

the conversation

Joan Rivers

'I really don't know where my anger comes from, but thank God it's there'

She lives like Marie Antoinette, lunches with Nancy Reagan and will say almost anything to get a laugh. *Tim Teeman* meets a survivor and a trailblazer

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hat does Joan Rivers treasure in her palatial penthouse — it's just off Central Park and has a ballroom — with its cream pillars, richly embroidered drapes, cushions and regal red and gold colour scheme? As she says: "This is how Marie Antoinette would have lived if she'd had money." Rivers, 77, has a butler who delivers brownies on a silver platter, fluffy dogs and a grandfather clock that plays whimsical Scottish tunes on the hour, which Rivers can't name beyond "Bonnie bonnie, Tam o' Shanter" in her rake-through-an-ashy-gutter New York rasp. Despite all this deranged opulence, Rivers cherishes her photographs the most of her husband, Edgar, who committed suicide, aged 62, in 1987; of their daughter Melissa, 42, and Melissa's son Cooper, 9. In her study are cushions with homilies such as: "Never economise on luxuries" and "It's lonely at the top. You just eat better."

The grit and endurance that Rivers employs to stay in the game is revealed in a piercing documentary of her, *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*, directed by Ricki Stern and Anne Sundberg. Rivers is shown to be a workaholic, swathed in furs, being chauffeured to gigs in the back of beyond and later performing her one-woman play in Britain, bitterly disappointed by lukewarm reviews. "Of course you care about the critics, otherwise you wouldn't have the sensitivity to do what you do," she says. She is insecure about her future and fame, as well you might when your career has ridden extreme highs (as a chat-show host) and extreme lows (Edgar's death).

She is working on a reality show of her and Melissa living together in Los Angeles while Rivers finds a home there. When I arrive she is on the phone with a producer saying that a sequence just filmed in a bar isn't right. "Reality show?" she says, rolling her eyes. "All the scenes are set up. The ones we've just shot don't make sense." She has star billing on the panel of *EL's Fashion Police*, which is a showcase for her to be horrible about celebrity fashion, as she used to do on the red carpets at award ceremonies, and interviews entrepreneurs on *How'd You Get So Rich?* She still shifts an impressive amount of her own-brand jewellery on the QVC shopping channel. I see her later on stage, jokes laid out on the floor as prompts as she bellows at Chinese women (husband-stealers) and lesbians (don't laugh enough) to sit at the back. Despite the visible riches in her flat, she feels impelled to work relentlessly out of an all-consuming insecurity. "A few bad shows, a few failures, and I could be sleeping on the street," she says, not joking.

Serious Joan Rivers sits squarely alongside the filthy-joke teller. Her library shelves are packed with political biographies (of Republican icons such as Abraham Lincoln, Colin Powell, Richard Nixon) and art books on de Kooning, Seurat and Manet. She has a therapist on speed dial. Does she get depressed? "Of course, that's the business!" she replies as wide-eyed as her surgically frozen and sculpted face can allow (it doesn't look that alarming, just hard and smooth). "There is incredible insecurity in this business. I have friends who won Oliviers and Baftas who aren't working and don't know where their next meal is coming from. That's good for you. It keeps you on your toes."

Anger motivates her. "I don't know where mine comes from, but thank God it's there," she says. "Anger at the stupidity of everything around you. Why say the recession is over? I voted for Obama, but like all



MICHAEL EDWARDS / REDUX / EYEVINE

politicians he lied and said he could fix things when he couldn't." Rivers has recently had to sack four people from her staff of 18 who run the jewellery business. "I think he's doing a weak job and making us a second-class nation." Sarah Palin is not the answer: "It's unfortunate and frightening that she is a force. The nice thing is if she's ever lost at least you know not to look in the library." Rivers says that she isn't a Republican, then adds that she is "very friendly" with the former First Lady Nancy Reagan. "I think she was amazing. I'm crazy about her." Really? With her astrologers and Aids-ignoring husband? "They got there in the end. Everyone was in the dark about Aids. I did the first benefits," Rivers shoots back. "The last time I saw Nancy I asked what she thought of Michelle Obama going to Spain in the summer and she said, 'I would not have gone! You don't go with two busloads of friends to Spain when the country is in the state it's in. You stay in America. It was a bad move.'"

Rivers and Reagan then talked about the Obamas holidaying in Nantucket rather than spending more time on the Gulf Coast, site of the BP oil spill. "Reagan," Rivers says, "thought: 'go to exactly where you're telling the world to go. They should've gone to the Gulf and stayed there longer, to show their support.'"

I realise I am looking at Rivers' face intently. What has she had done? "A lot of little things at different times," she says. "I began because she had always felt unattractive. 'The first thing was get rid of the bags under my eyes. I had my nose thinned and my chin done and my neck done twice. I have Botox and Restylane once every few

months by the best doctor in New York, Pat Wexler. In her waiting room I've seen the *Desperate Housewives* and *Sex and the City* girls. At Pat's 50th birthday party they came up to me and said, 'Haven't had anything done, she's just a friend', but when it came to blowing out her candles no one could because their faces were so frozen. I've never regretted it; in this business you have to look fresh and clean on camera. You don't want to see Clint Eastwood with a turkey neck or Julia Roberts looking like she needs a wash."



Everything is fair game: "I hate the lousy children kicking my seat on planes, I want to stand up and say, 'Are there any terrorists on board to deal with these little shits?' That usually has people gasping." Does she set out to shock and offend? "I love shaking up the audience. If you laugh at something you shrink the dragon. When I heard that families of 9/11 victims — Melissa lost three friends — were getting \$5 mil-

lion [£3 million] in compensation, I was like, 'Doesn't it make you look around the table at Thanksgiving and think, 'Well, if it is fast and painless who could I get \$5 million for in this family?' People are so frightened of death. My way is to joke about it.' Is anything off limits? Her mother's death for a while, but it makes Rivers "crazy" if she can't hear the audience laughing. "I knew from the start I wasn't the most talented, the prettiest or best, so I had to work much harder: the immigrant mentality."

Rivers grew up in Brooklyn: her father, Meyer C. Molinsky, was a doctor, her mother, Beatrice, a housewife. "I'm not sure if I was happy. I was the class wit, not the class clown: an important difference." Her parents were "loving, academically oriented". The children went to private school, weekends were spent at the country club.

Her father threatened to have her committed when she told him she wanted to be an actress. "If I had said I wanted to be an astronaut, they would have been like 'Do it.'" Rivers says. "Every time a prostitute came into my dad's office she called herself an 'actress'. They didn't have a clue."

It didn't help that her friends were Woody Allen, Richard Pryor ("that crazy black child"), Lenny Bruce and Lily Tomlin. "My parents were in shock. I would be too if Melissa brought those nutjobs to the house." But her mother "understood that in show-business you are never walking on concrete, always mud", and her father, "the minute I became a hit, seven years after I started, said 'I always knew she would.'" Her big break, she says, was becoming a guest, then co-host, on Johnny Carson's chat show. However, when she left to front her own in 1986,

he never spoke to her again. "It was terrible," she says. "He saw me as a rival and I never heard from him again, not even after Edgar killed himself. When his son died, I sent a note saying how sorry I was and I heard nothing, it was like spitting in the wind."

It was the cancellation of her talk show that led Edgar to commit suicide, Rivers says: "He was upset, we both were, but I had no idea he was feeling like that." He called Melissa the day before and told her he had to meet her the next day. "You don't get over it."

NO PROFANE, NO GAIN
Joan Rivers at The Ritz. Left: with her daughter Melissa. The pair are now filming a new reality TV show

Rivers says. "The survivors of suicide are the most damaged. The anger stays with you. He was a motherf*****g bastard for doing that. If he was alive I'd kill him." She jokes about it now, but her anger can easily flare into life. "He left me and Melissa high and dry, he took the easy way out. But when you're so self-absorbed in pain, you don't think about the effect on others." She laughs. "His English psychiatrist told me how surprised he was: 'Edgar was such a charming man. I had no idea, we always talked about books and philosophy'. His psychiatrist! How did Rivers feel? "Well, I didn't buy the party shoes. It was rough. You don't have time to be in pain, you have to push on or you could kill yourself and leave your child with nothing." Did she contemplate that? "Of course. But you can't. What a legacy to leave. 'Daddy checked out and mummy did too: aren't you lucky. We moved on.'"

Rivers has been single since a relationship ended two-and-a-half years ago. She won't say who with, though she likes going out with businessmen "because they're not in showbusiness so there's no competitiveness. He was liking me more and I was liking him less. We've not stayed friends, I'm not a friend-stayer." Before him was a nine-year relationship with a guy with one leg: "My Heather Mills," Rivers calls him. She would like a partner: "It would be lovely to come home after the party and say, 'Would you like a sandwich?' or 'Can you believe

It's frightening that Sarah Palin is a force. At least if she's ever lost you know not to look in the library'

what that bitch said? Or stay home and read and watch TV." As for sex, she rolls her eyes: "Old people talking about sex puts everyone off. Sex is tied to love for me. My generation was one for romance."

Rivers' friends "are dropping likes flies. I think about death constantly, you do at this age. Everything is fine and moving but at what point will it all be over? I'll kill myself if the doctor says my condition is terminal. I would not want to live if I could not perform. It's in my will. I am not to be revived unless I can do an hour of stand-up. I don't fear it. With plastic surgery the general anaesthetic is like a black-velvety sleep, and that's what death is..." She pauses... "Without waking up to someone clapping and going, 'Joan, wake up, it's all over and you're looking pretty.'" She frets most about Melissa, worrying that having become so close after Edgar's suicide, "when I die she'll lose a big pillar in her life." She dotes on Cooper, "although he's so boring: totally into football. He's embarrassed telling his friends that his mother's and grandmother's new show is on the WOMEN's Entertainment network."

What unmet ambitions does Rivers have? "A regular TV sitcom, a Broadway show and a meaty movie role," she says. "I've never been in a 'real' movie. That bitch Meryl Streep gets all the parts, it makes me so angry." She laughs that raspy laugh. But like Streep, she has been a standard bearer — in her case for comics such as Sarah Silverman and Chelsea Handler. "No, I was too busy pushing forward," Rivers says, "although it would be nice if they gave me 3 per cent. I don't want thanks, send a cheque." **Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work premieres at Sheffield Doc/Fest on November 3 and will be broadcast on More4 on November 9 at 10pm**

First ladies of comedy: the next generation

Sarah Silverman was recently described as "the world's hottest, most controversial comedian". Sample joke: "I was raped by a doctor... Which is so bittersweet for a Jewish girl."



Chelsea Handler has written three bestselling books, including *Are You There, Vodka? It's Me, Chelsea*. On sex: "I think we can all agree that sleeping around is a great way to meet people."



Tina Fey created *30 Rock*, and spoofs Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live*. On maternity leave: "I had to get back to work. NBC has me under contract; the baby and I only have a verbal agreement."

Kathy Griffin is the star of *My Life on the D-List*. At the Emmys: "A lot of people come up here and thank Jesus. I want you to know that no one had less to do with this award than Jesus."



Amy Poehler starred in *Mean Girls* with Tina Fey and is a *Saturday Night Live* regular. "I want to go on the record and say I have never urinated in public. But the night is still young."

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