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Storyteller Jean Shepherd hamming it up for a gala crowd of about 300 Channel 21 members, who each contribute at least $120 a year to PBS. Shepherd will return to PBS next year with *Jean Shepherd's America II*, a sequel to his hit 1970 series.

America's storyteller

Shepherd leaves us laughing with tales of our times but wishes critics would take him seriously

By Mitch Broder
Democrat and Chronicle

Jean Shepherd is onstage in Rochester, biting the hand that feeds him.

And the hand, characteristically, is eating it up.

"Every night you watch public television," Shepherd is telling the audience of public-TV patrons. "A basic form of true masochism. On all the other channels they're whoopin' it up — they've got shows that take place in Hawaii; Tom Selleck is running on the beach with God-knows-who wearing a bikini — and you're watching a three-part documentary on the fishing industry. You're *strong* people."

Strong, he adds, but admittedly lucky. After all, they're getting to see him.

"You people are part of the inner sanctum of PBS," he says. "You're really in. Isn't it great to be *in*? Your average slob doesn't even know this is going on."

Pity your average slob. Shepherd is America's storyteller — and when he talks, people laugh. Over the last three decades he's been telling stories on radio and television, in books and magazines, on stage and screen, and anywhere else someone will listen. Last year he launched his movie career with the hit picture *A Christmas Story*, based on his best-known book, *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*. And next year he's returning to television with the PBS series *Jean Shepherd's America II*, based on his hit series of 1970, *Jean Shepherd's America*.

THE 55-YEAR-OLD WRITER was in town late last week to promote the new series, which is scheduled to premiere in the spring. And as part of the promotion, he performed for the "inner sanctum" — a crowd of about 300 Channel 21 members, each of whom fortifies the station with at least $120 per year.

Shepherd captivated his audience with his patented tales of growing up in the Midwest. Among the featured characters were the Old Man (eternally clad in a Chicago White Sox T-shirt and forever clutching a can of Blatz), his mother (she of the rump-sprung Chinese red chenille bathrobe with a piece of petrified egg on the lapel), and his kid brother, Randy (who elevated whining to an art form and who could make his nose run at will).

In his two frenetic hours on the stage of the Xerox auditorium, Shepherd conducted a roundabout, rollicking tour of Americana. He recalled the desperation of the Old Man's favorite team: "There were years when the White Sox, on May 1st, were 35 games out of first place." He reflected on the determination of his mother's breed: "Every midwestern lady believes that if she can get the right Brillo pad and the right soap powder, she can Brillo away all the sin in the world." And he remembered the barrenness of his boyhood state: "Indiana's the only place I've ever known where the state turnpike does not have an exit in the state."

He also offered his views on such things as exercise, TV daddies, Howard Johnson's and, one of his favorite subjects, fate. ("Just think how great your life could've turned out," he observed, "if only you hadn't screwed up.") And, naturally, he had some thoughts on his host city: "All over America the sun is shining — and what do you think it's doing in Rochester? That's right. Emptying its bladder."

THE SHOW was a treat for the audience — and no less a treat for Shepherd. Of all the things he does, he enjoys stage performing the most. In the early days of his career, in fact, he worked extensively as a stand-up comedian. But while he loves to be told he's funny, he's wary of being told that funny's all he is. Shepherd has often been compared to Mark Twain, and the comparison, he says, is entirely valid. Not only does he do the same thing as Twain, he explains, but he is plagued by much the same problem.

"Twain really was a performer, like I am," he said in an interview after the show. "He got up and told stories about the frontier, and he put them on paper, too. But in those days, as it is today, critics didn't consider somebody who makes you laugh a serious writer. A serious writer is Saul Bellow. A serious writer is John Updike. And I know that it's only later generations who recognize what a guy like Twain said."

Thus, if you call Shepherd something like "America's foremost humorist," you shouldn't be surprised if he doesn't say "thank you."

"I've always resented the title 'humorist,'" he said. "I'm a writer; I just happen to make you laugh. You don't put, over a novel by Saul Bellow, 'tragedian.' You don't say, over Norman Mailer, 'complainer.'"

The names of the "serious writers" pop up repeatedly with Shepherd, not only in his conversation, but in his work. In a recent magazine story, for example, he told of a college professor who called to ask him how he discovered he was a humorist. "Does Updike get this crap?" Shepherd wondered in response. "Does Mailer? Like hell they do." And when, in a question-and-answer session after his performance, an audience member asked, "Who are some of your favorite writers?", Shepherd shot back, "Would you ask that of Updike?"

IT'S NOT that Shepherd secretly thinks these writers are better than he is. He doesn't. ("I can't stand Updike," he said while answering the aforementioned question. "I think Updike does literary doilies.") He does, however, seem concerned that other people might think they're better — just because they're more "serious." So when he perceives a lack of respect, he is quick to make the perception known.

He did it to several audience members during the question-and-answer session — most notably to the one who asked the name of the theme song played on his defunct New York radio show. "Everybody always asks me that," Shepherd said after rattling off the answer. "That's like coming up to Picasso and saying, 'Tell us about that frame.'"

In short, Shepherd appreciates his audiences, but he's not convinced that they appreciate him.

"You see the kinds of questions that are asked after the show," he said. "I'll do a very complex story, with all kinds of performance values and ramifications, and not one person asks me how, say, I get the idea for one of my stories. They ask, 'Did your mother really have a red bathrobe?' That kind of stuff.

His theory, he says, is that the people who come to see him are not sufficiently familiar with the art of storytelling. If they were, he believes, they'd realize that he's telling tales of our times — not his times.

"I'm working in a largely European form," he said. "I'm working like James Joyce. My stuff has been compared to Joyce. But the

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Americans hearing it take it literally, because they know all the symbols that I use. The prom, the date — these are all American symbols. It's vocal impressionism; it's very parallel to painting impressionism. It's parallel to Monet and Manet and Cezanne."

NEVERTHELESS, Shepherd continues to do what he does best, hoping to be properly recognized, but perhaps no longer counting on it. He has long since abandoned radio ("Radio, to me, is about as important as last week's *TV Guide*"), but he has not yet lost his fascination for television.

Jean Shepherd's America was a unique mix of comedy, philosophy, information and observation, and the new series promises to be more of the same. On one show, for example, Shepherd — in search of "dream fulfillment" — will be seen crawling through Death Valley, supervising the construction of his own Mustang convertible and winning at Indianapolis against A.J. Foyt.

Still, he says, his heart these days is mostly in the movies. He's at work on a sequel to *A Christmas Story* — tentatively titled *The Mole People Battle the Forces of Darkness* — and he's awaiting the PBS showing this fall of *The Star-Crossed Romance of Josephine Cosnowski*. The latter is the third in a trilogy that began with *The Phantom of the Open Hearth* (1978) and *The Great American Fourth of July and Other Disasters* (1981). He likes movies more than TV for the same reason he likes the term "novelist" more than "humorist."

"I think the movie world is a much more important world," he said. "Critics take movies a lot more seriously."

But perhaps more important, he says, movies last. So even if the critics don't understand him today, at least they'll have a chance to understand him tomorrow.

"Television is very temporary," he said. "I mean, who remembers Jack Paar today? But movies are different in this sense. Humphrey Bogart's been dead 25 years, and he's more famous today than when he was alive. His films keep getting played and played. Nobody plays old Jack Paar shows, no matter how good they are."