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One-woman show packs a loving punch

Punch Me In The Stomach

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Starring Deb Filler. Directed by Francine Zuckerman. Playing at the Bloor through Thursday. ★ ★ ★

By JUDY GERSTEL
MOVIE CRITIC

No, *Punch Me In The Stomach* is not about wife abuse or violence.

It's a warm, wry, one-woman celebration of life — in particular, a life growing up Jewish in New Zealand, the daughter of a Holocaust survivor.

Adapted from the New York stage show monologue of Deb Filler, the 72-minute film, a Canadian/New Zealand co-production, is a tasty *tsimmes* — a tangy stew of flavors.

Filler is for the most part successful in avoiding both sentimentality and stereotype, not because she eliminates them but because she circumscribes, neutralizes and builds on them.

She peppers with dark humor the bittersweetness of her father's survival (referring to their "whirlwind tour of the European death camps"). And she affectionately creates characters — mostly family — who are sharply observed and individual, but nevertheless familiar to anyone who grew up among eastern European Jews, or likely any European immigrant community.

The ironic title comes from the urging of an uncle who displays his health and fitness by insisting, "I want you to punch me in the stomach, go ahead, hit me, I won't feel a thing."

Of course, the title also refers to what life itself does to us, and the way the healthiest among us, the survivors, roll with the punches.

Punch Me In The Stomach is, in a way, a counterpoint to *Shine*, also the embellished true story of the child of a Holocaust survivor (in *Shine's* case one who immigrated to Australia).

It's Filler's overriding warmth, relaxed delivery and level of comfort



BITTERSWEET: Deb Filler tackles Jewish life in New Zealand in *Punch Me In The Stomach*.

with the material that's so engaging, as are the characters she creates with the help of accents, make-up, hairdos and minimal props — a pair of glasses worn at the tip of the nose for the radically left New York aunt, a hat and a moustache for her father.

The heart of the film is a tribute to Filler's father who, as a teenager, survived Auschwitz and managed to also

save his brother Mendel.

Filler really does seem to become her father in a scene where he talks about his experiences, supposedly on a New Zealand talk show, thereafter becoming, as Filler puts it acerbically, "a celebrity survivor."

While *Punch Me In The Stomach* is Filler's show, ripe with her talent and sensibility, it's also an achievement for Toronto filmmaker Francine Zuckerman, who co-wrote the screenplay and directed the film.

She adroitly intercuts staged scenes of the show with scenes of Filler "backstage," talking directly to the camera about herself and her show.

Unfortunately, Filler's appearance as she talks to the camera is startlingly severe, almost garish. She wears a turban and a violently red slash of lipstick that make her look more artificial and stagy than when she's on stage. What could have been more intimate and inviting, especially at the beginning, is merely off-putting — particularly the lipstick which she applies in the opening scene.

Some of the show scenes are fairly ingenious. There are huge, exaggerated desk accessories on a librarian's desk to dwarf Filler when she's playing herself as a child, and several witty

photographic backdrops.

Only occasionally does the material seem repetitive or jumbled — for example, a series of quick recaps of the characters at the conclusion of a surprise party for the father.

Zuckerman matches Filler's energy and flow with appropriate but unobtrusive angles and edits, reflecting her different faces and personas.