

# From war crimes to comedy: A serious career move for Jessica Salomon

BY BILL BROWNSTEIN, THE GAZETTE JUNE 8, 2011



Jess Salomon's *Doing Good* begins Thursday, June 9, and runs until June 19 at the Montreal Improv, 3713 St. Laurent Blvd., 2nd floor. Tickets: \$10; \$6 for students. For reservations and showtimes, call 514-849-FEST or go to [www.montrealfringe.ca](http://www.montrealfringe.ca) or to [www.jesssalomon.com](http://www.jesssalomon.com).

**Photograph by:** Gazette file photo

MONTREAL - Ratko Mladic has been much on the mind of Jessica Salomon of late. After years on the lam, Mladic, the former Bosnian Serb military leader, was recently arrested and is now facing charges in The Hague for the Srebrenica massacre of Bosnian Muslim men and boys. Salomon is a Montreal comedian who makes her theatrical debut Thursday at the Fringe fest with her solo offering *Doing Good*.

What?

On the surface, this might not seem to compute, but prior to taking to the chuckles trade three years ago, Salomon was a war-crimes prosecutor in The Hague, working with the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

Salomon had been involved in the cases of Vidoje Blagojevic and Dragan Jokic, the Bosnian Serbs accused of war crimes committed in the aftermath of the Bosnian Serb takeover of Srebrenica. And she was overjoyed to hear of the capture of Mladic.

“Friends have been asking me how they could have caught Mladic without me,” muses Salomon, 35, over a cappuccino. “What kills me, though, is how Mladic responded to the charges against him in The Hague. He calls them ‘obnoxious’ and ‘monstrous.’ Which are precisely the same two adjectives that have been applied to him.”

While Salomon is still in close contact with many of her former colleagues at The Hague, she has no regrets about turning over a new career leaf.

“I’m so happy for my former co-workers and especially for the families of the victims of all these atrocities. I miss the international environment, but not really the lawyer part. The day-to-day work was gruelling and grave.”

And comedy proved to be an excellent antidote to horrific stories of genocide.

“I decided I needed to get serious with my career after dealing with war crimes,” she cracks.

“It’s like that old joke: prosecuting war criminals is easy. Comedy is hard.

“But, really, the comedy provided me with some balance. Not to detract from the work that was so meaningful, but I had always wanted to pursue a more creative path and use my voice more. And I lost my passion for law.”

Salomon took to watching as much comedy as she could in The Hague for some escape. Then she had this notion about writing a sitcom based on her work.

“Hard as it may be to believe, there was comedy on the job – of the dark variety – and there were all sorts of characters,” says Salomon, who earned her law degree at McGill and worked at the federal Department of Justice in Ottawa before getting the UN gig in The Hague. She has since earned another degree, after completing courses here at Joey Elias’s Comedy School.

Some friends from The Hague have caught Salomon doing her comedy shtick and have been surprised. But not because they found her funny. That they already knew.

“No, they were taken aback by how dirty my material is,” she says.

Understandable. The dimpled Salomon has a soft delivery and a disarmingly innocent presence.

“Sometimes I go a bit too far and sense that people don’t want to hear that material from me,” adds Salomon, who, in spite of the raunch, has been getting a rise out of audiences on the Canadian

standup circuit for the last two years.

Salomon also produces and hosts a revue, Le Comedy Bistro, on the first Wednesday of every month at Parc des Princes on Park Ave. The event showcases an array of local wits. The next show, July 6, features the fabulous DeAnne Smith, one of Salomon's biggest inspirations.

Doing Good is somewhat of a departure. Salomon will deliver a mix of standup and standard storytelling over the course of her 45-minute show. Salomon will seek to explain that she means to do good, but is not always successful.

She recounts how she has drifted from the idealism of her "Guatemalan fanny-pack years" to "her inevitable decline into cynicism, pot-less brownies and leather purses."

She also will explain how she disappointed former UN boss Kofi Annan in The Hague; how she told a one-time boss how she really felt about her management style – unaware that said boss was dying; and how people think "bisexuality is something made up, like a unicorn or Gadhafi's social conscience."

"It's all guaranteed to make people feel better about their lives, loves and career choices," she says. "The only way to grow is to do and say things that make you feel a little uncomfortable."

Salomon gets guidance from an unlikely source, her 91-year-old grandmother Nicki. She serves as Salomon's mentor.

"She has been my biggest fan – when not trying to get me to go back to law and to find a husband," Salomon explains. "When she knows that's not happening, she tells me to be dirty. 'People like dirty,' she keeps on saying. 'I like dirty.'"

"And one always has to listen to one's grandmother, right?"

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