



May 16, 1993---

LAS VEGAS--- Everyone is in the audience of Jerry Lewis, which is the seed of his enigmatic spirit. When Jerry makes a film, he believes there are potentially 4 billion viewers. When Jerry appears onstage, he is everything a performer can possibly be.

Here on an elevator at the Sahara Hotel is Jerry with a bunch of guys in a billiards tournament. Jerry is easily recognizable, although dressed down in ocean-blue tennis shorts and matching sport shirt. He responds to the "Hey, you're Jerry Lewis!" greeting as if he had heard it a million times before. Jerry makes a joke by referring to a wacky alias.

This is his moment, this is his audience.

The pool players quickly turn away and get off the elevator. Jerry says goodbye, adding he hopes they all would win. After the elevator door shuts, Jerry corrects himself. "They all can't win," he says. He seems concerned that he screwed up.

Jerry doesn't miss a cue.

When Jerry appears next weekend at Drury Lane Oakbrook Terrace, outside of Chicago, there will be something for everyone. In an interview in a suite atop the Sahara, Jerry promised he will tell jokes, perform mime, magic, banter with the audience, sing, dance and conduct the 20-piece Bill Porter Orchestra. He's a one-man telethon.

"I do every single thing a performer can do to entertain an audience," Jerry says. "I may not do anything too terribly well, but what the hell I do, you can bet your ass I do good enough to perform.

"People always ask what I do. I'll tell you: I walk out onstage and let people know they can be nowhere near as benefitted by the evening as I am. Because I need it. They don't.

"They could go see 'Oklahoma.' They could see a remake of 'Pygmalion.' But on the night they see me, they're going to see a man who needs to be there. In the words of my dad, there's only one way to be a pro. Sweat. I never forgot that."

Jerry was born Joseph Levitch 67 years ago to entertainers Rae and Danny Lewis. Jerry has described his father as "the total entertainer," a man who sweated through many vaudevillian strains. Jerry's mother played piano at New York City

radio station WOR and was her husband's musical director.

At age 5, Jerry made his professional debut at a hotel in New York's Borscht Circuit, singing "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" He hasn't stopped since.

Jerry has worked Vegas for the past 48 years, including the 1946-56 glory years when he teamed up with straight man Dean Martin. Jerry even worked for Vegas gangster Bugsy Siegel.

Jerry is a fan of comics Steven Wright, Billy Crystal and Robin Williams, all of whom currently float through Vegas, but he says they're missing the frenetic energy of Vegas when it truly swung.

"They're not going to have the golden age," said Jerry, who has lived here for 15 years. "I did a show at 8 o'clock at the Sands. I did a show at midnight at the Sands. Between those shows I did the Sands lounge for an hour. After the midnight show, I moved across the street to the Frontier Hotel with Louis Prima and we did a show at 2:30 in the morning. Now, let's scramble it up and say Jimmy Durante comes in from the Desert Inn. So then Jimmy, Frank (Sinatra), Dean and I were with Prima. Then we'd all go knock Don Rickles' head in at 4:30 in the morning over here (at the Sahara's) Congo Room until until 6 a.m.

"Finally, we'd go over to what was the Silver Slipper and we'd walk out at 8 in the morning. The town looked like an A-bomb had hit. Yucca Flats. And we'd sleep until 4 in the afternoon, go to the steam room and be prepared to do six more shows."

These days, Jerry has redirected that energy toward his 13-month-old daughter, Danielle. After five sons (including '60s pop star Gary Lewis of the Playboys), 1983 double-bypass surgery and 1992 back surgery, this is Jerry's first daughter.

Jerry totes around an old brown briefcase full of potential film scripts. Sitting atop the paperwork are dozens of snapshots of baby Danielle. Jerry occasionally gets tears in his eyes when he talks about his daughter.

"What is that thing about the meaning of life?" Jerry asked intensely. "You get to a point where you don't think there is anything really different or inspiring. And I've done it all. At 67 years old, you think there's nothing else. But since my daughter arrived in my arms, it changed my life in a variety of ways.

"I can't watch television where women are assaulted. I cannot appreciate harrassment of any kind. Humor I used to think was humor relevant to the female is not funny anymore. The joke on the lady in the audience - that's gone. Why didn't I feel that with so many sons? I don't know. But never in your lifetime will you ever again meet a man so in love with his daughter."

Danielle has so inspired Jerry that he has committed to a full-tilt, 50-city U.S. tour

that will begin in October. Notoriously uncomfortable with the press, Jerry cut loose with three hours for this interview and is the subject of an upcoming feature in Vanity Fair magazine.

"Now I walk onstage and I look stage right to see Sam (SanDee Pitnick, his wife of 10 years) standing there with Danny in her arms and I work to impress that child," Jerry said. "She's just a year and a month old, but I want to walk offstage wet, look at her and let her know I'll always do her proud. Sometimes I hear myself and think I'm sounding like a weird duck. But what's weird about this kind of truth?"

After appearing in and directing more than 40 films, Jerry's most truthful role emerged in the 1983 Martin Scorsese film "The King of Comedy," in which he played talk-show host Jerry Langford, who was kidnapped by crazed fan-comedian Robert De Niro.

Scorsese uses Jerry's 1971 textbook *The Total Film-Maker* (based on 480 hours of Jerry's transcriptions) in the film classes that he teaches.

Scorsese asked if Lewis would read Paul Zimmerman's script for "The King of Comedy." Although De Niro had already enjoyed critical success in Scorsese's "Taxi Driver," "Mean Streets" and "Raging Bull," he still had an anonymous celebrity presence.

"Marty said, 'I need you to tell me what celebrity is and how it affects your life,' " Jerry explained. "After reading the brilliant script I saw that it needed punctuating. They didn't know what a star was. And Bobby De Niro is as important a movie star as I'll ever be. But Bobby doesn't know anything about death threats. Love-hate. By the time I got through with them, eight to 10 things that happened in my life are in that film."

Jerry said playing the cold straight man wasn't tough.

"Who are you sitting with right now?" he asked. "If you think about it carefully, what I had to do in 'King of Comedy' was like stealing money. All I had to do was be me, read the dialogue and not bump into the furniture. I was Jerry Lewis playing Jerry Langford. But, the hard part of that acting was maintaining consistency. They're asking me after 44 films not to go:

"Waaaaah."

"That's fucking tough," Jerry said, embarking on a roll. "But to call on the anger of some fan who knocks on the suite of your hotel at 20 to 4 in the morning looking for an autograph, that's easy.

"There's a scene in the picture that happened at the Sands. I was supposed to go onstage. The music was playing and a woman came up to me and said, 'Jerry, I

say novenas for you, I love you, we bless you every night, the laughter you've given us has made us a better family. My son Michael is sick and can't see your show tonight, there's the house phone, could you just call him and say you hope he feels better?' I said, `Maam, I would do it in a second, but they're playing my music and I have to go on now.'

"She said, `I hope you get cancer.'

"She never took a breath," Jerry said. He looked around the hotel suite and glanced out over the glitzy Vegas strip. The room was quiet. "It's incredible. She never took a fucking breath. That's how quick they turn."