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National Comedy Center Set To Open During Lucille Ball Fest

By [TRIPP WHEISEL](#)



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Coinciding with this year's 27th annual [Lucille Ball Comedy Festival](#), named after its most famous native, the [National Comedy Center](#) is set to open in Jamestown, N.Y. The fest takes place Aug. 1-5 with more than 50 events and 40 artists. Among those on hand to help celebrate what is being branded as the first non-profit institution and national-scale visitors experience dedicated to the art of comedy will be Lily Tomlin, Amy Schumer, Fran Drescher, original "Saturday Night Live" cast members Dan Aykroyd, Laraine Newman, Garrett Morris and "SNL" writer, bestselling author and Tony Award-winning playwright Alan Zweibel.

"It's not a hall of fame, which is what I like about it, and what they're doing is a really important thing," says Zweibel, who is on the advisory committee. "You can visit any era you want or any medium and get the aura of what things were like when they were produced."

According to executive director Journey Gunderson, the concept of turning the birthplace of America's queen of comedy, who died in 1989, into a national destination for all things funny was a decades-in-the-making idea conceived by Ball herself. It began in the late-1980s when the Chautauqua Arts Council approached her about building a museum to honor her career.

Opened in Jamestown as the Lucille Ball Desi Arnaz Museum in 1996 and still one of the area's most popular tourist destinations, it features memorabilia from the beloved comedienne's personal and professional life, including original props and set replicas from "I Love Lucy." Fundraising for the National Comedy Center, which also runs the Lucy-Desi Museum and the Lucille Ball Comedy Festival, got under way in 2011. Bolstered by the efforts of Ball's daughter, Lucie Arnaz, to honor her late mother's wishes, early supporters included comedy legends Aykroyd, Carol Burnett, Jerry Seinfeld, and Paula Poundstone.

Eventually endorsing the project and joining the advisory committee were Carl Reiner, David Steinberg, Lewis Black, Paul Provenza, W. Kamau Bell, Richard Pryor's daughter Rain and many others.

TV producer Norman Lear was one of the donors and says: "It's time laughter, which adds time to our lives, had a home. And there's no more meaningful place to create one than the birthplace of Lucille Ball."

With \$50 million funded by a public-private partnership and collaborative aesthetics by the exhibition design firm Jack Rouse Associates and Cortina Productions, priority number one for the Comedy Center was keeping it real. So much that they also turned to Herzog & Co., the production team behind CNN's doc-series "*The History of Comedy*," for storytelling expertise. "We knew authenticity was going to be a key ingredient," Gunderson says. "This is an industry and an art form of people who are cynical, smart and good at making fun of things. We knew that if we didn't get credibility and buy-in that it could risk becoming the butt of the joke."

The result: 37,000 square-feet in the combined site of a former railroad station and trolley garage now featuring more than 50 interactive exhibits designed to tell the story of comedy from its origins up until the present day. Each visit starts with a sense-of-humor profile that is embedded onto radio-frequency ID wristbands worn to help ensure an experience that appeals to visitors' personal comedic sensibilities. This includes everything from a giant interactive touchscreen highlighting comedy milestones in standup, film, television, animation and illustration to a blue room for devotees of humor's bawdier side. There are also personal archives from people including the Marx Brothers, Charlie Chaplin, Jerry Lewis, Joan Rivers, Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers and George Carlin.

Carlin's collection, which was personally donated by his daughter, Kelly, includes handwritten jokes on scrap paper that he kept in Ziploc baggies, along with journals, letters, awards, clothing and countless hours of audio and video recordings.

"We came up a plan that there would be some sort of permanent exhibit to honor my father's mind and contributions to comedy that would let the public get to do an interactive deep dive into his archives," says Kelly Carlin who also serves on the advisory committee.

Additional attractions include an original section of the wall from Rowan & Martin's "Laugh-In," which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year and will be dedicated by Tomlin during the Aug. 1 opening, along with scripts in director Harold Ramis' handwriting donated by his daughter Violet, as well as specialty theme exhibits on comedic storytelling, troupe comedy, improv, politics, and the relationship between humor and healing, as well as comedy and the USO called "Laughing Matters."

As for the opening itself, there will also be a standup showcase series featuring the Friends of the National Comedy Center and a panel discussion on comedy and censorship with Lewis Black, comedian Lenny Bruce's daughter Kitty and famed First Amendment attorney Paul Cambria who represented Larry Flynt.

Long term, the Comedy Center is expected to draw more than 100,000 visitors annually and continue to evolve.

"We're going to make this experience suited to the swimmers, the skimmers and the divers," Gunderson says. "The casual comedy consumer, the family that's on the way to take their kid back to college and then the hard-core comedy nerds for whom this is a mecca. We're designing it for both and everyone in between so that the conversation is always relevant."

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