



## Proof of Intelligent Life in the Universe!

NOW ORBITING LILY TOMLIN // BY STACY DAVIES

LILY TOMLIN IS ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE you can listen to for hours. Really. Even on the phone—which is how I got to listen to her the other day. And while some comedians might be cold and guarded off stage, when you talk to Tomlin, you get exactly what you'd expect: a mind-blowing hell of a good time. And a lot of giggling. *Her* giggling. Which will then make *you* giggle, or maybe even *cackle*—and I do apologize to Ms. Tomlin for the outbursts, but it was her own fault, after all.

Most people know her film work, including an Oscar-nominated performance in Robert Altman's *Nashville* and slapstick-ing it up with Dolly and Jane in *9 to 5*. But she's also won Emmys for her TV specials and Tonys for her Broadway one-woman shows—the most famous being *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, written by her partner Jane Wagner, who, she jokes, she's always pressuring to write more. "Sometimes I even try to seduce her with money, but it's all *our* money, so that never really works out," she laughs.

But while Tomlin's legendary shtick is channeling funky characters with often poignant social observations, back in 1969, the producers of her first TV gig, *Music Scene*, didn't want them around.

"They didn't get it," she says. "They thought the audience would be confused. So they made me do my monologues as myself. But regular Lily wasn't as funny."

Fortunately, *Laugh-In* producers *did* get it, and Tomlin quickly jumped ship to the politically charged variety show

where snarky phone operator Ernestine and forthright 6-year-old Edith Ann shot her to mega stardom. And more characters were to come—both culled from her imagination and imprinted from her past, and all people we immediately recognize and embrace.

"When I was a kid," she says, "we lived in the inner city in Detroit in a black neighborhood in an old apartment house, and some of the people in the building were incredibly educated, and some weren't, some had no politics, some had radical politics, some were very conservative—and whether you know that as a kid or not, you feel it. Seeing people when they break down and cry and fight or do something really funny and dear, and you just see all of them do it all, and you're just in love."

After college, Tomlin headed to New York to try out these emerging characters on the circuit. Obsessed with crafting and re-crafting characters, she'd grab anyone who'd listen and *literally* hold them captive.

"I'd go down to the laundromat on Second, and I'd be working on some old monologue, and honestly, I'd see someone I hadn't seen in maybe just a week, and I'd drag them to my apartment and *make* them sit there and watch me—and I'd just changed one little syllable or something, and this friend, you know, they might have seen that monologue *10 times* already! When I think back on it, it really was torture."

Tomlin's biggest kick is live interac-

tion—and she's a glutton for stunts. The prim and proper Judith Beasley once even took it to the street in 1977, right before Tomlin's *Appearing Nightly* show opened.

"It was February and freezing cold, and kids were in sleeping bags on the sidewalks overnight to get good seats. So, Mrs. Beasley put on her 1940s Red Cross uniform—which she always has with her because you never know when disaster might strike—and went down in front of the box office and passed out coffee and donuts all day, and Kleenex because everyone's nose was running. The kids always related to me as the character, which was so great."

Even when Tomlin just talks about her characters, it's as if they live in a real-time parallel universe in her head and are just waiting to come out—and sometimes they do, midconversation. Not in a kooky way so much as in an adoring way, and that affection is what gets the rest of us onboard. Friday night at OCPAC, we'll get to see them all again, and we'll get some updates, too. Edith Ann, for example, is enamored with the Obama daughters—and irritated that her mother doesn't know how to work an iPod. And Ernestine no longer works at the phone company.

"Ernestine was bereft over the divestiture of the phone company," Tomlin says. "When they were a monopoly, she could treat anybody anyway she wanted. She used to say, 'No matter how nasty I become, I'm always holding back.' So now, she's working at a big health care insurance corp denying health care to everyone. It's right up her alley."

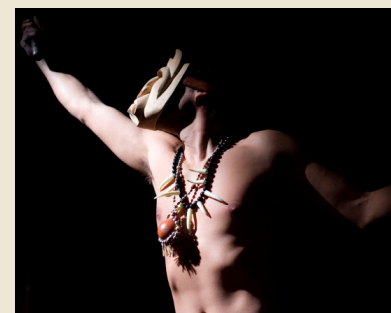
We can't wait to hear more.

## Waiting for This Moment

ENTER THE ABSURD WORLD OF ALIVE THEATRE

The Alive Theatre gang are totally those kids you knew in high school who were constantly being laughed *at*, not *with*. You remember: the dorky drama nerds who thought it would be a plumb fantastic idea to bust out a little commedia dell'arte during the lunch hour? (And at whom you laughed a little, too, when everyone else did?) Except now they're fully-formed attractive men and women—and, what's more, all that frenetic ambition has found a purpose, and it is to make you laugh. This time, you're *supposed* to be laughing at them.

The first giggles in Alive Theatre's "Cherry Poppin' Play Festival" come about half a minute into Anthony Cretara and Jasper Oliver's *The Adventure Play*—which initially sounds like a porno set to "The Great Gig in the Sky," all heavy breathing and excessive noise—courtesy of our clownish, "pre-pubescent plague-ridden serf" from the 14th century, Zozza, masterfully played by Jessica Culaciati. (And really, an entire column could be written just about her flawless body movement, as well as that of her supporting cast.) What comes next makes no sense on paper—or even as it unfolds before you—but there is tremendous joy to be found among the fart jokes, Beatles lyrics, Beyoncé references, men in rabbit



suits, fairies with stringed instruments and other assorted absurdity (including a man popping out from inside another man's head in a fantastic fit of blood splatter; "You have a big head!" is the punch line, naturally).

One of two new plays that can be seen on Friday night (the other being *Under the Great Boobie Hatch*; four additional new plays are split over Saturday and Sunday), *Adventure* leaves you at once bemused and excited. Maybe this whole time the joke's been on us. // ELLEN GRILEY

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