

FUN IN THE JORGE MODE

**A conversation with Jorge Salono, Cruise Director
of the Carnival Triumph**

by

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Jorge Solano rarely gets to take an uninterrupted stroll through the public rooms of Carnival Triumph. Guests stop him to shake his hand and to tell him how much they enjoyed his shore excursion talk, his debarkation talk but mostly how much they liked his introductions to the shows in Triumph's theater. "You were much funnier than the comedian," they tell him. "Have you ever thought of becoming a professional comedian?" Solano smiles and jokes with the guests in response, clearly happy to have formed such a connection.

In fact, Solano is a professional comedian with many years of experience playing comedy clubs. Born in Columbia but raised in Miami, Solano left school early, married and worked at a variety of jobs. Along the way, he completed his GED and eventually achieved success working on the management side of the pizza business in Florida. It was a stressful occupation involving long hours.

"I was never happy. One day I had a life changing experience where I got really ill. They

stopped my heart. When I woke up I was on life support system. I could have died. Once I was able to talk, I said to the wife: 'You know, I always wanted to be a stand-up comedian and I am going to be a stand-up comedian.' My family really thought: 'Oh, he has got brain damage' - - that sort of thing. But I said: 'I am going to work very hard at doing that' and that was almost 26 years ago."

"I became an amateur comedian. I started in Miami and I would drive to Tampa or Orlando just to get five minutes on stage. At that time, the comedy boom was just happening, I caught the wave and I started working. My first professional gig, was for the University of Miami at the Rathskeller. I had [12 minutes of material]. They hired me for a 30 minute gig and to this day, I still use a lot of the material I wrote that night. I have always been quick on my feet and to me improvisation is one of the best things and so that is my forte. I go with the moment and I can create a show. That plus material always equals a good time."

Although not an easy profession, comedy

has been all that Solano hoped it would be and has helped him through several family tragedies. "Once I step through that curtain and I am on that stage, I can forget everything that is going on in my life. You hear that laughter and you hear all those people having a good time on what you are saying. The laughter is their opinion. For that 10 or 15 minutes or whatever time you have there, it is such a different world. Once you step back through those curtains, it is like the whole world is waiting. It is like someone was holding it and says: 'Here it is, we held it for 10 minutes, now back to your life.' That is why I love being on stage, it doesn't matter what is going on, no one can take away from me what I just had - - that intimate moment that I had between myself and a thousand others. Whatever happens in life, my audience is right there and loves me. I can't wait to be that next time on stage."

Comedy at sea

Comedy led Solano to the cruise industry. In addition to playing the comedy club circuit, Solano worked as a guest performer on cruise ships including some of the Carnival ships. "In the old days, all the cruise directors had a show. They were either musicians, jugglers, comedians or ventriloquists. [The industry had] kind of gotten away from that and [Carnival was] looking for entertainers to become cruise directors so they could have a show. A lot of great kids are cruise directors but they never had an act. So, I saw the opportunity and I spoke with Brendon Corrigan and he gave me the chance."

"I went to the Holiday to train for eight weeks. My first cruise as a cruise director was 9/11. It was a tough one but we managed to get through. I said to myself, if I am able to survive this week, it will not ever be as bad and it has never been that bad. You always have the support of the [Carnival home] office. You always have everybody's support onboard." Since then, he has been cruise director on some eight Carnival ships.

The first contact most guests have with Solano is when he is emceeing the Welcome Aboard show. Solano develops his "Jorge" persona - - a friendly, happy character who can laugh at the world as well as himself. "I'm here to say: 'Hey, you are going to have the best time of your life. I want to do that, regardless of what you are going through.'"

Solano is able to gear his act to the various ports that the ship is sailing from. "Being a comedian that has traveled the country, you already



Cruise Director Jorge Salno.

know what to expect. Some crowds are more reserved than others. New Yorkers - - on this cruise I have pushed a little bit more and have been well received. Norfolk - - they were a little bit more reserved. Charleston was the most reserved I have had. It took them a little bit longer to grab onto me. It took them a day and on the second day they were really thinking in the 'Jorge mode.' In New York, right off the bat they were in the 'Jorge mode.'"

"I usually have 'Just for the Fun of It' seats. [At the Welcome Aboard show] I pick someone and ask: 'How long have you been married?' '50 years' and there is a big round of applause. Then, I tell them to come up and say: 'Tomorrow night I am going to give you front row seats for the show and a bottle of champagne. Is that okay with you?' In conjunction with the Destination Shopping Specialist, we always give them something like a little diamond or a little sapphire combination. By the end of the week, the guests get to know who these people are and it enhance their experience, especially the couples who have been married for 50 years. They are thrilled because suddenly there are all these people saying 'you're the couple who have been married that long.' I like doing that."

Another technique Solano uses to put the guests in the right spirit for the cruise is to pick an "I love you guy." "Sometimes you can look at a person [in the audience] and can that tell he is here but he is not. Maybe he has something happening in his life. [After joking with that person from the stage] I shout out 'I love you guy' and throughout the whole cruise I go 'I love you.' In all the years I have been doing it, I haven't found anyone who disliked it. They become like little celebrities. Wherever they go, people have their picture taken with them. The whole atmosphere, their whole way of thinking has changed and they say: 'I am so glad you did that'".

In addition to emceeing the evening shows, Solano appears on stage to provide information to the guests about the shore excursions and about disembarkation. "I cannot just sit there and pump out information. When I am thinking of giving [a talk], I am always thinking of where am I going to put this joke. I get the laughs but I get the information across. So, I don't come out and just talk about say the shore excursions. I come out and make little jokes and by the time I start into my travel talk about the ports of call, they are totally relaxed. They are in a laughing mood so now we can start talking about the ports of call, what to bring with you etc. They feel that they know the information but [we are] not pushing. I believe in making people relax. I am not an uptight person. I am very relaxed on stage. I just want them to have that same kind of feeling. That is when we connect with each other "

Making the guests feel at home is something Solano does off stage as well. "Most people feel like the cruise director is in charge of everything. They do not realize that the cruise director's scope is entertainment and being the face of the ship. But I don't mind their assuming that because we all work together. If someone comes and tells me they are having a problem, I am not going to tell them that is not my job. Obviously, I assist them and nine out of ten times, we will take care of everything right there and then. This is to avoid them getting upset or taking away from their cruise experience. But I love it, I don't mind any question. I sit with everybody. I could talk to them about the



port of call, I could talk to them about comedy, we could talk about anything."

Off stage

The job of being a cruise director involves more than interacting with the guests. "There is a management part - - I do the scheduling [of the activities and entertainment], I take care of the Capers. There are so many things behind the scenes that really are a lot of work. We have safety meetings, captain's meetings, hotel director's meetings, my own meetings, production - - so you are quite busy. The average cruise director averages no less than 12 to 14 hours a day, seven days a week. "

Reporting to the cruise director are a number of "supervisors like the dance captain, the musical director, the senior technician, and the assistant cruise director. The assistant cruise director helps me with scheduling. They all work very closely with their teams. They are a bunch of good kids. Usually, they all work as long hours as you."

"One thing I find on this ship a lot more than others is that all the management onboard really helps out each other. We all enjoy each others company. We are friends. It makes your [job] so much easier. There are no big issues. It is a very happy ship and that filters through to the crew and the staff. If you have a stiff upper management, you are going to have a stiff crew. I get out on that stage and I say: 'I am proud of my Carnival Triumph fam-

ily.' I like the feeling. I feel pride. These kids work hard for you. You can hear it in the applause and in the comment cards and the ratings."

In planning the entertainment and activities for a cruise, Solano keeps in mind the style of cruising that the cruise line seeks to offer. "We are overall a fun company. We want you to come here and have fun. Safe fun, not a wild thing where people are going to end up getting hurt - - that is not what we want. I think people used to have that perception of us. People come and find many great things to do. You can do [things] together as a family or your kids can go to Camp Carnival, Circle C, Club O2 and you can have adult time. That is the type of fun atmosphere that we are creating. But we are not getting away from the partying, we are getting away from the stigma of being the wild, let's-get-drunk kind of atmosphere. That does not happen. We do not claim to be perfect but if you give us a chance and you come and see what we have, you will go: 'This is such a beautiful, pleasant surprise.'"

"I'm a Carnie. I totally love the product. We have some great guests. There is a guy who just went home to sell his house and he is going to be cruising with us every week. Something that is really nice is the way people look for you to cruise with you. It is great when someone says: 'I found out you were the cruise director here and we booked and we brought friends with us.'"



Above: Salano is proud of the hard-working team that reports to him, which includes the ship's activities staff known as "The Fun Patrol"
Below: Carnival Triumph's Rome Lounge.

