

FILM FEATURE

Artie Lange Swings Away In "Beer League" - Part Two



Artie Lange on "Beer League's" premiere: "It killed in a way that these movies dream of killing. People belly laughing, enormous applause. We're proud of it."

As I mentioned in part one of my interview with Artie Lange, there are times where he'll blurt out things about his life on the air without provocation of planned thought. This was never more true than on the morning of September 21st, 2006 when, after mentioning to a young man addicted to heroin who was in the studio that there's a drug that can help him get clean, he was probed by Stern and company as to how he knew about them. He eventually caved and admitted that, before filming began for *Beer League* his mother, sister and his then girlfriend staged an intervention and forced him to end his own addiction to heroin. The film's backers demanded that Lange, who took four days off from the Stern show because of his condition, be back at work or else they were pulling the plug on the film. With help from a doctor, Lange received the treatment he so desperately needed and has been clean ever since.

In light of this recent confession, and in listening over the tape from our conversation in early August, I was shocked to hear Lange disclose his addiction to heroin to me a full month and a half before it ended up on the air. Granted, he didn't give me the same disclosure he gave to Stern, but he did tell me more than anyone associated with the show knew before that day.

My second conversation with Lange begins innocently enough, with Lange discussing his preparations for the William Shatner roast that month.

What is stressful about writing for a roast?

Well I've done a few of them. It's just a big spot. It's televised, a lot of celebrities in the room. There are a lot of great comics you're up against. That and being on the Stern show everything else is added pressure because everything you do outside the show is analyzed.

I've done Hugh Hefner, I've done Donald Trump, I've done a lot of big time roasts and I've been lucky enough to always do well. When you bomb outside of the show it just makes everything worse. Because if you bomb somewhere on tape Howard will play it all day. And if you kill he'll only play two minutes of it.

Because it's not as interesting as when you fuck up.

Exactly.

How do you prepare for this? Do you run jokes by people or what?

(long pause) Yeah. I write jokes. Some of my friends who are great joke writers help me.

Are they honest with you, you think?

Oh God yeah. This is no time to be dishonest. Guys like Nick Di Paolo, Frank Sebastiano, those guys send me jokes, I run jokes by them. You gotta get the best twenty or so down.

What's your rehearsal like when you get those down?

You just say them over and over again. A plane ride is cool if it's coming up 'cause you got that time to look at them. Just a matter of repeating them all in your head to get the timing right. A funny thing happened once a few years ago. I left LA, got on a red eye, got off the plane and the town car driver who picked me up was a big fan said, 'Hey man you better get into work. They're voting on whether or not to fire you.' Sure enough it came up; is the show better or not with Artie on it? Voting was done with people on the show and on the TV crew. I won 32 votes to 1. The only guy who said 'No, you should fire Artie' is Richie Wilson, one of the camera guys. I always thought he was a friend. I was like, 'Whoa! That was harsh.' Richie has since become a good friend of mine. Of course Howard loved him because he was being honest. But everyone including Howard voted no, we love Artie. As I got off the plane and got in the town car they were in the middle of that. I had planned on going home to crash first and go in even later and the guy was like, 'You better go in, man. They're voting to fire you.' I said, 'Alright, go right to the show.' I went in, bed head, still fucked up from the Percocet I took on the plane.

Was that for fun or for actual pain?

Both! I mean, c'mon. My opinion on drugs is that if drugs didn't wear off I honestly couldn't tell kids not to do them. What if you're 17 and you get high and you're just high forever. I mean, God, what a great world. No one would be driving, but who cares, you don't have to go anywhere.

I'm really lax on most drugs. But I've never really done anything because I came from a fucked up background with regards to my father.

Most kids like that with a messed up father go the opposite way. Good for you. But the

worst part about drugs is that they wear off. Heroin wears off.

And the problem is still there.

Your life becomes a living hell. Your whole life becomes about getting more heroin. I've had to withdraw from heroin a couple of times. I never shot it, but I snorted it. Snorting is even more addictive they say. That's what a drug addict will tell you. I hadn't done heroin until I was 24, I was in rehab for booze and coke. The guy got up and said, 'Have you ever tried heroin?' I go, 'No.' He said 'Whatever you do, don't do it, it's the greatest thing ever.' As soon as I got out I said, 'God, I gotta get some heroin.' The guy was right. But God when it wears off...it takes your soul. Your whole life will be about getting more of it. It's not worth the high. The best part is to never experience the high and I wish that I never did. It just takes your life away, slowly but surely. I've got good friends, where you look into their eyes and they're not there anymore. They would rape their mother if you told them 'I'll give you heroin.' Literally, they would rape their mother.

There are some people that are more predisposed to getting addicted for sure. Like I'm a big guy...that's the closest thing to addiction I've ever dealt with is food...so it's like getting mad at those people that are skinny that can scarf down a whole pizza in front of you. You just want to beat the shit out of them.

Some girls will tell me, 'God, I can't gain weight.' And I go, 'Have you tried putting mayonnaise on pizza?' I mean is it hard to do? I don't get it. They can't gain weight...shut up. I just want to punch them in the face.

You've had a couple of development deals, right?

After I did *Mad TV* Fox gave me one. I had two at NBC and one at ABC, so four. I did a pilot once, I wrote a script another time with Sam Simon and Frank Sebastiano. You always get paid a good amount of money. It's good for cash. The one for Fox was \$750,000. Beautiful.

They just pay you that even if nothing comes from it?

Yup. I shot a pilot. They didn't pick up the pilot, that was up to them. So I did my work and they paid me.

Jesus. (long pause) Hello? Hello? (long pause)

(in a pained voice) Hello?

Are you okay?

Oh no, yeah. I just got up...my back. I threw my back out. I'm getting back issues.

Comedian and co-host (with fellow comedians Jim Florentine and Shuli) of Howard

101's "Miserable Men," Reverend Bob Levy has known Artie Lange for five years after they met at a Stuttering John gig. The two of them became fast friends and began doing gigs together. "We must've done about 20 weekends together. We always have a fun time. We drink and laugh and make fun of people and do it again the next day."

While the two of them don't hang out a lot when they're not working together, Levy thinks the world of Lange. "We bust each other's balls on the air, but that's on the air. Off the air, I'd kill for him and I think he knows that."

On the topic of what it would do to the Stern show if Artie weren't a part of it, Levy says, "Nobody can replace him because he's such a funny guy, funny story-teller on the stuff that goes on in his life, he does great impressions. He definitely would be missed, for sure. I couldn't even think about that happening. He's young, he's got stuff going on and he's got so many problems that Howard can just get into it. That's what the show needs. You can't just have somebody go in and sit in there that's *just* funny. It might be funny that day, but in the long run it's not going to be funny."

All things considered, Artie Lange is in a pretty decent mood when I call him on the afternoon of Sunday, September 17th. This is the third day in *Beer League's* release. The film opened in select east coast markets to solid, if not boffo box-office. Current figures peg the film's box-office gross at nearly a half-million. Not bad at all for a rather small opening in a concentrated area.

We didn't come close to a million bucks, but it's still alive because the theaters it killed in, it did insane business. It did ten thousand and eleven thousand per screen in certain big theaters. So those theaters don't want to get rid of it. And the ones it didn't do so well in, we're trying to pull them out. There's been a big outcry in the other big Stern cities like Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Phoenix, Boston and LA. The fans who saw it...the reaction has been insane. It's averaging four-and-a-half out of five stars on these fan websites. All the critics hated it, which I knew would happen. It's so funny, you can almost predict what they won't like. Like the guy from the New York Times was upset because we put topless women in a bachelor party scene. They always seem like angry nerds or gay guys.

People are ridiculously more sensitive to so-called "offensive material" these days.

I wish you could have been in that room at the Ziegfield, a thousand people guffawing including Howard and Robin. They were so nice. They were so genuine. Howard said 'You hit a home run.' And Howard even gave a quote for the papers, which he never does. So right on the top of our ad it says, 'Howard Stern: I laughed my ass off at this terrific movie.' It was awesome. It's no gray area, it was the greatest night of my career. It was eleven hundred seats. Howard, Nick DiPaolo, Colin Quinn, Norm Macdonald, all of these people who I love and respect. About 800 regular Stern fans. It killed in a way that these movies dream of killing. People belly laughing, enormous applause. I went to theaters in Jersey and it gets ovations. It destroys with the people we made it for, which is good news. The first thing Robin said, 'It was gut-wrenching, side-splitting funny.' That means everything to me. We're proud of it. I'm used to a lot of negative shit in my life,

so I'm just gonna keep swinging.

I read on fan websites that a lot of people were buying tickets that didn't even live in the cities.

Yeah, the people that did go, I love them so much. I consider them personal friends. My comedy has always been non-mainstream, very un-Dane Cook-ish. It's not everybody's taste and the ones that do like it, they're just the best. I love them for it.

There was even one person who said he bought a ticket and who was flying in from Arizona to see it.

A couple of people flew in, drove in and hey, my agents didn't even do that.

Editor's Note: As we go to "press," Beer League is rolling out to a few more markets on Friday, September 29th. It's going into theaters in Connecticut and Delaware, while staying in New York, Ohio, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. There's unsubstantiated rumors of it hitting Los Angeles on October 06th, but that, as of right now, seems to be the extent of its release. Artie has said that the film will be out on DVD in time for Christmas, which is great, but my personal feelings on the matter are that the distributors were in over their heads and didn't plan the film's release properly. Putting the film in half the theaters or less in the markets they opened up in would have been the wise move. While more investment in promotions for the film and a solid roll-out would have also been beneficial. The fact that they didn't screen this film for critics in advance was also a bad move. Even if the critics didn't like it (for the most part they didn't), it's still free promotion and you can always snare people with the clips alone. Even if the majority of interest came from Stern fans, there are enough across the country to have targeted other cities besides those on the east coast. As a Chicagoan, I recoiled each time Artie told me that the reason they weren't looking to this city is because we're not typically a big Stern market. But goddamn if this still ain't the third biggest city in the country and to see Delaware get this film and not Chicago is just ridiculous. No fault to Artie at all, mind you. I put the blame squarely at the feet of the distributors. Lange, Sebastiano, the cast and crew deserved better and so did the fans.