



Always a “SMASH” Hit

by Glenn R. Swift

After graduating in 1969 from the University of South Florida with a chemical engineering degree, Leo Gallagher decided “to take some time off” to work as the road manager for comic/musician Jim Stafford. The two clicked, Gallagher enjoyed being around comedy – and future plans to work with a calculator and slide rule were quickly dashed.

Ten years went by.

Stafford and Gallagher went on tour in California, and Gallagher decided to do something a bit different – take the stage himself. The audience loved him and Gallagher thought he ought to give this new thing a shot. He then began honing his own comedy act while hanging out at LA’s The Comedy Store and Ice House.

Before you could smash a pumpkin, a comedy legend was born.

Gallagher became one of the most popular and recognizable American comedians during the early 1980s, producing at least one special a year from 1981 to 1987. His signature sketch became the “Sledge-O-Matic,” a large wooden mallet that he uses to smash a variety of objects: computer keyboards, containers of cottage cheese, cartons of chocolate milk, tubes of toothpaste, pound cake, Big Macs and... of course... watermelons.

Given the messy nature of this portion of his act, it’s usually saved for the finale of his shows. Fittingly, show

attendees in the first two or three rows are usually provided with plastic sheeting for protection. Gallagher also performs many other prop-food gags, including a demonstration of constipation using a jar of peanut butter and an explanation of the difference between men and women using a sausage wrapped in a banana peel.

The famed comedian claims he originally developed the Sledge-O-Matic act for George Carlin, but it was rejected. So, he began using it as the centerpiece of his own act. In addition to the Sledge-O-Matic, Gallagher's act features a variety of props, including a large trampoline designed to look like a couch, an adult-sized Big Wheel, and a cap with a fringe of hair attached to the back.

In many ways, his act is a criticism of American consumer culture and parodies ads for kitchen gadgets that permeated American television during non-primetime hours in the late 1970s.

"I write all of my own material," said Gallagher, who maintains a nearly non-stop touring schedule of more than 100 dates per year. "If you don't write your own stuff, you can't ad-lib," he joked.

"Many comedians have tried to copy what I do, but they don't realize the innate cleverness of my brand of comedy. The props are merely to add frosting."

As for how much thought goes in to coming up with ideas for his act, Gallagher chuckled and said, "Not much. My ideas come to me spontaneously... in an instant. You see, I don't really do jokes. I look for things that reflect the idiosyncrasies of our society. Luckily for me, people laugh."

Although he has been the center of attention for more three decades, in many ways, Gallagher is very much a loner.

"I don't have a personal life. The audience is my family."

Melodrama aside, Gallagher clearly enjoys what he does best – making people laugh.

"Laughter releases endorphins, which does a lot of good things for the body, like helping to fight cancer."

When asked if he's ever laughed at his own jokes, Gallagher replied, "A good comedian can't afford to do that. After all, he's supposed to act as if he doesn't know he's being funny."

Like other famed comics who first came on the scene years

ago, Gallagher laments the decline of American stand-up.

"So much of comedy today is vulgarity and nothing more. Most audiences have a low-level of expectation, and that's why most comics are such poor performers on stage."

What makes a great comic act?

"Variety... An act should not end the same way it begins."

As for any big plans in the future, Gallagher revealed that the old engineer is still alive and kicking in his noggin.

"I'm working on a video project to explain the inner-workings of the atom to children using action figures to represent the various subatomic particles. I'm going to play the action figures."

Now that's an act worth seeing. **PBG**

Comedic legend Gallagher will take the stage at the Kravis Center for the Performing Arts on Friday, November 21 @ 7:30pm. For tickets or more information, please call (561) 832-7469 or visit www.kravis.org.

