

## PROFILE

# All the world loves a clown

## Murray Horwitz just wants you to let him entertain you

By Hannah Monicken  
Senior Writer

Murray Horwitz loves an audience, even if it's an audience of one. And on the other end of the phone. With a journalist he's never met.

Someone sent him a St. Jude Spanish prayer candle, he's saying as he launches into his story after I squeeze in my name. He didn't order it. It just showed up to his home in Chevy Chase. And of course, he had just been on the phone with Amazon. But Amazon had no answer for why he had received a candle honoring the saint of lost causes.

With the wisdom that comes with a few weeks remove, he tells me later he imagines it was one of those schemes — he read about it on NPR recently — to get product reviews.

This is classic Murray Horwitz, but I didn't know that yet. If he is nothing else — although he is many, many things — the man is a storyteller.

He'll pepper conversations with quotes from and references to his idols of the areas that interest him — jazz, comedy, show business. He'll throw out a Duke Ellington quote one

moment, then move on to Norman Podhoretz or Athene Seyler or Dorothy Fields or George Carlin. He just assumes you'll keep up.

"Any time over the years if I was working on something and I had a question I thought, 'Well, I'll call Murray,'" says Merle Frimark, Horwitz's former publicist back when he needed a publicist and now a friend. "Because Murray knows everything about everything. He's always there to offer his two cents. Or butt in. But he tells it like it is."

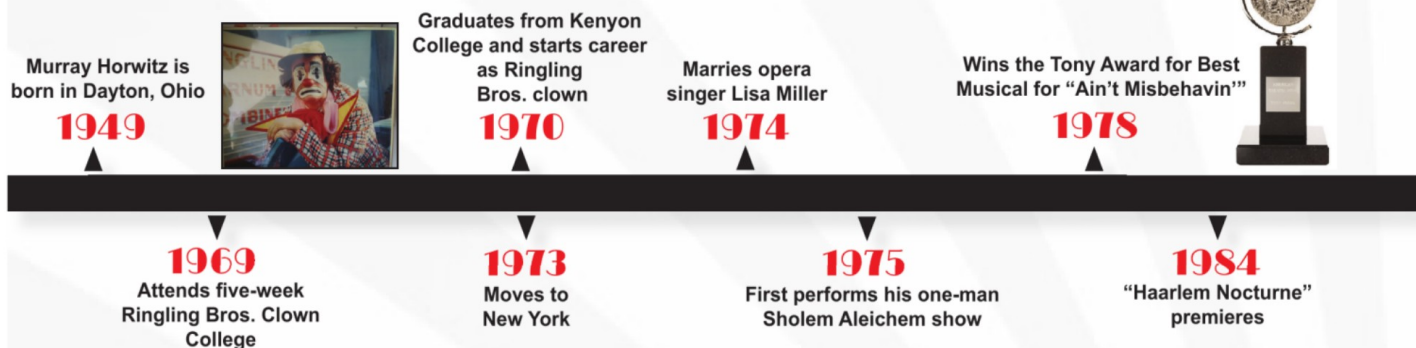
This is the closet anyone comes to less-than-glowing remarks about their good friend Murray Horwitz. That he tells a lot of stories, that he's quite a talker. But that feels like one of those weaknesses you choose to reveal during a job interview because it's also a strength.

Besides, Horwitz will tell you, he did quit the (silent) clowning business "because I loved to talk." But more on the clown thing later.

"I have done some acting, but I'm not really an actor," he says. "And I'm certainly not a musician. I mean, I can't play. What I am in many ways — and people usually use this as a pejorative term, but it shouldn't be — is a vaudevillian."

Which is the more old-school way of saying Horwitz is a showbiz Renaissance man.

### Anatomy of a Showbiz Life



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"Murray is what we call in the business a throwback," says friend and collaborator of 40 years John Schreiber, president of New Jersey Performing Arts. "Murray is an old soul."

He's a man of many media, from theater to radio to opera to television. He won a Tony Award for "Ain't Misbehavin'" in 1978. He wrote the libretto for an opera, "The Great Gatsby," which opened at the Metropolitan Opera House. And there were the three Peabody Awards he won during his tenure at NPR as director of jazz, classical and entertainment programming in the '90s. And he came up with the idea for NPR's comedy news quiz powerhouse, "Wait, Wait ... Don't Tell Me!"

It would be easy to list many more of Horwitz's accomplishments — he conceived of and named the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor, for instance — but locally he is most recognizable (and, in his day-to-day life, most recognized) as the newest voice behind WAMU's "The Big Broadcast," the long-running show that brings vintage radio shows to modern ears.

He actually had to try out, he says. Compete with the youth. But he got the gig in 2016 at age 67. He announced the news to his three adult children, and, naturally, couldn't resist a punchline.

"The guy who started it [John Hickman] had it for 25 years and then died," he told them. "Then Ed Walker had it for 25 years and died. So, 2041 will be a big year for you kids."

(John Hickman actually hosted for 26 years, 1964-1990, and died in 1999. But these are minor details in the face of a good joke.)

It takes an hour, on average, to record



Horwitz does not take the stage too often. An exception is his one-man show as Yiddish author Sholem Aleichem, which he first performed in 1975.

*Photo courtesy of Murray Horwitz*

all his introductions to episodes of shows like "Yours Truly, Johnny Dollar," "Gunsmoke," "Dragnet," "The Bob and Ray

Horwitz is good at taking direction, at redoing takes to get the right one, at letting the audio engineer tell him a word

**"He tries to strike a tone of a father of an interested child. And he's excited to share with you these programs. That warmth is important."**

— Jill Ahrold Bailey, co-producer of "The Big Broadcast"

Show" and "Jubilee." Unlike most hosts these days, Horwitz likes to stand to record. Better vocal control, he says. And probably so he can gesticulate more.

sounded too rushed. He seems in his element — he not only gets to talk to thousands of listeners, but also try to out-pun his audio engineer and sing "Build Me

Up, Buttercup" while warming up — even if it usually requires at least a few takes to get each part right.

"One-take Horwitz" they call me," he deadpans. "Not!"

He approaches each episode like he's a member of the family, says Jill Ahrold Bailey, who co-produces the show with Horwitz — the knowledgeable old time radio aficionado to Horwitz's experienced comedy voice. "He tries to strike a tone of a father of an interested child," she says. "And he's excited to share with you these programs. That warmth is important."

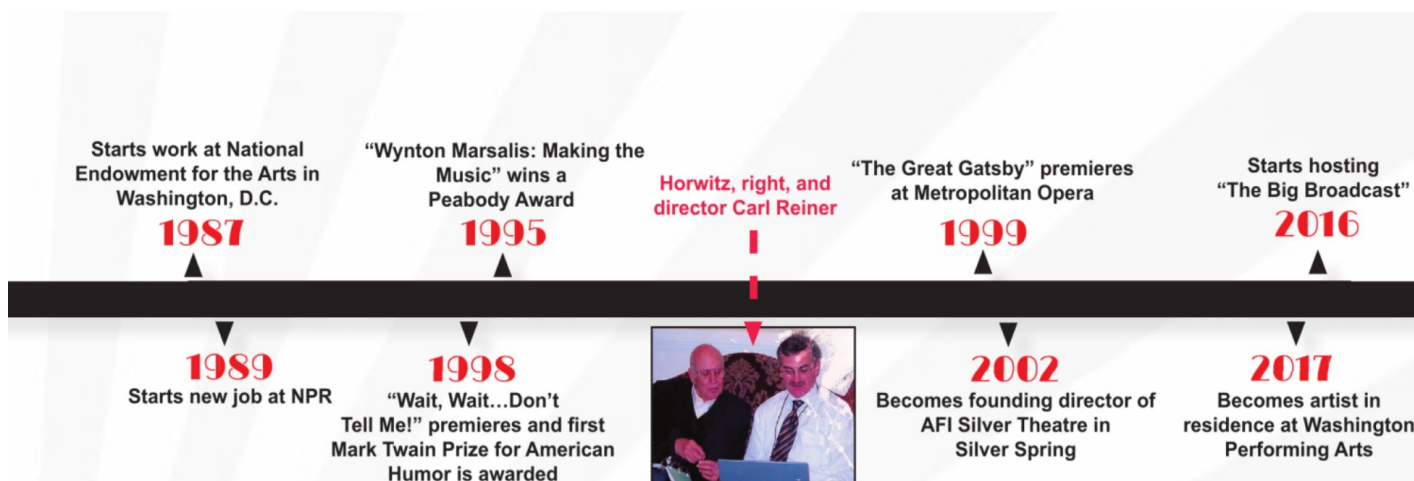
His introductions are meant to provide context or clue a listener in to topical references of the 1940s or '50s "without hitting you over the head with it," Bailey adds. "He wants you to get the joke."

"He wants you to get the joke" is a pretty good characterization of Horwitz's approach to comedy. He likens his comedy aesthetic to Woody Guthrie's approach to music. "What Woody Guthrie said about music, I think applies to comedy as well: 'I don't like songs that tear people down, I like songs that build people up.' I don't like humor that makes fun of people for who they are or because of their misfortune in life. What you really want is comedy that tells us we're all in this together."

Actually, he has a lot to say on this subject, as he does most subjects, but it especially galls him that humor, which should be a way to bring people together is, instead, sometimes used for insult or ridicule.

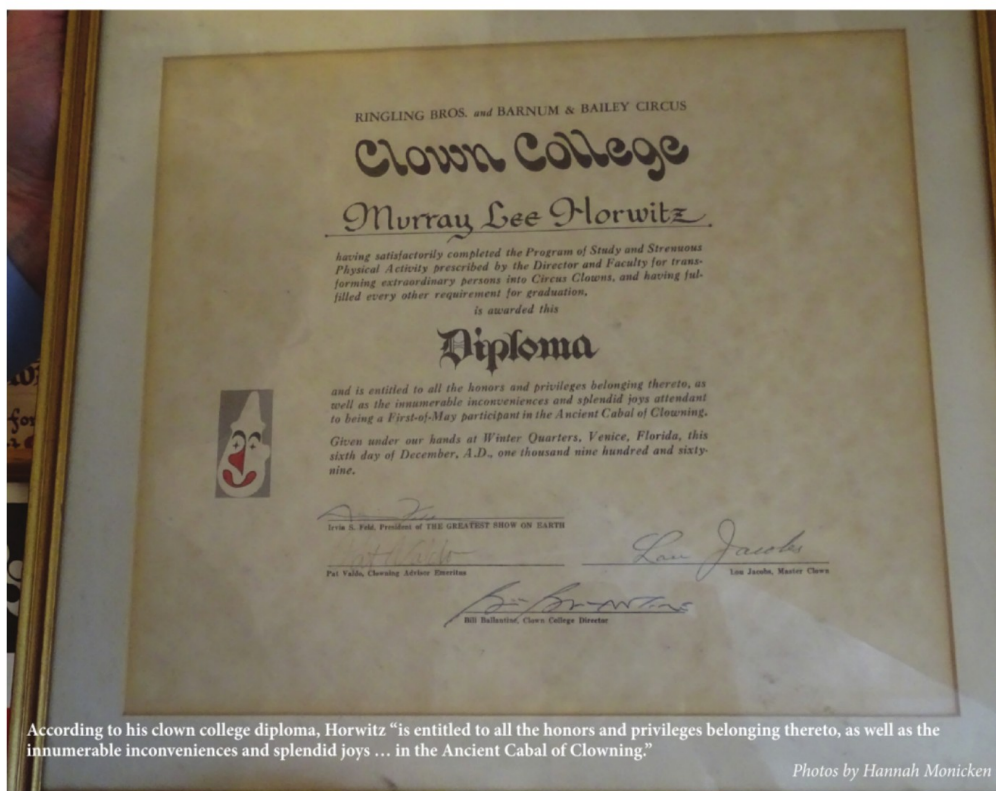
"With humor, you have to respect your audience," he says. "It's not a question

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According to his clown college diploma, Horwitz "is entitled to all the honors and privileges belonging thereto, as well as the innumerable inconveniences and splendid joys ... in the Ancient Cabal of Clowning."

Photos by Hannah Monicken

### MURRAY

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of knowing your audience so you can get over better with this audience as opposed to that audience. It's a question of respecting the audience."

This respect doesn't take away the edge of your comedy, Horwitz will tell you. Instead, it often means you have to be

He even talks about this in a sermon he gave last year during Rosh Hashanah at the High Holiday service at Sixth and I Historic Synagogue, which he has been attending for years. He ruminated on the parallels between good humor and the call for self-reflection, a connection that is clearly inherent to his creative approach.

"When I talk about finding out what's true and bringing that to the audience —

### 'An industry miracle'

If there is one through-line of Horwitz's career it's a curiosity in — and reverence for — our shared humanity, and, of course, how funny that can be.

And that's what he's aimed to do since his clown days. Yes, clown days. The Dayton, Ohio, native took five weeks out of his senior year at Kenyon College to attend the Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Clown College in Florida.

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—Murray Horwitz, former Ringling Bros. clown

funnier. You don't go for the easy laugh. "It should be sharper in its bite because the human condition is the human condition," he says. "And we're all fools and we all experience suffering and humor can bring us together."

I don't want to put too fine a point on it, but Judaism has a role in that," he says. "Helping us discern what's true."

And he impressed enough that he was offered a spot as a circus clown post-graduation.

It was there he nurtured not only his comedy, but a very specific characteristic

that defines circus people.

"People always ask me, 'What are circus people like?'" he says. "Circus people are people who in my experience lack a certain component of fear that most people have. I realized later that I, too, lacked a certain component of fear, which is the fear of feeling foolish."

After clowning around the country by train for three years, Horwitz chose New York as his new home base in 1973. Within six months, he had met his future wife, opera singer Lisa Miller. In two years, he was performing a one-man show as Sholem Aleichem, the Yiddish author whose work inspired "Fiddler on the Roof," directed by Richard Maltby Jr.

In 1977, Horwitz had the idea that eventually would earn him the most coveted prize in theater. The then-upstart Manhattan Theatre Club was performing cabaret acts and musical revues.

Now, Horwitz had been a Fats Waller fan since he was 17, listening to a record he had checked out from the library. The early jazz pianist and composer was, Horwitz says, "the musician I had been waiting for my whole life." So, naturally, when the cabaret club had a sudden opening, he and Maltby decided to bring Fats Waller back to the national consciousness (or at least the Manhattan Theatre Club consciousness).

"Murray and I first met when a miracle — an industry miracle — was happening at the Manhattan Theatre Club in winter 1977," says André De Shields, who starred in the original run of "Ain't Misbehavin'," both at the Manhattan Theatre Club and on Broadway. "And when I arrived in the room, Murray Horwitz and Richard Maltby Jr., and [musical director] Luther Henderson had an alchemy in their eyes. Like they were mixing the elixir of life."

What happened next was — and still is — mostly unheard of in theater.

Horwitz can rattle off the timeline in an impressively condensed — and properly whirlwind — fashion. "We got the gig in first week of November, went into pre-production first week of December, went into rehearsal first week of January, opened first week of February, closed the first week of March, went into rehearsal for Broadway the first week of April, opened the first week of May, got the Tony the first week of June."

So, that's how it goes, right? Not so much. Horwitz has had one other Broadway show, "Haarlem Nocturne," which he co-wrote with De Shields, who remains a close friend. That one didn't



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have quite the same success. It closed after six weeks.

### The Washington years

Alas, a Tony Award does not pay the bills and Horwitz had a number of showbiz jobs — including directing soap operas for a time — before he and his wife decided living in Manhattan while trying to raise a family wasn't going to cut it. And so, in 1987, they came to Washington.

His career since then is no less creative or artsy, although it is significantly more bureaucratic. He worked for the National Endowment for the Arts, NPR, AFI Silver Theatre, Washington National Opera and Washington Performing Arts. At 68, Horwitz calls himself semi-retired, but one man's semi-retired is another man's "this seems like full-time work."

He has two part-time jobs now as host of "The Big Broadcast" and artist-in-residence at Washington Performing Arts. In fact, through WPA, he and pianist Aaron Deihl have presented a series of concerts so far this year, the last of which is coming up on March 8. If you need a touchstone for work he's done with WPA, he spearheaded the 75th anniversary concert

of Marion Anderson performing at the Lincoln Memorial, which featured a notably broad spectrum of celebrities: Wolf Blitzer, MC Hammer, Dionne Warwick and Jessye Norman, among others.

Something else you should probably know about Murray Horwitz is he's ridiculously well-connected. His friend Cokie Roberts, NPR political correspondent, helped get him the job as founding director of the AFI Silver Theatre in Silver Spring. He has been given a shoutout as an early industry mentor by Lin-Manuel Miranda (of "Hamilton" fame), who

happened to be Horwitz's filmmaker son Alexander's roommate in college. (Horwitz is so delighted by this he tells me the story twice and also showed me the video of it.) He and trumpeter Wynton Marsalis have been close ever since working together on the NPR series "Making the Music."

Horwitz drops names like you might drop pennies — sometimes one, sometimes several, but always in the unconscious way that comes from being totally absorbed in what you're doing. Namely, telling a good story.

But he's generous with those names,

Horwitz sits by his piano, where he keeps his Tony Award and the songbooks for "Ain't Misbehavin'" and "The Great Gatsby."



according to his friends. Looking for a jazz musician? Need someone to interview? What about a choreographer? Murray Horwitz can hook you up. Frimark, the former publicist, says she saw Wynton Marsalis at a party once and, knowing he was also a friend of Horwitz's, went to introduce herself. Marsalis just came alive, she says, and it was like she was his long-lost sister.

"I said the magic words," she laughs. "Murray Horwitz."

So, yes, Murray Horwitz loves an audience. But most of all, Murray Horwitz

loves to make an audience laugh, especially at its own foibles.

"It's really rewarding when it works," he says, "when people really do laugh and when people do look at something a different way. You do a little bit of God's work, you know." ■

[hmonicken@midatlanticmedia.com](mailto:hmonicken@midatlanticmedia.com)