

Emerson Comedy Archives Oral History Project

BILL PERSKY

**Interviewed April 8, 2005
By Bill Dana and Jenni Matz
In New York City**

Biographical Info:

Bill Persky, born 1931 in New Haven, CT, is a Writer, Director, Producer, and Actor. He has written comedy for such television shows as *McHale's Navy*, *The Julie Andrews Show*, *That Girl* (also Produced), *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (also Produced), *Kate & Allie* (also Produced). He has directed comedies such as *That Girl*, *Alice*, *Kate & Allie*, *Who's the Boss*, *Spencer*, and *Welcome Back Kotter* among others. He has participated in numerous lectures about Comedy.

The Following is an Excerpt from our Interview with Bill Persky. To read the full transcript, please contact the Archivist.

DANA: The beginning of a career, Billy Persky's first awareness of funny. What...any sense of that?

PERSKY: Yeah. When I was in high school in Atlantic City, I guess like 1948, I got a copy of a book called Knights of the Clown Table that was written by **Joey Adams**, and it was about all of the comedians and all the people who used to hang out at **Toots Shore's** in New York. And, I was reading that and there were all bunch of jokes and comments, so I started, since no one in Atlantic City was gonna read that, I thought, I started telling the jokes and stuff, and it was fun. And that was really the first time that I ever thought of being involved in comedy. It was just fun to get laughs. I didn't have any need, you know, the old story, well, no one liked me or I was very well-liked, loved in fact. So it didn't come out of any emotional need. It just was fun, you know, I enjoyed making people laugh. Uh, then I went on to college, and I started doing little shows for the fraternity I was joining and stuff. And gradually did more and more stuff. Then I started I to do impressions which everybody who started out did. Everybody did impressions back in the 50's you know.

PERSKY: So, I did entertain somewhat and then I think, I think when you write with a partner you are an entertainer, 'cause you're, you are performing for one another, and so that that experience, when you're writing alone you know you talk to yourself and you do stuff but there's not that feedback that that comes... so I think that's performing. Then when I went on to become a director which is where I spent most of you know the last 20 years of my career that's when **Sam {Denoff}** and I very amicably and lovingly went our separate ways because I wanted to direct and that's very singular. I direct as a performer and as a writer, I just use different tools when I direct. Instead of paper or computer or whatever I use the people or I use the room that I was in. I would... I wouldn't give line readings but I would perform the essence of what I was looking for to kind of create-- a lot of guys get into deep psychological stuff... I would say, "you know when

you into a room and you're not sure whether you've got a hole in your sock and you walk like this or you do"-- and that would create that kind of a place where I thought the actors should be, and it was fun for me. I jumped ahead in my career. I think I summed it all up.

DANA: (laughter)

PERSKY: Good night.

DANA: Good night everybody. The awareness that you have a sense of humor that happened early on?

15:09:03

PERSKY: Yeah. It was particularly interesting to me because my father had absolutely no sense of humor. You know people say where's your sense of humor from? But my father had no sense of humor. My mother's family had humor but they never were funny when my father was around, you know, so it was a selective thing. But I realized, I guess I always lived outside of myself in terms of certain things I was doing. You have to be looking at yourself. **If you have a sense of humor, it has to start with a sense of humor about yourself.** You can't start looking at other people and thinking of them as funny or...you have to look at yourself. And I mean all through my life, I thought, "I cannot believe you're doing this... you're really gonna do this? You did it", I mean. So there's that third eye that people in comedy have, the ability to see from outside of what they're in, what is going on. And, you know, what is humane, human about it, what is shared with everybody else. I also think in a sense of humor it's essential to never feel sorry for yourself because when you're telling... I'm like at present, I don't want to call it a memoir because that's kind of pretentious, but there are a number of things that have happened to me or that I've gotten involved in that I've said, I cannot believe you're doing this. Maybe that's the title for it: *I can't believe you're doing this*. Um, but it was the ability to look at myself, and I think this is true of all people in comedy, and remove the pain from painful situations and get to the absurdity of how we behave in them and, you know. And, I grew up in **The Depression**. I said I grew up in the Depression. My father didn't know it was a financial circumstance. He thought it was all-

pervasive. But, you know, things were very tough. You, Billy, grew up in the same time. There was no money. There was a lot of moving around. I would go to sleep in one place and wake up in another part of town cause there landlord was coming and you know you always beat the rent. It was, so that there was a lot of tough stuff, something had to help you through it.

DANA: So you used comedy as a survival mechanism?

PERSKY: I think there's a certain amount of that and I think that part of it also for me was I always just thought the world was, what are we doing here? You know? This is silly, you know. So I always kind of looked at it from that point of view, survival, of taking the pain... **I mean laughter is I think the greatest painkiller of all.** And it doesn't, it helps your heart, it doesn't kill it like everything is, you know. I recently was asked to write a piece about comedy for kind of a philosophical book, and I didn't really know what I wanted to say because the more you talk about comedy the less funny you are and it is, you know. But I said something that I kind of really liked out of the whole thing. I said comedy is like your soul sneezing.

DANA: Mm hmm.

15:12;48

PERSKY: You know, it's, there's... something lands on it unprepared and it happens, you know, and it frees you. **Comedy frees everybody. I also said that comedy reveals more about who we are than any other thing that we do.** What makes us laugh? Cause it comes, you're not prepared. You're committing yourself when you laugh. You know, you can hold back tears. You can't hold back a laugh. I mean, it's just going to happen. So you're making a statement about "I and this". I find this funny or warm or touching in a funny way.

MATZ: There's a lot that you've said, and I mentioned that I've seen you speak on a lot of panels on comedy writing-- You've mentioned tools, teachable tools for people in this industry who want to learn them.

PERSKY: Right.

MATZ: And I want to touch on something you've said before that comedy needs to have a tension

to work- that comedy comes from something in a real life situation. How do you know where the line is between using a real situation that might be potentially hurtful or twisting it in a way to make it funny?

PERSKY: Well I think, I think that the-- the place that starts is to find the common human denominator in it all. There's a great story that **Don Rickles** tells, uh. His manager Joe Scandori(sp?) was a lovely, lovely guy and uh, he was crazy about his father. His father was everything in the world to him. And Don was his best friend, and when Don, when Joe's father died, Don was of course right next to Joe through the whole thing, at the funeral. And ah, so Joe was just beyond consoling and ah he said to Don, he said, "would you go up and take a last look at Pop?", and Don said "well you know Jews don't do that", you know. He said, "no I think it would mean a lot". So Don walked up to the coffin and he looked down, came back, and Joe said, "thanks. He looked good, didn't he?" Joe said. And Don said, "yeah, he really did." He said, "he looked just like Pop, didn't he, I mean just like he was sleeping. I mean he still looked alive didn't he?" He said, "yeah he did." He said, "I mean I can't believe he's dead, I mean when you looked at him did you believe he was dead?" He said, "you know something, right before I left Joe, he gave me one of these..." [gestures a wave] at which point Scandori fell on the floor and was laughing at his father's funeral. Now in that is all of it, you know. There's a point beyond which pain, love, everything just reaches a point where you have to go prick the balloon on it and say OK already, you know, and if you do it with love... maybe that's the thing that when you say how do you know where... if you do it with respect and not to hurt somebody or not to expose or undercut somebody but if you do it to kind of give em a little, hey wake up, or you're over the edge, a little something like that, it... I think if there... I hate to just use the word love as... but if you do it with gentle kindness and caring. Maybe caring better than love is the word. Love in the past few weeks with Terri Schiavo and I mean, love is getting kicked to crap by everybody, so I'll just say caring.

MATZ: Are there any instances you could remember back on maybe with the *Dick Van Dyke*

show or *Kate and Allie* that took a difficult situation and did what you're describing, took a hard thing to express?

15:17;03

PERSKY: Immediately something comes to mind in my own life that I think is a perfect example of everything that I have said so far. I don't know how much will end up being there so they'll say well, what did he say, this is the first thing we heard. My second marriage which I always find strange to say my second marriage since I was brought up in a time where you got married forever, but then I lived in California and the mid-70's and nothing was forever and it was all pretty crazy. So my second marriage ended. And I had also, it was strange, but it coincided with the time that my partner Sam Denoff and I decided to go our separate ways, in our careers. And two weeks later my then wife took off to find herself which was the heading of the time and you know she's still looking as far as I know, but she was terrific. And so I was alone really for the first time in my life it was I was alone in my career which was scary and then I was gonna be alone in my life you know. The night she was leaving I remember I was just so devastated and we were and I was retching and (inaudible)... she was fine, she was going to find herself. You know I was just, oh God, and I remember it was like 3 in the morning and I said "but you just don't, it's just", and I said "am I too macho?" At which point we both laughed through the rest of the night. She still left in the morning, but while I was down there I said look at you, you fool, (inaudible) am I too macho, I said. So, that's, that's what, I guess I'm talking about. Now an interesting thing is I used to be, when I lived in LA, I was on the radio a lot with Michael Jackson, the English, the guy who had the great show out there. And I, we were talking about divorce and stuff like that, and I guess too, **comedy is about being honest**. You know you can't be dishonest with comedy. It's got to come out of, out of the truth, and I think it's the recognition of that shared truth that allows the release, cause even though you're exposing yourself, you're doing it to someone who's already said me too, know. So, I was on with Michael, and he asked me a question about how you get through divorce and everything and I said well you got to find some way to find the absurdity

of what you've become. You stop being everything you are in certain situations and yet you got to be able to say wait a minute, this isn't me, what kind of a fool is this? And I remember I said I remember one of the lowest nights in my life when I was alone and you know you're always in a divorce situation you always stayed on your side of the bed just in case in the middle of the night she came home you'd want her to know she was welcome, you know. So uh, I was lying there and I couldn't sleep, and I thought well maybe I'll sing. And strangely, the only lyrics I could remember to anything were the Star Spangled Banner. So, I stood up on the banner cause it was the Star Bangled Banner (laughter) and was singing in the middle... The phones lit up. The response of everyone who understood and had been through that moment, maybe not with the Star Spangled Banner. But the, the admission on my part of just how stupid I was. If I sang the Star Bangled Banner it was one thing, but to actually stand up out of respect, who was gonna catch me? You know? So it's those kind of things. But you've got to know. **You have to know that you're doing them. If you don't know that you're doing them then you're crazy. If you know that you're doing them then you're funny, you know.**

15:21:54

MATZ: There a lot of rule-breaking involved in some of the shows you took on like *Kate and Allie* and *Working It Out* and but you've said that you shouldn't, that shouldn't be your aim and purpose to break rules of this business...

PERSKY: No.

MATZ: It should be if it's natural and if it serves your purpose. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that and why you made the decisions with those shows to set them in certain scenarios that were not really conventional?

PERSKY: Shows have a time where they belong. *Kate and Allie* which was on in the 80's there were a lot of people out there on their own who hadn't been, a lot of marriages that had failed and uh. And I, I felt with *Kate and Allie*, my overall approach to it was that I wanted people to recognize that two people committed to making a life together and having a mutual need for one

another. It didn't matter whether it was a man or a woman, and I'm not talking about, uh heterosexual/homosexual whatever. I'm just talking about a relationship is something that is based on mutual need, mutual trust, and mutual respect. And I wanted to have some family, a man and a woman, watching *Kate and Allie*, and the husband, and if they were in the middle of something, and the husband turned to the wife and said, Jesus, we had that argument last night. That to me was the... my whole purpose in *Kate and Allie* was to say if you need somebody and they're there for you, and you help one another, that's a relationship and it isn't a matter of you know, the sexual part of it becomes a battle ground or a place to act out certain things which you don't have in a relationship like theirs. I remember the high point for me of *Kate and Allie* was I got a letter which I still have from a lady who said "I want to thank you for *Kate and Allie*. I am recently divorced with 2 kids. I don't know what I'm doing. I'm scared to death, and I'm glad to know that I'm not crazy, and I'm not alone." **That to me was a series worth doing.** Then I had a friend who was a psychiatrist and he said, "you know, the funniest thing", he said "I had this woman who's been struggling with extra appointments about what to do over on Thanksgiving cause her husband is remarried and the kids go to two Thanksgivings.." she didn't know what to do. And then he said "she came in and said I know what I'm going to do." He said well what have you decided? She said, "I'm gonna to do what Kate and Allie did. They invited everybody and whatever happened happened." And, that's great. That's really great when you, when you, if you did nothing else that you just took a situation that you knew was out there and you kind of made it OK for people to go through it. Uh, I don't remember your question (laughter).

MATZ: (laughter) Well this brings me to something else though because we've been talking to a lot of people who --comedy it's not just a form of entertainment, it's doing something more, it's a nurturing factor in people's lives and in society. And you yourself have said you think situation **comedies are contemporary art forms?**

15:25;18

PERSKY: I think they're our mythology. I think the archetypes of the sit-com family, the sit-com

people, are kind of like a Mount Olympus gathering for our country. They represent what is either needed at the time or idealized at the time and you know...Somebody I was...I guess I was on uh, *Phil Donahue*, and I was on with uh, I was the only guy there. I was on with Barbara, the one who was Beaver's mother...

MATZ: Eden? No.

PERSKY: No, **Barbara Billingsley**, and I was on with **Shirley Jones**, and myself, and **Phylicia Rashad**. And they were talking about women in television and the roles that women... I was there cause I had done *That Girl* with Sam, and, which was a turning point for all women. And, uh, *Kate and Allie*, and had done work with **Mary Tyler Moore**, you know not on her show, but we were very close, and they were talking about the role of women as it was played out in television. And I said, actually if you look at it, it's very simple. In *That Girl*, which was in the 60's, if Ann Marie, Marlo, had a problem with a problem with a faucet or a sink or her plumbing, she would call her father. On Mary, the *Mary Tyler Moore show*, which was in the 70's, she would have called a plumber. And on *Kate and Allie*, in the 80's, they'd try to fix it themselves and then had to call the plumber and then Kate went on to have an affair with the plumber for 8 shows. And, I mean, it's just, it's just what it was. The growth, the behavior, it's down in those simple little places.

DANA: Let's just so that we mark it, that we have it in the context of what we're talking about, the suggestion of a course that could be taught at Emerson and other schools called, The Performer,

The Comedy Performer of the 50's-- 101.

PERSKY: Uh-huh.

DANA: How would you structure that?

PERSKY: Uh... I think I'd start off by saying, I want you to take one experience of your own, and I want you to write it and be able to perform it in a way -- and I want it to be a serious thing. I

want it to be someone's death, or a failure, or something that is not funny at the time that it happened. And I want you to give yourself the obligation to tell it with all of its meaning, but in a way that no one has to feel uncomfortable or sorry for you that this happened. I think that -- that would be a great starting place for it. Because it incorporates all of the ingredients that we're talking about -- that it starts with something personal, and that it requires honesty, and it gives you the obligation of removing the pain, for others to understand what happened to you. That would be a starting place, perhaps.

15:47;37

DANA: Survival in the business aspect -- what can you share with our students that are watching this?

15:56;12

PERSKY: I would say, **the most important thing to do is to be yourself** in all of it. Don't try and be something one time, and something -- because that's like -- you may pick the wrong version of you for the right time. So, at least if you're consistent with your beliefs, then -- then you... you know, if you're -- if you go into a room, the minute you walk in, some of the people are going to fall in love with you. Some of the people are going to hate you. And the majority are not even going to notice you're there. So if you walk into the room backwards, some of the people are going to love you, some of the people -- you know, I mean -- whatever way to make your entrance into a situation, you're not going to get everybody -- ever. So go with the one that is the most comfortable, and the truest -- the one you can answer questions about, and the answers are all kind of in a package -- this is who this person is. Also, I say to young people that are getting started: every job you don't get is just as important as the jobs you do get. It's like in art -- every painting has what is known as negative space. The *Mona Lisa* has negative space. It's the stuff where nothing is happening. But it is just as much a part of that painting as her face, and her smile, and everything else. So, allow for the fact that everything isn't going to work out, but

you're going to walk away with something from that -- that either you're going to be available for the next thing that happens, or you're going to have picked -- picked up a texture from that failure that... So don't make everything the most important thing, or the one that is... after about 20 years of not doing it, you'd find something else -- but I mean. But along the way, don't expect everything that -- you have to get everything. Because nobody gets everything.

DANA: There -- before success, during success, and then in... sort of the after-flow of the relationship between the agent, the manager -- all of the -- the phenomenon of representation. The business aspect of show business.

15:58;42

PERSKY: Yes. I have been inordinately fortunate. I had probably the best two agents that you could possibly have. I had **George Shapiro**... we were -- Sam Denoff and I were his first clients. I remember when we used to start writing nightclub material with people who didn't know who the hell we were -- and that's when we were writing for acts that appeared at the *Elegante*, and stuff. And George would say to them, "they get 100 dollars a minute -- 25 up front, or not a word goes on paper." And the guy would say -- "well, what do you mean, 25 dollars up front? Before I see anything?" He said, "you're dealing with pros." George made deals -- we had a comic -- we actually got paid by a guy who endorsed over an insurance check from an automobile accident that he had. Anyway, so, I had George, and George loved it. Have an agent who gets who you are. It's -- you know what? It's just like a marriage -- be with someone who gets who you are and likes it. And believes in it. Don't force yourself on an agent -- don't plead. Get someone who really gets who you are. And has integrity. And of course, George... there was nobody with more integrity. Except, maybe equal is **Ron Meyer**, who -- Ron Meyer is now the President of Universal, and he started Creative Artists. And he loved -- I mean, he had Sylvester Stallone as clients, he had Jane Fonda, he had everyone -- but he loved being my agent, because he loved what I did. Now, not everybody gets that break, you know? So my experience has been a very special one. They have -- they have not let me do things that I thought about doing, and they

have encouraged me to do things that were risky, and that didn't pay as much. They weren't worried -- get an agent who isn't... most agents -- I hate to say this "most," but really, you know this is true. A lot of agents are annoyed with their clients because the clients get in the way of them being in show business. Because they have to keep answering phone calls, and they have to have meetings, and they -- they can't be in show business the same way as if the clients would leave them alone. So, avoid an agent who loves show business too much. Let him love you, and let him love what you're capable of. And when you give him something to read, let him read it. And if they give it to someone else to read, you're with -- now, agents are very hard to find, so in the beginning, I guess, you've got to take what you can get. And also today, nobody wants to develop talent anymore. Everybody wants somebody who is already there. The joy of George and Ronny and those guys -- they loved finding somebody, and making it happen. Now, what most of the agencies do, is they get a guy who somebody has helped develop, and then he's off to a bigger agency, you know? And just -- don't have an agent who is more in show business than you are. But as I said, I've been, really, very fortunate.

16:01;17

DANA: Yeah, second the emotion with George Shapiro. And if you had one, like George has Howard West --

PERSKY: Right.

DANA:-- who handles... handles more the numbers game --

PERSKY: Yeah.

DANA:-- and you have somebody who appreciates you as an artist.

PERSKY: Yeah, yeah.

16:14;05

PERSKY: You know what it is? It's, **truth stays true**. You -- we did it. We wrote a truth. The

people who read it didn't know -- they thought it was funny, but they didn't know it was the truth. He comes, and he talks about, when they used to go, they wouldn't sit down, because they didn't want to crease their pants. It's the truth, and if I said anything -- that I could say one thing to young people who want to be involved in comedy. Even more than drama, I think. **Start with the truth.** Start with the truth and stick with it. **Sid Caesar** said... Sam and I did some writing for him, and then we did one of his specials, so... we got to spend some time with him. And he said, "You make a contract -- an agreement with your audience -- that you're going to be up here with your humor, or you're going to be down here." He said, "If you're up here, and you go down here, you'll get your biggest laugh, but you'll never get back up there. Because you broke your contract." And that's really, I think, all of it. There's an understanding you have with the people who are going to read your stuff. They're going to -- they're going to be going with you without a net, and if you pull the floor out from under them... you're going to lose them.

16:15;34

DANA: There's a certain resentment -- I saw that, I love Buddy -- we all... Buddy Hackett was family to us. And for some reason, in his career, he skewed his whole act to not only the joke --

PERSKY: Right.

DANA: -- which he was a brilliant joke-teller -- but just to --

PERSKY: Smut, yeah.

DANA: -- the dirtier, the better. And... well, I'm -- I'm on this side, but the thing is, on the way out after the performance -- of which I saw several -- people who had been laughing and slapping their knees would say, "God, why does he do that terrible stuff?"

16:16;23

PERSKY: Yeah.

DANA: So it doesn't -- it doesn't last out the door.

PERSKY: No. It'll make you laugh, because you're shocked, or whatever it is. But you don't -- you don't... it's like -- you know what it is? It's like eating something that isn't good for you. It tastes

great while you're eating it, and then afterwards it'll make you sick. That was brilliant. Don't touch that -- (laughter) -- that was good. No, that was good. I know good, and that was good.

DANA: A penultimate comment... let's design this course for Emerson on... the perform -- the comedian as entertainer. The comedian as performer. I don't know if they already have a class like that, but you could raise your right hand, left hand, whatever -- just say... and, you'll help us.

PERSKY: Oh, God yes. I'll be there. I'll go up for a day, a week -- whatever you want. Because... you know, there's a... there's another story that... actually, you know, when you hear -- I guess, with a joke. When you hear a joke that you made up. Someone said, jeez, I heard a great joke, and they're telling you your joke back, then you figure, "OK, this is pretty good." But there's a thing I always told the young people when I lectured. And the first time I told this story, strangely enough, was at Emerson. When my kids were there. And I went up, and they had asked me to talk to a class of... of, you know, students. And I said, "Here's a very important thing to know. I had a young kid -- a gopher -- working for me on *Kate and Allie*. Any number of them. I had a lot of them, but this one kid, in particular. I probably would have not noticed him -- he was a kid, he was nice, he was fine. And one day, I was down rehearsing, and I was very busy. And I didn't have time to have lunch, so I -- this kid came by, and I said, "Do me a favor -- go to the corner, and get me a container of watermelon." Right? So he was out and back in two seconds, and... when I got to the watermelon, it was all slimy. You know how watermelon gets overly red and overly wet? So, I said, "Get me Josh to come down here." So he came down. And I said, "This is the watermelon you got me." I said, "It's lousy. I can't eat it." I said, "What do you want to do with your life? What do you want to be?" He said, "Well, I want to be a writer, and I want to produce, and... you know, I'd like to direct, and everything." I said, "That's all great." I said, "You know what you are now? You're a watermelon-getter. And you better do that good. Or you're never going to get to the next stage. You are only the job you are doing at the time. I don't want to know your aspirations. When we're sitting, and I say, what do you want to do, and we're having a drink, or we have a moment -- fine. But right now, you are the guy who

gets the watermelon. And if you'd have brought me great watermelon, I probably wouldn't have had this conversation with you. But you brought me bad watermelon, so I had to tell you, and give you this opportunity." I said, "Right now, we're going next door, and I'm going to show you how to buy fruit. Because that's **the most important lesson in show business** you're going to get working around me right now." And we went next door, I said, "This is a good apple, this is not a good pear, this is too hard, this is too soft, this is" -- I said, "Know the job you're doing. And do that. Don't worry about what you'd like to be doing. Make it..." And I always told my kids, and they've grown up on this: know the job beneath you. So when someone says, "Well, I couldn't do it," you say, "Yes, you can, and here's how." And, you know, whether you want to be a writer, or an actor, or a... if you're an extra, be a great extra. If you're a supporting player, be -- if you're delivering flowers on the set in a moment in a scene, do it with all that's in you, and not - - don't want to be the lead in the scene; be the best flower-deliverer that they could have. What more could I say?

16:20;58

End of Excerpt from Interview - Bill Persky