can be used as a very strong weapon to criticize society?"*

"Absolutely! I think that the humorist is the Jester of today. Instead of the king, we have the conscience of the people, and the Jester points out the things that are wrong with his country."

*"That we can make a change in the world?"*

"Yes, and the best way to do this is through comedy. If you are too serious, nobody pays attention, but if you can make people laugh about something, you will sugarcoat the message."

*"I think Lenny Bruce was absolutely brilliant."*

"Yes, he was. But the problem was that he was before his time."

## **CHARLIE CHAPLIN**

*"Do you feel that as an artist, in the position you are now, that you have a responsibility of some kind?"*

"Absolutely! I think that every great comedian is a messenger of social change, of social inequity. It is our duty to take a chance and point it out. I did it in Blazing Saddles with the black and white issue."

*"With the black Sheriff coming to town?"*

"Yes, and there were plenty of laughs. I was praying it would work, but you never know."

*"Do you think that humor has changed in any way from when you started?"*

"Today it's more stand up, one line jokes. And it's cheaper, a little more vulgar, and it has very little to do with we the human condition. Good comedy, like Charlie Chaplin's, deals with the eternal vanities, the eternal fears; man's inhumanity to man, hunger, love, and fear. All these emotions are in Chaplin's films. If you go to a Comedy Store today, a guy gets up and does a bunch of one line jokes that have nothing to do with what's happening in the world! Lucille Ball was great; she was the first to point out what women really go through, the strife and the suffering of marriage."

*"Have you ever found that any of your films were doing better in Europe? 'Springtime for Hitler' was for instance a fantastic success in Sweden".*

"Yes, it ran for a year. I have to thank a Swedish journalist, Bjorn Fremer, for that. It had played a week and failed. Bjorn suggested that 'The Producers' should be renamed 'Springtime for Hitler'. Then they re-opened it, and it ran for almost a year! 'The Producers' did very well in Europe. It ran a year in the US too in the big cities, but it never got to Kansas. 'Life Stinks' didn't do too well here, but it was number one in Italy for six weeks. It beat Kevin Costner's 'Robin Hood', it beat everything. We did very well in Europe and Japan with 'Life Stinks'."

*"So sometimes there is a difference?"*

"Yes, it depends on the country's sensibility to the subject area."

*"Robin Hood – Men in Tights" is going to be released shortly in Europe, are you going to visit any of these countries for promotion?"*

"We are opening in England, France, Germany, Spain, and Belgium for Christmas, and for Easter in Italy and Scandinavia. I will visit every single country. It would cost a fortune to advertise on television, and it costs absolutely nothing to do PR.

## **WON TWO OSCARS**

*"You have won two Oscars, not many people know about that."*

"Yes, one for a short, animated subject that I wrote and narrated, called 'The Critic'. It is about a little Jewish man that goes to this art film, with dancing, color and light. The intellectuals understand it, but he is trying to make sense out of it: 'It's a cockroach, no, it's two men beating a pony.' The second Oscar was for my original screenplay to The Producers."

*"Any film projects or ideas for the future?"*

"I'm thinking of a movie called 'Hassidic Park'. A bunch of Jews raising baby dinosaurs, and trying to get other Jews to pay to see them."

*"Apart from making movies, what do you do?"*

"I love to go to the races and bet on the horses, I love to play tennis, and other things that I will not talk about in this interview!"

*"How would you like to be remembered?"*

"TALLER!"