

You'll Die Laughing

A Story of the Macabre

By

David Philips

www.davidphilipsauthor.com

You'll Die Laughing

Chester Gurevitz was a comedian on the comedy club circuit. The only problem was, Chester wasn't very good at what he did, and his hecklers were often funnier than he was. He was nicknamed 'Clicky' for the annoying habit he had of snapping his fingers as he delivered the punchlines of his not-very-funny jokes. Chester had lost count of the number of times he had been booed and jeered off the stage, and this was no longer a laughing matter.

Struggling to make a living, he couldn't afford a professional gag writer, so most of his material was of his own creation, and it was getting less humorous as time went on.

Desperate to make an impression, any impression, he had even tried recalling the story of Eric Douglas, the not-so-famous brother of Michael Douglas, both sons of the legendary actor Kirk. Eric, too, tried his hand at stand-up but failed in this endeavor just as Chester was doing. In a last-ditch attempt to win over his audience, Eric reminded them of who he was, saying, "Don't you know who I am? I am Kirk Douglas's son!" In a parody of one of Douglas senior's most famous roles, someone from the audience stood up and shouted, "No, I am Kirk Douglas's son!" Another audience member then also rose, repeating the previous assertion. One by one, the whole audience stood, all claiming to be Kirk Douglas's son! Eric never appeared on stage again. Chester wished he could have had that kind of quick-witted repartee. Sadly, this was not the case, and the struggling comedian had to face the unpalatable truth that, maybe, a life in live comedy, or any comedy, was not for him.

One day while taking stock of his life, Chester was wandering aimlessly through the park when he noticed a wooden bench. Deciding to rest his feet for a few minutes, he sat down, only vaguely aware of the man already parked there. Well, one thing, as they say, led to

another, and both men told each other their stories. Chester's was easily told. Failure at school, failure at college, failure in love, failure in occupation. So altogether, not a total success in life. His newfound friend surprised him by revealing that he, too, was a comedian on the circuit. Chester regarded the man in a whole new light, wondering why he had never heard of him. The man was considerably older and far more successful than Chester, and now only worked when the mood took him, maybe three or four months out of the year. Always happy to help a fellow aspiring comic, the man invited Chester to his show. Maybe he could pick up some tips about timing or delivery or how to 'work' an audience. It was make-or-break time. He could decline the older man's generous offer and go to work in one of his father's haberdashery stores. The money would be adequate, but the work would be tedious beyond endurance. Still, at least he would have a regular paycheck coming in. It was very tempting. He had been indulged long enough, his father had warned him. If he didn't settle down and stop all this comedy *mishigas*, he would find himself out on the street. Who did he think his parents were – the Rothschilds? No. Chester shook his head determinedly. He would give it one last shot. He would take this man's kind offer and see the show. What harm could it do? Worst case scenario, his old man's haberdashery store job would still be there. He hoped.

Two nights later, Chester was sitting with the crowd, awaiting the appearance of his benefactor, whose stage name was Funny Yushude Saydat. With a moniker like that, Chester couldn't understand why he had never come across this old man before. The accomplished comedian went into his routine, and it wasn't long before the audience was howling with laughter. He knew all the tricks, quickly spotting the more impressionable members and playing to them audaciously. Pointing to specific men and women, he made them believe he was doing his act just for them. And they lapped it up. He cajoled them, he

cossetted them, he caressed them, he even insulted them, and that was when they laughed the most and the loudest. And he did it all without clicking his fingers once. Chester was enthralled, not least because the comedian had made it all look so, well, so Goddamn *easy*. It didn't even look as if he was trying. It all came out so naturally as if he was born to play the part. And his material; Chester had never heard anything like it. It was so funny. Unsophisticated, crude, sexually and racially questionable, but so bloody good.

Sitting beside him was a young girl who also seemed to be enjoying the show. She, too, couldn't stop giggling, sometimes with embarrassment at Saydat's politically incorrect material. Her eyes, like his and most of those sitting around him, were teary with laughter. Suddenly, she lunged forward in a fit of uncontrollable coughing. She spluttered, grasping at her throat. Even in the throes of his own demented amusement, Chester panicked when he saw her in such obvious distress. Instinctively, he hammered her back with the flat of his hand, his concern for her evident, albeit in his heightened state of hilarity. No one else seemed to have noticed her near convulsion, as they were all enjoying themselves too much. Her coughing bout eventually subsided, but without either of them noticing, she had grabbed his hand tightly. Romances may have started in even more unlikely circumstances, but Chester was hard-pushed at that moment to think of one.

As the days and weeks went on, Chester found himself falling more and more in love with this girl. Her name was Hilary Feinstein, and the love-struck young man quipped some months later he wished he could give her a '*fine stone*,' by which he meant, of course, a diamond. He now had something worth aiming for, striving for. He did not want to lose this lovely girl; neither did he want to give up his ambition to become a big-time comedian. He was sure Funny wouldn't mind if he 'cribbed' a couple of the old man's jokes, just to get the

punters warmed up. Not only did he use the older comedian's gags, but he also remembered how Funny had delivered the lines. Incredibly, it worked. They weren't exactly roaring with laughter, but he did notice a few guffaws, and hardly anyone was trying to shout him down. Emboldened with even this limited success, Chester forged on. It wasn't the greatest achievement in the history of live comedy, but it was far from the disaster of his usual performances. He was getting there, he thought. He was finally getting there.

On his next gig, Chester decided to use some more of Funny's material. Just a little more; after all, if he used all of his mentor's work, he would no longer be performing as himself. He would just be Funny in a younger body. Like the last time, his audience laughed at his, well, at Funny's material, not so much at Chester's contribution. However, even still, it was better than before. Hilary was pleased for him when he told her how his routines had gone, omitting his plagiarizing of Funny's work. She was now more nervous about going back to any comedy venues since the last time when she had almost choked to death. She had not accompanied her boyfriend to his shows, preferring instead to amuse herself at home. He respected her decision not to come to his performances and understood her reasons for not doing so. He could only hope and pray, however, that she might make an exception for his next gig. The television cameras were going to be there. It was his one chance. If he got this right, it could mean the big time. Guest spots on chat shows, higher billing at comedy club venues, hell, maybe even his own TV show. Wouldn't that be something?

Despite his pleading, Hilary stood adamant that she would not come with him but promised she would watch him on TV. Someone else who tuned into the broadcast was Funny. Funny wasn't laughing for long, however, when he saw his protégé. Chester hadn't just used a few of Funny's gags; he had stolen his whole act. The old comedian wasn't just angry; he was

apoplectic. How dare this little nobody, this pissant good-for-nothing piece of garbage, take his entire *schtick*? Even that wouldn't have been so bad, but his execution was awful, worse than awful; it was *drek*. That ungrateful swine had just taken his life's work and pissed it against the wall, on television, yet. This was too much. That little bastard would pay a heavy price for what he did; he, Funny Fucking Yushude Fucking Saydat, would see to it. He would make sure that cocksucking little prick never worked again. If he did, it would be in the fucking comedy gulags of Outer Mongolia. He would...oh, shit...his doctor had warned him not to get too excited; his blood pressure was high enough as it was. He sensed the blood rising to his head; then, he felt more pain than he had ever felt in his life. It was like being hugged by a six-hundred-pound grizzly bear. He couldn't breathe, he felt his face turning puce, and he knew. As he was tumbling to the floor in his living room apartment, he knew he would never be able to get that asswipe...it was...too...late...

But it wasn't too late for Chester. Despite Lucky's damning critique of his performance, everyone else loved him. The big time was finally beckoning, but Chester should have looked more closely at the finger on that hand. It was long, and, oh, so boney...

For the next few months, Chester couldn't put a foot wrong. The television appearances, the higher billing in the comedy venues, the adulation from those who had previously ridiculed him. His transformation from bottom-feeder loser to the uncrowned king of comedy was nothing short of miraculous. And he loved it. The very thought of going to work in Pa's haberdashers was now a thing of the distant past. He was earning more money from one TV appearance than he had made in his entire stand-up career. As his performing star was rising, so his romantic star seemed to be waning. He was sure Hilary would understand. She had been with him since his pathetic days of scrimping for pennies and dimes. Surely she

would appreciate that he had to seize the moment. But she had become different, too. Ever since his appearance on the show that had changed his life, it was as if she had known that their time together was coming to an end. She had become more distant and melancholy as the days and weeks went by. They still saw each other, but the romance, the 'spark,' had gone from between them. Chester thought she might even be seeing someone else. Well, good luck to her. He didn't need her anymore. He had what he wanted now. With his newfound fame and fortune, he would find another girl easily, one who didn't choke every time she laughed.

It was on an appearance of a late-night chat-come-entertainment television show that Chester first noticed something not quite right, something unusual. He hadn't been feeling well that day but not ill enough to consider canceling his performance. Still and all, he wasn't his usual ebullient self, and he knew he was a bit weak, that he hadn't given his best. The strange thing was that the studio audience didn't seem to notice. They still clapped and applauded as if he had given his greatest show yet, and the cries for 'more' seemed louder than ever. Not only that, but even the TV ratings were superb. He reckoned the people were just being kind. They must have noticed he was having an 'off-day,' but he would bounce back better than ever. That was it. Surely.

His next gig was a couple of weeks later when he was headlining a comedy club venue. The day before his appearance, he had received a letter from the IRS demanding a great deal of his earnings in unpaid taxes. He had an accountant to handle this kind of shit. What was that bastard doing for his money? Sitting with his finger stuck up his ass? Well, if he was, Chester hoped the incompetent clown broke it, his finger, that is. His tax debt was still on his mind when he went out in front of the crowd. They stamped their feet and shouted his name

almost to deafening point. It took a few minutes to silence them sufficiently before he could begin. But it was no use. The tax bill was enormous, and he wondered how the hell he was going to pay it. Even with his new wealth, it would drain him financially, and he had made commitments. He had discovered horseracing, and he was proving as useless at betting on gee-gees as he used to be as a professional comedian. He owed people money. These people were the nicest, kindest, sweetest folks in all the world as long as you paid them back in time with a hefty interest. When that didn't happen, well, these folks weren't so kind anymore; in fact, they could get downright nasty – broken fingers, toes, and kneecaps nasty. As well as his tax worries, it was the thought of what they would do to him that was preying on his mind when he faced the auditorium. It was no use. He couldn't concentrate, especially when he noticed one of those folks standing at the back. Standing and smirking. What did he know? How could he be aware of the tax demand? It had only arrived yesterday. His creditor was looking at him with a vulpine grin. Oh, shit, this wasn't going to be good. Still, the show had to go on. These motherfuckers had paid good money to see him, money he now desperately needed. He went into his act, but it was no use. His heart and his mind just weren't on it. He tanked. He knew it, and they sure as hell must have known it. He was expecting a *déjà vu* scenario, remembering how it used to be. But wait a minute. Hold the fort. They were laughing, no, not just laughing, they were on their feet, applauding as he had never heard before. They loved him, begging him not to leave the stage. Even the wolf-like geezer at the back was crying with happy tears. What the fuck was happening here? They should have been throwing rotten tomatoes at him, not lauding him like the fucking Second Coming. Something really bizarre was going on; he just wished he knew what it was.

Even more weird was the event that happened a few weeks later. He was opening the new branch of a major supermarket chain. It was a big event for the small mid-west town, and almost the whole population turned out to see Chester go into his routine. At least, that's what was supposed to happen. Except that an hour before he was due to go on, Chester lost his voice. He had been feeling a sore throat the night before but assumed it would be gone by the morning. Unfortunately, not only had the irritation not abated, but now, sixty minutes before he was due to perform, his larynx had seized up completely. The crowd would go nuts. He would be lucky to get away without being lynched. OK, so this time nobody paid to see him, except the supermarket honchos, who would now probably hold back his fee. He took the mic, and in an almost non-existent voice, began to apologize for his condition, promising to return and do a free show for the whole town once his voice had gotten back to normal. Despite being able to be heard only by those at the very front with highly acute hearing, they all began to go into paroxysms of laughter. He thought they would calm down when they realized he wasn't saying anything. But, no, the laughter continued and not only went on but became louder and more raucous and insistent. They were applauding as if they were actually listening to his act. Even with his mouth firmly closed, they still carried on showing appreciation for his non-performance. Finally, he left the makeshift platform to thunderous applause. As he climbed off the stage, he nipped himself to wake up from this incredible dream. Except, this was no dream. It was for real. Everything was for real.

His next booking was another live show. He tried an experiment. After the initial expression of welcome had died down, Chester stood silent on the stage. His voice had returned and was as good as ever. He could have spoken but chose not to. Without uttering a single word, the crowd went wild. He had never seen anything like it. Everyone was on their feet,

shouting and screaming for him to continue. Continue what? He had stood mute and immobile in front of these people for over an hour, but yet they still cheered as if they had all won the lottery. He was getting rave reviews for his non-performance. Every agent in town wanted a piece of him. Every venue, every TV channel, radio station, they all clamored for him.

He appeared on national TV, except he didn't, quite. He was invited, and he went, only he stayed in the green room. He didn't front the cameras, and still, the studio audience went into orbit laughing uproariously as if he'd been telling his funny anecdotes in front of them. Not only the studio audience. Despite staring at an empty studio chair, millions and millions of people right across the country jammed the station's phone lines and brought down its website begging for Chester to be allowed to go on and on and on. Chester ran screaming out of the television studio into the night air. Flagging down a taxi cab, he begged the driver to take him to his hotel. The cabbie couldn't believe who his fare was. Chester Gurevitz, *the* Chester Gurevitz. Wow. Wait 'til he told his missus and kids. Then he started laughing. He couldn't stop. It was uncontrollable. He managed to steer the vehicle into the curb before convulsing, then collapsing, crimson-faced in his seat, his lifeless head slumped over the steering wheel, it's horn blaring loudly in the dark, empty street.

The comic ran from the cab, with the sounds of peeling laughter resounding all around him. Bounding down the street, he covered his ears in a vain attempt to shut out the incessant shrieking. It was no use. The noise was everywhere, in front of him, behind him, from every building, every vehicle, every shop, the sound of maniacal glee all directed at him.

When he had first met Hilary, she told him she was a student. He had never asked her what she was studying, and she had not thought to mention her subject. It was the Culture and

Superstitions of the Caribbean. She also hadn't bothered to tell him who the comedian was they both watched on that night she almost choked. She had watched his TV performance and recognized the material, the act he stole, the one that killed the sweet, loving old man, her father, Hymie Feinstein. In her hands, she held a small figure, an effigy made from wax and straw. It bore a remarkable resemblance to her ex-boyfriend, Chester Gurevitz. Except for the lower half of the face. Between the nostrils and the chin was his mouth, now elongated obscenely across its face, in a grotesque rictus grin, drawing the cheeks out by several inches in a hideous caricature of the comedian's features. She would keep stretching out the lips as the sound of merriment enveloped him, smothered him, surrounded him in a grip all of its own. Until the whole world was laughing at him as one. Until he could no longer bear to hear that sound for which he had craved so long.

The End