

Larger than life and twice as funny

PHILIP FINE

Special to *The Globe and Mail*, Montreal

Susan Jeremy pursed her lips and used them to point to audience members in the balcony.

It's a mannerism the New Yorker has noticed in her Brazilian girlfriend, and she exploited it for its humour during her standup set at the Sunday-night Just for Laughs show in Montreal. It's no coincidence that a small idiosyncrasy, which moments later she wears on a tough New York Puerto Rican character, delivers one of her biggest laughs at that evening's show of lesbian and gay comedians.

Although she was chosen to perform for the Queer Comics segment of the festival, it's not Jeremy's modest standup lines that got bookers to recognize her among their slush pile of videotapes. It was, rather, her character-driven comedy. If standup involves one person pointing out odd things about the human condition, then Jeremy is one of those performers taking comedy up the evolutionary chain — by letting all those observations play out in a setting inspired by real life.

She has been accomplishing that with abandon in her one-woman play, *P.S. 69*, which opens tonight for a three-night run in the Just For Laughs fringe series. Based on her experiences as a teacher at a New York City public school, *P.S. 69* has her playing 22 separate characters, and was co-written and directed by Mary Fulham, whose two children attended the school.

It was Fulham, says Jeremy, who kept the show from falling backward into standup comic. "She pulled the actor out of me. I tend to see everything in monologue," says Jeremy, who can also include break-dancer (touring with Herbie Hancock), clown, stilt-walker and Vegas opener among her past occupations.

In *P.S. 69*, Jeremy and Fulham portray an all-too-real school fuelled on Ritalin and government neglect. Among its occupants are a



Jeremy doing standup at Just For Laughs: character-driven comedy brings to life people in a well-told joke. ANDRE PICHETTE/*The Globe and Mail*

neurotic substitute teacher who sucks on her asthma inhaler and a rich mother with a patronizing, pinched face. Comedic lines are used sparingly, including a wry observation on the badly heated school, in which "going up and down the stairs is like going through menopause."

In the early 1990s, Jeremy would not accept that doing Joan Rivers imitations and opening for Andrew Dice Clay could be the apex of her career. She dropped out of comedy to study psychology at Hunter College in New York, but in the end, her desire to become a therapist was nixed by the prospect of hearing people's problems all day.

As she got back into writing and performing, Jeremy decided that she was done "with giving people just what they want." She would begin, she resolved, to write things that were truer to who she was.

And so in 1995 she penned the one-woman *Was That My 15 Minutes?*, mining some of her rich past: Although Jeremy was raised in the U.S., her father was Montreal-born

Frankie Lawrence, a transplanted Québécois who taught America how to mambo on *The Fred Waring Show* in the 1950s. *Was That My 15 Minutes?* documented some of his adventures.

When Fulham, a comedy writer, help Jeremy remount *15 Minutes* in 1997, they decided also to team up on a new production. "Enough already with the one-woman shows about someone's life," Fulham told her. "Let's do something that's not about you."

The perfect subject matter, as it turns out, was right there in front of them. *P.S. 69* was born from the raw observations of Jeremy, and the two women's mutual concern for the fate of the New York City education system. With Fulham's determination to build scenes from the daily realities of school life, the story of teacher Molly DeKowski began to unfold.

P.S. 69 debuted at the Montreal Fringe Festival earlier this summer and won two awards. Normally, one of those award winners gets to play the Just For Laughs festival; the other earns a run at the city's Centaur Theatre. Because Jeremy's show won both, it will be back in Montreal in September, between dates in Minnesota and New York.

While the adult characters portrayed by Jeremy in *P.S. 69* are all women, she says she admires the male characters played by comedians such as Tracey Ullman, and next up wants to start creating men like her hero Lily Tomlin did in her early days — ordinary guys "who don't analyze things."

In any case, she says she is happy that she can now do work that resembles her life more than when she was performing song parodies or dreaming of being a Rockette. "I'm glad I wasn't working in the 1930s," says the unabashedly out lesbian. "I wouldn't be reaching my full potential."

P.S. 69 premiers tonight at 7 p.m., and runs Thursday at 9:30 p.m., and Friday at 3 p.m. at The M.A.I., 3680 rue Jeanne Mance, Montreal. To order tickets, call (514) 790-1245.