

Between the laugh lines, a life full of drama

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Rachel Berger's new show plunges her into unaccustomed territory, writes Liz Porter.

AS A comedian of two decades, Rachel Berger has always believed that actors and comics are different species.

"Actors warm up their voices and do exercises before going on stage. For comedians, a glass of red wine and a cigarette is a warm-up — or in my case, a cup of chamomile tea."

But last month, *Hold the Pickle*, the comic's one-woman show about her Jewish immigrant parents, received two "serious theatre" nominations in the Green Room awards for excellence on the Melbourne stage. So the performer is fretting about the prospect of rubbing shoulders with such thespian legends as Robyn Nevin, Pamela Rabe and Barry Otto at the April 20 ceremony.

In the meantime she has been forced to question the two-species idea. Last year, the nightly demands of putting on an intense 75-minute dramatic monologue drove her into warming up the way "real" actors do. She also managed to abandon the security blanket of her own microphone and its stand. This mike has remained the key prop for her stand-up, with many of her gigs beginning with her stepping back from the stand, declaring that it made her "look fat".

"When I first started doing stand-up, I slept with my microphone," she says. "I knew it was the most important relationship I'd have."

Berger's idea for a play about her parents came about during the Tampa year of 2001. Seeking a way to talk to audiences about the Howard government's treatment of asylum seekers, she found herself drawing on her own experiences as the child of refugees from war-torn Europe.

Her parents' story is one of resilience and triumph over adversity. They survived in Nazi-occupied Poland, emigrating first to Israel, where Berger spent the first five years of her life, and then to Melbourne, where they ran milk bars in Altona, Footscray and Spotswood before setting up a delicatessen in St Kilda's Acland Street.

Hold the Pickle opened with a sell-out season at La Mama last June, followed by a seven-night season at Chapel off Chapel in September.

Last month, the Green Room Association recognised both her performance and her script with award nominations.

Yet Berger still struggles to recognise herself as a "bona fide actor". The most difficult part of her alternative incarnation has been abandoning her comedian's compulsion to make the audience laugh. "There are laughs in *Hold the Pickle*, but (at the beginning) there is not one laugh for 25 minutes!"

It took Berger until the end of her La Mama season before she could enjoy the silence of an audience, recognising it as rapt attention rather than as a warning of her imminent "dying" on stage.

As late as 24 hours before opening night, *Hold the Pickle* began with its star throwing an open suitcase of clothes down the stairs by which she enters the tiny theatre space, followed by a brief comic monologue.

Berger finally cut both scenes at the insistence of two friends, *Neighbours* drama coach Mike Bishop and Her Majesty's Theatre technical manager Matthew Peckham, who warned that the suitcase routine would end with shoes hitting audience members' heads. The duo had watched her final run-through with their heads in their hands. "They just sat there looking at me — as if to say, 'What the hell has she done?'"

Berger is still working as a stand-up, but in June *Hold the Pickle* will be back for 12 nights at Chapel off Chapel's larger 240-seat theatre, with the comedian taking voice lessons to ensure her voice fills the space.

She plans to take her play overseas. She has already talked to a London producer about a short run next year, and will investigate putting it on in the United States and Europe.