

Funny Girl

Comedienne Judy Gold's latest work probes into the psyche

of Jewish mothers—especially her own *By Bill Glovin*



Judy Gold RC'84 takes the stage at the Gotham Comedy Club in Manhattan and immediately targets a familiar face: "Weren't you here last night? You're a f**king stalker!" she screams. Before the alleged stalker has a chance to blink, she's talking adoption: "I was walking down Broadway on the Upper West Side this afternoon and I almost fell over myself when I saw an Asian baby—with Asian parents!" As laughter fills the room, she lowers her voice and mumbles into the microphone, "I hate my life."

Gold's 20 minutes of stand-up are filled with a combination of manic intensity, introspection, and Jersey girl sarcasm that has helped her build a career as one of the most successful women comics in the country. A familiar face on TV and a regular in Manhattan's top comedy clubs, she's the host of *At the Multiplex with Judy Gold* on HBO and one of the comics who told "the joke" in the 2005 film *The Aristocrats*.

But Gold's first love is stand-up, an outlet to vent about her 83-year-old Jewish mother, her former partner, Sharon, and their sons, Henry, 9, and Ben, 4. "Let me tell you about my really annoying kids," she tells the audience. "I was lucky enough to have them for the entire month of August. Now I realize why mothers who homeschool their children end up drowning them." Later, she turns the heat up on her heritage: "My kids have two Jewish mothers. That's enough for anyone to want to f**king kill themselves."

Gold, 43, first developed her sarcastic brand of humor when classmates teased her about towering over them. Putting them in their place came naturally. "My feet were so big that my mother had to take me to Manhattan to buy me special shoes," says Gold, who is 6'3" with a medium build and an expressive face behind her glasses. After graduating from Clark High School, she attended Rutgers-New Brunswick/Piscataway, where her father and her older brother and sister had all earned degrees.

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Raised in a kosher home, she recalls tasting her first cheeseburger in Campbell, a College Avenue campus river dorm. At Rutgers, she sang in the Kirkpatrick Choir and majored in music, determined not to end up like her tax-attorney father, who had little passion for his work. In her sophomore year, her task in a Secret Santa grab bag was to get up and make fun of her dormmates in a talent show. "That was my epiphany," she says over lunch near her Upper West Side apartment. "Making people laugh from a stage was a feeling I had never gotten from anything before."

In Ruth Gold's garden apartment in Clark, family photos dominate the decor. "My daughter calls every day; I should be getting residuals," wisecracks Ruth, who has trouble walking and uses a motorized scooter to shop. "I come out with things just because I know Judith can use what I say. People ask if I get insulted that my daughter makes fun of me in front of the whole world. I don't care. What difference does it make?"

The Golds first saw their daughter perform as a student at The Ledge, a onetime river dorm café. "I didn't like the language that Judith used and I still don't," says Ruth. But she's also quick to kvell. "My daughter was so determined to make it, plus she's an absolutely fantastic mother, schlepping those kids to Hebrew school and never missing an open school night." Leaning in for emphasis, she adds: "And she's a much better mother than that other one."

After graduating from Rutgers, Gold moved to Manhattan, where she supported herself working office jobs during the day while taking acting lessons and competing for slots in comedy clubs late into the night. Male comics were her main competition, she says; regulars on the scene at the time included Chris Rock, Lewis Black, and Larry David. "Stand-up gives you a sense of great power and command, and that's probably why it's so dominated by men," says Gold. "It's also a very lonely profession for a woman, especially when you're on the road and don't feel like hanging at the bar." Gold developed a thick skin when she hit the road to perform at clubs throughout the country: "It took years of working places you wouldn't send your worst enemy to to develop good timing and delivery. I've been called everything you could think of—and worse."

She needed a thick skin in November when *Nightline* featured her mother on a program about straight parents learning that their children are gay: "All the other mothers were like, 'After my son told me, we went shopping, we made a floral arrangement, he did my hair, decorated the

house,'" says Gold. "My mother told *Nightline*, 'Judith's lifestyle is not my cup of tea. At the ShopRite, people look at me funny because of it.' I told my mother, 'that's because they're afraid you're going to run them over with your f**king scooter.'"

One of Gold's favorite stories involves her mother struggling with telling her friends about the conception of her daughter's first son. She is suddenly channeling Ruth skirting the issue of lesbian motherhood: "Judith's roommate takes in the mail when Judith travels and—when Sharon had a baby—Judith adopted it.' My mother wants people to think that we were walking down the street and a hypodermic needle was flying around with sperm in it—and it happened to land in Sharon's vagina."

Despite Ruth's disapproval and the recent breakup of her 19-year-long relationship, Gold is mostly content. "Sometimes I *do* hate my life, but in general I think I'm a very happy person. Everything is exaggerated on stage. I definitely use the anger as fuel. I think it would overtake me if I didn't."

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With joint custody of her two kids, Gold prefers to stay close to her apartment in Manhattan and her home in Provincetown, having worked for several years as a writer and producer on *The Rosie O'Donnell Show* and costarring in *The Vagina Monologues* off-Broadway in 2001. Having enjoyed the experience of performing in a play—despite being six months pregnant with Ben—she cowrote one called *25 Questions for a Jewish Mother* and brought it to New York last winter. "It's quite a challenge," says Gold. "In it, I play 12 different mothers." The show, which explores the stereotype of the overbearing Jewish mother, has helped Gold better understand her heritage and relationship with her own mother.

Performing a Sunday matinee in front of Ruth in January turned out to be both scary and cathartic. Says Gold, "It was sad for my mother to hear all of the issues that we always avoided discussing, and hard for her because the show is so honest and personal." As Gold confesses to the audience: "To a great extent, so much of my comedy has been based on my mother. But hey, a girl has to make a living." □

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