

THE SUMMER SNIPS ISSUE



JEFF OF ALL TRADES

by Ryan Torok

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JEFF GARLIN... Seriously

by RYAN TOROK, Staff Writer

An hour before the start of Jeff Garlin's recent stand-up show at Upright Citizens Brigade in Hollywood, a huge line had formed around the block on Franklin Avenue, obstructing the entrances to adjacent cafes and a clothing store.

Most of the motley group waiting in line appeared to be in their mid-20s and all exuded a restless and excited energy, as if in on a secret. Maybe they were. Admission to Garlin's show, "Jeff's Combo Platter," cost just \$1.

The club — known to insiders as just UCB — is an ideal venue for Garlin, who performs an entirely improvised gig that varies in length depending on his mood. It enjoys a reputation for being one of the best venues in the city for improv and experimental stand-up.

On this night, Garlin, who turns 48 on June 5, played for almost 75 minutes. He came on stage looking very comfortable in jeans and sneakers. He's a familiar fixture here — his photo hangs in the club's lobby alongside shots of fellow comics Amy Poehler, Zach Galifianakis and Greg Proops, all of whom, like Garlin, thrive on improv that goes beyond the usual spontaneity.

Unexpected collaborations found their way into Garlin's performance that night. Making the theater feel more like a college frat house — albeit one with nerdy comedy fans rather than beer-bellied jocks — Garlin let a disheveled slacker type sitting in the audience perform half the show with him and encouraged the guy to slow-dance with an emo-looking male model, also from the audience. Onstage, the latter fellow admitted to Garlin, and to everybody else in the room, that he had a piercing in a very private place. Garlin then urged the two to dance while he sang "Kung-Fu Fighting." When the slacker guy, disappointingly, said he preferred not to dance with people of the same sex, Garlin grabbed the lucky model himself.

At the close of his set, Garlin told the audience it had been one of the best gigs he'd ever done. He appeared sincere, even grateful. Not only had the audience come to behold the lunacy, they'd enhanced the madness. Taking cues from Garlin, the whole crowd forfeited their inhibitions and became the show.

An actor, director and stand-up comic, Garlin recently added published author to his resume. His memoir, "My Footprint: Carrying the Weight of the World," which mostly chronicles his weight-loss program and his attempt to go green at the same time, was just released by Simon & Schuster.

Doing publicity for the book, including a recent appearance at Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills, is just one of the many projects Garlin is currently juggling. In addition to working with Larry David, co-executive-producing and co-starring in the half-hour HBO comedy "Curb Your Enthusiasm," which returns in 2011 for an eighth season, he voiced a character in Pixar's "Toy Story 3," arriving in theaters June 18.

Garlin — whose previous voiceover credits include 2008's "Wall-E," Time magazine's No. 1 movie of the decade — plays a new character in the "Toy Story" universe: Buttercup the Unicorn. Although the unicorn has pink hearts on its face — distinctly girlish — Garlin insists the unicorn's gender is irrelevant.

"Toy unicorns don't [have sex]," he pointed out.

Unicorn gender debates aside, Garlin's

Garlin voices Buttercup the Unicorn in "Toy Story 3." Photo courtesy of Disney Pixar

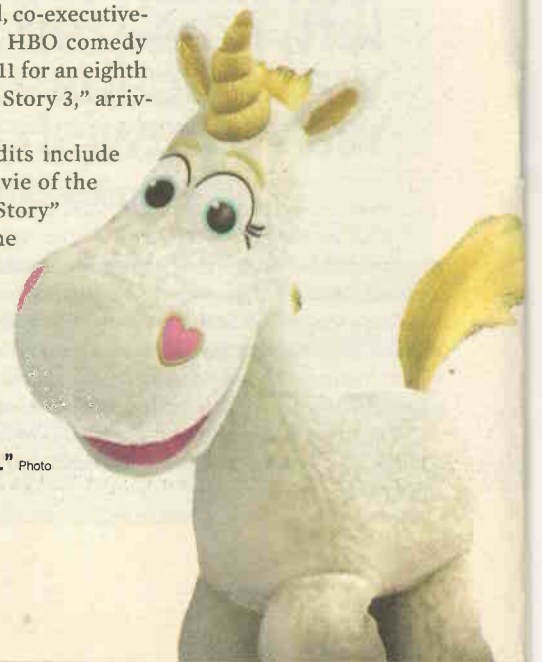


Photo by Dan Kacovinski

openness diminishes during interviews. In a conversation before his UCB performance, the actor talked about how much he dislikes the pontification that in-person one-on-ones demand. Reinforcing his preference for the stage, he re-created our uncomfortable scene together for the audience that night. When Garlin announced to everyone in the room that he had just done an interview and that he'd been characteristically unresponsive to my questions, I took a chance and yelled one out:

"What do you think about the fact that Larry David said he couldn't do ['Curb Your Enthusiasm'] without the Jeff character?"

"Right," Garlin said, acknowledging that this was, indeed, one of the questions I'd asked him. Before responding, he asked another, younger comic, to bring chairs out onto the stage. Together the two comics proceeded to arrange the chairs so that they were facing each other like they would be in a real interview. They then took turns playing me and playing Garlin, asking the question and celebrating Garlin's passive answers to an inquiry he felt he couldn't answer:

"I don't know why [Larry said that]."

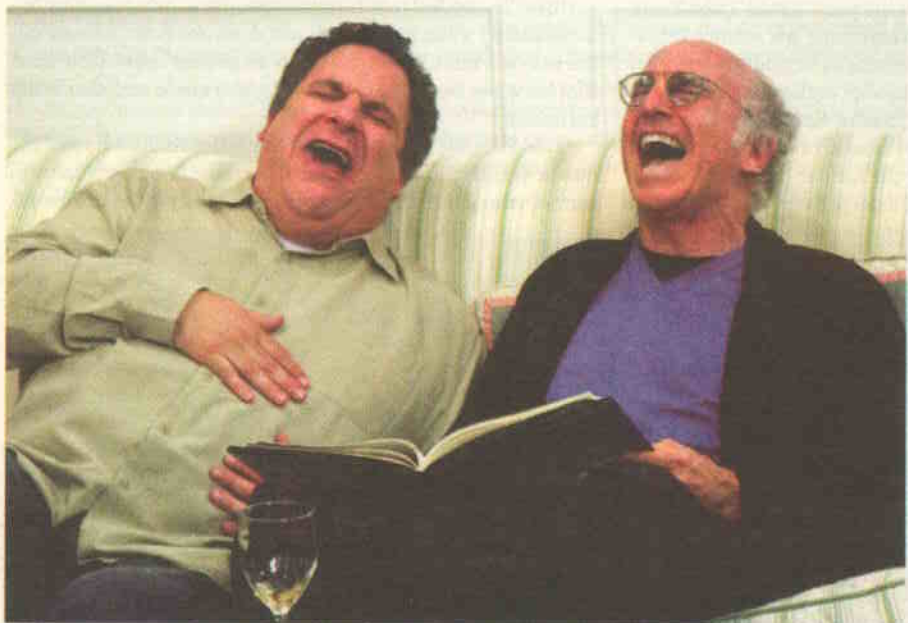
"You would have to ask him that."

"I don't know what it means if [Larry] says something."

Garlin was mocking himself, even as he mocked the publicity dance that all celebrities have to do at some point. But before turning the interview into a performance piece, he confessed to the audience that he thinks he was disappointing as an interviewee.

"He's very hard on himself," Susie Essman, who plays Garlin's wife on "Curb," confirmed in a phone interview.

"But most comedians are. The really cocky ones that think they are the greatest, really aren't that good. The good ones are insecure," Essman said.



Jeff Garlin and Larry David share a laugh in the "Curb Your Enthusiasm" episode "The Freak Book."

Photo courtesy of HBO/Claudette Barius

Garlin and Essman's friendship predates the HBO hit comedy. They met in New York more than 20 years ago, when both were struggling stand-up comics.

"He never pandered to an audience," Essman continued. "He always did what he wanted to do. He has a brilliant comedic mind. It's both disciplined and undisciplined. He instinctively knows what's funny and lets it go to that place."

A few weeks after the UCB show, I met Garlin for a second time at his Los Angeles office, where he had agreed to be photographed for this publication. The room is decorated with his passions: Two vintage seats from the stands of Wrigley Field lean against a wall; a framed Radiohead poster from the group's recent Haiti benefit concert hangs near his desk; books on Woody Allen and Stanley Kubrick, as well as a John Coltrane record, stand on a shelf.

During this meeting, Garlin continued to self-deprecate. He told me he doesn't believe he's great at anything, that he does a disservice to himself by trying to do too many things at once.

"I could have a bigger career if I focused on just one aspect of it," said Garlin, who admits in his memoir to having attention deficit disorder.

I recalled the black-and-white photo of Garlin displayed in the UCB lobby showing a younger man with a lit cigarette dangling from between his grinning lips. His hair was longer than it is now, an inch or two away from being a Jew-fro, and he was considerably heavier. Garlin has lost a lot of weight recently — thus the book. He now wears black-rimmed eyeglasses, and his hair is cut short.

Perhaps Garlin — who insisted backstage at UCB that he doesn't put any thought into his stand-up sets and that he doesn't take himself seriously — is, whether he admits it or not, changing. It would stand to reason: He's not far from 50; he's married and the father of two boys, ages 9 and 14. Details of his older son's recent bar mitzvah open a chapter in his memoir, also revealing Garlin's distaste for Hollywood-like flash.

"I wanted to make sure that my son's bar mitzvah was all about him having a fun time. I

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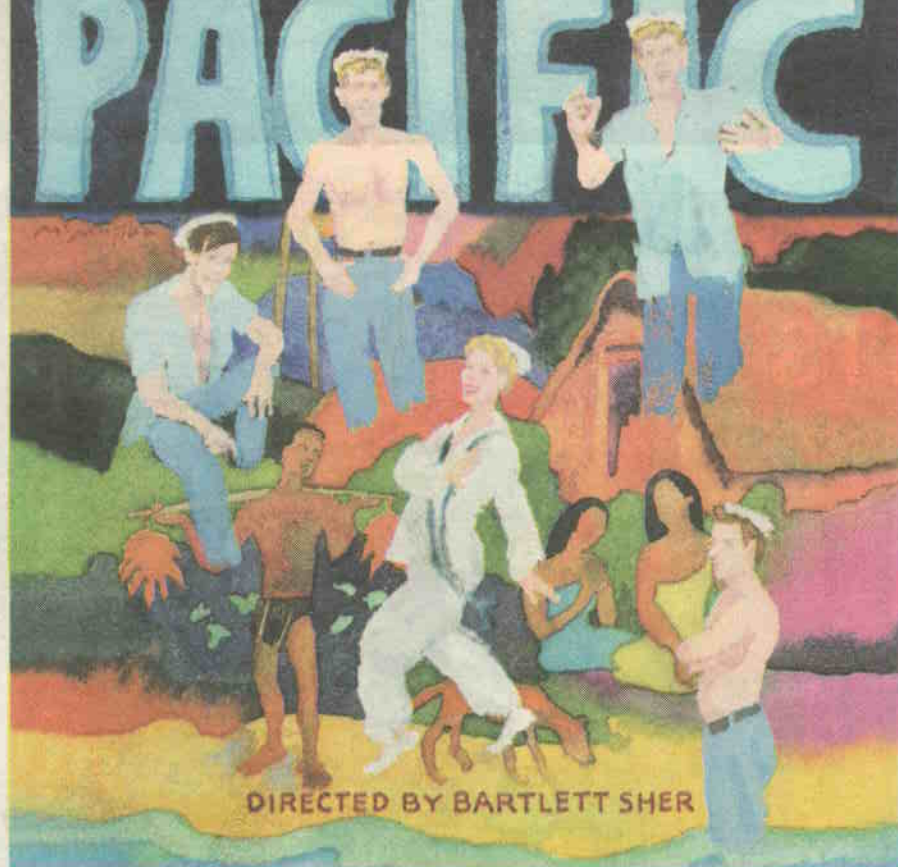


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Jeff Garlin

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didn't want to have one of these overblown affairs that cost zillions," Garlin writes. "Usually they're pompous and boring. Nope, [my son's] bar mitzvah party [was] all about him and his friends."

Garlin proclaims to be "very proud to be a Jew." Case in point: I asked about his tendency to bid people goodbye by saying, "Enjoy your good looks," and he compared the expression to "zei gezunt," a Yiddish expression. Neither of us knew the exact translation of the phrase, so Garlin sat at his computer and Googled it.

A Web page defines the phrase as: "Be well. Goodbye. Farewell."

"Exactly," Garlin said.

Despite his fondness for the Jewish religion and culture, nobody can convince Garlin to travel to Israel. He recalled his performance at a 2008 gala honoring Israel's 60th birthday, when he accidentally upset audience member Elie Wiesel. "I was talking about not having a big desire to go to Israel, and I got booed," Garlin said. "Not booed off the stage — I was funny, and it worked out ...

"But it's not like I want to go to Japan but I don't want to go to Israel. I don't want to go anywhere. I want to go to sleep. I've been doing [stand-up] for 27 years, and I prefer to stay at home. I still do it too much. I like taking a nap. I like watching a movie on my television — a DVD, Blu-ray. I like to spend time with my wife and kids."

Garlin got his start at Second City in Chicago, as did Tina Fey and Steve Carell. But he'd known he wanted to be a comedian long before that. "I made the decision when I was 8 years old," Garlin said. "I saw Jimmy Durante perform in Chicago and, on the way home, I asked my parents if that was a job. They said it was. I said, 'That's the job I want.'"

His first real break came in 1999, with a guest spot on the NBC sitcom "Mad About You," starring Paul Reiser, who, in a perfect payback, appeared several years later on "Curb." That same year, Garlin landed the role of Jeff Greene, David's fictional manager on "Curb." Although the idea for the HBO series initially came from an off-the-cuff remark Garlin made to David about a comedy special — this was after David had left "Seinfeld" — Garlin said he is deeply indebted to David. In Garlin's memoir, he writes of how thankful he is to David for including him in the show.

"Let it be known, I owe everything to Larry David," Garlin writes. "There you go. I wouldn't own a house, I'd have nothing ... okay, I'm going overboard. I can't say I'd be completely unsuccessful, but certainly I wouldn't have the life I have now, without Larry David. I thank him constantly. I do."

David said he's grateful for Garlin. "When he's not in a scene, he's an invaluable asset for me," David wrote in an e-mail, "both from a writing and a directing standpoint. I depend on him to tell me the truth about my own acting, and he always knows when something's phony and when we've crossed the line."

As for life after "Curb," I mention to Garlin that the cast members of "Seinfeld" have had difficulties landing successful roles since the show ended. Garlin's not worried.

"I don't even think about it," he responded.

Despite claiming he wants to spend more time at home, Garlin shows no sign that he will stop performing stand-up any time soon. In fact, "He's just beginning to get in his stride," Essman said.

Asked whether Garlin might someday be numbered alongside David, Jerry Seinfeld or Mel Brooks, a few of the many Jewish icons of comedy, Essman said, "I think he will. They've all got a lot of years in there. I think you earn membership into that club. But I bet my life he'll be a member."

Comedian Richard Lewis, who is a recurring co-star on "Curb" and, arguably, already an icon himself, agreed. Lewis recalled one of his fondest memories with Garlin:

"I gave him a book that Albert Brooks had given me for my 40th birthday, which was a joke gift, like a 5,000-page book of Milton Berle's jokes. But it was a meaningful and affectionate gift from Albert, who's a pal and fan. When Jeff turned 40, I passed that Holy Grail on to him and told him when he found someone like I found, who he felt had a great career going, he should eventually pass the book on."

I didn't ask Garlin about his own ambition to reach the level of the abovementioned comedians. I didn't need to; I knew he would say he doesn't even think about it, and I'd be inclined to believe him. Garlin's concerns are much more immediate, much more practical.

"After 27 years, I actually want to have an act," Garlin said during his show at UCB as he stood center stage, exposed. **SS**

"He never pandered to an audience. He always did what he wanted to do. He has a brilliant comedic mind. It's both disciplined and undisciplined. He instinctively knows what's funny and lets it go to that place."

— Susie Essman