

Laugh-in CALGARY

By Sean McLennan

Lily Tomlin is headlining OutFest—part of the OutGames April 1 through 8, and will be appearing for one performance on April 7. She's been an entertainer for the better part of forty years. Best known for her comic characters like Ernestine the telephone operator from *Laugh-In* (1969-73), and Violet Newstead from *Nine to Five* (1980), she has had a dynamic career that has included TV, stage, and screen, including highlights like *And the Band Played On* (1993) about the early days of HIV/AIDS, *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), about the portrayal of gays and lesbians in twentieth-century film, and *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* (1991), the award-winning one-woman show written by her partner Jane Wagner. *Outlooks* spoke with Lily about coming to Calgary for the OutGames:

Outlooks: So, have you ever been to Calgary before?

Tomlin: You know, I don't think I have. I've been to Canada many, many times, but I don't ever remember coming specifically to Calgary.

Outlooks: Always out east?

Tomlin: No, I've played Vancouver several times. I'm surprised I haven't been to Calgary.

Outlooks: Well we're getting much more attention with the oil boom.

Tomlin: Oh, is that right? Well, I hope the US doesn't try to invade you!

Outlooks: No kidding! I'm worried about that myself. Any thoughts about headlining for the First North American OutGames?

Tomlin: Well, certainly, I think it'll be fun—I'm looking forward to it. I wish I could go to some of the events, but I probably won't be able to.

Outlooks: That's too bad. It looks like it's going to be a pretty exciting week. Judy Shepard is the keynote speaker of OutRights, the human rights conference.

Tomlin: Oh, gee, I'd like to hear her.

Outlooks: What can we expect from your show?

Tomlin: Well, I do a lot of characters—about ten or so. It'll be pretty informal—more interaction with the audience as opposed to a theatre piece. And I usually do a Q&A at the end. I'll talk about Calgary and the US and Canada. Just try to be funny and relevant at the same time.

Outlooks: That sounds good—I think it's what you're good at.

Tomlin: That's what I'm good at? I hope so, bless you!

Outlooks: Speaking of the US—how would you characterize the US right now with respect to GLBT issues?

Tomlin: Well, we've got an administration that's questionable, not just on that front but probably a hundred others, so it's a tough time. I mean, there are so many issues, I don't know where to start. Fortunately, the anti-gay pressures only basically have power from the religious right, and with Bush and Cheney being diminished as they have been, I

think that's been diminished too. I don't think [the Republicans] ever really intended to push [the anti-gay agenda]; they use it just as a wedge and galvanizing issue to split the country apart—and to cater to their constituency.

They did succeed, of course, unfortunately, and a lot of states did vote on amendments against same-sex marriage. So they stirred up an awful lot of controversy, but unless the religious right can hold onto some real power in the country, it won't continue and I hope they've lost a lot of power through the failure of this administration.

Sadly, everyone who's courting that side of the fence is courting that constituency, so they're going to keep that point of view alive.

Outlooks: So you do have hope that it will change?

Tomlin: Oh absolutely! I mean, I have to have hope! I hope we survive, period. The way things are going, I have no idea where it might lead—nobody does. I mean, if we don't get this Iraqi thing to some sort of stability, and then you think about the environmental issues that face us—In our lifetime, maybe it won't be the end of everything, but there's a tremendous amount of negativity that has to be reversed.

Outlooks: If you ever get fed up with it, we'd be happy to have you.

Tomlin: (laughs) OK. Yeah, that's not a bad idea. Listen, a lot of people think about that!

Outlooks: A lot of your work, even some of the straight comedy, seems to have a political undertone to it. Is that something that determines your choice of material?

Tomlin: I think it just appeals to me to be able to say something about something. Even if it's just metaphorical about a social issue, not necessarily topical politically. Although I love something totally flat out farcical, but I'm always going to love something more that has politics and humanity and character and reflects the culture in some way.

Outlooks: Do you think there's a relationship between humour and political activism?

Tomlin: I think it can stimulate and motivate. I think it creates a voice. I think we need it because a lot of time, people who are politically active get a little bit too in earnest. There's the old saying, "If you get someone laughing, when their mouth is open you can flip in a little food for thought."

It's good to have a more magnanimous attitude, instead of being completely divisive and didactic. You should try to create something that reaches more people on some more human level, if you can. It's just like the religious right, which doesn't have much humour because they're just in such a righteous place. Righteousness on either side can create trouble for you.

Outlooks: In the past you've said that you've been very open with the media about your relationship with Jane Wagner but that they never really chose to write about it.

Tomlin: Yeah, I feel that, yes.

Outlooks: Do you think that that's changed now? Do you think that interviewers are more willing to acknowledge the two of you?

Tomlin: Oh yeah, they usually mention it now. You know, they'll mention "her partner of thirty-five years" or that "they've been together for a long time". Or they'll call me "an out lesbian"—whatever works for them, I guess.

Outlooks: I guess I'm a little surprised to hear that they didn't want to touch it—the media loves a scandal...

Tomlin: We're talking about years ago! I've been around for like thirty-seven years and in the beginning people just didn't write about that kind of stuff. Our media wasn't so *tabloidized*. They didn't write about certain politicians either. They were much more discrete. Covert. I don't know if it was just an unspoken rule that they adhered to or if they thought they would do me some kind of professional harm in those days. Although, *Time* did offer me the cover in '75 to come out.

Outlooks: Oh, really?

Tomlin: At that time, that was almost like some kind of bribery. I said, "Well, I'm not going to trade my personal life just to get on some magazine cover." Instead I put a piece in an album I did in '75 called "Modern Scream" about being a celebrity and being interviewed in a movie magazine. That was the era of *Boys in the Band* and Cliff Gorman, one of the actors, was very conscious of making everyone realize he was not gay. I just took his interviews and flipped them. So instead of saying, "What was it like playing a gay man?" it was someone asking me "What was it like to play a straight woman?" It was pretty funny. Unfortunately that album wasn't so successful. Maybe I should pull that old bit out and do it.

Outlooks: That would be great. Do you think it was worse having the lack of acknowledgment or having the sensationalism that we have now?

Tomlin: Well, it depends. I wish a lot of stuff—not just talking about being identified as being gay or not. The press—we don't even have press anymore. It's almost non-existent. The news divisions in the networks—they never tried to make money before, they were subsidized so that they had integrity. They weren't pandering to the lowest common denominator—they at least made the pretense of real discussion and analysis. The only media that we get here in LA that, to me, has any validity is the *Pacifica* station, *KPFK*. Occasionally *NPR*, but *KPFK* is the only one that's really political and not afraid to stick their neck out. The networks don't, and of course, then you've got *Fox*. Those people, they get by doing anything they want because they say they're not newscasters, they're commentators. But their point of view is totally administration driven—I used to listen to everybody—Rush Limbaugh and Hannity and O'Reilly—and you could almost see the fax that came over the machine that week with the talking points. It's scary.



But talking about [acknowledgement of my relationship in the past], it's not something I'll ever really know how it would have been. People used to tell me and Jane not to drive to work together.

Outlooks: Really?

Tomlin: Yeah, they'd say we should come in different cars. We never did, of course, cause Jane didn't even drive, but I was always amazed at people's fear, thinking that they're protecting us.

Outlooks: I feel very grateful to live in the time and the place that I do.

Tomlin: Yeah, things are different. They're certainly different in the gay community. People used to be much more repressed—somewhat in my time, but the decades before me, we were much more repressed. I had an acquaintance—Evelyn Hooker, who was a psychologist who helped get homosexuality removed from the list of psychological disorders—I went to see her talk a couple of times about how people would have to have secret places to meet just to socialize and meet other gay people.

Outlooks: How do you feel about the portrayal of GLBT people in the media these days?

Tomlin: I haven't noticed anything really negative going on. Usually in those action movies there's always some little scene that makes someone the object of ridicule but I haven't noticed anything like that recently, have you?

Outlooks: Yeah—300.

Tomlin: Oh, that 300—that thing looks disgusting. I had a feeling about that movie—I thought it was bad enough just from its billboard.

It's this pandering to some adolescent streak that exists in some people, and it makes the audience feel in some way superior. You can beat up women and do all kinds of violence and it's like nothing—it's expected. So the media won't say anything about some terrible dehumanization of gay people.

But we've had great things on television—shows that have had very sympathetic, funny characters. At least we're visible.

Outlooks: Any new projects we should keep an eye out for?

Tomlin: I'm in a new show that's coming on HBO sometime in the next year. We just did the pilot—it's called *Twelve Miles of Bad Road* and it's about a really rich Dallas real estate family. I play the matriarch of the family. Mary Kay Place and I are sisters and Leslie Jordan—he was on *Will and Grace*—plays our cousin Kenny. Linda Bloodworth, who created *Designing Women*, created the show.

Other than that, what I would love to do is go back to New York with a new stage show. That's always my real drive. Jane and I are always working trying to come up with a sequel to *The Search...* or something like that.

Outlooks: Well I hope you get the opportunity to! Speaking of sequels, there are rumours of the possibility of a sequel to *Nine to Five*.

Tomlin: Yeah, they have talked about that for so darn long and we tried to do it before Colin Higgins died. He was the director and writer of the original. There were a couple of scripts but somehow everybody just never agreed on them. Right now, Jada Pinkett-Smith has the rights to *Nine to Five*—Jane Fonda let them lapse sort of accidentally—and I think that Jada's been trying put together an African-American version. But I know Dolly and Jane and I would love to get together again. We're still friends.

Outlooks: I would love to see that. Thank you very much for speaking with me—I look forward to seeing your show in April!

Tomlin: Well, thank you—I'm looking forward to coming to Calgary.

Lily Tomlin appears Saturday, April 7, 7:30 PM at the Jack Singer Concert Hall, EPCOR Centre for Performing Arts. Tickets through Ticketmaster. For more information, check the OutFest link at calgary2007.com ▼

Sean McLennan is a native Calgarian with (nearly) a PhD in Linguistics and Cognitive Science from Indiana University, where he was heavily involved in GLBT education. He currently has a full time gig in software for mobile technology.


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