

# Jim Belushi wants it all! (almost)

By Michael Giltz

"I'm coming down to Florida to kick the Miami Dolphins' ass!" jokes Jim Belushi, an ardent Chicago Bears fan, even if their weak defense last Monday night did tick him off.

Who knows? Belushi just might do it. He seems to be doing everything else. That's everything, as in EVERYTHING. He has one movie (*About Last Night* . . . ) in the theaters, and another (*Salvador*), just reached the video stores. A Comedy Experiment (*The Birthday Boy*) recently aired on Cinemax, about five other movies are in various stages of development and, to top it off, he's just begun rehearsals with John Ritter for a

comedy for United Artists called *Real Men*.

So why is this very busy man taking time out from his very busy schedule to come down to Florida and give a lecture on "The Art Of Improvisation?" That's easy.

"I love it," Belushi said in a telephone interview. "Every time I go back to Chicago, I go do an improvisational set (at Second City). That's where I feel my roots are. (Improvisation) is what I do best, and that's why I lecture on it."

His speaking engagement will include a talk

on improvisation, followed by some practical demonstrations involving Belushi as well as randomly selected members of the audience. While it promises to be funny and entertaining, this show is not a comedy routine. "I don't do stand-up," Belushi says.

To some people in the audience, Jim Belushi will be seen as a former member of *Saturday Night Live* and brother of the late, great John Belushi. Others will also remember him as the loud and occasionally obnoxious Bernie in *About Last Night* . . . Still others will recognize Belushi as a fine

stage actor who garnered leading roles and critical acclaim in such plays as the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Sexual Perversity In Chicago* (which metamorphosed into the film *About Last Night* . . . and *True West*, an off-Broadway play by Sam Shepard.

Of course, Belushi is a combination of all these factors. He is an actor whose diverse credits are a testament to his versatility, as well as the fact that he's had . . . the good fortune to work steadily for the past 12 years."

Hard-working and ambitious, Belushi wants to do everything, including writing, producing and, of course, starring in the projects he develops. "To really get control of your career," he says, "it's great if you can do it all."

However, Belushi is also level-headed and knows when enough is enough. For example, he considers directing to be "too much of a strain" on top of everything else he wants to do.

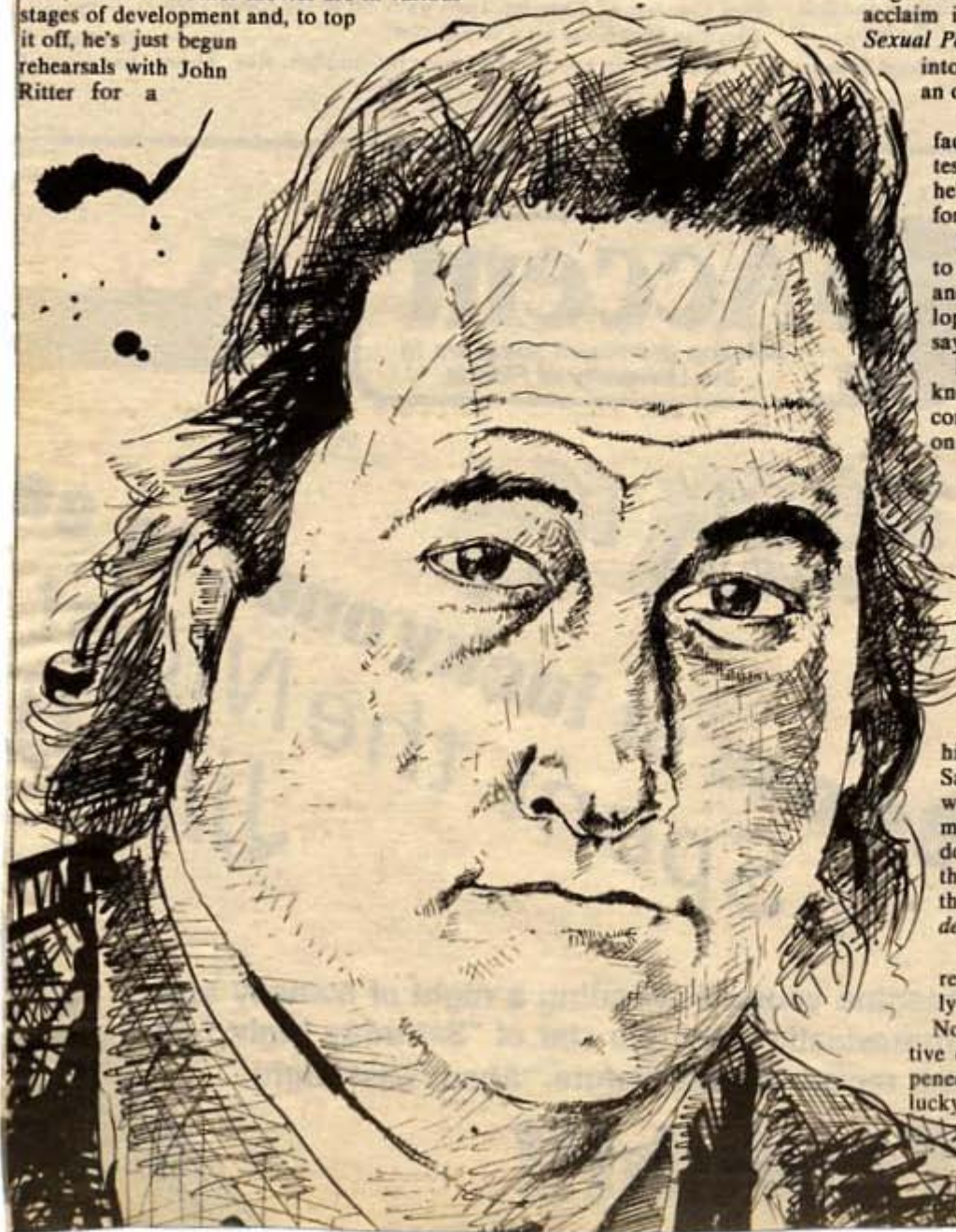
And what he wants to do most of all is act. When asked about whether he prefers the theater over movies, Belushi says bluntly, "I'm an actor. I like to work. Working is my favorite type of work."

Later, when discussing possible reasons for turning down a role, he says, "Look, as an actor, you don't hesitate when they give you a role. The only reason I wouldn't do a role is if the script sucked."

One script that didn't suck was *Salvador*, the highly controversial film about reporters in El Salvador. This politically charged movie, which starred James Wood, received wildly mixed reviews (everything from a "thumbs-down" from Siskel and Ebert, who commented that "its politics are all screwed up," to "one of the year's 10 best films" from *The Fort Lauderdale News*).

Unfortunately, it also received a sloppy release from its distributor, and *Salvador* quickly headed for the video stores.

Nonetheless, the experience was clearly a positive one for Belushi, who says, "*Salvador* happened to be the best script I ever read. I felt very lucky to be part of that film."





## Belushi

from page 1

Besides, he was certainly no stranger to commercial failure. In the late 70s, he starred in two ill-fated sitcoms: *Working Stiffs* for CBS and *Who's Watching The Kids* for NBC. At their mere mention, he good-naturedly breaks into an apparently oft-repeated routine. "Yeah, the question is, 'Who's watching the kids?' and the answer is, 'Nobody!'"

A much more satisfying venture, both commercially and critically, was *The Birthday Boy*, a Comedy Experiment that aired on Cinemax. Considering the many duties he assumed for the half-hour special, it's probably a harbinger of things to come.

"I wrote, produced and acted in that. It's my baby," he says proudly. The cast he assembled for the show was cheerfully nepo-

tistic. "I used my friends. My cousin is in it. My son is in it. My girlfriend and I wrote it. I used a friend of mine to shoot it and co-produce it."

"Critically, it got an unbelievable reception," he continued. "*The New York Times* just went nuts over it. That made me feel very good."

If there was any down side to the project, it was the limited budget. "We did it for \$150,000. \$150,000 is spent on 10 seconds of a Pepsi commercial, you know? (But) I'd love to do that type of thing again." Pause. "With a little more money!"

Though Belushi has achieved several artistic peaks during the past decade, his most visible success has come just recently with the release of *About Last Night*. . . . The film received exceptional critical praise. Roger Ebert, for one, called it one of the best films of

the year. It also did bang-up business at the box office.

It is based on *Sexual Perversity In Chicago*, which was written by David Mamet. The drama took a harsh, cynical look at the singles scene of the late 70s, while the movie softened that message and managed to remain hopeful.

The few criticisms leveled at the movie generally dealt with these changes, but Belushi answers the charges easily. "Well, the play is 55 minutes long and the movie is an hour and 55 minutes long, so I think (the changes) were necessary." Laughing, he said, "Otherwise, you've got an hour PBS film, you know?"

Still, these changes did necessitate rethinking Bernie, the role he'd originated. "I had to lighten him up a little bit," Belushi says. "In the play, Bernie is much more threatened by Debbie (played on screen by Demi Moore)."

One of the funniest moments in the film occurs when Bernie meets Debbie for the first time. He leans toward her and says, "Has anyone ever told you you're a very beautiful girl?" Pause. "HUH?" His grunt turns the standard pickup line into a menacing threat, causing Debbie to jump in her seat and the audience to burst into laughter.

Belushi revealed that he improvised that bit of business. "I got the 'Huh?' from my dad," he says. "He was riding his horse one day and the horse kept biting to the side of the bit. My dad goes, 'What are you doing? HUH?' The horse just shook his head and I thought it was the funniest thing in the world, so I used it."

Belushi clearly loves the opportunity to improvise. He says, "You restructure beats, you change things around, you delineate stuff and you add stuff." However, he explains, the amount of improvisation done in a movie depends on the director, the script and the other actor.

In this case, the other actor was usually Rob Lowe, a person who, until *About Last Night*. . . and to a certain degree *St. Elmo's Fire*, was known more for his good looks than his acting ability.

"I was a bit skeptical about working with him," Belushi admits. "You know, 'pretty boy.' But here's a kid who's young, talented, rich, good-looking. He's got women up to his knees; all he has to do is bend down and pick them up. To have all that going on, this kid handles it great."

He continues warmly, "I'm very fond of Rob and we became good friends. He's a guy. He goes to ball games and loses money. He's a real guy."

Belushi is also fond of making movies. Though television and the lure of easy money are always dangling in front of him (he claims all three networks have offered him developments and a firm series commitment), he has resisted.

He says, "I've done prime-time, I've done late-night, I've done off-Broadway, I've done Broadway, I've done industrial films, I've done commercials, I've painted houses, I've bused tables. I've done all that stuff, but I haven't really done film. I want to work in this as long as they'll let me."

At the moment, everyone is more than happy to let him work. *Real Men*, the comedy he's going to film with John Ritter of *Three's Company*, is described by Belushi as "very hot." It should be. The "very hot" story was penned by the very hot Dennis Feldman, a writer who also scripted *The Golden Child*, a movie coming out this Christmas starring Eddie Murphy.

After he wraps up that film, Belushi will launch straight into *The Principal*, "a dramatic film, like *The Blackboard Jungle*."

That doesn't mean he would ever limit himself strictly to movies. "Each medium has its challenges," he says. "I'm an actor, you know? It's like a plumber. He doesn't just want to work on the toilet, right? He wants to do the whole house."

And what part of the house does he feel most comfortable in? Is it stage? Screen? Television? Comedy? Drama? It's a dumb question because Belushi obviously wants to live in every room of the house. He says simply, "I'd like to be pegged as an actor." Well, it looks like Jim Belushi is about to be pegged.