

Howe's Brooklyn

Stand-Up Comic and NBC Give Diverse Talent Chance To Dazzle

by Brooklyn Eagle (edit@brooklyneagle.net)

WIL SYLVINCE, FROM EAST NEW YORK, has been making people laugh since third grade, when he started with the girls, feeling “too unattractive” to catch their attention any other way. As he grew older, Sylvince began sneaking around without the knowledge of his strict parents to perform the irrepressible comedy building within him.

“From my parents it was, [imitates Haitian accent] ‘Go to school, get a job, get married, have kids. In that order. A job with benefits, mind you.’ I had to do it behind their back.”

It wasn't until his mom, who usually goes to bed early, happened to catch a 1 a.m. broadcast of his stand-up show at the Apollo Theater that his secret was out. And she loved it. One of this mom's favorite jokes was even a bit dirty.



“We could never curse around my parents. I said, ‘Sorry, sorry mom!’ They were so strict. I guess they only knew one way, but when you show them another way, they get it.”

That episode long in the past, Sylvince has appeared on “BET's Comic View,” “The Apollo Comedy Hour” and “Russell Simmons' Def Comedy Jam.” Last fall in New York's Funniest Stand-Up contest he won the title of New York's Funniest Comic, mostly, according to one impressed critic, on the strength of his Haitian material and tragicomic demeanor.

Sylvince can do dirty routines and he can do clean. His versatility was cemented when he earned a standing ovation at “Def Comedy Jam” with a performance that included no vulgarities or sex humor. That was just a personal challenge, though. He doesn't believe comics should be limited.

“I believe in freedom of speech for comics,” he says. “They should be able to talk about whatever they want, like Richard Pryor, [George] Carlin, [Eddie] Murphy” — all of whom he counts among his favorites. It's about making friends and family laugh, and keeping them together. “When I got my parents to laugh it was like, ‘Cool,’” he says.

Sylvince is founder of the NBC Comedy Short Cuts Film Festival, a phenomenon now in its third year. About more than presenting movies, the goal is to display and celebrate diversity in entertainment, providing creative individuals an opportunity to show their materials in front of key decision makers at NBC Universal and other industry players.

“Minority groups are not adequately represented in the movie industry. The purpose of our festival is to provide them with the opportunity to be seen and heard,” says Sylvince.

The eight '08 semi-finalists were screened Monday night; Anthony Anderson of “Law & Order” hosted. (Drink of the night: the “Diversitini”.) Two sets of filmmakers from the talented group will win a blind script commitment from NBC.

The festival idea came to Sylvince when he was writing and filming Dave Chapelle-like comedy sketches and showing them at Caroline’s. He wanted to pull together his friends for a film festival to screen their work. One pal who worked at NBC thought the idea held something special and passed it on to the company heads, who proved equally enthusiastic.

“Somewhere along the way it turned into a competition, so none of my films are in it, but that’s OK, as long as the festival keeps gaining momentum,” says Sylvince. “I hope it will be as big as the Tribeca Film Festival.”

Next year he wants to add a seminar component, to teach filmmakers how to edit, present and sell their work, because even “if you have a great film, if you don’t know how to do those things, no one will see it.”

Among other venues, Sylvince has often done stand-up at Harvard University.

“They keep asking me back,” he says. “I don’t know why.”

Yes, big mystery there, Sylvince.