

THEIR LIVES SO FAR - AN EVENING WITH LILY TOMLIN AND JANE WAGNER

by Tanya Dewhurst

[Gaywire] Despite no props nor costume, when Lily Tomlin walks out on stage and adopts that tongue-lolling expression of childhood wisdom and intones in that nasally juvenescent vernacular, the audience does not see or hear Lily Tomlin. Instead they recognize Edith Ann, the permanently aged-six year old whose sandbox aphorisms delighted "Laugh In" viewers throughout the seventies.

Now, twenty years later, Edith Ann's philosophies are back, bound and ungagged in her very own book, 'Edith Ann: My Life So Far as told to Jane Wagner'. To launch the book and kick-off a seven city book tour, Tomlin once again donned her Edith Ann persona, and together with Edith Ann's chronicler (and Tomlin's long-time partner and collaborator), Jane Wagner - and hosted by dyke comedian, Reno - shared Edith Ann insights with New York's 92nd Street Theater crowd.

Reno, whose frenetic one-woman shows 'Rage and Rehab' and 'Reno Once Removed' launched a rapid rise to notoriety, plays Edith Ann's therapist - or "feelings doctor" Dr. Lopez in the animated series 'Edith Ann', premiering this fall on ABC Television.

From the small town of Edgeville, USA, Edith Ann contemplates the world and its citizens including her family, the local

skinheads, gays, and "senior citizens who like to power walk, like Mrs. Milfred."

Gay life makes an occasional appearance including an anecdote about Edith Ann's "dipstick dyke" art teacher, Ms. Taylor appearing on TV, and a letter to Richard Simmons asking him to help Edith Ann's fat friend and urging him to get back with Howard. "I know you love his kids and life is too short," she says.

Edith Ann's short life so far certainly grapples with the grim realities of urban life - and death - in these troubled times from the alcoholism of her father and Uncle Claude to teenage runaways (especially her sister Irene) to the education cutbacks besetting her school resulting in the loss of Ms. Taylor. "I might as well face it, I doubt I'll ever lay eyes on Ms. Taylor again." Edith Ann laments, "Unless, of course, she has another lapse in judgment and shows up on Geraldo again defending gay rights to a bunch of skinheads."

The book's author and illustrator, Jane Wagner, whose television work has earned her four Emmys and Broadway hit 'The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe' won a Tony Award and became a best selling book, began her collaboration with Tomlin way back in the 'Laugh In' days. "The first time we ever worked together was with Edith more than twenty years ago," explains Tomlin. "I was not very happy with the depth of Edith and I was developing the character, doing Laugh In, you know. I was not a writer by any means and I yearned for material - I had to come up with whatever I could take off the writing staff. I saw the teleplay J.T. which was the first play Jane had written and subsequently won a Peabody for. She actually came to New York to be a song writer. Well, we kind of took it from there and, well it was a



blessed moment for me to have connected with Jane."

Edith Ann is the sum of two halves. Firstly, there is Wagner's insatiable quest for the perfect reworking. "Until last night when we got on the red-eye to come here," says Tomlin with a mischievous glint. "Jane was still determined she was going to rewrite the book for the second printing. By 8:30 she decided to give it all up, that's the editor's job." Lily looks at Jane: "but one of the most wonderful things about you is how - you don't know this - when you're writing or drawing or making art you hum." Tomlin demonstrates and scribbles on an imaginary pad and busily hums to herself. "As soon as I say are you finished, that's great, she sits down and I see her going hm hm hm. I said look you're writing the second book."

The second half that allows Edith Ann to bloom is Tomlin's indomitable desire to drive everything forward. "I was at the dentist's being treated in the chair," says Tomlin. "And to distract me while he gave me a needle he said how's Edith Ann coming, and I said good, and then he said I hear you're doing all the drawings yourself...and then I said, no, no I don't draw that well."

Tomlin, a self-effacing control freak of the nicest kind, was not only determined to star, draw and direct the animation specials, but cast the parts as well. With simple hilarity she recalls the story of tracking down the perfect player for Dr. Lopez. "We got to the point where we couldn't find a psychologist because everyone who read for it would be condescending to Edith. They really needed

to be confronting with her and make her just come up to it. The production house who did the animation got kind of fed up with us, we had all these different people in. I heard Eartha Kitt was doing a German tv show and I even called her up in France and made her read over the phone with me. For hours. When I saw her I said oh my god, she's probably furious with me, I never called her back or anything.

"You can't believe how many people I had on the phone. I was calling everybody, going I've got to find this psychologist. I mean does the word Meryl mean anything to you?"

"Because studio time to audition is so expensive I even had a mic set-up in our living room. Everyone who came over I'd say sit down, I want you to read for the psychologist."

Underlying the mirth is the almost telepathic communication between Tomlin and Wagner and the kinetic energy sparked from their rapport. "Jane comes in with something, then Lily comes in with something else," says Reno, who hails the pair as her "heroines". "They wind it all together in these really deep, rich layers. It's just amazing to watch them work together."

This energy and collaboration of course transmutes into the creation of wonderful characters like Edith Ann. Wagner gives her the words, Tomlin the personality. Together they propel her future. Will Edith Ann ever grow up and come out? Tomlin looks at me with a wry smile. "Edith Ann? Well, she was talking before about sitting on the drain in the bathtub while the water went down and she found that an interesting experience. So it's quite probable she'll be open, sexually."

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