

TV Close-Up: Andy Richter

by Eirik_Knutzen

Andy Richter's father spent nearly 40 years as a Russian linguist at Indiana University. His mother is going strong as a designer of custom kitchens near Chicago; his older brother sells computers in the Windy City.

The comedic actor's Illinois-based younger siblings entail a no-nonsense high school teacher brother and a serious research biologist sister.

All smart and dedicated, there are spirited debates whenever Richter and his wife - actress-writer Sarah Thyre - show up for family reunions and special occasions. But the conversation always returns to the same subject.

ANDY RICHTER - Andy Richter plays a full-time accountant and a part-time private investigator in the TV sitcom 'Andy Barker, P.I.' CNS Photo courtesy of Hopper Stone.

"Most of my family members will say things like, 'So, if the show doesn't get picked up, what are you going to do?'" said the 40-year-old performer. "And I'll say, 'I don't know.' Or, somebody will say, 'So, after this movie is over, what's your next job?' My response is always, 'I don't know.' Then they shake their heads, completely mystified as to how I can live like that."

Of course, when Richter works (for weeks or months at a time) he makes more money than all of them put together. As was the case last year when he shot all six episodes of a midseason replacement comedy called "Andy Barker, P.I." On the air at last, he portrays Andy Barker, a mild-mannered accountant-turned-mild-mannered gumshoe when spurred by a case of mistaken identity.

The somewhat ruffled Richter still can't believe his luck, which stretches all the way back to when he was Conan O'Brien's Ed McMahon on "Late Night with Conan O'Brien" from 1993 to 2000. "The 'Andy Barker, P.I.' gig is the easiest job I've ever gotten," he said, laughing. "Conan had the idea for the show, then brought in his ex-'Late Night' head writer Jonathan Groff to help develop it.

"Both thought of me for the role, but waited until they sold the pilot script last year to call me," Richter said. "I didn't even know the show was happening until I picked up the phone and was offered the job. A midseason show, we had the luxury of having all summer to write all the episodes and actually finished them with a few weeks to spare. We sat around for a while not knowing what to do ..."

Everything was filmed last fall (five of the episodes will air on the Peacock Network; all six are available on the Internet courtesy of NBC Universal Television Studio) and the project represents his third shot at TV series stardom - as "Andy Richter Controls the Universe" (2002-03) and "Quintuplets" (2004) bit the dust in near-record time.

Richter's 20 or so feature films include co-starring parts in Will Ferrell's "Elf" (2003), "Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby" (2006) and the upcoming 'Semi-Pro' - playing the team manager of the Flint, Mich. Tropics, an ABA team owned and operated by player-coach Ferrell who is desperately seeking a merger with the NBA.

"We have known each other for a long time and his producing partner has been a friend of mine for 20 years," he explained. "The movie is populated by my buddies. If you're in the business long enough, I guess you meet everybody."

The man from Yorkville, Ill., via Grand Rapids, Mich., wrapped his acting gigs just in time for his wife to hit the road promoting her new book, "Dark at the Roots" (Counterpoint Books, \$23), an amusing memoir about growing up in the Deep South. Part of her book tour is a stop on "Late Night with Conan O'Brien." "Some think that Thyre had the inside track there," he said, laughing. "Naaah."

With Thyre crisscrossing the country in her quest to make a buck, Richter is left in control of their two children, William, 6, and Mercy, 18 months, in Los Angeles. "It's not a problem, especially since we spackled together two great women working part-time as my support structure," he said. "I've always been very involved with my kids; my days include diaper changing, nose-wiping and cooking."

Conan O'Brien's former sidekick considers himself extremely fortunate to hit the flat screen again. "This is a tough, tough business that can be really frustrating," he sighed. "I'm still in the privileged position of having heads of networks trying to build TV series around me. But in my most insecure moments I think I'm going to end up as the new 'What's My Line' person."

However, one thing is abundantly clear: Richter did not find himself on the verge of television stardom by accident. He spent four years studying film and TV production at the University of Illinois in Urbana and Chicago's Columbia College, though he didn't graduate from either school.

Still, Richter kept pushing until he made his professional television debut in 1990 on the tabloid show "Hard Copy" playing one of 33 victims strangled by Chicago party clown - building contractor-convicted serial murderer John Wayne Gacy. The tiny gig netted \$75, a fortune at the time, but his siblings just shook their heads ... they just knew he wouldn't amount to anything.

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