

Richard Lewis likes to poke fun at himself

STAR SPEAK



FRANK SANELLO

Comedian Richard Lewis has made a successful career poking fun at his myriad neuroses. His mental health may in fact be hereditary. His grandparents had a bumper sticker that said, "I'd rather be weeping," and his mother had a self-complaining oven, he jokes.

Lewis' neuroses-propelled humor has tapped into the national consciousness and made him one of the most popular comedians working today. Last December, he performed at Carnegie Hall, the Super Bowl for stand-up comics. GQ magazine put him on its list of the 20th century's most influential humorists, along with Robert Benchley and Dorothy Parker.

But there's no chance that success will make Lewis a healthy person and possibly eradicate the source of his humor. The comedian can mine plenty of angst from the recent cancellation of his critically acclaimed ABC series, "Anything But Love."

Lewis' comedy specials on cable reflect his continuing mental anguish. The first was titled "I'm in Pain," followed by "I'm Exhausted." His third special will run on HBO in July. It's called, appropriately, "I'm Doomed."

Q: Is the real Richard Lewis as neurotic as the character in your act?
A: Yes, unfortunately. But I'm not

as loud, and I usually don't walk around the house with a hand-held mike. But I'm a survivor. What I say is pretty positive, even though my posture and my clothing make me look like I'm wearing a shroud. People come backstage and say, "Boy! We feel miserable too. Thanks." I'm sure I've saved thousands of relationships. On the way home from my show, I'm sure people look at each other and say, "Whew. I'm not him." I feel like a public-service comedian.

Q: Why do you refer to yourself as the comedian from hell?

A: I don't call myself that. Other people call me that. I just hooked into that phrase about 10 years ago because I just felt so overwhelmed by things. Everything seemed like it was from hell. Which is not to say I'm Satan's messenger, even though I've been visited by Satans — make that Satanettes.

Q: Your HBO special has an unusual feature.

A: Yes, I invited some celebrities to come on the show and participate in group therapy right in front of the camera. Angie Dickinson, Robert Goulet, O.J. Simpson, Dudley Moore. They reveal the most penetrating things about their lives. Angie Dickinson! You won't believe the intensity of her emotions. The crowning moment is when Robert Goulet gets in touch with his feelings. I've never seen him like that. Forget Barbara Walters. No one could have gotten this stuff out of celebrities.



Richard Lewis

'I invited some celebrities to come on the show and participate in group therapy right in front of the camera.'

— Richard Lewis

Q: You've written a screenplay, "No Life to Live," which you also plan to star in. What is the film about?

A: It's like a neurotic "Rocky." I'm in the center of the most demonic, neurotic forces in the world, and I overcome them at the end.

Q: How does your mother feel about you using her as the butt of jokes in your act?

A: She loves it when I mock her on "Letterman." She leaves messages on my machine about certain areas she feels are ripe for ridicule about her.

She loves it when I tease her on the air, although for a while it was a little uncomfortable when people would come over to her at the grocery store and say, "Did you really make your dog commit suicide?"

Q: You're practically a regular on David Letterman's show, aren't you?

A: Two years ago, I was grand marshal at my alma mater, Ohio State. They asked how I wanted to be introduced. I said just mention that next week I'll be making my 40th appearance on "David Letterman." But they screwed it up and said, "Next week,

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