

# Oh, mein papa

*Punch Me in the Stomach* is one daughter's ode to a Holocaust survivor

by BERTIE MANDELBLATT

Deb Filler has 50 characters speaking in her head, all in strong Jewish hybrid accents—Spanish-Jewish, French-Jewish, New York-Jewish, New Zealand-Jewish. They're there, she says, to compensate for the isolation of her father, Sol Filler, who at 22 was released from Auschwitz at the end of the war. He moved to New Zealand where he got mar-

## Film

*Punch Me in the Stomach* opens this Friday, July 18 at the Cinéma du Parc. See repertory listings for showtimes. Deb Filler and director Francine Zuckerman will be present for the premiere screenings on July 18.

ried and started a family; Deb, the eldest daughter, was the audience for his stories and memories. "The only thing we could do," he says describing his first night in Auschwitz piled on a bunk with nine other men, "was laugh." His daughter listened well.

The result is *Punch Me in the Stomach*, the film adaptation of Deb Filler's staggering one-woman show produced off-Broadway by the New York Theatre Workshop. The film captures the uneasy balance between black humour and the earnestness of a Holocaust survivor's daughter—for whom the right to tell her story in the shadow of The Story is a hard-won victory.

The film begins backstage with Deb in turban, black eyeliner and scarlet lipstick.



Deb Filler Up close and personal

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life filled with the characters in her head, mostly wacky family members: uncle Mendel swigging Pepto Bismol and complaining about his itchy colon, overly generous Aunt Rae ("here, take my jacket, take my shirt, here, take my bra, no take it..."). Deb's severe grandmother knitting her hands together ("I'm not negative, no, just because we lost the chalet near Spain when the Ottoman Empire fell..."). Not all the characters are family; her sheepish teenage boyfriend Calvin Beagleman and her best friend Felicity's patronizing WASP mum also appear.

And Deb Filler does them all. Switching accents, posture and facial mannerisms seamlessly with the aid of a prop or two, Deb peoples her interior world beautifully.

The film revolves primarily around her relationship with her father, Sol, who tells wartime stories on television and becomes

a hysterical surprise 70th birthday party for Sol, he and Deb leave together for a "whirlwind tour" of Eastern European concentration camps. They find Auschwitz, the memorial to the Jews from his village in Poland, and both face the devastating grief of those events. Subsequently Deb finds the words to tell Sol of her own struggle.

The most striking quality of this film, and of Deb Filler's performance, is the contrast between the simple directness of the delivery of non-comic lines and the energy of the raucous Jewish slapstick. This blend of elements is reflected in the title, from Uncle Stan's "Punch me in the stomach... go on, punch me" (doubling over after the blow, followed by a quick recovery). It evokes the emotional dualism of much Jewish humour (Isaac Bashevis Singer, Woody Allen and Bernice Reubens, among others), which implies that grief is never far away, hence laughter