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Laughing Through The Tears

New Zealand native Deb Filler straddles comedy and tragedy in punchy one-woman show.

HEIDI MAE BRATT
SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH WEEK

It's no coincidence that Deb Filler fills her poignant, funny family portrait "Punch Me in the Stomach" with 36 characters.

Thirty-six is double chai.
"I suppose I created characters instead of having children," muses Filler, the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, who was raised in New Zealand, not exactly the epicenter of Jewish life in the Southern Hemisphere.

Certainly when she was living in the "land of no blintzes" and playing with her schoolmates who mistook the green tattooed numerals on her father's arm for his phone number, Filler hadn't a clue that the facts of her life which set her apart from her WASP best friend Felicity were going to be spun into gold later on.

What Filler has created in "Punch Me in the Stomach," which airs Sunday and again on Dec. 10 on Channel 13, is a powerful one-woman show replete with a metagerie of 36 characters, all of which she plays, and many of whom are plucked from her own extended family.

The cast includes her chronically ailing Un-

cle Mendel, who kvetches about his itchy colon; Aunt Vippy, a rain forest-saving Long Island limousine liberal who reasons that if she doesn't eat the steak, the animal would have died in vain; sister Estelle, who hounds her Israeli husband on the cell phone, and of course, Sol Filler, Filler's father and New Zealand's very own celebrity survivor.

Adapted into a film by Canadian director Francine Zuckerman, "Punch Me in the Stomach" captures a balance between black humor, Filler's wacky family and her long-fought struggle for the right, as the daughter of a survivor, to tell her own story of growing up in the shadow of the Holocaust.

But only as an adult, Filler says, did she realize that her disdain for schlepping through the woods stemmed, in part, from the terror tales she heard at the knee of her father, who endured the death marches before he was liberated from concentration camp.

In another side-splitting sequence, Filler turns what should be a simple telephone conversation between two children of survivors trying to meet into an anxiety-filled strategy session of plans and "If God forbid anything happens to me" contingency plans.

"I think the work of children of survivor artists bears witness to something that we've never seen, but that we feel," says Filler, who appeared recently at the Boston Jewish Film Festival for a screening of "Punch Me in the Stomach."

"I didn't really feel I had a choice," says Filler, who is in her early 40s and lives in Toronto. "I had to face up to my history and embrace who I was."

Embracing who she was took some time, not to mention some therapy, but what was crystal clear early on was that Filler was a performer. As a kid, she joined her younger sister and mother in entertaining at family gatherings. "We were the Jewish Von Trapps of New Zealand," she quips. As a youngster, Filler also learned how to soften her father's dark moods: make him laugh.

"Once when he was about to explode," she recalls, "I mimicked his laugh and one of his gestures. He called out to my mother, 'Hey that's me.'"

Hoping to pursue a career in acting, Filler left New Zealand in 1980 and landed in New



Stomach ache: Deb Filler, daughter of a Holocaust survivor, finds a way to balance the pain with some black humor in "Punch Me in the Stomach."

Like other children of survivor artists, Filler, who has been called "the Jewish Anna Deavere Smith" for her powerful impersonations, has also created in "Punch Me in the Stomach," a glimpse at what it's like to be part of the second generation and grow up with Auschwitz as a back-

drop. For instance, Filler makes hysterical hay out of the dread she felt during her childhood Huttmann camping trips, where she and other little Jewish kids had to traipse through the wilds of New Zealand presiding to be Israeli pioneers.

York where she quickly became a habitue of the Lower East Side, performing for black-clad hipsters in smoky, funky art spaces, and singing for the suburban set at Sammy's Famous Romanian Jewish Steak House.

"I was a singing waitress," she recalls. "I'd get up and say, 'I'd like to sing a song from New Zealand, the song which many of us think of as our national anthem, we sing it like a prayer.'" Then she'd shock the seizer out of the staid bridge-and-tunnel crowd by belting out a raucous Yiddish tune.

Yet even in those hard-scabble days, fame wasn't far off. It was in her back seat. One of her odd jobs was driving a car service, chauffeuring Martha Graham, Judy Collins and Leonard Cohen.

On one trip, Filler managed to so impress the musical miserymeister Cohen with her jokes that a decade later he remembered her funny stories and gladly gave her permission to use his music in the film.

But her real turning point came later, shortly after 1990 when she joined her father on what she calls "a whirlwind tour of Eastern European death camps."

Their journey included a chilling stopover at Auschwitz, where her father was interned, and a visit to his Polish hometown, Brzeznow. It was there where Sol Filler finally was able to pay respect to his parents, murdered en masse on Aug. 10, 1942, along with 1,200 others.

It was a blustery, autumn day, Filler recalls, and the candles that they brought to light kept falling over. Ever stoic and in control, Sol Filler directed his daughter to snap pictures of him and the newly erected memorial marking the mass grave. He was nervous, very nervous, Filler remembers, as he posed in every conceivable way before the camera. He couldn't keep still.

"Dad," she whispered to him, "Why don't you say Kaddish."

Sol Filler slowly began the Hebrew prayer, and for first time since they started the trip, his voice caught. Father and daughter let loose.

"It was absolutely cathartic," says Filler. She also felt something stir as she stood there at the grave of her grandmother and grandfather. "I felt them bless me, and I heard them say to me, 'Love your life.' It was then that I determined to do something for them."

As soon as she returned to the States, she began working on "Punch Me in the Stomach." Like dummies, out poured the 36 characters who shape the tragic-comedy. The daughter of a Holocaust survivor, who once learned from her father, a baker, that like bread, laughter is a staple of life, has learned something else.

And that is, "To live, to really live one's life, is the ultimate triumph," she says.

Double chai, indeed. □

"Punch Me in the Stomach" airs Dec. 7 at 10 p.m. and Dec. 10 at 11:30 p.m. on Channel 13.