OF GOD AND WEINERVILLE

Sure, Marc Weiner now reigns over a brilliantly absurd puppet kingdom, six days a week on Nickelodeon. But he crossed a big desert to get there. BY ELLEN PALL

AROUND 1 O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING ON A SUMMER SATURDAY IN 1983, ONE OF THE hottest stand-up comics in the country finished his last set at a club in Cleveland. In keeping with the Sabbath strictures of his new-found faith, he plunged on foot into the seediest part of downtown, walking for an hour or so past hookers and strip joints and topless bars to the hotel where the club put up its headliners. The club owner cruised alongside him in a car, chatting through the window, remarking on the dangers of the neighborhood. Every now and then, he asked, "Sure you don't want to get in?"

Marc Weiner had never been more sure of anything in his life. Orthodox Jews do not use cars on the Sabbath, and Weiner, a former Hebrew-school cutup who barely squeaked through his bar mitzvah, had fallen in love with Orthodox Judaism. Indeed, the midnight walk was only one in a succession of strange scenes in his life at the time. In dressing rooms in Atlanta or Indianapolis, for instance, he would find himself studying Torah while trying to block out the rhythmic sound of line, laugh, line from the opening act. Stranger scenes and far harder days were to come, as his growing faith would first dismantle his career, then nearly tear his heart in two.

BOISTEROUS ON STAGE, THE 43-YEAR-OLD WEINER — NOW best known for Weinerville, the brilliantly silly puppet world at the heart of the children's television show "Nickelodeon Weinerville" — is exquisitely shy in person. Dark and compact, he seats himself yards from a newcomer, listens carefully, speaks hesitantly (and mainly to his lap) and often interrupts what he says to criticize it.

But he loves to perform. Especially, he loves puppets. When he drops to the floor of his small Manhattan office and starts to work his bare fingers across the worn carpet, he almost glows with enthusiasm. (During a recent visit, Weiner — whose name is pronounced like the hot dog — was finishing the script for a "Nickelodeon Weinerville" Hanukkah special, to be shown Thursday at 8 P.M. and several times over the weekend.)

"A hand puppet like this, there are human movements there," he says, his practiced fingers bouncing with Olympic precision. "It's doing push-ups. It's sitting. It's crossing its leg. It's flipping the bird." His bare hand, even without benefit of puppet, makes a weirdly convincing human figure. He stands up. Again, he is instantly uneasy as he tries to put into words what excites him about his work. Plagued since childhood by dyslexia, he finds that words often elude him, especially if he thinks about them hard. At last he produces four: "Creating something from nothing."

Weiner's act, back when he was riding the cresting wave of club comedy, was never pure stand-up. He juggled a rubber hand, a toilet plunger and an M&M. He dressed his hand in tiny clothes and walked his fingers over miniature sets, creating a form of puppet he called the Weinerette. Playing a noisy old sea captain in a storm, he doused his audience with water.

It wasn't a particularly subtle act — Weiner cites Jerry Lewis as a major influence — but Weiner was going for belly

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Photograph by Dietmar for The New York Times

hitherto inexplicable difficulties: he had a severe case of Fanconi Anemia, a rare, vicious, inherited disease that eventually halts the bone marrow's production of red and white blood cells and platelets. To survive, he would one day need a bone marrow transplant, preferably from an exactly matched donor, usually a sibling.

With foreknowledge, doctors can spot Fanconi Anemia in utero in time to abort if the parents so choose. Sandy was several months pregnant with their second child when Avi's diagnosis was made. There was a 1 in 4 chance that the new baby would also have the syndrome. Tests indicated it did not; still, the wait was miserable.

Through everything, though, Sandy's faith never faltered. A clear-eyed realist, she had not been shocked, she says, when Avi was born: "I knew that babies are not always born healthy. I just wanted to know we could make him O.K." Once the anemia was diagnosed, she gradually began to accept that "O.K." might never happen.

For Weiner, it was different.

"The whole ordeal was like a wake-up call," he says. "All the restrictions of the Shabbos, and I have a son who's dying. I don't have a career because of being observant. You know, you're not allowed to ride in an elevator on Shabbos. But we had to. In the hospital, I would push the elevator buttons, and Sandy would say, 'Oh, you shouldn't do that.' But I had to take care of reality."

To do so, he began to "uncomplicate" his life, dropping Orthodox practices one by one. All the same, he was coming apart. "I couldn't function. I got out of the business. At that point, I could no longer be funny."

He took a job at Best Plumbing Supply, the thriving business that his father, Mel, had founded and that Marc's brothers now ran. When the new baby, Rebecca, was born healthy, "we cried, we were so happy," Weiner says. (The couple have since had a third child, Max, and a fourth, Sara, both perfectly healthy.) For Avi, they hoped against hope to find a donor or create one; Rebecca was not a match.

Between hospital stays, Avi would come home. "The sweetest boy in the world," Weiner says. "Lots of silly things made him laugh, lots of stuff with the puppets. And we would get him laughing so hard."

At first, Weiner prayed when Avi went into surgery. "But after all the torture I saw him go through — 'How could God do this?' You know, I changed my life to become closer to God. And then my son is tortured, dying. I didn't, I still don't understand it. I don't understand how that happens."

Avi died just before he turned 5, quite suddenly, of a brain tumor associated with the Fanconi Anemia. "In a way, I looked at his death as something that spared him years of suffering," Sandy says, vividly aware of how painful his life would have been. Her faith sustained her through the ordeal. "If anything," she says, "it became stronger."

But Weiner, though he has resumed most of the Orthodox observances, is even now far from reconciled. "I still believe in God," he says. "But my relationship with God has definitely changed. My relationship with God at this point in my life is a little . . ." — he gropes for a word for a long time — "a little *strained*."

Weiner (here as Dottie) aims for puppet history on his Hanukkah special by putting his gang on skis.

"THAT'S NOT FAIR" IS A GAME SHOW THAT JOB might have invented in an antic disposition. Weiner came up with it in the late 1980's, after several offers to do short television sketches, coinciding with a lull in Avi's troubles, motivated him to quit the plumbing business and return to comedy. On the show, a cast of puppets asked human contestants trivia questions. But whether the answer was right or wrong made no difference: points were awarded entirely at the whim of the emcee — Weiner.

The puppets he used for "That's Not Fair" were a new kind he had been developing for a while: he glued a headless puppet body to cardboard and stuck his own head up over it, and sometimes wore makeup, sometimes a wig or a hat. While the sets and moves for Weinerettes take weeks to work out, he could make a new "head" puppet and sketch out a routine in a few days. A creative outburst followed. He made Dottie, Weinerville's future Mayor (a waitress, in this first incarnation) and General Weiner, who would one day become the heroic Captain Ozone. By the time of Avi's final illness, Marc had filled the garage, the den and the living room with puppets. Without meaning to, he says, "I had created a town": Weinerville.

Though intended for grown-ups, the pilot for "That's Not Fair" wound up at Nickelodeon. "I remember thinking, 'Wow, look what this guy can do,' " says Kevin Kay, an executive producer for Nickelodeon Productions who helped develop what became "Nickelodeon Weinerville." "A great gag writer, a great physical comic, with an endless supply of wonderful characters. And he loves kids."

Weiner was taken aback at the prospect of being a children's show host. "I wanted to be on the adult channel," he says. But now he believes that the years he spent in hospitals with Avi — and other children — prepared him for this career. "I had developed a sensitivity to kids' needs," he explains. "I saw how nice it is to make them laugh."

In a world of aggressively slick productions for children, Weiner's show is a miracle of low tech. The exuberant sets where the puppets live, most made by Weiner, his wife and his father, are fashioned from recycled cardboard boxes, coat hangers, poster paint and what looks in one case like the waistband from a pair of undershorts. The scripts (by Marc, Sandy and a staff of three or four) are simple. In one show, Captain Ozone — who makes Dudley Doright look like Ratso Rizzo — foils the evil polluter Eric Von Firstensecond. In another, Dingling Brothers Circus cancels a show, so the Weinerville crew puts on its own, with Socko, a tough-talking teen-age Weinerette, as a lion tamer facing down a live house cat. Weiner does nearly all the voices. There is a thick sprinkling of jokes for the grown-ups ("I want Barney money," growls Boney, Weinerville's skeletal, misanthropic dinosaur), but the scripts are mostly pure shtick and nonsense: puns, pratfalls, a "Weinerizer" machine that turns audience members into puppets.

For now, with Weiner working on a series of specials, the regular show is in reruns six times a week. The Hanukkah special, meanwhile, transposes the story of the Maccabees to outer space. When the potato-pancake-shaped Sektals (sektal is "latkes" spelled backward), fleeing the evil Antidorkus (a.k.a. Antiochus), run out of oil and are forced to land their spaceship on Earth, they meet the Weinerville gang on a ski vacation.

Weiner's voice quickens as he describes never-before-tried skiing-puppet sequences to be filmed at the real-life Killington mountain in Vermont. "We're going to make puppet history!" he crows.

The last sound viewers will hear on the Hanukkah special is Avi's laugh, which is heard at the end of every "Nickelodeon Weinerville" show.

"He had such a beautiful laugh, a cackle of a laugh," says Weiner, who harbors a notion that sounds and images from Earth spread out into space in infinite, if ever less perceptible, waves of energy.

"So, if you were able to go *far* out, Avi would still be alive. I like that image. And every day, his laugh is broadcast into the universe." ■

PHOTOGRAPH BY VYTO STARINSKS/NICKELODEON

laughs. "He was always very funny, truly funny," says Jerry Seinfeld, who came up through the clubs at about the same time. "And he had a very pure heart on stage. I think people always responded to that."

In 1971, after he dropped out of Monmouth, a small college in West Long Branch, N.J., Weiner had no clear ambitions. He opened a campus coffeehouse he called Expression. He worked as the cook — and learned to juggle — on the sloop Clearwater, Pete Seeger's floating ecology lesson. He took a course in clowning and another in mime. By the late 1970's, he was a street clown outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art. One winter night, to get out of the cold, he auditioned at the Improv. Within a year he was a regular.

Early in 1980, he and Rocko, a pugnacious boxer Weinerette with a voice like a pickax, landed a series of spots on "Saturday Night Live." The audience response was fervent, and the exposure catapulted Weiner into the mushrooming club scene. Soon he was headlining all over the country. At first he was thrilled.

"I was just — Oh, look! Cleveland! A hotel!" He jumps from his chair and takes a goofy, gleeful skip. "You know, I'm coming off a boat."

After a year or two, though, the charms of hotels and traveling began to subside. "The career was really moving nicely," he says, "but I was thinking: 'What am I living for? So I can develop my puppet?' I needed more."

From the outset, Weiner knew it was what he had been looking for. "The whole thing felt right," he says. "Rooting. Like I had come home."

An old joke: Two women meet after many years. One asks the other about her three sons.

"Manny is doing very good. A doctor, big house, everything the best."

"And Ira?"

"Also wonderful. A lawyer, fancy-shmancy."

"And the little one, Max?"

"Ach! Max is scraping along. He's a rabbi."

The friend nods sympathetically. "It's no job for a Jewish boy."

ACCORDING TO THE ORTHODOX TRADITION, it is incumbent upon Jews to obey not only the Ten Commandments but also an additional 603 directives and proscriptions laid down in the Bible. These oblige observant Jews, among other things, to love their neighbors, value modesty and keep separate dishes for milk and meat. An Orthodox man should study daily and join other men in prayer three times a day. The Sabbath is observed from sundown Friday to nightfall Saturday, when the Torah forbids such activities as working for pay, encouraging other Jews to violate the Sabbath or lighting a fire — which modern scholars interpret to mean using a car or turning on electricity.

It's no religion for a nightclub comic.

'I still believe in God,' Weiner says. But, he adds, 'my relationship with God at this point in my life is a little ...' – he gropes for a word for a long time – 'a little *strained*.'

A son and grandson of thoroughly assimilated Jews, Weiner had hardly seen the inside of a synagogue since his bar mitzvah in Mahopac, N.Y., a rustic suburb in Putnam County. The comfortable home he grew up in was only casually Jewish, but now he began to wonder what Judaism had to say about the meaning of life.

To fill the empty hours on the road, some comics go bowling. Some write new material. Weiner began to drop in on synagogues. "I would work Friday night and go to shul Saturday," he says. With his picture on posters all over town, he had an easy time mixing with the congregation. People would often invite him over, feed him, take him in. He went to only Orthodox synagogues, finding a "love for living Judaism" he had not experienced in the congregation he knew growing up.

Anticipating a Jewish bride, his parents were at first delighted. Slowly, though, they began to realize that their son's increasing religiousness would not only hamper his career but — because of restrictions on driving — might also prevent him from joining the family for holiday services. In New York, Weiner had started to attend special beginners' services, led by Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald, at the Orthodox Lincoln Square Synagogue.

On the advice of Rabbi Buchwald, Weiner proceeded slowly, gradually cutting down on his "violations." He started to keep kosher. He excised hostile jokes and ribaldry from his routines. ("Would you come aboard and help me raise my mast?" the salty old captain used to ask women in the audience.)

Pretty soon "the act kind of lost its edge," Weiner notes drily. "I'm, like: 'Oh, thank you! God bless you! Moses loves you!'"

As his desire to be observant grew, he again consulted Rabbi Buchwald. Friday-night performances posed a special problem. "The microphone, they turned it on for someone else, so don't worry about it," Weiner remembers the rabbi telling him. "The paying — you got paid not for doing *that* show, you got paid twice for doing the show before." (A similar line of reasoning comes into play when rabbis themselves conduct services on the Sabbath.) But, as Weiner says, the rabbi concluded, "The driving back and forth — that's a problem."

So Weiner started walking from the club to the hotel. He began to date only Jewish women. Where he could find them, he dropped in at Jewish bookshops. He set about relearning Hebrew. At last, inevitably, he decided to stop working Friday nights.

Except in the biggest cities, clubs book comics for a week at a time. A couple of owners tried to accommodate Weiner by giving him Fridays off, but they soon found it impossible to get a suitable one-night replacement. Weiner's career took a nose dive.

"But I didn't mind, because I found God," he says, a hint of self-mockery creeping into his voice. "I was getting out of the secular world, studying Judaism three, probably four nights a week. Praying three times a day for an hour, an hour and a half." His club work gone, he paid the rent working one- and two-night stands at colleges. A comedy-club acquaintance who saw him walking down Broadway around this time with a group of fellow worshipers remembers ducking into a newsstand to hide.

"Marc was wearing a hat, a long coat," he says. "I looked at him, I couldn't believe it. He used to wear a red bow tie!"

Weiner is distressed by the anecdote ("I wasn't a Martian," he protests), but in retrospect even he feels he was living in "a little dream world." "I was ready to give up everything, move to Israel to study. But so much of the only thing I was trained in involves playing with the English language, American culture. What was I thinking?"

In 1984, Weiner met Sandy Rosenblatt, a sharply funny, gravely beautiful graphic artist. Raised in an Orthodox home — her father is a cantor — Sandy had grown less observant by the time she met Weiner. But, she says, "Marc was so sincere, so gung-ho, it brought me back to it."

Weiner agrees. "I brought her back into the fold. And I got a toaster for doing that! Everybody you bring in, you get a gift." Rabbi Buchwald married them late that year.

Meanwhile, Weiner had begun to notice something funny: Learning about orthodoxy, "I'm seeing the Jewish religion is very rich with wackiness. You wash, you don't wash. You eat, you can't eat." Slowly, he began to evolve routines about becoming an observant Jew. There were jokes about kosher roach motels (indispensable, lest the roaches walk from milk dish to meat dish), jokes about anchoring a yarmulke with "the ultimate commitment to Judaism: the bobby pin." In time, he started doing the act at kosher hotels and Orthodox fund-raising events. Lubavitchers loved him.

Early in 1986, Weiner performed his routine at Lincoln Square Synagogue for the 10-year anniversary of the beginners' services. On a videotape of the show, he is absolutely radiant with joy.

"I was glowing because I was with God," he says. "I was married." Sandy was pregnant. "I had no career. But I was in seventh heaven, you know? Then things hit the fan."

IN JULY 1986, SANDY GAVE BIRTH TO THEIR FIRST child, Avi. "And right before your eyes," Weiner says, "the whole thing starts to unravel."

Avi had multiple birth defects: his thumbs were not properly attached to his hands; more important, many of his internal organs were irregularly formed. Doctors performed six operations in his first year alone to correct what could be corrected.

Then things got worse. A few months after Avi's first birthday, doctors discovered the cause of his