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American Masters —Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work

In Memoriam Tribute Broadcast

Tuesday, September 23, 10:30 p.m. – 12 midnight on PBS

(check local listings)

Press Notes

(courtesy of distributor IFC Films, 2010)

LONG SYNOPSIS

"I AM a performer. When I am on stage, it is the only time I am truly happy."

— Joan Rivers

JOAN RIVERS - A PIECE OF WORK exposes the private dramas of irreverent, legendary comedian and pop icon Joan Rivers as she fights tooth and nail to keep her American dream alive. A unique look inside America's obsession with fame and celebrity - Joan's story is both an outrageously funny journey and a brutally honest look at the ruthless entertainment industry, the trappings of success and the ultimate vulnerability of the first queen of comedy.

With unprecedented, unguarded access, the film captures intimate scenes shot in Joan's 76th year -- Joan at home, during holidays, performing stand up and acting in a play she wrote, gossiping with her QVC fans, writing jokes and managing her career -- interweaving them with home movies, stand up routines, book recordings, personal photographs and archival footage to create a

lush visual landscape and cinematic backdrop for the narrative as it unfolds. Filmed as a cinema verite documentary, the film reveals a rare glimpse of the comedic process and the toxic mixture of self-doubt and anger that often fuels it.

Joan's is the quintessential story of survival and of determination – a child of Russian immigrants - she is the female pioneer who cut paths and broke boundaries in the otherwise all-male world of comedy, opening the door for other women comedians to follow. Joan is the only woman to have ever held the position of host on a network late-night talk show. Her career has had dramatic highs and lows -- a Tony nomination, an Emmy awarding winning talk show, a husband who committed suicide, a fraudulent business partner and a booming entrepreneurial business – forcing her to constantly reinvent herself. And while she achieved celebrity heights on the Johnny Carson show and in the Vegas comedy world, she remained the anti-celebrity celebrity, always considering herself an outsider.

Joan starts her 76th year launching a play in London about her comedic rise to stardom with the hope of garnering legitimate respect for her life's work only to return to America with financial concerns. Hustling to find work, Joan stars in two television pilots, promotes her two books, performs stand-up around the country and participates in an NBC primetime show called CELEBRITY APPRENTICE. As an aging performer, Joan is nothing without her stage and her audience. Joan fights to remain in the public eye by pushing herself working 18-hour days, 7 days a week. Her career is her drug and without it she may as well be dead. By the end of the year Joan has reinvented herself. The consummate performer, Joan has already taken precautions in her Will so that she will not be resuscitated if she cannot perform a 60-minute comedy set.

Joan Rivers has become an icon of her time; someone who will stop at nothing to remain in front of an audience; brash at times and always brutally honest, she engenders strong feelings. An inspiration to some, a plastic surgery joke to others, Joan Rivers' controversial personas are what continue to fascinate the public and draw audiences to her. The film provides a rare look at Joan Rivers, an iconic performer, stripped of her comedy masks and laying bare the truth of her life and inspiration.

DIRECTOR'S Q&A

RICKI STERN & ANNIE SUNDBERG

Q: What was the genesis of the film; and what made you interested in working with Joan?

I (Ricki) first met Joan Rivers through family. I knew very little about Joan's history in the comedy world; but I knew she was considered the grand dame of comedy. We had recently finished several documentaries that addressed subjects like genocide and injustice, so the idea of

doing a film about a comedian was appealing to all of us at Break Thru Films. Once we spent time with Joan, it was clear that her personal story as a breakthrough female performer and her life's course of struggle and reinvention were universal stories; her story would ultimately emerge as the quintessential tale of an aging performer determined to succeed and remain in the spotlight.

After two brief meetings, I asked Joan if she would like to be featured in a documentary that would illustrate her life-long work while also capturing the obsessive drive of her every day struggle to keep performing. She said "Yes" with no hesitation. However, I was a bit wary. We warned her, "Joan we will be there on Saturday morning as you roll out of bed with no make up." She responded, "I have lived my life in front of the cameras, I know how this goes." Even after she reassured us, I was still concerned that she would hold back her acerbic humor, close doors at meetings, limit time with us. Remarkably, in the course of filming her over the following fourteen months, Joan never gave us reason for concern again. Joan allowed us unedited insight into her life and unconditional access to meetings, rehearsals, hiring and firings, dress fittings, birthdays, dog training and holidays. The only place we were not allowed was Prince Charles' birthday (but honestly that was more a function of Buckingham palace security than anything else).

Q: Over what course of time did you begin and finish shooting?

We filmed Joan over a 14 month period, beginning on her 75th birthday and finishing this past summer 2009. At our first sit down interview with Joan, her assistant Jocelyn checked the lighting to make sure there were no unflattering shadows on Joan, but after that day, they never checked the lighting again. Our trust in each other was sealed that day. Frankly there was so much running and fast shooting with Joan (in cars, airports, airplanes, bathrooms, backstage dressing rooms) we rarely set lighting and relied on an LCD light panel for a lot of our shooting. We showed up in the early hours, threw a microphone on Joan and simply followed her on a year-long quest to reinvent herself.

Our very first day filming, Joan's dog had been put to sleep the night before and she met us at the door in tears. She wanted a new dog that day. So we all walked down to the nearest pet store and Joan got her new dog Sammy. Just walking from Joan's apartment to the pet store and back provided enough funny and intimate moments that we were hooked. After one day of shooting, we knew Joan would be a complex, controversial subject who would take us on a rollercoaster ride for the following year.

Q: Was there anything different in how the both of you approached this documentary as opposed to your previous works together?

People have wondered during the year at our decision to make this film. The film is a departure from our most recent documentaries like *THE TRIALS OF DARRYL HUNT* and *THE DEVIL CAME ON HORSEBACK* or even the one we are doing now for HBO called *BURMA SOLDIER*, but these films all have one thing in common - they have strong character based narratives. We don't set out with a goal to tackle social issues like criminal injustice and human rights violations. We are first drawn to and motivated by interesting people who have powerful, compelling stories, like Darryl Hunt, who served 20 years for a murder/ rape he did not commit, and Brian Steidle, a former Marine who bore witness to genocide in Darfur. Not surprisingly, Joan Rivers is a fascinating person with a strong point of view and a misunderstood story that has never fully been told. And thank god she's funny.

We have a fairly organic way of working together. We will sometimes go on shoots together but we often split up and reconvene in the edit room. We discuss style, tone, music and story as we go. For this film, we deliberately kept the crew size down to 2-3 people so we could be inconspicuous in most settings and keep Joan at ease; therefore, our shooting team mostly consisted of Ricki, Charles Miller (DP) and Seth Keal (sound & producer).

Q: What were your biggest challenges during filming?

One of the challenges we faced - in making a film about a pop culture icon and a controversial legendary person - was confronting people's preconceived idea of Joan Rivers. Joan Rivers' persona has been exploited widely and she can be a polarizing figure, so our task was to peel away layers and expose the self-driven, work obsessed, perfectionist and inspiration in a way that would surprise audiences. We devoted a lot of time to shooting Joan as she traveled throughout the US and UK in order to capture her unguarded moments and to build a structure that communicated deeper meaning in what might otherwise be presented as a reality television glimpse of a celebrity. While much of Joan's work this year could be taken at face value as entertainment, scenes were constructed to tell Joan's greater, more universal story -- that of an aging performer in a business and culture driven by beauty and youth.

The other challenge with filming Joan Rivers over a year was in choosing which new adventures would be important to the narrative, and then physically shooting her marathon days. We were never certain which possible job offer might lead to a transformative event and define the film's narrative arc. We adapted the thinking of new parents who missed their baby's first steps; if we were not there to see it happen, it did not happen, and we had to let it go. When Joan was scheduled for 24 hours in a Northern Wisconsin casino, we looked at it as a small gig in the dead of winter in a remote town that required three flights just to get there. At the last minute we decided to send Charles Miller (DP) to cover the trip with Joan; we figured it wasn't a big show and probably not important but you never know... and then, the raw and unexpected footage of an audience member heckling Joan turned out to be an integral moment in the final film.

Joan's sheer workload was an additional challenge. The following is a typical two-day shoot with Joan: Fly at night with Joan to Palm Beach, meet her the next morning in her hotel room at 6:00AM for hair/ make up, followed by 7:00AM local interviews and then a breakfast lecture and book signing. Next, pile into an SUV with Joan and her assistant Jocelyn and drive 4 hours to Key West for another 2-hour book signing. With 15 minutes to spare, drive past Hemingway's house, spend some time looking for the best gay scene in town and then land at a theater where Joan warms up the band, changes clothing and does an hour stand up set. Then, drive to Miami and arrive at an airport hotel at 2 AM. Four hours later, fly off to LA where Joan is booked at 1:00pm on a talk show. After the show, take the red eye with Joan back to NYC, landing Sunday morning where she drives to her country home to entertain friends for the night.

It's hard to believe she's 76.

Joan definitely tired of us at times, questioning the film's interest and narrative. "Is there even a movie here?" She joked to Howard Stern that if she died during the course of the filming, we'd have a great movie – that became the running joke. I believe Joan quietly wondered, and feared, how her life caught on film would look cut into a documentary. Would her every day life be interesting? Would her comedy translate to film? Who would really care?

Q: What do you think people will learn about Joan that they weren't aware of before the film?

When I first showed Joan the fine cut, just the two of us in her apartment with grilled American cheeses set before us- she was fairly quiet throughout the viewing. She'd occasionally jot down a note and chuckle at an old joke but her feedback was very minimal. Of course the scenes we worried about the most – when Joan was the most vulnerable and bare – were not a concern for her. All her comments were directed at how other people might feel – she didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings. The worst part for me was when the DVD kept skipping and going back to the head of the film which opens with extreme close ups of her face – she merely comforted herself under her breath saying "it's a documentary; it has to look like that." But after a week of calm, Joan's worry resurfaced and she sent long, general notes and short terse requests. She wrote everything from "it's wonderful" to "it's so negative." This is the perfectionist side of Joan; the side that keeps her up all night preparing and rehearsing, writing and rewriting; the side we strove to illustrate in the film and the side that occasionally drove us crazy.

Q: What do you want people to take away from this film? What makes this film important?

Joan Rivers is funny, edgy and relevant. She's a captivating and bold female performer, writer,

icon, and businesswoman. She has the bravery to tackle issues in her comedy that has left her excluded from the boys' clubs and removed from lists of more "appropriate" lady comediennes. Her comedy dissects the truth, and she embraces humor to ease the pain of tragedy. She has personally confronted suicide, business failure and biting criticism, and in the face of it all she perseveres.

Ultimately Joan engenders strong feelings in people...they love her, they hate her...and because many people have some prior exposure to Joan, the film works to strip away those surface associations to reveal a private and surprising portrait of this very public persona.

While the film pays tribute to the reigning queen of comedy - who broke boundaries and paved way for other female comedians from Kathy Griffin to Sarah Silverman - Joan's story is universal as it speaks to aging in a culture obsessed with youth, and exposes the fleeting nature of fame by looking closely and unforgettably at the exception to the rule.

CREW BIOGRAPHIES

RICKI STERN and ANNIE SUNDBERG - DIRECTORS AND PRODUCERS

Ricki Stern and Annie Sundberg, Emmy nominated for their work as co-directors and co-producers of films including: THE DEVIL CAME ON HORSEBACK (2007 Sundance Film Festival and Gotham Award and multiple Emmy nominee), *"Brutal, urgent, devastating — the documentary The Devil Came On Horseback demands to be seen as soon as possible and by as many viewers as possible,"* Manohla Dargis (The New York Times). Theatrically released by International Film Circuit, with US broadcast premiere on the National Geographic Channel (2008), the film has won many awards, including Best International Film at Brit Docs, Amnesty International UK Media Award for Best Documentary, and the Index on Censorship prize for Best Documentary (UK). Stern and Sundberg have been recognized with the Best Female Filmmakers Award- San Diego Film Festival; the Adrienne Shelly Excellence in Filmmaking Award; and the Lena Sharpe/Women in Cinema Persistence of Vision Award – Seattle International Film Festival.

Stern and Sundberg co-directed and co-produced the Emmy nominated documentary THE TRIALS OF DARRYL HUNT (2006 Sundance Film Festival) for which they are recipients of the Dupont-Columbia Award for Excellence in Journalism. THE TRIALS OF DARRYL HUNT was short-listed for the 2007 Academy Awards for Best Documentary Feature, and was a 2007 Independent Spirit Award nominee for Best Documentary. The film won awards at more than thirty festivals, and premiered on HBO in spring 2007, with theatrical release (ThinkFilm) in summer 2007.

They are currently in post on BURMA SOLDIER for HBO, about a former junta member who risks everything to become a pro democracy activist.

In 2009, Annie and Ricki received a Sundance Institute / Skoll Foundation “Stories of Change” production grant to support a new film about the innovative program YouthBuild – following the lives of young people selected for a high stakes community rebuilding project in North Philadelphia, one of the toughest communities in America.

Stern and Sundberg co-directed and co-produced THE END OF AMERICA (2008) made in collaboration with best-selling author Naomi Wolf (The Beauty Myth); the film makes a chilling case for constitutional protections as it puts the recent gradual loss of civil liberties in the US in a historical context. The film premiered at The 2008 Hamptons Film Festival.

In addition to their work in film, Ricki and Annie are creating projects for television, including an upcoming series inspired by Kenneth Cole’s AWEARNESS project, currently in development with the Sundance Channel.

Ricki Stern is a director, producer and writer. Stern is the director and co-producer of the award winning IN MY CORNER, a documentary film on the world of amateur boxing and the lives of the young men who train in the South Bronx. The film was nationally broadcast as part of PBS’ award winning documentary series P.O.V. (Point of View). She directed and produced the Emmy nominated NEGLECT NOT THE CHILDREN, a documentary about a Harlem based youth program. NEGLECT NOT THE CHILDREN was hosted by Morgan Freeman and nationally aired on PBS. Ricki’s producing credits include the HBO series on forensic science AUTOPSY I, II, III,” and MURDER 9 to 5 on workplace violence. Stern is the author of a children’s book series “Beryl Bean: Mighty Adventurer of the Planet” published by HarperCollins. She founded Break Thru Films, inc. in 1990.

Annie Sundberg is a director, producer and writer. Sundberg produced the independent feature film TULLY, nominated for four 2003 IFP Spirit Awards (Best Film, Best Screenplay, Best Debut Performance, Best Supporting Actor). TULLY screened at Toronto and London Film Festivals, and received Best Film at eleven festivals, including the Los Angeles Film Festival. She was a supervising producer and director on the HBO series BRAVE NEW VOICES (2009). Additional television directing credits include TRAILER FABULOUS for MTV. Prior to that, she directed the pilot for the series BEHIND THE BASH WITH GIADA DELAURENTIS (Food Network). Sundberg was Series Producer on FAMILY PLOTS (A&E) following a family run funeral parlor in San Diego. Additional producing credits include a four part series on the Mayo Clinic for Discovery Health (2004) and the 1996 Academy Award and Emmy winning ONE SURVIOR REMEMBERS, a co-production of HBO and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. She was co-producer of IN MY CORNER, a feature documentary film on the world of amateur boxing and the lives of young men who train in the South Bronx, which premiered nationally as part of PBS’ award winning P.O.V. series (1999).

SETH KEAL - PRODUCER

Seth Keal has various experiences in the world of filmmaking. He has had many roles in the

filmmaking process including producer, editor, camera operator, sound recordist and post production supervisor. Keal has worked with the award winning company Break Thru Films for over three years. JOAN RIVERS: A PIECE OF WORK, an official selection at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival, is his first feature film credit as a producer. He is currently working on a television pilot.

CHARLES MILLER - CINEMATOGRAPHER

Charles Miller is a Director of Photography who works in both motion and still mediums. Miller has done work domestically and internationally for commercial clients such as BMW, Google, Target, BBC, and MTV. Miller has also worked with various NGOs whose subjects vary from Hurricane Katrina to the victims of the civil war in Uganda. His latest work, JOAN RIVERS - A PIECE OF WORK is an official selection at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival. This is his first feature film.

PENEOPE FALK - EDITOR

After receiving an MFA in Film Production from the University of Texas at Austin, Falk moved to New York to work as a documentary editor. Her credits include A LETTER WITHOUT WORDS (Sundance Film Festival), BOMBAY ENUCH (winner of the New York Gay and Lesbian Film Festival), STAGEDOOR (debuted at the New York Film Forum), TOOTS SHOR: BIGGER THAN LIFE (Tribeca Film Festival), ELECTION DAY (SXSW Film Festival) and SMILE TILL IT HURTS (Slamdance). Falk has also done numerous films for television. These credits include AFGHAN STORIES (the Sundance Channel), UNCLE SAM WANTS YOU (A&E), ESCUELA (PBS) and UNFINISHED COUNTRY (PBS).

PAUL BRILL - MUSIC

Paul Brill's compositions can be found in numerous award-winning films, TV series and commercials; an NPR program theme, and several acclaimed CDs of original and innovative songwriting that show youthful adventures as an herbal smokes salesman, street performer, valet, corporate errand boy, and a marine biology instructor can serve the creative spirit well.

Brill's original score for the film, THE DEVIL CAME ON HORSEBACK, was recently nominated for an Emmy Award; his score for the celebrated HBO film, THE TRIALS OF DARRYL HUNT, was also nominated for an Emmy Award and was hailed by Variety as "memorably chilling, sounding notes of purest dread." Young American Recordings recently released the Hunt soundtrack, curated by Brill, featuring selections from his score and contributions by Andrew Bird, M. Ward, Dead Prez and Mark Kozelek among many others.

Brill recently scored the much-heralded HBO special, RIGHT AMERICA: FEELING WRONGED, and is currently at work on the film adaptation of the best-selling book, Freakonomics.

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