

## STEP INTO MY PARLOUR



By Shaun Proulx

She's been to Georgia and California and sipped champagne on a yacht.

Ooops – wrong woman.

She has been places though, **Elvira Kurt**. The comedian's dogged pursuit of success has seen her rise to play the best of the best comedy houses: The Improv, The Comedy Store, Caroline's, Catch a Rising Star and the legendary House of Blues. She appears regularly in Las Vegas, and she's a familiar face on the boob tube, with half hour specials on Comedy Central, and on shows for Showtime, A&E, PBS, the Lifetime Channel, the BBC and in Australia and New Zealand. Her orgasm scene in the Toronto production of *The Vagina Monologues* put Meg Ryan to shame, her wide appeal has made her one of the hottest and most in-demand college acts in North America, and she is the recipient of numerous awards including Funniest Female Comic at the Canadian Comedy Awards.



All a very long way from her first gigs in Toronto's gay bars where she would accept T-shirts in lieu of payment (giving them to her unsuspecting father to wear); a very long way from the days when she would stop before Second City alumni photos and imagine her grinning mug one day hanging alongside theirs – indeed it has been now for some time.

## SHAUN PROULX TALKS TO ELVIRA KURT



But the path Kurt chose has cost her in more ways than one, including having little room to maintain friendships and relationships. After years in L.A., she's now back home to Toronto and doggedly pursuing a new set of goals: a commitment to a relationship that's working, redefining success, and squeezing something called balance into her life.

But did she get to paradise? Has she ever been to 'me'? When I finally managed to pin her down at some ungodly hour of the morning to ask, I learnt that even funny ladies have to get serious sometime, and that perhaps for this funny lady, that time is now.



Wow, Elvira. I'm liking the morning voice.



Is it sexy?



Very Cruiseline, very M4M.



Very Brenda Vaccarro?



That too. What's this I hear about you taking on some deeper themes in your comedy?



Yeah. How 'bout that, huh?



Have you gone Oprah on us? 'Change Your Life Laffs'?



Yeah, that's it. God, wouldn't that be horrible? I don't want to call it a phase. I've reached that point where you start to kind of question: how did I get here? And what have I passed up in my relentless pursuit? And it's happening now because you don't think about these things in your twenties. Going ahead and handling that – it comes out in my material. Believe me, there have been days and shows when I have wanted to keep the material light and happy and still the dark side pulls me.



Do you worry that giving an audience something to think about might be detrimental?



I do! That's brilliant. No one else has ever appreciated that! You've got to go with it. I over-think things and I worry about the price the audience pays.



What's with the questioning? At what point do you – or does any artist - relax and enjoy a level of satisfaction wherever you're at?



You know who you should ask that question of? Mr. Jerry Seinfeld, who I once saw perform at The Improv after I'd done a set. At the end of the night there he was there with a couple of friends. I passed by him and he turns to them and says: 'Do you think I was good?' Oh my God, if you have 90 million dollars and you can't tell if you're good I don't think it's ever going to end. It was one of the most levelling and then depressing moments that I've experienced.



Who do you have to be good enough for?



Exactly. I won't say this is true of every performer – but as a stand-up comic there's a part of you that can't believe that you ever get a laugh.



I remember something you said before that hits the nail on the head, about the awful combination of being self-absorbed and insecure at the same time.



*(Laughing)* Who are you? James Lipton? Mr. Brian Linehan? You do your research!



Along the way there must have been some validating accomplishments, such as when Ellen DeGeneres called you to write for her HBO special and the pilot to her now infamous TV show.



For me to appreciate success doesn't happen easily. I realize how rare it is, especially in this country, to make a living from not just the thing you love, but something artistic. When I got the call from Ellen to help her it felt momentarily validating, but it was more dazzling to think, 'Oh, I'm that much closer'.



Tell me about L.A. for you. Because that wasn't just another city; that was another culture. You got there and hit the ground running -



- but I didn't go down and look around. I was in full conquer mode, how could these people not love me? I looked at L.A. like it was my mother.



With her comforting bosom?



I was tricked! L.A. sees people like me coming a mile away.



And they aren't going to extend themselves, because there's people like you all over the place.



Yeah, it's like you're trying to butt into this long line that ain't going anywhere. Nobody's going to let you cut in – and as a Canadian you're just too polite.



Six months into L.A. you'd gone through your savings, cashed in your RRSPs and maxed-out your credit cards.



The universe was telling me to slow down and I didn't heed its advice. I then literally took a fall. I was looking after a misbehaved dog and thought: 'Of all the other things I am here to do, I will also train this dog.' I'm running with this dog and trip and fall on gravel. I had to go see a dermatologist - with money I didn't have – for them to take gravel that was imbedded in my face. The first thing she said was, 'You've got to rest; you can't do anything for weeks'. And I'm like, '*No! I have a comedy festival coming up!*' And damned if I wasn't on that stage with pus oozing out of my face. The audience was horrified. Not only did they hate my material, I looked like I was in a horrible accident.



Is your ambition your Achilles heel? You've said it's cost you every relationship and every friendship along the way.



This is something I would not have been able to think about ten years ago when I was in the midst of being so driven and so focused. I would have prided myself on my ambition. But the first thing that happened when I got to that place was I thought: 'Oh my God is this all I have? What I've done is all I have? Oh my God I'm so unsuccessful, then.' I didn't think my ambition was too much, too excessive. Now of course when I look back, I feel it's good to have ambition but unless you've got it balanced it's as bad as having none at all.



How's the balance coming in now for you?



It isn't –



I was just about to say! I'm not buying into it because I know what your schedule's been the last two weeks alone.



(Laughs). Yeah, you're right.



Then again you're obviously more *aware*, which is the first step, right?



Now I can see what I'm doing and now it just scares the hell out of me. Before I wasn't paying attention. Now I see what's happening.



What made you come back to Toronto?



I just wanted to be around my people. But the bigger truth is that I have a relationship that meant as much to me as my work. Finally. My permanent address is Los Angeles but I spend most of my time in the airport. I'm mostly not home anywhere. But that's just so I can afford living in both places.



How's does your mother Irene - whose been so much material for your act - deal with the fact that you are still a show-biz freak and not a doctor?



Here's the interesting twist, the thing I would never have conceived. After I had spent some time back home and my mother was used to me being back - and in a relationship with a girl that she is *crazy about* - I noticed a change in her. She was a lot more demonstrative, a lot more affectionate. So I called her about it and asked what was going on. And she goes (launching into her now-famous imitation of her Hungarian mother): 'I'm de *new* mother. This is de *new* mother.'



What was that about?



I can't speculate. She's from a generation that whenever I press her on anything she's like: 'Tinking! Always tinkin! Notin' just happens.' But her inability to enjoy absolutely anything doesn't bother me as much as it used to. My girlfriend and I have talked about making a deeper commitment together and my mother is like, 'Why? Why, if everything is fine, why?' And I explained to her: 'Every time something good comes, without even thinking you already have the negative to it. There isn't even a moment you wait to say something bad.' And she just sat there listening to me describe this, and I asked: 'Do you understand?' because of course, communication between us has always been a big thing with my bad Hungarian and her bad English. 'Yes,' my mother says. 'You're tinkin I always say sometin' bad.' I said, 'I'm glad you understand. Does that help you change at all?' 'Yes,' she says to me. 'Now I'm vaitin' five minutes.'



Where do you go from here? You've got a new perspective, so what's the new pot at the end of the rainbow?



I'm getting closer to what I imagine something really good is. I'm going way too serious with this, but I measure things differently. You ask me now what that pot is now but I don't even feel like setting myself up.



It sounds like you are reaching a nice place. Not putting so much pressure on yourself and enjoying the ride.



Yeah, I'm getting there. Remember: I am the child of Hungarian immigrants. We must always worry that the ride is going to break down, or it hasn't been properly tested or there's a government plot to overthrow us.



Maybe you should try 'vaitin' five minutes first?



Oh God! That's exactly what it is! You're right! I'm doing the same thing as my mother does! That's so great. And look! Your hook for the story!