

Arts Beat



The Culture at Large

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Billy Crystal Reads for an Audience, Prompting Laughter and a Surprise

By JOHN SCHWARTZ

When Billy Crystal read selections from his forthcoming book on Thursday night, the audience was expecting an evening of laughs. They got them — but they also got something they were not expecting.

Speaking at the Cantor Auditorium at his alma mater, New York University, Mr. Crystal was delivering chapters from “Still Foolin’ Em: Where I’ve Been, Where I’m Going, and Where the Hell Are My Keys?” (Macmillan). The book, which will go on sale Sept. 10, is part memoir and part standup routine committed to paper, with musings on life, complaints about getting older and jokes about his reproductive equipment that are unprintable here. The purpose of the reading, he explained beforehand, was to record some of the book before a live audience so that he could slip those chapters into the coming audiobook.

This was Mr. Crystal’s crowd, a hometown audience for a Bronx-born entertainer. He read like the comedy professional that he is, using an iPad as a teleprompter and occasionally repeating lines he botched so that the audiobook producers could edit a clean version. The crowd, who paid \$250 to get in — the money will finance a scholarship named for Mr. Crystal’s late mother — both tittered and roared with laughter.

But then Mr. Crystal got to his final selection of the evening, about buying a burial plot, and reached a few lines about hoping that he dies before his wife Janice, because “I would miss her.” And he stopped talking. He choked up. The audience went still, as if a few hundred people were holding their breath at an unscripted and very real moment in a polished performance — and for many of them, choking up as well, and probably thinking of their own lives and spouses.

And then, chaos. Mr. Crystal fumbled at the iPad and knocked it off its stand, barely catching it before it could skitter off the lectern and crash to the floor. And he cursed, floridly and with great force. “This is why I miss PAPER!” he shouted, regaining his comic timing, but still discombobulated as the tablet refused to show him his text. “Now I know how George Bush got through the White House,” he joked.

And he got back to reading, repeating, “I would miss her” and talking through a list of things, big and small, that have made up their lives together since he first saw Janice Goldfinger in a bikini at the age of 18.

He finished, and the crowd was on its feet with a standing ovation that lasted a very long time. Then they went out into a night full of rain and resolutions to seize the day.
