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SAG AWARDS

For Betty White, a career on the sly

Almost 88, the comic actress will receive the Screen Actors Guild's Life Achievement Award.

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By Gina Piccalo
January 6, 2010

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Betty White is a master of the double-entendre. Over the years, her sly deadpan has trumped some of Hollywood's most trenchant wits. Even now, on the cusp of 88, even when she's being genuinely demure, a zinger of a punch line feels imminent.

A few days before Christmas, White was arranged elegantly on a sofa in an office overlooking Westwood, her platinum coif just so, her long pink nails poised over one knee. For the moment, the petite comedian was playing it straight, puzzling over the news she'd be receiving the Screen Actors Guild's Life Achievement Award.

"I have been the luckiest old broad on TV," she said, flashing one of those signature dimples. "Everybody says, 'When are you going to retire?' Why should I retire from something I love doing so much? They'll stop asking soon enough."

White is probably the only one surprised by the honor. She has, after all, clocked more than 60 years on television, winning six Emmys, earning more than a dozen nominations and racking up a list of memorable credits. Her brand of comedy, it turns out, has no expiration date.

Just a few days earlier, White had taped one of her lively appearances on "The Late Late Show With Craig Ferguson"

dressed in a Santa Claus suit and posing as a Salvation Army bell-ringer, chortling about her exorbitant medical marijuana bills and how much she cherished "the feeling of a big pair of bells in my hand." This was just the latest in a series of sketches White has done for the show, appearing in others as an accountant with a briefcase full of cocaine, as a prison guard and as a Girl Scout. And again she proved she could hold her own with an audience that had cut its teeth on YouTube.

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"It's the audience that has changed more than the business," said White, the charm in her voice giving way to a more no-nonsense tone. "Now they know from the first word of a script where it's going. They've heard every joke. They've seen every plot. It's a hard audience to surprise."

Last summer, White ranked as the chief scene-stealer of the Sandra Bullock blockbuster "The Proposal," playing the free-spirited Grandma Annie. To promote the movie, she appeared on FunnyorDie.com trading R-rated barbs with costar Ryan Reynolds. White is nothing if not versatile.

On the surface, she's a sweet little old lady with uncanny comic timing. White makes it look so easy. But that's because she came of age on live TV, back when a performer lived, quite literally, by her wits. Her pace in the early 1950s could lap the most exhaustive modern blogger. White spent 5 1/2 consecutive hours on the air, six days a week, ad-libbing all the way on the talk show "Hollywood on Television." After dinner, she turned around and hosted an evening variety show.

"That's like going to television college," she said of those years.

"From the very beginning of television, there she was," said SAG President Ken Howard. "She lights things up. She's been good at it for so long. I think she loved the fast pace."

White was a career woman before there was such a term, confounding two husbands and more than one suitor. She was 41 when she finally agreed to wed game-show host Allen Ludden (he wore her would-be engagement ring on a necklace for a year before she said yes) and the couple were together until his death in 1981.

She was a sought-after game-show panelist in the '60s and '70s, when that genre was popular. She was also a regular on the late-night circuit in the '70s, matching wits with Jack Paar, Johnny Carson and Merv Griffin. Then came vinegar-tongued Sue Ann Nivens on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," which earned her two Emmys, and, in the 1980s, bubble-brained Rose on "The Golden Girls" earned another.

And the accolades keep coming. Her one episode last fall of "My Name Is Earl," in which she played Crazy Witch Lady, earned White an Emmy nod. Still, she sees herself as a workaday actor, taking jobs as they come.

During the filming of "The Proposal," she waved off attempts at special handling by director Anne Fletcher. There were times, though, that Fletcher caught the spiny end of White's wit.

"I just started singing on set," Fletcher recalled, "and without missing a beat, she said, 'Oh, honey! Nobody requested that song.' I laughed for five minutes. It put me right in my place, in the best possible way. You just can't compete with her."

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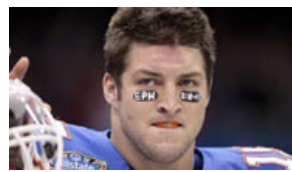
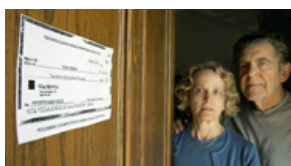
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