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Judy Toll is one funny valentine

BY HANK ROSENFELD, CONTRIBUTING WRITER | PUBLISHED MAY 4, 2008 | [ARTS](#)

Groucho Marx said anyone can get old—all you have to do is live long enough. But what can you say about a comedian who lived it all in 44 years, as a breakthrough stand-up, gifted improv actor and writer for the hottest HBO comedy show?

Meet Judy Toll.

“Judy was a Jew; I don’t know if you’re aware of that,” comedian Andy Kindler deadpanned. “She came from a long line of Jews.”

Toll also went and took her mother to the Holy Land, married an Oscar-winning filmmaker from the Simon Wiesenthal Center and was loved by so many friends that she even went to therapy with them.

Now, according to the documentary made by her brother, Gary Toll, Judy was “The Funniest Woman You’ve Never Heard Of.” It’s a labor of love that rushes at you through her characters, her lovers, her sketches from *The Groundlings*, her episodes from HBO’s “*Sex and the City*” and her family life in Philadelphia.

“The Funniest Woman” is wrapped in anecdotes from creative pals like Kathy Griffin, Wendy Kamenoff, Taylor Negron and Michael Patrick King who detail the more hellish dramas Toll created to jump on stage and talk about. Friends loved this frenetic personality who struggled to turn her pain into our pleasure before succumbing to cancer in 2002.

“What a thing for her to have this terrible affliction when she had such a profound influence on the comedy business,” comedian Rick Overton said. “Her bold character work, the sort of thing that stars have.”

As a child in the 1960s, Toll starred in her family’s living room—mocking in-laws with perfect mimicry and mad-libbing Hawaiian Punch ads.

“I never laughed as hard with anyone as I did with Judy,” her brother said.

Toll and her siblings would stay up until mom Sandy yelled because their father, Jay, had to get up early to get to the furniture store he ran on Market Street in

Philly for 40 years. Sister Joanne (now a producer of HBO's "In Treatment") helped shoot Super 8 movies—not normal family nachas but scripted, elaborate spoofs.

"Judy often said she had the most fun in her life making our movies," Gary Toll said.

Groundlings veteran Jim Doughan remembers the Tolls as "the weirdest family I've ever encountered."

From Samuel Gompers Elementary School (Kevin Bacon's mother was her teacher), Toll launched her career: Suburban theater trouper and "My Fair Lady" fundraisers for the Philadelphia chapter of ORT.

This was followed by her brilliant, disruptive Hebrew school years.

"She jumped off a sofa and broke her leg two weeks before her bat mitzvah," Gary Toll said. "Probably an early example of her causing drama. Bat mitzvah was a big showcase for her."

After theater at U Mass, Toll became the first female comic "in the comedy club surge of the early '80s," according to Steve Young, co-founder of the Philadelphia Comedy Works.

"On stage, she did characters and jokes. Off stage, she did Judy. That's who you fell in love with," he said.

Kamenoff remembers meeting “this sweet little blond, Jewish angel” while doing her own act there. “Barely 5-foot-1, with this huge personality. I said, ‘Oh my God, I love you, let’s be friends!’” she said.

Toll and Kamenoff shared the kind of adventures particular to stand-ups on the road in the 1980s.

“Madonna was doing her ‘Blond Ambition’ tour,” recalled Kamenoff, now a writer and teacher. “We did our ‘No Ambition’ tour—Utah, Wyoming, Montana. Honky-tonks with screen doors slamming, the stage the size of a desk. These were cowboys who had never seen a Jewish girl in their life. Or a woman comic.”

Judy won them over.

“She didn’t have a censor,” Kamenoff said. “They loved her.”

After arriving in Los Angeles, Toll rose through the comedy ranks.

“When you were around Judy, you laughed a lot,” said actress Edie McClurg, who performed with Toll at The Groundlings Theatre. “She was a pretty and beautiful soul.”

“She was born to do characters,” Gary Toll added.

After seeing Toll creations like Naomi the B.U. feminist and neurotic Sheila Nadelstein, who returns matzah when it's broken, a critic for The New York Times called her, "a combination of Judy Holliday and Gilda Radner."

Radner was her idol.

Buzzing around Los Angeles with a CMDYGAL vanity plate, Toll worked part time selling Chipwiches at the La Brea Tar Pits and broke through with Groundlings partner Wendy Goldman on a sketch called, "Casual Sex."

Ivan Reitman bought and produced their play as the 1988 movie, "Casual Sex?" starring Lea Thompson and Victoria Jackson. Upset she wasn't cast to play herself, Toll instead found success writing sitcoms, appearing in other films and on shows like "Curb Your Enthusiasm." During the dulled-down comedy club scene of the '90s, Toll found a home at Un-Cabaret, an alternative comedy space for stand-ups stretching into storytellers.

"Audiences witnessed a diary of what was going on in her life," Kamenoff recalled. "She discovered her voice there."

"Judy always called Un-Cabaret the 'comedy of love,'" said Beth Lapidés, the venue's co-creator. "That was one of her major themes. And she loved when there was a small audience, because it was so much more intimate."

At the Un-Cab, wearing her favorite cherry earrings, Toll read new writings or ranted out her hypochondria—"I live in anxiety and fear!"—detailing her

calamities in and out of romance, AA, OA and even Scientology. But when a boyfriend found an irregular mole on her back, she really did get sick. Melanoma.

“Judy and our mother took a trip to Israel and Judy was very affected,” Gary Toll said. “She started going back to services and studying. I don’t think Judy would have dealt with her cancer as courageously as she did if Judaism had not been a part of her life.”

She also got the job of her life with HBO’s “Sex and the City,” writing about what she often talked about on stage: women falling for the wrong men. Writer Liz Tuccillo remembered Toll as being “amazingly upbeat in the writers’ room while battling her illness.” One day though, “she told us that she felt like she had lost her sense of humor. She was crying a bit. Soon, however, she started talking about how her sense of humor had moved to Florida to retire. She went on to write some of the show’s funniest lines that afternoon,” Tuccillo said.

