

REALITY SHOW

SKIN DEEP

Entertainer Frank Marino uses plastic surgery to keep a safe distance from the aging process



Entertainer Frank Marino stands in his doctor's office one day after undergoing cosmetic surgery on his neck and eyes.

By SONYA PADGETT • REVIEW-JOURNAL

Dressed in a blue jogging suit with his face and head wrapped in layers of gauze, Frank Marino sits on the edge of an exam table in his doctor's office, looking more like a boxer on the losing end of 12 rounds than the king of Las Vegas drag queens.

Shades of purple and red highlight his swollen eyes, giving him a just-been-pummeled look, and his demeanor is that of the heavily medicated. But this 41-year-old funnyman, celebrating a 20-year run on the Strip impersonating comedian Joan Rivers, can't help but crack wise about his situation:

"Usually I keep my audiences in stitches. Now I'm the one in stitches, literally," he says, just getting warmed up.

"My motto is no pain, no gain; I'm keeping up with the Joneses. I'd rather get out of an old car with a new face than a new car with an old face."

Marino underwent plastic surgery Dec. 8

in Las Vegas, nothing new to him but more drastic than anything he has had done in the past, which includes "a nose job, chin and cheek implants, eye-lift, laser peel under the eyes, liposuction, and routine injections of botox, Restalin and collagen."

He planned on having a little nip and tuck later this year, but an opportunity arose that he just couldn't pass up. His doctor, board-certified plastic surgeon Goesel Anson, was asked to appear on the Discovery Health Channel's "Plastic Surgery: Before and After," scheduled to air in March. She needed a youngish patient,

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Frank Marino as Joan Rivers is shown before, above left, and after, above right, his most recent plastic surgery in early December. Marino has kept his look fresh and up to date during 20 years of performing as the comedian. The real Rivers is pictured at right.



▶ SURGERY: In three weeks, Marino is back onstage at the Riviera

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someone with a hook, as it were, and thought of Marino immediately. The show wanted another hook, so they invited him to have a face-lift along with his mother, Mary Mastrangelo, 58.

"They liked the idea of a celebrity and his mother doing the surgery together," Marino says.

Now, the day after his miniface-lift, Marino is back for a recheck.

"I'm going to admit, surgery is addicting," he says. "It makes me feel better internally."

Not that he needed major work, he says, but Marino did want to do something special for the premiere of "Miss Congeniality: Armed and Fabulous," starring Sandra Bullock and featuring Marino as himself. The premiere is scheduled for March in Las Vegas.

Marino adds he also wants to stay ahead of the natural aging process; jowls on a drag queen are a little distracting. And he's more than happy to talk about it and allow a photographer to take pictures,



Dr. Goesel Anson, a board-certified plastic surgeon based in Las Vegas, checks Frank Marino's surgical wounds the day after operating.

but not of the really gory stuff.

"A lot of people have plastic surgery and hide it but I don't," he says, adding that he hopes the cable show, and this story, bring a new level of acceptance to cosmetic procedures.

The doctor, petite with a head of dark curls, comes in and takes a look at her five hours' worth of handiwork: in layman's terms, a neck-lift — with liposuction to define the

jawline — and eye-lift. Marino proclaims his affection for Anson, joking she has inspired him to become a plastic surgeon.

"I love that it's a woman doctor because they pay more attention in school," he says to a reporter, then turns to Anson.

"Do I look good?" "Yes, you really do. You see this bruising here, this isn't bad," she says, gesturing to the coloring around his eyes.

The final results won't be known for another six months, she tells him, and he will experience more bruising and discomfort in the coming days. Overall though, Anson is pleased with the results.

"Now that it's over the good part will come," Marino says at the end of his checkup. "I don't want to look 21, I want to look good for my age."

Fast forward three weeks, to Dec. 29, on the day of Marino's first show after the surgery. He's had just enough time for the bruising to fade but the swelling will be around for another few weeks.

"My eyes are all puffy, my ears are numb for at least another month, my cheeks feel tight and I can't even feel my neck," he says, comparing the lack of sensation to a Novocaine-induced numbness.

His main concern isn't the after-effects of the surgery, though. It's a raging cold he caught flying home from his annual vacation, a trip to Disney World.

"I feel terrible. I'm nervous about going onstage with such a severe cold," he says. "I'm gonna be a makeup artist tonight. Today will be a test

for me."

Marino gets physical in his show, "An Evening at La Cage," in the Riviera, changing costumes 17 times and delivering a stand-up routine that requires exaggerated facial expressions and lots of movement.

"I think the physical exertion will help me heal quicker," he says, putting a positive spin on the upcoming performance. "I'm looking forward to practicing getting my mobility back. If I survive tonight it'll be a miracle."

His concern proves unfounded; Marino takes to the stage like he hasn't been gone a day, clipping earrings to numb ears and putting together the perfect look with his wigs, makeup and costumes. The day after, he sounds clearer, more energetic.

With all of the entertainment options available on the Strip, Marino sees the surgery as just one way to keep his act, and himself, fresh and competitive. It's also a great opportunity for a little self-promotion. Not that there

is any shortage of such opportunities. In February, he's scheduled to receive the second star in the Las Vegas Walk of Stars, following Wayne Newton.

The honor may have come at just the right time in his career; though Marino knows he will be with the show through 2005, he doesn't know what he will be doing after that, other than building a new home in the valley.

"We're in our 20th year with the show and I'm dedicating 100 percent of this year to working on the Strip. Then I am donating 2006 to myself. I'm hoping this year takes me to the next level in entertainment. I don't know if I'm going to go to New York and do Broadway or do more movies," he says. "I don't know if I'm going to get out of drag and start doing movies as a boy."

Marino says, when it comes to doing drag, he'll know when it's time to retire.

"As long as I can put myself back together and look good as a woman, I'll do it," he says. "I won't go onstage and embarrass myself."