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Holocaust and Humor?

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Can the Holocaust be humorous?

Viewers and critics split over Roberto Benigni's recent movie, "Life is Beautiful." While critics tripped over the film's slapstick opening, viewers -- including those who award the Oscars -- found the film not just entertaining, but spiritually uplifting as well. Why the disagreement?

The crux lies in what we have taken the Holocaust to mean, and how we use it to gauge our humanity and spirituality. For viewers contributing to a fan page on the World Wide Web, the movie's value lies in its ability to move us emotionally. Time after time, comments suggest that by responding emotionally to the screen we have established our post-Holocaust spiritual credentials. But for historians of the Holocaust who consider it their ethical responsibility to connect what we see to what there was -- at the death camps of Auschwitz, Belsen-Belsen and Birkenau -- emotion seems too easy a response to a horror that must be felt intellectually in order to be resisted spiritually. And historians of Hollywood, placing "Life is Beautiful" beside the challenge of "Schindler's List" and "Shoah," suggest that Benigni's movie is possible only because of these earlier films' unflinching gaze at the Holocaust's horror. Our spirituality depends on our intellectual honesty as well as our emotional facility.

Deb Filler, international stand-up comedy star, has long negotiated the border between horror and gladness, humor and spirituality in the context of the Holocaust. Her one-woman show, "Punch Me in the Stomach," has won awards across the world, been filmed for PBS, and acclaimed in newspapers as diverse as the counter-culture Village Voice and the often-stodgy Boston Globe. How does Filler succeed where millions of dollars and months of

Hollywood hype cannot? In "Punch Me in the Stomach," Filler makes no attempt to use the past for present emotion. Rather, she tries to come to terms with the past. She struggles to accept her father's Holocaust memories as he seeks to honor them, yet escape them, and ultimately pass them on to her. Protected from her European past -- her family lives "exiled" in New Zealand, "the land of no blintzes" -- Filler begins the show by announcing she will visit Auschwitz with her father.

There, as the child of a survivor, she will feel adequately "punched in the stomach." But the visit becomes deferred as she introduces family members across the world who exhibit both the life-perpetuating strategies and the psychological damage of holocaust survivors ever eager to forget, and to remember. Filler brings us the joy that teeters ever on the brink of memory and pain as well as the spirituality that maintains a life in the full knowledge of horrific death.

The Philadelphia City Paper Interactive comments on "Life is Beautiful" include "the film (shields) us from the true horror of the Holocaust the sense of scale is what's missing." Although Filler likewise treats the Holocaust as a gap, she fills that gap with knowledge of a people, their suffering, and their survival in the here and now. She doesn't make us cry and she does make us laugh. Yet most important, she makes us learn. She opens a space for spirituality.

Filler will perform in Laramie at 8 p.m. Saturday, June 18, in the University of Wyoming Fine Arts concert hall. Call (307) 766-5139 for ticket information and reservations.