

Hollywood, Etc.: Comedian Saget has found his off-color calling

by Lee Grant

For some, Bob Saget will always be "Mr. Tanner," clean-living single dad to three daughters, the sweet star of TV's "Full House," a hit sitcom that ran for eight seasons beginning in the late '80s.

TRUE BLUE - There are some who think Bob Saget's standup comedy is for the birds. On this photo, he said 'I feel badly for the bird, but (expletive) happens when you're sitting around on a shoot.' CNS Photo courtesy of Robert Sebree. Ask Saget his favorite episode and he'll tell you "the last one."

Then there's hosting "America's Funniest Home Videos," in which people sent in moments of their loved ones getting hit in the crotch.

Of its interminable eight seasons, Saget says, "It was like Hanukkah. It would never end." He'll kiddingly tell, too, of his personal stash of sex films people mailed to the show.

In real life, Saget, 51, is the divorced father of three daughters, living on Los Angeles' Westside, raising money for, among other causes, the temple where his children had their bat mitzvahs.

He's also focusing on a blooming stand-up comedy career.

If you've seen "Bob Saget, That Ain't Right - Good Guy Gone Wrong," his recent HBO special that's still playing on the network, or his filthy telling of a famous show business joke in "The Aristocrats," you know this is a guy comfortable with blue material and scurrilous language.

Says he, on the HBO special: "I do children's parties, if you ever need me."

Over lunch and conversation at Houston's, Saget is easy to talk to and open about growing up in a family beset by tragedy. One sister, for instance, died of scleroderma, an autoimmune disease, another of a brain aneurysm.

Saget's stand-up ranges from infantile poop jokes to hilarious songs reminiscent of the legendary Tom Lehrer. He was encouraged by his late father, Ben, an executive in the supermarket business, who appreciated the off-color jokes. Then there was "Farce of the Penguins," the satirical, straight-to-DVD film Saget directed. "For the love of God," dad once told his boy joshingly, "turn this thing off."

At his dad's funeral, amid the loving tributes, Saget brought the house down with this line: "I knew my movie killed, but I didn't realize to what degree."

Saget, the son, laughed recalling the moment: "I was raised with gallows humor."

Saget was born in Philadelphia, grew up in Virginia and then Encino, Calif. He attended Philadelphia's Temple University, winning awards as a filmmaker.

Arriving in Hollywood, he worked the door at the famous Comedy Store on Sunset Boulevard, getting to know major talents like Richard Pryor, Robin Williams and the late Sam Kinison. In the middle of the night, Comedy Store matriarch Mitzi Shore would let him go on stage for a few minutes. "It was 3 a.m. and nobody was there," said Saget of those times.

Often Pryor, the brightest and funniest stand-up of the era, was there and the men would commune about their profession until the sun came up. "I consider him a mentor," said Saget.

At Houston's, Saget orders for the table, a combination sushi appetizer, fresh fish and dirty rice. Mealtime topics range from life in L.A. as a parent ("you love them and you drive them around"), his pals like comic Jon Lovitz and actor Jonathan Silverman, and the crudeness of his material.

Saget is also a striving actor. He was featured a couple seasons back as an eerie murderer on "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit." He played himself as a raucous, ladies-indulging neighbor on HBO's "Entourage."

"I go through a door when it opens," said Saget, who performed on Broadway last year in "The Drowsy Chaperone."

The day before opening on Broadway, he did a stand-up show at the University of Maryland with pal Jamie Kennedy. The two have created a hip-hop video called "Rollin' with Saget" that's been downloaded on YouTube more than a half-million times.

Saget ponders the evolution of his scatological comedy: "I didn't go out and say I'm going to be dirty." He recalls what the late Rodney Dangerfield, who once hired him for a young comedians' TV special, observed of the Saget humor: "It's a 12-year-old who knows bad words."

"I love the dirty stuff more than anything in the world," he said. "Well, maybe, solving world hunger.

"I come out on stage and I'm going to say things, talk about life, stuff that happens. I get such an adrenaline rush from it. It's kind of theater of the absurd or how messed up everybody is."

In "The Aristocrats," he tells Penn Gillette, the film's producer, his wariness of the infamous joke: "It's a terrible, terrible thing." Then he gets into it feverishly, embellishing the story with the grossest of details. At the end, he instructs: "Send this to the kids at 'Full House.'"

He's been told, "You go too far." Saget says, "No, that's who I am."

He knows his work "can come off harsh. It's like a car wreck hitting a boat, hitting a train. It's like throwing down on a Boogie board."

There are devoted fans: "You know who likes us is firefighters, police officers, people who work hard. I'd do anything for them. Look at what they do. If I make them laugh, that's it."

Saget is adamant about the important place of comedians in society, even more important than astronauts, he says: "I make people forget about their lives for an hour; an astronaut goes into space."

Saget's work on TV is closer to his real personality. On "1 Vs. 100," NBC's entertaining quiz show where the host bellows, "Do you want the money or the mob?" Saget identifies with the folks who risk a lot and lose. "I completely get involved," he said.

Now, he's on the road again: "It's 'hello, old friend.'"

Headed out of the restaurant, on his way to pick up his youngest daughter at school, Saget is reflective: "As you get older, you find out who you are. I'm an artist. I feel, at 51, I haven't even started yet."

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