

# Winging It With Jonathan Winters

By MARTHA WEINMAN LEAR



**J**UST possibly, the high priests of the World's Fair Corporation made a mistake when they denied Jonathan Winters permission to film part of his television show on the fairgrounds. Mr. Winters would have been funny, and the fair could use a good laugh.

The General Motors Pavilion would have become, for example, the B. B. Bindlestiff Pavillion, owned by trillionaire B. B. Bindlestiff ("This building cost me \$10 million. When I got the bill I had that much in my pants"), who would have explained his financial wizardry thusly: "I grow money trees. I plant poor people in the ground and money comes out." And at the foot of the ICBM rocket would have stood astronaut Sterling Studwell, bound for the moon and fearing nought but his wife: "She keeps flashing those insurance premiums in my face and saying, 'When are you going? When are you going?'"

Large props, of course, have large comic possibilities. But Winters can wring laughs, great laughs, out of very small props.

On a recent television show—one of six N.B.C. specials he has been doing this season—the prop was a telephone. Four writers (on this show they prefer to call themselves "catalysts," or "triggermen") were feeding him premises, and Winters was taking off from there—"winging it," as he says, which means to improvise completely. It is the kind of performing Winters likes and does best.

"Jonathan," a writer said, "you're in your hotel room, you've just been robbed, your arms are tied behind

your back, and the telephone rings. Go."

Winters, 39, just under 6 feet tall and hefty but not fat, shrank visibly into 200 pounds of frightened flesh. He knelt clumsily. The face, normally rather like a brooding butterball, with its sturdy cheeks and narrow, heavy-lidded gaze, trembled in all its parts. The head groped toward the telephone, the teeth grasped the receiver and laid it tenderly on its side; and as the chin jutted forth to position it more compatibly, he said, with infinite courtesy, "Just a moment, please."

He is a sloppy housewife, a writer told him. It is noontime, she is hanging around the house in her bathrobe, and the telephone rings.

Winters, sloppy housewife, slouched down into a folding chair suddenly transformed into a vinyl-leather lounge, face gone slack, eyes fixed upon an imaginary television set as she spoke into the receiver, arm gathering imaginary robe (clearly flannel, faded plaid, property of her husband) about her ample frame. "Oh, I'm just sittin' here, Mabel, kickin' a head of lettuce around the floor," she said. "Guess where I've got Fred? In the refrigerator! All curled up in a little ball..." She giggled gleefully, assuming the embryonic posture. "Come on over, we'll get him out and spin him on the linoleum."

Now, then: He is a tribal chieftain. He's never even seen a telephone before. And there one is, ringing.

Winters jumped up in panic, arms raised, fingers curled outward, and did a few funny little prancing steps, rather like a Yellowstone bear. His eyes rolled heavenward in supplication. "Arumba maji Donya!" he cried, kicking the telephone. It rang. He began to circle it, hopping from foot to foot, waving unseen hatchets in

either hand, uttering war whoops and chanting magic words. "Ai-eee butcha butch," he intoned, shaking his head up and down. He circled three times, stopped, brought the hatchet down with a mighty blow. The ringing stopped abruptly. Winters flexed his muscles, flung out his arms and grinned up triumphantly at the gods. "Arumba!" he howled; and surely the gods were grinning back.

It doesn't have to be a telephone. Given any prop, however nondescript, Winters will build prime comedy material around it. Give him a stick: He is an Indian paddling down the river, he is William Tell aiming at the apple, he is a witch astride her broom and off on unspeakably evil missions. Once, as a guest on the Andy Williams Show, he was given a great mound of hats. Eyes gleaming with pleasure, he dug them out at random, clapping each on his head and tossing off suitable one-liners, boom, boom, boom. "Wasn't much fun in Andersonville, was it?" he said, regarding his Confederate Army cap with distress. And then, looking mildly astonished beneath a Hun warrior's helmet, with its two menacing antlers: "Talk about wisdom teeth!"

**T**HUS it is not necessarily curious that friends and fellow performers, struggling to describe his talents (Winters, perhaps more than any other comedian extant, is a You Had to Be There kind of performer), will do so in terms of his ability to animate Things.

"Most of us see things three-dimensionally," says Robert Morse, who stars with Winters in the forthcoming film, "The Loved One" (Winters plays The Blessed Reverend Dr. Wilbur Glenworthy, whom he describes as a dirty old man, and his brother, Harry,

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**Jonathan Winters, perhaps today's No. 1 free-winging (or improvisational) comic, demonstrates the "stupefying range of facial expressions" he can summon at the drop of a hat, wisecrack or—for that matter—cue. Clockwise from top: "Grandma Maudie Frickert"; monster; school teacher; George Washington; deer confronted by a hunter; captain of industry; Civil War soldier; airline pilot; a truck driver in "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World," and The Blessed Rev. Glenworthy in the new "The Loved One."**



whom he describes as a loser). "I think Jonny sees things 59-dimensionally. Give me a hairbrush and I see a hairbrush. Give Jonny a hairbrush and it will be a dozen funny things. He could break you up with a paper clip."

"Between takes," says Stanley Kramer, who directed Winters in "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World," "people were always saying to him, 'Jonathan, take this bush and do a thing with it.' And he would do 10 great minutes with the bush. He fights against being on, but it's hard not to. Everybody is forever coming to his altar."

Cast and crew from both films recall that, in spare moments, the action was all around Winters. On the "Mad Mad" set, with its monumental array of comic talent, this was a gorgeous testimonial to the standing Winters enjoys among his colleagues. Through his long years of semi-celebrity, when the public knew him only vaguely as that funny fellow who appeared on other people's shows, Winters has been known in the business as a comedians' comedian, cherished wherever the hippies have gathered.

He doesn't particularly like the "hip" association, preferring to feel that he has a broader base. Certainly much of his humor reflects a comfortable familiarity with grassroots country: the farmer ("The Government pays me \$25,000 just to watch the ground. Sometimes I think I would like to do some farming, just for the hell of it"); the Sally Sweetwater of Suburbia ("I can't tell you what I think of Vietnam. I only read Life magazine covers"). But his stance is sophisticated. Jackie Gleason aficionados are not necessarily on his wave

length, and vice versa. Winters in his good moments is a satirist and, in his best moments, when he takes off unhampered by scripts, a humorist.

Occasionally, and wrongly, he is called a "sick" comedian, a faint damnation none of the New Wave of comedians, with the possible exception of Shelley Berman, seems to be able to escape. To compare him with anyone else is useless. Winters does not tell jokes or take pratfalls, specialize in current events or use profanity. His humor is seldom denigrating, although, when need be, he is probably the fastest man in the business with a riposte. ("Did anyone on the 'Loved One' set ever try trading punches with him?" Robert Morse was asked recently. "Oh, ho, ho," Morse said. "Who would dare? He'd kill you.")

He never goes wildly offcolor, although among his classic characters are Maudie Frickert, an 84-year-old lady who likes the boys, and a chap he calls "The Sissy," who also likes the boys. (In a *sub rosa* recording he once made, when he and some friends were sitting around a microphone, Grandma Frickert suffers a pass at the hands of Lenny, the 22-year-old farmhand. She screeches and pleads and carries on something awful: "Lenny, what are you doing, you mad fool, you? I'm 84 years old!" But finally she submits, and murmurs at the fade-out: "Off to the village, Lenny? Well, don't be long now, will you?")

Of Grandma, Winters says: "We shelve the old people. We tell them they've got to go to Fort Lauderdale and sit in chairs. Well, maybe they don't want to sit in chairs. People don't stop being hip just because they grow older. That's what I'm trying to say with Grandma."

He may take jabs at what is false or stupid or pretentious in the world around him, but the humor in such instances is not sick; the target is. Thus, when he is doing Binky, the *hant* Hahvahd man: "Bahbara and Ol ah racing to Nassau next week. Bahbara's sailing huh yacht and Ol'm sailing moine and whoever loses has to take the children for Christmas." Or when he is the ultra-conservative, asked to sum up his philosophy: "I think every man, woman and child should carry a .45 and a prayer book." Or the ultra-liberal asked what the parade is all about: "Oh, this is just a lot of beautiful people trying to say something." Or his Typical Housewife, asked what she looks for in a Presidential candidate: "Well, a God-fearing man. Not afraid of God, but someone who knows that if he does bad, God will get him."

"In a way," he says, "I think I do in comedy what Tennessee Williams does in drama. I try to take what's out there and hold a mirror up to it, but make it bigger than life. When you deal with reality, people say you're sick."

Winters's characters are a matter of selectivity ("We all have the same camera—our eyes," he says. "And the same tape recorders—our ears. The difference is in how you edit the material, up here," pointing to the forehead), superb mimicry, and a stupefying range of facial expressions and sound effects. "Jonny is the only genius I know," Stanley Kramer said recently. ("That's frightening!" Winters said when he learned of the comment.) "He makes out of thin air the most creative portraits I've ever seen." Any straight line is enough to evoke a character, a situation or, at the very (Continued on Page 52)



# Jonathan Winters

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least, a good gag, and a favorite sport in Winters's circle is throwing him the lines.

"Well, now, Chief Sitting Bull," his friend, writer Pat McCormick, said at lunch recently, apropos of absolutely nothing, "that is a most interesting native costume you are wearing. Can you tell us the significance of those feathers on your chest?" Sitting Bull looked morosely down at his chest. "A chicken ran into me," he said.

"Mr. President," a reporter said, "tell us about your bill to beautify America."

"Ah love Amurica," he said.

"Evah since Ah was a small boy in Johnson City, Ah have wanted to beauteefy Amurica, and now Ah have the chance. We will continyuh. . . ."

"Have you a model plan, Mr. President?"

"Johnson City, that's mah model."

"You mean you will bring Johnson City to Washington?"

"Ah think it's already *there*, honey."

**O**N television, there is little room for this kind of winging. Given a competent foil such as Jack Paar, and allowed to roam freely in the

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wilderness of his fancy, Winters is in his element. Without the foil, he must be both puncher and counter-puncher, and cope as well with the traditional addenda: prop cues, lighting cues, commercial breaks, rehearsals, a song, a dance, a pretty girl. "Jonny works best out of instant panic," says one of his writers. "Scripts inhibit him. When he has to read off the TelePromp-ter he says goodnight like he has leukemia."

Winter fights the system as best he can. He will rehearse a bit of material one way, dress-rehearse it another and wind up on the final taping with a blackout—a "blowoff," he calls it—that comes as a surprise to everyone, writers included.

Thus the mood at a Winters rehearsal is festive with anticipation. At one recent rehearsal the star was sick—he had a sore throat—and making the best of poor health. He lay on a cot. "This is it," he groaned. "I'm going out now . . . wrapped in an old Army blanket. . . ."

(He had picked up the sore throat the day before, when shooting a segment of the show in the farthest reaches of Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx. It had been a wet, chilly day. Dressed as George Washington, his splendidly buckled slippers losing out to the mud, Winters stood in unhappy confrontation with the horse he was required to ride. "Noble steed," he said, but kept his distance. "You may find him a little on the pokey side," the stable attendant said. "Let's just keep him as pokey as we can," said Winters, and mounted and headed off in the wrong direction. "Whoa, boy. Whoa, boy," he snapped sternly, but it was a while before the horse obeyed and by then the sore throat had taken insidious root.)

The dress rehearsal began. Winters was to portray a dinner-party host wielding an electric knife. Suddenly, in a totally unrehearsed bit, he accidentally cut off a guest's hand, apologized sweetly, and passed a portion to another guest, commenting, "Oh, aren't you the lucky one. You got the part with the ring." (The incident was dropped in the editing as being a mite too rough for a mass audience.)

Portraying a Senator visiting a jet-testing ground, Winters rehearsed him as a tough bull of a V.I.P., clamping down on his cigar and snarling to the test pilot, "This thing better work, buddy." But for the air tape, a scant hour later, the Senator had metamorphosed into a wee rabbit of a man who tapped his fingers together, Hugh Herbert-style, and murmured anxiously, "Oh, I do hope it works. I'd like to go back to Congress with more than some 8x10 glossies."

"He will rarely repeat some-

thing he has just done because the orchestra has seen it and he wants to show them he can do something new," says Perry Cross, producer of the Winters show. "He's always got to top himself."

**B**ETWEEN takes, while the camera crew figured its angles, Winters sat alone in a corner, holding a hand microphone and making noises. He was an airplane, he was a heartfelt kiss, he was 76 trombones. When the crew laughed he would look up from under the heavy



**ON SET**—A businesslike Winters listens to director Tony Richardson while making "The Loved One."

lids, scowling slightly, like a bored and somewhat myopic bulldog. Then the scowl would break into a Grandma Frickert giggle and he would sink down into a paroxysm of mock humility.

Winters was simply, in low-key style, amusing himself and everyone else. He works with confidence now, and discipline, saving himself for the camera. But friends remember the days when any audience of one was enough to put him into high gear. "Nowadays, when the performers break for lunch, Jonny goes to lunch," one says. "Before, he'd stay in the studio to do 30 minutes for the crew."

"If he went into a store to buy a pair of shoes, he'd be on for the customers. If we got on an elevator with one other passenger aboard, immediately he'd be a surgeon who just operated on some big businessman on the 14th floor—right at the fellow's desk. He was on 24 hours a day."

Winters himself recalls that during high-school days in Springfield, Ohio, being "on" was a matter of social survival. "I was the class clown," he says. "Other guys had more

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security, steady dates and all that. . . . I didn't. The only thing that kept me together was my comedy. We'd all go to a tavern called O'Brien's and I would do impressions of the Indianapolis Speedway. I had quite a following."

His professional sights, however, were on commercial art and cartooning, for which he still has a fine flair. He entered Dayton Art Institute, married, settled down to earn bread and amuse the neighbors, and didn't think of amusing anyone professionally until he entered, and won, a local talent contest. Adieu, commercial art.

In 1953, after a successful local stint as a disk jockey, Winters brought his Indianapolis Speedway to New York, got some minor television parts ("I was Santa Claus on C.B.S. Six ho-ho-ho's") and moved on to the better supper clubs, notably the old Blue Angel and Ruban Bleu. He and they were made for each other, and network people began taking notice. At one point, in the mid-nineteen-fifties, he was almost fully employed as a guest star, making appearances with Jack Paar on a C.B.S. morning show, Garry Moore in the afternoon and Steve Allen at night. But, except for a 15-minute program in 1957, he had no show of his own. He was the darling of the cool people; the question was, where to go from there?

Winters went on the road doing one-man concerts, at which he excels, and nightclub dates, which he detested.

"It was just no fun," he says. "The sweaty little dressing rooms with the sweaty jugglers' costumes. And all the lonely hotel rooms, and getting up to go see a movie alone or sit in a bar alone and listen to the pianist, and then back to do another show.

"And the hecklers! Throwing thousands of little ice picks at you, picking your eyes out. It became a fight to exist." (He fights well. "Oh, you're Jonathan Winters. Be funny," some wit told him recently. "I would," said Winters, "if I thought you'd get it.")

"And I got sick of fighting. Sometimes I felt it was like medieval times. I'm standing up there and they're sitting in ermine and tiaras—'Appear, fool. Throw him melons, throw him pennies. Own him for 45 minutes.' I remember one night in Houston, some guy started in on me—'You're a Northern boy, ain'tcha?'—and we went on from there, and suddenly I thought, 'Who needs this?' And that was my last club date."

There followed a relatively inactive period of hard self-examination and long ponderings upon his past and future. Then came a period weighty with guest appearances, which led to his casting in "Mad, Mad World." ("Films, I love them! That's the medium for me.") He has a role coming

up this summer in the movie to be made from Arthur Kopit's "Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad." Winters will play Dad—but not the stuffed-corpse character who appeared in the stage version. He will be "live"—for eight minutes—on screen.

**L**AST year Winters moved to the West Coast with his wife and two children—Jay, 15, and Lucinda, 8. Knowing he is funny ("He's a genius in his field," says his wife, Eileen, warmly echoing Kramer, "and the great thing is he doesn't know it"), the family lets him play it straight. He fishes, he putters, he lies around the pool. His social activities are limited, primarily because in social situations he is forever being pushed to perform. "A woman invites you to a party," he says, "and pretty soon she's sidling over and saying, 'Jonathan, would you do one teeny bit? Our guests would just adore it.' The minute I sense I'm being used, I cut."

His big guns are directed at those he calls "the rude people, the bores and the left-handed hand-shakers. Those phony hippies who call each other 'baby' . . ." (When he sees the latter type approach, Winters goes into *sotto voce* action. "Ah," he mutters, "here come the cadets in mohair suits. Hello, sweetheart; hello, baby; go kill yourself.")

"I'm not an angry young man," he says. "I'm for a little love and understanding. And the left-handed hand-shakers don't have it.

"Years ago I made my wife, Eileen, promise that she would never shake with her left hand. One night we were at a Hollywood party and there was this big star holding court. To the important people, she said, 'Hello, darling.' To the little guys, she said, 'What did you say your name was?' I sat there watching her quietly . . ." ("Jonny always watches quietly," Robert Morse says. "He sits there thinking of chocolate sauce and pussy willows and taking in everybody's foibles.")

"And then someone brought Eileen over to her. Sure enough, the star holds out her left hand and says, 'What did you say your name was?' Eileen threw me a look and I threw one back that said, 'Stick to your guns, baby,' and she kept both hands down.

"Then I walked over and said, 'Madam, I have been observing you. You have a peculiar habit. When you are introduced to a Somebody you shake with your right hand. When you are introduced to a Nobody you shake with your left hand. Can you tell me why this is so?' She said, 'You can't talk to me that way. Who do you think I am?' I said, 'I will tell you, Madam. I think you are a phony.' And we cut."