

Director rolls the dice on late sister

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The late Judy Toll, pictured in the character of Andrea "Dice" Clay, is the subject of "Judy Toll: The Funniest Woman You've Never Heard Of." The film, directed by her brother, Gary Toll, has its world premiere Thursday at the U.S. Comedy Arts Festival. (Courtesy U.S. Comedy Arts Festival)

ASPEN In the late 1980s, Philadelphia experienced a resurgence in stand-up comedy, thanks to the opening of The Comedy Works. At the center of the renaissance were Gary and Judy Toll, brother-and-sister comedians who grew up on the Main Line, the city's western suburbs. As Gary got a glimpse of the professional road ahead, he bowed out. "We started out together, and I saw how tough it was going to be, and I gave up," Gary said. "I couldn't face that." Judy Toll took the opposite path, staring the beast straight in the eye, without blinking. Judy threw herself onto the standup stage, into improv, into writing and acting and clawing for the gold ring. Her relentlessness paid off; Toll rode a moderately successful career as a stand-up, a handful of credits as a TV writer and the feature film "Casual Sex" to a position as a consultant for "Sex and the City." But the failures and the near-misses – and the effort to produce them – exacted a price: Toll died in 2002, at age 44, and one gets the sense that the cancer that killed her was tied up with how she spilled her guts for relatively little glory. Gary Toll, meanwhile, took the fairly painless route of becoming a director of shorts, commercials and TV projects – "Nothing you've ever seen," he assures in a phone conversation.

But for his first feature-length movie, Toll absorbed a good bit of emotional hurt: "Judy Toll: The Funniest Woman You Never Heard Of," is his loving and illuminating tribute to his

sister. The film, directed and produced by Toll, has its world premiere at 4:30 p.m. Thursday at the Isis Theatre as part of the U.S. Comedy Arts Festival's Film Program. (It also shows at 10:15 a.m. Friday.) "Emotionally, it was tough," Toll, 46, said from his home in Los Angeles. "Judy died five years ago, and it took me a few years before I could even touch anything. I gathered up her material, her old tapes, and couldn't look at it. I had to put it down." Eventually, Toll did put together a film, featuring home movies of the Toll family (invariably yukking it up, in outrageous costume, with Judy leading the way); clips of Judy doing standup, appearing with the improv group the Groundlings or just entertaining herself; and anecdotes and reflections from Kathy Griffin, Michael Patrick King and others. "It was very sad for me," said Toll, who was close to his sister through Judy's life. "In the editing process, you watch this stuff a zillion times. If I go a week without seeing it, and then come back to it, it tears me apart." "The Funniest Woman ..." reveals much to admire about Judy. First is her ambition to make it in comedy. In one poignant scene, Judy had a job selling Chipwich ice cream snacks from a cart at the La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles. Or more accurately, not selling them; she spent her time manning the pay phone by her cart, pursuing her real job. It is the only mention of a day job for Toll; she preferred to take the crummiest stand-up gigs and writing jobs to keep herself in comedy. "That's what we were working on, that struggle. She struggled," Gary said. "There was stuff I didn't use, Judy in a panic, with such anxiety. And she never gave up."

Toll was fearless in making comic material of her own life. Her often dismal romantic fortunes, her professional disappointments, even her cancer were bound for the stage. "She was the best at that," Gary said. "With Judy, it was no hold barred. And she lived such a rich life, with so much adventure. She would do things because it would be good onstage." And Toll was funny. Late in her career, she began spoofing Andrew "Dice" Clay; as Andrea "Dice" Clay, she gave a female spin to raunchy, chauvinistic material to superb effect. The role landed her on "Live with Regis and Kathie Lee," and in typical fashion, Judy refused to break character for the family-friendly program. For much of "The Funniest Woman ..." Judy plays as a quasi-tragic figure. Big breaks eluded her. Executives always pushed her toward writing rather than acting, and she was saddled with more than her share of lousy assignments. "It was always my thought that Judy should have been really, really big," Gary said. "She was so talented. She was, and still is, the funniest person I knew. She was quite successful, well-known in Hollywood. But I thought she should have been huge." Toll's story points toward bigger issues. "The Funniest Woman ..." is a well-documented tale of what it takes to make it in the entertainment world, and how a person can be driven to sacrifice everything in that pursuit. The film also addresses how vital a sense of humor can be as one faces her demise. Judy laughs until the end, bringing the guts she displayed on the stage to her deathbed. It is a courageous, life-affirming, even joyous way to go down.

Other shows
Other features showing today in the USCAF Film Program include: • The world premiere of "Death at a Funeral," directed by Frank Oz ("Dirty Rotten Scoundrels," "Little Shop of Horrors") (3 p.m., Isis) • "The King of Kong," a documentary about competitive

video-gamers, 2:30 p.m. at the Isis)• The romantic comedy “Ira & Abby,” written by and starring Jennifer Westfeldt, 5 p.m. at the Isis).Stewart Oksenhorn’s e-mail address is stewart@aspentimes.com

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