

Emerson Comedy Archives Oral History Project

ED BEGLEY, Jr.

Interviewd May 31, 2005

By Bill Dan and Jenni Matz

In Studio City, CA

Biographical Information:

Edward James Begley (b. September 16, 1949 in Los Angeles) has been a stand-up comedian, having formed a comedy duo with Michael Richards (of *Seinfeld* fame). He began his acting career in the 1960s and 70s with roles on *My Three Sons*, *Room 222*, and *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*. He has appeared in numerous television roles and film roles since then, in a career spanning over 30 years, including the cult-favorite “This is Spinal Tap” and other Christopher Guest films.

“Inspired by the works of his Academy Award-winning father, Ed Begley, Jr. became an actor. He first came to audiences’ attention for his portrayal of Dr. Victor Ehrlich on the long-running hit television series, “St. Elsewhere,” for which he received six Emmy nominations. Since then Begley has moved easily between feature, television and theatre projects.

Begley appeared recently in “A Mighty Wind”, a follow-up to the American Comedy Award-winning film, “Best In Show,” with Christopher Guest, Catherine O’ Hara and Parker Posey. His other feature film credits include “Batman Forever,” “Greedy,” “The Accidental Tourist”, “She-Devil” and “The In-Laws.”

On television, Begley just completed a new pilot called “True”, starring Anne Heche on the WB. He can also be seen in recurring roles on “Jack & Bobby”, “Six Feet Under” and “7th Heaven.” He also guest starred in such series as “The West Wing,” “The Practice,” “The Drew Carey Show,” “Touched By an Angel,” and “Providence.” – *from edbegley.com official website.*

The Following is an Excerpt from our Interview with Ed Begley, Jr. To read the full transcript, please contact the Archivist.

BEGLEY: The very first day I ever worked as an actor was on *My Three Sons*. I had one day. I was so happy. I'd wanted to be an actor my whole life since I was, yeah I mean my whole life since I was 3 since I could really put a thought together in any cogent manner. 'What do you wanna be', 'oh I wanna be an actor'. I want to be a comedian I would also say. I wanna be a comedian. I wanna be an actor and then finally, and I kind of resent it now its so funny when I look back at it. To be honest I resented that my dad wouldn't just get me a job like (A) he could get me a job just by picking up the phone and (B) that that would be helpful to me had he done that you know. He wanted me to earn it which was a very good plan, but I resented it but finally age 10 I started going out on interviews -- clearly he helped me with that you know but I never got a job. Why? Because I didn't train as an actor. Its the only business I know where somebody goes I think, I wanna be a plumber. What do you do you put a couple pipes together right. I'll got in the truck with you today dad, I'll got do a job. Its the same. You would never think to -- I'm electrical, I'm an electrician I'm gonna go do some wiring. One of these is the hot wire right -- you know what I mean. As an actor you think I could do that, my dad does it. And I thought I could do that, then I finally started to train a bit as an actor and by no small coincidence I got a role on *My Three Sons* and I worked a day on that.

MATZ: Laughter certainly has a power.

BEGLEY: Yeah it does. And then I had a standup act. I did standup for awhile. I had a partner, **Michael Richards** and I were partners -- Kramer from *Seinfeld*. Michael ah, was my partner. We went to Valley College here together and we ah, we had a duo. We went to the *Troubador* and we played there and we had different people who wanted to manage us. We had a very funny act. It was all improv. We didn't know you know what we were doing but we made people laugh and so it never really took off because we didn't understand why we killed one night and then we didn't do well the next 2 or 3 times we did it. You know we did OK but we didn't kill like we did before. We didn't know the amount of training and work and putting together 20 minutes even. How long it takes. It would take you a year or two years, three years to do that. So we didn't get that. And so then I went, Michael went in the Army and I went off on my own and did standup and then built some material and kept writing and writing and I did standup in *Max's Kansas City* and *The Bottom Line* and the *Troubador* and *The Comedy Store* and the *Great Southeast Music Hall* in Atlanta and *A Quiet Night* in Chicago and ah, big venues like the

Nassau Coliseum - 18,000 people. I opened for Loggins and Messina and John Sebastian and Poco and that was, that was incredible to open for you know for those kind of people and in a stadium of 18,000 people. I was, I felt like I'd hit the big time.

09:15;21

MATZ: You said that you went back and actually studied the people who've come before you, Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. I don't know if that's who you looked up to but what's the importance of what students interested in comedy today can take from those who came before them?

09:20;35

BEGLEY: Yeah, I think you, you glean something from every, um, great comic that you can take the time and should take the time to watch. You know, there's people who don't do any physical comedy that are wonderful, you know, the **Garry Shandlings**, the **Jerry Seinfelds**, the, you know, there's some wonderful comics out there that have no props, nothing they just get up there and do wonderful, wonderful stuff. **Bill Dana**, you know, is not a prop comic. You know, he came out there just with his skills as a comedian, as an actor, to get into the character to not show us a character but to become the character, you know, and, uh, fine acting work. And that's what's great about **Lily Tomlin**, that's what's great about **Richard Pryor**, they're not showing you these char-- *Mudbone*, I'm going to show you this guy a caricature. To me, he's a fine actor Richard Pryor, he can be, and he would become *Mudbone*, literally like one is possessed, you know, like you're channeling someone and the same with Lily Tomlin. She really is a wonderful actress and she in her one woman show, you can see she can (snaps) turn on a dime, become this character and that and its fine acting and that's always good. That's what's great about **Jonathan Winters** too, you know? He'd be *Maude Frickart* one minute and be *Elwood B. Sluggins* the next and, uh, you know, he's a wonderful actor. And that's, that's what I've always been drawn to as a fan of comedy, those kind of people that can do that kind of thing, to do those wonderful characters. And uh, I think its important for young comics to study that and to see, and really go far back to the **Buster Keaton** and the, the **Charlie Chaplin**, the **Paul Parrot** kind of level people. Uh, those people did something wonderful back when there's a lot to be learned from that. And, I think it's, it's valuable as an actor. When you look at what's great about **Meryl Streep** in *Sophie's choice*, or what's great about the scene I alluded to a moment ago which the Laurel and Hardy carrying the piano down the stairs, they're based on the same basic principle why one is wonderfully moving, it moves you to tears, one is because what does a person do when

they're dealing with that level of pain of having to choose which child to give and which child to hold on to when they're someone so cool they make you choose that. So how does a person -- What would you do if you were in that situation? And it's moving beyond words what someone would do -- To witness that and to experience that with a fine actress Meryl Streep and in that wonderful movie, that moves you. It moves you to laughter if you see **Laurel and Hardy**, their fall down the stairs, that's horrible, that's really bad right there, to fall down stairs would hurt. If you've ever fallen down stairs, and then the piano falls down on top of them? (laughter) It's so absurd that you're like -- it's the same thing. It's how people deal with pain. It's always the most compelling thing to watch. How people deal with it, comedy or drama, and they both -- it's kind of a universal law in both, how you and if you, you must do it in a real manner. If you do it in a bogus manner you can evoke a response of sorts, you know, if it's very broad, what have you, but it's not the same if you do it in a manner that is real, um, it really, you'll get the biggest laugh and the biggest emotion if what you are doing is drama.

09:23;58

DANA: That's, that's one of the best riffs on comedy that I've ever heard right there. Are you teaching at all?

BEGLEY: (laughter) No I'm not tea-- I'm not qualified to teach. I'll be your student. I won't teach anything.

MATZ: Steve Allen said tragedy plus time equals comedy.

09:24;19

BEGLEY: And he's right. Tragedy plus time does equal comedy. And when you're removed from it like that, you know that Laurel and Hardy never get -- well, we assume they never got hurt. They probably got hurt plenty like the **Three Stooges** got hurt plenty, "How did you do that? Nobody got hurt?" "What are you talking about? We got hurt a lot. It hurts." You know, it was a balsam wood thing and that hurts to hit you on the head with it. Well, it was a rubber mallet, you get -- let me give you a rubber mallet, it hurts like hell (laughter). You know, the trick is like, it's like when you-- to swallow fire. You know, how do you swallow fire? I think it's **Penn Gillette** or somebody. The trick is to not mind the pain. It hurts like hell, it's hot. You know, there's a coating or something you put in your mouth, I don't know there's some other trick to it. But the trick is also not minding the pain, that's the trick. So, it's uh, it's interesting to watch and it's very helpful to learn as a comedian, as an actor to study this fine work comedy or drama and to see what is it about it that really grabs you as an audience member. And it universally for me

is how people deal with pain, how they deal with pain.

09:25;30

DANA: What is your take on the license that people are taking today? I mean, there's -- the -- the -- all of those rules are bro-- especially on *Saturday Night Live* where we were told an edict came down that said don't worry about endings.

09:27;06

BEGLEY: Right. (laughter) Yeah. I think you've got to have endings for bits, and I -- you know, I have a lot of irreverent stuff in my act back in the '70s and, uh, stuff, uh, that I would never do today. Stuff -- you know, I was in my 20s and, uh, I just -- I did a lot of stuff -- I'm not for censorship, don't get me wrong, but I chose many years ago by that being the late '70s, I decided to stop -- I don't think it was funny to make fun of dead people, you know? (laughter) I mean, I'm not saying things should be off-limits, you know, but, uh, I'm not for censorship, but I just choose not to do that. I have a certain amount of reverence for people. And people have families and other stuff -- you know? I try to be more sensitive, you know?

MATZ: Is there another strain to this, in terms of controlling your own image in this industry? Is there, any advice you could offer about the dangers of being stereotyped or, you know, controlling your own image?

09:34;11

BEGLEY: I think you should go for whatever work comes your way, but try to always -- if you have choices -- if you do have choices, when you're starting out, you do just about anything, unless it's something you don't want to do because -- errr, you know, violence against women, things like that. I certainly applaud people, whatever point in their career, that stay away from that stuff. And I have. So, uh, you stay away from material unless it's really objectionable. Other than that, you do whatever part comes your way. Having said that, when you do -- when you are able to make choices, like you are after being on a show like *St. Elsewhere*, you can choose a little bit. Not all the time, you couldn't say, "Ah." If you stick with the best material -- not the best money -- not the, you know, best prestige even -- these are separate things. But the best material, and then also, you know, there's another value that you have to figure into the best people. You know, by that I mean the best directors, the best writers, you know. But the -- the material's the thing #1. You read the script, and if it's really good -- "Well, this is scale." "It's

deferred." I don't care; I want to do this. "No--The other one is going to pay \$20 grand a week, and... da... da." No, thank you. That script isn't so good; I want to do this one. That's the best long-term plan. When actors ask me for advice, I give it to them and I say, "Always go for the best material if you have that choice." And the second thing, where do you live? I say. "Huh? I'm asking you for acting advice, not real estate advice." I said, I'm giving you real -- acting advice. Where do you live? "Well, I've got a little apartment on Burbank Blvd." (inaudible) good. Stay there if you get the series. Stay there for the second or third year, and if you do move, then move to a modest house or a rental or whatever. Do not go for the big -- "Oh, I've got a series! Ahbubbawa!" Then you get the big mansion or the big car and the -- all the stuff. Then you got to keep stoking coal in that -- in that furnace to keep it burning, you know? You've got to -- "Oh, I've got to take that crappy TV movie. My accountant said I need to do it. I don't want to. I got to do that crummy commercial, but, you know, I'm going to be broke if I don't because I've got the channeler and the masseuse and the spirit guide and the chef and the driver to pay." You know? (laughter) I mean -- and they're doing stuff you don't want to do, and then their career tanks. You know? **Rule #1, go for the best material. Rule #2, keep your life simple.** Live simply so that others can simply live. It's a good way to -- to live your life anyway, but also it's good for your career. It is career advice. Keep it simple so that you can do the best material.

09:36;40

MATZ: That is wonderful life advice for anyone.

BEGLEY: I think so.

MATZ: In keeping with this, *I wish I had known that before* train of thought: We know that you can't teach anyone to be funny. But if you start off with a natural gift, are there certain tools that you sort of honed in on through your career of how to sharpen that gift? How to make it better?

09:37;02

BEGLEY: Yeah, **the greatest, thing I did to, to try to improve as an actor and as a comedian, specifically comedy, was to go out and do clubs.** You can't pay, there's no workshop, there's no school you can go to, there's no college in America, where you can find out right there -- it's very immediate -- what makes America laugh. Or, if you go on tour around the world, what makes France laugh or England laugh. You go on tour to clubs and colleges and concerts and you -- there, it's very immediate. It's either, "who is this guy? What the hell is he doing? [throat-clearing] Thank you! Next!" You know, either you're going to get that or you're going to get laughter, or something in between. There's

no, you know, preview house needles to worry about or focus groups. The focus group is right before you! They're either going to laugh or they're not, so you learn, "Wow. Why did that tank tonight? Oh, you know what? I took too long before I did the thing with the bottle. I -- I didn't take applause like that before. It tanked because I took too long. I thought it'd be funnier to really take a long beat, but that -- I -- I killed the joke by taking the long beat. I do it -- Let me try it tonight. Oh, yeah, it worked. Hit the head with a bottle quickly and it worked, so take -- ." Or the other way around. You find out immediately what takes wha-- you know, what it takes to make people laugh. That was the best training, to get out there and do it in clubs, to do stand-up, to work in a comedy -- an improve group -- whatever your thing is, whatever you want to do to get out there and work and do it. You'll find right away what works because it's very immediate, gratification. You will get people to laugh or you won't.

09:38;38

09:46;35

MATZ: I think it's also greatly to do with awareness. Probably a lot of things that you'd just spoken to us, many people wouldn't know about unless someone like you, who is so visible, brought it to light. And I wanted to talk about that for a second because a lot's been said -- you know, pro and con -- about celebrities using fame to talk about political or social issues. But there can be a great advantage to using the soap-box if you've got one.

BEGLEY: Yeah.

MATZ: And you've been so identified with the causes that you promote that, could you just, talk about what -- what you think the importance could be if you're lucky enough to have this?

09:47;10

BEGLEY: Yeah. And I do feel that I am lucky to have this opportunity to have the soap-box, to have the microphone, to have the mega-phone for a moment to talk, and that's one of the advantages of it, because I don't think there's time to go door-to-door talking about these problems. I think we have to use that moment when it arises. **But there's a great responsibility that comes with that.** You don't want to cry out fire in a crowded theater, first of all. And you want to have your facts right. You don't want to do, "Oh, the world is really polluted, we're all doomed, and it's really bad, man, there's nothing we can do, OK, dude." I mean, you don't want to say things that aren't true. You don't want to say we're poisoning people, you know, horribly every day, and it's -- there's -- there's -- you

know, this is "800 tons of poison going into the LA River right now -- a minute!" You know? Facts. You've got to check things out and make sure -- and I'm talking about peer-reviewed studies. Make sure somebody with Ph.D. after his name is involved. Peer-reviewed studies. Published papers and what-have-you. Things that are real. People like the Union of Concerned Scientists. People like that. And that's who I rely on. They're -- but they are like the fire marshal, if you will, in the theater. I'm about to go onstage to sing a song and dance, you know, and to go out there and just sing a song and dance when the fire marshal in the form of the Union of Concerned Scientists, somebody's tapped me on the shoulder -- mmm? "Ed, there -- I don't -- you wouldn't want to alarm people. Tell them to -- But they got to get -- we got to get people out of the theater, row-by-row. There's a problem, and we have to vacate. Start with the first rows, and tell people to be calm and what-have-you." To just, "OK, thanks for telling me. I'm going to do a song and dance." How could you go in front of a microphone then and not share that information? It's been shared with me by the fire marshal. That's the Union of Concerned Scientists. More than half the living Nobel Laureates have told me about some of the very real problems. Not anecdotal stuff, not baloney; it's stuff from peer-reviewed studies. NOAA and NASA and National Geographic-kind of level stuff that's really been studied and looked at in a very, very, uh, cogent manner. Uh, to go onstage and just do your act after that, I don't know how you do that. The people say we shouldn't -- "Just shut up! You're a performer! Do your act and leave us alone; we don't want to hear any facts!" I can't do that. The fire marshal has told me there's a problem, and I got to -- again, you don't want to panic people. "There's no hope folks. Nothing --" You know? And have people, uh, hurt themselves or others. You don't want to do that, but you want to tell them the real stuff. Here are the exits. We're going to have to vacate row-by-row. Here *are* the exits! Hybrid vehicles, available today. You know? You can do that. You can put money in your pocket and less dependence on mid-East oil and clean up the environment. Comp-- you can't afford that good. Can you afford a bus pass? Can you afford a bus token? Take public transportation; it's going to cut down sig- - can you afford a light bulb? Go get a compact fluorescent. That's what you can do today.

09:49:57

MATZ: This is an interesting point, is that in order to really get these big issues across, humor can be a very powerful weapon.

BEGLEY: Very powerful.

MATZ: To have that twist, so --

BEGLEY: Yeah. Yeah. You have to -- you know, if you're going to tell a story about the environment or anything, you can't -- it can't ever be the A-story. You know. It has to be woven in as the B-story. You know, *Chinatown*, if it was just about water in LA, it would've been a -- "What is this? I don't like this movie." It's about murder and if you're rich, you can get away with murder and, oh-by-the-way, there's all this funny business going with water. I mean, if you weave it into the story, something about the environment or homeless issues or whatever it is, you know, you can really, you know -- For the most part! But if you're going to do something, it can be done the other way. It has to be something remarkable, like *Angels in America*, done about the AIDS crisis. But it's -- we -- what that's really about is all these different people from different, uh, cross-cultural kind-of mixes that interact. Uh. You know, it's about the people and, 'oh, yes, by the way, it's in the middle of this plague that started to befall us that we became aware of in the early '80s', so, um, but it -- you know, you've got to -- Samuel Goldwyn was a smart man. He said "if you want to send a message, go to Western Union". You know? You can weave a message into the story, but it can't -- I don't think it can ever be the A-story. Very difficult.

DANA: Satire is something that closes on Saturday night.

BEGLEY: Exactly right! (laughter)

MATZ: Well, this has been a running theme through all the interviews is that, you know, humor can be one of the most powerful means of communication and, perhaps this is why some of, you know, the more -- the more talented people that we've talked to turn to humor as opposed to straight drama or straight -- you know? That they understand that this is something that really can get something more across, that makes it more palatable to take in for an audience that would otherwise not, like, listen to a lecture from (inaudible).

BEGLEY: Yeah. Look at what Richard Pryor did with humor. What he did with *Mudbone* and those different characters in -- in the '70s and the '80s. It's extraordinary what he did. You know, what Bill has done with humor about the environment back when, you know, early on, what different people have done with humor. Lily Tomlin has done humor. I mean, it's extraordinary. Great social commentary woven in. It's always about the behavior and the character -- **and the comedy is king -- but there's a -- you wind up getting a wonderful message in the mix -- that you leave with, I think, in each of those cases. I think it's wonderful. It's the most wonderful way to get a message across. It's as good as Western Union.**

09:56:05

MATZ: Um, is there anything -- any kind of advice you would offer. It could be a broad life lesson or something specific that -- for someone entering the business?

BEGLEY: Yeah. The advice I give actors and actresses, when they ask me, "What do you think? Should I go in the business?" Or comedians. I always tell them, absolutely not. Ab-- if you have to *ask* that question, the answer is no. Because some -- many people do. "I was thinking of getting in the business, should I -- " Oh no -- no way. If you're coming and asking me. But if you say to me, I have a passion, a desire beyond all words of measure - - I have to do it. What do I do with this passion, desires? I'm waiting tables, but still, I got to go act in my free time, and go down to the Matrix theatre, and be part of a little play. I say, "Good, OK. You're going to be fine. Keep doing that; get out there, pick the best material, and then give them the list from there." **But if anybody ever asks, you know, "Should I be an actor? Should I be a comedian?" No way. If it's an option, no.** And you look at the people that hung in there year after year after year; decade after decade, some of them. And never really making it. In my case -- 15 years, still an itinerant actor at best -- mostly a day player, working here and there. To be honest, I was thinking of packing it in. I was going to move to Atlanta, of all places. It was a town I had done stand-up in, and I liked the town -- it was kind of a cosmopolitan town, the South -- I thought, "I'll try to be a big fish in a small pond. Maybe get a talk show going there in Atlanta -- I don't know how I'd go about that, but I'll move to Atlanta, and try to get into the scene a bit -- I know a few people there -- and try to" -- because this is 15 -- a decade and a half! If you've been working a decade and a half in the storm door industry, selling aluminum siding, or whatever, and you're not really getting to where you want to get to be the manager of a -- you know, a storm door company, or whatever your dream is -- it's time to shake it up a little bit. So I thought, I'll move to Atlanta, and I'll -- I literally talked to my wife at the time, I said, "We've got to -- we've got to, I think, bust a move here, and go, you know, move to another place, and try something new." Brrring -- "Yeah, hello? Oh, what is it? What's it called? *St. Elsewhere*? Yeah, I'll go in and read the thing. I think I'm moving -- leaving town. No, I'll do this one last interview." I literally {laughs} was about to leave town; I got this call to do -- for a part in *St. Elsewhere* I didn't get. I was up for the part of -- *Dr. Peter White*, I guess. The part that Terrence Knox got -- who wound up being murdered later. Wound up being shot. So I got -- they threw me a bone; they didn't give me the part of a regular. They gave me the part of this guy *Erlich*, who was like -- had, like, just a few lines, or what have you. And

"OK, I'll do that." And then I would up having these scenes with William Daniels, you know? And they went -- wait a minute, what's this? This Mutt and Jeff thing between Bill Daniels and Ed Begley -- and maybe we'll write some more for this. And it was a recurring character that then they made a regular. So, it's so funny the way fate, you know, will have some twists and turns for you. I was ready to leave town, because it wasn't -- just wasn't happening. And then, something kept me here.

10:01;44

MATZ: Don't give up.

BEGLEY: Don't give up. No terajes. Don't give up.

DANA: Yeah. That's good -- we -- we have a stet question, that -- we don't have to after-wrap and stay here all day, this is wonderful. But... the one liner is, was it worth it?

BEGLEY: Oh, yes, **it was so worth it**. I wasn't kidding what I said before -- about winning the lottery. I really feel like I won the lottery... and I didn't buy a ticket, you know? To be... to have a job at all in 2005. I feel like I have the status symbol of the new millennium -- a job, to work as I do. And now -- not to have a 9 to 5 job, to work one day here, three days there, with different people -- sometimes the same people. To have a job doing something that you like -- something that you love? I mean... it's off the charts great. I'm so lucky. I just feel blessed beyond all words, to do the kind of work I do, and to get paid for it. It's great. I'm blessed. It was so worth it. And, if it stops tomorrow, I wouldn't count myself a loser -- it's been a great ride for now, and if it stopped tomorrow, I would still, I hope, be very grateful. Because it's been 38 terrific years, and... having said that, I hope it does continue.

10:03;11

End of Excerpt from Interview - Ed Begley, Jr.