

The New York Times

December 20, 2006



Michael Nagle for The New York Times | The Comedian Judy Gold, top, celebrating Hanukkah on Sunday with her mother, Ruth, and her sons, Henry, age 10, left, and Ben, 5.

Comedian Can't Escape Give and Take of Moms

By DINITIA SMITH

It was the third night of Hanukkah, and the comedian Judy Gold, star of an autobiographical one-woman show, "25 Questions for a Jewish Mother," was celebrating—with her real mother, Ruth, not the based-on-reality creation she pokes fun at for about 70 minutes, eight shows a week at St. Luke's Theater in Midtown.

It was chaos. There were Ms. Gold's two sons, Henry and Ben. Henry, 10, was born to her former partner, whom Ms. Gold calls "Wendy" in the show. Ms. Gold adopted him and gave birth to Ben, 5, whom the ex-partner is in the process of adopting.

There were various relatives and neighbors, including Sy and Marjorie Cohen, the boys' godparents, who live down the hall from her apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, and a family friend, Uncle Bob Smith, who is supposed to be, Ms. Gold said, "another male role model for the boys." Ms. Gold's niece Sarah was on all fours chasing the cat while the cat tried to tear the wrapping paper off the presents.

In the kitchen was the 6-foot-3 Ms. Gold, 44, just back from a performance of the show, which she wrote with Kate Moira Ryan. She was trying to put together a feast of latkes, sour cream and applesauce.

In the midst of it sat the regal figure of Ruth Gold, 84, her skin smooth as silk, quietly surveying the mess.

Judy Gold begins her show with an actual recording of a message her mother left on her answering machine. Ms. Gold had hung up on her accidentally one day and failed to call her right back. "Judith, are you all right?" Mrs. Gold says in a deep, Yiddish-inflected voice that her daughter mimics perfectly. "Did you fall down? What happened? Where are you? I'm a wreck."

Ms. Gold then remarks, "She thinks Jeffrey Dahmer is chopping my body up into a million pieces."

Ms. Gold grew up in Clark, N.J. Her father, Harold, was a tax attorney. She has a sister, Jane, 48, and a brother, Alan, 49, whom she refers to, alternately, as "Jesus" or "the Messiah," because of her mother's apparent favoritism toward him.

When Ms. Gold was little, she says in the play, the first book her mother read to her was not "Cat in the Hat," but the pop-up version of "The Diary of Anne Frank." She describes her mother reading it to her: "I still believe that people are really good at heart." Now pull the tab, Judith. Dead. Pull it again. Alive."

So, the real Ruth Gold, what do you think of the play?

"I was delighted," she replied. "I've been a big booster."

The women began to banter back and forth between the living room and the kitchen. "What!" Ms. Gold cried out from the kitchen.

Her mother said stoically, "Well, it's obviously the impression she got," simultaneously acknowledging and dismissing her daughter's complaint.

The show is based on interviews with 50 Jewish mothers, including Ruth Gold of course. But she said that she hadn't realized the play would be all about her. "She discusses her home life and how rotten I was," she said. "I thought she was just interviewing the neighbors. I would've been on my good behavior." (The play has led to a book with expanded material to be published by Hyperion in May, in time for Mother's Day.)

As Sunday evening wore on, it became obvious that mother and daughter disagreed about a number of things, and the back-and-forth continued. In the show Ms. Gold describes her mother as "completely embarrassed" when she found out her daughter was gay.

Sitting in the living room now, Ruth Gold said, "It was never a big issue, never

discussed."

Her daughter interrupted: "It was an issue. Believe me. She's lying. At first she told me that that was the reason I was depressed."

Mrs. Gold said, "I didn't."

Ms. Gold exasperatedly cried, "Omigod!"

Initially Ruth Gold was taken aback by the complex birth and adoption arrangements. Now, Ms. Gold, standing in the kitchen, said knowingly, "Henry is her favorite."

"I don't have favorites," Mrs. Gold replied stolidly from the corner of the apartment where she was sitting.

Ms. Gold whispered, "I will tell you, he has more money in his Hanukkah envelope."

"First of all, he's the oldest," Mrs. Gold went on, undeterred.

Despite the nearly constant arguing, Ms. Gold speaks to her mother three times daily. "You called your mother three times a day: 289-5699," Ms. Gold reminded Ruth, reciting her grandmother's old phone number by heart.

As it turned out, when Ms. Gold interviewed her mother for the show, she discovered a few things that helped her better understand Jewish mothers, and her own in particular. She learned of a freak accident that scarred Ruth's childhood and made the possibility of unexpected loss an ever-present reality. Ms. Gold, her voice softening, later confided about her mother, "I am so lucky to have her."

With the presents opened, the latkes eaten, it was time for grandma to return to New Jersey.

"Call me after you speak to Judith," Mrs. Gold instructed. "I don't want her to correct what I have to say."

"Call me at 1 o'clock," she added. "My aide goes home from 1 to 4."

She was asked why the aide goes home in the middle of the day.

"Because I can't stand her," Mrs. Gold replied.