

“LAUGH OR DIE”

By Alan Swyer

“*Chicken* gets a laugh,” Max Fine explained the first morning Larry Becker met him for breakfast at a Studio City deli. “But *pigeon*? At best a maybe. *Lollygag*? Yup. *Dawdle*? Nah. *Woebegone*? Bingo! *Sad*? *Miserable*? Goose egg. Follow?”

Not wanting to hurt the older man's feelings, Becker nodded. When their coffee and bagels arrived, he listened as Max continued to lecture. “Then there's the Rule of Three,” Fine stated. To get the maximum, you need variations of a joke three times. First, for a chuckle, is to establish. Second, for a giggle, to reinforce. But the third, that's for a belly laugh. Stop at two, you sell yourself short. Go beyond three, and it backfires.”

Though Becker didn't know it, that he was spending time with Max Fine owed to a high-powered Hollywood dinner party. That's where network exec Arnie Koppelman heard fellow TV potentates reminisce about comedy duos from the past: Abbott & Costello and Laurel & Hardy. Burns & Allen and Martin & Lewis. Cheech & Chong plus Belushi & Aykroyd.

That night Arnie Koppelman's mind couldn't stop racing. In need of a hit due to an under-performing nighttime schedule, he tossed and turned while playing his *What if* game. What if he could create a launching pad for comedy duos? What if, instead of simply coming up with contemporary equivalents, he could spin the concept by creating teams from two entirely different vintages? Wouldn't it be magical if he could somehow match Jack Benny with Dave Chappelle? Or George Carlin with Sarah Silverman? Or Phyllis Diller with Zach Galifianakis? Those pairings, which would send ratings through the roof, had two problems. First, the old-timers were dead. Second, even if he could afford the younger ones, no way would their representatives allow them to be on that kind of show.

The answer, Koppelman realized, was to make the show itself the star, like “Your Show Of

Shows” in the golden age of TV,” or “Saturday Night Live” in the decades that followed. If some of the talent used it as a springboard to stardom a la Sid Caesar, Gilda Radner or Bill Murray, he would be heralded as a great discoverer of talent.

It didn't matter that the time of the classic stand-ups – George Burns, Jack Benny, Shelly Berman, and Joan Rivers – was in the distant past. Nor could he hope to snare living legends like Mel Brooks or Dick Van Dyke. The perfect prototype was someone like Murray Roman, if he could still walk and talk without drooling. But what made even more sense was to shoot for comics from the wave that followed. Hopefully he and his casting directors would find some who were still funny without being doddering. For the younger partners, the goal was to find up-and-comers in need of a break.

By dawn, what started as a notion had become “The Next Big Thing” in Arnie Koppelman's mind. Describing it to his staffers once he got to the office, it became a weekly prime-time competition called “Laugh Or Die,” which in Hollywood terms would be “The Voice” meets The Pillsbury Bake Off. When informed by an intern that a Finnish film had used that title some years before, Koppelman sneered. “Finland?” he said dismissively. “What kind of ratings do they get?”

“Is this April Fool's Day?” Larry Becker asked when his manager told him he'd put him up for an audition.

“If you don't want to go, you can always play golf with Brad Pitt, or go sailing with Beyonce,” countered Ed Kriegel.

“Whoa,” said Becker. “I'm supposed to be the funny one.”

“Then be funny for the casting director.”

Reminding himself of embarrassing roles willfully omitted from his official bio – an Italian chef

inundated by exploding spaghetti... a singing snake slithering on its belly... a magician attacked by the rabbit he produced from a hat – Becker dutifully made his way to Burbank, all the while reminding himself that any opportunity would be preferable to his day job of driving for Uber. Fearing rejection from a project that sounded to him somewhere between fishy and cockamamie, Becker was pleasantly surprised when the casting director greeted him with a smile. “I’m a fan,” said Lilly Hernandez.

“Glad I’ve got one,” joked Becker.

“I’ve been touting you since I saw you on some silly thing on Netflix. I told my boyfriend that anyone who can make a dancing carrot funny has got it. I was even more convinced when I saw your bit about a blind date at that comedy club in the Valley.”

“Will you do me a favor?” asked Becker. “Actually, two?”

“Sure.”

“If you get tired of your boyfriend, marry me.” Becker waited as Lilly laughed. “Second, call my mother and vouch for me.” After another laugh, he spoke again. “Make that my high school English teacher, since my mother’s no longer around to find fault.”

Not only was Becker informed that the job was his, but that he’d be matched with one of the best oldsters: Max Fine.

“But one thing to be aware of,” warned Lilly. “Max is nice and funny, but he sure loves to talk.”

At the deli, with Lilly’s warning ringing in his ears, Becker interrupted his breakfast companion.

“Instead of just gabbing, shouldn’t we start tossing around ideas?”

“How much time before we have to present our bit?” asked Max.

“Two weeks.”

“So shouldn’t we get to know each other instead of forcing it?”

When Becker nodded, Max smiled. “So tell me about yourself.”

“Want the long or the short?”

“My tryout for the Lakers isn't till tomorrow,” replied Max, “so let's go with the long.”

Realizing that his hope of making some money driving for Uber that morning would have to wait, Becker took a deep breath. “What would you like to know?”

“We don't need to get into how and when you lost your virginity,” said Max. “But let's start with where you grew up and what those years were like.”

After mentioning that his formative years were spent in urban New Jersey, Becker found himself dwelling on something he rarely discussed: the difference between how happy he was outside of his family's apartment, and how miserable he was when home.

The rest of the day, whether driving people to the airport, Universal Studios, or Rodeo Drive – or grabbing takeout Thai food for dinner – Becker remained astonished at how much he'd opened up in front of someone who was basically a stranger, yet felt almost like the uncle he wished he had.

“Based on the Youtubes I watched last night,” Max Fine announced when Becker joined him for breakfast the next morning, “you're funny.”

“I guess that's good.”

“But not good enough. You do funny bits, you've got funny lines, but to me there's something missing. Know what?”

When Becker shook his head, Max pointed at him. “You. Funny situations, witticisms, and *schtick* can only take you so far.”

“So what do I need?”

“A character. Watch clips of Jack Benny. His stage character – his persona, to get highfalutin – was a cheapskate. So what's his most famous bit? A stick-up man says, *Your money or your life!*

When Benny doesn't answer, the bad guy repeats forcefully, *Your money or your life!* Jack's response? *I'm thinking.* People howl – and more importantly, they remember. What was Rodney Dangerfield's character?”

“*I don't get no respect,*” answered Becker.

“Made him a star. And the basis of Sarah Silverman's character?”

“Tell me,” urged Becker.

“The opposite of what she really feels. She forces the audience to think in a new way about rape, the Holocaust, AIDS – stuff most comics won't get anywhere near. With me?”

Becker nodded.

“I can go on about Lenny Bruce, George Lopez, or a dozen others. But more importantly, what's your character?”

“Umm –”

“Maybe that's a problem. Yesterday you said you and your mother never got along. Anything memorable she ever said?”

Becker took a deep breath. “Until her dying day,” he said painfully, “she called the doctor who delivered me as *The sadist who ruined my life.*”

“Is that generic or specific?”

“Very specific.”

“Not something that could come from anyone of twenty other comics?”

Becker shook his head.

“At school, did you hang with the kids who asked *Does neatness count?*”

“Never.”

“Then who?”

“The jocks, the wild ones, the baddies.”

“Any of that inform your comedy?”

Becker shrugged guiltily.

“So what has a chance of making you special – that kind of stuff? Or tales of driving an Uber and blind dates?”

“You're killing me.”

“Do you know that Richard Pryor started out as a poor man's Bill Cosby?”

“Really?”

“Same kind of jokes, only not as well told. Feeling like a phony, he took off for Berkeley and reinvented himself. Like saxophonist Sonny Rollins, who checked out of the music scene to play on the Williamsburg Bridge until he became what he wanted to be. Or my favorite of all, Ray Charles, who used to imitate Nat King Cole and Charles Brown until he found his own voice and became the Ray we know and love.”

“Sounds like you really know music.”

Max smiled. “Especially Black music. Other than my kids, it's what I love most. Ever heard of the Soul Stirrers?”

Becker shook his head.

“The Gospel group Sam Cooke was in before he went out on his own. I've made my daughters promise that when I die, they'll play their version of *One More River To Cross*.”

“Since we've got a gig coming up,” said Becker with a sigh, “please don't die.”

“And give others the satisfaction?” joked Max. “But Richard, instead of remaining Cosby lite, came roaring back and blew everyone away.”

Though he needed revenue, Becker chose to forego his Uber duties that afternoon. Instead, he drove to Venice Beach, where he strolled for a while, gazing at the colorful murals and the even more colorful boardwalk denizens. Then he climbed onto some rocks and stared out at the ocean, thinking about all that Max Fine had said.

There was no doubt that his comedy career was nowhere near where he wanted it to be. Nor, he had to admit, was there anything specific that defined his comedy, or that set him apart from others.

Most importantly, it wasn't as though the search for a character would be a stretch. What he needed was to acknowledge, then make the most of, who he was and what he'd been through. That meant both the good and the bad, plus the happy and the sad.

But could he own up to who he really and truly was? Could he face an audience at a comedy club, or on TV, and tell tales of a home life in which if he said *Hot*, his mother said *Cold* – and if he said *Day*, she countered with *Night*? Could he talk about the fact that his father, figuratively, was gelded? Could he discuss the double life he led while growing up: bad boy troublemaker by day, yet secret reader of Kerouac, Raymond Chandler, and Hemingway at night?

This was, Becker realized, his existential moment – his opportunity to decide who and what he wanted to be.

But was he up to it?

Becker couldn't wait to get to the deli the next morning so as to tell his new mentor his new resolution. But instead of giving him that opportunity, Max immediately started speaking.

“You're probably wondering why, if I'm such a know-it-all, I'm not rich and famous.”

“I guess it crossed my mind.”

“You guess?”

Becker responded with a shrug.

“I was supposed to be the Next Big Thing, hitting clubs from coast to coast and getting courted by networks. Then, out of nowhere, one morning my wife felt sick.”

“Bad?” asked Becker.

“We hoped not. But I dropped everything, for what I thought would be temporary, to help with her and our two daughters.”

“How old?”

“At that point, three and five. But Claire got sicker and sicker, so that temporary was no longer temporary.”

“Did she pull through?”

When Max shook his head, Becker gulped. “I’m so sorry.”

“At this point, it’s ancient history. While looking after the kids, I managed to cobble together a living, writing jokes for others, punching up sitcoms, doing whatever I could. But now that the girls are grown, when this thing came along, I saw it as a chance to do – even in a tiny way – what I hoped to do back then.”

Max stopped speaking when a red-headed waitress with a name tag that said Sonia, came to take their orders. Then Max again faced Becker. “Enough about me. Let’s talk comedy.”

Becker flinched. “Shouldn’t we start talking about what we’re going to do?”

Max frowned. “This informs what we’re going to do. All comedy, in less enlightened times, was about a man in trouble – though now it’s a man or a woman. As for trouble, what’s the mantra of our people?”

“I give up.”

“They attacked, we survived, let’s eat. And what do we do next?”

“Tell me.”

“We tell jokes to turn tragedy into comedy. But let’s focus on you. Anything your father ever said that makes you laugh, or sticks in your craw, or that you can’t forget?” When Becker nodded, Max insisted. “Tell me.”

“When I announced, after having a couple of short pieces published, then doing some open mic nights in Jersey, then in New York, that I was thinking about moving out here, my dad, for the

first time ever, wanted us to talk man-to-man.”

“Go on –” said Max.

“Out of nowhere, he wanted – actually begged and pleaded – for me to go to law school.”

“Why law school?”

“Because I didn't have enough science courses for med school or dental.”

“But why was it so important to him?” wondered Max.

“That's what I asked.”

“And his answer was?”

Becker sighed. So that I'd have something to fall back on.”

“What did you say?”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

Suddenly, Max beamed. “That's it!”

“What's it?”

“Where we go with our skit, our sketch, or whatever we call it.”

“I don't follow.”

“We do it as father and son.”

“Really?” said a stunned Becker.

“Inspired by you and your father.”

The next morning, Becker couldn't wait for it to be 8:30 so that he could head out for another session with Max. But just as he was about to leave, he got a call.

“I think we need to skip today,” said Max, not sounding his usual upbeat self.

“You okay?”

“My heart's not what it used to be. Actually, neither's the rest of me. But don't worry. You're stuck with me.”

“Hope so.”

“I’ll yell when I’m up to it.”

Concerned, Becker put some water up for tea, then began pacing. How strange it was that something about which he initially felt begrudging had progressed first to being interesting, then to being a process he adored.

That owed to Max Fine, who had become a mentor, and now was about to be a surrogate father.

As he was about to head out for Uber duties, Becker got an unexpected text from an old girlfriend. *Flying into LA tomorrow*, wrote Holly. *Meet for dinner?* Becker’s reply was instantaneous: *I’ll pick you up at LAX*. Holly: *You don’t have to*. Becker: *I want to*.

“What’s different?” asked Holly when she climbed into Becker’s car at LAX and studied him.

“Different how?”

“Your cloud of gloom is gone.”

“I have a cloud of gloom?”

“Only ninety percent of the time. But now you actually look happy, and I don’t think it’s on account of me. Did you win the lottery?”

“Kind of.”

“This I want to hear,” said Holly.

After a moment’s hesitation, Holly became the first person to hear about Max Fine’s impact on both Becker’s comedy and his life.

“He sounds amazing!” gushed Holly. “Realize how lucky you are?”

“You bet.”

“I hope for your sake you win.”

“And for Max’s.”

It wasn't until three days later that the two men got together again. "You okay?" asked Becker as he approached Max's table at the deli.

"Let's talk work instead of me. Give me some Jerseyisms. You know, sayings or whatever about your home state."

"How come?"

"Specifics. If something takes place anywhere, it takes place nowhere."

"We can start," said Becker, "with *You Know You're From Jersey When* –"

"Go ahead –"

"You know you're from Jersey when you ask which exit, not where do you live."

"Keep going –"

"You don't go *To The Shore*, you go *Down The Shore* – unless you live at the Jersey Shore, in which case you go to the beach."

"Don't stop."

"You know where every place in *The Sopranos* opening credits is... You know the Statue of Liberty's really in Jersey, and you've climbed to the top... You can't understand why other states don't have 24-hour diners.... And you never in a million years say Joisey!"

"Now we're getting somewhere," announced Max.

Entering the deli the next morning, Becker was determined to thank Max for his new lease on life. But as he approached their usual table, it was empty.

Immediately Becker summoned the red-headed waitress who always took care of them. "Have you seen him?"

"Not yet," said Sonia. "But I held the table."

Becker took a seat and waited, waited, then waited some more.

Perplexed, he called Max, only to get voicemail. After leaving a message, he waved to Sonia.

“Might as well eat something.”

Between rides on his Uber duties, plus an ice cream cone with Holly, Becker made several attempts to reach Max, all to no avail.

When the same was true the next morning, he reached out to Lilly Hernandez to get other numbers for Max. “Anything wrong?” asked Lilly after giving him a number for Max's manager.

“Not that I know of.”

Becker left word for Max's manager, then heard back an hour later. “He's enjoying working with you,” said Shirley Roth,” so let's hope no news is good news. If you want, maybe try his daughter Fern. Iris lives in Brooklyn, but Fern's somewhere in the Valley.”

After taking Fern's number, Becker left word for her, then tried not to let his worries overtake him.

When a return call came in toward dusk, Becker answered on the first ring.

“Sorry I didn't get back to you sooner,” said Fern, who was sobbing.

“Is he —”

Before Becker could finish his statement, Fern interrupted. “We lost him!”

“Oh, no!” responded Becker, feeling like he'd taken a punch to the gut.

“Did you know his heart was bad?”

“I didn't know how bad.”

“He was on borrowed time,” said Fern. “Or as he put it, *My warranty has expired.*”

“Anything I can do?”

“You already did a ton. He loved working with you.”

“Not as much as I loved working with him. Will you let me know about a memorial?”

“No memorial,” said Fern. “He made my sister and me promise that, as he said again and again, *No muss, no fuss, and no memorial*. But he also made us promise that we'd listen to his favorite Gospel song.”

“*One More River To Cross*.”

“You know?”

“I'll be playing it, too.”

Though Becker couldn't bring himself to watch the premiere of “Laugh Or Die,” he was told by first by Holly, then by Fern, and even by Lilly Hernandez that the show would have significantly benefited from the team of Becker & Fine.

Nor did Becker get to see the second episode of Arnie Koppelman's opus, since bad ratings and scathing reviews led to its being canceled.

Thanks to his new, heavily autobiographical, and quintessentially Jersey character, Becker's career started improving – slowly, then exponentially.

As his dream unfolded, he never failed to honor the memory of Max Fine, or to be grateful for the friendship and guidance.

And he always got a laugh out of *chicken* rather than *pigeon*.