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JOE FRANK



## JOE FRANK

WORK IN PROGRESS

Joe Frank, radio and performing artist, has been compared by the reviewing press to Orson Welles, Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman, Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges and Raymond Chandler for his widely acclaimed weekly radio program, "Joe Frank: Work in Progress." Produced by KCRW, the Santa Monica based National Public Radio station, "Work in Progress" is broadcast Sunday mornings at 11 a.m.

Aired on NPR in 30 cities nationwide, "Work in Progress" has won numerous awards since its 1986 debut. Lauded as "creative mind theatre," "radio noir," and "a chronicle of the American psyche," the shows are thought-provoking entertainment, bizarre and darkly comic.

One of Frank's most acclaimed programs is the three-part "Rent a Family," which won Columbia University's prestigious Major Armstrong Award and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting Program Award, both in 1988. This fictionalized story focuses on a single mother with two young daughters who decides to rent her family to lonely professional men yearning for family life. After viewing a number of videotapes, she selects a man and the stage is set for a chilling tale. The man disappears with her children and the woman turns, in desperation, to her ex-husband and his new wife.

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The story breaks for surreal panel discussions on the sociological, psychological and spiritual implications of surrogate families.

This year Frank expanded his range as a performer to include the stage, a direction he intends to continue exploring. In February, "Rent a Family" was adapted and directed by Paul Verdier, well-known for his productions of Ionesco's work, in a series of performances at Los Angeles' Stages Trilingual Theatre. In March, Frank's one man show, "Joe Frank: In Performance," played a twice extended, sold-out run at the Museum of Contemporary Art's Ahmanson Auditorium. Next winter a collection of fiction by Frank will be published by William Morrow & Co. (New York).

David Carpenter, in the September issue of "Spin" magazine, wrote: "Joe Frank is an invaluable warrior who stands in defense of our fears, our vanities and our forever-eroding sense of ourselves. He transforms the everyday banality of the human comedy into an inspired weirdness that feeds on pathos and irony, and feels a lot like revelation. Sartre would have called it nausea; Frank makes it art."

April 1990



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### BIOGRAPHY

Joe Frank was born in Strasbourg, France of a Viennese mother and Polish father. His family immigrated to New York City where Frank was raised and educated. Frank, who received a B.A. from Hofstra University, attended the Iowa Writers Workshop and subsequently taught at The Dalton School in Manhattan.

In the mid-'70s Frank joined WBAI, the New York Pacifica station, as a volunteer. By 1977 he was the host of "In The Dark," a late-night entertainment program that featured Frank's monologues, improvised sketches, and live music. In 1978 Frank moved to Washington D.C., to anchor the Weekend Edition of "All Things Considered" on National Public Radio (NPR). From 1979 to 1985 he wrote, performed in, and produced 18 dramas for NPR Playhouse, garnering many broadcasting honors, including the 1982 Broadcast Media Award, the 1983 Radio Program Award from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, two consecutive Gold Awards at the International Radio Festival of New York (1983 and 1984), the American Nomination to the 1984 Prix Italia and a Special Commendation from the Berlin Prix Futura (1985).

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In 1986, at the invitation of Ruth Hirschman, general manager of KCRW, Frank moved to Los Angeles where he created his own weekly one-hour program, "Joe Frank: Work in Progress," at the Santa Monica-based NPR station. In 1988 Frank won both the prestigious Major Armstrong Award and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting Program Award for his three-part series "Rent a Family."

In February 1989 "Rent a Family" was adapted and directed by Paul Verdier at Stages Trilingual Theatre. In March of 1989 Frank gave his first one man show ("Joe Frank: In Performance") at the Museum of Contemporary Art's Ahmanson Theater.

Frank has published two plays, "The Decline of Spengler" (New Directions 48, New York) and "A Tour of the City" (Tanam Press, New York). A volume of fiction, "The Queen of Puerto Rico and Other Stories," will be published by William Morrow (New York) next winter.

Montreal's Theatre Anima will present Frank's award-winning "A Tour of the City" at Hangar Number 9 of the Old Port of Montreal in June, 1990. This drama, featuring a cast including performers from Cirque du Soleil, will be under the direction of Jordan Deitcher.

Michael Mann, creator of the television series' "Miami Vice" and "Crime Story," has purchased the rights to Frank's radio monologue, "Night," and plans to adapt it for a feature film.

April 1990

CHEECH MARIN • GLENN CLOSE • DAVID LYNCH • JOE FRANK

NOVEMBER 1989

THREE-FIFTY

# L.A. STYLE



## AROUND THE HOUSE

THE EAMES LEGACY

EASY BRUNCHES

THE NEW HEIRLOOMS

L.A. ARTISANS



KCRW'S TWISTED GENIUS PUSHES THE ENVELOPE OF RADIO DRAMA

BY RALPH RUGOFF

# THE DARK PROGRESS OF JOE FRANK

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DENNIS KEELEY

STYLING BY KELLY RAY

JOE FRANK'S "NIGHT," A ONE-AND-A-HALF-HOUR RADIO MONOLOGUE FIRST BROADCAST IN 1988, BUILDS TO A MOMENT SO UNRELIEVEDLY DARK THAT IT IMPRINTS ITSELF ON THE LISTENER'S MIND LIKE A BLACK HOLE, CAUS-

ing ordinary compassion and sympathy to flounder and fail. Frank's voice is clipped and hypnotically driven, barely wavering from a monotone as he weaves his program around a web of hard-luck narratives: A hapless fry cook accidentally burns down a restaurant; a small-chested stripper receives a toxic silicone implant as a birthday present; a New Age preacher is exposed for having sex with a male staff member who later commits suicide. Finally, Frank relates the story of one of the preacher's followers, a Vietnam veteran who has desperately battled his own suicidal impulses and is slowly dying inside. He loses his sense of smell; his hearing deteriorates; he experiences numbness in his hands and feet. And it occurs to him that he's withdrawing from life, but there's nothing he can do about it

because he stopped caring a long time ago.

What makes this portrait of despair additionally chilling is that, like all of Frank's monologues, it's based on a true story.

"I never wanted to produce radio programs in order to comfort anybody," says Frank. "People are comforted enough. Radio and television dramas typically end with a resolution of problems. But in real life 'happy endings' are just the beginnings of new problems. I want my program to be about the way life really is, even if it is often painful.

"I find the darkness powerful," Frank adds. "I find it almost religious in some sense. It's almost as if the darker these stories are, the more profound they become. It's through suffering that we're forced to exam-

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**Joe Frank**

*Continued from page 167*

ine the meaning of our lives."

A weekly program aired in Los Angeles over KCRW-FM, "Joe Frank: Work in Progress," delivers its darkness in two remarkably divergent formats. Frank's monologues, based on biographical material collected in lengthy interviews, explore scenes that are so squeamishly personal, so harrowingly intimate, that listening to them is akin to reading the journal of a close friend and discovering things you'd rather not have known.

Frank also produces droll ensemble pieces that deftly scramble the factual and the fantastic. In ersatz docudramas like "Rent a Family" (a 1988 show in which a single mother and her children are hired out to lonely bachelors), the humor is Kafkaesque—absurd, dreamlike and decidedly black. Yet for all their comic incongruities, Frank's *verité* simulations are often spiked with heart-wrenching pathos, as even the most absurd premise is acted out with compelling psychological realism.

Evident in both his monologues and his dramatic pieces is a fascination with alienated characters. Frank's stories frequently feature individuals who've been derailed from mainstream trajectories and find themselves confronting fears of never getting back on track. Riddled with ambivalence and indecision, they engage in wayward quests for emotional contact and intimacy. Inevitably, they come up against despair and frustration.

"They're alienated people, but then again, who isn't?" Frank asks rhetorically. "In my experience, no matter how normal and integrated someone might seem on the surface, whenever I get to know them really well, I find trouble. I think when you remove the masks and the disguises, we're all fellow sufferers, struggling through life one way or another.

"People who *do* fit in well, who *are* integrated, don't really reflect a lack of ambivalence to me. Instead, I think they're just not in touch with their unconscious. In a society like this where you have so much stimulation and so much freedom to choose, how can anyone end up being anything *but* ambivalent? In a sense we're too intelligent for our own good. We're weighed down by conflicting thoughts, feelings, temptations, options. When you're with one woman, you're thinking about

being with another one. And when you're with her, you're thinking of the first one.

"The bottom line is that the human condition is inherently full of ambivalence. In every meaningful relationship, I think you're going to find love, hate, resentment, compassion, cruelty. Nothing," concludes Frank, "is simple."

Frank's Venice neighborhood, a deracinated, fun-and-sun suburb near the beach, seems to belie the dark visions he forges on the radio. And in person, despite his professed belief in the power of darkness, the 49-year-old radio dramatist hardly seems diabolical. His sharply focused eyes and the lines around them suggest the powers of concentration one finds in a concerned psychologist. Durable good looks exude a weathered kindness and there's something about his demeanor—a probing, deeply attentive curiosity—that reminds me that the most dangerous person to interview is a good listener.

Frank's face eases into a cautious smile as he leans back in his Barcelona lounge and contemplates life in Los Angeles. "I've gotten used to it," he admits. "But when I first moved out here, it seemed far too clean and sunny. I was sure that I was going to die spiritually and would be returned on a railway car in a coffin back to the East Coast."

Death, both spiritual and physical, is a recurring theme in Frank's work. Suicides, fatal accidents and terminal diseases, as well as a host of macabre fears, crop up routinely on his programs. In his stage performance at the Museum of Contemporary Art last spring (sold out for its six-week run), his obsession with mortality took a peculiar twist. In addition to a blood-filled water cooler, the sparse set included a coat rack shaped like a crucifix and a clock stopped at three, which, as Frank points out, is the hour Christ died on the cross.

"I was born with clubfeet and as a child was subjected to repeated surgery, so the idea of crucifixion has a special resonance for me," Frank relates. "Also, my father died when I was five and a half, after an illness that had lasted for two years, and in a way, it was like the death of God. That experience of living in a situation where my father was ill and I was ill, and my mother was young and vital and in a sense burdened by us, certainly had a telling effect on my psyche and sensibility."

Born in Strasbourg, France, in 1939, to a Viennese mother and Pol-

ish father in flight from Nazi Germany, Frank grew up in Manhattan. After attending a notoriously permissive school on the Upper West Side, he moved with his widowed mother and stepfather to Great Neck, Long Island. "I was sent to public school at the age of thirteen and for the first time in my life I was confronted with the reality of homework. It was crushing," he recalls.

Frank found some consolation in listening to Jean Shepherd, a late-night radio monologist who would fill hours of airtime reminiscing about his Indiana boyhood. "I had difficulty sleeping," Frank remembers, "and it was a comfort having him to listen to late at night. He was entertaining and moving, and he made you feel less lonely. Looking back, that was probably the first time I realized how radio could affect and nourish people's lives."

Eventually graduating "493rd in a class of 508," Frank spent his time in high school daydreaming of athletic glory or dashing off amusing prose pieces he'd hand to his classmates. That flirtation with writing developed into a serious affair during four

years at a local community college, and following a postgraduate stint as a night duty volunteer on Bellevue's psychiatric ward, Frank headed west to the celebrated Iowa Writers' Workshop. Two years later, sans degree, he returned to New York, where he spent the next decade teaching English in a private school. His writing plans slowly faded from sight.

In search of an alternative creative outlet, Frank ended up knocking on the door of WBAL, an independent-minded New York radio station run largely by volunteers. After lending a hand on various programs (at one point, editing down a Gertrude Stein opus), a slot opened up for his own show. And then, after ten years of wondering what he was going to do with his life, Joe Frank found himself. On the air.

"In the Dark," first broadcast in 1977, was a prototype for Frank's later programs, combining rambling personal monologues with improvised comic skits. From the beginning, he avoided using scripted material. "The performances in radio—



they're not subtle enough and they overproject. So I decided that when I worked with actors, I would give them only the premise of a situation and then see how far they could take it. And I found that when you do improvisational work with really creative people, they'll think up things you would never have imagined.

"It can be an exciting and wondrous experience when you encounter something done in a way you'd never envisioned before," he continues. "Whenever I've had that kind of experience, whether it was the first

was a horrendous experience," he remembers. "They brought me on because they thought I had a good voice, but I had no journalistic experience. I remember talking to Senator Moynihan in his office and finding the situation utterly dreamlike. Frequently during interviews, my mind would start wandering and I'd come back with an hour and a half of tape that was virtually unusable."

Frank ultimately convinced the NPR executives to let him produce radio dramas instead, and for the next seven years he worked in Washington as a free-lance writer/pro-

ducer. In 1986, he moved to Venice at the invitation of KCRW manager Ruth Hirschman, who offered Frank a weekly show.

Since moving to the movie and TV capital of the world, Frank's radio program has enjoyed an uninterrupted success. In its short lifetime, "Work in Progress" has garnered numerous prizes and awards, as well as significant funding from national radio and arts agencies. In early 1990, William Morrow will release a book compiled from programs being rewritten by Frank for publication. Film producers and directors have already begun courting Frank in a time-honored Hollywood ritual.

The success of Frank's program is indubitably linked to its unnerving, diarylike rawness—and to an audience raised with voyeuristic appetites. "I think we're all interested in how other people live their lives," he comments. "You only have one life, so it's fascinating to see other paths you might have taken. Assuming we're all troubled to some extent, it's particularly interesting to listen to a program that explores people's struggles which, though extreme, are similar to our own."

According to Frank, the fact that his monologues are closely derived from true stories further augments their appeal. "I don't believe it's possible to credibly tell a story that isn't true," he maintains. "Or put it this way—I think true stories are much more interesting than anything you can make up. When people hear something honest and authentic on

the air, they know it." Yet like the proverbial good wine, Frank's offbeat imagination may not travel well. In more commercial media, the unalloyed intensity of his radio shows will most likely be compromised. Even in his performance at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Frank seemed hesitant to take the same risks with a live audience that he does on the air. Assembled from fragments of past programs, the show was liberally peppered with one-liners. "I was always a troublemaker," he quips at one point. "I remember creating open rebellion in the fourth grade when I told my classmates that the vaccine shots we were about to receive would be administered directly into our eyeballs." Rather than challenging his audience, Frank seemed bent on entertaining them.

One person who was not amused was MOCA curator Julie Lazar, the woman responsible for getting up the show in the first place. "She called me the morning of opening night and told me the show trivialized my work and that, based on my radio programs, she knew I was capable of much deeper material," recalls Frank. "I went into a tailspin. I remember rushing into my den and desperately looking through my files to see if I could somehow put together another show for the performance that night."

While the MOCA piece proved to be an unqualified success with audiences, Frank admits that it wasn't as close to his heart as the rougher-edged "Work in Progress." Having just received several major grants for radio work, he's now concerned with producing new programs which will surpass the risks he's already taken. "I've created these dark shows and now the question is, 'Will Joe Frank just repeat himself, or is he going to take things a step further?' What can I do now so that I won't let down my audience, so that when they turn on the radio, they know something different might happen?"

"It may be strange and inappropriate," he continues, "but there are fanatics out there who regularly listen to this program, and I feel compelled to take them places they've never been. In a sense, it's like being a knight and wanting to do wonderful things—even if they are dark and perverse and strange. I want to meet new challenges, to confront new dangers and to honor my listeners by acts of spiritual, if not physical, courage."

In a culture where the term "radio

drama" usually evokes bland BBC productions or the nostalgic quaintness of "Prairie Home Companion," Frank's edgy shows seem hopelessly out of sync. Yet by nose-diving into the dark side of the human condition and delving into its pathetic absurdity, desperation and inexplicably enduring hopefulness, Frank's "Work in Progress" has found a growing audience. It may be that in the midst of all that darkness, listeners perceive a glimmering light. Frank certainly does.

"I feel deeply moved by many of the stories I tell on the air. I feel they have to do with the search for meaning and spiritual connection.

"I'm not formally religious, but I constantly wonder and contemplate the purpose of our lives and I marvel at the cruelty of the world we live in. Just outside this house, in my backyard and a few blocks away in the ocean, there's a violent, unseen struggle going on, where in order to survive, members of different species have to kill one another.

"Yet I don't feel the world is a nihilistic vacuum. I just think we don't have a clue as to what's actually going on. There's a reality around us that we cannot grasp, any more than a dog can read Plato. If you can't imagine empty space going on and never ending, or the alternative possibility of it ending somewhere without any space beyond it, then right away you're caught in a conundrum you can't solve.

"Now if we can't imagine either of those possibilities—the only two options our intelligence can fathom—then where are we? How can anybody presume to know the truth about our condition when we can't even understand basic concepts like time and space?"

Frank pauses for a moment to catch up with his thoughts. His corrugated brow suggests a man fascinated by life's biggest questions, questions that make the mind stutter. But while Frank takes them seriously, he isn't naive enough to be looking for long-term answers.

"I feel there's mystery," he explains. "More than we can imagine. And this might sound pretentious, but in a sense, the radio programs are a way for me to try to touch that mystery.

"Maybe it's because my father died when I was young, but I have never wondered if there's any meaning in life. I know there is," he insists with quietly unassailable conviction. "Pursuing that meaning is why I'm on the radio."

## WAS ALWAYS A TROUBLEMAKER.

### I REMEMBER CREATING OPEN REBELLION IN THE FOURTH GRADE WHEN I TOLD MY CLASSMATES THAT THE VACCINE SHOTS

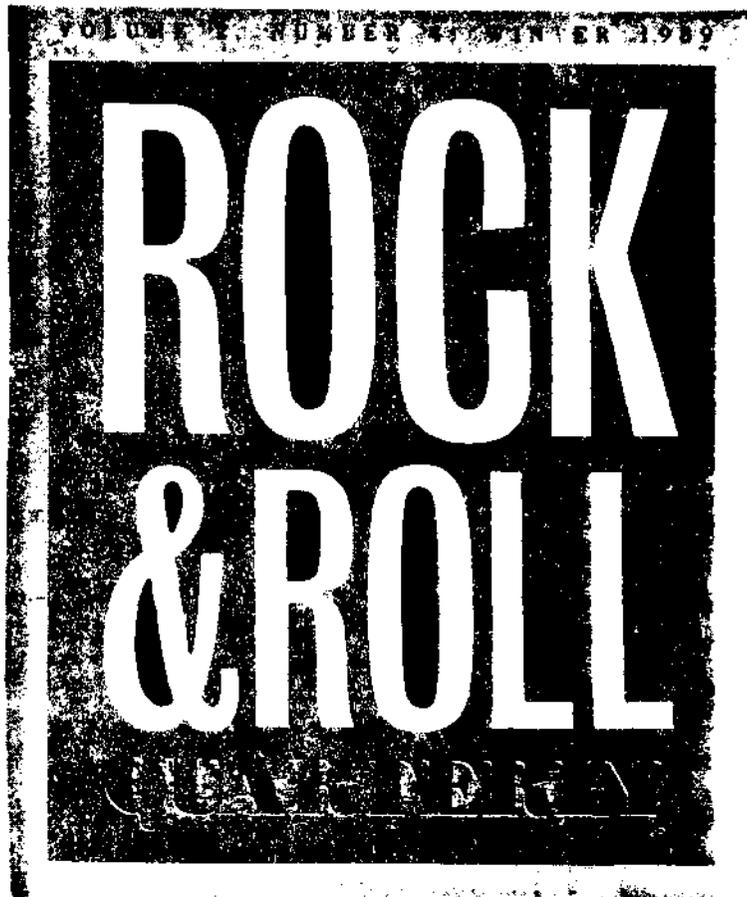
### WE WERE ABOUT TO RECEIVE WOULD BE ADMINISTERED DIRECTLY INTO OUR EYEBALLS.

time I read *The Sound and the Fury* or saw an Ingmar Bergman film, it's been very, very powerful. So when I went into radio, I wanted to create a program that would give people a similar experience, something that would make them sit up and wonder "What the hell is this?"

One way Frank achieved that effect was by featuring elaborate, improvised put-ons. An actor would be introduced on the show as a distinguished guest, perhaps a best-selling author or a controversial sociologist. Frank would then discuss with him, in quasi-serious fashion, increasingly bizarre topics. On one program, a guest was presented as a world-renowned mime and Frank, after inquiring about the mime's current world tour, asked him to give a live performance. The resulting minute of dead air time—"something you just don't do on radio," Frank points out—divided his audience between befuddled outrage and wry appreciation. On another program, an actor posed as a New Age doctor and took live calls on the air. "His suggestions were so bizarre that it was funny, but it was also cruel," Frank notes, "which is something my programs are still accused of being. But art is about extremes. If you're going to write a love story, you don't write about a mildly satisfying affair."

By 1978, "In the Dark" had drawn the attention of National Public Radio and Frank was hired to host the weekend edition of "All Things Considered." He lasted for three months before resigning. "It

the village  
**VOICE**



**Joe Frank's "Work in Progress":** The most imaginative, literate monologist in radio today. Produced at KCRW (Santa Monica), aired locally on WFMU and WNYC. If a microphone could capture the nether recesses of the modern psyche, it would sound like Frank's absurd, comical excursions: Radio Vertigo.

# SPIN

September 1989



Say you're driving down the road one existential night, or even better, you're lying on your back, alone in a big dark room around midnight, listening to the radio. There's the sound of water in a tub, and a man and woman talking. Water splashes as she begins to wash his back, and the man quietly asks, "What makes you sad?"

Or you're in an auditorium packed with young scenesters from the literary, music and performance worlds. The lights go down and a middle-aged man with penetrating eyes walks out onstage wearing a sweatsuit and holding a microphone. "I'm an insomniac," he begins. The audience chuckles. He then describes how one night he phoned an escort service to request "a slim graduate student, her hair in a bun, wearing glasses, her smoldering sexuality overlaid by a deep knowledge of Heidegger. Her left buttock should have tattooed on it a verse from the Koran—failing that, an obscure poem by Joyce Kilmer. . . ."

Joe Frank makes his living as a purveyor of angst-ridden introspection. "Work In Progress," his weekly one-hour broadcast produced at Santa Monica, California's KCRW and aired nationally on National Public Radio, is a journey through a surreal landscape of words, sounds and ideas. Combining spoken text with music, audio effects and improvisations of a group of New York actors with whom Frank has long

been associated, an episode might take the form of a dramatic monologue, diatribe, talk show, audio documentary, or hallucinatory travelogue. It might be an impassioned and clumsy ode to "woman" that detours into an unnerving portrait of misogyny, a discussion of domestic terrorism, or a simple story of friends who come to the rescue, lovers who drift apart, and family members who die.

This summer Frank took his "Work In Progress" into a new medium, performing live to packed houses (the run was extended twice) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in L.A. Drawing from his radio programs, Frank stalked the stage holding his microphone like a talisman, delivering deadpan truisms as he stared the audience down, laid back on an analyst's couch and told stories about the rain, his childhood, and the nature of desire. A collection of his stories will be published this winter by William Morrow and Co.

"Humor is a way of deflecting terror," Frank has said. If so, then Joe Frank is an invaluable warrior who stands in defense of our fears, our vanities and our forever-eroding sense of ourselves. He transforms the everyday banality of the human comedy into an inspired weirdness that feeds on pathos and irony, and feels a lot like revelation. Sartre would have called it nausea; Frank makes it art.

—David Carpenter

## LEISURE &amp; ARTS

## Radio's Prince of Darkness Rules the Freeways

By KATHLEEN A. HUGHES

Los Angeles

It's 7:30 p.m. and the freeway is bumper to bumper. Flipping the radio dial yields the usual mix of rock, muzak and news. But then a soft, hypnotic male voice floats into the car. The voice is even and dreamlike. It sounds like a whisper directly into the ear:

*"A dog will never be able to read Plato. A cat will never solve algebraic problems. Their intelligence binds them. It traps them. Why should we think we are any different? There are truths of which we shall remain unaware forever because we don't have the intelligence to grasp them. We are condemned to live in darkness. . . ."*

The voice, which continues along these lines for almost an hour, is that of Joe Frank, a radio personality who rapidly has become a cult figure in this sprawling city of freeways. The monologues and dramas on his program sound like a blend of philosophy texts, soap operas and Garrison Keillor. The shows are alternately dark, bizarre and very funny—but always hard to turn off.

In "Rent a Family," a single woman with two children talks about her loneliness and her decision to rent her family to a publishing executive. In another monologue, a man tells of being seduced by a woman who has only pretended to be deaf. Some of Mr. Frank's sagas give the impression that the radio accidentally has tuned into someone's phone line; the conversation seems far too intimate or bizarre to be on the air.

Other freeway riders, it turns out, also find the sagas disturbing. "This is incredibly depressing," says one friend who nevertheless insists on remaining in a parked car 20 minutes to listen to the end of a one-hour episode of "Rent a Family." A hospital administrator says, "They're so weird I turn them off. They remind me of the scary stories that used to be on the radio before television."

The man behind the stories lives in a small house in Santa Monica and operates out of the nearby basement studio of KCRW, a public radio station; his shows are broadcast in 13 other major cities including San Francisco, Chicago, Philadelphia and Minneapolis. A ruggedly handsome man of 48, he answers the door wearing sweat pants and a T-shirt. Over cranberry juice in an austere furnished living room, he explains how he wound up telling such peculiar tales on the radio.

"My life has been dark," says Mr. Frank, who explains that his family fled Nazi Germany and his father died when he was still a child. The family shoe business in New York went bankrupt. Other traumas included having to wear leg braces following an operation to correct clubfeet.

After working as a teacher of literature and philosophy at a Manhattan private high school, he got into radio more than a decade ago by hosting a late-night talk show on WBAL, a New York public radio station. "I talked a lot about relationships and obsessions of mine which had to do with death, alienation and ambivalence," he recalls matter of factly. He also freelanced as a radio writer and producer before joining KCRW two years ago.

All this gave him practice at making his voice hypnotic. "Before I went into radio I remember not liking my voice," he says. "I learned that the closer you are to the microphone the more intimate it is."

To gather material, Mr. Frank says he often pays people he meets socially to tell him true stories from their lives. He asked an actress if she ever had been involved with someone she now despised. She had. So he told her to "imagine he's on the phone and go over the relationship."

In the resulting tape, entitled "Thank You, You're Beautiful," the woman berates her former lover for being shallow, selfish and vain. "You deserve everything that's coming to you and you're going to get it. Certainly from me," she says. It's

like overhearing a woman breaking up with her boyfriend while you're waiting to use a pay phone. It's not Tennessee Williams—but it's hard not to listen.

The woman's monologue is interrupted at various points by Mr. Frank saying, "Thank you. You're beautiful," a phrase that is followed by the sound of a crowd



Joe Frank

cheering. Mr. Frank also interjects absurdist phrases such as, "I'm sitting in a cafe in Paris, revolted by the roots of a chestnut tree," a reference to the novel "Nausea" by the late French author Jean-Paul Sartre.

Much of the time, Mr. Frank says, people's real-life stories aren't very interesting; the idea for "Rent a Family" came from his own musings. Mr. Frank, who is single, says he found himself thinking, "Wouldn't it be great if I could have a family for a short period of time, then get out of it—and then bring it back?"

The saga begins with a monologue by a character named Eleanor, an out-of-work

divorcee who notices an advertisement for a rent-a-family service. Her voice sounds pained and serious as she tells of going to the agency, filling out a 10-page application form and making a videotape with her two daughters for prospective renters. The next day the family has a taker, a publishing executive.

But as the saga continues, "Rent a Family" becomes like a soap opera for the insane. A date at the beach ends in disaster when the renter disappears with her two children. Subsequently Eleanor obsessively calls her ex-husband, Arthur, and his new wife, Kathy, and cries on the phone to them about her loneliness—despite their pleas that she stop calling. Each pathetic conversation is preceded by the eerie sound of a long-distance phone number being dialed. At one point, Eleanor begs Arthur and Kathy to let her become their housekeeper.

"He's gone too far with this one," says my traveling companion. At times, "Rent a Family" sounds all too real. But it's too much sobbing and desperation for the airwaves. Listening to it in the car is like being stuck in a psychiatric ward with garrulous roommates.

Some of Mr. Frank's shows are lighter. For one live broadcast, he called three of his former girlfriends in New York in the middle of the night. After telling them they were on live radio, he asked them to sing along to the tune of "I Remember You." Only one didn't. And in a spoof of a radio talk show, Mr. Frank congratulates a piano player from the "Fast Piano Players League" for playing a piece of classical music in 58 seconds flat.

Even some of the darkest stories turn out to have amusing twists. In "Emergency Room," Mr. Frank uses tapes made in a Baltimore hospital emergency room that include cries of pain. Cut to the sound of waves, with Mr. Frank talking about how wonderful it is to be alone in a beach house in Kurosawa, Japan.

"You drum your fingers on the bureau top and then you draw out the revolver and gaze at it. You put the barrel into your mouth, close your lips on it—and take a bite. The chocolate breaks off and melts on your tongue. The Swiss guns are better than the Dutch. . . . But you know you shouldn't eat them. You're a diabetic. If you go on this way you'll kill yourself."

Many of the sketches involve ruminations on loneliness, a state Mr. Frank finds conducive to working. "When I'm involved with someone, things become muddled," he explains. "There's a lot of static. I don't function and my energies are dissipated. Another person is a disturbance."

But he insists his stories aren't depressing. "Most of what you hear on the radio is banal, trivial and doesn't cut deeply," says Mr. Frank. "When you confront the nightmare you transcend it."

# PENTHOUSE

THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE FOR MEN

SEPTEMBER 1989

## VIEW FROM THE TOP

### RADIO

BY KATE LYNCH

Public radio's black sheep, Joe Frank, creator and narrator of the popular radio drama "Work in Progress," is into his third season, thanks to sizable grants from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the National Endowment for the Arts. Despite the program's steady growth in popularity (featured on over 30 stations nationwide), "Work in Progress" cannot be heard in the nation's capital on either of its two National Public Radio stations. And he has been exiled to a middle-of-the-night slot on WNYC—New York City's N.P.R. flagship station. Does the native New Yorker find this strange? "Not really," Frank told *Penthouse*. "but I am disturbed that program directors make decisions for their listeners." New Yorkers can hear Frank at a reasonable hour on New Jersey's WFMU. (See *Penthouse* "Games," March 1989.)

"Work in Progress"—occasionally dismissed as malicious, vile, ridiculous garbage—is more often lauded as thought-provoking entertainment. "His best work transcends the genre of radio and becomes great art," offers WXPN (Philadelphia) Music Director Mike Morrison. WBEZ (Chicago) Program Director Ken Davis says the majority view Frank's work as "creative mind theater."



Although Davis believes Frank is "an acquired taste," he adds that many listeners "live and breathe it. It's almost impossible to leave the show once you get sucked in."

The stories are legion of spellbound listeners driving in circles around their homes until a program's conclusion. Positive reaction is often immediate—"Your radio show impressed me dramatically and indelibly the first time I heard it," one fan told Frank. Or more gradual—"At first I hated it, then I was confused, and finally it dawned on me that it was genius." Ohio resident Rob Shoher said of his Joe Frank experience

Frank himself has faced angry listeners, as in the case of a Pennsylvania woman who called KCRW, the Santa Monica station that produces the show, after becoming incensed by "Rent a Family"—a three-part series that won the C.P.B. Public Radio Program Award and Columbia University's Major Armstrong Award in 1988. After Frank explained to her that the theme of the show deals with loneliness in this country and the inability to commit, she calmed down

and they "agreed to disagree."

In any case, Frank's work never fails to move listeners when it lurches from lullabies to disasters or tragedies. In "Nausea," for example, the narrator muses dreamily over a soundtrack of gently falling rain, saying, "Rain puts the world in a trance." Then, abruptly shifting gears, he states that he has never felt lonelier in his life, and resolves to leave his wife before the rain stops, telling her, "I realized you're a stranger to me."

Another of Frank's characters ridicules the trimmings and trappings of Christmas in "A Road to Hell." He describes the Christmas tree he leaves up till mid-August: "The other decorations on my tree are fire extinguishers, smashed bifocals, blocks of steaming dry ice, a cameo of Eva Braun, a dental chart of Anthony Eden. . . ." Shock and titillation are not Frank's purpose, but as he soberly explains, "To face a painful truth is ennobling or enriching, and suffering can lead to wisdom."

The former teacher also strives to "astonish listeners, open up new vistas, and expand the imagination." Frank, the student who ranked 493 in a high school graduating class of 505, says that had he foreseen his current success—which this year included sold-out one-man performances at Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art and a book deal with William Morrow—"I would have fallen on my knees with tears in my eyes."

Accolades and awards aside, Frank says of his listener mail, "Without the

letters, I'd be in limbo." Students, senior citizens, and prisoners are among his diverse "cult" audience. People have written him that they listen to "Work in Progress" with family and friends as in the radio days of old. A Japanese exchange student wrote Frank after returning home, "Life without Joe is boring and almost empty."

## STAGE REVIEW

# 'Rent a Family' Pays Price for Taking on a Radio Play

By SYLVIE DRAKE,  
Times Theater Writer

At the heart of Joe Frank's short radio play, "Rent a Family, Part One," lies a provocative idea: That just as we rent and abandon everything else in our society—cars, apartments, furniture, clothes, cooks, cleaners, escorts and other companions, why not rent a family for a day, a week, a month? The implications are clear.

At the heart of Paul Verdier's stage adaptation of Frank's "Rent a Family" (now playing in plain English at Stages Trilingual Theatre) lies the same provocative idea. Never mind the satirical jab behind Frank's words. There is something there that stings in deep and much deadlier fashion.

It is the plausibility of such a notion. The very idea, couched as it is in soothing corporate conundrums and ad-agency jargon, has a chilling effect on any audience, but particularly a live one with its collective unconscious huddled in a small dark room. It is . . . agitating. It typifies much, if not all, that is wrong with our American lives. People are collectively unnerved.

They react.

That is the strongest case that can be made for Verdier's attempt to stage a radio play, which, by its very definition, is a static affair.



Charles Parks, from left, Tony Pandolfo, Kenneth Danziger and Tom Fucello with Grace Zabriskie in "Rent a Family."

The director splits our focus between a meeting of two corporate executives and two experts who discuss the merits and demerits of the RAF (Rent a Family) Corp.—and the account of a divorcee with children and few options who decides to take a job hiring out with this corporation.

For an hour, we hear the pros and cons from both sides. The corporate panel is the conscience of the piece, examining it from all angles like a corpse.

In highly stylized and frequently hilarious fashion, the impassive experts (Tony Pandolfo, Charles Parks) and executives (Tom Fucello, Kenneth Danziger) rationalize the advantages of renting a family, of not making commitments ("it allows people to be more spontaneous"), of the idea as the sine qua non of the free enterprise system, and of the long-term effects on the children. Instead of being stuck with one father, a variety of fathers offers a smorgasbord of experiences—what could be better than that? So it goes.

From the divorcee's point of view, things proceed more cautiously. Eleanor (an eloquent Grace Zabriskie) is prudent as she approaches this new career. She tries to be careful—as careful as it is possible to be. There are lots of forms to fill out. Lots of screening. Everyone at RAF is very pleasant. There's no pressure. She and the children are videotaped for prospective renters. Prospective renters are videotaped so she can see them. It's computer dating.

Addressing us from a corner of the tiny Stages auditorium, she outlines her concerns, shares her thoughts with us. But as she investigates, it begins to seem . . . workable. Possible. She's even able to develop enthusiasm for the idea.

Right about then, of course,

something happens to illuminate another, more seabroos aspect of our American lives. It is a predictable but chilling finale to Eleanor's hapless little saga.

This must work beautifully as theater for the ear. Frank is a master of provocative understatement who looks at contemporary behavior through a more timeless moral prism and knows exactly where to aim for the kill. He indicts a society sick with terminal cynicism, fulfilling Oscar Wilde's worst nightmares of knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing—and paying more dearly than it knows for the lapse.

But is "Rent a Family" theater for the stage? Not really.

The suspense is the same either way: We are told, not shown, what happens. This is discursive theater where all action is virtually motionless and the stage bare except for a table and chairs. The characters don't move from the spot where we first see them. No. The only advantage to watching "Rent a Family" on stage is that of experiencing it with an audience of live, listening bodies—and talking about it afterward.

As such, and only as such, it is recommended, particularly since Verdier has directed with considerable wit and everyone in the cast

is good at restrained emphasis. If it's action you want, you won't find it here. But if you're after moral gymnastics, try it.

At 1540 N. McCadden Place in Hollywood, Wednesdays through Saturdays, 8 p.m., with matinees Sundays at 3, until May 7. Tickets: \$15; (213) 465-1010.

# Rent a Family Hits Home on Issue of Commitment

By Tom Stringer

Many thanks to Stages Trilingual Center for bringing Joe Frank's brilliant radio drama *Rent a Family (Part One)* to the stage. Particularly rewarding is Grace Zabriskie's well-modulated portrayal of Eleanor, a middle-aged divorcee who, out of personal and financial desperation, rents herself and her two children to a lonely publishing executive.

**E**leanor addresses the audience directly, telling her story in a serious, conversational tone. At the story's beginning, she has just lost her job and, searching the want ads, finds an

*Rent a Family, Part One*  
Stages Trilingual Theatre  
1540 N McCadden Place, (213)465-1010  
Through April 30.

advertisement for a rental service that is looking for mothers with little children. Doubtful and nervous, but intrigued by the idea, Eleanor goes to the agency and fills out an extensive application form.

Eleanor's story is interweaved with excerpts from a panel discussion in which a trio of sociological experts debates *Rent a Family's* virtues with the company founder, Joe Barrington. *Rent a Family*, we learn, provides a video match-making service for executives who want the benefits of a spouse and children without the burden of a long-term commitment. Clients are encouraged to try a broad range of families—a "sampling" of the vast "inventory"—as either an experiment to help the executive learn what type and size of family suits him, or for the mere enjoyment of variety. It's a matter of freshness, Joe Barrington tells us. "People who bring to a relationship very little history are free to exist happily in that moment."

In the meantime, Eleanor makes a video tape with her two daughters, all the while assuring herself that everyone connected with this agency is extremely nice and "above board." Even her first date is the epitome of the well-credentialed, nice-looking man. Only when it's too late, in the terrifying conclusion of Eleanor's date, does she discover the evil that can exist beneath such pleasant surfaces.

The notion of renting a family brings into focus not only the obsessive tendencies of a consumer society—the convenient, quick-fix solutions we seek for deep and abiding needs—but also the alienation of single adults in a culture that heavily promotes the virtues of family living. That a successful business venture could be built around such a need—or at least made to sound plausible—suggests great numbers of lonely people that intentionally forego the experience of long-term commitment. In this vein, Joe Barrington's arguments in favor of *Rent a Family* are so audacious we have to wonder, at least for a moment, which institution will eventually crumble—*Rent a Family* or the family? Might *Rent a Family* be a good idea? Or should the family remain entirely apart from mercantile considerations? In what ways is the institution of the family so sacred that suggesting a price for one is taboo?

**O**n opening night, during a post-performance discussion, one man in the audience defended the idea of renting families as not only workable but desirable. While others laughed at such a literal reading, it is this reading that reveals the play's grounding in human desires and fantasies. The play inspires uneasiness no more than when we hear, during a pre-recorded taped segment, a woman's cheerful voice greeting a stranger at her door, then calling to her child, "It's your new father from the agency!"

Paul Verdier's stylized direction of the panel-



*Rent a Family*

ists underscores the comic absurdity of the play's central premise. With dour expressions, the men move at times in unison, making clear the otherwise oblique distinction between fantasy and reality. One could argue that the panelists are unnecessarily reduced to fools, but this drives home the point that their well-considered, if dryly academic analyses present a less-than-for-

midable opponent to the charming demeanor of the handsome entrepreneur.

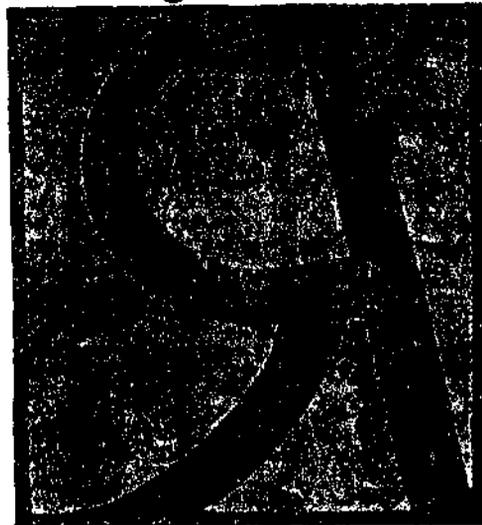
Verdier's handling of Eleanor retains the simple, intimate delivery of the radio broadcast. Eleanor's voice on the radio, disembodied and intensely private, was haunting—the inner voice of a desperate woman, the kind of dramatic monologue one might imagine in one's own mind but never deliver out loud. In the stage version, Grace Zabriskie's Eleanor, comfortably barefoot and seated in a rectangle of gold light, entrances the audience with her subtle, authentic tone. Zabriskie conveys Eleanor's profound disturbance by staring, as if into a void, each time the light on her dims. In the role of the sleazeball Joe Barrington, Tom Fucello is irresistible, a glib corporate hype-artist with a million-dollar smile. Kenneth Danziger, Charles Parks and Tony Pandolfo play the cartoonish, intellectual panelists.

The ultimate significance of Frank's play lies not so much in the possibilities it suggests as in the present-day realities it exposes and satirizes. We are a culture that allows a great amount of freedom and power to rest in the hands of corporate opportunists. Sucking us in gradually, they prey on our needs and allay our fears with niceness. In Frank's dark vision of human and corporate relations, we discover too late the evil that exists beneath pleasant facades. The vision is dangerous and true, a tragic view of the state of things today.

We eagerly await the stage versions of *Parts Two and Three*. □

Friday, March 24, 1989 Vol. 11, No. 23

## Los Angeles Reader



BY STEVEN MIKULAN

## Mr. Insomnia

*Joe Frank and  
the art of high anxiety*

**H**ow do you answer when asked to name uniquely L.A. inventions? Jay-walking tickets, midday gridlock and the pronoun "me" are some things that reflexively come to mind, though obviously, none of these originated here. It's just that they so often go with our sandy turf that they seem to have sprung naturally from the soil, like the ubiquitous eucalyptus trees — themselves imports.

Monologist Joe Frank is a person who might be added to the above audit. Imported from New York, he seems to be the embodiment of Angeleno angst — a lonely, inquiring voice drifting out of KCRW's Santa Monica studio every Saturday and Wednesday night. He's also the spokesman of a culture built around first-person pronouns. Frank has become one of the most successful exponents of the art of talking about one's self precisely because he never seems to be, during his forlorn radio narratives. He instead appears to be talking about us and our fears of insignificance, and because of this we accept him as a guide to our own confused lives.

Frank isn't a monologist in the strictest sense — his hourlong radio dramas frequently use other actors. But they, along with the New Age music that invariably wheezes in the background, are marionette-like devices under his creative thumb. Two performances grafted from his show *Joe Frank: Work in Progress* have recently made the evolutionary leap from airwaves to live stage. *Rent a Family (Part 1)*, is taken from a three-episode series that had won the Major Armstrong

### RENT A FAMILY (PART 1)

By Joe Frank  
Adapted and directed by PAUL VERDIER  
At STAGES  
1540 N. McCadden Place  
Hollywood  
(213) 485-1010  
Through May 7

### JOE FRANK: IN PERFORMANCE

Performed by Joe Frank  
Based on radio programs created by Joe Frank in collaboration with David Ragins and Arthur Miller  
Directed by PAULA MAZUR  
At the MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART  
Abramson Auditorium  
250 S. Grand Ave., downtown  
Fri. Sat., 8 p.m.; no performance May 5 and 6  
(213) 624-6828  
Through June 3



A lonely, inquiring voice made visible

Award's first prize and a Public Radio Program Award from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. It's the tale of a business that rents out women and their children to single men who yearn for the family experience without its emotional and legal entanglements. An oversight panel of men reviewing this singular enterprise occupies center stage, while downstage a woman relates her encounter, under the agency's auspices, with what seemed to be Mr. Right. *Rent a Family* is typically Frankian in its premise's nagging plausibility.

From the plausible, Frank's story moves to the grotesque: longings for companionship and support are very real, but the degrading context in which actor Grace Zabriskie, as the lonely, unattached mother, expresses them underscores Frank's viewpoint that hell isn't so much other people as it is our pathetic selves. Director Paul Verdier's adaptation of *Rent a Family*, a production with which Frank is not associated, suffers from the sort of genre static-cling that often accompanies media transitions that aren't wholly successful. The piece's lack of onstage movement precludes any kind of physicality, and what had seemed ironic on the radio merely comes off smarmy in the theater.

**J**oe Frank: *In Performance*, though, features the man and his microphone alone in a 90-minute pastiche of past KCRW shows — and it's a breathtaking display of soul-baring. Gone is the mumbling, shadowless reader who performed with Tom Waits and others at 1988's Ionesco tribute, gone is the shield of invisibility protecting the storyteller from his radio audience. Here Joe Frank puts up his presence as collateral for journeys into the psyche, and is clearly rewarded by the re-

sponse of an auditorium of listeners. For unlike such soloists as Spalding Gray and Kedaric Robin Wolfe, Frank never allows us to feel voyeuristic — his gruesomely funny stories are the two-way glass in which we simultaneously see the narrator and ourselves.

Under Paula Mazur's deft direction, Frank wanders about a starily appointed



Beth Lapidis: New York stories

## Ars Brevis

BY IAN BRESLAUER

**T**hey call her the Ed Sullivan of performance art. A better aphorist than I dub her enterprise: "a beatnik *Gone With a Show*." Anyway you quip it, Deborah

set to assume his various identities. "I am an insomniac," he begins the evening, neither as a complaint nor as a boast. He is stating the case for many of us in L.A. Whether or not we literally have trouble sleeping at night isn't the point; we are all sleepwalkers searching for friendship and dignity in this city that rolls up its side-

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Oliver's invitational performance-dance showcases are candy for those with an appetite for the off-the-wall. She recently institutionalized these avant-garde free-for-alls, and the benefit, *Burning Ice* (at the Powerhouse in Santa Monica two weeks ago), was the first outing for her new banner org, the Los Angeles Performance Exchange, Inc.

Exchange what, you ask? Performance synergy at a one-stop-shopping smorgy of teaser excerpts from works both in-progress and complete. The 13 ditties on the bill ranged from Linda Frye Burnham's activist lamentation to Lynn Swanson's red-and-black surrealist scenario to wooden-hula-skirted Martin Kersel's hyperventilated study in movement as masochism. Producer Oliver contributed *Girl Stories Part IX: There Was a Drought*, a semi-danced narrative solo that had some sardonic one-liners, while Peter Schroff positioned himself in and around a floating window frame and intoned a cryptic jeremiad.

Dance and poetry shared the program with improvisation and abstract theater. There were more misses than scores here: Martha Graham-oid dancers, self-

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JOE FRANK ◀ PAGE 36

walks after rush hour.

Frank starts out with a story about watching his TV's "Sex Channel" and responding to an ad for an escort service. Twenty minutes after reciting a ridiculously fussy list of requirements (e.g., "Her left buttock should have tattooed on it a verse from the Koran, written in classical Arabic. Failing that, an obscure poem by Joyce Kilmer") over the phone, his dream date arrives — a middle-aged, overweight woman wearing glasses, who apparently has nothing in common with the caller's admittedly tall order. Just as "Maureen" is the complete letdown of

Frank's expectations, his instantaneous infatuation with her is in turn completely at odds with our expectation of his response. His falling in love with this homely call girl is a denial of our superficial, appearance-mad society, a denial we would like to think we ourselves are strong enough to abide by.

His relationship with Maureen becomes the evening's leitmotif, recurring in progressions as Frank unravels his life. It is a life dimmed by self-deflation. At one point he lies on a shrink's couch as the analyst unexpectedly begins to talk about his *own* inner thoughts until he falls asleep; Frank, the patient, turns to the somnolent psychiatrist, facing anew his own ultimate sense

**The Joe Frank persona is capable of the kind of abject behavior of which the audience knows in its heart it is itself capable, as though within every would-be poet there were a tyrant screaming to be released.**

of loss — his reason for being there in the first place. Later, he proposes the theory that perhaps humans have evolved on Earth merely to serve as hosts to races of

viruses. "What a downer," he laments. "And I thought I was important."

This ego-shattering notion of our own insignificance threads throughout Frank's performance. He's continually confronted by his own failures: an ex-lover belittles him on the phone, he finds himself trapped on horizontally moving "elevators" that let their passengers off at city street stops. On the other hand, his narrator is a fervent believer in his own personal greatness: he speaks condescendingly to God, and he'll leap onto a woman in the audience to scam on her, only to dump her and hop over to another potential lay.

The Joe Frank persona is capable of the kind of abject behavior of which the audience knows in its heart it is itself capable, as though within every would-be poet there were a tyrant screaming to be released. Paradise, both urban and tropical, is frequently suggested by the menacing appearance of a palm-tree shadow. It represents both a paradise-lost L.A. and the killing field each of us suspects we are capable of turning Eden into. At one point Frank agrees to indulge his flair for self-gratification by buying a tiny Caribbean island; soon that island reappears as a tormented hell, and Frank as its megalomaniac dictator. Like dictator, like lover, as it turns out: he eventually tires of Maureen and rejects her, the honeymoon turning into an emotional hangover. In fact, it is a post-honeymoon blues that perpetually reigns over Frank's world, an alert sadness that comes from living in urban promised lands like New York and Los Angeles. It is this knowing melancholy that makes Joe Frank's hilarious accounts of life in hell the perfect antidotes to the smiling superficiality of our Love-Connected city. **L**

# PERFORMANCE

BY DICK LOCHTE

Los Angeles

MARCH 1989  
VOLUME 34, NUMBER 3

## Frankly, Joe's Branching Out

There are no hard-and-fast rules about success in show business. But for the past three and a half decades, ever since the vast listening audience was transformed with alarming alacrity into the vast viewing audience, the belief has endured that there wasn't much of a future in radio drama. Over the years, several melodramatic ventures have tried to beat the odds and have slunk away in defeat. But just as the Electronic '80s are sputtering to a close, it appears that the form has found an unconventional new champion.

Joe Frank is a sort of dark knight of the airwaves, who is winning the battle for at-home hearts and minds and ears with a captivating, completely original approach to story telling. His 60-minute program, *Joe Frank: Work In Progress*, is heard Saturdays at 11 p.m. (and repeated Wednesdays at 7 p.m.) on KCRW-FM, where it is produced. The shows are then picked up by other National Public Radio stations after a considerable delay caused by NPR's conservative screening process. Frank's unique composites of fictional and semifictional interviews, monologues, sound effects, dramatic sketches and radio vérité—all underscored by a variety of haunting, exotic beats—manage to be hilarious and unsettling, surreal and painfully familiar. And their consistent effectiveness is green-lighting new media avenues for their creator: to travel.

This month, Stages Theater Center in Hollywood is presenting the theatrical world premiere of Frank's *Rent a Family, Part One*, adapted by the radio show's director, Paul Verdier. (The original version, a three-part miniseries on the subject of the loneliness and alienation of singles in America, this year received the first-place Major Armstrong Award and a Public Radio Program Award from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.) Then, on April 21, Frank will begin a series of Friday- and Saturday-night stage performances at the Museum of



Frank: "Management thought my shows were too provocative—too much sex in them."

Contemporary Art's Ahmanson Auditorium that he says "will be literally a work in progress" with new material and possibly a backup band. "With radio, you don't get a direct audience response. This will be an immediate way of finding out what works and what doesn't."

This fall, a collection of Frank's stories will be published by William Morrow. And various other projects are being mulled over, involving MTV, Fox TV, HBO and Steven Spielberg's new anthology series for TV. Norman Lear's office recently called requesting background information and tapes. Frank says all the possibilities are making him feel like Tantalus, the mythological king who found himself thirsty and hungry, but stuck in water that

he couldn't drink and just beyond the reach of mouth-watering fruit.

Of course, Frank's present situation at KCRW is considerably more comfortable than the tormented king's. When compared with some of the twists and turns his radio career has taken, it may even qualify as idyllic.

Frank first entered the radio arena in Manhattan. "I'd been promoting rock and folk concerts in the New England area," he recalls. "I was a one-man production company. I put up the posters myself. And I did a lot of driving. I came to realize how powerful the radio medium was, especially when you were in a car, driving at night. There was this medium and nobody seemed to be using it to do anything provocative or

imaginative." So he became a volunteer worker at Pacifica's WBAI, where a crisis developed and many of his coworkers quit.

When the midnight-to-5-a.m. slot opened up, Frank jumped in as host of *In the Dark*. He'd had a vague idea of what he wanted to do on radio, influenced by monologist Jean Shepard and another WBAI broadcaster, Steve Post. "I began doing some of the things I'm still doing," Frank says. "I worked with actors. I always wanted whatever we did to sound absolutely authentic. The actors had to be very bright, very good at improvisation. I wanted the audience to think they were listening to real interviews that would take a slightly bizarre turn."

There was, for example, an interview with a "mime" that covered his origins, his teachers and the differences between performing for large audiences and small ones. So far, so good. But this discussion was followed by the mime demonstrating his craft. "That meant dead air, of course," Frank says. "Sixty seconds of absolute silence at the end of which I told him how splendid I thought his performance was."

"I did that sort of thing for a year and a half, and it was wonderful. But I wasn't being paid. I was a volunteer. And I began to feel that I was a dilettante. I was in my thirties. I sort of panicked. I went to other stations and let them hear excerpts of my program, but they thought it was too far out for them. I went through a period of despondence, depression and re-evaluation."

Just before he exited the radio business entirely, National Public Radio in Washington, D.C., called and asked him to host the weekend edition of its popular news-feature show *All Things Considered*. "They said they thought of me because they were trying to make the weekend edition more entertaining and arts oriented. Still, serious journalism was completely foreign to anything I'd ever done. But it was the break of my life. So I told them I was very interested in current events and was eager to give it a try. Thereupon I began the most horrendous time of my whole broadcasting career. I didn't know a thing about journalism. I knew how to conduct a stupid interview, but not a serious one. There's an art to getting a three- or four-minute piece with a beginning, middle and end. And I didn't know how to do that."

"I remember going into the office of Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan and feeling completely out of my depth, like an eight-year-old child who'd walked into a room filled with philosophers. During that interview, and others, I would fade out, not know what the other person was talking about, feeling as if I were in a dream. It

## PERFORMANCE

turned out that very few of my interviews ever got on the air. I'd return with a mass of tape, and there would be no way to cut it. I was so bewildered and confused that eventually I told my producer that there was no use prolonging the agony."

Frank was allowed to finish the final six months of his contract by producing one radio drama a month for NPR. "They were very successful in terms of listener response, but management thought they were too provocative. Too much sex in them. When my contract was up, I was out. I was very bitter and unhappy. I had thought I was on the cutting edge of radio, doing things that really made a difference to people, and these jerks, these bureaucrats, were afraid to do anything that wasn't mainstream."

For a few years, Frank tried independent producing, supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Satellite Program Development Fund. The shows, which wound up on *NPR Playhouse*, earned a number of awards. "Still, in creating four radio programs in a year, you're not spending a lot of time or making a great deal of money," he says.

"So I entered another dark period of reassessment . . . and this was when Ruth Hirschman [KCRW's general manager] invited me to come out to L.A."

The *Work in Progress* series began in January 1986. Critics have described the programs as innerspace poetry, an exploration of the mind's hidden landscape, a chronicle of the American psyche. When asked how the shows are specifically created, Frank has no concrete answer. He prefers to let the events speak for themselves.

**A Joe Frank workday:** By 10 a.m., he is seated before a tape console in KCRW's well-appointed studios on the Santa Monica College campus, making a tape loop of a 20-second segment of a South American song to use as background music for an upcoming show. He discards the pile of excess audio tape on his way to greet the first of three actresses with whom he will be working.

Escorting her into a studio, Frank explains that for the next two hours he would like her to talk to some imaginary person, a lover perhaps or a friend, in

conversational tones, responding to Frank's questions and suggestions. The questions and suggestions will not be heard on the broadcast; her replies will form a monologue of sorts. The actress, also a comedienne, warms to the task, eventually describing a heart-rending tale of young love that goes unfulfilled. With scarcely a pause, Frank asks her to react to someone who is brushing his teeth with his mouth open. The total lack of continuity is so absurd that the actress feels challenged and responds wholeheartedly.

After lunch, another actress is seated across from Frank, providing him with more material. This time, the centerpiece is a dark reminiscence of a romance in Italy that has sinister overtones. Frank makes a suggestion that moves the tale from probable autobiography into fiction. The actress eagerly improvises, adding flourishes and filling in the fictitious background. When the session is over, Frank signals to his engineer to stop the tape. He thanks the actress, but before she leaves, Frank asks her the real ending to her story. "Well, he always carried this knife," she says, and Frank interrupts her

immediately, asking the engineer to start the tape again.

At 3 p.m., the last actress arrives. Another profitable session. Frank's plan is to use only portions of these tapings for his next show and to spread much longer segments over several future shows. But when the next program airs, it is devoted entirely to the actresses. "I taped a monologue, but it didn't work," he explains. "So I decided to go with just the interviews. I finished editing about five minutes before we went on the air." Even then, work on the program is not complete. Though it has been seasoned with the music loop and with appropriate sound effects, such as the brushing of teeth and gargling, Frank decides a few more touch-ups are needed before the show is rebroadcast.

"It's very hard to explain why I do what I do," he says. "It's a gut-level feeling I have. It's not so much *why* I want to do it, it's *that* I want to do it. Inviting these women to the station and asking them questions about themselves, their first loves, I don't even know how to rationalize it, exactly. Except that I want to create something very real, very authentic and compelling. Something different from anything anyone has ever heard." That mission is accomplished every week.

teners describing their clothing and bodies and asking, over the phone, to be posed and photographed by Frank.

The final call, Shearer remembers, "was from a woman who described in fairly frightening detail her preparation for an act of suicide. And you can hear Joe trying to read this situation, and when it got too scary, he took her off the air. And I thought, 'You can do a lot of things, but you cannot put a live suicide on the air.'"

Shearer was, as were many others, fooled. Off the air, the would-be suicide admitted she didn't intend to kill herself. But the feeling that anything might happen is Frank's most potent appeal.

"It's easier to confess on the air than anywhere else." Frank, dressed in black, sits at a relatively quiet inside table at the Pioneer Boulangerie in Santa Monica. "With radio you can be hidden. The audience is an abstraction. They're not distracted by what you look like." His voice carries a slight edge of hostility, as if someone were trying to pry. He has a square, Slavic face bordered by graying sideburns, and he looks directly at you: In a stare-down contest, he'd win. His hands, which look clean enough to perform surgery, toy with the sugar wrapper from his iced tea. His nails are bitten to the quick.

"I couldn't do conventional radio if I wanted to," he continues. "I see life as problematic. Basically, there are two kinds of relationships—those that fail, and those that are difficult. I don't know how I'd do a program in which two people are really happy and in love and things work out great."

He's twisted the sugar wrapper into a tiny spear.

KCRW's general manager, Ruth Hirschman, first heard Frank after the station staff left the monitors on while his program was being broadcast from Washington as part of National Public Radio's drama series, "NPR Playhouse." And the staff didn't just leave the monitors on, they switched them to full volume. Work stopped, phones went unanswered, and Hirschman realized she was listening to something extraordinary, "something more than just an excellent radio program."

Frank, who started in radio as a volunteer at WBAI-FM in New York City before getting his own show and then moving on to NPR in Washington, had a small but ardent following. Hirsch-

man felt that Frank's risky radio carried the voltage to attract a more mainstream audience. After Frank made two exploratory trips to Los Angeles Hirschman offered him "a home at KCRW," and in January, 1986, he packed his silver Volkswagen Jetta, drove across country and moved into the Marina Pacific Hotel in Venice Beach.

In Washington, Frank had been accustomed to producing four or five dramas a year; now he was responsible for about 40. The first thing he did was put together five autobiographical monologues. But five programs were enough to make him feel in danger of repeating himself. So he began to look for "people with interesting stories." Friends, acquaintances and strangers volunteered to open their lives to Frank's scrutiny.

It's one thing for Frank to cushion himself in a deserted studio and ventilate his fantasies. How does he get strangers to reveal their bleakest moments? Perhaps there's something about his self-effacing manner and his graceful way of diverting attention away from himself and on to others. And perhaps there's something about his serious, sensitive brow, his absorbing hazel eyes and his soft, lulling voice that makes people feel safe to speak the unspoken, knowing that pretty soon a good part of Los Angeles will hear it.

**T**HE WALLS in KCRW's performance studio are padded with oatmeal-colored carpet; metal music stands are wrapped in blue bath towels; a grand piano is covered by quilted black vinyl. In the midst of this Frank sits expressionless and unblinking, under an enormous pair of headphones, looking like a still life of a man in outer space. He flips a switch that carries his voice to the glassed-in control booth. "Sharon, get me a crisis hotline."

Sharon Bates, a station volunteer, makes the call; when she gets through she waves to Frank, who's resumed his usual, distant, off-air expression.

Now he leans forward, his lips nearly touching the microphone, ready for the hot line. "I do a radio program where I talk about my life," he tells the counselor. He rests one hand on his hearing aid. "And because I'm sort of depressed"—his voice takes on a caressing shimmer—"I thought of calling you

# Radio Noir

On the Air, a Voice Like Dirty Honey Tells Stories Grim as Nightmares. If You Think Radio Is All Top 40, You Haven't Heard Joe Frank.

BY JAMIE DIAMOND

**I**T'S RUSH HOUR. You're crawling along the San Diego Freeway, engulfed in exhaust clouds, fiddling with the radio, dialing for diversion, mental transport, transubstantiation, something.

When you hear sounds like peaceful ripples across a pool, you stop: A man's voice as rich as chocolate is telling a story in a tone so confidential, so confessional, you're sure it's meant only for you.

The story is about a depressed guy named Dave who gets a job playing guitar in a sleazy strippers' bar. The walls are hung with murals of goddesses, and roaches crawl out of his amplifier, yet Dave feels happy for the first time in years: His music is drawing a response. The lights go up, and Dave is eager to see the faces of his fans. One man nodding to the music is a victim of a spastic disorder, and the other fan is so blotto he couldn't hold his head still to save his life.

Then a tragedy: The bar goes out of business, and Dave loses his job. He starts stuffing himself at fast-food joints: Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut, McDonald's, Blimpies. He tops off his meals with ice cream sundaes and chocolate-chip cookies.

Now Dave gets winded putting his clothes on. When he lies in bed, his stomach serves as a tray. He can put a plate, silverware and a napkin on it.

---

*Jamie Diamond is a fiction writer and free-lance journalist.*

You move to change the station. But somehow Billy Joel wouldn't sound good right now. You've been hooked. You want to know how this ends.

When Dave sits in a fast-food restaurant, the table cuts into his belly. When he walks through a doorway, his sides press against it.

Making love has become difficult. The missionary position is out of the question.

The voice keeps pouring out like dirty honey. "Sometimes when I think about the life I'm leading," it confesses, "I'm filled with self-loathing and disgust." Then the voice brightens, becomes almost cheerful: "But then when I imagine myself as a character in a novel, well, then I think I'm pretty interesting, offbeat, entertaining. . . ."

The voice trails off, overpowered by the lush sounds of a waterfall and tropical birdcalls, and a dispassionate radio announcer informs you that you've been listening to Joe Frank's "Work In Progress."

From the day almost two years ago when Joe Frank started broadcasting from KCRW-FM, the Santa Monica public radio station, he has attracted a cult following. Whether people are entranced or repulsed by the verisimilitude of his radio noir, they listen, magnetized by the sound of his voice, hypnotized by the defiant sleaziness of the terrain he travels.

During a recent fund drive, when the station pulled the show because it was reluctant to pollute the stream of

Frank's narratives by trolling for dollars, listeners threatened to take back their contributions unless his program was reinstated. Response has been so strong that KCRW airs "Work In Progress" for one hour two evenings a week (at 11 p.m. Saturday with a repeat at 7 p.m. Wednesday) and broadcasts the program to more than a dozen other cities via satellite.

Harry Shearer, the comedian-actor-writer and former "Saturday Night Live" regular who has his own satire program on KCRW, says that when he first heard Joe Frank, "it was like a fist coming out of the radio. Other people besides Joe are doing 'new' radio drama," Shearer says, "and it sounds just like 'old' radio drama, except that it's in stereo. Joe's approach is much hipper, much more intimate. It's like you're eavesdropping into his life."

Shearer is referring to programs that feel like chapters in an obsessive, violent and sexual odyssey; programs like the one in which Frank dragged a bathtub into the studio and oohed and aahed in the suds, enjoying being bathed by a French woman, crunching on potato chips and dialing phone-sex lines. Or the monologue in which Frank talked about the urge to dismember the elevator operator who took him up to his psychoanalyst's appointment. Or the parody that analyzed the works of a blind photographer whose pictures of legless debutantes appeared in Photography Yesterday. That show was laced with provocative calls from female lia-

on the air."

"A crisis stems from specifics in a person's life," the counselor says. "What's happened that's made you feel this is the last straw?"

Frank looks into the control booth at Bates and Eric Meyers, the engineer who's recording the conversation for

**Frank on his absurdist view:  
"It's like when you go to a funeral and find you have to run into the men's room to contain your laughter."**

later use.

Frank sinks down in his chair and begins to explain that he moved to Los Angeles a year and a half ago, leaving behind a six-year relationship with a woman as well as all his friends.

"Have you made new friends, Joe?"

His eyes narrow and he sinks down farther. "It's hard for me to make friends. And the cat I had for 14 years died." He folds his hands as if in prayer, brings them up to his lips and sighs. Then he continues, relating a series of other losses.

Frank's head is bent over, and he's confessing that he's taken on a new radio show and faces the possibility of failure. He rests his chin in his hands. After a moment he lifts his head to the microphone. "What do you do when you find yourself in crisis?" he asks.

Within a minute his magic has worked. The counselor is describing her previous career in real estate, her experiences as a bereavement counselor, her "holistic" perspective that enables her to deal with the inexplicable tragedies she hears about night after night.

Another engineer, Jack Cheeseborough, saunters in, popping M&Ms. "Looks like he's turned the tables again," he says.

FRANK ACQUIRES the evocative stories

that he weaves into his programs by lucky accident, as in the case of the crisis counselor, or by interviewing people he senses will be "interesting." He often tapes up to 30 hours of material for each hourlong program; then he edits down and adds what he thinks are the most influential elements—the sound effects and music. The sound effects are so precise and so visual that listeners experience the radio in 3-D and Kodacolor. The music, an audio Valium that never reaches a crescendo, is painstakingly chosen and looped: Frank finds a segment of music he likes, sometimes just a few bars, and then records it over and over to form a pulse that beats throughout his story.

In addition to his autobiographical monologues and intimate confessions of real people, Frank is known for radio dramas that make one feel lost in a surreal landscape. These are droll satires in which, perhaps, a panel of experts debates the merits of boxer shorts versus briefs; or black comedies in which, for instance, an ambulance runs down people instead of rescuing them, or a go-go dancer's parents drown in the waters of Lourdes.

For these dramas, Frank relies heavily on the influence of a small band of gifted improvisational actors, many of whom perform on Broadway; he met them in New York and still visits there to record these programs.

In contrast to the other characters who wander through KCRW's overly air-conditioned catacombs in the basement of Santa Monica City College's student activities building, Frank pales. Others make bold fashion statements but Frank does not wish to be judged by externals; clothing is something he gives little thought to. He wears things like an old man's T-shirt under his short-sleeve shirt, bagged-out pants that hang too low on his waist and worn-down Florsheim shoes.

But this morning he appears in the studio in an electric-blue shirt patterned with Memphis squiggles. "Somebody else made me buy this," he says, confessing to a closet that's almost entirely black, brown and gray. "But I sort of like getting into colors." He flashes a smile that seems to say, "I'm having fun even though I'm not supposed to" and then quickly subdues his momentary lapse into enthusiasm.

Today he must get permission from the supervisor of the crisis counselor to

use the conversation on the air; later he has an appointment to work with an actor he's never met. But he's got something more pressing on his mind. In the morning's rush, he left home without his Lomotil, a medication he taken daily for nine years to quell the constant upheaval that pulls at his stomach. Before anything he must get his pills.

He puts on black-mirrored sunglasses and walks to the parking lot with a slight limp. He moves unsteadily, reminiscent of a bear walking upright. When he reaches his car, he apologizes. "It's a mess." The spotless Jetta gleams in the sun.

"Inside is a mess."

The interior of the car looks like it just came off the assembly line, except that on the back seat there's a basketball, an empty light-bulb carton and T-shirt.

"The T-shirt's dirty," Frank says.

**W**HEN FRANK returns to the studio, the actor, Harvey Sachs, is waiting.

"You're not what thought you'd look like," says Sachs, a muscular man with an intense smile.

Frank steps back. "What did you expect?"

"Someone taller, with sunken eyes and 10 years younger."

Frank lowers his gaze; he's 48. The age nerve seems to be a touchy one.

Because Sachs does a convincing East Indian accent, Frank asks him to sing "What the World Needs Now" in the accent.

Sachs happily agrees.

Frank says: "I want you to talk some of this. We don't need another Caruso." He leaves Sachs in the performance studio and moves to the control booth.

From the booth he can see into three other studios. In one of them, KCRW's assistant musical director, Ariana Morgenstern, a young woman with a helmet of short dark hair, a Romanesque profile and graceful, pale arms, is eating green grapes. For the past year and a half, she and Frank have been steady companions. But today, at work, they give no indication that they're aware of each other.

Frank cues up the syrupy music. "Don't be nervous," he calls to Sachs. "This is radio. You cannot fail because we can always tape it again."

Five takes later, Frank sits on the floor facing the monitor, head cocked like the RCA dog. "It's not working," he says. He lies flat on the carpet, lacing his fingers and resting them on the top of his head. He closes his eyes. "He's gotta talk it." And although Sachs hasn't heard him, the actor suddenly says, "Lord . . ." in the tone of voice of a man chastising a grandfather who's brought his grandchildren 200 Twinkies, ". . . we don't need another mountain." Frank sits up. "This is good." He laughs and calls a lunch break. Sachs and Frank return to the big table in the performance studio bearing take-out boxes of marinated vegetables, tofu and tuna. Sachs sits down; Frank purposefully walks to the opposite end of the table, clears it, and takes a seat 12 feet away.

**F**RANK'S VIENNESE mother and Polish father were in flight from the Nazis when he was born in 1939 in Strasbourg, France. They settled in New York City, where Frank's father established a successful shoe-manufacturing business. Frank spent most of his childhood recovering from leg operations and confined to casts and braces to correct his clubfeet. "At school I used to wish I could say I'd been in a train wreck, anything," Frank says, "rather than having been born as though I belonged to another species."

The day before Frank was to undergo major surgery, his father died. Frank was told his father had gone away on business. After his surgery, he learned the truth. He was 5 years old. "My childhood was so hard to fathom that I developed an absurdist way of looking at things," he explains. "It's like when you go to a funeral and find you have to run into the men's room to contain your laughter."

At 20, he suffered a severe illness, and while recuperating he experienced something that turned around his life: He read William Faulkner's "The Sound and the Fury," the story of a good family gone to seed. "I was completely staggered by Faulkner's stream-of-consciousness method," Frank says. "You're going along and then all of a sudden, you're inside somebody's head, thinking what they're thinking."

Inspired to write, Frank attended the Iowa Writers Workshop and then

taught at a private high school in Manhattan for 10 years. But he quit the Dalton School in the mid-'70s after, he says, "I realized I'd spent my entire life in school. I was teaching kids whose parents were more accomplished than I, and it was time to move on."

He decided to sign up as a volunteer at the local Pacific station. On Tuesday mornings from 5 to 7, groggy coffee sippers could hear such distinctive Joe Frank pieces as a mime performing on radio (daring: one minute of dead air), or a wry interview with a bogus Romanian playwright. Then, as now, some listeners didn't know how to take this material. But then, as now, many listeners were hooked.

**T**HE LIVING ROOM of Frank's two-bedroom stucco cottage in Venice doesn't get much light. The carpets and couch are the color of Alpo; the furnishings resemble those of a post-college apartment, and the only nod to 1987 is the exercise bike peeking out of the study. This is where Frank settled after a year in the hotel.

Dressed in a black shirt, gray pants and thick, brilliantly white socks that appear to be brand-new, he sits in a low-slung chair talking about how he's changed in the last year and a half. "I've grown older. I cut deeper. The programs used to be more funny than they were serious. Now I've done these monologues, which are honest, emotional and wrenching. I didn't do that when I began."

He's quiet for a while, then sits up straight. "Sometimes I feel like a voyeur into people's lives. Even listeners might feel that way." He sits back in his chair. "But it's not voyeurism. Because when you look into the life of someone else, you see what you share with them. You see your own reflection."

Frank is holding onto the toe of his white sock and staring down at it.

After a moment, he says: "When I was young, when I was in high school, when I lost my license for reckless driving, I used to try to live my life as though it were a movie." His eyes travel to the dining room table, covered with stacks of paper, most of them transcriptions of tapes. "And now I have no life. All I do is radio. And so in a lot of ways, radio is more important to me than my life. At least for now," he says, still holding firmly onto his foot. □

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## STAGE REVIEW

# Joe Frank Sets Radio Voice, Vision on Stage

By ROBERT KOEHLER

Joe Frank is on to something. It isn't his half-earnest, half-mocking voice, the perfect radio sound taken just a little too far. Nor is it his sneaky way of lampooning urban paranoia while at the same time celebrating it. It isn't even the anti-narrative thrill Frank shares with his audience, the excitement he quietly conveys of inventing some kind of new fictional form.

All these apply to his radio work, titled "Joe Frank: Work in Progress," which has aired on KCRW-FM for the past three years. They also apply to his new theater piece at MOCA, "Joe Frank: In Performance." But by taking his show to the stage, Frank's ingeniousness has become clearer. Which isn't to say that the mysteriousness of his world, an odd mixture of Borges, Donald Fagen and intellectual soap opera, has been dissipated.

Frank, it turns out, has all the good instincts of a playwright, yet his new work is no more a "play" than his KCRW pieces are "radio drama." Like his radio work, "In Performance" questions the premises of the medium he happens to find himself in. The way Frank tests things is by beginning with familiar words and images, then finding the underlying strangeness. This is not unlike how Ibsen or Beckett have operated. Theater is the home for the surprise merchant, and Frank fits right in.

He does because if there is one unifying notion in Frank's various monologues, duologues, streams of



On stage, Joe Frank begins, as his act did, at the radio mike.

consciousness and pseudo-documentaries, it's that life is forever surprising. This is set with the opening piece, which has "Joe" dealing with his insomnia by watching the cable sex channel. He takes the channel up on its offer to dial up its 976 number and get the woman of his dreams.

So far, so familiar. Then Frank starts throwing big hooks into the fire. Such as Joe demanding his dream woman fulfill a list of outrageous qualifications (like Henry Miller, Frank is a great writer of lists). The woman arrives, and she isn't at all what he requested. We are told that she has "the odor of infants' nurseries," which could be either good or bad. It turns out to be so good, he proposes to her. They marry in two days. And we're not even 10 minutes into the show.

Throughout the rest of the evening are references to the marriage, as if it's in a test tube that Dr. Frank checks in on from time to time. Now, the surprise isn't how the connubial bonds have suffered—with Frank, everything eventually suffers—but how com-

pletely, unthinkably they've suffered. It's a life painted in wildly hyperbolic tones, and you begin to see that Frank's deepest source is the great master of tall, dark fiction, Ambrose Bierce. The connection wasn't made when hearing only Frank's voice. Now, as he reads written words on stage, the literary lineage is dramatic.

As the title implies, "In Performance" isn't just Frank sitting before a mike. Like the initial familiarity of his tales, he starts that way. Close your eyes, and the amplified voice with the background mood music (lots of Jon Hassell, Giovanni Venosta and Roberto Musci) puts you in radioland.

The stage, outfitted with dry wit by Marina Levikova-Neyman's set design and Jason Berliner's lights, begins to assert itself. Frank puts

himself on the couch, and we're in a psychiatrist's office. He stands by a water cooler, and we're in the corporate war zone. He takes his confessional monologues right into the audience, always addressing the women in the crowd (Frank's métier is heterosexual fundamentalism). He stands against a wall, next to a palm tree's shadow, and it's either a vacation spot or a tropical Third World nightmare.

Because the pieces here are based on radio programs Frank created with his collaborators David Rapkin and Arthur Miller (not the author of "Death of a Salesman"), what has been achieved is a visualization of them with the sparest theatrical devices. Besides the sense of surprise, Frank also has the playwright's knack for getting in and out of a scene without losing a scene's internal dramatic logic.

The entirety lacks that logic, partly because it feels like a sampler of various pieces. A weekly radio segment by Frank, though typically open-ended, is also typically satisfying, because it works out a theme. "In Performance" is so replete with bits of themes that it nearly becomes themeless, the dark side of Frank's weakness for eclecticism.

There could be worse weaknesses. The important news is that theater is seen as a thriving option for a writer who refuses to be hemmed in by the printed page, who is obsessed with pushing his words into the third dimension while keenly exploring the fifth.

At 250 S. Grand Ave., on Fridays and Saturdays, 8 p.m., through June 3 (dark May 5-6). Tickets: \$12; (213) 626-6828.

JEROME HENKEL