



GLOBE PHOTOS/ZUMA PRESS/MCT Jonathan Winters, one of the great comedians of the 20th century, died April 11 at age 87.

Appreciation

Winters Was A World

Into Himself

BY ROBERT LLOYD

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LOS ANGELES — The large child known as Jonathan Winters died last Friday at age 87.

Accompanying him into the now-noir hereafter were the multitudes he contained, a cast of men, women, children of every race and nationality, rich and poor, city and country. Some were characters with names to whom the comedian would return — Maude Frickert, the go-go granny — but more of them existed for a minute or less, brought into focus, played with and then sent on their way, as another appeared in their place. He could create a person, a back story and a world in the space of a line.

Significantly, he began in radio, in Ohio — a man in a room, filling it with people and noises with nothing but his own voice. (He was an expert producer of sound effects.) The tenor of the times — it was an age of comedy-as-theater, including improvisational theater — set the stage for Winters' work, but he found his own way into it.

Improv, which is often done badly (and rarely solo), is not just "making things up." It requires a depth and breadth of knowledge, a sponge-like sensitivity to the wide variety of humanity, from the way people walk to the sounds they make, and not a little empathy. Winters brought a varied background to his art: He knew country and city life; he was a gunner on an aircraft carrier in the Pacific in World War II; he had thought at one point to be a political cartoonist and went to art school to that end.

After a nervous breakdown on-stage at San Francisco's Hungry I, some time in a mental hospital and a second collapse, he quit nightclub gigs. In the early 1960s, his work included TV appearances that more and more were tailored to his gift.

All it required for him to turn this on was a suggestion, a prop. In one famous appearance with Jack Paar, a stick becomes a fishing pole, a lion tamer's baton ("Send in those big cats — uh, send in the smaller ones"), a flute, a violin bow ("Imagine what I could do if I had the other part," Winters said, sawing his arm), the feeler of a giant beetle, a paddle, an arrow, a golf club (in the hands of a perfectly captured Bing Crosby), stocks (the kind you sit in as punishment), a teacher's pointer, a bullfighter's sword and a wand.

He was considered a kind of magician; not just a clever comic, but a different species of being, a human oddity. "This isn't a prepared comedian," Paar said of him. "There's nobody who can do what Johnny Winters does; there isn't another Johnny Winters."

His singularity means that there is not a long line of followers: There is only really Robin Williams, whose own comedy is a career-long homage to Winters' — appropriately, they played father and son (Williams being the father) on "Mork & Mindy" — and possibly Jim Carrey.

The "Mork" role was inspired casting: Not only were Winters and Williams fellow prisoners of a rapid-fire brain, but Winters' big, round face and small features gave him perpetually the look of a large baby, though he was a serious and sometimes troubled person. But that is almost a metaphor for comedy.

There was something compulsive about his comedy. "I answer my phone as anybody but myself," he told David Letterman in 1986, "because life does get a little dull when you're not working steadily."

Interviewed decades earlier by Ed Murrow for TV's "Person to Person," which was shot in the subject's home, he began: "Good evening, Ed. I am Jonathan Winters. This is my wife. These are my children. This is my living room. I'd like to show you more of the house, but there isn't any more."

On a cross-country airplane trip, he turned to the person in the next seat and said, "Gosh, see that down there ... HE-L-P ... Oops, snow blowed it over. Well, that's life."

MONDAY PRIMETIME/LATE NIGHT APRIL 22, 2013. Table with columns for time slots (3:00-1:30) and rows for broadcast stations (PBS, KTVU, NBC, etc.) and cable channels (HBO, MAX2, SHOW2, etc.).

TUESDAY PRIMETIME/LATE NIGHT APRIL 23, 2013. Table with columns for time slots (3:00-1:30) and rows for broadcast stations (PBS, KTVU, NBC, etc.) and cable channels (HBO, MAX2, SHOW2, etc.).

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