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Carol will take your questions

Tour harks to TV show opening, when audience was part of act

By Lisa Stone
PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFFREY MAYER

During the decade-plus run of "The Carol Burnett Show," the host would assume questions from the studio audience before getting into vignettes and sketches for sketches.

Burnett recaptures the impromptu spirit of those exchanges on tour, taking the stage to open a dialogue with fans, delivering vignettes and sketches in response to questions and comments from the crowd.

The 77-year-old Texas native will be at the State Theatre in New Brunswick on Monday, during nine shows for her remarkable career.

She has a new memoir on her shelves, "The Time To Offer Laughter and Reflection," a look back at her adventures in the '60s and '70s, with tales of friends like Jimmy Stewart, Lucille Ball and Cary Grant. She also delves on the stars of her own show, including Tim Conway, Harvey Korman and Vicki Lawrence.

These days, she prefers being busy writing, performing live and making cameo appearances on TV ("Law & Order: Special Victims Unit") and in films ("Devious Woman's War," "In the Company of Men").



"It keeps the old gray matter ticking."

—Carol Burnett
(October 1999)

1960 for a musical special, "Julia and Carol at Carnegie Hall," which was an Emmy. The main challenge Burnett says is finding a broadcast or cable TV channel interested in doing the show.

The tour's national tour dates are during a recent phone interview.

Q. If someone goes to the State Theatre and they really want to ask a question, is there a strategy to getting called on beyond raising your hand?

A. Yeah, if they start jumping up and down, I guess, sometimes people say "Carol, over here in the balcony." It's every kind of a free-for-all. It keeps the old gray matter ticking.

Q. It's curious if you get a range of questions.

A. Yeah, if they start jumping up and down, I guess, sometimes people say "Carol, over here in the balcony." It's every kind of a free-for-all. It keeps the old gray matter ticking.

Carol Burnett in sketches, above, and as one of her best-loved characters, below left.

Carol Burnett
Where: The State Theatre, 12 Livingston Ave., New Brunswick
When: Sunday at 8 p.m.
How much: \$45 to \$65. Call: (732) 244-7400 or carolburnett.com

Obviously people are fascinated with your career and all the people you've worked with, but also do people ask philosophical questions like, "How do we ever transcend mortality?"

A. I try to keep it light, but sometimes I get, "Why aren't there any more variety shows on TV?" The answer is simple enough: The networks aren't going to spend money on a show like "Sassy & Cleo" or "Laugh-In" when they

can do a reality show for a lot less. **Q. Are there any reality shows that you can deal with? I try to stay away from those but I have to wonder what I'd enjoy "Jerry Show?"**

A. I don't watch them. I have a lot of respect for them. I think what they're doing is killing creativity of writers and actors and directors. The programming is so cluttered down where they don't really write anything, and I don't feel the talented writers who have no way to show their work. I don't know that there are any really tough comedies where you really laugh out loud. There were times on our show when Tim Conway would get up and read stuff improvising, and we would have reacted in English for the audience. The crew would be laughing. I don't know how they kept the comedy alive.

Q. Did he catch you off guard too?

A. Yeah, you know you're trying very hard not to crack up. Harvey prided himself on being a consummate actor, but Tim just got to this. It was hilarious. People get a kick out of watching the funny to knock up, and so whether he would or not but I've had the sketch could be so good without knowing it.

Q. In terms of the question and answer hours, they actually read back to the television show?

A. Our executive producer, Bob Bennett, said it would be a good idea to let the audience get to know the letters. I would go out and do all this other stuff. I looked at Bob.

Q. What was your response?

A. I was scared. I didn't know if I could answer a question. I went into his office for two weeks. The first night I went out and I was terrified. I was scared that nobody would raise their hands, and then I was scared that somebody would. I was really giddy and shy, and finally somebody raised their hand and asked what I'm afraid.

Q. Very close question.

A. At least it was a question. Tim Conway was my guest, and he was at his peak and everybody went, "Oh great." I learned up and I



The classic TV cast, from left: The Comedy, Vicki Lawrence, Burnett and Harvey Korman.

brought Vicki out and introduced her. The next couple of weeks, the studio audience had been the previous shows and they were ready to raise their hands and it started to become fun for me. I liked it because nothing was written.

Q. In terms of hearing you, has anyone asked a question where you were like, "Yes, good?"

A. Last year in San Antonio, a lady said, "If you could be a member of the opposite sex for 24 hours and then pop back into being your self again, who would you be and what would you do?" The audience laughed a lot of nervousness because they saw the blank look on my face. I said a little prayer. I said, "Okay, God. I'm gonna open my mouth and whatever comes out, I'm just gonna come out and it's your fault."

Q. Had you every reacted to proper before, or was this the first time?

A. No. This was the only time.

Q. This was women in San Antonio, has that been?

A. I never. I wasn't prepared or you thought. It was pulled out of my mouth. I said, "I'd be George in London and I'd kill myself."

Q. How, my problem is, I would think of that a week later.

