

A JOE of All Trades

Rebounding from nearly becoming a politician, what's next on Joe Piscopo's agenda?

by Nick DiUlio
Photography by
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standing outside my office just off Route 70 in Medford, I wait in the ice cream puddle heat for Joe Piscopo to arrive. Not twenty minutes prior, I got a call from the former Saturday Night Live star's personal assistant, who informed me Mr. Piscopo would be in Cherry Hill for a promotional event and could stop by to have a sit-down with me on his way home to Central Jersey. With

haste, the interview was arranged and now I pace the parking lot, realizing I have absolutely no idea what vehicle to expect the "Ebony and Ivory" faux-crooner to be driving.

But I guess I should have known.

After all, I am about to interview a former television-turned-semi-movie star—one probably recognized more for his penchant for fitness and bodybuilding than any Oscar-worthy performances of his past. Someone who had just declined to run for



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New Jersey’s coveted gubernatorial seat, even after several of his champions had petitioned, “If Arnold can do it, why not Joe?” So, as Piscopo’s sleek, black Hummer turns off the highway and heads in my general direction I think, “Of course.”

It doesn’t take long to survey Piscopo’s motivational landscape, to hypothesize why he should want to entertain the thought of throwing his lounge hat into New Jersey’s boiling and somewhat mired political ring. As the door to his battle-ready beast of a car shuts behind him, I notice for the first time what his vanity plates declare for all the world to see: JRZBORN.

Well, there you have it.

Pleasantries exchanged, we move into my office where I know I have about 20 minutes of his attention. But just before the tape recorder rolls, Piscopo leans in a little closer and, in a half-whisper befitting almost any character from a Martin Scorsese mob film, asks, “So, uh, you an Italian kid?”

“Oh yeah. Half anyway,” I say. My mother is Irish-English, I tell him, but my father was born and raised in South Philadelphia in a house my exceedingly Italian-American grandmother still calls home. After a 30-second dissertation on my Mediterranean pedigree that left me feeling more like I was being “made” than preparing to ask a few questions, Piscopo’s face lights up. He leans back in his chair, undoes his suit jacket and—with characteristic Italian gesticulation—says, “Oh that’s great. Fabulous.”

Phew. He approves.

At 54, Piscopo resembles much of the man I remember watching as a kid of the ‘80s—with a few noticeable exceptions. Still sporting a face that contains all the malleable animation of a caricaturist’s dreams, he is about 90 percent jovial energy and only (to my surprise) about 10 percent machismo. He is a trimmer version of the self he promoted during the bodybuilding days of his post-SNL life, and it’s surprisingly effortless to get him glowing, although severity, it seems, is never too far in the distance. Joe Piscopo has the guiltless, wide-eyed air of the recently saved.

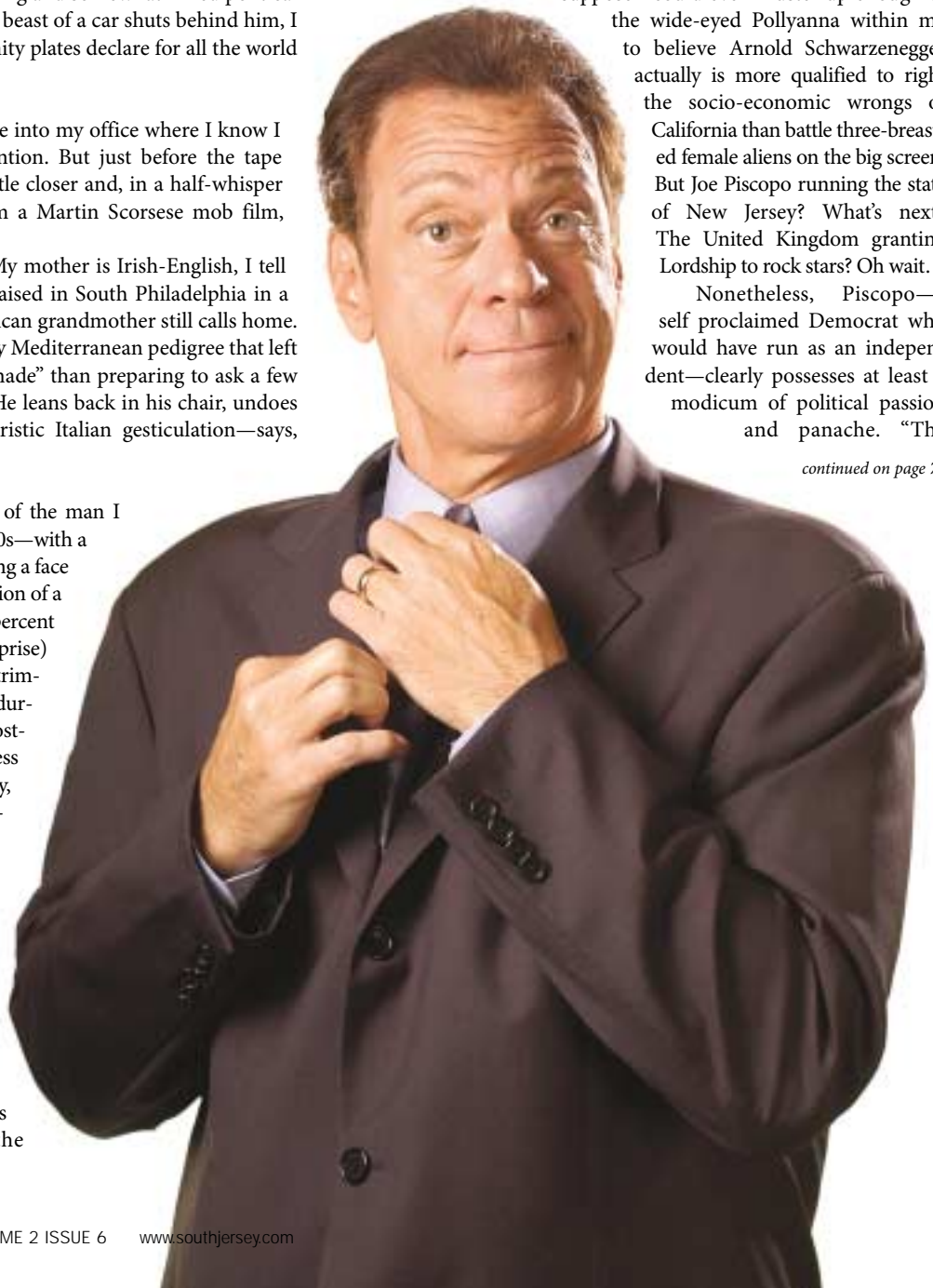
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When I first heard about the prospect of Piscopo running for office shortly after former New Jersey Governor James McGreevey resigned in a flurry of controversy over McGreevey’s admission of an adulterous affair with another man, I thought it was a joke. Okay, perhaps former professional wrestler Jesse “The Body” Ventura’s victory in the 1998 Minnesota gubernatorial race was a political fluke. And I suppose I could even muster up enough of

the wide-eyed Pollyanna within me to believe Arnold Schwarzenegger actually is more qualified to right the socio-economic wrongs of California than battle three-breasted female aliens on the big screen. But Joe Piscopo running the state of New Jersey? What’s next? The United Kingdom granting Lordship to rock stars? Oh wait...

Nonetheless, Piscopo—a self-proclaimed Democrat who would have run as an independent—clearly possesses at least a modicum of political passion and panache. “The

continued on page 70



rank and file of the Democrats and Republicans are disenfranchised,” he says, favoring a contemplative, diplomatic expression of solidarity over the usual whiskey-toned ebullience of his public persona. “They really feel it’s all about special interest and special power. And that’s really what it’s all about, serving the very few that vote. People thought they needed a homegrown kinda guy, someone who had no baggage and would just make an opinion. I didn’t care what anybody thought or anybody said.”

With one exception: his wife. After months of speculation over whether or not Piscopo would accept the goading of Doug Friedline—Ventura’s now famous campaign manager turned Piscopo-advocate—Joe decided against running in the upcoming November race, citing the concerns of Kimberly and his four children, three of whom are under the age of seven. And even though he remains concerned about the state of our state, family comes first and his was not too fond of the idea of taking up residency in Trenton.

“Kimberly said, ‘You ain’t goin’ nowhere,’” he says with a chuckle. “The young family was the thing. Kimberly said, ‘They’re going to eat you alive. They’ll make things up, even if there’s nothing.’ So it was pretty much Kimberly and the young family.”

Piscopo’s is a personal history that does not lack the occasional fleck or two of controversy. During the late 1980s, he was accused of steroid use—a charge he vehemently denied. In addition, Piscopo went on to divorce his then-wife, getting betrothed to Kimberly, his son’s 18-year-old babysitter, shortly thereafter. And while he neglects to raise these specifics during our conversation, he does make allusions to a fear of slung mud.

“I’m true to myself and I would never change that. I say what I want, I know who I am. I’ve made mistakes. I’ve had failures,” he says. “I’ve had successes. I will tell you what I am and if you don’t like it, don’t vote for me. This is who I am and I would never change because of the special interests.”

Occasionally I have to remind myself Piscopo is not running. When talking about the hot-button issues affecting the Garden State today—astronomical property taxes and school budget crises to cite a few—he is every bit the concerned public figure, trying not to slip into politicianese, remaining uncompromisingly disgruntled in his eloquence. Currently he says his vote is leaning towards Democratic candidate Jon Corzine but that he doesn’t know Republican candidate Doug Forrester well enough to make a thoroughly-informed decision. Moreover, Piscopo maintains he has not yet ruled out the possibility of getting involved in politics—just don’t expect the announcement anytime soon.

“I’ll tell you what; if Doug Forrester and Jon Corzine start sleeping with each other, I am going in. For the record: if there’s an implosion

like we had a year ago, I was going in then and I would go in if something were to happen [now]. We deserve better than that," he says. "I'll look at it in the future. I would definitely consider it. I enjoy it. I understand the issues. I may be a slow learner in life but I have a real curious knack to pick up issues at a glance. I don't know if it's because I was brought up in the state. I don't know what it is. I dig the issues. And I find it more interesting than anything in entertainment. What's wrong with me? I don't know."

It all comes back to his love (obsession) of the state. Piscopo, who was born in Bloomfield and currently calls Hunterdon County his home, seems to forever be engaged in a wily transfiguration that leaves him the bodily manifestation of New Jersey; the seeming framework for so much of his personality and the inspiration for so many of his projects, including the Positive Impact Foundation, which seeks to provide positive media images of underprivileged children.

"The sincerity of the people [of New Jersey] is great, because if you are real with us as a people of the state, then we will die for you. We will be loyal; and we will go to the wall and be your best friend," he says. "But if you show any amount of insincerity—and this is what I really love about the texture and character of somebody from New Jersey—any false sense of reality about you, then we don't want anything to do with you. We'll turn on you so quick. It's all about being genuine. If you're disingenuous then you don't belong in this state."

As of late, Piscopo makes no apologies for his celebrity status hovering just around the level of those one might see on "The Surreal Life." He even engaged in a little self-deprecation last year when he appeared on The Today Show and told host Katie Couric, "I'm not on the A-list or B-list. I'm sort of on the wait-list." He knows his place and, at the end of the day, seems as content as ever.

"I'm just a working actor, a working entertainer basically. That's all I ever wanted to be, a celebrity that kind of gets in the way. And I never wanted to be a star because all I want to do is work," he says. "And you always gotta come back home here. You always gotta come back to Jersey. That's what builds the strength of communities. That's what makes the state strong. And that doesn't happen everywhere else. Even Bruce [Springsteen] was born to run. But where's he living now?" ■

Joe Piscopo Saturday Nights The Sands Casino Hotel August, October and December

Vocal performances in tribute to fellow NJ native Frank Sinatra, Piscopo welcomes some of his closest friends to the stage for an unforgettable evening of laughs, music and antics. Tickets available by calling Ticketmaster at 800-736-1420 or by visiting www.ticketmaster.com.