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Laughing matters

Comedian recalls days at Dal as she gets ready for Halifax Comedy Festival

By STEPHEN COOKE Entertainment Reporter

SHE'S FACED tough comedy club patrons from coast to coast, traded barbs with a smart alec cat puppet on Sabrina the Teenage Witch and product-pitching celebrities on her daily talk show, but Caroline Rhea says none of that really prepares her for her Halifax Comedy Festival debut at Casino Nova Scotia on Thursday night.

It turns out between growing up in Montreal and taking those first steps into the comedy scene in New York City in 1989, the zesty blonde raconteur took a detour to Halifax to study at Dalhousie University, a decision based on meeting a cute Dal hockey player while visiting her sister at Carleton in Ottawa.

"I finally found him the last week I was in Halifax, and I walked up to him and said, 'You either have to dance with me or reimburse my entire tuition, because I came here for you.' And he just said, 'Uh, who ARE you?' So that was my experience in Halifax. . . . Is there still a Swensen's on Spring Garden Road?" she asks, referring to the long-vanished family restaurant and ice cream joint. "That's where I worked when I went to college there. . . . But getting to come to Halifax is a very big deal for me, and I can't believe there's a direct flight from New York."

Calling from the makeup room backstage at a charity event in Montreal where "they're making me look like I look on TV," Rhea jokes about having ex-boyfriends show up for her set in the Casino's Schooner Showroom at 8 p.m., but downplays any insecurity saying she's got the life/career balance working pretty well at the moment, enjoying her new role as a mom to 18-month-old daughter Ava Rhea Economopoulos — "The Economopoulos is silent, it's like a cat got loose on the keyboard when they were writing it down at Ellis Island" — and combining live performance with voiceover work as the mom on the popular Disney Channel cartoon Phineas and Ferb.

"But last year I decided to cut back on performing," she says. "I really don't like leaving my child, and she doesn't enjoy it much either. My boyfriend's a comedian too, so we take turns. We're reliving A Star Is Born, and I get to be Kris Kristofferson because Costaki gets to go off into the world and he's doing really well."

Rhea is using her time off the road to write new material and is also penning a book about her experiences, which include Sabrina — still a hit with young viewers in reruns — hosting her own daily talk show and reality show The Biggest Loser. But now her voice is familiar to an even younger audience thanks to Phineas and Ferb, where she plays the mom of two

imaginative stepbrothers whose pet platypus Perry defeats evil villain Dr. Heinz Doofenshmirtz on a weekly basis.

"It used to be that I couldn't go anywhere without . . . well, yesterday I literally got 10 Sabrina shout-outs, it was very exciting, but now Pineas and Ferb is almost outstripping it," says Rhea, who calls the show "her favourite job." "Yesterday I went to the iStore, and there was this little boy who was so cute, and I asked him if he watched Phineas and Ferb, and his eyes got soooo big.

"Now my favourite thing is calling people's homes and leaving messages for their children. I love it, and the best thing about doing voice work is you don't even have to care what your hair looks like."

PARDIS PARKER

East Coast talent is also a vital part of the festival lineup, and this year provides lots of space for the Maritime talent it's helped foster over the years, from show hosts Mark Critch and Mark Little to those who've planted their roots in bigger centres, like Nikki Payne and L.A.-based Jay Malone.

Halifax's Pardis Parker is one of those performers who's making the transition from local highlight to internationally known standup thanks to making inroads in both the U.K. and Los Angeles, and online with projects like his acclaimed short film *Afghan*. This week provides several opportunities to catch his wry delivery, including tonight's opening gala at the Schooner Showroom, the Friday night taping of CBC Radio's *The Debaters* at the Delta Halifax's Bluenose Room and in the Gala Finale on Saturday night at the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium.

Born in Sri Lanka and raised in Halifax, Parker's material ranges from the awkwardness of daily personal interaction to the West's often absurd reaction to terrorism and conflict in other parts of the globe. His delivery is laconic and thoughtful, letting the audience absorb the ironies of the situations he presents and allowing an intelligence to shine through that's helped put him over in the U.S. and England as well as at home.

"(British audiences) are probably the most culturally diverse crowd that you'll ever perform in front of, and they seem to have a real appreciation for good comedy. By reputation the crowds there are notoriously difficult to please, and if they don't like you they have no problem with being vocal about their displeasure," says Parker, who recently appeared at London premiere of the feature *The Infidel*, starring British-Iranian comic and actor Omid Djalili.

"Performing with Omid was pretty awesome. He's a comedian I've always looked up to and respected, and to share the stage with him in front of 3,700 people was pretty cool, and it's always a pleasant surprise when the people you look up to turn out to be kind, gracious people outside the spotlight. It's one of those small insignificant experiences that you don't really think twice about until you stop and realize that before you started, you'd never have dreamed that you'd get to the point where you'd perform with him."

Besides *Afghan*, Parker has also come into his own as a music video director for Halifax acts

like MIR and GhettoSocks, and as soon as the festival wraps he'll be making a new comedy short with Picnicface's Evany Rosen. He's also looking forward to working on a more involved project this summer involving music, dance and drama.

"It's my modern take on Bollywood films — what I think a Bollywood film would look like if it was done in Hollywood — and it's probably my most complex production to date," says Parker, who's enlisted MIR's Asif and Shehab Ilyas to provide the score.

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