

BLOG: VELVET

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Interview with Jess Salomon



Photo: Susan Moss

Jessica is an up-and-comer in the international comedy scene. She's whip-smart, charming, worldly and disconcertingly crass all at once. She's also a former war crimes lawyer turned stand-up comedienne - AKA "a person who makes fantastic life choices" heralds her 90-year-old grandmother.

Jess hales from Montreal where she performs regularly at the **Comedy Works** and the **Comedy Nest**. She has also performed in Ottawa, Toronto, London and Chicago, and auditioned for Just for Laughs.

When she's not writing and performing Jessica likes to check in with her old colleagues in The Hague. She enjoys hearing how sad the war criminals are without her observational wit and storytelling to keep them going. She believes they are jealous of her comedy audience and regret what they have done.

Enjoy the Q & A!

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Photo: Susan Moss

Why is being funny sexy for a man, but rarely so for a woman – or is the double standard more perceived rather than real?

You don't find my joke-cracking sexy? C'mon! Was it the time I told that story about digging a hole and taking a poo on an Ecuadorian beach?

I think men and women are attracted to different things. Lucky for me, I'm attracted to both, and lesbian audiences seem to find female stand ups sexy.

Seriously though, the sexiness double standard that really concerns me is the one that exists between musicians and comedians. It concerns me because I can't be a musician.

Is there comedy material that's still a total "no-go" for a woman comic, or have Margaret Cho, Sarah Silverman, Joan Rivers and other pioneers broken down all barriers?

I can't really think of anything that is still taboo, for men or women. But if you're going to go with something that's kind of edgy or dark or racist, it had better be funny. It also has to fit with who you are on stage – with your comedic persona - um, and your race. That said, sometimes you just need to try stuff out, even if it hurts. Kind of like lifting a weight you can't handle at the gym. Sometimes I feel sore after a bad night of comedy ... in the liver muscle.

I've actually noticed that a lot of younger female comics, more so in Toronto, are pretty dirty. My first jokes, if you could even call them that, played off the fact that even though I look innocent ... it was easy to get a reaction, but I realized it

wasn't what I was interested in exploring on stage, at least for now.

If there are barriers still standing, what's the one you most want to be first to tear down?

I'd like to tear down the sexiness double standard between musicians and comedians. Single-handedly. After I do that, I'd like to be something like a female version of Jon Stewart. I don't think, with the exception of Janeane Garofalo, that there are many examples of female comics doing satire. I'm probably missing someone important.

How has being a lawyer in general, and a war crimes tribunal lawyer specifically, influenced your comedy?

Some people picture the audience naked; I pretend I'm billing them by the minute. Bang! Insert cheesy lawyer joke, check. Specifically though, being a war crimes tribunal lawyer has given me a niche and yet next to no relatable material to work with ... it's also given me something to fall back on, which can be a bad thing as far as comedy goes.

I'd like to say that after coming face to face with several war criminals, hecklers don't intimidate me, but that's not exactly true.

In a general sense though I think that life experience is important to comedy and the more unique your life experience the more unique your perspective.

So yes, it is a trajectory I highly recommend if you want to get into comedy.

I'm funny, and I want to get on stage. What do I do? How tough is it to get gigs?

One of the great things about stand up is how accessible it is. There are open mic nights here in Montreal at the Comedy Works and the Comedy Nest and all you have to do is call in. If you can bring people to shows that also helps you get stage time. Aside from the clubs, there are other rooms around town where comics perform. It's not hard to find out where they are or who to facebook. The English comedy scene in Montreal is pretty small and very welcoming. Ottawa has some fun stages too and it's not too far away.

As far as paid gigs go, it takes a while before you can make a living doing stand up. I think you have to look at it like going to school for a while and then interning for free. Eventually once you get good you get booked for paid gigs, but it doesn't happen overnight. It's a process and you have to like the process.

How do you keep a smile (let alone stay funny) in such a competitive industry?

I don't think you have any other choice if it's something you want to do.

That said, every once in a while I'll ruffie better comics on important nights. Also once, in a Best of the Open Mic competition at the Comedy Works, after I went up the microphone "mysteriously" just stopped working. Everyone but me had to do their sets without a microphone. It was awesome. Now everyone calls me Tonya Harding. Ok, that last part isn't true.

Is it true, what they say, that comedians are really just angry misanthropic people working out their murderous desires through humour?

Yes, everyone. Except for me. I am very well adjusted.

Best and worst moment on stage for you ever?

Best: I was doing a bit about this weird guy I had hooked up with and a girl in the audience yelled out, "did that happen in Ottawa?" Turns out she had slept with the same guy. That bit is very relatable.

Worst: I tend to try to forget them, probably though my first time, which was actually in Amsterdam. I blame the Dutch.

Can the funny person at a party, also be a funny person on stage, or are these two types of "performing" completely different?

A funny person at a party can be a funny person on stage but a funny person on stage is not necessarily a funny person at a party. It's not a necessary condition. Can you tell that I used to be a lawyer?

I've seen people get up and bomb that seem really surprised. Like what's wrong with the audience? Usually these people are wondering why the audience doesn't think they are as hilarious as their friends think they are. You need jokes. You can't just get up there and be charmingly drunk, although that does help.

The future of women in comedy is it like all other fields, a question of evolution toward full equality, or will it always be harder for women?

I think we're looking for superiority. Full equality is for pussies.

Your favourite women comedians, who are they?

Maria Bamford, Ellen DeGeneres, Sarah Silverman, Wanda Sykes, Janeane Garofalo, Tig Notaro, Chelsea Peretti, and my friend DeAnne Smith.

Where can we catch you next? Upcoming gigs (a month's worth?)

October 10th, 8:30 p.m., **Comedy Works** (1238 Bishop): Girl on Girl on Girl Comedy Show

November 4th, 5th, 6th **Comedy Nest** (2313 rue Sainte-Catherine Ouest, Pepsi Forum): Opening for Joey Elias

Your favourite man-eating mammal?

The killer whale that killed its trainer at SeaWorld. Too specific? Too soon?

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