

# Worlds apart

Prosecuting war crimes helped mould the dark comedy of stand-up comedian Jessica Salomon.

BY ELIZABETH THOMPSON

'Comedy can be a very effective form of advocacy,' says Jessica Salomon.

**S**itting in a courtyard next to Yuk Yuk's comedy club in Ottawa, Jessica Salomon was reflecting on the differences between her old career and her new one — how helping prosecute war criminals in The Hague is easier than stand-up comedy. "I wish I could say that facing war criminals head on has made me immune to hecklers but it really hasn't," Salomon laughs, her blue eyes twinkling. "Even war criminals aren't going to yell 'Show us your tits,' in court."

At first glance, Salomon's two careers appear worlds apart. Mastering the intricacies of international human rights law at the International Criminal Court for

the former Yugoslavia is very different from mastering the art of comedy. But as Salomon moves seamlessly back and forth between talking about comedy and human rights law, it is clear the two very different careers are joined by a common thread — Salomon's passion for human rights. "As crazy as the two careers sound, as disconnected as it might seem when you hear war-crimes-lawyer-turned-comedian, comedy can be a very effective form of advocacy," she explains. "The great thing about it is you can reach a more mainstream audience that's not plugged-in to politics and law."

While she is a rising star on Canada's comedy scene, Salomon is the first to admit her background isn't exactly typical.

She grew up in the wealthy Montreal suburb of Westmount attending exclusive private girls schools, first The Study Academy then Miss Edgar's & Miss Cramp's School, with Jewish classes after school. Her father was in real estate. Her Peruvian-born, stay-at-home mother volunteered for various charities and school events. "I have been really fortunate. It's not really like a typical Canadian story. 'Hey everybody, I haven't had any issues in life — now relate to me,'" Salomon jokes.

At Tufts University in Boston, Salomon did a BA in international relations; a semester in Ecuador studying the border conflict with Peru; and a final semester in the Education for Public Inquiry



and International Citizenship program with Tufts' Institute for Global Leadership. It was there Salomon met Montreal human rights lawyer and former Canadian justice minister Irwin Cotler, who spoke at a symposium Salomon helped organize. "I heard him speak and I was really blown away."

For the first time, Salomon started thinking about law as a way to advance human rights. "I decided that I wanted to work in human rights but I wasn't sure about law," Salomon recalled. "I didn't grow up fantasizing about being in a courtroom. I didn't grow up dreaming about being a lawyer. It was more that I started to get turned-on to social issues and social justice and feel very upset at an early age about inequality."

After working as one of Cotler's assistants for a year, Salomon applied to McGill's law school. Cotler says Salomon's interest in human rights was apparent from the first time he met her at Tufts. "That passion for human rights was evident both in her time as a law student and then when she went to work [articling] in the Department of Justice thereafter. At a certain point, which is all part of an ongoing engagement with human rights, she then went to work in The Hague at the war crimes tribunal."

In The Hague, the trilingual Salomon worked with Judge Fausto Pocar, who had just been elected president of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. She arrived in the president's office shortly before former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, who was being tried on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity, died in custody, which led to Salomon having a front-row seat at a meeting between Pocar and U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan.

While the court brings the authors of horrific war crimes to justice, Salomon was spared some of the more gruesome aspects of war crimes legal work, serving at the appeal level and in more administrative roles like writing draft judgments. "People assume that I was in prosecution and was digging up evidence from mass graves and stuff [but] I didn't do that job."

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Still, the very nature of the court's work results in a kind of dark humor, Salomon explains. "You're surrounded by really such dark things all the time that a lot of that kind of gallows humor, I guess is the term for it, or just the banality of the evil and the situation that you're in, lends itself to comedy."

Salomon also found escape from the world of war crimes in television shows like *The Office*. "I started seeing my environment as a sitcom — a very dark sitcom — and I started thinking a lot about the idea of comedy as another type of advocacy and that law is really just one piece of the making-the-world-a-better-place puzzle and that maybe that wasn't the tool I needed to use."

However, Salomon says her first attempt at stand-up at a comedy club in Amsterdam was "a disaster." "When I got up on stage there was a spotlight and I stood kind of to the side of it because I thought that's weird, that's really hot, and I can't see anybody. People think, 'You're a lawyer so you must have been up in court.' . . . But I wasn't that kind of lawyer, really. I never really got up in court. But even in court there wouldn't be a spotlight on you. It would just be normal lighting, you wouldn't be sweating."

Undaunted, Salomon left The Hague and returned to Montreal where she took some script-writing classes, submitting one script to *The Daily Show*. It was a different class, though that once again changed the course of her career. "I took a stand-up comedy class thinking that it would help me with my writing. I really got hooked and it ruined my life," she says with a laugh. "Once I realized that I liked it, that's it. Now I'm stuck doing this."

Salomon has been doing stand-up comedy for five years — about as long

as she practised law — and is now able to make a living at it. She has become a regular at clubs in Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto. She has appeared on radio and television and recently staged two shows: *In My Opinion* at the Montreal Fringe Festival and *Pretty Semitic*, a Jewish/Arab two-woman show she performed with Palestinian comedian Eman El-Husseini in July as rockets

were raining down in the Middle East.

Salomon admits it has been a learning curve; finding her own voice and mastering the art of stand-up comedy. "It takes a little while for your skills as a comedian to catch up with the topics that you want to talk about. So some of those topics are kind of challenging, they're like a higher level of comedy than other things. So, at the beginning I was really dirty. I still enjoy dirty jokes."

Slowly, however, she is introducing more material related to politics and human rights.

"Eventually you get to the point where you know how to take a topic, something that's important to you or some societal observation that you had or some hypocrisy that you have noticed, and you can pack it in or distill it down, really, to some hilarious nugget that even a drunk person who doesn't read the newspaper is going to be like 'Yes,' and just be like 'You got it man — yeah.' Then when you can do that, it's great. I've had a couple of moments when I've started to have that but it takes time. But ultimately that's what I want to do in stand-up."

Cotler agrees comedy can affect change. "I think Jon Stewart has been effective in the manner in which he has used comedy. I have seen Jay Leno engaged in good critical satire."

While Salomon wants to succeed in comedy and expand her career into the United States, she maintains her membership in the Law Society of Upper Canada, however she doubts she will return to practising law. "I miss the colleagues that I had, especially in The Hague because they are the most hilarious and hopeful and cynical kind of people. I miss the work environment. I just don't miss the law." ■