

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/don-rickles-the-insult-king-from-queens-1437406094>

REAL ESTATE | HOUSE CALL

Don Rickles: The Insult King From Queens

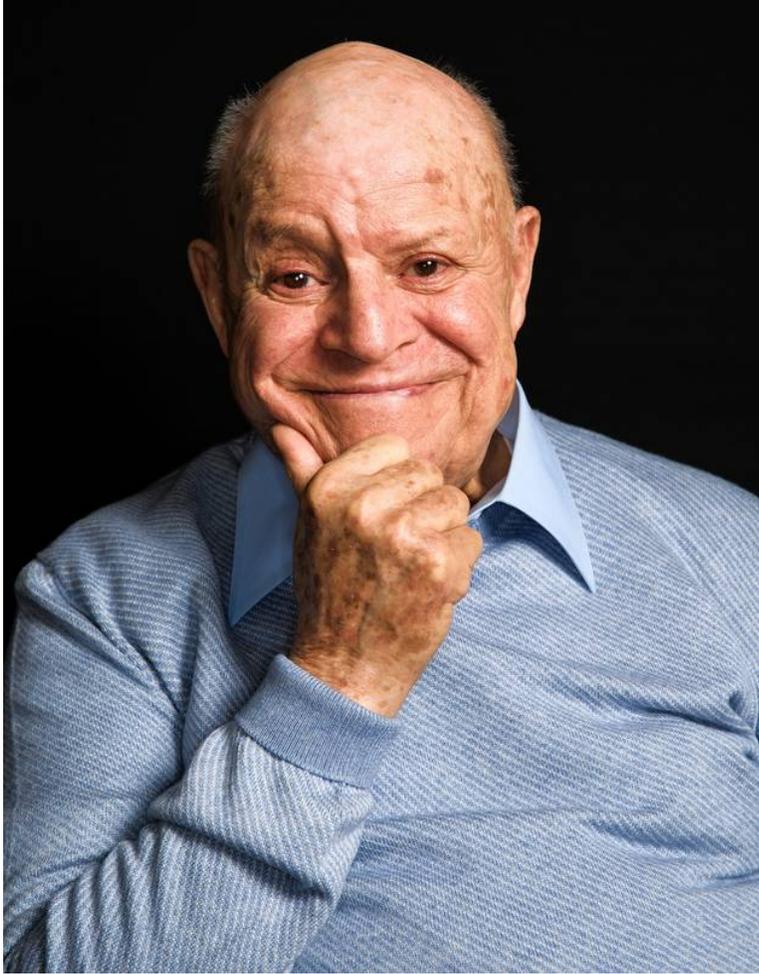
The tart-tongued comedian throws zingers while reminiscing about his family's New York apartment across from school

July 20, 2015 11:28 a.m. ET

Comedian Don Rickles, 89, will appear Aug. 6 at the Bergen Performing Arts Center in New Jersey. The first season of his 1976-'78 TV series "CPO Sharkey" was recently released on DVD. He spoke with Marc Myers.

Whenever the school bell woke me up, I knew I was late. I grew up right across the street from P.S. 148, in a four-story apartment building at 8909 32nd Ave. in the Jackson Heights section of Queens. What did my family's two-bedroom apartment look like? What am I, an architect?

I was an only child and I had my own room—we weren't that poor. Probably the most unusual feature in our apartment was a dumbwaiter in the kitchen. You opened this little door, put your garbage in there and lowered it by rope to the basement. That was our cellphone. What did I have in my room that I wish I still had now? That's 70 years ago, for God's sake. You want to write a history book, go call up Benjamin Franklin's family. I was a big sports fan, so probably some memorabilia from the New York Giants.



Don Rickles, photographed in Biloxi, Miss., for a recent performance. *PHOTO: EDMUND D. FOUNTAIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

RELATED READING

- Comedian Chris Elliott on His Quirky Homes (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/comedian-chris-elliott-on-his-quirky-homes-1425397249>)
- Kramer and the Smell of the Beach (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304137304579290252046224612>)
- Richard Lewis on What's so Funny about Growing up in Jersey (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/richard-lewis-on-whats-so-funny-about-growing-up-in-jersey-1409674137>)

My father, Max, was an insurance salesman and a good one, which is saying something since it was the Depression. He eventually made me take the test to become an agent after I graduated high school. But I had a problem. While I could get people to listen to my pitch, I couldn't close. I was too nice a guy. As soon as a prospective client said the policy looked good, instead of saying,

“Great, sign here,” I’d say, “OK, I’ll come back Thursday.”



The most entertaining person in my family was my mother, Etta. But I wouldn’t say she was funny. She was the vocal star of our

The comedian with his mother in the early 1940s. PHOTO: WYNNFIELD PRODUCTIONS, INC.

neighborhood and would sing “Some of These Days” at family parties. I still get choked up when I hear the song. She could take over a room in a matter of seconds. Let’s put it this way, when she’d take me to see a show at Radio City Music Hall, there was a line around the block waiting to get in, but somehow we found ourselves at the front. She was very pushy—but in a nice way.

What I remember most about Jackson Heights is that I left. The neighborhood was dear to me when I was growing up. My parents were very active in the synagogue two blocks away, and I was in every activity there as a young man, including shows and the Boy Scouts. In school, I wasn’t a wiseguy. I had the same

attitude that I have on stage today. My personality is such that I'm never hurtful and I can get away with being a smart aleck. People just need to know up front that your intent isn't personal.

Tests at nearby Newtown High School were tricky for me. One time, while everyone was busy writing on their test sheets, I was looking over at the girl's paper next to me. The teacher said, "Mr. Rickles, what are you doing?" Without missing a beat, I said, "I'm cheating." The whole class fell down laughing. What happened to me as a result? The teacher took out a whip and sent me to Germany. Snap out of it. Nothing happened to me. She just told me to knock it off.



His childhood home in Jackson Heights, Queens. *PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

I was never expelled because of something I said or did. I was president of the school, president of the dramatic society, president of everything—except schoolwork. I wasn't dumb, but I wasn't conscientious either. I was always in trouble but never seriously. I was the fun guy, and all of the teachers liked me. If it wasn't for World War II, I'd probably still be there. I enlisted in the Navy in 1944 and served as a seaman first class. I was honorably discharged in 1946.

In the late '40s, I studied acting at New York's American Academy of Dramatic Arts. Roles were hard to come by so I started doing stand-up. After my father died in 1953, my mother moved us down to Miami Beach. I began appearing at Murray Franklin's nightclub, where the audience sat on rocking chairs. I was never afraid of offending anyone during my act. It felt comfortable.



The school that's located directly across the street from his home. *PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

The first time Frank Sinatra came to see me there, I knew in his heart he liked me. Sure enough I was right. I said many things to Frank over the years, but he always laughed. He knew that when I said things like, “Make yourself at home, Frank—hit someone,” it was an act. I was playing off his image.

I never think about what I’m saying when I perform. I never say, “Oh God, I shouldn’t have said that.” In my business, if you worry about what you’re saying, you fail.

Today I live in a gated community in Los Angeles. It has 38 rooms and a giant lawn. It’s magnificent. I stand by the window and look at the trees. I’m not a forest ranger, just a guy in a house looking out the window at the woods.

I don’t walk around the house or at the store constantly making remarks. What I do is a performance, a form of acting. The difference between my act and the movies is I’m playing the same role every time—Don Rickles. Hey, I hope I gave you enough stuff. If this winds up being only two lines, I’m going to find out where you live.

Copyright 2014 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.