

What I've Learned

Leslie Nielsen

Actor, 82, Fort Lauderdale, Florida

Interviewed by Cal Fussman / Photograph by Jeff Minton

- **It was a boy's name first.**
- **One thing** a person won't do when he's laughing is try to beat you up.
- **When I was a boy**, I delivered newspapers on my bicycle at 64 below. The worst part is, I wanted to impress the girls, so I had to look good. I couldn't wear a hat with earflaps. I had to sport the wave. So I'd put some water through my hair and push that wave over my forehead. Then I'd step outside and *spliceccccchhh*—it would freeze.
- **On the Arctic Circle**, where I grew up, laughter is part of the food of the day. Nobody wants to hear you say, "Gee, it's really cold."
- **There are many lessons** my father gave me. But there was one that always stuck with me: He said to me, "Just remember, never say 'That is.' Say 'That's.'"
- **If you're going fishing**, make sure you don't bring your sperm-whale line with you. A sperm whale goes down to twenty-five hundred feet and can hold its breath for eighty minutes.
- **Even if you did** catch a sperm whale, when you put it in the boat, he'd sink it.
- **It took me** a long time to realize that I came from a dysfunctional family. But, you know, at least I had the revelation.
- **I remember** as a young man seeing *Death of a Salesman*, with Lee J. Cobb. When the play was over, nobody in the audience moved. All you could hear was a little sniffing. The silence was just overwhelming. It was a remarkable demonstration of the power of the theater. I'll never forget that. Never.
- **Yes, it's true**, I've been called the Laurence Olivier of spoofs. I guess that would make Laurence Olivier the Leslie Nielsen of Shakespeare.
- **There's an old saying** that God exists in your search for him. I just want you to understand that I ain't looking.
- **I have a fart machine** that I usually bring with me. I was at a bar once, going down toward the john, and these two guys were in a confrontation and things were getting a little dicey. As I got in between the two of them, I said, "Where's the john? Is it straight back there?" *Fffffffppppppppp*. Well, these guys look at each other and then look at me, and they both start laughing. Fight was over.
- **People ask me**, "What would you like to be remembered by?" It really doesn't make any difference. I've done *Airplane!*, three *Naked Guns*, *Wrongfully Accused*, and *Dracula: Dead and Loving It*. The way I look at it, I've built my own little pyramid and it's gonna be around for as long as people have eyes to see.
- **You can't be a cop** and survive well without a sense of humor.
- **I've been honored** by many police departments, but this story sort of sums it up: I was playing in a celebrity golf tournament with presidents. Clinton was there. Ford and Carter. We're going around as foursomes. There was a stall. I come up with the cart, and this guy walks over, stops directly in front of me, stands at attention, and says, "Ten-hut!" And then he salutes me.
- **When you're signing** an autograph, there are people who want to give you directions. "Will you please write 'Don't call me Shirley'?" When there are a lot of people waiting, people should understand that it takes twice as long.
- **What happened** was that I left my daughter with four friends who were sunbathing by the pool. I said, "Hey, keep your eyes on Maura." She must've been six years old at the time. Well, they started talking. I cross the yard, go up these stairs, and see her at the bottom of the pool. You react instantly. I remember diving into that pool and grabbing her. She spluttered when she came up, so she wasn't drowning. She hadn't been down for that long. After I knew she was okay, two feelings ran through me: I was livid at my friends for not watching her. And, not that I was a hero or anything, but it felt really good to know that without even thinking, I would do anything to save her. The feeling that I had when it occurred is no different than it is now at the thought of it.
- **I don't like oceans**, because you can't see the other side.
- **The whole trial** was about reasonable doubt. My take is, I have a reasonable doubt that no one but O.J. could have done it.
- **I remember** a buddy from the police department was gonna open up the car door to get out, and he pushed against it but it didn't fully open. I thought, He's maybe ten years older than I am. Jesus Christ, is that what they call getting old?
- **The reason** there's a question mark on my front door is just in case I forget my address.
- **Living in** Fort Lauderdale makes me feel like I'm always on vacation.
- **I can't be** around Barbaree without being aware of her love. I remember one time Barbaree looked at me and said, "Are you aware how much I love you?" And I said, "Well, I have some idea." She said, "Do you know, if anything at all should happen to you, I think I would kill myself." There was a long pause. Then she said, "How do you feel?" I'll never forget that one.
- **I really have** to keep an eye on myself, because sometimes I think I might say something important. **#**



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