

Entertainment

Laughing through tears

Comedian Judy Toll made hypochondria part of her shtick. And then she really got sick. The talent, the thwarted ambition - it's all there in a film by her brother.

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Stand-up was Judy's route to renown in Philadelphia; she departed in 1981 for Los Angeles.

by **Amy S. Rosenberg**, Inquirer Staff Writer

Hypochondria was always a part of comedian Judy Toll's life, and her act. On stage, she would name a symptom - "I feel tired" - and leap to its fatal conclusion. "I have leukemia!"



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"I have a headache," the Havertown native would say, then, pointing the microphone toward the crowd, "That means I have a . . ."

"Brain tumor!" the audience would shout back.

"Let's all get a CAT scan!" she'd cheerlead.

And so when, inevitably, at 44, having achieved by most measures a successful career in writing and comedy but never the stardom she herself craved (she was not, she was told along the way, "sitcom pretty"), Toll actually got sick, she knew what to do.

"She called me and said . . . 'I need you to come over and just yell at me for faking cancer,' " recalls her friend, comedian Kathy Griffin, in the new documentary *Judy Toll: The Funniest Woman You've Never Heard Of*. The film, directed by Toll's brother Gary, is being shown April 13 and 15 as part of the Philadelphia Film Festival.

"And I would be like, 'Oh, look who has *cancer* all of a sudden. How *interesting*. Is this as bad as the stomachache you had in 1987?' "

Way worse. And real enough that it took Toll's life on May 2, 2002, just 10 months after she finally made it down the aisle, her groom a nice Jewish Holocaust documentary filmmaker, which would almost be funny were it not so damn sad. Or maybe the point is, it's both.

"My dream really for Judy was that she should be huge," says brother Gary Toll (these Tolls are not related to the building/newspaper-owning Tolls).

"Judy's gone, and people didn't get to see her," Toll said in a telephone interview from Los Angeles. "How can I get people to see how funny she was, how great she was? That was one of the first things on my plate to do, to do a Judy movie."

His sister had left Philadelphia in 1981 to try her luck in Los Angeles, after making a local name for herself as a regular at impresario Steve Young's Comedy Works, the Comedy Factory Outlet and the London, along with then-boyfriend Tom Wilson. She is described in the movie as "the star of Philadelphia."

In Los Angeles, where she had more success with writing than acting, she was a member of the improv group the Groundlings - *Saturday Night Live* honcho and Groundlings scout Lorne Michaels was said to have never been in the audience when she performed - and wrote the movie *Casual Sex?*

She also wrote several pilots for sitcoms that were produced but never aired. In typical fashion, she was passed over not once but twice for playing the part of herself, in *Casual Sex?* and then again in a pilot called *Me and My Needs*.

"I don't think she ever recovered," says her mom, Sandy Toll.

But Judy's last years saw her writing for both *Sex and the City* - producer Michael Patrick King was her good friend and champion - and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. She continued her stand-up career nearly to the end. ("In therapy I got to the root of my problem. I think I'm a piece of crap that the world revolves around.")

Gary Toll had opted out of the Los Angeles route, choosing to stay in West Chester with his wife and daughter and make a career in film, only in the commercial end of film. He says he always intended, once his daughter graduated from high school, to join his big sister out West, write for her, and help her make it. He was on the verge of that when she died.

He decided to go anyway, moving his family from West Chester to Los Angeles, to try to forge a collaboration with his sister even in death. He enrolled in film school and set about watching hours and hours of Judy stand-up, Judy home movies, conducting extensive interviews with her

vast network of comedian, actor and writer friends and, in takes so hilariously blunt she nearly steals the movie from Judy herself, their mom, Sandy.

"Nobody in the world loved being made fun of more than Judy," says Gary Toll. "Judy would take me in a room and say, 'OK, make fun of me.' The more brutal you were, the more honest you were, the more she liked it."

Let's hope so. In the movie, her mom says things like: "I didn't like Judy very much when she was young" and "She always reminded me of a dancing hippo. Everything she did, she overdid."

In a telephone interview from Florida, Sandy Toll - whose husband died six months before Judy - says her honesty is just how she deals with her grief. No pretensions. And you begin to see not a mother who chronically disapproved, but a mother who was willing to see Judy for who she was, and whose brutal candor perhaps was at the root of Judy's own comic sensibility. Though Sandy sees it the other way around.

"It's kind of my sense of humor, which I inherited from her," says Sandy. "It's my way of dealing with the fact that she's gone. You can say anything in front of me. If I say it first, then people feel comfortable with it. That's kind of the way she was."

"I've always been honest about my children. I tell it like it is," says Sandy, then volunteers: "She was thrown out of camp one year for smoking pot."

And this: "I never thought that she really would make a good mother or make a good wife. Judy once said to me, I think you're the only Jewish mother in the world that doesn't want her daughter to be married. I'm just trying to be supportive. If you're not the marrying kind . . ."

Judy's near misses take on a heartbreaking tone in the documentary, as does her continued obsession over her weight and her intense desire to walk down the aisle. She dove headfirst into Scientology for a while but somehow managed to get her money back when she emerged. (This is foreshadowed earlier in the movie when, during one of many home movies made with her brother, she holds a piece of matzoh, breaks it, and vows to return the broken matzoh and get her money back.)

One typical Judy moment not in the film was captured in a Stu Bykofsky Daily News item from August 1991: "Poor Judy Toll. The local comedian was being introduced as her 'Andrea Dice Clay' character on yesterday's Regis & Kathie Lee show when CBS switched to the Bush/Gorbachev press conference."

Sandy Toll said making the movie helped Gary manage the grief he felt after the death of his sister and father. Because Judy was sick when her father died, she was unable to attend the funeral and asked that it be taped. Mother and daughter watched that over and over. After Judy's death, her mom constantly watched tapes of her performing, but Gary couldn't.

"He was really not dealing with her death. He was very depressed. This helped him. He couldn't face it. He couldn't talk about it. We were watching her videos nonstop, the wedding video, the memorial video, comedy tapes. I couldn't stop watching it. I would show it to anyone who would sit and watch it. He wasn't watching it at all. He would really cut me off."

The film had its first showing at the Aspen Film Festival in February, where it was well received. After its two showings in Philly, Gary Toll says he hopes it will be aired on television, giving the

big sister he says is responsible for, among other things, the scared look in his eyes in all his baby photos, the exposure she always craved.

"Judy Toll: The Funniest Woman You've Never Heard Of" will be shown at 7 p.m. Friday at International House and again on Sunday at 2:15 p.m. at the National Constitution Center.

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