

Comics Young and Old Mourn 'Mr. Warmth,' Don Rickles

Don Rickles, the master insult comic who created laughs with ridicule and sarcasm in a decades-long career that earned him the facetious nickname "Mr. Warmth," died on Thursday at his Los Angeles home of kidney failure, his publicist said. He was 90.

Rickles, who said he devised his brand of mockery-based humor because he was no good at telling traditional jokes, had developed a bacterial infection in recent months that led him to cancel a number of performances.

His death was confirmed by his spokesman, Paul Shefrin, who said Rickles is survived by his wife of 52 years, Barbara, as well as their daughter, Mindy Mann, and two grandchildren. He would have turned 91 on May 8.

Rickles' last appeared on stage in Las Vegas in late October. But he continued to work after falling ill in February, taping segments of an upcoming internet series for the American Association of Retired Persons titled "Dinner with Don," hosting one-on-one conversations with various celebrities, Shefrin said.

The New York-born Rickles had an intense, often-ad libbed, rapid-fire delivery and a wide, impish grin. He delighted nightclub audiences, Hollywood royalty and politicians by hurling invective at them, all in good fun.

Encountering Frank Sinatra for the first time during a stand-up act in 1957, Rickles greeted the mercurial singer as Sinatra walked in with a retinue of tough guys by saying, "Make yourself at home, Frank—hit somebody."

Luckily for Rickles, the line amused Sinatra, who became one

of his biggest boosters and took to calling the short, bald Rickles "Bullethead." The comedian soon became an ex-officio member of the Sinatra-led group of popular entertainers known as the "Rat Pack."

Dishing It Out

Performing decades later at the second inaugural gala of U.S. President Ronald Reagan in 1985, Rickles did not hesitate to zing the commander-in-chief, asking, "Is this too fast for you, Ronnie?"

But the most frequent targets of the "Merchant of Venom" were the fans who packed his performances for a chance to be belittled as a "dummy," a "hockey puck" or worse. Celebrities often showed up just for the honor of being mocked by Rickles, and no minority or ethnic group was immune to a Rickles tongue-lashing.

"He was called 'The Merchant of Venom,' but in truth, he was one of the kindest, caring and most sensitive human beings we have ever known," actor-comedian Bob Newhart and his wife, Ginnie, said in a statement.

Comic actor Jim Carrey tweeted: "Don once begged me for a couple of bucks, then told me to twist myself into a pretzel. Ego slayer! Comic Everest!" Oscar winner Tom Hanks also tweeted a tribute to his *Toy Story* co-star, saying, "A God died today. Don Rickles, we did not want to ever lose you. Never."

Rickles also mocked himself and shied away from describing his act as insult comedy, insisting his humor stemmed not from mean-spiritedness but from wild exaggerations played for laughs.

"If I were to insult people and mean it, that wouldn't be funny," he once said.

Much of Rickles' material played on racial and ethnic stereotypes that did not always keep up with cultural evolution.

He came under fire in 2012 for a joke that characterized President Barack Obama as a janitor. His spokesman defended the line as just "a joke, as were the other comments Don made that night."

"Anyone who knows him knows he's not a racist," the spokesman told Politico then.

Heckling the Hecklers

Rickles, a graduate of the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York, proved especially adept in early nightclub engagements at handling hecklers. Eventually, poking fun at audience members would become a major part of his act.

In an interview with Reuters to promote his 2007 memoir *Rickles' Book*, he said his flair for impromptu insults grew out of his shortcomings as a conventional comic.

"I just can't tell jokes," he said. "As a young man I had a personality that I could rib somebody and get away with it."

Rickles, who served in the U.S. Navy during World War Two, also built a resume as an actor, making his film debut as a junior officer alongside Clark Cable and Burt Lancaster in the 1958 submarine drama *Run Silent, Run Deep*.

He went on to appear in a series of 1960s "beach party" movies with Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon and in 1970 played Army hustler Sergeant Crapgame in the wartime caper *Kelly's Heroes*, with Clint Eastwood, Telly Savalas and Donald Sutherland.

He endeared himself to an entirely new generation by providing the voice of Mr. Potato Head in the computer-animated *Toy Story* movie and its two sequels in the 1990s. In 1995, he had

a dramatic role in Martin Scorsese's Las Vegas crime film *Casino*.

But Rickles' biggest exposure came on television, both as a frequent sitcom guest star and late-night and variety show regular, especially on NBC's *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* and *The Dean Martin Show*.

On Carson, Rickles was typically introduced by Spanish matador music, signifying someone was about to be metaphorically gored.

Several Rickles TV series were short-lived, the most popular of which was the NBC comedy *. Sharkey*, in which he starred as a U.S. Navy chief petty officer in charge of new recruits. The series lasted just two seasons.

A TV documentary, *Mr. Warmth: The Don Rickles Project*, directed by John Landis, aired on HBO in 2007. {eoa}