

Tomlin brings cast of characters to Raue Center

When and where

WHO: Lily Tomlin

WHEN: 8 p.m. Feb. 12

WHERE: Raue Center for the Arts, Crystal Lake

INFORMATION: Tomlin will revisit some of her timeless characters, including Ernestine, Sister Boogie Woman, Mrs. Beasley and Edith Ann

Tickets: \$80, \$77 and \$74. A "Lovin' the Laughter" package offers two tickets, a guest room at The Country Inn & Suites by Carlson, a \$50 gift card to Jameson's Charhouse, choice of red or white wine paired with cheese and crackers and a bouquet of flowers from Countryside Flower Shop. Package costs \$244 for a Country Guest Room, \$254 for a Parlor Suite or \$299 for a Celebration Suite.

RESERVATIONS: www.rauecenter.org, call 815-356-9212 or visit the theater and box office at 26 N. Williams St., Crystal Lake.

Somewhere in the midst of an interview with Lily Tomlin, she turns the questions around.

And before you know it, you're telling Tomlin about your family. By the end of the conversation, she's asking you to e-mail her a photo of your kids.

You nearly forget you're speaking with a comedic legend, whose incomparable, award-winning career spans across television, theater, film, animation and video.

Nearly, but not quite.

Still, it's this sort of informal, friendly conversation Tomlin says you can expect from her performance next weekend at the Raue Center for the Arts, 26 N. Williams St., Crystal Lake.

"It's kind of my version of stand-up, which I have done for a long time," she said in a phone interview. "I do a lot of characters. It's intimate. It's less formal. I talk to the audience."

She'll bring along some multimedia, and interact with some video from years past.

She'll revisit some of her timeless characters, immortalized from her days on "Laugh-In" beginning in 1969 and the countless television specials and Broadway performances that followed.

They're the same characters she's morphed into before, but with a slightly modern twist, she said.

Take Ernestine, the brazen, snorting telephone operator, for instance.

"She now works for a big healthcare insurance corporation denying healthcare to everyone," Tomlin said. "Very often, Ernestine has a webcast chat show where she Skypes everyone and calls political people. If Ernestine calls you on it, you better have an answer."

Other characters expected to make an appearance are Edith Ann, the bratty 6-year-old in the oversized chair, housewife Mrs. Beasley, the bag lady Trudy, 77-year-old blues revivalist Sister Boogie Woman and Madame Lupe, the world's oldest beauty expert.

Many of the favorites stem from Tomlin's one-woman Broadway shows, which include "Appearing Nitely" and "The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe," both written by Tomlin's partner, Jane Wagner.

She's especially proud of the shows, with the latter standing out. In "The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe," Tomlin plays 12 seemingly unconnected characters woven together.

"I thought it was a really beautiful, incredibly funny, but moving play," she said. "One of my favorite things ever written about it was, 'At the end, we were on our feet applauding our higher selves.'"

Tomlin said her work probably has been most influenced by the late Ruth Draper, an actress and dramatist who specialized in character-driven monologues. Draper died in 1956 at age 72 just hours after giving a performance on Broadway.

Tomlin only discovered Draper through recordings of her performances she listened to when she was 18 years old. They guided her from then on.

"They were so funny and so real and so compassionate," Tomlin said.

She said she's never considered herself naturally funny, at least not like her younger brother, whom she once shared in an interview had cut the family's couch in three to make sectionals.

Growing up in Detroit, the two then stayed up all night pretending to be New York socialites, drinking imaginary vodka in dress-up evening wear.

Unlike most comedians performing on talk shows back then, Tomlin's natural voice and way of speaking wasn't funny. A talent agent on the Merv Griffin Show once asked her, "Don't you have a funny voice or something?"

"I said, 'Well, the characters have funny voices,' " Tomlin remembered.

"I'm pretty regular in my speech and my appearance," she said. "Maybe I'm funnier than I think I am, but I'm not sure. I never thought of myself as funny."

It's nearly impossible to sum up all the honors and awards Tomlin has received over the years for her work, including critically acclaimed dramatic roles in television and film. She's won six Emmys, a couple Tony awards, a Grammy and two Peabody Awards, among others.

She was nominated for an Oscar for her film debut as Linnea, a gospel singer and mother of two deaf children in Robert Altman's "Nashville" in 1975.

She later went on to star in numerous notable films, including "9 to 5" with Jane Fonda and Dolly Parton (all three remain friends), "All of Me" with Steve Martin, "I Heart Huckabees" with Dustin Hoffman and "A Prairie Home Companion" with Meryl Streep.

She credits late director Altman, whom she worked with for 30 years, for seeing her as more than a comedian. He gave her her first dramatic role.

"Nobody would have done that really, that was just him," she said.

More recently, Tomlin played Lisa Kudrow's mother in the web series, "Web Therapy," which reportedly has been picked up by Showtime.

She's also guest-starred on "Desperate Housewives" as the sister of Mrs. McCluskey, played by Kathryn Joosten.

"We got a lot of attention together," Tomlin said. "There were people who wanted to develop a series with us. We're working on that."

She also played President Bartlett's assistant in "The West Wing" from 2002 through 2006, and has guest-starred in the FX series "Damages" starring Glenn Close.

Tomlin has lived her life following the advice she'd offer any aspiring performer: "You do it every chance you can. You just have to throw yourself in, and not be afraid of falling or being rejected. It's going to happen. It happens to everyone.

"Nonetheless, it's part of the challenge, and part of the satisfaction of being an artist and having to put yourself out there in front of audience and make it or break it in that moment."

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