

# *The New* REPUBLIC

"No Respect: Rodney Dangerfield (1921-2004)"  
by Adam Baer  
October 6, 2004

*"It's not easy being me. When I was born, the doctor told my mother, 'I did all I could but he pulled through anyway'...I could tell that my parents hated me. My bath toys were a toaster and a radio... What a childhood I had; why, when I took my first step, my old man tripped me!"*

Such were the telling words of one Jacob Cohen, a.k.a. Rodney Dangerfield, the fish-eyed gold standard of self-deprecating comedy, who died at age 82 in Los Angeles on October 5, after awaking from a coma into which he had slipped following heart-valve replacement surgery. Dangerfield, a sweaty, rambling nightclub icon, who had most recently lived in a humble Beverly Hills apartment with his second wife Joan, 41, had spent the latter part of his roller-coaster life ranting, "I can't get no respect." But it wasn't until the May publication of his autobiography, *It's Not Easy Bein' Me: A Lifetime of No Respect but Plenty of Sex and Drugs* (HarperCollins), that he honestly explained the source of his comedy.

After detailing how his vaudeville-comedian father balked at parental responsibilities ("I found out much later that he was a ladies' man. Dad had no time for his kids -- he was always out trying to make new kids"), Dangerfield writes:

Although I didn't realize it at the time, my childhood was rather odd. I was raised by my mother, who ran a very cold household. I never got a kiss, a hug, or a compliment. My mother wouldn't even tuck me in, and forget about kissing me good night. On my birthdays, I never got a present, a card, nothing.

In fact, Dangerfield's first chapter is entitled, "I was a male hooker." And Dangerfield wasn't kidding. Growing up alone and destitute in Jamaica, Queens, five-year-old Cohen would often allow a neighborhood man to pay him a nickel to sit on his lap and give him a kiss on the lips. It was sexually ambiguous enough to solidify for Dangerfield a life of consistent unhappiness, servitude, and hence measured comedic success. On a recent Howard Stern Show interview, Dangerfield admitted that he never felt happy, or expected to feel anything like happiness, even in his most successful years. It was a saddening but revealing moment, and it made plenty of casual fans who had never known Dangerfield for anything other than his whoop-it-up one-liners and wacky shenanigans in laugh-riot films like "Caddyshack" reconsider the man's depth.

Many great comedians, especially those rooted in the Jewish Borscht-Belt tradition, have both endured and made hay of hardship. But hardship is relative, and Dangerfield's seems pretty acute in comparison to those of his colleagues. He was born in 1921, worked a demoralizing job delivering groceries to his schoolmates' homes, and wrote jokes through his teen years before ascending to life as an out-of-work comic-cum-singing waiter. His first stage name was

Jack Roy, and throughout the 1940s he flaunted this moniker throughout Catskills dining rooms to little success. In New York City, he drove trucks delivering fish and dirty linens, before marrying Joyce Indig, a singer, and retreating from comedy to paint houses and sell aluminum siding in Englewood, N.J.

He didn't return to comedy until he was 42, asking The Inwood Lounge nightclub owner, George McFadden, to allow him to perform under another name. "Rodney Dangerfield" was the label he received and accepted, and with it, he began to land more gigs, including the Ed Sullivan Show. Soon, after the death of his first wife Indig, he opened up the New York comedy club Dangerfield's, and eventually appeared on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson and won film spots before his big-time 1980s hits. Those included *Easy Money*, a movie in which he played a gambling addict who has to go straight in order to win an inheritance, and *Back to School*, an illuminating anti-frat farce in which he played a loving, wealthy goofball-father who returns to college with his freshman-year son, employs Kurt Vonnegut to (unsuccessfully) write term papers on Kurt Vonnegut, and (literally) charms the khakis off an English professor who can easily see through his crass veneer.

Unlike that professor, however, most boomer fans of so-called sophisticated comedians – Bill Cosby, Bob Hope – considered Dangerfield crude and bawdy, a cheap laugh-grabber who used widely available kitsch templates ("Take my wife, please") to connect with a collegiate, immature and predominantly male audience. Such pigeonholers would do well to reconsider their decision. Laced into nearly every Rodney joke is an affecting aspect of emotional pain. "I can't get no respect" becomes the mantra, and it's easy to look at an unattractive maker of dirty jokes and laugh *at* him. But in the end the mantra is just a marketable package designed to allow him to distribute effective zingers marinated in deep meaning.

*"My wife made me join a bridge club. I jump off next Tuesday...I remember the time I was kidnapped, and they sent a piece of my finger to my father. He said he wanted more proof... When I was a kid I got no respect. The time I was kidnapped and the kidnappers sent my parents a note they said, "We want five thousand dollars or you'll see your kid again...When my old man wanted sex, my mother would show him a picture of me."*

Do these so-called "cheap one-liners" seem to be the work of a feeble-minded bottom-feeder?

One of the great things Dangerfield will also be remembered for – he has written and acted in mostly forgettable comedic and dramatic films for the past twenty years – was his interest in helping young comedians make a name for themselves. He knew how hard the enterprise was and remains, and he was also smart enough to know that his success, such as it was, would be short-lived. Because of the performance opportunities and connections he gave them comedians like Jim Carrey, Jerry Seinfeld, Sam Kinison, Roseanne Barr, and Bob Saget felt confident about forging ahead into a pool of razor-toothed sharks. Comedy was something Dangerfield felt compelled to practice, and he recognized others who worked at the craft with an equal amount of devotion.

In 1981 Dangerfield took a Grammy for the album "No Respect." He received The 1994 Lifetime Creative Achievement Award at the American Comedy Awards. And one of his iconic white shirts and red ties live in perpetuity in the Smithsonian Institute. But for all that recognition Hollywood never paid him his due in the way that he deserved. When the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences decided to overturn their rejection of Dangerfield's 1995 application for membership, Dangerfield told them, "No thanks." In the end, he may still be "lowbrow" in some people's opinion, but he wasn't quite low enough to accept table scraps from an increasingly impotent establishment that was too close-minded to understand truly effective and engaging comedy.