



Michèle LaFong





Smokin': Señor Wences and Johnny in their heyday

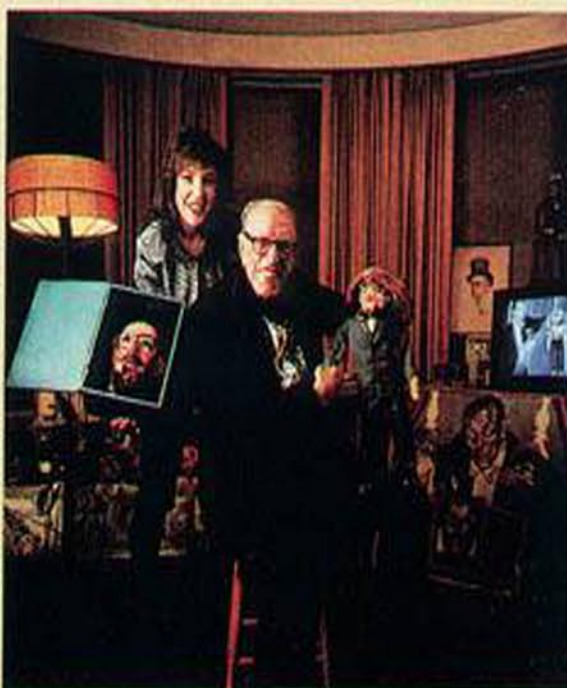
Hand Off

JOHNNY, THE CHARACTER brought to life by Señor Wences's hand, was having a hard time getting work a few years back. The Señor, who'll be 102 next month, went into retirement long ago and took his hand with him. Tough luck for Johnny: no hand, no head. No head, no act. But at Wences's 100th birthday party, Johnny got a new lease on life. Michele LaFong, a ventriloquist who grew up in Queens, N.Y., watching the Spanish maestro on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, was asked to perform. Her own act—which features Paco, a gold-chained and hairy-chested puppet based on an ex-boyfriend ("It was a revenge thing, but the guy liked it!")—so charmed Wences that he befriended LaFong and taught her how to do Johnny and his pal in the box, Pedro. "S.O.K.?" It was more than O.K. "It was an honor," she says. "He showed me the secrets, like how to make Johnny smoke. But now Johnny chews gum and blows bubbles." Señor Wences is pleased to see his characters introduced to a new generation by a woman who can mimic even Pedro's growly voice. But there is a difference. "I don't speak Spanish," says LaFong. "The puppet does. I don't understand him."

—ALLISON ADATO



Yesterday: Wences and Johnny during one of their 48 visits with Ed Sullivan



Today: Pedro (in box), LaFong, Wences and Johnny

DAILY NEWS

NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

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DAILY NEWS Television

JANUARY 7, 1998

Wences' puppets: Gotta hand it to 'em

By SCOTT WILLIAMS

Daily News Staff Writer

JOHNNY and Pedro, the puppets Señor Wences immortalized for TV audiences a generation ago, are ageless. Yes?

"Yes," piped Johnny, looking for all the world like a bewigged hand with a lipsticked mouth and two button eyes. "I theenk so."

"That's very good, isn't it?" "Very good," growled Pedro, the disembodied one, from his box. "Close ze door."

Michele LaFong, their ventriloquist, looks bemused. Once again, the puppets she inherited a year ago from the beloved Wences have relegated her to a supporting role.

"Their characters are so strong, you know exactly what Johnny would say in a given situation. Ask Johnny. 'You like Santa Claus?' Johnny says, 'I like.' Pedro says, 'No, I don't like! Close ze door.'" she said, laughing.

"They've stayed the same. I've just '90s'd them up a bit," she said. "Where Wences had Johnny smoking a cigaret,

I have him blowing bubblegum. The principle is the same, the joke is the same, but nobody's going to lynch me for making Johnny smoke."

Wences, still hale and hearty at 101 (he'll be 102 in April), gave the puppets to LaFong after seeing her act. "He saw right away that it was his inspiration, his style, his timing I used in my act," she said.

"It's like 'The Honeymooners,' a classic where you can watch the same thing over and over and you laugh every time. That's the beauty, and that's what I learned from Wences," she said.

It's Johnny who's enjoying a comeback now in the Mercedes commercials that evoke the old "Ed Sullivan Show." Of course, LaFong is along for the ride.

"I'm getting a lot more commercial offers because of Johnny, and I'm getting a lot more TV exposure, too," she said. She's also featured, with Wences and the boys, in the March issue of Life magazine.

"Young people who don't remember them think they're the funniest, most



SEÑOR CIRCUIT: LaFong and friends

original thing they've ever seen," LaFong said. "And the people who do remember them are just so happy to see them, nobody notices that I updated anything."

Michele LaFong

Comic/Impressionist/Ventriloquist



Who Said That?

Ventriloquist Michele LaFong Starts The Laughs

Michele LaFong is breaking out the laughter as she opens for Jackie Mason in the Hollywood Theater at the MGM Grand.

Mason and LaFong met several years ago, when both were cast on a national Mercedes-Benz commercial. He had the opportunity to see her perform the same night and immediately saw her potential. Mason, who happens to be LaFong's comedy idol, explained that being "different" is a blessing and an obstacle at the same time; The very thing that separates you from "the pack" is the very thing the comedy industry fights against.

LaFong's comedy act offers a full repertoire of stand-up comedy, original characters and offbeat ventriloquism, including some of the original puppets given to her by legendary Señor Wences. Wences, famed from his days as a regular on "The Ed Sullivan Show" with "Johnny" his lip-stick-painted hand puppet, presented LaFong with many of his puppets from his vintage collection.

LaFong has mastered his character-in-a-box vocal technique along with other tricks of the trade (multiple voice and rapid exchanges) that require technical skills that both baffle and delight audiences. Wences was pleased to see his characters introduced to a new generation by a woman.



Comedian Jackie Mason and Michele LaFong share a longtime friendship.

Jackie Mason with Michele LaFong

Where ▶ MGM Grand

When ▶ April 9

Info ▶ 891-7777

The Washington Post



Michele LaFong with Paco: They're both rising stars—for now.

PHOTO BY JIM CALLAWAY FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

The Hot Act

Michele LaFong is the real thing. She's got big-league stuff. She is going to be a star.

What's more, she knows it.

"I'd rather not be watched by other people," she says in the hotel lobby. "Lotta thieves," she whispers. Comedy thieves, she means.

That's why LaFong doesn't have her puppet attached to her, even though "Entertainment Tonight" is about to come through with video cameras.

The moment she slips her foam-rubber-and-terry-cloth puppet on her right arm—it's a flashy Latin dude named Paco—you know she's got cause to be cagey. "He's the reason we're going straight to Hollywood," LaFong says. "It's a good thing you know it," Paco says, with a macho tilt of the head. "I knew it all the time. Si." The thing is alive. "You know," Paco whispers, leaning toward a stranger, "she's using me."

Her vocal technique is first-rate, her bogus Spanish accent is a trip, and her puppeteering skills are extraordinary. In one quick move, Paco grabs his crotch and twists his mouth in proud defiance. He thrusts his fist high and declares himself "The king!" And while LaFong looks at you with her almond-shaped eyes and carries on a normal conversation, Paco casually strokes her cheeks with the back of his hand.

They've got some sex going on, these two. "Yes we do," LaFong says. Paco begins to kiss her neck. Then nibble her chin. LaFong scrunches her shoulders, giggling. "Stop," she tells him. "Stop some more. Right there, right there. Oh yes..." Paco keeps nuzzling, kissing. LaFong keeps writhing. Right here in the lobby!

"Boy, are my parents proud of me right now," LaFong says with a cackling laugh.

"The king!" Paco says, punching a fist into the air. "She's lusting after me. Siii."

This nice Jewish girl from Queens has been on a path to glory ever since she and a wooden dummy named Russell did Abbott and Costello routines as

a kid. LaFong was a good vent then, she says, but "I resented the puppet after a while, because I felt like it was upstaging me." So she gave it up.

Only after developing her own persona as a stand-up comic and an impressionist did LaFong return to ventriloquism eight years ago—with Paco. Paco's based on an old boyfriend. "He's such an idiot," she laughs. "He doesn't realize I'm making fun of him. He carries a picture of [Paco] in his wallet like it's a son. You know?"

"I'm going to be BIG!" Paco says. "BIG!" He turns to his woman. "Maybe I'll stay with you. Maybe not."

Paco has already been offered TV commercial work, LaFong says. By himself. "They want him without me," she says. "And it ain't gonna happen. I'm not standing back giving him the open door, because he'll leave me."

She's laughing. But she's not kidding.

Fame is a jealous mistress.

By David Mills
Washington Post Staff Writer

DAILY NEWS



NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

http://www.mostnewyork.com

Everyone's a comedian

Expo gives standups a moment in the spotlight

BY ROBERT DOMINGUEZ
DAILY NEWS FEATURES WRITER

Michele LaFong is no dummy. A Queens-born comic who specializes in ventriloquist routines, LaFong — and her assortment of dummies and hand puppets — has been doing the club circuit since the 1980s, has appeared on TV and has headlined at colleges across the U.S.

She's smart enough to know that just a seven-minute routine at this year's New York Comedy Expo in Manhattan could be what raises her career to the next level.

"I'm trying to get a sitcom out of this whole thing," says LaFong, who will be one of 10 comics competing at the second annual Expo on Sunday at 9 p.m.

"The exposure is tremendous," she adds.

Held at the Broadway Comedy

Club on W. 53rd St., the Expo, running tomorrow through Tuesday, gives the performers an opportunity to be seen by comedy clubgoers — and by industry execs looking for the next Jerry Seinfeld.

The 10 standups, several with New York roots, will be judged by a panel (including actor Danny Aiello and WOR deejay Joey Reynolds) on originality and audience response.

Three winners will go on to compete at the Las Vegas Comedy Festival. But the Expo also features three days of workshops, seminars and two open-mike nights for anyone hoping to break into the business (see www.newyorkcomedyexpo.com for info).

"It doesn't matter whether they've been doing this for 15 years or just starting out," says Expo founder Marty Fischer. "We want to showcase the talent that's out there

by bringing them to the attention of the industry."

The acts promise to be diverse. Howard Feller, 44, best known as the announcer on "The Jon Stewart Show" in the mid-'90s, says he's hoping to wow the audience with his off-the-wall humor.

"I used to be a dyslexic, agnostic insomniac," says Feller, of Manhattan. "But it was terrible. I'd be up all night wondering if there was a Dog."

LaFong, meanwhile, will share the stage with her puppet Paco, a sleazy, bongo-playing Latino Lothario that she based on a real-life dummy — an old boyfriend.

"Paco's even got a hairy chest and gold chains," says LaFong. "The act was supposed to be my revenge, but my ex actually liked it. He didn't realize I was making a jerk out of him."



Ventriloquist Michele LaFong (with Paco) is hoping the annual event will help her land a sitcom.

Photo: April 27, 2007

LAS VEGAS SUN

NOW APPEARING

LaFong show offers 'a tour de force' at Bourbon Street

By Joe Delaney
LAS VEGAS SUN

Michele LaFong's "I Love LaFong" is a 70-minute one-woman comedic melange, combining impressions, stand-up comedy and ventriloquism, in the box-like mini-theatre at Bourbon Street. Ventriloquism with a series of dummy sidekicks is her long suit, correctly placed as the 30-minute show closer.

Comedian Jackie Mason is a big booster, and LaFong wisely preceded the show with Mason on film, who gave her a long, funny, affectionate introduction. LaFong opened with her impression of Mason, followed by a

takeoff of Georgette, the dumb blonde character (played by Georgia Engel) on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," and Julie Kavner as Brenda on "Rhoda."

LaFong shifted into high gear with a raucous Joan Rivers and a flamboyant Bette Midler impressions, which included a clever dialogue using the names of various cocktails and brand-name liquors. Next she switched to Andrea "Dice" Clay, a female version of the professional foulmouth, and closed this portion with Dr. Ruth, the sex therapist, using a woman from the audience.

A succession of wigs and costume additions made the impres-

sions section even more effective. It was time for the stand-up comedy segment, which started with a take-off on Ethel Merman, included a bit of family talk which could use some development and more time, plus a discussion of the various talk-show hosts.

Russell was her first puppet, and his story proved the validity of Mason's suggestion that she incorporate more of this into her performance. The great Senor Wences was a mentor. After his death at age 103, he left LaFong the body of Johnny, his famous dummy whose head was Wences's fist with a dab of lipstick and a tiny wig. This was a

nostalgic high spot.

Russell was brought back to do the famous Abbott & Costello "Who's On First" baseball routine, which was the night's top laugh getter. Paco is her main dummy, modeled after an ex-boyfriend, and the act became a series of musical bits that showed off LaFong's extraordinary ventriloquism talents, leading to a closer where she did four voices — a tour de force.

As an encore, a man was chosen from the audience and outfitted to be LaFong's human "dummy," enabling her to get offstage a big winner. Can ventriloquism become the next big Las Vegas draw? Could be.



Michele LaFong, with Paco, combines impressions, stand-up comedy and ventriloquism in her show at Bourbon Street.

Michele LaFong
Comic/Impressionist/Ventriloquist

She's No Dummy Ventriloquist Impresses

Michele LaFong is an alpha-female performer. Her show at the Bourbon Street hotel-casino is a 70-minute, high-energy tour de force combining stand-up comedy, impressions and ventriloquism.

The show begins with a warm and funny introduction by comedian Jackie Mason, who's a big booster.

From there, LaFong begins a string of impressions that are dead-on replications. There's an impression of Mason, carbons of Joan Rivers, Bette Midler, "Andrea" (a female version of Andrew Dice Clay), and a raucous Dr. Ruth. A satirical take-off on Ethel Mermen is an effective transition into the stand-up comedy portion.

LaFong demonstrates her skill as a stand-up comedian, starting with familiar, but effective, subjects such as growing up and family fare. That's followed by an amusing discussion of various talk show hosts.

The ventriloquism portion of the evening begins with a tribute to her second mentor, the late Señor Wences who was still performing at the age of 100.

LaFong uses one of Wences' actual puppet figures, "Johnny" (pronounced "Yonny") to create some of Wences' classic routines.



Michele LaFong puts words in others' mouths.

"Russell" is the first of her own dummies. Together, they recreate another classic routine, Abbott & Costello's "Who's On First" baseball bit, as funny as the original. "Paco" is another of her dummies that she based on a former boyfriend.

LaFong also displays her ability to blend ventriloquism and music. Ventriloquism clearly is LaFong's strong suit; she ranks with the very best.

Previously, LaFong performed at the O'Shea's casino next to the Flamingo with two other female comedians. She is much better presented at Bourbon Street. It's to her credit that LaFong can stand on her own (with the help of her "friends") at the Bourbon Street show.

Over at the Rio, ventriloquist Ronn Lucas recently concluded a successful month-long run. Is ventro-comedy the next big thing? Could be.

— Joe Delaney

I Love LaFong Show

Where ▶ Bourbon Street

When ▶ Nightly

Michele LaFong

Comic/Impressionist/Ventriloquist

'Funniest Females' justify billing during O'Shea's performance

Seven-figure show budgets have become commonplace along the Strip, swelling ticket prices without always delivering the rewards consumers should expect for their hefty payouts.

So where does that leave a rare \$19.95 show in today's high-priced Las Vegas market?

Sitting pretty, actually, provided it's a quality product that avoids the pretense of trying to simulate surrounding spectacles.

In fact, there's little more frightening than enduring a low-budget horror show striving to tart itself up with sleazy costumes, cardboard-cutout sets and a handful of dancers plodding about to yet another faux-hip Enigma ditty. Add glitter, feather boas and strobe lights for lethal impact.

"Funniest Females," a fine show starring engaging ventriloquist Michele LaFong, and Las Vegas locals Joni Grassey and Shae Denim, avoids the traditional pitfalls with a no-frills approach that's all about laughs instead of flash. But first you've got to find their performance home, which is hidden away despite a prime location across from Caesars Palace and The Mirage.

Toward the back of O'Shea's, a Leprechaun-themed casino at 3555 Las Vegas Blvd. South that hardly evokes images of the Emerald Isle — all right, maybe the suburbs of Belfast — there's an aging stairwell that leads to Valentine Vox's Magic and Movie Hall of Fame.



MICHAEL PASKEVICH
ENTERTAINMENT

Vox is the kindly curator of a fascinating collection of old arcade games and displays honoring the likes of such magicians as Lance Burton and David Copperfield, and great ventriloquists such as Edgar Bergen and Señor Wences.

Wences — famed from his days as a regular on "The Ed Sullivan Show" with Johnny, his lipstick-painted hand puppet — is still alive at age 103 and, after watching LaFong perform a few years back, he presented her with many of his puppets to maintain their life span.

And LaFong has served the good Señor Wences well, mastering his character-in-a-box vocal technique along with other tricks of the trade (multiple voices, rapid exchanges) that require technical skills that both baffle and delight the average Joe.

Working in a Victorian-tinged showroom that seats about 180, the thick-haired ventriloquist from Queens, N.Y., actually kept her cohorts in storage for the opening portion of her act. Previously, she kept them in the dark

for several years to hone her stand-up skills — dummies have a weird way of inhabiting their human handlers — and LaFong's onstage singlehood has helped her become a solid prop-free practitioner.

She bantered with the audience to set up a few well-received punch lines, perfectly echoed the clipped Yiddish tones of rabbi-turned-comic Jackie Mason, then tossed in quick but effective sendups of Julie Kavner (from TV's "Rhoda") to the voice of Marge on "The Simpsons" and bunny-brained-blondie Georgette (Georgia Engel) from "The Mary Tyler Moore Show."

LaFong's take on a rushed and harried Joan Rivers is a cynical hoot — "The whole world is a crotch!" — and hits a few minor blue notes as Bette Midler playing a bawdy Sophie Tucker. Still, there's not a curse word to be heard as LaFong employs more effective innuendoes.

Her Andrea "Dice" Clay in leather jacket is as disposable as Clay's crash-and-burn career, but LaFong has a pair of puppet aces that clamber out of their trunks and become their own personalities; the goal of every ventriloquist worth his or her salt.

There's soft-sculptured Paco, a purple satin-clad Hispanic hipster and macho vato who LaFong modeled on an ex-boyfriend. The fact that the ex in question actually took the caustic creation as a compliment is another story, but jive-generating Paco is a real



Ventriloquist Michele LaFong and her macho sidekick Paco.

piece of work. He moves both arms, bangs away on bongos and a cymbal to "Oye Como Va," and declares himself "The King" in a thick accent after every speed-rapping dialogue duel with a tolerant LaFong.

Another bonus is her revival of Wences' Johnny, who comes alive with only lipstick, button eyes and a red wig attached to LaFong's left hand. The little guy is endearing and further demonstrates both LaFong's impeccable technique and solid comic flair.

"Funniest Females" gets affable support from opening act Denim, a large yet graceful woman who glides past the easy weight jokes — "Yes, I will have dessert!" — and shows off some edge with her review of the origi-

nal "Carrie" film as a feel-good flick with a happy ending. Denim shows promise and already has the poise.

Grassey, a quality Vegas mainstay, precedes headliner LaFong with another winning set that rightfully focuses on her life as a 40-year-old mom who once again finds herself eating for two — "No, I'm not pregnant again. ... I'm schizophrenic."

Grassey's bubbly presence carries her through a few slow moments but she's mostly on target, works well with an audience volunteer and ends her set with a darkly funny tale about a group of young female church regulars who recently staggered in with all their sheets to the wind.

The no-staging, no trick-lighting simplicity of "Funniest Females" is a virtue, allowing audiences to concentrate on the generous amounts of humor from this trio of talented women. They complement each other well and apparently have a collective pact against male-bashing material, thus widening their appeal.

In short, nothing fancy. Just funny. And the \$19.95 ticket comes with a pass to wander around Vox's unique collection of artifacts.

"Funniest Females" plays nightly at 8:30 and 10:30 except Mondays.

Rating: ★★★

Michael Paskevich's entertainment column appears Fridays and Sundays.

NOW APPEARING

LaFong and Co. provide plenty of strong laughs

By Joe Delaney
LAS VEGAS SUN

Michele LaFong and her "Funniest Females" revue has returned to O'Shea's, next to and really part of the Flamingo Hilton, hopefully for a long run after a successful fortnight there earlier this fall. LaFong is a multitalented performer, standup comedian, impressionist and ventriloquist who first served notice that she had Las Vegas potential last year at the defunct Debbie Reynolds hotel.

New York's Barbara Singer opens the show with a brief turn, then serves as an emcee. There is an East Coast stridency that would not wear well in a longer stint. Her approach is the usual comedy club style. She has a personality and good moves, but the material is weak. The personality carried her; she is likable, a strong plus.

Boston's Joni Grassey finished her 10 minutes or so on a high, setting up La-



Paco and Michele LaFong

Fong's 45 minutes nicely. Grassey, a mother for the first time at age 40, contributes a life-story stream of consciousness, narrative-style, rather than setup and punch, with realistic content and more than her share of laughs. A fourth female, Shae Denim, was absent, due to death in the family.

LaFong carries the show with standup comedy as a starter then, using props from an onstage cabinet, does rapid changes as she becomes a series of well-known personalities such as Joan Rivers, Bette Midler and a very clever Dr. Ruth, using a young lady from the audience, closing with an Andrew "Dice" Clay that merited a huge hand.

Michele shifted into high gear with a tribute to Senor Wences, now 102 years old, who taught LaFong to do his routine with Johnny, a hand puppet, really a fist for a face, sitting atop a two-foot dummy — most effective, a worthy replica of the original. Paco, a puppet modeled after an old boyfriend, is her bread and butter closer, a tour de force of all the ventriloquist tricks — multiple voices, voices from various distances, heavy stuff.

With one show a night, dark Mondays, LaFong could make the upstairs showroom a year-round winner with three strong females for a 90-minute show, but it would need full support from the Flamingo Hilton. This could make the Magic Museum that takes up most of the second floor at O'Shea's even more successful. It is a worthy attraction.

There was half a house at the show caught. Those present had a good time and seemed to think their money was well spent.

Michele LaFong
Comic/Impressionist/Ventriloquist

Look Who's Talkin'

By James Ebbree

Michele LaFong is a woman who knows what she wants — Stardom. Whether or not Paco, her puppet sidekick, will allow the comic/ventriloquist to have it, however, is another matter.

LaFong, along with Paco, a flashy, smooth-talking Latin “stud-puppet,” headline “Funniest Females” comedy show at O’Sheas Casino and as LaFong explains it, getting the better of Paco is no easy task. It seems Paco thinks he’s the star of the show, and the way audiences react to him, it’s no wonder.

In a leather outfit with gold chains glimmering on his exposed hairy chest, Paco was modeled after an ex-boyfriend of LaFong’s. Putting Paco onstage was her way of getting back at him. “I had Paco talk the way he did, move the way he did and think the way he did. He was so chauvinistic — he thought he was the king,” Bur, LaFong says, the plan backfired. “He [the ex-boyfriend] thought it was the greatest compliment,” she says. “He kept a picture of Paco in his wallet like it was his son. He didn’t see anything wrong with the way this puppet was acting.”

Though the ex-boyfriend is long gone, Paco is another matter. “It got to the point that whenever Paco came onstage, I somehow got lost. Paco had evolved into this underground icon,” LaFong says, “and he was stealing the show.”

About three years ago the pair ended up in acting class together. “I didn’t want to lose myself onstage, and I felt I could bring the act to another level,” LaFong says. “I would bring Paco to acting class and we’d do these [Meisner] acting exercises together. It was like *The Twilight Zone*. I had no idea what he was going to say and I would react to what I saw — a face or whatever — and we would go back and forth. Before we knew it, we were on this whole other level where we were two separate energies onstage.”

As if keeping up with Paco wasn’t work

enough, the Queens, New York, native, who took up her first puppet at age five or six because she wanted to “finally win an argument with someone,” was recently honored by Señor Wences, the legendary ventriloquist who appeared many times on the “Ed Sullivan Show.”

Wences’ original characters, “Johnny,”

tremendous thrill. “I have to say, I felt really blessed.”

LaFong has appeared at numerous comedy clubs, including The Comedy Store in Los Angeles and Catch a Rising Star and Caroline’s in New York City, as well as on a number of television programs. She was recently featured, or should I say Johnny was recently featured, in a new Mercedes Benz commercial.

According to LaFong, the commercial worked so well the company had to stop running it — because they ran out of cars! It’s all in a day’s work for LaFong. “It’s ironic,” she says. “Most people think puppets are corny and it’s going to be a corny act — but it’s very hip. The older people like Johnny and the younger people like Paco. Really, there’s something for everyone in the show.”

Two big talents join LaFong and her puppets in “Funniest Females.” Veteran comic Joni Grasse, who has appeared on numerous comedy shows, including “Girls Night Out” on the Lifetime Channel, lets the crowd know she’s in charge with a quick, ad-lib style. Promising newcomer Shae Denin, recently voted Best New Stand-up Comic in Las Vegas, emceeds the show, and her easygoing pace provides a nice balance to LaFong’s more energetic style.

Whether it’s LaFong or Paco who hits the big time, somehow I don’t think you’ll hear any complaints from either member of this comedy team.

“Funniest Females” featuring Michele LaFong and Paco can be enjoyed twice nightly in the intimate, theater-style showroom on the second floor of O’Sheas. Showtimes are 8:30 and 10:30 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. Tickets are \$19.95 per person and include a free pass to the Magic and Movie Hall of Fame at O’Sheas (a \$10 value). Drinks are \$1 for beer and \$1.25 for mixed cocktails with no minimum. For tickets or more information, call O’Sheas at 702-737-5363. **K**



the lipstick hand puppet, and “Pedro,” that head in a box, became classics. Last year, in a tribute to her talent, Wences gave LaFong exclusive rights to the two characters. A ‘90s version of Johnny now makes an appearance in “Funniest Females,” to the delight of her audiences.

“Wences was so graceful, so choreographed onstage,” LaFong says. “I had studied his technique before I met him and he showed me the style.” The night she was given the puppets, which was chronicled in *Life* magazine, was a

**Michele
LaFong**
Comic/Impressionist/Ventriloquist

STUFF



SPEAKING of...

Odds and ends on the casinos and the area

• Eddie, clowns and hobo stew, '40s music, boxing and early birds

SPEAKING OF EDDIE REALLY BIG SHEW AT THE FLAMINGO LAUGHLIN

"A Really Big Show: America's Favorite Variety Show" has returned to the Flamingo Laughlin for its second season. It returns because it was a hit during its first run. Funny how that works. Dad shows rarely get re-ups.

This show was first billed as a quasi-tribute to Ed Sullivan and his TV show of the '50s through '70s. While the basic format remains the same, Gene Siler, the producer of the show, is going after a more general approach to selling things this year.

"This is a high energy, variety show that can appeal to all age groups," he explains in perfect "producerese." "We want young people to know this is for them as well as for those who remember Ed Sullivan."

Siler having said that, it can also be said that if you are of a certain age group you will be getting a nostalgic treat via the show with access to

many inside jokes relevant to the classic TV show (otherwise Wayne and Schuster and Topo Gigio are but vacuous names and a gay mouse).

As it was last year, the show is emceed by Jerry Hoban in the role of Ed Sullivan. As can be seen by the photo on these pages (for those who can remember), Hoban has the Sullivan look down. He also employs the stiff "waltz" that was a Sullivan trademark, as well as the lifting cadence of his introductions ("Ladies and gentlemen, on our stage tonight... THE BEAT-ELS").

Hoban sends up Sullivan along the lines of Will Jordan, the most popular of the Sullivan impressionists during the heyday of the actual show. That is, it is exaggerated and over-the-top. In a good touch, Hoban adds updated material to his asides and one-liners to give the show a footing in today's world.

While Hoban is the catalyst of the show, it is the actual variety acts that are the stars. Siler is right when he states that the show can appeal to young and old alike. A good magician works anywhere, anytime. To watch a skillful ventriloquist is fascinating stuff. And so on. If one act falls flat, hang in there, another is on its heels.

Siler also plans to keep things



Current cast members of "A Really Big Show: America's Favorite Variety Show" (clockwise from upper left) Jerry Hoban, the Dancing Gauchos, Dan Birch, Michelle LaFong and Lance Lapinski

fresh by changing the line-up of the acts every eight weeks or so. Thus, if you catch the show in November it will be different come January.

The following is a closer look at the current line-up:

THE DANCING GAUCHOS

This husband and wife team are a novelty act that fits the bill of this show perfectly. The Ed Sullivan show was filled with acts made up of strange foreigners who did equally strange things. Bulgarian plate spinners, Hungarian acrobats, Nepalese contortionists, and so on. Thus, a pair of Argentinian drum beaters and boleadoras would be right at home. That's why the Flamingo Laughlin show has just that: a pair of Argentinian drum beaters and boleadoras.

Outfitted in over-the-top gaucho outfits, the couple whirl and twirl, bang drums and spin boleadoras (these Argentinian orbs attached by string that are traditionally used in

hunting). This is strange, yet somehow alluring stuff. You're not sure if the circus is in town or a gypsy wagon broke down in the parking lot. A perfect good-spirited opener of a Sullivan show.

MICHELLE LAFONG

Anyone and everyone who has seen the Ed Sullivan show knows about Señor Wences, the Spanish ventriloquist who introduced audiences to the characters of The Man-in-the-Box and Johnny, that lipstick-and-wing, hand puppet. LaFong brings these characters back to life, and she does so with the blessing of the late Wences, who gave her some of his prized puppets in his latter years (and that doesn't mean he gave her his lipsticker).

While The Man-in-the-Box gets short shrift in LaFong's act, Johnny gets to show his stuff and prove all

over again that a puppet doesn't need to be an elaborate thing of wood and strings to come to life. No, what a good puppet needs is a talented ventriloquist. And LaFong is all of that. She impresses with a skillful display of techniques, aka, throwing her voice while drinking water or blowing a bubble gum bubble, or making a voice sound like it's coming from deep within a box.

In one skillful and seamless segment, LaFong carries on a four way conversation, jumping from character to character with tongue twisting speed.

LaFong also shows she is more than a Wences tribute act by introducing her own characters. One of them is Paco, a man-child with an attitude (LaFong claims he is based on one of her ex-boyfriends). It is through Paco that LaFong gets to stretch her comedic legs and show that in addition to being a ventriloquist she is also a talented stand-up comic and impressionist.

DAN BIRCH

While magicians like David Blaine have moved magic to spots that border on the mystical, Dan Birch travels a more traditional route. He is a magician with old school stylings, i.e., he wears tux and tails and even dove white gloves as he pulls countless numbers of doves out of seemingly thin air.

He does go after the slightly eerie through his brooding stare and deliberate movements. An audience doesn't exactly warm up to Birch. It is converted through slight of hand.

It is this "in-your-face" magic that is his edge. With a variety show like this, there is no time to set up elaborate prop tricks and the budget doesn't call for an assistant to saw in half.

Thus, Birch's act is tailored to fit the format. Though he is capable of performing bigger illusions, he goes for the up close "now you see it, now you don't" variety of magic. And he does so skillfully with a successful less-is-more effect.

In all, "A Really Big Show: America's Favorite Variety Show" is a tight show that plays well on a variety of fronts. It's not feather and fans nor uptown theater. But it is entertaining, or as The Man-in-the-Box would say, "a'allright!"

"A Really Big Show: America's Favorite Variety Show" is presented on the Club Flamingo Showroom at the Flamingo Laughlin nightly.

TICKET

'Glitz on Ice' at Lily Langtry's features Russian skaters

By Dante J.J. Bevilacqua
Theater Reviewer

The name may change but the show goes on! The former Sheraton Hotel in King of Prussia is now the Radisson Hotel Valley Forge. The name change comes at the end of a \$13 million plus property-wide renovation. As the publicity flyer states, Radisson operates 350 hotels in 39 countries in addition to managing their "Seven Seas Cruises."

So it comes as no surprise that the latest show at Lily Langtry's Restaurant & Showplace has an international flavor. "Glitz on Ice"

features a team of Russian ice skaters who gracefully perform Vegas style specialty acts and a Broadway tribute. The

skaters also do a colorful routine that depicts the Russian winter and the vigor of the Russian people. In addition, there are several distinguished solo numbers that capture the spirit of Spain, India, and Africa.

The show gets off to a slow start. Christi, my theater companion for this event, noted that the "Chorus Line Number" beginning with 5-6-7-8 had very little kick or enthusiasm. She also observed that the Russian troupe looked rather mechanical until the music of their native country accompanied their dance numbers.

There's no doubt that the combination of dance and ice skating makes for a fluid movement that can be visually exciting. Add the unusual interplay of

video projections on two large screens at each side of the stage and your eyes are in constant motion trying to keep up with the action. I might say that the use of video projection — sometimes tape sequences, as in the opening "That's Entertainment!" — or live action showing a different perspective of the stage is always very well edited and adds a nice touch to the performance.

In "Glitz on Ice" there are two extraordinary performers that literally steal the show. The first is a Russian power juggler that the program calls a specialty act, but the performer remains nameless in the program or publicity material handed to us. His work in twirling heavy objects was a sight to behold. The strength and control exhibited by this artist had us doing a double take.

The second showstopper is a young lady whose vocal technique is first rate and her puppeteering skills are extraordinary. Michele LaFong is a very talented impressionist and a creative ventriloquist



Some members of the cast of "Glitz on Ice" at Lily Langtry's Showplace.

LaFong grew up in Queens, N.Y. and had the good fortune of being befriended by the late Spanish maestro Señor Wences, who taught her how to do Joey Wences' sidekick character. Anyone who has enjoyed the remarkable Señor Wences on the Ed Sullivan Show will be impressed by Ms. LaFong's little Johnny and his pal in the box —

the gold-chained, hairy chested Paco, whom she styled after an ex-boyfriend — but, she notes, it backfired, because "he liked it!"

In addition to Ms. LaFong's stunning ventriloquist act, she does a perfect impersonation of Joan Rivers, Bette Midler and Dr. Ruth. You'll enjoy "Glitz on Ice," but these two acts alone make the evening worthwhile.

Michele LaFong's comic turns, ventriloquism sparkle in Lily Langtry's 'Glitz on Ice'

By Rita Charleston
Correspondent

Michele LaFong loves leaving big impressions on people. And people, especially audiences at Lily Langtry's Restaurant and Showplace in King of Prussia, seem to love the impression this gal from Queens, New York, leaves.

Now appearing in "Glitz on Ice" at Lily's through Jan. 16, 2000, LaFong, the daughter of a French mother and Jewish father, describes herself as a comic/ventriloquist who grew up with foreign parents and always had an ear for different inflections.

"I really started quite young," she recalls. "When I was five years old I was already talking to myself. I wanted to have an argument with somebody and make sure I won all the time. But then my parents got me a Jerry Mahoney dummy and I'd watch Paul Winchell's show all the time, practicing on throwing my voice and getting in trouble in school."

Still, once out of school, LaFong shied away from becoming a professional comic or ventriloquist, working, instead, in every profession one could imagine. "I was a licensed beautician. I was a bartender. But I never stayed with anything.

"Then one day when I was bartending it occurred to me that half the bar wasn't drinking. They were just there so that I could make them laugh. That's when I realized I should probably try my hand at professional comedy."

She began going to open mike nights at various comedy clubs around town. The first time she appeared on stage at New York's famed Improv, she says she was a success. Luckily, the jobs kept coming and she turned professional within two weeks.

LaFong's impressions range from Jackie Mason (who calls her act "a brilliant momentum of laughs combined with impeccable comedy timing!"), to Joan Rivers, to an absolutely hilarious Bette Midler and Dr. Ruth, complete with absurd costuming that just makes the act that much better.

With all her abilities, however, LaFong says one of her all-time idols has always been famed Spanish ventriloquist, Señor Wences — "S'All right? S'All right!" LaFong says she had the great fortune of being befriended by the late artist, who regularly appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show and eventually taught LaFong how to do Johnny, his famous sidekick character.

"At first, he was very apprehensive about teaching me anything, even talking to me about his act,"



Michele LaFong and her hairy-chested puppet friend named Paco are among the highlights in "Glitz on Ice," now at Lily Langtry's.

LaFong remembers. "He didn't like ventriloquists in general. But then he saw me perform and saw how I had studied him — his technique, his style, his rhythm.

As he talked to me he found out I knew every inch of every spot he ever did on the Sullivan show and he was totally blown away by that."

So blown away, in fact, that little by little, Señor Wences began trusting LaFong, teaching her some of his tricks of the trade. Eventually, Señor Wences, who died recently at the age of 103, took LaFong under his wing.

"He taught me how to do Johnny, and his pal-in-the-box, Pedro," LaFong says. "He taught me how to make Johnny smoke, although now Johnny chews gum and blows bubbles."

Meanwhile, LaFong also created her own separate act, featuring Paco, a gold-chained and hairy-chested puppet based on an ex-boyfriend.

"It was a revenge kind of thing, but it didn't work. The guy liked it!" laughs LaFong.

Single, "very single," she insists, LaFong, who lives in New York and Las Vegas, says she will remain that way until one thing happens: "When I find a guy who lets me put him in a box when I'm done with him, I'll give him a try."

IF YOU GO

"Glitz on Ice,"
featuring Michele LaFong and an array of award-winning Russian ice skaters, will continue at Lily Langtry's Restaurant & Showplace at the Radisson Hotel, 1160 First Ave., King of Prussia, through Jan. 16, 2000. Info: (610) 337-2000.

Michele LaFong

Comic/Impressionist/Ventriloquist

ENTERTAINMENT TODAY

VEGAS

Dynamite Show

Debbie Reynolds Discovers Hot New Talent

Michele LaFong's "Vegas Live!" is now being presented Sunday through Wednesday in Debbie Reynolds' Celebrity Cafe, beginning each evening at 10 pm. Tickets for this dynamite show are only \$9.95.

"Vegas Live!" is a Las Vegas variety show, with live music, the best comedy Las Vegas has seen in a long time, incredibly talented singers and starring multi-talented Michele LaFong. The show features all fresh new talent, including comedian/host Steve Caito.

"Ms Reynolds has offered my cast and I the opportunity to be "seen" here in Las Vegas," says LaFong. "It took someone like her to know that Las Vegas needs a place where talented young people can perform and have a chance to be "discovered." At the beginning, we were given Sunday through Tuesday, but because the response has been so over whelming, we were just given an additional night.

LaFong is an accomplished ventriloquist (her puppet boyfriend "Paco" is truly hilarious), she's a fine impressionist (you name the heroine and she nails her with outstanding accuracy) and her ability to handle a crowd speaks for itself. "A lot of my material is spontaneous," LaFong explains. "If something goes wrong (or right, for that matter) during the day and I find it funny, I use it in my act that night. I enjoy going with my thoughts and the more chances I take, the more 'on the edge I become'."

In a show-stopping finale

to her "single woman's answer to dating in the nineties"...a macho latino "boyfriend" named Paco...dressed in black leather and decked out in gold chains. This womanizing, smooth-talking "stud puppet" is a sight to behold, and the kind of signature piece which, once seen, is not easily forgotten! By the end of LaFong's show, you'll feel

you've been on a roller coaster ride...your senses reeling, your grin tired from overuse. Her comedy is Alive and Swell!

"Vegas Live!" appearing in Debbie Reynolds' Celebrity Cafe, Sunday through Wednesday, beginning at 10 pm. Stop by and be part of the "late-night-crowd" who loves to party!



Debbie Reynolds & Michele LaFong

New "Vegas Live!"



Comedienne, Impressionist, Ventriloquist and just plain hilarious, Michele LaFong will debut her new show "Vegas Live!" in the Debbie Reynolds' Celebrity Cafe on Sunday.

Michele LaFong goes beyond energy. She is a lightning burst of comedy, a driven mistress of the stage. LaFong doesn't wait for her audience to come around, she goes right at them and yanks them by the

an accomplished ventriloquist (her "boyfriend" Paco is truly hilarious), she's a fine impressionist (you name the heroine and she nails her with outstanding accuracy), and her ability to handle the crowd speaks for itself. "A lot of my material is spontaneous," LaFong explains. "If something goes wrong (or right, for that matter) during the day and I find it funny, I use it in my act that night. I enjoy going with my thoughts and the more chances I take, the more 'on the edge' I become."

In a show-stopping finale, LaFong introduces her audience to her "single woman's answer to dating in the nineties"...a macho latino "boyfriend" named Paco...clad in black leather and decked out in gold chains. This womanizing, smooth-talking "stud puppet" is a sight to behold, and the kind of signature

"I've been clowning around since day one. I've been thrown out of every school I ever went to. I just wasn't student material. Show business is the only place I fit."

August 7 at 10 p.m. "Vegas Live!" featuring a long list of Las Vegas mainstays, newcomers and comedian & host, Steve Caito, (all of which LaFong refers to as "A Cavalcade of Stars") will be offering performances on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday evenings, each beginning at 10 p.m. and ending "when the audience yells 'Uncle!'" There is no cover charge, only a two drink minimum to enjoy one of the most entertaining shows in Las Vegas.

collar. You'd get a bang out of her whether you wanted to or not. "I've been clowning around since day one," she says. "I've been thrown out of every school I ever went to. I just wasn't student material. I lost a lot of jobs too...as a rock & roll drummer, a bartender, a hair dresser. I lost jobs I didn't even have! Show business was the only place I fit!" And fit she does.

In a world where women comediennes are often chewed up, LaFong is a keeper. She is

piece which, once seen, is not easily forgotten! By the end of LaFong's show, you'll feel you've been on a roller coaster ride...your senses reeling, your grin tired from overuse. Her comedy is ALIVE and SWELL!

"Vegas Alive!" appearing in Debbie Reynolds' Celebrity Cafe, offers live music, live comedy, talented co-stars, guest appearances and much, much more. Stop by and be part of the "late-night-crowd" who loves to party!

Michele LaFong
Comic/Impressionist/Ventriloquist

March 28 to April 3,

ENTERTAINMENT

Whew! Comedienne takes OC audience on a rollercoaster ride

By SHERYL JAROS

If you happened to be in Ocean City last Saturday night you may have been lucky enough to catch comedienne Michele LaFong's hilarious show in the lounge of the Carousel.

Michele goes beyond energy. She's a lightning burst of comedy, a driven mistress of the stage. She doesn't wait for her audience to come around, as evidenced by her performance. She goes right at them and yanks them by the collar. You'd get a bang out of her whether you wanted to or not. Trust me.

I asked Michele when she first realized she was funny. "I've been clowning around since day one," she said. "I've been thrown

'I've been thrown out of every school I ever went to... I lost lots of jobs too - as a rock & roll drummer, a bartender, a hairdresser. I lost jobs I didn't even have.'

out of every school I ever went to. I just wasn't student material. I lost lots of jobs too - as a rock & roll drummer, a bartender, a hairdresser. I lost jobs I didn't even have. Show business was the only place I fit in!"

Michele grew up in Queens, New York and still uses that as her home base. For six years she's been making headlines in nightclubs in New York, Las Vegas, Philadelphia and, recently, has begun working her way toward Baltimore.

In a world where women comedienne are often chewed up, Michele is a keeper. She's an accomplished ventriloquist (her "pal" Paco is an interesting foil to the later part of her set), she's a fine impressionist (you name the heroine, she nails her with outstanding accuracy) and her ability to woman-handle a crowd speaks for itself. The highlight of the show is an original big with Michele at Bette Midler, telling a wild story that utilizes clever use of alco-



Michele LaFong and Paco

holic drinks. There's no way to do justice to it by describing it here, just make sure you catch her at the Carousel in Ocean City or Tracy's Comedy Club in Baltimore this spring.

By the end of her show you'll feel you've been on a rollercoaster ride - your senses reeling, your grin tired from overuse. Her comedy is alive and swell.

Michele LaFong

Comic/Impressionist/Ventriloquist

PICTURE PAGES



Michele LaFong & Senor Wences

Wences teaches, and gives Michele LaFong his puppets, that he made legendary on "The Ed Sullivan Show".

From the stage at Bally's H&C in Atlantic City Senor Wences' 100th Birthday tour



Michele LaFong & Paco, Mickey Rooney, Senor Wences, Marty Allen (Host) (just to name a few)



Marty Allen, Senor Wences, and Michele LaFong at Bally's H&C, Atlantic City, After the Show

**Michele
LaFong**
Comic/Impressionist/Ventriloquist

PICTURE PAGES



Senor Wences, Michele LaFong & Paul Winchell (right)

Senor Wences 100 Birthday Tour USA

Backstage at
The Players Club
In New York City



Tony Bennett, Senor Wences, and
Michele LaFong



George Kirby, Michele LaFong,
and the legendary Tubby Boots
Back Stage In Ocean City, MD

**Michele
LaFong**
Comic/Impressionist/Ventriloquist

PICTURE PAGES



Michele LaFong, Yakov Smirnoff,
unknown woman & the legendary
Tubby Boots

Michele LaFong with
Terry Fator backstage
at the
Las Vegas Hilton



Michele LaFong with
Tony Orlando
at the
Las Vegas Hilton

**Michele
LaFong**
Comic/Impressionist/Ventriloquist

OBITUARIES

Señor Wences, 103, 'Ed Sullivan Show' Ventriloquist

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Señor Wences, the master ventriloquist who delighted "Ed Sullivan Show" audiences by bantering in a comic Spanish accent with his puppet-in-a-box Pedro ("S'OK?" "S'awright!") and his falsetto-voiced hand puppet Johnny, died Tuesday at 103.

The Spanish-born Wences, whose real name was Wenceslao Moreno, died at his home in New York City.

During the Golden Age of television in the 1950s and '60s, Wences bickered and bantered with his puppets while he drank, smoked and juggled. One of his puppets was gravelly-voiced Pedro, who consisted only of a head in a box. Pedro was born out of necessity when Wences' ventriloquist's dummy was damaged and only the head was spared.

Another puppet was Johnny, whose comeback line was: "Deefecult for you, easy for me." Wences created Johnny by scrunching up his fist, drawing a steel Johnny by scrunching up his fist, drawing a mouth where thumb and index finger met, and draping a blond wig over the top.

Wences would talk to his puppets with his face right in theirs, as if daring the audience to watch his lips, which, of course, never moved.

Pedro's voice would become clearer as the door to his box opened, and muffled as it closed. Audiences forgot the sound was really coming from outside the box.

Wences would stuff a hankie in Johnny's mouth and have the puppet speak with a muffled voice while he himself smoked a cigarette. Then he would give Johnny a drag, and the puppet -- that is, Wences' hand -- would somehow emit perfect smoke rings.

"Most of us were in awe of Wences," ventriloquist Jimmy Nelson once said. "He could get laughs just by saying, 'S'awright!' And I still don't know how he got those smoke rings out of Johnny."

There were no jokes, just what one writer has described as "bizarre, farcical, Spanish-accented patter."

"The main thing he taught me was it's not about the joke," said twentysomething ventriloquist Michele LaFong, who became friends with Wences and inherited his original Pedro and Johnny puppets. "Even though you know what's coming, you laugh anyway. That's the difference between someone who relies on a punch line or someone who's just plain funny."

He had a precise, economical act: 19 minutes with a one-minute encore. He would ask the promoter for only a card table and a glass of water. He continued touring into his early 90s. A memorial service and burial will be held in Spain this weekend.



Señor Wences performing on the "Que Man Show" (AP Photo/TV Five Photo)



Ventriloquist Señor Wences

By Polly Anderson, Associated Press writer

NEW YORK -- Señor Wences, the master ventriloquist who delighted "Ed Sullivan Show" audiences by bantering in a comic Spanish accent with his puppet-in-a-box Pedro ("S'OK?" "S'awright!") and his falsetto-voiced hand puppet Johnny, died yesterday at 103.

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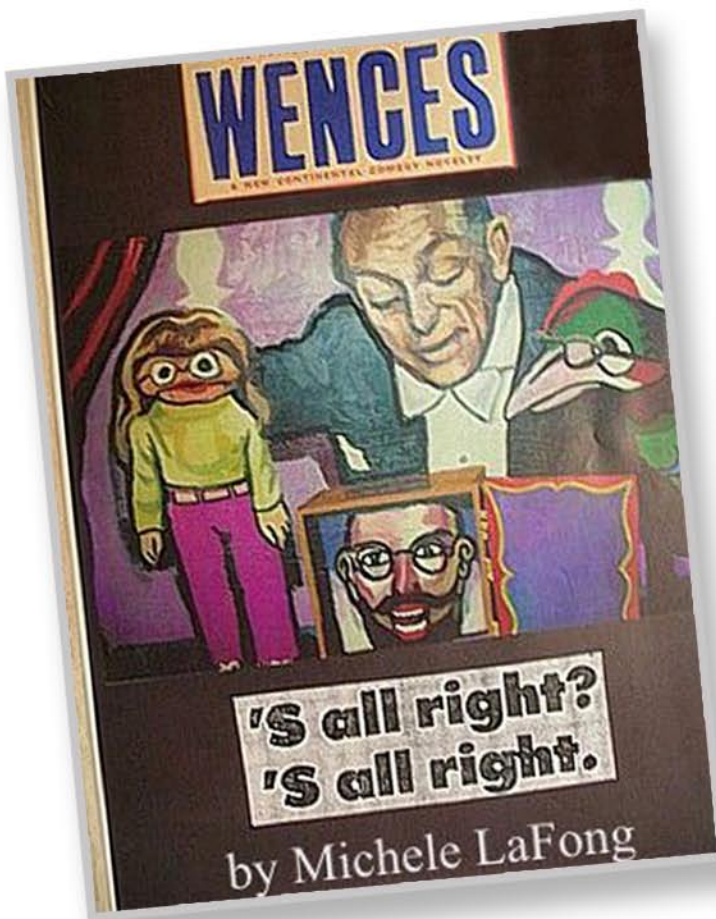
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In between his many Sullivan show appearances, he entertained four presidents, toured with Dean Martin & Jerry Lewis, did a Broadway show with Danny Kaye and played every casino in Vegas. He had a precise, economical act: 19 minutes with a one-minute encore. He would ask the promoter for only a card table and a glass of water. He continued touring into his early 90s. Wences was born in Penarada, Spain, and discovered his gift for mimicry amusing his classmates in grade school.

In 1934, when he came to the United States, Wences was conventional -- "another ventriloquist with a dummy," as he put it. But two years later, en route to Chicago, his act was transformed when his dummy, Pedro, was crushed in a baggage car accident. Wences bought a box, stuck the head inside, and -- on stage that day -- inquired if he was OK.

Pedro replied: "S'awright!"



"Coffee Table Book" will be available soon!

A compilation of Señor Wences' "never seen before" scrapbooks, with articles, and reviews of himself, and other icons, dating back to 1937-on.

A piece of Show Biz history!

The book also includes Señor Wences' complete inventory of original puppets, props, trunks, contracts, drawings, ideas in the making... the list goes on and on. **Incredible Stuff!**

**Michele
LaFong**
Comic/Impressionist/Ventriloquist