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RIVER CITY TIMES

WEEK OF
JULY 30-AUG. 5



IN SEARCH OF A FEW FUNNY MEN

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George Wallace



Staff photos by Scott Sommerdorf
Gary Shandley

'Three On Stage' gives town something to laugh about

"Three On Stage," an evening of comedy, presented by Laughs Unlimited in the Plantation Room of the Delta Queen Restaurant, 108 K St., performances are scheduled for 8:30 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesday, 7:30 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays and 3:30 and 7:30 p.m. Sundays. Closed on Mondays. Admission is \$4. For reservations, call 444-3963.

By RICHARD SIMON
Staff Writer

Sacramento seems less of a sleepy little river town since the grand opening Thursday evening of the comedy club, Laughs Unlimited, in the Plantation Room of the Delta Queen Restaurant in Old Sacramento.

Until now, entertainment here has been sedate — people sitting attentively in their seats and watching politely what was happening on stage.

Laughs Unlimited changed all that — at least during the opening show starring comedians George Wallace and Gary Shandley and magician-mime Peter De Paula.

The audience was uninhibitedly uproarious, punctuating the barbed observations of the performers with endless ripples of laughter interspersed with comments of its own.

IT MAY BE THAT the audience Thursday night was special since it contained a sprinkling of people who had flown up from Los Angeles to support one of their own, but the show was good enough to have produced on its own the happy rapport that was established. And that proved particularly true when the headliner, George Wallace, took over.

The opening night audience was particularly lucky since Wallace appeared only for the grand opening. His place will be taken through Sunday by Dave Cowler, of "Make Me Laugh."

Wallace proved himself an extraordinary performer. His stage presence and the nimbleness of his mind were such that he probably could have kept the house figuratively in the palm of his hand even without good material. He had good material, however, and the combination was irresistible.

SOMETHING OF THE sense of the unexpected that he produced became apparent at the beginning of his set when he addressed two attractive women sitting ringside.

"You're really pretty," he said to one of them with the suave inflection of a connoisseur. "I'd like to take you home and tie you up."

That was prepared material, perhaps, but clearly not planned was his next observation. Squinting up at a border of glaring lights overhead, the black comedian asked, "Can you

turn the lights down and make me look beige?"

Once those two asides were out of the way, Wallace struck a theme that was to prove a leitmotif for the rest of his set.

"IT'S A CRAZY world!," he said and then began to prove it.

One of the craziest things he cited was a situation in which a man put a gun to his head and asked, "Who are you for, Reagan or Carter?"

Wallace reflected a while and then told the gunman resignedly, "Go ahead and shoot."

The best contemporary comedians, however, do not depend on humor with predictable punchlines. They appeal to the irreverent in all of us. And Wallace played upon that yearning for freedom by saying "We're here to have a good time! I feel like standing up and taking all my clothes off!"

THAT CONFESSION produced the first of a sequence of roars of approval from the approximately 200 persons who filled the room.

Wallace played upon the audience like a virtuoso pianist at the keyboard. He moved around the room with his glass of white wine (but rarely drinking from it), asking casual questions of the crowd.

"I work to the vibrations of the audience," he explained, and there is no question that he has a highly developed ear for those vibrations.

On occasion he sounded a note that had the cutting edge of truth. And one such occasion arose when he discussed Leon Spink's report card as a schoolboy. The card bristled with "D" and "F" notations, and his parents asked Spink what they meant.

"DOIN' FINE," Wallace has Spink replying. And then, with perfect timing, Wallace added how pointless it was for him to make fun of Spink.

"Spink is a millionaire," he pointed out, "and I'm in Sacramento."

The opening of the comedy club made Thursday night a historic occasion, but Wallace made it doubly historic by announcing his candidacy for the presidency.

"If elected," he promised in stentorian tones, "Valet parking will be established in every police station. Every Hare Krishna will have a broom (to tap the wasted energy) and yellow lights will no longer mean caution but speed up—you can make it!"

I'd vote for him without a moment's hesitation.

THE SHOW OPENED with Gary Shandley, a personable young comedian whose material reflects an unusual concern with excretory functions.

He is not alone in that respect, however. Many comedians seem equally intrigued by the subject, and it raises a philosophical question: Are people fascinated by scatology drawn to comedy, or do people enter comedy and then discover that audiences want to hear scatological humor?

Shandley struck a responsive chord, however, when he observed that food at most coffee shops is so bad that even the boat people wouldn't eat it. He cited an imaginary situation in which a refugee would decline such food with the polite answer, "No thanks. I ate on the boat."

THERE WAS ALSO the funny recollection of his trick-or-treat days when a lady put an apple in his bag, and he replied, "Lady, I'm not in this for my health."

Magician-mime Peter D. Paula offered a pleasant contrast to the verbal humor by some remarkable manipulations with a maquette of a hand synchronized with a cape and with a dazzling piece of mime in which he created the illusion that he was enclosed by a glass wall.

A FUNDAMENTAL rule of success in business is "Find a need and fill it." Sacramento needs a comedy club, and residents here should be grateful to impresario Scott Edwards (and his four partners) for filling it.



Peter De Paula

Russian Comedian Bridges Cultural Differences With Jokes

OPENING NIGHTS are tough in any branch of show business, but maybe the worst are those in stand-up comedy. That's where every night's an opening, in a sense, because in making contact with the audience you have to start from scratch each time.

It's the laughter. Few other

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branches demand such immediate and tangible audience feedback; and few so readily betray, by laughter's lack, whether the performer is dying up there. For that matter, few make audience response such a challenge for consumer as well as vendor.

Take Tuesday night at Laughs Unlimited, where Russian expatriate Yakov Smirnoff opened a week-long stand atop a bill fleshed out by Susan Kolinski and John Carvi. (That "fleshed out" is close to literal: the way things work in comedy, the people at the bottom of the bill are like sacrificial lambs — or lion tamer's assistants — because it's their job to go out and master the multitude, warming it up for the headliner.)

Laughs Unlimited is well-enough established now to have opening-night regulars — sophisticates as much interested in an evening of comedy as in who's providing it. These are the customers who've seen it all. They're less likely to laugh out loud even when they're enjoying the show. Add to this the nightly sprinkling of nervous newcomers and the fact that Tuesday nights were fewer than 50 customers in a room with a capacity four times that, and you have the makings of a real challenge.

Thus, to say that Smirnoff brought down the house is to report something amounting to a real accolade. (Not to mention a tribute to the spadework of Kolinski and Carvi, even though their amusing efforts didn't evoke much outright laughter.)

Much of Smirnoff's comedy pivots on the political and cultural differences between America and his native country ("I left Russia in a

very unusual way," he reports; "alive"). Siberia, for example, is like Bakersfield. The games Russian children play have different names, like "Simon Demands," and "Hide and Stay Hidden." Male athletes have a real problem: "If you don't win, you become female athlete." And the TV shows have names like "One Day to Live," "Last Days of Our Lives" and "Bowling for Food."

"My mother used to put an empty plate in front of me and say, 'Starve. There are children eating in America.' ... You know what I like best about America? Warning shots."

But there is a hefty helping of innocent-abroad material, like his initial work in Cleveland (a city that "made me feel so much at home I had to escape again"): "I couldn't speak English. I couldn't get a job. So I was selling drugs — for \$3 an hour."

The American drug scene has its own linguistic confusions, he noted. Downers, for instance: "We called them bullets." And when someone suggested he use a razor to chop cocaine, he tried his Norelco.

Smirnoff has been working the American comedy circuit some four years now, and this is not his first visit to Laughs Unlimited. It's his first as a headliner, though — an event that wasn't supposed to happen until June. This week's headliner was to have been Jimmy Aleck, but Aleck had a TV commitment that forced him to cancel; now he'll be appearing in Smirnoff's June slot.

For that matter, Carvi and Kolinski are far more entertaining than Tuesday's audience reaction (amused silence, mostly) might indicate. Both do standard stand-up routines and neither has any exceptional schtick, but both are funny.

Laughs Unlimited (446-5905) is at 1124 Firehouse Alley, next to the Firehouse Courtyard in Old Sacramento. The Smirnoff/Kolinski/Carvi bill will continue nightly at 8 p.m. through Sunday with 10:30 p.m. shows Friday and Saturday.



Photo special to The Bee

Yakov Smirnoff

I Can Make You Laugh



Meet one of the funniest men in America, comedian John Fox, at Sacramento's hot comedy club. Laughs Unlimited. You can't resist laughing.



Tonight 7:30 PM



Comedian Jay Leno brings sold-out audience to its feet

Jay Leno may have opened a new era in Sacramento comedy last night at Laughs Unlimited comedy nightclub in Old Sacramento.

His bullet banter on topics contemporary — television shows, restaurants, movies, fast food restaurants — put a capacity audience on its feet, and left club owner Scott Edwards beaming.

"This means Sacramento will pay to see this kind of talent," Edwards said after the first of two soldout shows. "We'll be bringing a lot more of it up."

Bringing Leno — one of the hottest comics around just short of stardom — to Sacramento was something of a gamble for Edwards. He is paying Leno more than \$1,000 a night for a five-night stand. That is twice as much as Laughs Unlimited has paid for its previous top name, Pat Paulsen.

It worked. "The phone has been ringing off the hook all day," Edwards reported.

Leno has a string of guest spots on the Johnny Carson, David Letterman and Merv Griffin shows. Many of those in the audience, people in their 20s, appeared to be familiar with the 33-year-old standup comic.

Leno ran through 70 minutes of fast-paced stuff like a wide-eyed kid (If he could have gone four hours, he probably would have — but there was the 10:30 p.m. crowd lined up out front and the nervous owner looking at his watch backstage).

He is amazed and bemused at the wackiness of the everyday world. He is the astonished observer. He is very funny.

Beauty pageants, for instance. In a dippy contestant's voice and with batting eyes, he announced: "My goal is to bring peace to the world and then get my own apartment."

But he is not sexist. He talks about the differences between men and women, but he is not demeaning to women like so many comics. He once said he learned early in his career that women have a sense of humor also.

He also does few drug jokes and some sex jokes, but clean stuff. Leno is meat and potatoes. Blue collar. Heavy eyebrows and booming voice.

It seems in Leno's mind, anything can have an absurd tangent, like tragedy at the Evelyn Wood speed reading school: "Apparently somebody had an eyeball blow out at 10,000 words."

Or Star Trek and its ever-fretting Scotty and its hostile Dr. McCoy. Or the strange after-midnight customers at 7-11 foodstores. Or Bob's Big Boy.

Or the telephone company. Or Marlon Perkins of television's "Wild Kingdom." Or McDonalds employees: "They all have that glazed-over minimum wage look."

Even God has a humorous side.

"Ever lose anything? Only God knows where it is," Leno's God snickers to himself with childish delight: "'Now, he's in the living room! He walked right by it!'"

Near the end of his show, when Leno mimicked the dinner table sermon of the quintessential disciplinarian dad ("In my day . . ."), the audience laughed, and when that died down, it began applauding. The applause spread through the room. It stopped the show for a few seconds. For a split second, Leno seemed genuinely touched, maybe embarrassed.

Leno appears through Saturday, 8 and 10:30 p.m., at the club, 1124 Firehouse Alley, Old Sacramento. Reservations can be made by phone, 446-5905. The shows are sold out through Thursday. However, there are tickets remaining for the \$6 shows on Friday and Saturday.

Appearing with Leno are comic/ventriloquist Dave Strassman and comic Doug Keyhoe.

Keyhoe talked about drugs in his short opening stint Tuesday.

"I do an awful lot of drugs," he explained. "You talk about what you know."

He got a big laugh when he said that.

Strassman, who has a choirboy face, shared the stage with a vile puppet named Chuck Wood who clutched a knife in his hand throughout the show and spit venom at an unlucky front row victim.

Treading Old Comic Ground In A Wonderful, Hilarious Way

By John V. Hurst
Bee Reviewer

ADD TO THE continuing puzzle over why some standup comics are funnier than others, even with the same or similar material, one salient fact: Jay Leno is one of the funniest.

He's doing two shows a night at Laughs Unlimited this week, a three-night engagement that's now been extended through Saturday, and his opening show Tuesday set a level of levity even he's likely to have trouble maintain-

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ing. He did 64 minutes of top-notch and, except for the laughter, non-stop comedy; I got the feeling he could have continued for two hours more and not once repeated himself.

Leno's performance brought the crowd to its feet in a spontaneous standing ovation when he finally did quit the stage — the first, and hottest, such demonstration a semiregular has ever seen there.

Yet — and hence the puzzle — Leno's not really treading any new ground. His material roves the same kind of territory trod by standup comedians everywhere: the Reagans, movies, cars, television and, especially, the wonderful, wacky, manifold manifestations of human social and sexual behavior.

What makes the difference, of course, is Leno's style and personal skew. Just as, physically, he looks something like comedian Pat Harrington with Bob Hope's chin, his comedy is similarly exaggerated into loopy hyperbole.

Thus the after-midnight scene in an all-night convenience market is "like a Fellini casting

call"; parents who lived through the Great Depression tell you "there was no air when I was your age," and when you break your telephone, "they make you stay home a day to get it fixed."

But it's the imagery that clinches things. Take Leno's discourse on horror movies in which women inevitably contribute to their own demise at the hands of the extant monster by freezing in their tracks: "Look, lady, I'm doing 1½ miles an hour and dragging 50 feet of slime behind me. . . ."

Then there's the delight of driving a '55 Buick Roadmaster — "No padded dash on this baby; you hit your head on the dashboard in this, they hose it off and sell it to somebody else" — and scaring the bejeezus out of Honda drivers. Or another kind of delight over those combination gas station-convenience stores that serve as one-stop robbery centers.

Leno ignored the red light that warns comics at Laughs Unlimited it's time to wrap things up and get off the stage; but, what the hell, he was on a roll.

Leno's socko performance was all the more remarkable because he had a tough act to follow in the person of ventriloquist Dave Strassman. A headliner in his own right, Strassman and "Chuck Wood" did a half hour of stuff that would have been, and was, hilarious, except in comparison to Leno's tour de force. (Sample: "If I was your father I'd give you poison." "Yeah? If I was your son, I'd take it.")

And Doug Kehoe did a too-brief opening set of less than 15 minutes in length — too brief because it, too, was hilarious.

JAY LENO will continue at Laughs Unlimited, 1124 2nd St., Rear, with shows at 8 and 10:30 p.m. through Saturday. 446-5905.



Photo special to The Bee

Jay Leno: first-rate comedy



"We had no employees. I took the money at the door, I cleaned up the room, I emceed the show."

Scott Edwards was broke when Laughs Unlimited opened three years ago. Now there's money in the bank and acts are lined up months ahead.

See photo by Margie Ong

Plenty To Laugh About These Days In Old Sac

WHEN LAUGHS Unlimited opened its doors three years ago, not even Scott Edwards knew for sure if his dream of running Sacramento's only all-comedy nightclub would survive from week to week.

Certainly the enterprise couldn't have had a shakier start. Broke and jobless, living off his girlfriend, Edwards had been forced to borrow from friends when his initial financing evaporated at the last minute. He collected barely enough to open, in a banquet room rented from Old Sacramento's Delta Queen Restaurant, and the business had to support itself from the git-go: Edwards needed to do at least \$1,800 at the door each week to be sure of surviving for another.

Other than the comics (the Delta Queen supplied the cocktail waitresses), "We had no employees," Edwards says of those early days. "All my partners had their own jobs, so I ran everything. I booked the acts, I took the money at the door, I cleaned up the room before and after the show, I sat the people and I emceed the show. Six days a week. And I didn't receive any money because the company couldn't afford it. . . . We were in the red for six months."

Things certainly have changed. Not only is Laughs Unlimited now firmly in the black, with 14 full- and part-time employees of its own, it has carved a secure niche for itself in Sacramento's comedy consciousness: doing steady to thriving business six nights a week — even selling out entire weeks — and serving as host to a bankable crowd of sustaining, repeat customers.

"We went from being in a banquet room, with all rented equipment, to our own room with all owned equipment," Edwards says of the three years since that opening — Sunday was the anniversary date — "and now we have a liquor license, our own restaurant and the whole bit." There's even a rented condominium in downtown Sacramento's Bridgeway Towers to house each week's trio of comics.

Now there's talk of expanding the club, of holding over each week's bill for one-night stands in Foothill towns, of setting up Laughs Unlimiteds in other West Coast cities, of staging big-name "comedy concerts" in Sacramento's Community Center Theater, even of — maybe, someday — hosting a comedy hour on television.

For his regular club shows, however, Edwards is more likely to bet on the come, to book solid pros who haven't yet hit it big. "I've got a real reputation as being one of the cheapest club owners in the business," he says. "I get a lot of flack sometimes."

BUT I STILL don't have any trouble booking six-seven months ahead, and with quality talent; because a lot of these guys started out as nothing and we've grown with them."

One recent example is Michael Winslow, who filled the anniversary-week bill between John Fox and San Francisco newcomer Perry Kurtz. "He's starring — not co-starring, but starring — in a major motion picture coming up this Christmas," Edwards reports. "He's also scheduled for Letterman and Carson in the next few months."

"But he is not yet famous. You'll probably never see him as a middle act again; he'll be at the top of the bill, and for a lot more money."

The Foothill-tour idea could generate more income for his weekly acts. "Right now," Edwards says, "I'm negotiating with a company that wants us to provide shows in Sutter Creek and in Nevada City."

The improbable comic

Yakov Smirnoff hails from gray Soviet Union

CYNICAL comedy buffs sometimes smirk they hear about Yakov Smirnoff, the Russian comic, because they simply don't believe such a phenomenon exists.

Nevertheless, that cynicism does not bug Smirnoff, who is performing through Sunday evening at the Laughs Unlimited showroom in Old Sacramento, because he's used to it.

"I hear that constantly," the 32-year-old Ukrainian emigre says philosophically in his very slight Russian accent. Hearing that constantly is not the only reason he is philo-

sophical about it, however, for he adds, "There are good reasons for it."

The most obvious reason, he reports, was the unmasking of an imposter, a man from New Jersey, on the CBS evening news.

A more subtle reason, he speculates, is that Americans find the mere idea of a Russian comic "as improbable as a drunken Mormon."

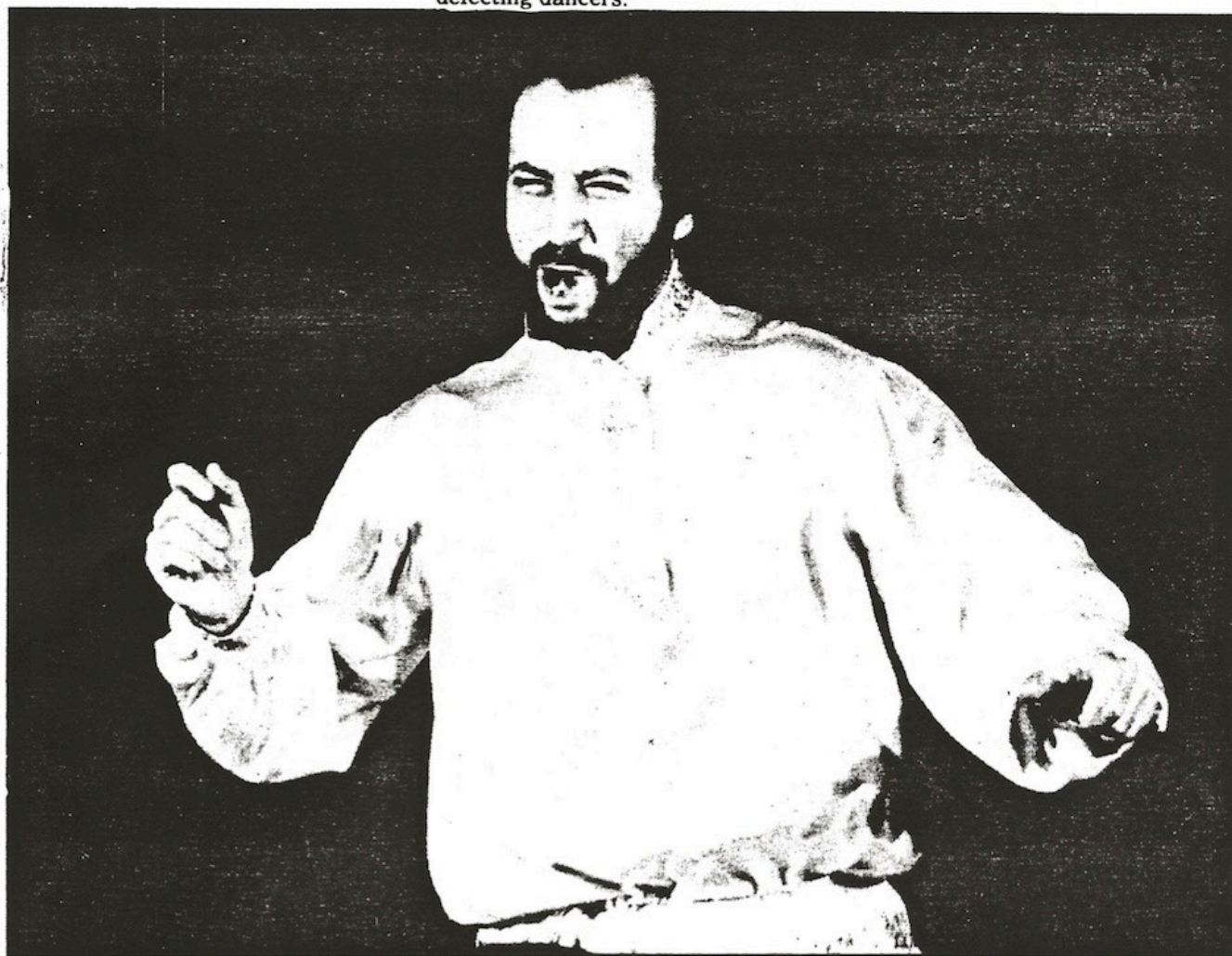
"They know life is very gray in Russia, very depressing," he goes on. "They think that the only entertainment in Russia is ballet with its defecting dancers."

Smirnoff cannot be considered a defector since he (along with his mother and father) left the Soviet Union legally in 1977.

In doing so, they ignored what Smirnoff refers to as the motto of Russian Express: "Don't leave home!"

Applying for an emigration visa in Russia requires moral courage, Smirnoff reports, because "they treat you as a traitor when you do."

Applicants are fired from their jobs in order to discourage others, compelled to wait while the mills of



RUSSIAN COMIC Yakov Smirnoff, who emigrated from the Ukraine in 1977, says in doing so he ignored the motto of Russian

BRYAN PATRICK/staff photo
Express: "Don't leave home!" Smirnoff performs through Sunday at Laughs Unlimited in Old Sacramento.

the Soviet bureaucracy grind slowly and then are ordered to leave on 10 days' notice.

While waiting, Smirnoff found surreptitious work as a comic in the clubs where he had previously worked openly as a government-approved comic. The club owners hired him because they knew he would not say anything that would get them in trouble, and they paid him under the table.

In Smirnoff's case, the granting of the visa took two years to process.

"We got out of Russia in a very unusual way—alive!" he says in recollection of that experience.

Today Smirnoff is alive and well and living in the Hollywood Hills, where he leases a million-dollar pad with two colleagues and drives a Mercedes Benz 450SL and a just-acquired 1977 Rolls Royce Silver Cloud.

He describes the acquisition of the Rolls with the offhand statement, "I just bought a new toy." As he makes the announcement, he tosses the ignition key with its distinctive silver RR logo on the counter of the Magic Hat, the showroom just above the comedy club.

"It's really for my parents," he says diffidently. "My Mercedes Benz 450 is a two-seater, and I can't always take my parents along in that."

The Rolls and the Mercedes are not the only outward signs of Smirnoff's affluence. That affluence is also reflected in his outfit during the interview: a black leather jacket, slacks, a thin black tie and a neat

"Why do I wear leather?" he asks himself rhetorically. "Because it's different. It's show business. If that is creating an image, I enjoy it."

The reason for Smirnoff's success, however, is more than mere image. He succeeds as a comic because of his unique status as an outsider to American life. "It gives me my comic perspective, my identity. It has worked to my advantage. Someone once told me that I'm a mustang," a reference to Smirnoff not being one of a herd.

Nevertheless, he is becoming less of the outsider with the passage of time.

"It's been 6½ years since I left Russia," he points out. "The distance is getting bigger."

So is Smirnoff, for he has become a very hot property.

He made his debut as a comedic actor (as opposed to a comic) as a kicker for a football team in a segment from "The Scarecrow and Mrs. King." He has also appeared in "Entertainment Tonight," the "Night Watch," and three appearances with the "Merv Griffin Show."

He is also to appear in a soon-to-be-released film starring Robin Williams, "Moscow on the Hudson." Smirnoff plays a Russian scientist compelled to work as a dishwasher because he can't find an appropriate job.

Also coming up is "Buckaroo Banzai," starring Peter Weller, in which he plays a national security adviser to the president. It is a \$25 million science-fiction drama, and Smirnoff predicts that its special effects may make it a hit comparable to "Star Wars."

Surprisingly, one of his favorite clubs is Laughs Unlimited here.

"The crowds here are clever, better than in most cities. I think it's because it's the capital. I trust the audiences here. I know from one take here whether a new joke is good or not."

He also likes the room with its configuration that focuses all eyes on the comedian and the low ceiling that brings back the laughter.

It's good that the acoustics of Laughs Unlimited brings back the laughs, but it is even more of a cause for rejoicing that Smirnoff can make 'em laugh.

So can the other two comedians on the showbill.

Angel Salazar, a Puerto Rican from New York City, brings an exhilarating sense of the outrageous to his good-natured satire of white, Hispanic and black stereotypes. A bright touch is bringing his own banner on stage, covered with his own graffiti so he will feel at home.

Frank Prinzi finds humor in his growing up in San Francisco with a father who continually admonished "you can't educate pork," the singularity of liking wingtip shoes and his nostalgic pleasure in cookies and milk.

Looking for a LAUGH

The comedy leader in town is undoubtedly **Laughs Unlimited**. Begun in August 1980 in a banquet room at the Delta Queen restaurant, Laughs has slowly grown into a legitimate, recognized comedy club. It has not been an easy climb, however.

Scott Edwards, 28, the founder of and main force behind Laughs, spent a rough two years getting the fledgling club off the ground.

While still employed as an insurance agent, Edwards visited a Los Angeles comedy club. He became obsessed with the idea of establishing a similar club in Sacramento. One day he quit his job, filed bankruptcy, and began to work on fulfilling his dream. At one point, he had gathered investors totalling \$25,000, but when it came time to sign the papers, they all fell through. Relying on his salesman skills, Edwards convinced the Delta Queen to let him and his four partners (one of which is his wife Patti) operate the club, with the Delta Queen taking all revenue from liquor sold during the show. Edwards and company got the money from the door.

For the next two years Edwards lived with friends and made virtually no income. All of the equipment at Delta Queen was rented — chairs, sound equipment, everything. There were no employees. Edwards did most of the work himself: clean the room, set it up, take the money at the door, seat people, emcee the show. He worked seven days a week, night and day. ("It's a wonder I have a son," he jokes.) But gradually business picked up.

When Delta Queen went through an ownership change several years ago, and it looked as though the new owners wanted to take over the comedy club themselves, Edwards decided it was time to

move on. The present location (1124 Firehouse Alley, Old Sacramento) seats 200 and they actually own most of the furnishings now. Zero employees turned into 15, and on weekends the shows invariably sell out. The biggest indicator of Edwards' success is that he is now able to draw a salary.

Not surprisingly, Edwards is expanding. On Dec. 29 he opened The Magic Hat bar upstairs. Its creation fulfilled another lifelong passion for Edwards — magic. In addition to libations, The Magic Hat offers magicians who meander from table to table, entertaining patrons with their sleight of hand. The bar has not yet established a true clientele of its own but is usually well attended before and after the shows at Laughs.

For his next comedy club, Edwards is looking south, towards Stockton. "Stockton is far enough away not to be competition for the Sacramento club, but close enough to manage properly," Edwards says. "And the people there tell us they're ready to support a comedy club."

Edwards doesn't believe Sacramento is ready for another comedy club. He thought about opening a weekend club in the Sunrise area, but felt the time wasn't right. "Believe me," Edwards says, "as soon as we feel Sacramento can handle another club, we'll do it."

Another dream Edwards has for Sacramento is to book big name acts like Joan Rivers and Robin Williams. But that takes money, big money. And Laughs' 200-seat capacity room would be far too small, which means renting a facility like the Community Center Theater. But it's possible, insists Edwards.

"All it takes is money," he says unabashedly. "Why should we let Bill Graham do it?"

No dead wood in the Willy and Lester act

SACRAMENTANS DO not ordinary go out on weeknights, and the showbills at Laughs Unlimited, therefore, generally play to half-filled houses.

There are exceptions, however, and one of them was the opening Tuesday evening of Willy Tyler and Lester. Virtually every chair in the approximately 200-seat house was occupied for the ventriloquist and his companion.

What's more, all of the eight regularly scheduled shows are sold out. To meet the demand, manager Scott Edwards has added 10:30 p.m. performances tonight and Sunday.

Tyler is clearly a "hot ticket," and his act demonstrates convincingly he deserves to be. He can do things with ease other ventriloquists do not venture to do at all. So complete is his mastery of the medium the audience can only sit back and marvel. There is more than brilliant technique involved, however. He has also developed an act that touches something deeper inside than the funny bone because it depends as much on character as it does on mere jokes.

The character is that of the wide-eyed-yet-shrewd Lester, who sits on Tyler's right knee when he is not occupying a small suitcase. And there is no question Lester considers himself a character with thoughts and feelings although he speaks candidly of his origins in some forest or woods.

In a conversation backstage after the performance, Lester revealed his awareness about who he is while Tyler threw some light on their symbiotic relationship.

"I'm whatever turns you on," Lester said, "I'm the same age as the kids in the audience, and I'm Billy Barty (the midget actor) to the adults."

Tyler agreed, "He's a multi-character. He's bigger than life."

There was a time, Tyler recalls, "when I used to experiment to develop other qualities — comic,

singing, etc. And I give all those qualities to him."

Tyler is generous in other ways as well. "I give him the punch lines, and I don't mind it because he can handle it." There is a second reason. Tyler admits disarmingly "I'm basically a straight man."

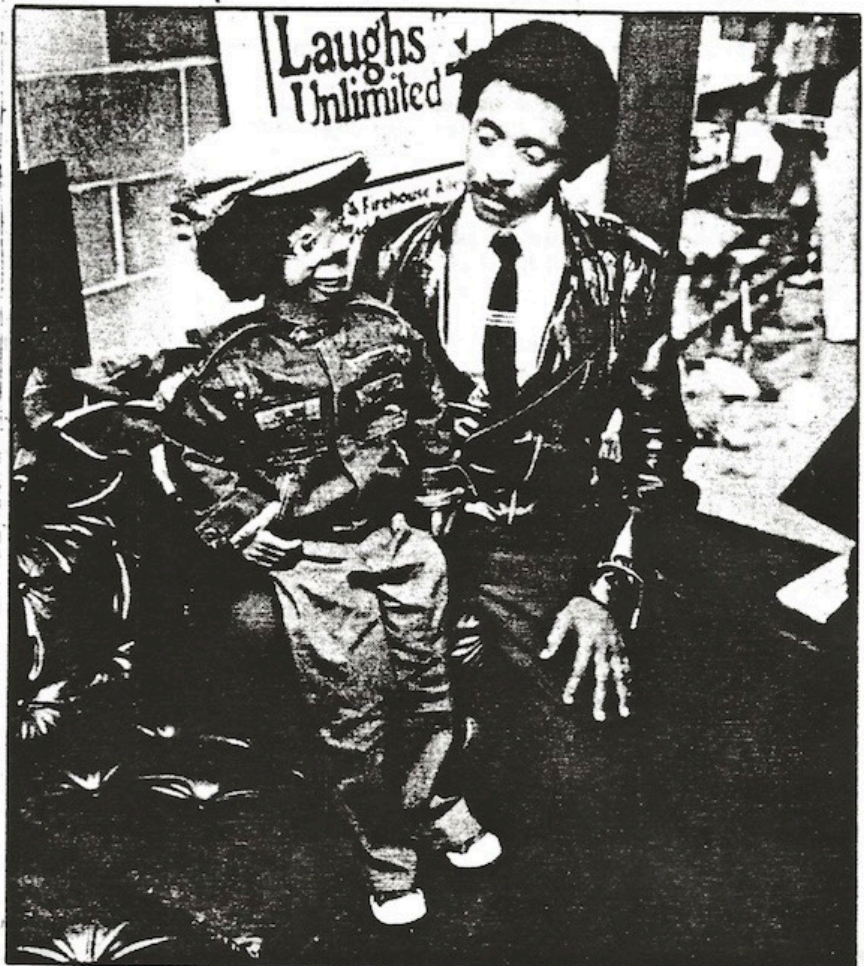
One thing he won't admit is how old he is. "I never mention my age," he says, "because I don't look the age I am, and people haven't believed me when I told them." His current position on that subject is "Whatever I look, I am."

Tyler and Lester both share more than a certain reticence about their respective ages. Tyler demonstrates toward Lester an affection that raises Lester to the status of something more than a prop. Lester reciprocates by directing toward Tyler looks that plead for assurance.

Sometimes an exchange on stage causes Tyler to break up, and it is clearly not a comic *shtick*.

Tyler explains, "Some nights the way it is said kind of cracks me up."

The same element of chance is reflected in the relationship with the audience. "Sometimes it is funny. Sometimes it's not, and you can't make it be there. It's the chemistry."



BRYAN PATRICK/staff photo

STREET BROTHERS Lester and Willie Tyler share secrets.

Paulsen's deadpan still tickles funnybones

By Cathy Cassinos
Special to The Bee

IT DOESN'T MATTER that he pulls from the same old bag of tricks year after year.

Pat Paulsen, presidential candidate or no, is still one of the funniest men alive.

He had 'em in stitches at Laughs Unlimited Tuesday night, where he opened for his sixth annual week-long stay at the Old Sacramento comedy nightclub.

It's a job he looks upon with great pride.

"I used to be big," he noted with facetious cool. "But now," he

ers for the show's success.

Well-aware that his political posturings haven't lost their original touch, Paulsen spent the first half of his act behind a podium.

Donning a conservative navy suit and a silly pair of glasses, he delivered his 1988 campaign speech in a loud, commanding voice, only to stop halfway through and quietly announce "uh-oh ... I think this is the wrong speech." Then he grinned boyishly, shrugged sheepishly and meekly stated, "I'm very excited to be in Sacramento ... the gateway to enchanting Stockton."

It's that kind of timing that makes Paulsen so completely irresistible.

His one-liners are just as biting brilliant as ever, too.

Though many were targeted, of course, at political figures ("Have you seen that new Nixon commemorative stamp? You don't have to lick it — you just look at it and it sweats itself onto the envelope"), the subject matter was delightfully diverse.

Probably most surprising were the number of comments Paulsen made about his own sexuality — some self-effacing, some with a phony macho bravado.

"I know I don't appear very daring," he said, "but underneath this suit, I'm covered with hickeys.



Bee file

Pat Paulsen's show doesn't change much from year to year — but his dead-pan style of humor keeps the crowds coming back.

"Of course, they're all self-inflicted."

And, as has become his tradition, he and his trusty acoustic guitar delivered a number of self-penned tunes.

These, naturally, were as lifeless as his facial expression — monotonous melodies spanning no more than two chords, with flat, emotionless vocals.

Topics ranged from life in Los Angeles to morbid memories of Greenwich Village to his "Hawaii Travelogue/Dialogue," each sparklingly sarcastic.

No, his show doesn't change much from year to year — but if it works, it works. Pat Paulsen knows that — and so do the crowds that keep coming back.

The two comedians opening for Paulsen — John Pate and Joe Morris — were as different as could be, and just as funny.

Pate is a true-blue country boy from Alabama, and Morris offered an urban view (he's from southern California).

Morris did an especially commendable job of ad-libbing when hecklers from the crowd got more than just a little out of hand.

PAT PAULSEN, John Pate and Joe Morris will perform at Laughs Unlimited, 1124 Firehouse Alley, Old Sacramento, through Sunday. Call 446-5905 for reservations and information.

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moaned, "here I am, working in some old cellar in Sacramento ..."

Paulsen first became "big" in the '60s, when he appeared as a regular on the "Smothers Brothers' Comedy Show."

With his deadpan deliveries of presidential campaign speeches — which, hilariously enough, spawned some write-in votes during the 1968 and 1972 elections — Paulsen's unique shtick became so popular with his fellow Americans that he was probably just as responsible as Dick and Tom Smoth-