



Caroline Rhea on the Art of Stand-up Comedy Transcript

[Music: "A Little Wiggle"]

Maddie Orton, host:

I'm Maddie Orton and you're listening to the *Jersey Arts Podcast*. This upcoming episode feels like my own personal holiday and birthday gift rolled into one. For years, my Friday nights were devoted to watching comedian Caroline Rhea on the TV show *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. She played Sabrina's guardian and aunt who also happens to be a witch, the hilarious Hilda Spellman.

You may also know her from *The Caroline Rhea Show*, as a voice on Disney Channel's *Phineas and Ferb*, her recurring spots on *Hollywood Squares* and *The Match Game*, *A Very Sordid Wedding*, *A Mrs. Miracle Christmas*, or one of her many stand-up specials. Caroline kicked off her first comedy tour in several years this past June and will be at New Brunswick Performing Arts Center this new year's eve.

We talk about the art of stand-up comedy, tour life, *Sabrina* and parenthood. Also, I wasn't kidding – it really is my birthday this week, which I only mention because my being a Capricorn comes up in the episode. So, happy birthday to me and Happy New Year to all of you. Enjoy Caroline Rhea.

[Music: "A Little Wiggle"]

Maddie Orton:

First of all, let me just say it is such an honor to be chatting with you because I loved, and still love, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* so much, and you were just so amazing on that show.

Caroline Rhea:

Thank you. It was a joy to do. It still is. And it was... Yeah, it was a huge part of my life and always will be. There's not a day that goes by that someone doesn't call me Aunt Hilda, and I literally answer to it so readily that it's just like—and I have such an affinity for kids your age because I, you know, when you were little and you come up to me and you'd be like, 'Did you ever see the episode where...' And then have you explain the whole episode to me. I go, 'Yeah, I saw that one.' 'Did you ever think...' I'm like, 'Yeah, I did. I did. Uh-huh. I did.'

And then inevitably used to ask me, around seven or eight, 'Is the cat real?' Yeah. Or, 'How do you do the magic? Is it real?' You know what? It's really a cliché, but it was a very magical show because it's of a generation and it showed women really supporting each other.

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Maddie Orton:

Oh, yeah.

Caroline Rhea:

And it was women in charge. And women are powerful and women are magical. And the only man was a cat, you know? I mean.

Maddie Orton:

Right, right.

Caroline Rhea:

I remember we got this award once from England, and they were like, We love your show and the gay aunts. And we're like, 'Sorry? What? The aunts are gay now? Okay!'

Maddie Orton:

Oh, my gosh, that's so funny. I mean, you know. Well, but you dated Willard. I mean, there's a whole background there.

Caroline Rhea:

We both dated Willard. I married. Whatever. It made—it was very nice to be a part of something that made people happy. And in, like, the broad strokes of life, like you, the older you get, the more you go. Like, 'Well, what is my purpose?' You know? Like, 'What am I here for? What am I supposed to do?'

And I personally am so happy to be doing stand-up again because mine is to, like, shift people's energy into a happy place for as long as that show lasts. It's really like—my shows are fun. Like, it's—and it's a perfect night for this new year's because nobody wants the pressure that they have to be with someone and they don't have a date and they're not—someone to kiss at midnight. Like, it's the celebration of another year of life and starting something new. And it shouldn't be about dating. It should be about fun!

Maddie Orton:

Oh, totally. How did you initially fall in love with performing? Was stand-up you're in? I mean, what gave you the bug?

Caroline Rhea:

You know, I was talking to a friend of mine who has been doing stand-up for a while, and she was like, I just told him, I go, you don't have the sickness that it is the that the unbelievable need to do it. And that's what stand-up is. You need to and you need to—I don't know. For me, it's how I connect to another human. It's like sharing our commonality, you know.

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Like I thought I was going to be so successful because I was so unique. And now the only reason I was in any way successful is because I'm exactly like everybody else. I like to talk about it. And I also wanted to talk about things that women weren't particularly talking about. And I wanted to be a voice for women.

And now I continue to do it because when my mom was my age, she didn't have a voice. She didn't get to influence or affect or—except for her immediate family and her friends. So I don't know. I wouldn't give that up.

Maddie Orton:

I mean, I will say it's nice to hear, you know, as a mom, it's nice to hear comedic voices in that space. I think when I was pregnant and, you know, early into motherhood, I was like, 'Wow, this is the most, uh, feminine thing I've ever done. And I feel like everybody's looking at me like I'm one of those Precious Moments dolls, and I need everybody to chill out for a moment.'

So I think it's really nice to hear people talk about it in a way that's like, you know, funny and real and not whatever that is—which is nice for people who feel that way.

Caroline Rhea:

I mean, I'll tell you, it was my experience, like, I would say, as much as it was the happiest, it is the loneliest time of your life at the beginning when they're little because you're so disconnected from your former life, and your former identity, and there's no mourning process of 'I am no longer that person. I am this person.' And you fully embrace it, but it's very hard.

There's so much crying that happens! In those—I mean, I used to just weep when my daughter was like in her twos. I remember just being like, like, the pain of, you know, like the exhaustion of, like—and I was like, on the floor playing. But like, I think that—I think it's better to be a comic who is telling the truth and saying it's okay. Even the yucky parts—not the yucky parts, but like the harder parts, you know?

I'm not one of these mothers that drinks wine and thinks it's hilarious. You know, like, I actually fully love my daughter. There's some people that are like, 'I love getting rid of my kids!' Like, I don't. I love, I love hanging out with my daughter. Yeah. But she has given me so much material.

[Music: "A Little Wiggle"]

Caroline Rhea:

And now I first started as a stand-up in when I was 24. But prior to that, I've done a lot of acting and regional theater, and then I moved to New York to become a stand-up. And then I did that for a long time. I had a lot of like early television success, and then I did many pilots and had many development

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deals, and I had done a pilot that didn't go. And it's funny because the other guy that was in the pilot that didn't go was Eric McCormack.

Maddie Orton:

And then neither of you did anything ever again!

Caroline Rhea:

Yeah, I said—I saw him the other day, and I said, 'Whatever happened to you after that pilot?'

So I do believe that people get the part that's meant to be their part. I really do feel like—like when I got Aunt Hilda, when I read that script, I was like, 'No no no! I want to be in *Zelda*! I want to be the crazy scientist!'

Maddie Orton:

Oh, funny.

Caroline Rhea:

They were like, 'No. You're Aunt Hilda. That's who you are.'

Maddie Orton:

So when you started performing, you said you were doing regional theater. Was there the first show for you where you were like, 'Oh, this is the thing'?

Caroline Rhea:

Well, any time I was in front of an audience, and any time—I had very funny parents and very funny sisters. So that was our love language was to make each other laugh, you know? And I went to all-girls school, so I basically had a class of captive customers my entire school. Like, I was, you know, like constantly testing material.

Maddie Orton:

Sure.

Caroline Rhea:

And then I just got the bug that first time I was on stage, and I was like, 'Oh, this is it.' But I also feel that way when I'm in a play or in a movie. It's just that—like to me, I loved *Sabrina*, but there's nothing more fun than live performance.

Maddie Orton:

Sure.

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Caroline Rhea:

It's only going to happen that one night with those people. You're going to have a shared, unique experience, and you're going to be connected through it, and nobody else got to experience it. So even when you do a special, and like you kill and you're like, 'This is the best I've ever been,' it never translates to as good as it was on camera.

Maddie Orton:

Interesting. So your parents, you said, were very funny. I mean, they were also doctors, right?

Caroline Rhea:

My dad was a doctor, my mom was an antique dealer. Yeah. And my dad wanted to be a doctor. I mean, a comedian so badly and an actor. That's all he wanted. But his mother said, 'No, you're gonna be a doctor.'

Maddie Orton:

And so what did they think about you pursuing a career in performance?

Caroline Rhea:

Well, my oldest sister, like won 'best corporate lawyer in Canada' or something like that last year, like, she's a genius. And my other sister is a genius, and she graduated from college at like 20. So they were so happy if I did anything that they were like—like there was very—I had youngest child no pressure.

Maddie Orton:

Oh, that's sounds great.

Caroline Rhea:

And they were very—my mum was the perfect kind of mother that she was like the source of love and energy that you go out in the world and do whatever you tried and then come home, you know. And it's hard because my daughter's a teenager, so now it's like, I want to be that for her, like, 'Yeah, go and have the best time and have so much fun.' And inside I'm like, 'Do you want to stay with Mummy and play? Mummy's so fun!' No.

Maddie Orton:

Well, it's such a you know, it's such a hard career, too. And I, you know, I think about—I mean, my kid's only three, but I think about, you know, if he wanted a career in certain things that I think are tough, you know, you want to encourage them to be happy and live their best life. But also you're like, 'Just make sure you can pay your bills and, ideally, have health insurance in a perfect world,' you know, it's—

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Caroline Rhea:

You are such a Capricorn! Oh, my God. If you just said that, I would have said, 'Capricorn!'

No, you know what? There's practicality, but at some point, you know, you have a calling, you have a purpose in your life, right? And you have to stay true to it and figure out what it is. And hopefully it's one that benefits everybody. You know? Like whatever your job is that you're hopefully making the world better, right?

So I don't think we should look at what our kids think of as 'it's going to be hard.' We have to look at like, this is—'Are you trying your hardest? Are you getting better at something? Are you persevering?' That's what it is. That's all I want for my daughter—that she feels like she's doing something that she values.

Maddie Orton:

So when you started doing stand-up, I mean, that to me is like the scariest thing in the whole world.

Caroline Rhea:

You know, what the scariest thing in the whole world is? I would rather go up in front of 100,000 strangers than have someone watch me try and download an app on my phone.

I literally was having a party last week, and after 20 times of putting in my password to Paperless Post, and then it said 'Your passwords don't match.' On the 20th time I said, 'I'm not having a party. That's it. I'm not.' And I'm not going to! And, I'm not.

Because anything technological is so much harder. Stand-up is not hard. Stand-up is—if it's, if it's not your thing, then yeah, it would be hard. But everybody's job is hard.

Maddie Orton:

Yeah, that's true.

Caroline Rhea:

Stand-up's not hard, traveling and leaving your family is hard.

Mike MacDonald was a great comedian, and he used to say, 'That's what they pay us to do. They don't pay us to do stand-up. They pay us to, you know.'

Maddie Orton:

And to that end, you, you know, you took a break from touring for a while you were raising your daughter. And so you're going back to touring. Is that part of why you took the break to be able to do the parenting thing without doing the tour thing?

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Caroline Rhea:

Oh, yeah. It took me a very long time to have a baby. I gave birth to Ava at 44, so I was not going to then have a baby at 44 and be like, 'See ya! I'll be at Chuckle Bananas in Omaha!' Like, no.

And you know what? I really thought at that point I was done. I kept thinking, 'I'm done. I've done, I've done a lot of whatever. I'm good. I've had a great career and this is all icing.'

Maddie Orton:

Wow.

Caroline Rhea:

And I really stayed home for—I mean, the first five years, I really, really wasn't touring.

Maddie Orton:

Yeah.

Caroline Rhea:

Then, you know, I did *Phineas and Ferb* for like 10 years.

Maddie Orton:

Yeah.

Caroline Rhea:

So that was like a gift from God that I can say—

And then—I would always do stand-up here and there, you know, like, and I would do it in New York every weekend. So I always did stand-up, but then I was like— I went and I did a show in June, and Jimmy Fallon was there, and he asked me to do his show like the next week.

Maddie Orton:

Which I saw and was great. Great, great, great.

Caroline Rhea:

Thank you. Thank you.

And I was like, 'Oh!' And he kept going, 'Do you want to do it next week?' And I'm like, 'No! I need to go, I need to go get, you know, rust off and practice!' So I can't tell you how many sets I've done since June, like—but now—it's like a muscle. Now I'm like back in shape. That's when I'm like, 'New Years! Yeah!'

I'm so happy after COVID. I'm so appreciative that there are audiences that we have, like, a human connection.

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Maddie Orton:
Yeah. Oh, for sure.

Caroline Rhea:
Plus, I have a ton of new material! And it's so fun!

Maddie Orton:
Well, so that's what I'm thinking is, like—I appreciate, first of all, that there is just an art form entirely unto itself there. That I'm sure the crafting of that arc is its own thing, which I would love to hear about. But also parenthood has to just be like a font of ridiculous comedic bits, I assume?

Caroline Rhea:
Ridiculous! I mean, my daughter is so funny. Really often I just repeat what she says.

Like one time she was doing her homework, this is a couple of years ago, and she—it was during COVID because she was on Zoom, and she goes, 'Mummy!' I go, 'Yeah.' She goes, 'If you're walking down the street and you get hit by an ambulance, do they call another ambulance or do they just throw you in the back?'

And I go, 'I think they would just throw you in the back. But what subject is this?' Like, 'Where is that?' And she was like, 'No, I was just curious.'

Maddie Orton:
Wow, that's great.

[Music: "A Little Wiggle"]

Maddie Orton:
When you're creating that, like the structure of a—what is it, like a 60 minute set, or something like that?

Caroline Rhea:
Hold please.

Maddie Orton:
Okay. Holding.

Caroline Rhea:
See?

Maddie Orton:
Wow, that is incredible! So you have a, an enormous white board easel in your kitchen—not normally in

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your kitchen, brought into your kitchen—that has columns and rows of Post-it notes that are, I guess, bits, right? Stories and bits?

Caroline Rhea:

Yeah. And you're structuring them because sometimes I tell—that's the joy of having done it for a long time, is you can really just tell a long story.

Maddie Orton:

Okay.

Caroline Rhea:

Because stand-up is about trust, right? So when you've done it for a long time, the audience trusts you, and they've shown up for you, because they trust that you're going to be funny, and you're going to entertain them.

That's my unspoken part of the contract. I will connect with you, you will connect with me, and we will—I will make you laugh, and we will do this together. I'm very inclusive. Some stand-ups get out there and they say the same 45 minutes. Like it was so hard for me to do *The Tonight Show* because to not make it like connecting with the audience.

I'm Aquarius Rising. I want to like, see—I'm so intuitive I can pick up on most people what's going on with them. It's like sometimes I am a witch. It's just exhausting. I'm like—I look at them and I'm like, 'Oh my God, they're about to get divorced. Why do they even look over there?' Like, I know what's happening,

Maddie Orton:

Oh my gosh.

Caroline Rhea:

Yeah. No, I know.

Maddie Orton:

So, when you are crafting, is it like, 'This bit next to this bit sort of feels right. Or you can tell you're workshopping this, it's like, 'Woof. Got to move those.'

Caroline Rhea:

Well, that's the fun thing. I mean, I've done so much stand-up in the fall. I mean, I didn't even list half the places I went. You tell a story and all your jokes eventually become beginning, middle and end. And then where do you want to go? Like, what story are you telling? And then you break it up.

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Maddie Orton:

That's so interesting. So, I mean, when you're touring, do you—are you tweaking as you go along, and like, how is that how you keep it fresh for yourself?

Caroline Rhea:

Yeah, I write on stage. I think a lot of people do that. I think the only way you can tell if a joke is funny is in front of someone. It's so it's constantly evolving. You know, this is my 33rd year doing this, and I'm only now thinking like—like I look and I go, 'Oh my God, how did I miss that?'

Maddie Orton:

Huh!

Caroline Rhea:

Like, 'Why am I doing that?' Like, there's so much you can tweak. And I mean, the great thing is nobody's going to know in the audience that's watching, but I know.

Maddie Orton:

Yeah.

[Music: "A Little Wiggle"]

Maddie Orton:

So the people who come to see your show on new year's eve, what should they expect from your stand-up this time around, this version of the tour?

Caroline Rhea:

Well, I always say my style is like it's at a dinner party, right? We're at a dinner party, and I know what I'm serving, I don't know who my guests are, and I don't know what we're going to talk about, but I know that I've got four hours' worth of recipes that we can make.

Maddie Orton:

That's great.

Caroline Rhea:

What's going to happen that night? It'll be fun.

[Music: "A Little Wiggle"]

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Maddie Orton:

There are two performances of *New Year's Eve with Caroline Rhea* on December 31st at 7 p.m. and 9:30 p.m. at the New Brunswick Performing Arts Center. For more information, visit NBPAC.org.

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This episode was hosted, produced and edited by yours truly, Maddie Orton. Executive producers are Jim Atkinson and Cie Stroud. Special thanks to Caroline Rhea.

I'm Maddie Orton for the *Jersey Arts Podcast*. Thanks for listening.



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