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Former prosecutor gets serious with comedy

Janice Arnold, Staff Reporter, Thursday, December 15, 2011

Tags: Arts



Jessica Salomon

MONTREAL — Prosecuting tyrants of the former Yugoslavia for war crimes was work a young Canadian lawyer with ambitions of improving the world felt privileged to do. But 2 1/2 years in The Hague convinced Jessica Salomon that the law was not for her

In a radical career move that even she couldn't have foreseen. Salomon returned to Montreal to try to become a standup comedian and TV scriptwriter.

Salomon is one of the Jewish and Muslim comics performing on Dec. 21 in Kosher Jokes for the Halaladays (KJH), which sold out for its first vear in 2010.

Produced by Jeff Schouela, who is Jewish with family roots in Syria and Egypt, and Eman El-Husseini, who was born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents, KJH is intended to give Jews and Muslims an opportunity to get together and laugh at a time when both may feel left out of Christmas festivities.

Like last year, the Montreal show will take place at the historic 425-seat Gesù Theatre on Bleury Street, which houses performance space and a functioning Catholic church.

This year the ecumenical fun is crossing provincial borders; KJH is at the University of Ottawa Dec. 17 and the Al Green Theatre of Toronto's Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre Dec. 22.

Salomon grew up in Westmount and attended the tony Miss Edgar's and Miss Cramp's School, before going to Tufts University in Boston to study international relations and pursue an interest in human rights and refugee issues.

When she heard McGill University law professor Irwin Cotler speaking at Tufts, she was so impressed she decided to do an internship at McGill's law faculty in 1998

Working with Cotler convinced her to go to law school and pursue human rights advancement. "But I was never 100 per cent sure [about the law]; I just knew I wanted to do good in the world," Salomon said.

She interned at The Hague, working for Judge Fausto Pocar, president of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, for four months after graduating in 2001. Then, after a stint at the federal Department of Justice, returned to work full time under Pocar.

As a law clerk, she helped draft orders and judgments against the 161 former Yugoslavians indicted for war crimes, including ex-president Slobodan Milosevic, who died in custody in 2006 while she was there.

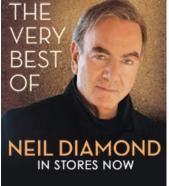
It became even more stressful as the United Nations Security Council pressed for the proceedings to be wrapped up.

"It isn't that I became cynical or stopped believing in international justice," said Salomon. "I was just not that passionate about the law."

Comedy was not an obvious alternative. She had never been the class clown, but was good at telling stories about herself or her family that made her friends laugh.

While still in The Hague she began writing comedy as a "counter-balance" to the horror she dealt with daily. There were absurdities, too, that could be made funny.











Canadian Jewish News (The CJN)

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Canadian lewish News (The CIN)

We had some fun at The CIN Chanukah party today. In the picture is the Winner of our "Guess Who's Who" contest. Joe, the Arts and Travel Editor was deep in thought as the GM Gary made an attempt to neek at his

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She returned to Montreal in April 2008 with the intention of giving herself a couple of years to make it in the entertainment field. She took a class with Montreal comic and Just for Laughs veteran Joey Elias – who is performing in the Montreal KJH show, and began getting up at open-mike nights at the Comedy Nest.

"I was hooked; I loving being on stage, the laughter was immediate gratification, unlike writing which you do alone," she said.

Salomon is now a regular at the Comedy Nest and ComedyWorks, and has toured in Toronto, Ottawa, Chicago and last month in Los Angeles. "Sometimes I get paid with beer, but I'm having a lot of fun," she said.

Her material is mostly about herself, not especially Jewish, although she has some jokes about being Jewish in Westmount and growing up in an essentially WASP milieu. She was in the Segal Centre's new standup series last month.

With her red hair and freckles, Salomon says she doesn't look Jewish, which makes conventional Jewish humour not the best fit. When she discloses that she is one-quarter Sephardic (her Peruvian-born mother's parents were from Egypt and Poland) people are incredulous.

Her girl-next-door looks also don't prepare audiences for the "smart and dirty" material she often uses. But it's nothing she wouldn't test on her 92-year-old grandmother, whom she describes as her best muse.

"I'm still finding my style," Salomon said. "After years of being constrained by the law it takes time." Her past career does not often come up in her act, because she thinks most people could not relate to it. She does inject a little politics or references to what's happening in the world.

Making it as a woman in the comedy business is tough, she concedes, but she is determined to not do the stereotypical female humour about body image or living alone with her cat. She toured this fall with DeAnne Smith in the saucy all-female Girl on Girl show.

"I do not think any topic should be off-limits to me," Salomon said.

As much as she makes her grandmother laugh, "She never fails to prod me about going back to law and finding a husband." For now Salomon has no intention of doing either.

For tickets, call 514-861-4036.

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