

ARTS



Lily's back

The versatile performer promises a roller coaster of a show next weekend in Costa Mesa.

By **NICOLE GREGORY**
ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Let's hope Lily Tomlin brings her full entourage of characters when she shows up at the Segerstrom Center on Saturday.

It's just been way too long since we've been treated to Edith Ann, the precocious, chatty child who sits in a giant rocking chair riffing on life. Or Mrs. Beasley, the repressed housewife with a cheating husband. Or Ernestine, the nosy telephone operator with the scrunched-up face and snorting laugh — the character who made Lily Tomlin famous on "Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In" appearances in the 1960s and '70s.

"It's my version of stand-up," says the 73-year-old comedian about her upcoming show. "I use multimedia to sati-



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Tomlin's character Edith Ann is a precocious 5 1/2-year-old who riffs on life.



ARMANDO BROWN, FOR THE REGISTER

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Lily Tomlin, clowning during a makeup session in her office, was a waitress before her show business career took off. She has appeared on Broadway, in the films "9 to 5," "Nashville" and "All of Me" and on TV shows "Murphy Brown," "The West Wing," "Will & Grace" and dozens of others. She has earned Oscar, Emmy and Golden Globe nominations.

TOMLIN: Her many faces

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rize myself and show something about the characters. It's really fun. I want it to be like a roller coaster - I never want you to know what's going to happen next."

The one-woman performance is a familiar format to Tomlin. "It's how I started, it's what I've always done. When I was kid, I used to love to put on shows."

And as a kid, Tomlin had plenty of material to work with, growing up in a working-class part of Detroit. There were 40 apartments in the building where the comedian lived and Tomlin knew the tenants in every one of them.

Among them was a Mrs. Rupert, Tomlin recently recalled. "Mrs. Rupert told me she had worked at the phone company - that she came from a very rich family but married Mr. Rupert, even though he was just a commoner," says the comedian, hinting that Mrs. Rupert may have been the genesis of Ernestine. As a young child, Tomlin would visit the intelligent and eccentric neighbor after school to learn lessons in how to be a lady. "The deal was I'd go over, I'd walk her Chihuahuas for 15 cents and we'd listen to Gabriel Heatter on



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When she was a girl, Tomlin says a neighbor once told her, "If you're not careful, you're going to end up in show business!" Saturday's show in Costa Mesa will include a Q&A with the comedian/actress.



Lily Tomlin

Where: Segerstrom Center for the Arts, 600 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa
When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday
How much: \$39-\$89
Call: 714-556-2787
Online: scfta.org

Saturday's show in Costa Mesa will include a Q&A with Tomlin, something she often includes with her show.

"During my first Broadway show in February 1977, I went out in the bitter cold and walked the line of people waiting to get in, dressed up as Mrs. Beasley. I had an ambulance with me - the conceit is Mrs. Beasley believes at any time a disaster could strike - and my stage manager dressed up as my son, who I was chaperoning on his senior trip to New York. We worked the line all day, and got loads of press. It was like a happening on the street - we were passing out coffee and doughnuts." In character, Tomlin fussed over her fans, telling them that their mothers must be worried with them out there in the cold. "I said to them, 'Lily doesn't care - she's staying at the Marriott and just

came from a very rich family but married Mr. Rupert, even though he was just a commoner," says the comedian, hinting that Mrs. Rupert may have been the genesis of Ernestine. As a young child, Tomlin would visit the intelligent and eccentric neighbor after school to learn lessons in how to be a lady. "The deal was I'd go over, I'd walk her Chihuahuas for 15 cents and we'd listen to Gabriel Heatter on radio. We'd read The New York Times and I would look up words I didn't know in the dictionary. After that we'd eat petit fours and have tea."

One day Mrs. Rupert opened her window and called to Tomlin and her brother, inviting them to come see something important. "We thought it would be a baby's foot or something," Tomlin says. "She brings out nesting boxes. We were on the edge of our seats! She takes out about three ornate mysterious exotic boxes. She gets down to the last long rectangular box, she opened it up and pulled out a dagger with rust on it that looked like blood. She told us 'This is the knife that killed Mussolini.' We didn't even know who Mussolini was! Mostly we were disappointed - we wanted to see a dead finger."

But Mrs. Rupert's last words to Tomlin were prophetic.

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MARTY LEDERHANDLER, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Tomlin rehearses for a hosting appearance on "Saturday Night Live" in 1983.

lady," Tomlin says. "She said, 'Mr. Rupert will be home tomorrow night.' I was about 12 at the time, and I said, 'Could I come over and do a magic act for him?' She said, 'Don't tell me you've been spending your money on magic! If you're not careful, you're going to end up in show business!' I flounced out and never came back."

As a young woman, Tom-

lin worked as a waitress and perfected her imitations of stars such as Brigitte Bardot and Jeanne Moreau. Once her career in show business began, these finely tuned skills launched the characters that audiences adored. Teaming with writer Jane Wagner solidified her as a consistently funny performer, both as an actor and comedian. Tomlin's been in movies such as "9 to



RANDY RASMUSSEN, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

In 1981, Tomlin won an Emmy in the Outstanding Variety, Music or Comedy category for "Lily: Sold Out."

5," "Nashville," "All of Me" and "The Incredible Shrinking Woman," and her one-woman show "The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe" was made into a film.

She's appeared on Broadway and on television shows such as "Murphy Brown," "The West Wing" and "Will & Grace" and recently played Lillie Mae on "Malibu Country" with Re-

ba McEntire. She's been on "A Prairie Home Companion" radio show (and co-starred in the film) and recently narrated a film about the plight of elephants.

Her devoted audience has stayed with her all along the way. Tomlin enjoys her fans, many of whom are her contemporaries. "I'd be surprised if any of them is under 40," she says.

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This kind of play between Lily and her characters makes her comedy unpredictable and fun. And unlike some comedians who exude bitterness, Tomlin's humor is generous. That's why each of her characters, though eccentric, is also very human and real. Tomlin attributes this to the diverse culture she grew up in as a child. "I see everybody as an outsider," she says. "Look, I have Southern roots. My relatives are all Southern - some are the types who would send you an email saying Obama's a Muslim. I grew up in a black neighborhood in Detroit and spent every summer in rural Kentucky.

"When you live a long time, you either want to kill everyone or embrace everyone."

Luckily for us, she embraces a whole range of humanity in her characters. Now, we just have to wait and find out which ones will show up next weekend in Costa Mesa.