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Entertainment

Dr. Katz will see you now

By Roger Catlin September 25

This year's Bentzen Ball comedy festival kicks off Thursday with a therapy session conducted by Dr. Katz.

"Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist" was one of the first animated hits on Comedy Central. It ran for six seasons starting in 1995 and featured the deadpan Jonathan Katz listening to comedians on the couch, as well as navigating his own life amid a recurring cast that included H. Jon Benjamin, Laura Silverman and Todd Barry.

Produced with Tom Snyder in a distinctive style of animation that made the lines of the characters constantly wiggle, the show featured an array of top comics, which makes it a natural fit for the Bentzen Ball, which was named after a Danish man who is said to have laughed himself to death while watching the movie "[A Fish Called Wanda](#)."

[Tig Notaro](#), who has been curating the event, and whose festival-ending set Oct. 4 quickly sold out, will be a guest on "Dr. Katz Live," along with Janeane Garofalo, Jim Gaffigan and Morgan Murphy.

We spoke recently with Katz, 68, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1996, about the cartoon's legacy and the live show.



How often do you do these live “Dr. Katz” shows?

I’ve done it a few times. It’s just so different than the TV show itself because we don’t have the luxury of editing, and we work in front of a live audience, which I think is really not the way most therapists work.

How edited was the original “Dr. Katz”?

The show was edited to within an inch of its life. Digital editing changed everything. And [producer] Tom Snyder did it all himself the first

season. He’s somebody who really loves working. I have a shirk ethic; he has a work ethic. And that’s not that funny, it just rhymes.

How did “Dr. Katz” come to be?

Tom lives in Cambridge [Mass.], I live in Newton, which is maybe 15 minutes away from each other. And he saw me in a movie by David Mamet called “[Things Change](#).” Afterward, he said, “Gee, I’d love to work with that guy,” and he discovered we were neighbors.

The first project we started working on was an idea he had called “Live at the Teachers Lounge,” because he and his wife are teachers. And then we started working on “The Biography of Mr. Katz.” It was voiced by this woman,

Julianne Bond — she played the bartender in “Dr. Katz” — leading me into my material, essentially. If I would have been funnier or more prolific, we never would have moved on to “Dr. Katz.” But it had a limited life span.

We needed more comedians. The patients, in Comedy Central’s eyes, were the best way to promote the show. And we also needed to give “Dr. Katz” a life of his own, so we added his son “Ben,” played by Jon Benjamin, and my receptionist, played by Laura Silverman. And that, for the really die-hard “Dr. Katz” fan, was what the show was about. It’s about me and Ben, and me and Laura, and Laura and Ben.

Those interactions were part of the charm of the show. You all sincerely laughed at each other.

I think that was unusual. And also the fact we didn’t sound like cartoons; we sounded like people.

“Dr. Katz” didn’t look like other cartoons either.

When Tom Snyder Productions sent the pilot that they had made to Comedy Central, they said, “Wonderful! When are you going to shoot the real thing?” And Tom said, “Well, that is the real thing.” They thought it was just like a rough draft of how it might look. But it was Squigglevision.

You certainly had quite a variety of top comedians on the show.

Ray Romano, Louis C.K., Dave Chappelle

And you have some big names coming to your D.C. live show. Have you worked with all of them before?

Janeane and Jim were both on the TV series, and Morgan I worked with in San Francisco. And Tig I'll be meeting for the first time.

She's quite a hot commodity these days, with two documentaries and an HBO special.

She is. It's pretty remarkable. People tend to think that there's such a thing as overnight success in comedy, but she's been doing this for a while. I'm so excited about out-subtling Tig Notaro. That's going to be like a subtle contest.

She also does this remarkable thing about cancer.

Well, if she thinks that cancer is funnier than MS, she has a lot to learn. I have an MS act, which I do either just when I'm talking with people who either live with MS or have another kind of disability. And it kills.

I talk about having a neurologist, during my MS show, who has a very holistic approach to the illness. He says no more salt, no more alcohol, no more red meat. I asked him, what about sex? He says, "I'm seeing someone." That's a joke I can tell either with or without the MS crowd. I just leave out the neurologist part.

I don't know if you know anyone with MS. It's a very odd disease. It's my hook. I'm the MS comedian. I would rather have a hook that didn't come with a disease. But I'll take what I can get. I have so much material that has accumulated over the years. My mind is like an encyclopedia of jokes. Not all of them mine.

It seems like comedy has come around to your sensibility in recent years.

I think there's some truth to that. When I started doing comedy, the guy with whom I most closely identified who was successful was Steven Wright. His comedy existed in an alternative universe. And another guy who died quite young named Ronnie Shakes, who wrote these incredible one-liners. He'd show up with a list of jokes, and if a joke didn't work he'd tell the same joke again with a different punch line. He was one of Johnny Carson's favorites.

His most popular joke was: "I've been in therapy for 12 years, and yesterday my shrink said something to me that brought tears to my eyes: 'No habla ingles.' "

What excites you about comedy these days?

I'm so excited about these GOP debates. The guy I'm most excited about is Ben Carson, because I love his voice. I'd love to animate the guy. He's the only guy I can do an impression of. I really think I have him down. It's just a matter of ticking my voice down five decibels.

Catlin is a freelance writer.

Dr. Katz Live with Jonathan Katz, Janeane Garofalo, Jim Gaffigan, Tig Notaro and Morgan Murphy at 8 p.m. Thursday; doors open at 6:30 p.m. Tickets: \$35. Lincoln Theatre, 1215 U St NW. 202-888-0050 or www.bentzenball.com.

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