

Musing from my Hermitage

by Larry F. Ginsberg

If it ain't one thing, it's another ...

“Of the three Female cast members [on the original SNL], Gilda Radner made the deepest impact. There is hardly a Female sketch comic today who does not claim Radner as an inspiration to her comedy career.” – Yael Kohen, 2012

No, not the obnoxious personal advice expert, Roseanne Roseannadonna; no, not Baba Wawa; no, not the elderly, hearing-impaired woman who gave angry and misinformed editorial replies on “Weekend Update,” Emily Litella; but Gilda Radner who was born in a log cabin (oops, wrong bio), who was born in a “little house on the prairie”--oops, blew it again--who was born to a Jewish family in Detroit. Yes, really!



“What is all this talk about the Supreme Court decision on a deaf penalty?” - Gilda Radner as Emily Litella

Gilda dropped out of the University of Michigan in 1964 to follow her boyfriend, Jeffrey Rubinoff, a Canadian sculptor, to Toronto, but more importantly to start her vagabond career in acting. Her nomadic days followed the pattern of the rising young comic: *Godspell* in 1972 with Eugene Levy and Martin Short; the Second City Comedy Troupe in Toronto; *National Lampoon's Radio Hour* with Chevy Chase, John Belushi and Bill Murray; and as one of the original “Not Ready for Prime-Time Players” on the first season of *Saturday Night Live*. As the first player cast for *SNL*, she collaborated with Alan Zweibel to spoof, among others, Barbara Walters, Rose Ann Scamardella, Lucille Ball and Olga Korbut. “You feel completely in control when you hear a wave of laughter coming back at you that you have caused.”

The smash hit, *Gilda Radner—Live from New York*, opened on Broadway in 1979, featuring the song “Let’s Talk Dirty to Animals,” which was much racier than what the NBC censors would allow on *Saturday Night Live*. She married her first husband, the musician G. E. Smith, in 1980 and they divorced in 1982. She then had on-again/off-again relationships with many of the major comic stars of the time: Harold Ramis, Martin Short, Bill Murray and Dan Aykroyd. Radner could not bear to watch *Ghostbusters*; too many exes were in the cast.

Gilda Radner: THIS IS YOUR LIFE! *“We met on the movie set of Sidney Poitier’s film Hanky Panky and worked together on The Woman in Red and Haunted Honeymoon. Yes, here is your husband: Gene Wilder. Gilda, the love of my life...”*

Gilda always had medical issues including bulimia, severe fatigue and pain in her upper legs. It took until October 21, 1986, for her to be correctly diagnosed with Stage IV Ovarian Cancer. She was a fighter and she would not “go gently into that good night.” Her public fight and the support of her husband Gene Wilder became an inspiration for many women worldwide, but she succumbed to the disease on May 20, 1989.

“Cancer changes your life, often for the better. You learn what's important, you learn to prioritize, and you learn not to waste your time. You tell people you love them. My friend Gilda Radner used to say, 'If it wasn't for the downside, having cancer would be the best thing and everyone would want it.' That's true. If it wasn't for the downside.” - Gilda Radner

“I wanted a perfect ending. Now I’ve learned, the hard way, that some poems don’t rhyme, and some stories don’t have a clear beginning, middle and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what’s going to happen next.” – Gilda Radner

Wilder never gave up the fight, establishing the Gilda Radner Hereditary Cancer Program at Cedars-Sinai and Gilda’s Club, which led to the Gilda Radner Familial Ovarian Cancer Registry.

“I’ve learned what I can control is whether I am going to live a day in fear and depression and panic, or whether I am going to attack the day and make it as good a day, as wonderful a day, as I can.” - Gilda Radner

She was both an Emmy and a Grammy winner, an enshrinee to the Michigan Women’s Hall of Fame; received a posthumous star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 2003, and a beloved member of the local North Stamford community. As Gilda said: “Fame changes a lot of things, but it can’t change a lightbulb.”

