

Daughter of Holocaust survivors bakes challah live on stage

By Mike Cohen
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MONTREAL – What can be said about a Jewish New Zealand comic actor who bakes challah bread live on stage? In the case of Deb Filler, the critics call her “hilarious.”

The present-day resident of Toronto will bring her 27-character play, appropriately titled *Filler Up!* to the eighth annual Wildside Festival of the Centaur Theatre (453, St - Francois Xavier), which began its run in Montreal Jan. 11 and wraps up on Jan. 22.

Filler says that the challah skit is somewhat biographical. She was actually born in a bakery. Her father was a Holocaust survivor who nearly starved to death in the camps and had a lifelong obsession that food could never be wasted. Her recently widowed mother, also a survivor, had her own issues with food. This produced a passion but highly unusual household. *Filler Up!* asks how do you take the recipe your own? The story of the play surrounds this semi-fictional family, whose offspring inevitably developed self-esteem issues about being overweight, as well as a plethora of hilarious and poignant stories. These include young Deb unknowingly being sent to a fat farm and the bitterness/struggle of being an overweight actress in New York City.

In 1992 Filler performed her celebrated tragic-comic-bio-drama, *Punch Me In the Stomach*, off Broadway at the New York Theatre Workshop and later toured the show throughout the world for 11 years to critical acclaim, including productions in Toronto, Sydney, Hong Kong, San Francisco, Melbourne, Auckland, Seattle, Washington, DC, and Philadelphia. The show will be performed in London in 2005. She studied with Stella Adler and Uta Hagen in New York and made her off-Broadway

debut in the musical comedy Sophie, based on the life of singer Sophie Tucker. *Punch Me In the Stomach* was made into a film by Montreal filmmaker Francine Zuckerman. Filler is currently writing a new comedy about women and money.

Filler says she was knee-high when she started out as a comic. “My mother was the family poetess, entertainer,” she relates. “My grandmother, my mother’s mother from Germany, also. And I had talent as a child. I think they spotted it as I came out of the womb singing. I used to perform as a kid all the time. And one of the things I noticed was that my mother was quite overwhelmed with her relationship with her own mother who was a bullying woman. I could make my mother laugh and my grandmother laugh by becoming my grandmother – so I would be this ‘Al Capone German grandmother.’ And my grandmother would be shocked into laughter and I learnt very early that laughter was a wonderful way of communicating. That’s how it all sort of started.”

Filler has previously performed *Filler Up!* (www.fillerup.ca) at the Friends of Italian Opera English Theatre in Berlin. “It was very redemptive for me, baking bread and breaking bread on stage with Germans,” she told a German newspaper. “Berlin is like New York. It’s a separate country. I’ve never been uncomfortable there. I love it, actually. I could even see myself living there.”

Filler’s mom still resides in New Zealand. “My parents got out of Germany in 1938,” she says. “My grandmother was hell-bent on getting them out. My grandfather, who was a German Iron Cross-awarded hero refused to believe that anything terrible could happen to them. And she was such a strong feminist for her time. She said ‘Either we leave with you, or without you.’ And he went to New Zealand and ended up the rest of his life eating ‘crow’ – humble pie. Had he got his way, we wouldn’t have

lived. I wouldn’t be alive. He knew that and he was always very sorry for having wanted to cause the destruction of his whole family. Unwittingly, of course. It’s just completely overwhelming – the amount of culture, thousands of years of culture and education and beauty that were just wiped out there. It’s very sad because it was such a thriving Jewish community.”

“My mother always says, ‘We didn’t go out and cause problems. We stayed quietly amongst ourselves and made ourselves better.’ The fact that we were so innocent was for her an even greater shock. It’s still a shock. How could that have happened? And there’s no answer to it. The answer is multitudinous. I think that within each person they say there’s a Mother Theresa and an Adolph Hitler. It’s just ‘who’ and ‘when’ and ‘how’ and ‘where’. But hopefully Anne Frank was right – people are basically good. One has to believe that or just curl up and die. And people of good will always find each other. E. M. Forster said that. I think the opposite is true, too. People of bad will find each other. So good-willed people end up clustering around in groups and I feel very fortunate with the friends I have in



Comic Deb Filler’s comedy comes from her past. She was actually born in a bakery.

my life – all people with good will and good intentions. Those sort of people must stick together.”

Filler lived in Israel for a year and recently went back there to perform. “I know there’ll be peace there,” she predicts. “I know there will. I feel that. Within 50 years it will be fine. It’s just in the meantime that it’s dreadful.”