

## DVD Review: 'Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work' Should Have Been a Contender

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on December 21, 2010 - 12:11pm

- [Anne Sundberg](#) [2]
- [DVD Review](#) [3]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [4]
- [IFC Films](#) [5]
- [Joan Rivers](#) [6]
- [Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work](#) [7]
- [Kathy Griffin](#) [8]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [9]
- [Ricki Stern](#) [10]
- [The Apprentice](#) [11]
- [Theater, TV, DVD & Blu-Ray](#) [12]

CHICAGO – Anyone who considers Joan Rivers to be little more than a plasticized sight gag is advised to check out Ricki Stern and Annie Sundberg's wonderful documentary, a sorely deserving (and unfairly snubbed) contender in this year's Oscar race. The film invites viewers to look under Rivers' immobile Botox mask and observe the angry, brilliant, brutally honest and fiercely insecure woman hiding beneath.

Though her dreams of becoming a serious actress have remained unrealized, Rivers' trailblazing comedy paved the way for cutting-edge female comics from Kathy Griffin to Sarah Silverman. It becomes quickly apparent that Rivers' deformed features are the result of a desperate spirit that refuses to grow old, retire and be labeled a legend. She's gradually become the punch-line of her own jokes about age, beauty, identity and especially plastic surgery. Some time after her husband Edgar committed suicide, Rivers joked that she was the reason he did it, because while they were making love, she took the bag off her head.



DVD Rating: **4.5/5.0**

Behind every self-deprecating comic is a tale of heartbreak, yet Rivers is anything but self-pitying. In fact, she never gives herself a break. When her calendar consists primarily of blank pages, she literally feels as if her entire life has been a failure. This is a woman bound and determined to either die laughing, or die in the midst of laughter elicited from the mouths of adoring fans. The stage has become her life. While coping with the loss of her husband, Rivers and her daughter Melissa co-starred in a TV-movie where they played themselves coping with Edgar's death. Rivers admits that it "probably sounded sick" to most people, but it somehow proved to be "healing" for her in the long run.



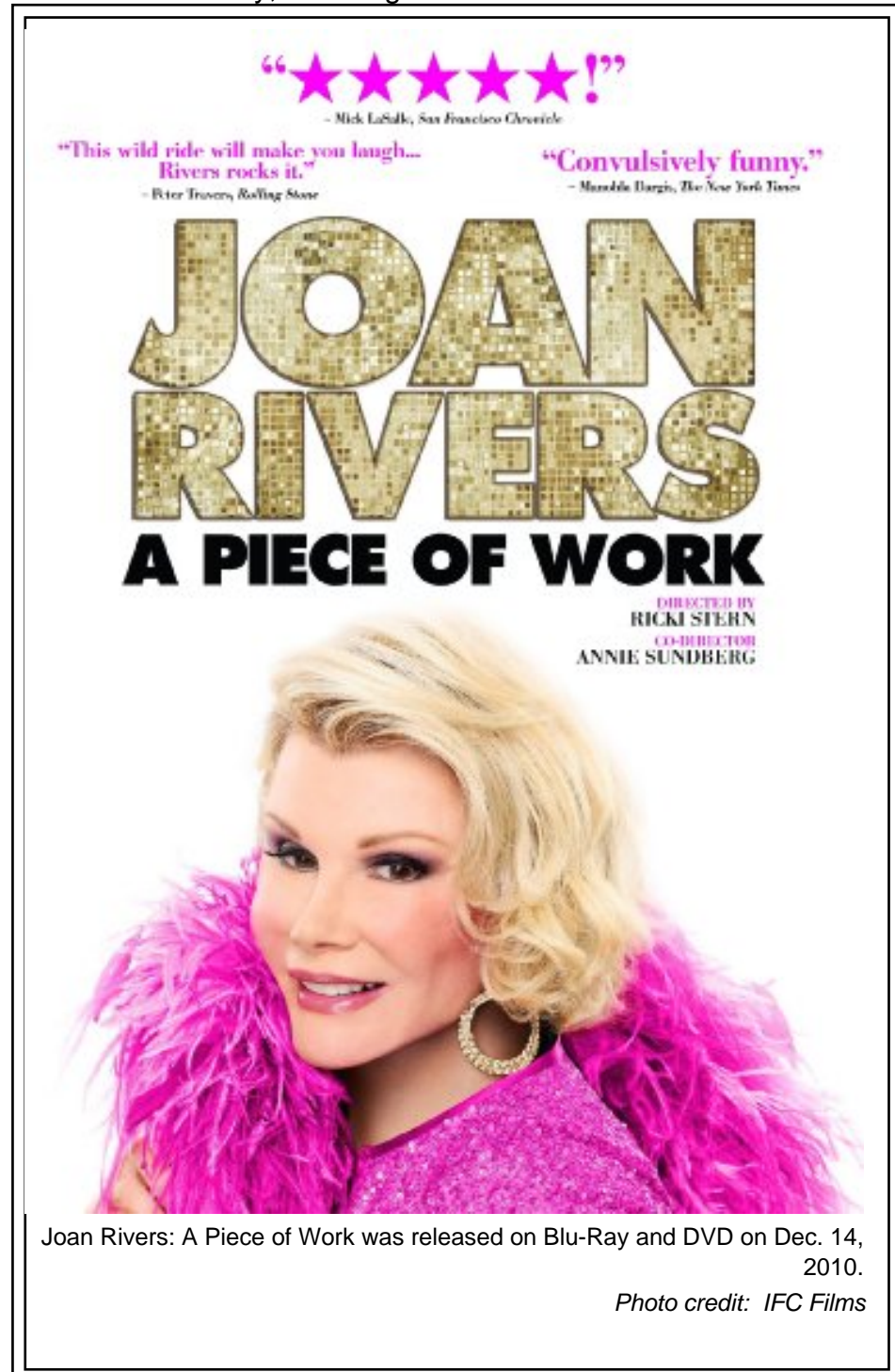
Ricki Stern and Annie Sundberg follow Joan Rivers through a year of her crazy life in Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work.

*Photo credit: IFC Films*

Instead of attempting to superficially summarize their subject's life in a nutshell, Stern and Sundberg opt for more of a fly-on-wall approach, following Rivers through a year of her tightly scheduled, fast-paced, jam-packed life. We see the interiors of her house, exuding an extravagance that would've made Marie Antoinette blush. We see Rivers toiling away at an autobiographical play that earns rapturous

applause from audiences, but is panned by London critics (causing the discouraged star to ditch it). We meet Billy Sammeth, Rivers' longtime manager who always seems to disappear exactly at the moment when he's needed most. We also finally understand why Rivers participated in the humiliating "Celebrity Apprentice," since the show would force her onto NBC, the network that refused to invite her back ever since her fall-out with Johnny Carson.

"A Piece of Work" is a masterful portrait of a life lived to the hilt. If the recent stand-up footage in the film is of any indication, Rivers is as raw and bracing as ever, mining the humor in every sacred topic imaginable. Her anger at life's inherent unfairness has become the primary fuel behind her comedy, and laughter has become her source of healing.



There's an unforgettable moment when Rivers finds herself to be a hilarious fish-out-of-water while performing at a casino in northern Wisconsin. Her joke about Helen Keller angers an audience member whose son is deaf. The heckling devolves into a shouting match, as Rivers defends the need for comedy in times of tragedy. Though Rivers ends up winning back her audience, she leaves the casino clearly rattled, and expresses her sympathy for the man, noting that his outburst probably gave him catharsis.

Perhaps Rivers's startling candidness in this documentary will provide her with a considerable amount of catharsis. She certainly will have deserved it. Though Rivers will never be remembered as a serious actress, "A Piece of Work" proves to the cynical masses that this is one comedy legend who deserves to be taken seriously. Just don't call her a legend.

"Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work" is presented in its 1.78:1 aspect ratio, and includes a half hour of deleted scenes, the best of which is Rivers' visit to a voting station where she asks a McCain voter out to coffee so they can "cancel each other out." There's a few memorable insights that could've easily been included in the final cut, such as when Rivers reveals the details of her will, which states that she is not be artificially resuscitated unless she still possesses the ability to "get onstage and do an hour." A 12-minute Q & A at the film's Sundance premiere shows Rivers soaking up the love of adoring fans. She highlights comic Lynne Koplitz as the next big thing, while citing "Spaceballs" and "Muppets Take Manhattan" as her last big moments in film.

Despite the disc's wealth of extras, the directors themselves remain tight-lipped about their own perspective on the material. Rivers is allowed to dominate the audio commentary, which is easily the funniest and most purely enjoyable commentary track of the year. She seems to have a self-deprecating quip and poignant anecdote for every shot, even the throwaway ones. While watching a transitional shot of two boats passing each other, Rivers sighs, "That's like me and my last husband." Her comic arsenal is clearly fully loaded, as she comes up with news gags for various sequences. While regarding her blank calendar, Rivers laughs, "Even Stevie Wonder would say I'm in trouble...It looks like Bernie Madoff's dance card!" The only moments she has trouble viewing are those featuring Edgar. As usual, beneath all the humor is a startling

amount of bracing honesty. When asked about her role as a social satirist, Rivers says, “My whole life is social commentary on a shallow level.”

*‘Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work’ is released by IFC Films and features Joan Rivers, Melissa Rivers, Larry A. Thompson, Mark Phillips, Kathy Griffin and Don Rickles. It was directed by Ricki Stern and Anne Sundberg. It was released on Dec. 14th, 2010. It is rated R.*



[13]

By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [14]

Staff Writer

HollywoodChicago.com

[matt@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:matt@hollywoodchicago.com) [13]

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- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/joan-rivers>
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