

Making a case for comedy

Jessica Salomon was a U.N. war crimes lawyer. Then she decided to get serious

BY BILL BROWNSTEIN, THE GAZETTE NOVEMBER 18, 2009



Instead of collecting a lawyer's salary, Jessica Salomon is working for chump change and beer as a stand-up comedienne.

Photograph by: John Mahoney, The Gazette

MONTREAL – The evening's emcee, Mike Meo, isn't just cracking wise when he makes this announcement: "We have some people doing this for the first time ever. And we have some people doing this for the last time ever."

The "this" Meo is referring to is stand-up comedy. It's Open Mike Night at the Comedyworks, where every Monday evening a dozen or so aspiring wits have about five minutes to prove they have the right stuff. Most don't. And the audience, gruff at the best of times, delights in hooting the wannabes off the stage.

Even Meo, who has been on the scene for a few years, senses this will be a rough night. He gets no response with bits about energy drinks and cell-phones. But he does loosen up the crowd with this insight: "I'm a vegetarian and I'm Italian. Which means my father thinks I'm gay."

The next performer tries to seize on the vegetarian aspect with an over-extended ode to baby carrots and gets mostly groans from the cheap seats. (And at five bucks a pop, it doesn't get much cheaper.) Another guy manages to gross out a not easily grossed-out group with tasteless and witless suggestions for charity sporting events which entail sex with the ailing. He is followed by another deep thinker who points out that not all Asians look the same: "The long-haired ones are the girls!"

Waiter, make it a triple vodka!

The stage is now set for the only woman on the bill.

Ever smiling and innocent looking, Jessica Salomon immediately disarms the audience with shtick filthier yet a whole lot funnier than what was dispensed by the preceding procession of boys.

"I went home with this guy," she says, ever-poised. "We had sex. After sex, he invited me to sleep over - which I thought was included. But the weird part to my complimentary sleep-over was that he brought a sleeping bag to the bed. Okay, camping role-play I can deal with. But then he zipped himself in the bag." Pause. "He was practicing safe sleep - I would have preferred safe sex instead."

The crowd erupts in giggles.

Salomon, looking relieved, thanks audience members, then tells them: "I used to work as a war-crimes lawyer for the United Nations, but I decided I needed to get serious."

More gales of laughter. Except this is no joke. Up until last year, Salomon, 33, worked on the prosecuting team in The Hague with the UN International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Specifically, she was an associate legal officer in the Office of the President for nearly three years.

Salomon was involved in the infamous case of Vidoje Blagojevic and Dragan Jokic, the Bosnian Serbs accused of crimes committed in the aftermath of the Bosnian Serb takeover of Srebrenica.

And it's real safe to say that none of the other performers on this evening's Open Mike ever hung with former UN boss Kofi Annan. Salomon met him when he showed up in The Hague to boost morale at the tribunal.

War crimes to comedy? Now that's a stretch.

"I guess you couldn't go to anything more extreme," says Salomon following her five minutes in the spotlight. "It was so very grave, the work I was doing in The Hague. I came to a crossroads, and I realized I really didn't love the law. I didn't have the passion for it any longer.

"I watched comedy as an escape when I was working. Then I had this crazy idea to write a sitcom about my workplace in The Hague. Believe it or not, there was comedy on the job - though more of the gallows variety. And lots of characters, too. What I have in mind is something like M*A*S*H meets The Office."

Salomon earned her law degree at McGill and worked at the federal Department of Justice in Ottawa before being hired for the UN job in The Hague. She recently earned another degree, upon completing courses at Joey Elias's Comedy School.

"I figured in order to write comedy, I needed a voice. So I tried stand-up seven months ago," explains Salomon, who only landed her first paid booking last weekend at Yuk Yuks in Ottawa, opening for

David Pryde.

So instead of making a six-figure salary as a barrister, she is working for chump change and beer as a stand-up and is contemplating a side-career as a barrista to supplement her income.

"Perhaps surprisingly, my family is actually very supportive," she says. "Especially my 90-year-old grandmother, who is the funniest in the family."

Also impressed is Comedyworks owner Jimbo Skomorowski. "Your material was very cleverly written and your delivery was solid," he informs Salomon. "The potential is definitely there. You just need more stage time."

On that note, he offers Salomon opening spots Friday and Saturday at the Comedyworks with Big Apple headliner Michael Somerville. This is a rarity for Open Mikers with such limited experience.

As an added incentive, Just for Laughs reps will be in attendance those nights looking for new talent.

Salomon is as thrilled as she is nervous. Scott Faulconbridge, one of the leading lights on the local comedy scene, tries to reassure her - sort of: "Comedy crowds are tougher to pass than a UN Security Resolution."

But without missing a beat, Salomon fires back:

"Yeah, it's like that old joke: Prosecuting war criminals is easy. Comedy is hard."

Jessica Salomon opens for Michael Somerville, Friday and Saturday at 8:30 and 11 p.m. at the Comedyworks, 1238 Bishop St. 514-398-9661.

Salomon can also be caught at DeAnne Smith's Stand Up/Strip Down, Nov. 26 at 8:30 p.m. at Katacombes, 1635 St. Laurent Blvd. Show also features comics Scott Faulconbridge and Jay Whiting and comic/strippers Miss Sugarpuss, Nat King Pole, Velma Candyass and Gigi. 514-866-9317.

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