

# Shelley Berman Laughs Last

Forty years after his fall from grace,  
the legendary comedian's phone is ringing again

**S**HELLEY BERMAN DRIVES the same way he does standup: confidently but with a maniacal edge that makes you feel at once safe and terrified. Careering uphill toward his L.A. home in his bulky silver Toyota 4Runner, the 79-year-old comedian is talking about Larry David, the co-creator of *Seinfeld* and the co-reviver—with Berman himself—of Berman's TV career. David plays Berman's son on *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, an unscripted HBO sitcom that just began its fifth season.

"Working with Larry is always a kick," says Berman in his crisp, deep professor's voice as mountain scrub zips past his window just a bit too fast. "While you're improvising, you may come up with something which

will break him up. As soon as that smile comes out, you know that, hey, we're having fun."

The show revolves around David, a notorious perfectionist and a proud neurotic. These qualities made Berman a natural to play his father, because neurosis made Berman a huge star once, and neurosis all but took that away. After one public misstep 40 years ago—a private tantrum aired on national TV—Berman became a pariah. Now, after years spent in a wilderness of *Love, American Style* and regional theater, Berman's star is on the rise again with a role in the cult hit *Curb*, headline comedy gigs in Las Vegas, and cameos in films such as *Meet the Fockers* and *The Aristocrats*. This time, he says, he's enjoying the ride. >>

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the last few tear-jerking moments of a sketch about his own father. Berman finessed the distraction, but when he got backstage, he freaked. "Take those phones off the hook when I'm working," he shouted, throwing his freshly lit cigarette down. "I'll pull the damn phones out of the wall!" He dashed the phone's receiver to the floor with a *clunk*. Then he put on his suit coat and leaned face-first into a corner, arm overhead and head down.

When *Comedian Backstage* aired in March 1963, this outburst was its centerpiece. Berman and his managers had seen the film ahead of time, and no one objected to it. "I said to somebody, 'Can this hurt me?' and they said, 'How can it hurt you? And believe me, they won't forget who you are.'"

The last part, at least, was true. Within days after the show aired, Berman had become the era's Janet Jackson—overexposed and drowning in torrents of hysterical criticism. "It was the first time that reality programming poked its head out of the rock," recalls Mary Tyler Moore, an admirer who later had Berman as a guest on her 1970s sitcom.

"It was an enormous brouhaha over something that I think, in today's world, would have not even been newsworthy," says actor Martin Landau, a friend from the days when he and Berman were both struggling young performers in New York City. "In fact, it would probably be considered quite human today—the fact that he cared so much."

But this was 1963. Celebrities were not supposed to be human. Suddenly job offers were fewer and the pay was lower. "Soon we were not doing too well," Berman says. In order to avoid being seen as a monster, he had to back off of his obsession with the technical details of his act. "Everything became amplified," he recalls. "When I asked for a light, it was a demand. When I demanded a light, it was a f---ing fit." Berman's performances suffered as a result, fueling his descent. Before long, he was working mainly in regional theater—when he worked at all.

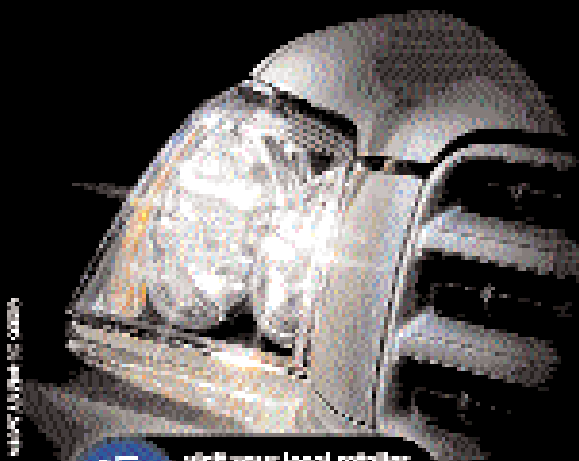
Life, of course, went on. In 1964 the Bermans moved to Beverly Hills, into

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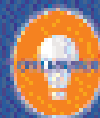
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## DroppingBy

a villa once owned by ventriloquist Edgar Bergen. They adopted two infants—Josh in 1965 and Rachel in 1967. A doting father, Berman felt an almost mystical bond with his son. “I would sit with Josh sometimes when he was very, very little,” Berman recalls. “All of a sudden we’d connect, and no words were said. We’d sit there staring at each other until the tears came running down our faces. He was somebody who kept saying ‘I love you,’ but he was somebody who never needed to say it.”

The fallen comedian scraped for TV guest spots, wrote books and plays, and directed a film, *Keep Off! Keep Off!* starring Mickey Dolenz of the Monkees. But the superstardom that had once seemed likely never materialized.

Jewish father that his daughter will someday marry a Southern Baptist?”

\* \* \*

If Berman sowed the seeds of his own professional destruction, he also sowed the seeds of his own resurrection. Bookers and producers don’t live forever, after all, and in time the ones who had shut down Berman’s career eventually stopped making all the decisions in Hollywood. In their place came a new generation—a generation that had worn out Berman’s records on their family room turntables. He began getting more TV work—a recurring role on *L.A. Law*, two episodes of *Friends*.

And then in 2002 he landed a role as the very nearsighted, very bald father on *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. (Berman

**“He has aged well,” says Martin Landau. “If you don’t learn along the way, your life hasn’t added up properly.”**

“He is a guy of great talent, both comedic and dramatic,” says actor Tom Bosley, who belonged to a winter stock company with Berman in the 1940s. “He deserved better than he got.”

Then in 1975 the family got news that dwarfed Berman’s professional struggles: Josh was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Within 18 months, at age 12, he was gone. “I had him studying for his bar mitzvah until he couldn’t stand it anymore, because I wanted him to live to the very last minute,” Berman recalls. According to Gerald Nachman’s book *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (Pantheon, 2003), Berman gave an interview a month after Josh’s death. “I’ve been taught a profound lesson,” he said then. “The future is a breaker of promises.”

Today Rachel lives in North Carolina and has two sons. One is named after her brother.

“Young Joshua is over 13, and he’s into manhood right now, young manhood,” says the proud grandpa. The boy was not bar mitzvahed—nor is it likely, Berman says with a laugh: “He’s a dyed-in-the-wool Baptist. Haven’t I told you that it is the dream of every

has worn a hairpiece since his 20s—even, he says, to take out the garbage.) Much early Shelley Berman is present in the character—the exaggerated oddness of everyday life, the nerves on edge, the sentimental undertone. But there’s modern-day Berman there too. One of Nat David’s most appealing traits—and one of the offscreen Shelley Berman’s—is a perfectly delighted, silent laugh that is too pure and happy to have fit into his 1950s act: it’s an almost shocked, wide-open grin, like a dolphin’s.

“He has not lost a step,” says comedian Richard Lewis, who plays a version of himself on the show. “You close your eyes and he’s doing improv with Nichols and May in the ’50s. It’s astonishing.” Having idolized Berman since his childhood, Lewis says he is awed to call him a friend. “He’s the sweetest, most brilliant guy in my field that I have ever known,” Lewis says. “I just adore him. And that’s an understatement.”

Berman has clearly mellowed since his early days. The people who work with him now call him a sweetheart, a doll. “I think like good wine he has aged well,” says Landau. “He’s still a hell of a performer, but if (continued on page 117)

## Shelley Berman

(continued from page 32)

you don't learn along the way, your life hasn't really added up properly."

And yet some traits endure. "He's unbelievably neurotic," says Jeff Garlin, who coproduces the show and plays David's agent. "He needs to be told all the time how good he is, and it's easy to do because he's terrific."

\* \* \*

It's June 2004. Berman takes the stage at the annual Los Angeles Improv Festival. He perches on a barstool, his one trademark prop, and asks the audience for words to riff on. Dialing an imaginary rotary phone—"Incidentally, this pantomime should give you an idea of just how old I really am," he jokes—Berman concocts a conversation with a woman who has advertised a lost balloon that Berman has found. The monologue is absurdly funny at the outset, but it grows sweeter when Berman asks to speak to the woman's son, whose balloon it is.

"These things leak, you know," he tells the imaginary boy. "I don't want you to come here and be disappointed." Even if something lost can be restored, he instructs, it may not be the same.

Then, it seems, Berman's mind turns to what has been lost that cannot be restored. "Are you crying?" he asks the boy tenderly.

Lately the once-difficult comic has taken to writing poetry. One of his recent poems is called "Curb." Scattered with jokes about life on the set—"We are the breath mint addicted, / worshipful druids of chlorophyll"—it also lauds the craft of improv comedy and its basis, trust. With trust, Berman writes, the actors' back-and-forth works to create something beyond the show itself. "This is where the doings emerge, / where the Taking / is the Giving," he writes.

*Where we in our invention  
Are mindful always of  
The end and persistence of intention—  
the Laughter; the Laughter.  
The end is nothing  
if not the end in Laughter. ■*

Margaret Guroff is a features editor for AARP THE MAGAZINE.

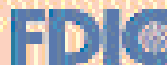
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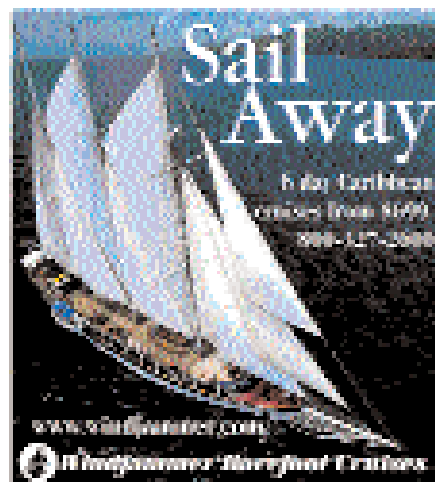
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