

Joan Rivers on comedy, college and careers

Mia Perry, features reporter Mar 30, 2011

The 77-year-old Joan Rivers has been in show business for more than 50 years, dabbling in acting, writing, comedy, TV and many other endeavors. Most of us know Rivers from her barbs about celebrity style on the red carpet through shows like Fashion Police.

But here we see a softer side of the woman who made the phrase, “Who are you wearing?” famous.

VTU Lively Arts Series, Hillel at Virginia Tech, and Multicultural Programs and Services is sponsoring “Can We Speak? With Joan Rivers” at 7:30 p.m. tonight in Burruss Hall Auditorium.

The Collegiate Times caught up with Rivers before she brings her standup comedy act to campus.

COLLEGIATE TIMES: How would you describe the show, and what can audiences expect from you this Thursday night?

JOAN RIVERS: Outrageous. Politically incorrect. A lot of code references obviously, so it’s going to be, you know, whatever’s annoying me at the moment.

CT: So, is the show part of a tour you are doing?

RIVERS: No, it’s not a tour, what I do is ... I have two shows — I have “Fashion Police” on E! on the air every Friday, so I have to go out to California to do that. I am now working the Joan and Melissa show, which is now going into its second season, and now I also do QVC for my jewelry line that I designed. So I do one night stands — they say, “Do you wanna go down to Roanoke,” and I say, “Yes!” so I fly out to Roanoke, do the show, turn around and go back the next day, so isolated one-nighters.

CT: Well I guess we're lucky to have you then.

RIVERS: Yes, you are, and so am I, 'cause I also get a chance to perform, which I love.

CT: You mentioned your show, "Joan and Melissa: Joan Knows Best?" How has that whole experience been for you?

RIVERS: Very difficult. You know, living together, two grown women living in the same house, wanting to run the same house in a different way. It was also terrific to see her that much because, once you're out of college, usually your children don't go home. Melissa and I haven't lived together under the same roof since she was in college — she went to the University of Pennsylvania. I think she was class of '93, so it's been a long time since we've got together.

CT: Why exactly did you decide to move out with her (from New York to California)?

RIVERS: Well, "Fashion Police" is out there, and my daughter's out there, and my grandson's out there, and I just wanted to have more of a sense of family.

CT: Our Jewish student group, Hillel, is the sponsoring group for this event. Is your Jewish heritage a big part of your life?

RIVERS: Not really, I don't think. I know I'm Jewish, God knows, I know I've got my family — uh, it's something you're proud of, something you fight for. I think the ethics of the Jewish religion are extraordinary moral, very ethical, very moral. That I like — when I got older and went to study (it), I went, "Oh! I believe in that, that's good."

CT: I believe our LGBTQA is supporting the event as well. You are an outspoken supporter of gay rights, correct?

RIVERS: Oh, of course. It's been so many years, you don't even think about it, you know what I mean? It's like, why is anyone upset? Of course they should get married. This is just stupid. You know my mother had a furrier (someone who dresses furs), and she would say, "You know, I think he's a homosexual." And now you would say, "Oh he's so gay, he's fabulous!" Life has changed so much for the better.

CT: You are known for your comedy among other things, and in your standup you seem to poke fun at yourself a lot of the time. Is that a way of dealing with insecurities that Hollywood brings about when you are in the spotlight so much?

RIVERS: I think insecurities come way before. You know by the time you're five, you either think you're pretty or you think you're not. And you spend your whole life, no matter what you look like, battling what you think you look like.

CT: Do you still get nervous performing after all these years?

RIVERS: Yes, constantly. I wish I could say I walk out and say, "Oh no problem." Yeah, I'm very nervous. I always want the audience to like me. And that's a big responsibility, because, I don't know how big your place is, but I usually play (3,000) to 4,000-seaters. And you know they came out to see me, and they got in their car and got dressed, and you want them to have a good time.

CT: How do you deal with those nerves?

RIVERS: Drink and drugs.

CT: After 50 some odd years, is it difficult to still come up with new material?

RIVERS: Let me just tell you, as long as God gives you a Helena Bonham Carter and a Charlie Sheen, and the Kardashian sisters — it ain't hard.

CT: What would you say is your proudest accomplishment in life?

RIVERS: That I'm still doing it. That I'm still relevant, and that at this age it's a miracle that I have two shows on the air. It's a miracle! It's great and I love that. And everyone thinks you get someplace in a business and you relax. No, no, no, no. You get some place in a business and you work three times as hard.

CT: Yeah, I think multiple generations can relate to you. I mentioned to my mom that I would be interviewing you and she could remember watching you guest host on "The Tonight Show," with Johnny Carson when she was in college, and her boyfriend, who later turned out to be gay, would be literally rolling on the floor laughing.

RIVERS: Yes, some people know me from Carson, some people know me from red carpet, some people know me from “Fashion Police.” It’s so funny, and it all just depends on how old they are.

CT: You actually began your career as an English major at Barnard College. You’ve applied your writing talents to a lot of different areas, like writing for shows and playwriting. What inspires your writing and what do you get out of it?

RIVERS: I’ll tell you why writing is wonderful: Because it’s there and it’s something you can see. You write a book and it’s something you can touch all your life, and have, while performing is ethereal. You can say, “You should have seen the good performance, or the bad performance, I had last night,” and it’s nothing tangible. So I love writing, I love creating something. I love thinking of a joke, and writing it down and then trying it out, the whole process.

CT: Oh yeah, I saw a clip from the documentary about you, “Joan Rivers is a Piece of Work,” where you were looking through thousands of jokes that you had filed away over the years.

RIVERS: Yes, because I couldn’t possibly remember all of them.



CT: Your “Fashion Police” jokes are a little harsh but they are also hilarious.

RIVERS: Comedy is rough these days. Comedy is very rough — go look at Robin Williams, go look at Chris Rock, go and look at Sara Silverman. Comedy is rough, life is rough! Your generation, you’ve got a hard road ahead of you, and I think the comedy generally reflects it.

CT: Have you ever felt bad for making fun of someone, or did anything ever backfire?

RIVERS: It's not my problem to feel bad. When I do Fashion Police, I am a critic. The same as when you go and see a show and have to write a review, I have to go and look at clothes and talk about them — I'm a critic. And my allegiance is to my audience, and so I can't feel badly. To lie and say that somebody looked good that didn't, then what I am I doing it for?

CT: How did you get involved with fashion? Was it something you liked from a young age?

RIVERS: Always enjoyed it, always had fun. When I got out of college I wanted to be an actress. I got odd jobs in department stores and I always loved fashion because I always worked with it. And I did windows for Lord and Taylor, and I would do window displays for Saks. So I was a window display girl, working my way. That was my part time job in college, and afterward. So I always liked fashion. But fashion should be fun. No one should take it seriously. It's all silly, just go out and do it and try it. If someone wants to wear spangles, they should go wear spangles. It's fun. These idiots and fashionistas that take it so seriously, you know they're just stupid.

CT: Do you have one fashion icon in particular?

RIVERS: Audrey Hepburn. I mean look at the pictures of the movie stars of the 1930s. Ah! Oh my god, all those ladies that were way before my time. Satin dresses, trimmed with fur, oh my God.

CT: Do you have any other advice for college students these days?

RIVERS: Whatever you do, whatever job you get, don't be a clock-watcher. In my jewelry line, I have 20 people working. And the ones that get ahead are the ones that work like dogs. And it's funny how these college graduates go to school for something, and five years later they say, "I think I want to do something else." Switch!

CT: Do you have any favorite memories from your own college years?

RIVERS: Oh my God, college is so much fun. I was the student actress. You know, we did plays, so all I wanted to do was act, act, act, act. I can remember when I got out of college, the fact that I learned and could speak Spanish was a miracle. I had a Spanish professor who took pity on me.

Otherwise I'd still be in school!

CT: Do you have a role model outside of fashion?

RIVERS: I wish I could say yes, but no, all my friends are role models in my life, in a sense that I respect them because they are hard workers, but I have no one role model. Maybe Monica Lewinsky.

CT: What is your next career move?

RIVERS: I'm writing a comedy-horror movie and it's going to be wonderful. We are doing that and then a second season for Joan and Melissa. And then I have "Fashion Police" and these live performances. So it's all good, all good.

CT: Is there anything else you wanted to share with the students at Virginia Tech?

RIVERS: Just get ready for total inappropriateness.