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STILL A STANDUP GUY/ 'Tonight Show' chair cushy, but Leno likes taking act on road

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He's the host of the legendary "Tonight Show." He performs a 15-minute monologue five nights a week in front of an audience that's obligated to laugh whenever a sign lights up. A whole band kicks in just because he's there. He's got a desk and a comfy chair and a coffee mug with his name on it. All the biggest stars drop by to visit. He hugs them and gives them pecks on the cheeks. He's happily married to a lovely woman, Mavis. He owns a home in Los Angeles. His collection of expensive cars and motorcycles creeps ever closer to triple digits.

So what is Jay Leno doing in Colorado Springs, of all places, on a Saturday night? Telling jokes, of course. Eighty minutes of 'em. Twice in one night.

"I'm on the the road every weekend going somewhere," Leno says during a phone interview. "I was a stand-up comedian before I had this job and I'll probably be one after I have this job." Or as he phrased it in Jerry Seinfeld's behind-the-scenes inside- the-obsessive-mind documentary "Comedian," "If I get fired tomorrow, I'm a comic."

He also claims he lives entirely on the money he earns on the road. "I've never touched a dime of my 'Tonight Show' money," he tells Seinfeld casually. That's got to be one heck of a rainy day fund.

Before he landed the full-time late night spot, Leno performed about 300 nights a year. Now he estimates his gig dates at half that. On some weeknights, after filming the "Tonight Show," he hits a club or event to perform. He'll hop on a plane, do a set, then head home in time for work the next day.

But his lifestyle has its practical side, too. Every Sunday night he delivers an hour-long routine at the Comedy & Magic Club in Hermosa Beach; rumor has it he records these sessions to gauge audience response.

"The idea is to sort of find things that work," Leno says. "And so you do them all over the country and as they work all over the country then they work on television."

The opposite is also true.

"In the same way, if a joke works in the monologue that everybody thinks is funny, then it should work at the Air Force Academy or Berkeley or wherever you might go."

But Leno notes there are differences between the two.

"If I'm working on a piece of material tonight at a club, hopefully I'll have it perfected by the time I get to the Air Force Academy on Saturday. I try it a couple of different ways," he says. His act includes stories about his life. "You can pontificate a little," he says.

"When you do a 'Tonight Show' monologue, you're really just doing, hopefully, a funny version of the news," he says. "(It) tends to be a series of one-liners all strung together."

Academy officials can rest easy, though: Their recent news stories about rapes and sexual harassment aren't on Leno's menu for the evening.

"I don't know where you go with that," he says. "I mean, if it was a case of a streaking or mooning. . . . But these are serious charges that are best dealt with by probably not a comedian."

It's not that he's avoiding the topic, he clarifies. It's not that he's afraid to deliver a joke worth telling. After all, he reminds us, he's done Reagan jokes, Clinton jokes, Bush jokes - all in front of their subjects.

"You find the foible they have and you have some fun with it," he says. "They're politicians. I mean, good heavens, if they can't laugh at themselves, please!"

He also has a solid history of performing for the troops, including a USO tour in Bosnia in 2001.

"I'm a big fan of the military. I'm a supporter of the military," says Leno. "I've got a couple of veterans in my family. A couple of West Pointers."

As for this show, his expectations are high.

"It's the Air Force Academy. I mean, it's the best and the brightest we have. So hopefully they'll get the jokes."

THE DETAILS

Jay Leno performing standup comedy

When: 6 p.m. 9 p.m. Sept. 13

Where: Arnold Hall Theatre at the Air Force Academy

Cost: \$45 or \$28

For information: Contact the Air Force Academy Entertainment Office, 333-4497; Ticketmaster, 520-9090. Or visit any Ticketmaster outlet.

Don't wait: If you haven't ordered your tickets yet, do it today. No tickets will be sold at the door the night of the show without military or Department of Defense ID. Though the performances are open to the general public, high security is in effect. Attendees must enter through the North Gate and have a ticket (or be on the will-call list) and photo ID.