

LIVING EXTRA LARGE

Bernie Brillstein is very rich. Here the mogul answers *Talk's* questions about failure, success, and the best sandwich money can buy. **By Holly Peterson Photo by Dafydd Jones**

TALK: How did you break into show business?

BERNIE BRILLSTEIN: The William Morris mailroom. The mailroom was the greatest. My weight has always been a plus. I look different from most people—separate from the pack. So that was good. I was making friends. Not kissing ass.

TALK: Did you think you were going to make a fortune?

BRILLSTEIN: All I wanted to do was make \$25,000 a year. I would've sold my soul for that.

TALK: Were you eager for success?

BRILLSTEIN: Here's what I thought: That I understood show business probably better than my contemporaries and better even than a lot of my bosses at William Morris. It's in your gut.

TALK: Were you afraid of failure?

BRILLSTEIN: *Death of a Salesman* scared the hell out of me. I didn't want to grow old and have William Morris fire me. I knew I'd have to form at least a one-man business with a secretary so I couldn't fire myself.

TALK: When did you make your first million?

BRILLSTEIN: Probably 1975, but 1978 was the big year. That was the year of *The Muppet Show*, *Saturday Night Live*, and the Blues Brothers. During that six-month period, I thought I had invented show business.

TALK: What's the best deal you ever completed?

BRILLSTEIN: Selling *The Muppet Show*. Because I kept 90 percent of the merchandising for Jim Henson.

TALK: Are you still afraid of failing?

BRILLSTEIN: Look, this past year I produced *The Martin Short Show*. I believe Marty Short is one of the top five most talented people in this business. But what he does for some reason didn't translate into the hit I thought it would be. I feel I let him down.

TALK: Did you ever make a bad decision?

BRILLSTEIN: Getting married, the first three times.



"My weight has always been a plus." Brillstein yachting in Monaco, 1999.

TALK: What is a vulgar display of wealth, to you?

BRILLSTEIN: When people think they're experts on life. That really makes me cringe. Money doesn't make you an expert on anything.

TALK: What bothers you about rich people?

BRILLSTEIN: I've seen them act like pigs. But God has the book upstairs. He's there with a beard,

he's on the cloud, and if you talk bad to a waiter or stiff a cab driver, he knows it.

TALK: What's the most self-indulgent thing you've ever done with your money?

BRILLSTEIN: Gambled.

TALK: What advice would you give someone who is suddenly rich?

BRILLSTEIN: Get a business manager.

TALK: Is there a dream house you haven't built?

BRILLSTEIN: No. I've had the houses. Every time I had a house in the mountains, I got divorced. Every time I had a house at the beach, I got divorced. I have one house now and it's just fine. You live out all those stupid things as a young person making it.

TALK: What's the best thing money can buy?

BRILLSTEIN: Medical attention.

TALK: How do wealthy people surprise you?

BRILLSTEIN: Here's the way I describe wealth in California or New York: You go to these fancy, formal dinners for whatever the charity is. They give away gift bags and wealthy people fight for them. Who doesn't like something for nothing?

TALK: Do you chase bargains?

BRILLSTEIN: I had a mother-in-law who said, "When you go on Rodeo never pay what they ask. Say, 'What's the real price?'" I tried, and sure enough 30 percent came right off. I was shocked. I'd been paying full price all these years. I thought I was such a putz. But that's the only time I've ever bargained.

TALK: Did you give your parents money?

BRILLSTEIN: My mother died before I had any money. I took care of my father for 25 years. It was the greatest pleasure in my life.

TALK: What do you think about all these kids, all the Internet billionaires?

BRILLSTEIN: I call it Nothing.com. Because I've never heard of businesses doing great with no profits.

TALK: If you lost it all, what would you miss the most?

BRILLSTEIN: When you get down to it, it's a hotel suite, it's room service, and it's traveling first class. I swear to God. What is better than getting into bed at 11:00 at night and ordering room service? Club sandwich and french fries. A Diet Coke. Extra ketchup. God, the Bookmaker sandwich, at the Dorchester in London. Isn't it great when they wheel that thing in? ■