

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NATIONAL CENTER FOR JEWISH FILM

Deb Filler stars in a one-woman show.

Putting the past onstage

Exploring Jewish life in New Zealand and beyond

By Daniel M. Kimmel

It's hard to tell which is more surprising in Deb Filler's one-woman show "Punch Me in the Stomach," the fact that she single-handedly plays some three dozen different characters or the discov-

Movie Maven

ery that growing up Jewish in New Zealand feels mighty familiar?

Her sketches and stories run the gamut from going to a Jewish summer camp and discovering other Jewish kids, to visiting Auschwitz with her father, a Holocaust survivor. Some are quite funny and others, as you might expect, are quite moving. The title comes from a relative's boast of how fit he is at a family party.

There's a real international flavor here although you may not realize it until the closing credits. Her parents were German and Polish Jews who settled in Australia and New Zealand. Her mother went to Australia to find a nice Jewish boy ... and did. Filler eventually came to New York, where an aunt assured her that the rich culture of Long Island was much more diverse than Down Under. She began performing off-Broadway and the result was this one-woman show,

filmed and released in 1996 as a co-production of Canada and New Zealand. Her characters take us to most of these countries, including a trip to Israel, where Filler discovers that camping and hiking with hundreds of other Jewish teens in a kibbutz is not for her.

Much of the ground she covers is familiar, even if the accents are different. There's her dealing with the mother of one of her classmates (who tries too hard to be nice to "the Jewish girl") and her early dating experiences. There's also the growing bond with her father — whom she plays in the show and who appears for real at the end of the film — as he starts speaking out publicly about his experiences.

Then there's the

unfamiliar, such as her giving voice to what it is like growing up as the children of survivors. In a bitterly funny scene, two such adult children make plans to meet and go through numerous contingency plans if, heaven forbid, something should go wrong. That worrying about their familiar world being destroyed in a moment is something she unthinkingly absorbed from hearing the real horrors her father endured.

She's at her most touching when describing her realization that the Nazis, who tried to destroy the Jews, were defeated and gone, and the Jewish people survived. It's something she needed to feel on a personal level.

Through laughter and a few tears, Deb Filler offers us some fresh perspectives of a story we might think we already know.

"Punch Me in the Stomach" is available through the National Center for Jewish Film for \$36. Public performance rights separately available. Call (781) 736-8600 or go to www.jewishfilm.org.

Daniel M. Kimmel, a Boston-based film critic and author, reviews Jewish films for the Advocate. He lectures widely on a variety of film-related topics and can be reached at daniel.kimmel@rcn.com.

