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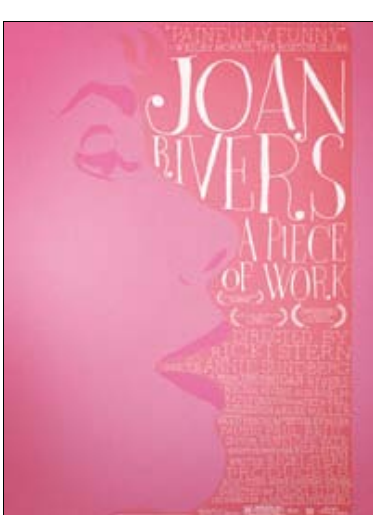
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JOAN RIVERS: A PIECE OF WORK

 POSTED ON FRI, 11/06/2010 @ 07:06 BY:
KIMBERLY GADETTE


English actor Edmund Gwenn is credited with the quote: "Dying is easy. Comedy is hard." **Kimberly Gadette** wonders if Joan Rivers will ever think of comedy as anything other than tough, angry and very, very hard.

According to this film's production notes: "Joan has already taken precautions in her Will so that she will not be resuscitated if she cannot perform a 60-minute comedy set." Words that sum up the comedienne's dead serious point of view. Because in Joan Rivers' world, there's death and then there's life... which isn't worth a single breath if you can't stand up and deliver.

Filmmakers Ricki Stern and Annie Sundberg took on a sizeable challenge, deciding to unveil the mask, plastic and otherwise, of the 75-year-old iconic comedienne. To that end, they persuaded Rivers to grant them unguarded access as a minimal crew followed her around for fourteen months. Cinéma-vérité, the Joan way.



The film opens on two naked eyes, free of cosmetics, and we get the hint: as the façade is laid bare, perhaps the core will follow. Taking a step back, this presents a fascinating conundrum – Rivers is a celebrity who has to fight every day of her life to keep from falling into obsolescence, who must constantly prove herself as still vital, still employable, and damn it, still attractive at her advanced age. And yet she gives over her otherwise rigid control of her physical world to this documentary's intrusive cameras that will record all of her: the successes and the failures, the pettiness and the generosity, the honesty and the self-deception. It's the perfectly-constructed stage face versus those beady eyes without a trace of makeup.

And why? Because on the other side of this fourteen-month trial is the bigger picture. Not just any big picture, but *the* big picture. A picture of Joan for all the world to see, to experience, that will once again remind us of this comedic goddess in all her flawed glory. And this film, this *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work* is worth whatever discomfort she may feel, whatever portion of herself she's compelled to lay bare. Because fame is all.

Now that's ambition.



Stern and Sundberg combine just the right amount of archival footage with Rivers' year-long journey to stay on top. They continuously break the rhythm by interspersing revelatory moments with snippets from her current performances, whether she's receiving a standing ovation at a theater in Edinburgh for her star turn in an autobiographical play, or dressing down a heckler in a casino in Northern Wisconsin.

We see the life of a working comic as never before: an overnight flight from New York to Palm Beach, up at 6am the following morning, 7am for interviews, then a lecture, followed by a book signing. A four-hour drive to Key West for another book signing, followed by performing a stand-up set at a club. A few hours' sleep and then she's on a flight to LA to appear on a talk show. Then the redeye back to New York where more work awaits. All this activity at the age of 75 ... perhaps she swapped her innards for a high-speed microprocessor when no one was looking.

And her biggest fear? A blank engagement book. Though she jokes that the empty white pages are so blinding that they force her to go running for her sunglasses, she's not amused. One engagement per day is simply not enough.



The filmmakers mix up Joan's on-camera scenes with interviews from her closest family and friends. The fact that Rivers' primary assistant Jocelyn has been with her for fifteen years tells us worlds about how well Rivers must treat her staff. When her longtime manager Billy disappears on her one too many times, she finds it necessary to finally part ways – and her distress is heartfelt as she cries, "I will never... not miss Billy."

Most revealing are the scenes with her daughter Melissa. In one instance, after a monologue to camera in which Rivers swears that her daughter comes first, Melissa weighs in, stating that it's the career, and always the career, that wins out every time. Melissa's words aren't sad or bitter – she's simply stating the facts. What we've got here is one dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship, revealed rather than exploited.

At a brisk 84 minutes, the piece seldom lags. The only drawback is that the filmmakers neglect in giving us occasional dates. Not that we need an ongoing chronology, but such life-changing experiences as Rivers' husband's death prompt our desire for a contextual timeline.

Less than a year ago, another documentary debuted that also centered around a mature Manhattaner who'd attained the heights of celebrity. But while Anna Wintour (of *The September Issue*) continues to have a hand in creating and selling the world of face and beauty, Rivers sprouts after it from behind, never quite catching up. Even her face is slipping.

Which, oddly enough, is part of the charm of this raw, insecure and vibrant septuagenarian, beautifully captured in this film. Let's all stand up for the stand up.

Rating on a scale of 5 throaty demands of "Can we talk?": 4

Release date: US = 11 June 2010 (limited); UK = TBC

Directed by: Ricki Stern & Annie Sundberg

Written by: Ricki Stern

Featuring: Joan Rivers, Jocelyn Pickett, Billy Sammeth, Larry Thompson, Kathy Griffin, Melissa Rivers, Cooper, Don Rickles

Rating: US = R; UK = TBC

Running Time: 84 minutes

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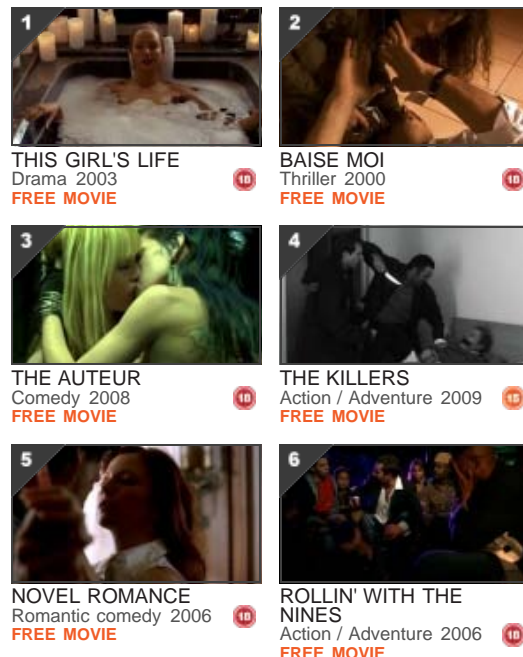
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