



Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work Discussion Guide

Directors: Ricki Stern, Anne Sundberg

Year: 2010

Time: 84 min

You might know these directors from:

The Devil Came on Horseback (2007)

Knuckleball (2012)

FILM SUMMARY

Caustic, biting, and funny as hell, Joan Rivers is the poster girl for over-the-top plastic surgery and she is still going strong in her 8th decade of life.

JOAN RIVERS: A PIECE OF WORK spends more than a year with the revered female comedian, offering a surprisingly poignant portrait without shying away from the tougher aspects of Joan's personality. Intercut with stand-up footage and plenty of archival material, the film gets up close and personal, allowing viewers to access the unrelenting drive that's allowed Joan to rebound from numerous career dips. Joan's 'team,' along with daughter Melissa, give further insight into what makes Joan tick. Not all of Joan's relationships run smoothly, and one surprise toward the end of the film reveals how much this warhorse has lost, how much she has gained, and how she has survived the turbulence of her life.

Ultimately, **JOAN RIVERS: A PIECE OF WORK** reveals that the great, the good, and even the downright hilarious people are much like you and me. Joan is a complex human being. Even in her 76th year, she is still as full of ideas, hopes, and dreams as she was when first starting out more than half a century ago.

FILM THEMES

JOAN RIVERS: A PIECE OF WORK reveals the drive and inner strength it takes to achieve our dreams, while not losing ourselves in the process.

PROFESSIONAL DRIVE

While many of us experience highs and lows throughout our careers (and our lives), Joan Rivers has experienced a sheer rollercoaster while trying to enter the comedy business as a woman. Despite the ebbs and flows, Joan's determination to constantly pick herself up again epitomises the old saying 'Never let the bastards get you down.' A true rainmaker, Joan offers plenty of inspiration to anyone who wants to attain professional success despite the odds, despite the setbacks.

FOLLOWING YOUR DREAMS

To follow a dream, particularly when you're breaking new ground, takes an enormous amount of courage. Throughout her career, Joan Rivers has pursued her dreams in her own unique way. She once remarked that her real dream has been achieved in her heart but others do not see it. She doubts whether she'll ever get the kind of recognition she desires. This raises the question of why we follow - or should follow - our dreams in spite of the fame and fortune they may or may not bring. It seems, in this film, that Joan's dreams are a catalyst for almost everything in her life.

VULNERABILITY

The Sad Clown is a comedy cliché but it's one that doesn't quite seem to fit Joan Rivers. Vulnerability, however, is a very present part of Joan's personal makeup and the key to her work, despite the tough and prickly exterior that the world often sees. Her vulnerability is, in fact, part of why she is so tough and prickly - which leads back to a version of the sad clown. Like many other performers, Joan needs and uses her vulnerability, inner disappointments, and pain for her act - not unlike many of us who connect with others by using our various stories, the best of which include high comedy alongside pathos.

THE MASKS WE WEAR

The majority of us wear a mask as we shift through our personal and professional lives. Joan Rivers is no exception. The picture she presents to the world in a professional capacity is not the whole picture. Like us, she reveals only what she wants to reveal. We are all complex, multi-faceted individuals with strengths and weaknesses, good traits and bad, exchanging our masks to perform the roles we must play in life. As the famous playwright Shakespeare wrote: "All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players / They have their exits and their entrances / And one man in his time plays many parts..." The difference for Joan, however, is that there's a spotlight shining on her.

“Age - it’s the one mountain you can’t overcome.”

Joan Rivers

“Good things don’t always happen to good people and I’m very angry about it. But, if I didn’t have the anger, I wouldn’t be a comedian. Anger fuels the comedy.”

Joan Rivers

FILM FACTS:

- Joan Rivers was the child of Russian immigrants, and while she grew up in several different New York City boroughs, she is most identified with Long Island.
- Joan attended both Connecticut College and Barnard College, graduating from Barnard with a degree in English and Anthropology.
- Filmmakers Ricki Stern and Anne Sundberg were able to gain access to Joan Rivers due to Ricki Stern having a family connection, which led to the making of the film.
- Joan Rivers is the author of 11 New York Times best-sellers. Topics range from mother-daughter relationships to plastic surgery. She's also published two biographies.
- Joan received her star in the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1990.
- Joan has been married twice. Her first marriage, in 1955, lasted all of 6 weeks. Her second marriage, in 1965, lasted 22 years, until her husband's death.
- Joan Rivers was the first female cohost of NBC's Tonight Show. She was also a pioneer in female comedy, doing away with the 'nice' female comedian act.
- Joan has appeared in nearly 30 films and over 40 television programs, excluding several long-running programs of her own, like her daytime Emmy Award-winning 'The Joan Rivers Show.'
- While Joan has always been the quintessential New Yorker, in her later years, Joan has moved to Malibu, California to live with her daughter Melissa and grandson Cooper.
- Joan continues to try out new material at various clubs around New York City, mostly scattered across lower Manhattan, particularly in Greenwich Village.
- Joan's falling out with her mentor Johnny Carson was a seminal event in her life and career. After their break, Carson never spoke to Joan again. She maintains that he had her blacklisted for many years.
- On being in her 80's, Joan told NPR: "Loss. Loss. Loss. That's what the final act is about. Nobody wants to hear that you met Harry Truman... I met Harry Truman. But you know what I mean? Nobody's interested. They want to know you met Rihanna. And that kills me."
- Joan admits that comedy has become rougher because life is rougher. She says things onstage now that she wouldn't have 10 years ago.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others the chance to laugh and be inspired by Joan Rivers. Develop your inner comedienne and find other funny women at [Funny Women](#).
2. Learn more about the filmmakers of JOAN RIVERS: A PIECE OF WORK and support their future efforts at [Break Thru Films](#).
3. Follow Joan Rivers example. She backs a number of charities such as Habitat for Humanity and American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, which are always grateful for additional support.
4. Find out more about female comics - do some research and be inspired. If you want to support female comedians, search for Women Hosted Comedy Podcasts.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.