

25 Questions for a Jewish Mother

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(Ars Nova; 99 seats; \$35 top)

An Ars Nova presentation in association with *Jewcy* of a play in one act by Kate Moira Ryan, with additional material by Judy Gold. Directed by Karen Kohlhaas.

With: JUDY GOLD

By Mark Blankenship

In her one-woman show at Ars Nova, Judy Gold relates amusing and emotional responses to her '25 Questions for a Jewish Mother.'

After decades of touring her act, Judy Gold has become an expert comedian. In her one-woman show, "25 Questions for a Jewish Mother" – written mostly by playwright Kate Moira Ryan, with Gold providing additional material – she never misses a comic or dramatic beat as she tries to prove that she is nothing, nothing, nothing like the stereotypical Jewish moms that surrounded her as a child. Alternating between political rant, witty observation, and personal confession, Gold has more than enough delightful presence to smooth over the script's occasional rough patches.

It's quickly apparent why Gold's perspective warrants its own act. "Look at me," she says. "I'm a six-three kosher standup comic bringing up two kids on the Upper West Side with Wendy ... I'm like a documentary premiering at a gay film festival in Berlin."

From that moment forward, she's supremely honest as she recalls how she and Ryan traveled the country asking various Jewish mothers a prepared batch of questions about their lives. Even though Gold re-creates the interview subjects with impressive dramatic range, the show avoids ripping off Anna Deavere Smith by weaving tales of the comedian's own life among the other's stories. For instance, a woman recounts sitting shiva after her child marries a Protestant, which leads Gold to a funny bit about telling her own mother that she's married a woman. The parallels and political implications are clear, but the material is too good-natured to overstate them.



No doubt the show remains positive because it represents a long, successful journey for Gold, who has obviously included those Jewish mothers who altered her own perspective on family, sexuality, or faith.

But that doesn't mean the show is solipsistic therapy. Ryan gives the comedian's anecdotes an interesting dramatic arc, turning Gold's mother into a character who's no less memorable than Gold herself. We always get a sense of perspective and are never asked to accept that Gold is absolutely right.

The willingness to admit she's fallible allows the show to mix jokes with stirring emotional moments. Among others, Gold portrays an Auschwitz survivor and a woman who watched a sibling die all to illustrate how the performer herself had misunderstood why people act the way they do.

Those scenes offer elegant insights, though Ryan is not adept at moving elegantly between them. Transitions between interview subjects, stand-up patter, and Gold's personal history are universally clunky. No performer should ever introduce a scene by saying "And when we told her, it went a little something like this..." but "25 Questions" can't get enough of that awkward line.

Though they try their best, director Karen Kohlhaas and lighting designer Jennifer Tipton can't correct this jerky rhythm with their fluid blocking or color shifts. Fortunately, though, those small hitches can't dilute the goodwill that Gold invites so easily.

Set and costume, Louisa Thompson; lighting, Jennifer Tipton; sound, Jorge Muelle; production stage manager, Ain Rashida Sykes. Opened Jan. 25, 2006. Reviewed Feb. 2. Running time: 1 HOUR, 10 MIN.