

Jenice Armstrong | Remembering Judy

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THE CHARM OF the annual Philadelphia Film Festival is that you never know what jewels you'll unearth, which movies will haunt you after the event is over.



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One that I'm sure will resonate with filmgoers who came of age during the 1980s is a documentary made by a former Philly resident. It's called "Judy Toll: The Funniest Woman You Never Heard Of" and will have its Philadelphia premiere during this year's festival.

The film, which opens with black-and-white family movies, is as much about one woman's struggle for fame and love, as it is a touching example of a brother's devotion to his sister and desire to keep her memory alive. Judy achieved moderate success as a stand-up comic and actress in Hollywood before her untimely death at the age of 44.

"She would have been a superstar," said Gary Toll, a former used-car salesman and real estate developer who had no film experience before deciding to undertake the project.

"The story is of her struggle and of her conquering insurmountable goals . . . I wanted [the audience] to laugh. That was important to her. I wanted them to laugh and know how funny she was and get a feel as to who she was."

After she died in 2002, Gary moved his family to Los Angeles, where he enrolled in film school and set about interviewing Hollywood insiders - Kathy Griffin and Michael Patrick King, executive producer of HBO's "Sex and the City," are two of the biggest names who appear on camera - about his sister's career and legacy. According to them, Judy had the chops to have become one of the greatest female comics ever. She was outrageous, raw and willing to make fun of herself.

She began her career in the early 1980s at Philly nightspots such as the old London Pub, Comedy Works and the Jailhouse. She started out performing with her brother, but he quit after the rigors of all the late nights and endless rehearsals proved to be too much.

But Judy, a 1975 graduate of Haverford High School, was born for the stage. You know the type. The starry-eyed, laugh-a-minute extrovert for whom being onstage is as essential as breathing. The daughter of a furniture store owner and a homemaker, she had the bug - hard.

In 1981, at age 23, Judy moved to Los Angeles and immersed herself in the comedy club scene, which back then was dominated by the likes of Robin Williams, Sam Kinison and Jim Carrey. Several years later, she landed a gig at the noted Groundlings Theatre improv group, which spawned such notables as Paul Reubens (Pee Wee Herman), actress Lisa Kudrow ("Friends") and Laraine Newman ("Saturday Night Live.") Watching old clips of her onstage, you're reminded of the zaniness of Lucille Ball's physical humor as well as the off-the-wall appeal of the late Gilda Radner.

Some of the funniest moments of the film are when she shares her dismal dating experiences. After breaking up with actor Tom Wilson ("Back to the Future"), she would joke onstage, "I just got out of a three-year relationship and all I keep thinking about are the two good times we had together."

Finances were also an early problem.

"She struggled for so many years," Gary recalled. "She wasn't making any money and [our parents] kept having to send her money to support her for many years."

Eventually, Judy managed to snag some forgettable TV roles and attain a fair amount of success doing stand-up. But the stardom she so desperately craved continued to allude her, despite finding success in other areas of the business, including writing. Hollywood, unfortunately, had deemed her not "sitcom pretty."

A successful play she'd co-written and starred in while a member of the Groundlings, "Casual Sex?," was made into a major movie, but she wound up not being cast in the picture, which was a crushing disappointment.

In an oft-repeated routine, Judy adopted the persona of a female version of the foul-mouthed, chauvinistic comedian Andrew Dice Clay. In the documentary, she's shown wearing a black leather mini and clutching a cigarette as she goes a bit too far cracking jokes on "Regis & Kathie Lee."

Her writing credits include "The Geena Davis Show," "Boy Meets World" and "Alright Already." But the most recognized of all her hard work was as an off-screen consultant to the HBO hit show, "Sex and the City."

She was responsible for such memorable scenes as one in which Miranda (Cynthia Nixon) is seen eating chocolate cake, putting it back in the refrigerator only to take it out again for another taste. Miranda does this over and over, and only manages to stop after she tosses the box into the trash can and pours dishwashing liquid over it.

One reason why she clicked so well writing for the show was because, like the characters on "Sex and the City," Judy was on a constant quest for love. Shortly before her death, she met a documentary filmmaker, Rick Trank, on the online dating site JDate, whom she married. The film shows her beaming joyfully as she walks down the aisle.

"Judy was sick and fighting cancer and had gotten tired of being on her own. She was really searching for a man. Rick is a take-charge, controlling kind of guy, and that's what she needed at that time. He took over. He took charge and told her what to do," Gary recalled.

"She fought until the very end. We were constantly searching for that answer. It was tough for her at the end . . . The cancer had spread to her liver and they felt that it was in her liver and her stomach. After that time, the doctor told her, 'This is it. You're not going to make it.'

"When he told her that was it, she said, 'OK. I want to travel to Europe.' "

Tragically, she never made the trip, just as she never achieved the stardom she sought all her life.
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