



Jean Shepherd at Monmouth College.

(Press Photo)

SHOW NOTES

Shepherd's View

By JOAN PIKULA

WEST LONG BRANCH — I feel like shouting something ridiculous, like: "Radio Lives!" or "Long Live Jean Shepherd!" But, then, maybe it isn't so ridiculous after all.

A long time ago a college professor I respected very much told me about Jean Shepherd — at least told me that she listened to him every night, all night. And if you knew the professor, you would know that's saying a whole lot for Jean Shepherd.

But radio never was my medium so I never did hear him — not until last night when he spoke at Monmouth College, the second of five guests in a five-program lecture series being sponsored by the Jersey Shore Branch of the American Association of University Women, the Central Jersey Bank and Trust Co., and the N.J. Natural Gas Co.

The feeling I have now — after listening to a highly exuberant, seemingly off-the-cuff dramatic monologue that lasted almost two hours — is that I missed a lot all these years by not tuning in to WOR at 10:15 p.m.

Shepherd's talents are two-fold: He has a view of the mundane everyday happenings of life that moves them into the realm of the absurd; and he has the ability to transmit that view. He's done it in writing (screenplays, a Broadway play, short pieces for magazines, a novel), and he's done it orally, on the air, during lectures.

You couldn't actually call Shepherd's discourse in the college gym last night a lecture. I mean, he climbed up onto that platform stage, dungarees bagging down his legs, stripped shirt open at the neck, jacket tails flapping in the breeze, stepped into the circle of light provided for him and launched into a monologue that picked up momentum as he spun it out.

He spent some time spearing television commercials with his wry wit then moved on to recount his ideas and experiences about school, where "you can smell the ancient crud-covered ideas." He told about life from the back of the classroom, often stirring our own memories of things long forgotten, and pulled the wandering tales together with lines like: "How many of you have had the feeling all your life that half the class has had the class?" or, the one and ONLY thing he learned in all his eight years of grammar school — "Bolivia exports tin."

It's hard to imagine Shepherd sitting in a radio studio, hooked into the system with earphones, depending on a cool, impersonal microphone to deliver his ideas. Yet that's the way he spends most of his conscious hours. It's the way he chose after a couple of years in the Army, some time in college, and a small flirtation with television. He started out in Cincinnati in 1949, moved to Philadelphia and then back to Cincinnati. Finally, in 1955, he made the move to New York — and has been there ever since.

Some people might call him a philosopher, I guess. He has his own view of the world, and he's pretty good at communicating it.

He moves around a great deal while talking, frequently putting his hands on his hips or his knees; he wipes his face frequently, gestures with his hands, paces. And he laughs a lot, his face dissolving into a confusion of lines and sparkling eyes.

The audience here was not a student audience. There were only a few young faces in the crowd of a couple of thousand. Mainly the people there were the ones who grew up with radio and who have never replaced the magic of it with television. They laughed out loud at the high points of the stories and hung onto the words between, anticipating the next crest.

What a pleasure to find someone who can make you laugh — not because he can tell a smutty story, but because he can make you see that life is really funny. All you have to do is look at it right . . .