

Playing the Child, He Became the Master of Nonsense

By Irv Sternberg

Nonsense, quite literally, means that which makes no sense. We have an abundance of examples all around us, too many on the political scene. But, in the pursuit of lighter fare—and for the sake of sanity—I will avoid that subject and go elsewhere.

Nonsense, when treated properly, can bring smiles to our faces and sometimes uproarious laughter from our bellies. The recent death of comedian, fund-raiser and occasional commentator on the human condition, Jerry Lewis offered a prime example. More than anyone I can recall, who still claimed sanity, he exploited nonsense to perfect a kind of comedy that erupted in laughter and launched bright smiles that lingered long after his performance was over. He was unconventional, ridiculous, absurd—a foolish child in a man's body. And we loved him for it.

Although he was afflicted with various health problems as he aged, Muscular Dystrophy was not one of them. Nevertheless he chaired the annual fund-raiser for many years, earning millions of dollars for what he called "Jerry's Kids."

Jerry was not only born in my home town of Newark, but in the same hospital less than two years before me. That's the only thing we have in common—other than he earned millions as a comedian, and I earned nada idolizing him. His parents were both entertainers. He made his debut at the age of five, singing "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" in the Catskills of upstate New York, the birthplace of a legion of comedians. He later went on to perfect a comedy that featured slapstick antics such as physical gyrations, exaggerated voices, contorted faces, contrived situations—all based on sheer nonsense.

Teaming with Ohio crooner Dean Martin in 1946, the pair conquered nightclubs, film and TV for ten years, until they broke up after repeated bouts of infighting. After that, Jerry went on to even more success as a pioneer in comedy production, introducing new concepts as a writer, producer, and star entertainer in such films as *The Nutty Performer*. He could be candid and coy, insightful and insulting in the same sentence," a critic wrote, "and tireless, demanding and insecure."

Several times he told interviewers that he never felt more than nine years old, and his performances demonstrated that—a young boy who could be obnoxious and loveable at the same time. In other words, A Master of Nonsense.