



JERRY LEWIS: WHAT'S WRONG

JERRY LEWIS stunned friends and fans who tuned into his annual Labor Day MDA Telethon, looking terribly bloated and sickly.

"I had not seen Jerry since last year's telethon and I was totally shocked to see his face," confides one of his old pals. "He looked like a bullfrog. His face was badly swollen and his hands trembled."

Insiders tell GLOBE that Lewis' bloated look was caused by the medication he's been taking to combat a recent bout with pneumonia.

"Jerry was very ill in the hospital the week before the telethon," says one insider. "We were all extremely worried that he wouldn't be able to host the show or, even if he did, how long he could last."

"He managed to do the entire thing by staying seated most of the time."

The 75-year-old comedy king has been plagued for years by serious health woes, including diabetes, heart problems, prostate cancer, painkiller addiction, viral meningitis and back surgery. But in spite of his poor health, Lewis insists on hosting the marathon 21-hour event, as he has for 36 years, instead of turning it over to another entertainer.

Lewis' courage astounded everybody working on the show. Hour after hour, he kept plugging away, although there were times when his breathing was dangerously shallow.

"We had oxygen backstage for him," says one telethon insider.

"Sometimes he needed it desperately. He would clasp the mask to his face and take deep breaths."

"The pure oxygen would give him a lift and help him keep his energy up."

One of the backstage staff asked the veteran funnyman, "Are you OK, Mr. Lewis? Should you be working so hard?"

Lewis tried to laugh and said, "Thanks for the thought, buddy. But I just gotta do it."

Members of the production team thought he must have been working against his doctor's orders.

"Our hearts were in our mouths," says one staffer. "It seemed at times that he was risking his life - but he kept saying the show had to go on."

At one point, sweat was running down Lewis' face and he grimaced in pain. Suddenly, he started to sing the old song lyrics, "I'm in the mood for love," to himself, but changed the words to "I'm in the mood for sleep..."

Then he rested his head on a desk for a few moments, while sitting in a wheelchair.

But within minutes, he had to be on camera again. He mopped his face, broke into a smile that hid the pain he was feeling and told his viewers, "You folks are so great. You've got the biggest hearts in the world."

And the showbiz legend's extraordinary effort paid off. This year, he generated a record \$56.8 million in pledges to help fight muscular dystrophy.

"I was just in awe of his courage and determination," adds the friend. "The telethon raised a record amount this year and I'm sure that was partly because the TV viewers saw just how much pain Jerry was enduring."

- ROBIN MIZRAHI

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