



Billy Crystal's theory of relativity

He turned down *The Producers* to make his Broadway debut this fall all by himself. But the master mimic isn't nervous—he'll have the whole family up there with him.

By Joel Stein

Billy Crystal has been ready to be an old man for a long time. He's only 57, but he was so eager to be a grandfather that even before the kid was born he wrote the children's book *I Already Know I Love You*. (Like most everything the star touches, it was a hit.) And starting this November, every night at Broadway's Broadhurst Theatre in the solo show *700 Sundays*, Crystal is going to further cement his genially aging image by sitting on a replica of his childhood front porch in Long Island and sharing his memories. By the time he turns 60, he's going to be wearing his pants up to his armpits.

But Crystal isn't going soft: He insists that he has *always* been soft. "I've always done bittersweet characters," he says. "My dad was in the jazz business and the first thing I ever did on *Saturday Night Live* was a tender recollection of those jazz musicians." In *700 Sundays*, he plays a host of characters who helped shape him into a man, after his dad (whom he only saw on Sundays because he worked two jobs) died of a heart attack when Crystal was 15. So the show is kind of like *Tuesdays With Billy*, only with jokes. "There's nothing more intoxicating than laughs," he says. "But making people feel is a little harder. It stays with them. It's not Chinese food. I did the show in May at the La Jolla Playhouse, and I'm still getting cards from people saying 'It made me call my mother' or 'It made me call my father.'"

700 Sundays could test Crystal's unique ability to keep his cool quotient while staying the comedian of choice for housewives. While the edgier Robin Williams lost all his comedy-club cred after *Patch Adams*, no amount of sappy Meg Ryan movies or silly Oscar-hosting song parodies seems to smear Crystal. And it's not like he's just coasting on his cool *Saturday Night Live* characters, his gutsy turn as the gay guy in *Soap* or the kick-ass obstacle course he ran on the *Battle of the Network Stars*. Crystal just seems to know exactly how much schmaltz he can get away with. So for the one-man show, Crystal has tried to carefully balance the emotion-tugging with the jokes. "It works very well if you can take the audience to the point of going too far and then hit them with a big joke that lets them know you're okay and you're not getting too maudlin. I like the high-wire act of this one."

Though he's wanted to do Broadway forever, Crystal has turned down the parts he's been offered, including an appeal from Mel Brooks to star in *The Producers* alongside Robin Williams. "Why come in to replace someone as great as Nathan

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Lane when I could do this?” he says of *Sundays*. “All along I thought I was saving myself for something.” While it would be much easier to do standup, produce films, analyze something else or just day trade (the guy is so successful he’s got a bar named after him at the Friars Club—and he doesn’t even drink), Crystal says he’s far more excited about the challenge of pulling off a two-act play—all alone. “I’m worried about it,” he admits. “Plus, it’s going to be a lonely cast party.”

Having never done scripted theater, or even a solo standup show in 17 years, Crystal is intimidated. Grandpa Crystal is doing seven shows a week instead of the usual eight, which Bea Arthur and Elaine Stritch managed, but he’s still concerned about the workload. “Doing seven shows a week is daunting. I know me, I get bored sometimes. I hope that the mental discipline of doing this every night is something I’m up to,” he says. “But it’s so new and so damn exciting. The last time I felt this excited was over Sophia Loren sometime around 1964.”

The play has evolved drastically since director Des McAnuff (*The Who’s Tommy*, *Dracula*) started working on it last year. At first the structure had comedian David Steinberg interviewing Crystal, James Lipton style, about his career, with Crystal acting some of the memories. Eventually Crystal must have realized that only desperate acting students would sit through that, so he showed McAnuff the four pages of childhood recollections he’d been working on. McAnuff was much happier with the concept of a one-man show (Steinberg, not so much).

Crystal began stringing together the anecdotes in the mid-’90s. At the time, he had felt the urge to work in front of an audience again, which he’d been doing on and off since he did stand-up as the opening act for Barry Manilow and Sha Na Na. But after a series of difficult personal circumstances, he tabled the idea. “My mother died, my godmother who I was very close to died, my best friend died a month after that, plus 9/11,” he says. “How could you feel funny at all? Then I got itchy to talk about it. To say, ‘I’m going to be okay.’ I said to Des, if I

could get through all those things, it would be such a great lesson for people suffering and feeling lost [for me] to say I got screwed early because of the death of my dad. Now I’m alone, but I’m okay because my parents were great people.”

Unlike the vast majority of folks who do one-person shows about their relatives, Crystal really does have an interesting family. His eccentric uncle is the subject of *My Uncle Berns*, an HBO documentary directed by Crystal’s daughter Lindsey, his uncle Milt started Commodore Records and his dad, Jack Crystal, owned a record store and produced jazz concerts. Billie Holiday took Crystal to see his first movie, *Shane*. The *Playbill* cover of *700 Sundays* in La Jolla showed Crystal at his bar mitzvah listening to New Orleans jazz trumpeter Henry “Red” Allen sing. Louis Armstrong joined the family for a Passover seder. Those events alone have got to get him to the second act.

In working on the play, Crystal spent a lot of time with McAnuff talking about his dad. “They became very therapeutic sessions for me,” Crystal says. “The play is a really interesting concept of how you develop in life without a dad.” To make his childhood memories even more vivid, McAnuff uses the windows of the house to project photos and film from Crystal’s childhood. Luckily, when Crystal’s father was around, he liked to photograph and film everything. “I joke in the show that my father knew that these home movies were being shot so I could make a buck,” says Crystal.

While it might seem psychologically risky to sit in front of an exact replica of your old home pretending to be the father whom you felt ignored by, Crystal insists that the project has been a health boon to him. “It’s very moving to me every night,” he says. “The house becomes another character. It ages with me.” In other words, by the end of the second act, the house just may be wearing its pants up to its armpits.

700 Sundays starts November 12 at the Broadhurst Theatre (235 West 44th Street, New York City; 212-239-6200).

// Photograph by NIGEL PARRY/CPI