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Baruch Puts Women Comics In Spotlight

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Gender and Jewishness: Sheba Mason, left, Judy Gold and Jackie Hoffman

Time was, the very idea of a female comedian up on stage was a joke.

Now, with so many women making their careers as comics, nothing seems more natural. But how far have Jewish women, in particular, come in winning a share of the limelight? A series at Baruch College this month, “Solo in the City: Jewish Women, Jewish Stars,” may help to provide an answer. The series features seven performers who will each take a turn on an evening in March — the lineup of comedians includes Sandra Bernhard, Jackie Hoffman, Judy Gold and Sheba Mason. In addition to humor, the series also features singer Rachael Sage, pianist Inna Faliks and actress Tovah Feldshuh.

The series is the brainchild of John Malatesta, the managing director of [Baruch’s Performing Arts Center](#), and Jessica Lang, an English professor who teaches American Jewish literature.

“We wanted to connect more with the city at large,” Malatesta said, “and to take a more contemporary approach.”

Lang’s interest in the series was sparked when Sheba Mason, who is Jackie Mason’s daughter, took a course with her. “She did a great stand-up routine in class,” Lang recalled. Lang and Malatesta compiled a list of performers to invite, and many of them accepted. “It’s a fascinating cross-section of women who have made it and those who are still up-and-coming,” Lang said. “Some identify more strongly than others with the community they came from and the household that they grew up. Some will emphasize gender more than Jewishness.”

Mason's performance will do both. The comedian's shtick is inspired by her background as the illegitimate daughter of the famous comic and upbringing by her mother, Ginger Reiter, a high school teacher in South Florida. (Reiter's long-running Off-Broadway musical about her 10-year affair with Jackie, "702 Punchlines and Pregnant," stars Sheba in the role of her mother and runs on Sunday afternoons at the Broadway Comedy Club.)

Describing herself as part of a "new wave" of comedy, Mason put herself in the category of those female comics who are "brash, brazen and not afraid to announce our promiscuity." At the same time, she noted that her performances are a "throwback" to an older style, such as that of Phyllis Diller or Joan Rivers, in which a performer's syntax, intonation, body language and acting ability were all called into service. "I don't go for the hipster comics, who just stand there and don't emote," she said.

Because she plays a broad range of venues, Mason gets to test out Jewish material on different kinds of audiences. What limits her, she said, is more her gender than her ethnicity. "A lot of comedy clubs, especially on the road, won't put two women on stage in a row," she complained.

Tuesday evening Joyce Antler, a Brandeis University professor and author of numerous books on Jewish women in American culture, moderated a panel discussion with featured filmmaker Suzanne Wasserman, novelist Jennifer Gilmore, and art critic Gail Levin that kicked off the series.

In an interview, Antler said that the series "puts right up front this wonderful tradition of Jewish women in comedy" — performers, she pointed out, who have induced us to look critically at the roles assigned to women in our society. While they may make some of us uncomfortable with their often "irreverent and bawdy" approach to sexuality, she said, they ultimately "make us question who we are both as Americans and as Jews."

For details on the series, call [646] 312-5073 or go to www.baruch.cuny.edu/bpac.