

Comedian, impressionist Little brings act to Capital City

By Nick Thomas
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At 69, most career entertainers would have slipped from the limelight into retirement. Not Rich Little.

In recent years, the veteran comedian and impressionist has toured dozens of cities with his one-man show. On Dec. 14, Little will perform at the Davis Theatre.

Impressions have been Little's stock and trade since his school days in Ottawa.

"I would answer teachers' questions in their own voices," said Little in a telephone interview from his home in Las Vegas. "Pretty soon, they stopped asking me questions!"

That was over 50 years ago. Today, crowds still flock to see the man who claims a repertoire of over 200 voices. In fact, more than 150 short audio clips of his impressions can be heard on his Web site, www.richlittle.com.

Little's long-time friend and fellow impressionist, Fred Travalena, said Little brought impressionism to an art form.

"You only have to look at 'Saturday Night Live' to see how mainstream it has become," said Travalena by phone from Los Angeles. Travalena credits Little with inspiring his own career.

Unlike ordinary comedians, Little says impressionists have double-duty on stage.

"You've got to do a convincing impression and also tell jokes in that character," Little said. "It's really all about concentration when you do impressions and becoming the person you are doing. Sometimes when I really get into Johnny Carson, I'll come off stage and find myself writing out an alimony check!"

Although Little changes his act from season to season, Montgomery audiences can expect to hear all their favorites: "John Wayne, Jimmy Stewart, Johnny Carson, George Burns, Ronald Reagan — they're all in this year's show," Little said. "And dozens more."

Little's performances focus mostly on deceased silver-screen era celebrities and presidents, but that doesn't mean he can't do a convincing Jack Nicholson, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Willie Nelson, George Bush or Bill Clinton.

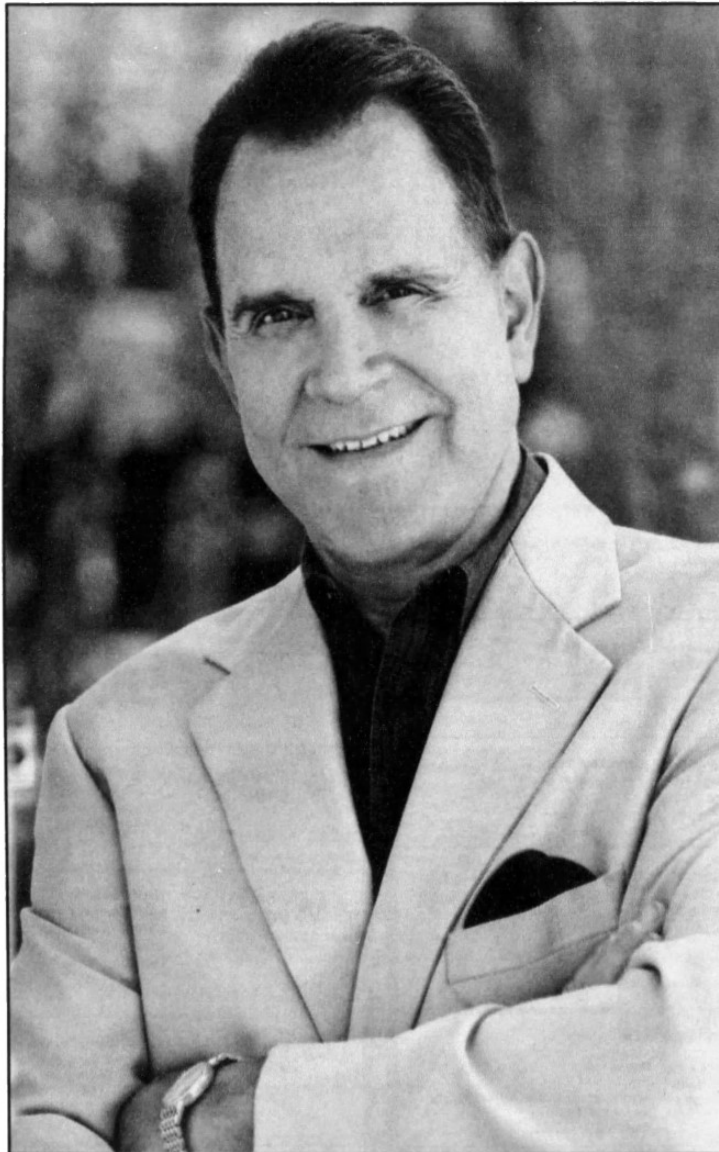
"You have to keep it topical," he said. "I don't know what the future holds for me, but if Hillary becomes president, I may be in big trouble!"

Although Little does do some female impressions, such as Dr. Ruth, Carol Channing and Jean Stapleton, he said Clinton would be tough to mimic at the moment.

"She needs to develop a lisp or a rasp or twitch to make her a little more distinctive," said Little. But should she win in November, "with the pressure of becoming president she may get one!"

As for impersonating today's hot, young movie stars, Little also laments their lack of distinguishing voices and body language.

"So many of the stars of the silver-



Contributed photos

Rich Little

screen era had distinctive voices, walks, hand gestures and facial mannerisms," said Little. "But how do you do Brad Pitt, Johnny Depp or Leonardo DiCaprio? Their acting is good, but their voices just aren't that distinctive. Even Robert Redford is near impossible to do."

Little's performance in Montgomery will be one of his last road shows for a while. He recently signed with the Golden Nugget in Las Vegas for a six-month stretch. In addition to performing, Little has also been promoting his latest DVDs, "Will the Real Rich Little Please Stand Up!," which features a live show recently

filmed in Las Vegas, and the Emmy Award winning "Rich Little's Christmas Carol."

"I played all the characters in the Dickens' classic," said Little. "It's been out of print for years and just re-released on DVD."

There's also an autobiography in the works.

"I've met so many fascinating people and have so many stories to tell, I wanted to write them all down," he said.

The book will contain sketches by Little, who is an exceptional artist.

"I've dabbled in art all my life, char-

WANT TO GO?

Tickets for "Rich Little and Friends" at 7 p.m. Dec. 14 at the Davis Theatre for the Performing Arts are sold out. To be put on a waiting list, call 241-9567.



coal portraits mostly," said Little. "I've done hundreds of sketches over the years. I guess I have these people in my head and I can put that down on paper as well as voice. I've also done people other than the ones I imitate, like Meryl Streep and Tom Cruise. I did a pretty good portrait of Tom Cruise, but it wasn't easy because he kept bouncing up and down on the sofa!"

Despite the strain impressionists place on their vocal chords, Little says his voice has held up well over the years. He says he has never taken voice lessons or studied the science of speech, and that it just came naturally to him.

"I just listen over and over again to a new voice and practice until I get it right," he said.

And no, his voice is not insured. "I once contacted Lloyds of London, but they wanted something like \$50,000 a year to insure my voice," Little said.

So has Little ever been tempted to use his talents to mimic any of these famous people for personal gain? Well, sort of, he says.

"Years ago when I was starting out, I ordered room service as Gary Grant — and found he got much faster service than Rich Little usually did. When the food arrived and they asked for Mr. Grant, I just took the food and said he was in the shower."

Of course, not all his impressions command the same respect.

"I once ordered a cheeseburger as Richard Nixon," Little recalled. "I'm still waiting for it."

Nick Thomas is a freelance journalist who has written stories for USA Today, The Washington Post, Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune and many others. He lives in Millbrook.