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Comedian Annabelle Gurwitch on 50 being the new 50

by Naomi Pfefferman

June 3, 2015 | 10:50 am



Annabelle Gurwitch at the Skylight Theatre. Photo by Ed Krieger

"Fifty is the new 40? That's total BS," Annabelle Gurwitch, an acclaimed humorist, author and performer, said during a recent interview at a Chinese cafe in West Hollywood. Gurwitch, whose witty work has been compared to that of Nora Ephron, is 53. But, she said, "53 is like 83 in actress years."

In years past, her TV roles have included a secretary on "Murphy Brown" and a hooker in "Miami Vice"; she starred in HBO's "Not Necessarily the News" and was a clever and funny co-host on TBS' "Dinner and a Movie." But in her 2014 New York Times best-selling book, "I See You Made an Effort: Compliments, Indignities, and Survival Stories From the Edge of 50," she recounts frenetically emailing pictures of herself to a casting director to prove she could pass for a middle-aged woman from the Middle Ages, with the pithy subject line, "I was born to crone."

Then there have been the relentless missives from the American Association of Retired Persons, all embossed with staid photographs of

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elderly models that shout, “Take my libido for the rest of my life, which won’t last much longer anyway,” Gurwitch writes.

She’s channeled these observations and more into her new solo show, “I See You Made an Effort,” which recounts — among many other anecdotes — how your marriage can stagnate when you take Polaroid snapshots of all the dirty socks your husband has left around the house. Gurwitch is performing the show based on her book at the Skylight Theatre Skylab in Los Feliz through June 8.

“I’ve aged right out of my wardrobe,” she says onstage. “I’m heading for the [designer] Eileen Fisher years ... a cross between a hospital gown and a toga.”

She’s also discovered, with alarm, a beauty cream called Hope in a Jar. “You know that’s the last stop on the anti-aging train,” she said during our interview. “What’s next, sleeping in an oxygen hyperbaric chamber? Voodoo doll sacrifices?”

Quips aside, Gurwitch’s play also explores, in a tragicomic way, the more fraught sides of life post-50: her diagnosis of osteoarthritis not long ago, for example, and flying to Florida to care for her aging parents at the same time she is raising a teenage son, with her husband, producer and writer Jeff Kahn, in Los Feliz.

At one point during the conversation, Gurwitch excused herself to take a call from her father, who suffers from advanced lung disease. She learned that her mother, who has long been battling breast cancer, had been hospitalized. She returned to the table in tears. “My parents are both declining,” she said with a sigh. “It’s been really hard.”

On the home front, meanwhile, she’s dealing with a surly 17-year-old who has forbidden her, among other things, to ever utter the word “oy,” because that’s “too Jewish.” His mortification about anything his mother does began around the time he was 13, when he ordered Gurwitch not to act in a way that might embarrass him at his bar mitzvah. When she asked what might embarrass him, he replied, “*Anything* you do, Mom.”

Gurwitch began writing the book version of “I See You Made an Effort” at 49, “when I kept having these middle-aged experiences that I didn’t recognize,” she said. “Suddenly I’m at a party and everyone knows their cholesterol level. Things are different, and I wanted to make some comedy out of that, and talk about things in a way that, hopefully, people hadn’t heard before.”

The book and the play explore the question: How are we supposed to age at a time when baby boomers are living longer than ever and many have become part of a “sandwich generation,” caring for both elderly parents and children?

There are fiscal anxieties for many of this sandwiched generation, and, Gurwitch said, her own worries have been exacerbated by memories of her financially unstable childhood in Mobile, Ala., and Sunset Islands, Fla. Her father, an entrepreneur, often spent funds he

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Naomi Pfefferman Magid arts & entertainment edit the Jewish Journal, where spent the last quarter cer interviewing everyone fro Rogen, Natalie... [Read more.](#)

didn't have, dodging creditors — one day a Rolls-Royce would be parked in the family's driveway, and another the Gurwitches would be crashing at an aunt's house after losing their home.

In person, Gurwitch is tall and slender, approachable as an old friend as well as wry and hilarious. Yet, she said, as a child she was very serious and did not initially aspire to a career in comedy; rather, she went off to study at NYU's experimental theater wing. The change came when she moved to Los Angeles in 1989 and began getting cast as a guest star in sitcoms. While honing her own comic voice, including serving as a commentator for NPR, she also snagged roles in myriad television series, including dramas such as "Dexter" and "Boston Legal." She also co-authored with her husband what she describes as a "self-hurt" marital memoir, "You Say Tomato, I Say Shut Up," (2010) which they adapted into a play that has toured nationally.

Her comedy idol, all the while, has remained Woody Allen — so much so that her home was crammed with copies of all of his movies and published scripts. So Gurwitch was elated when Allen cast her in the New York production of his pair of one-act plays, "Writers Block," about nine years ago, only to be devastated when, she said, "He was just mortified by my performance," and went so far as to say that Gurwitch seemed to be "retarded," firing her not long into rehearsals.

Afterward, she said, "I cried for about 12 hours on my friend's couch, leaving a tear stain," and told everyone she met that Allen had fired her — including all the guests attending a Passover seder at the home of her rabbi, Mel Gottlieb, now president emeritus of the Academy for Jewish Religion, CA. "For a while I wouldn't see any of [Allen's] movies — it was like I was sitting *shivah*," she said.

But when friends kept telling her about their own experiences of being fired (actor Jeff Garlin, for example, described being canned in the middle of a comedy set), she turned their stories and her own into a 2006 book, "Fired! Tales of the Canned, Canceled, Downsized, & Dismissed," that went on to become a series of staged readings as well as a Showtime documentary.

Gurwitch is also now adapting "I See You Made an Effort" into a documentary for FX; she hopes the piece will help erase some of the stigma associated with aging. "I've learned that there's something really empowering if we can actually embrace the age that we are; maybe we can define that in a new way, so that 50 is the new 50," she said.

At the end of her play, Gurwitch describes jumping on a trampoline with her son, despite the pain of her osteoarthritis. "F--- you, 50!" she triumphantly proclaims. "You're my bitch!"

For tickets and information about "I See You Made an Effort" at the Skylight Theatre Skylab, call 213-761-7061 or visit boxoffice@skylighttix.com