

Hold the Pickle

Martin Ball, Reviewer
June 25, 2008

Rachel Berger is well known as a comedian, a performer who delivers rapid-fire lines with assertive and acerbic virtuosity. In *Hold the Pickle*, however, she leaves the microphone behind to paint an intimate portrait of her parents' life story, and by extension her own cultural heritage.

It's a simple solo show, where Berger takes on a variety of characters. She begins in the voice of her mother, telling the harrowing story of precarious survival as Jews in German-occupied Poland, before emigrating to Israel and finally to Australia.



The new world offered new hope, but there were scars that lingered. Emotionally, the legacy of the Holocaust haunted all survivors, but there was a physical cost too. Her father suffered, having lost an arm - and with it much of his dignity.

Growing up first in Spotswood was not easy, but when the Bergers moved to Acland Street, St Kilda, and life began to make sense. The family ran a delicatessen between the Monarch cake shop and the famous Scheherazade cafe, and Berger tells a wealth of stories about the Jewish émigré community who after the war found a haven here away from Europe's dark memories.

Scores of characters come to life, each crafted with affection and wry observation. Berger's parents are the main protagonists, of course, but this is no mere sentimental nostalgia trip, and Berger's honesty in exploring the gamut of family life is a key factor in the success of *Hold the Pickle*.

In terms of performance, Berger's considerable stage experience ensures a confident hold on story and characterisation.

She also knows how to tell a joke, of course, though the few times Berger dips into stand-up mode, the shorter cadences tend to upset the carefully constructed rhythm of the larger narrative.

In any case, there is clearly an extended audience for this show, and Berger might find she can hold the pickle for quite a while.