

## Dying for a Laugh

by Gary Tillery, SFSPE



Marty Rosen’s career ended, fittingly, in the Rock Bottom Lounge.

You may remember the place, on Sepulveda. It stood just a half-block from the Tomb of the Unknown Comic. The memorial was named that in order to honor all of the comics who have ever died on stage, but everyone knew that the guy who inspired it was Larry the Grump. He bombed so disastrously one April night in 2015 that it became legendary in stand-up circles as the Hiroshima of gigs.

Larry took the stage at 9:00 that night with 12 minutes of what he thought was good material. He figured he would judge the response, trim out a minute or two, then take the set to a nicer club—maybe even TV. But fate decided to have some fun with Larry. The audience he drew

that night was not just cold, it was arctic. Most of them, it turned out, were German tax auditors—a group on day six of a tour they had learned, just that afternoon, was not deductible.

Larry came out oozing confidence and began tossing zinger after zinger into the lifeless void:

“I tell you, I’ve had it with L.A. traffic...”

“Have you ever noticed the weird stuff people hang from their rearview mirrors?...”

“And what’s with Tesla? What’s going on in their heads?...”

He put himself out there for a full minute without the crowd giving him so much as a titter. Not a murmur. Not even a groan. Nada. Bupkis. Zilch.

He rapped the mike with his knuckles. “Is this thing on?”

The hair at his temples grew soggy with flop sweat.

Then things took a turn for the worse. His mike began to emit a weird hum whenever his mouth came near. He tried to compensate by holding it farther away. But there was a jackhammer at work on Sepulveda, working overtime to break up asphalt. Under normal circumstances, the sound would have been negligible, absorbed by the walls and bodies. But this was a scene of hold-your-breath silence—like when you’re in church and you start to worry that the preacher, building to a climax on the wages of sin, might hear you exhale and turn his gaze toward you. To be heard over the clatter outside, Larry was forced to project.

With his shirt sticking to his neck and shoulders, struggling to keep the mike at the magic distance—precisely four-and-three-quarters inches from his lips, he raised his voice and tried to spark some flicker of life.

“Last night, my girlfriend, of all people, turned on the ball game...”

“You have to imagine—just my underwear and a Dodgers cap...”

“Who’s with me on this? Am I *wrong*?...”

No reaction at all. He was about three minutes in, and his desperation could be sensed all the way to the preoccupied couples at the back wall. The Germans glanced at each other, then at their watches. The girl who served the tables stepped gingerly, afraid of scraping the floor and attracting attention.

As the emcee, the club owner should have come on stage to end it. Any owner with a heart would have. And, after all, it reflected on his establishment. As it turned out, though, Tony

de Luca had a very good reason for letting the situation play out.

“You wanna know what *really* drives me up the wall?...”

“Who *is* it that comes up with some of these memes?...”

“Whew. Did someone leave the sauna door open?”

The longer Larry bombed, the sweeter it tasted for Tony. That very afternoon, he had barged into Larry’s dressing room and caught his wife, Carla, in a compromising position on the floor. Flustered, she said she was searching for a lost earring. She got even more flustered when Tony pointed out that both were still in her ears.

Carla had the good sense not to stick around for Larry’s show that night. But, of course, that cost him the easy laughter that might have been the spark to get others in the room to loosen up.

When Tony saw Larry glance at him in a silent appeal for rescue, he just stood there with his arms folded across his chest. *Not a chance, hot shot. Let’s see you dig yourself out of this.*

Five minutes into the set, perspiration poured off Larry’s forehead in a stream. He swept it off his eyebrows with his fingertips and valiantly kept trying to rouse the dead.

The lack of response became an insidious weight that took on a reality of its own, a communal reluctance to budge, confirmation of Newton’s first law of motion. As Sir Isaac might have put it if he could have whispered in Larry’s ear, “Seriously, my good fellow, do you think an audience that hasn’t laughed at a punchline in six minutes is going to respond to *anything* you say?”

By the time he reached seven minutes under the spotlight, Larry’s posture resembled a marathoner

who had staggered to the finish line on quivering legs and who could not imagine a greater pleasure in life than sprawling on his back on the asphalt.

Still...

“Can anyone tell me where all the good music went?...”

“I’m up to *here* with the crap they play now...”

“Seriously, the stuff in the eighties...”

The climax finally came just over eight minutes in. “Does anybody remember”—he winced—“the Grateful Dead?” With that, he clutched his chest, dropped the mike, and collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Ironically, that earned him his very first laugh. The couple nearest to him assumed that it was an ad-lib meant for comedic effect. But, after several long seconds with no movement, they began to sense otherwise. The woman with the tortoise-shell comb in her hair finally set down her strawberry daiquiri and reached out to poke him.

Tony decided that he had better take a closer look. After assessing the situation, he shouted to Gustavo, the bartender, to call for an ambulance. The lights went up. A siren wailed in the distance

and then arrived. Following a flurry of activity, Larry the Grump left the stage on a gurney, covered by a sheet.

Naturally, the story made the news the next day. Tony was interviewed on two channels and got a couple of paragraphs on page one of the *LA Times*. The dying-on-stage meme caught on, and soon people were standing in line to get into the Rock Bottom Lounge. Tony realized that he could raise his prices and attract better talent, and his negative cash-flow turned around. He bought a new Tesla and even took Carla to Maui for a week.

A couple of B-level comics in L.A.—friends of Larry—took it upon themselves to start raising money for a plaque out front. That came to the attention of the local councilman; the idea grew, and suddenly there was funding for a Tomb of the Unknown Comic.

It’s still there, of course. But the Rock Bottom Lounge is no more.

Oh, I seem to have gotten away from the point. Marty Rosen ended his career there, too, five months after Larry. He walked out of the club one night after a lackluster set and was flattened by a guy who had leaped through the window of his third-story apartment in a Superman costume. Ω



“Life literally abounds in comedy  
if you just look around you.”

—Mel Brooks