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BROCK'S BANTER: Comedy & Tragedy

By Brock Weir

Right at the outset of this week's column I would like to thank Angela Gismondi for putting last week's edition of The Auroran together in my absence. It was nice to have a week off to re-charge before the busy election season ahead!

Although it started a week later than it has in years past, I was off once again to Jamestown, New York, a smaller-scale city in upstate New York, near the Pennsylvania border, for the Lucille Ball Comedy Festival. The annual trek to Jamestown, the birthplace of Ball herself, has become something of an annual family tradition for these local Lucy fans and it is fascinating to see how the festival has evolved over the years.

What started out as a festival for ?new comedy?, eventually morphed into a series of festivals honouring Lucille Ball, Desi Arnaz, their co-stars,

co-workers, and their respective television series.

It was a Lucy fan's dream to have the chance to meet and learn from some of the people who made their own indelible marks on this particular niche of the entertainment industry, but the years have necessitated a shift back to its original focus.

Those who had been involved with I Love Lucy from the start, and even those with even the most tangential relationship with Ball and/or Arnaz, have become endangered species with the passage of time, so organizers of the Festival have gone back to their roots with a returned focus to comedy, with a few dashes of ?Lucy? thrown in for good measure.

Although it started on Wednesday, August 6, this year's festival went into full swing the following day with a Stand-Up Comedy Showcase hosted by Canada's own Caroline Rhea. As someone unfamiliar with her comedy work outside of ?Hollywood Squares? and Saturday morning reruns of ?Sabrina the Teenage Witch? growing up, I was pleasantly surprised how hilarious this woman is as she hosted up-and-coming comedians Carmen Lynch, Moody McCarthy, and Andrew Norelli who each brought their unique perspectives of the world to the stage.

Comedy continued the following evening with stand-up performances from Tom Cotter, who almost took the crown on America's Got Talent, with his wife, comedienne Kerri Louise as his equally funny warm-up act.

Comedy continued throughout the weekend in various locations and it culminated with a headliner appearance from Jay Leno on the Saturday evening, which was opened by a wonderful ? but all too brief ? concert from Lucie Arnaz.

Jay Leno was? well, he was Jay Leno.

Okay, in the interests of full disclosure, I am dyed-in-the-wool Team Coco, but I did go into the evening with an open mind. After all, if you expect the worst you're always bound to be pleasantly surprised, right? Well, I'm here to report that old adages are not necessarily true.

Many people love Jay Leno and I can see why. Comedy ? and what people find funny ? is a very broad spectrum. Some like their comedy pre-digested, some like their comedians to lend a voice to what they're thinking, or wish they thought of themselves. That's Jay Leno to me.

Many friends who were also in attendance over the weekend, however, want their comedy to be fresh and topical. (Yes, before I go on, I am fully aware of the irony in looking for fresh and topical comedy at a festival founded to honour a woman who would have been 103 this month and a show which made its TV debut 63 years ago this fall.) So, with that in mind, we took bets as to how many fresh and topical Monica Lewinsky jokes would be part of his act.

After putting my money on three, I am also here to report my wallet is lighter. There was not a Monica Lewinsky joke to be found in the hour-and-a-half he was on stage, but there were jokes aplenty about the wonderful world of transfats (?That's fat that's liposuctioned from?? well, in the best interests of this newspaper, I won't finish the punchline), Lynndie England and Abu Ghraib prison and, my personal favourite, ?Remember when Bjork wore that swan dress to the Oscars a couple of years ago?? (For those keeping score, ?a couple of years ago? was 2001.)

The important thing is many people were thoroughly enjoying themselves, it was a sold-out crowd, and a sure indication the Lucille Ball Comedy Festival will carry on the comedic legacies of the First Lady of Comedy and everyone in her orbit for years to come.

Another indication of the interesting things to come? The creation of a National Comedy Hall of Fame in Jamestown, NY, similar to the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, NY, founded in honour of Ball and Arnaz, with their daughter presiding over the soil turning ceremony of Phase 1 a few hours before the show.

MEANWHILE, OVER IN CALIFORNIA?

Hindsight is a very interesting thing.

After the festival wrapped and the thousands of people from 38 U.S. states, Canada and Australia began their journeys home or settled back into their ?real lives? once again for the workweek ahead, news broke on the tragic and untimely suicide of Robin Williams.

It is difficult to consider that as so many of us spent that particular weekend in a comedic paradise, burning more than a few calories with more belly laughs than is practical to count and, for some of us, walking away with a few well-earned laugh lines, that one of the world's brightest comedy lights was considering and preparing to, to borrow a phrase from I Love Lucy, ?dim his bulb.?

In almost every avenue over the past week, pundits have reiterated the principle that comics are often tortured souls who find a particular outlet in making people laugh. I suppose it is true, as Lucille Ball herself came from a background of tragedy and struggle, but Williams' death has underscored the point.

Whether you thrived off the manic energy Robin Williams brought to stage, screen or television in Mork & Mindy or Good Morning Vietnam, preferred some of his more dramatic, lower-key work like in Good Will Hunting or The Face of Love, which unspooled at the Toronto International Film Festival nearly a year ago, he offered something for everyone.

For those of my generation, he was an indelible part of our lives, whether we came to know him from his brilliant voice work in Aladdin, from his fresh interpretation on a classic story in Hook (I still have all the Hook trading cards collected religiously when I was six), through being thoroughly disturbed watching One Hour Photo expecting a comedy, or by driving everyone within a certain radius crazy quoting from Mrs. Doubtfire.

His was a light that will certainly be missed, but as I look back over the last weekend, I wonder what drove everyone taking the stage over the Festival into the warm embrace of comedy and its audience. Do they just want to make people laugh, or are they looking for a comfortable outlet for what is bothering them? Do they have so many keen observations bubbling over that they need to express them to a collective, or are they looking for an escape?

Whatever the reason, they make a lot of people happy, and if anything good can come from this tragedy it is that everyone takes a good look inside themselves and, if needed, seeks help for whatever might be weighing them down. As strong, solid, and permanent his legacy to comedy might be, this might, at the end of the day, be his greater contribution to the world.