

GET 4 WEEKS
FREE

[Subscribe Now For Full Access >>](#)

[Subscribe](#) | [Log In](#)

U.S. EDITION Friday, October 12, 2012 As of 7:04 PM EDT

- Home
 - World
 - U.S.
 - New York**
 - Business
 - Tech
 - Markets
 - Market Data
 - Opinion
 - Life & Culture
 - Real Estate
 - Careers
- [News](#) [Sports](#) [Culture](#) [Real Estate](#)

TOP STORIES IN
New York



1 of 12
Apple Growers Turn to Cider



2 of 12
Cuomo Aide Plays After-Hours Role



3 of 12
Revamp in Ramapo

NY CULTURE | October 12, 2012, 7:04 p.m. ET

A Comedic Room of Their Own

History of Women in Comedy as Told By Female Comics

Article

Comments

[MORE IN NEW YORK-CULTURE >](#)

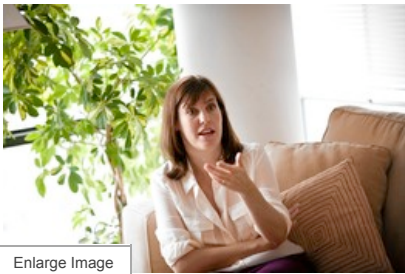
ARTICLE FREE PASS

Enjoy your free sample of exclusive subscriber content.

GET ALL OF WSJ.COM: [SUBSCRIBE NOW - GET 4 WEEKS FREE](#)

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

For her new oral history "We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy," author Yael Kohen interviewed more than 200 people active in the laugh business from the 1950s to the present. Beginning with the late Phyllis Diller, the book surveys the evolution of stand-up comedy, from yuck-yuck one-liners to iconoclastic new forms of storytelling, with appearances by Joan Rivers, Lily Tomlin, Janeane Garofalo, Kristen Schaal and many more. It also covers the development of sketch comedy, bolstered by the work of women including Elaine May, Gilda Radner and Kristen Wiig.



Enlarge Image

Ramsay de Givie for The Wall Street Journal
Yael Kohen, author of 'We Killed'

Never far from the proceedings is the specter of Christopher Hitchens's infamous, bluntly titled 2007 Vanity Fair essay, "Why Women Aren't Funny." In response, Ms. Kohen writes in her introduction, "Women have always been funny. It's just that every success is called an exception and every failure an example of the rule."

At her home in downtown Brooklyn, she spoke with The Wall Street Journal about

showbiz past, the limits of pink and the female comedians she came to consider differently again at the backdrop of history.

You mentioned there being no shortage of reasons to do this book. What gave you a start?

We all know the Christopher Hitchens piece. When I read it, I hadn't been exposed to the idea that women weren't funny. I didn't know people walked around saying that. I felt like I wanted to know more, so I read more—and then still wanted to know more. I read anecdotes and stories, but there wasn't anything that captured the full history and context. I just wanted to call women who work in comedy and ask them what it was like.

Were they receptive to your queries?

My general feeling was that they would roll their eyes a little bit. A lot of comics seem like

BEST LUXURY HOTELS 2012



GET THE LIST

Available to WSJ.com Subscribers

U.S. Says Iran Is Behind Cyberattacks

Japan Utility Says Crisis Avoidable



Pharmacy in Outbreak Aced Like Drug Maker



Surge Earns Romney Room on the Right



Get your 4 week risk free trial

[SUBSCRIBE NOW](#)

Don't Miss

Powered by Taboola

they're tired of talking about why women are or are not funny. But the funny thing was, that wasn't really what I wanted to talk to them about. Look, the book is pink, it's about women, but I don't think it's about women as much as how the scene and styles have shifted over time. In order to understand the women, you have to understand the world they were in. Otherwise you're just talking about women in relation to other women, and I wanted to think about women in relation to comedy.

You interviewed a lot of men, too.

We talk a lot about "boys' clubs" and how a lot of men shut out a lot of women and to an extent it's true. But there were also a lot of guys who mentored women and helped push them along. From the '70s and '80s, people love Richard Belzer. Roseanne [Barr] talked about Louie Anderson. A lot of women were talking about the guys who helped them, until you get to Janeane Garofalo, who all of the sudden [in the '90s] was helping everybody.

Your history begins with Phyllis Diller. What was she like?

I went to her house, walked in, and her assistant said, "You should call her Madame Diller," which was kind of strange. She was lucid, but she was frail. And she really did have an overpowering laugh: I thought she was going to keel over while laughing during the interview, like she would fall off her chair. There was a strange formality to it, but at the same time she was very warm.

Who would you have most liked to interview that you couldn't?

Gilda Radner. I don't think there's a woman in sketch comedy who does not point to her as the person they wanted to be, or the person they fell in love with first, or the person who influenced them the most.

It's interesting to look back and recognize familiar figures as radicals. Were there surprises in your findings?

I knew Elayne Boosler was a comic, but I didn't realize she was such a pivotal figure. She was important in terms of shifting comedy away from some of its self-deprecating style and husband jokes. She was like the first women's-lib comic: she was talking about having sex, she was talking about politics, she was joking about being a single woman in the '70s. One of her jokes at the time was that men want you to scream "you're the best!" while swearing you've never done this before.

The book tracks the changing nature of comedy on the stage. Was that a strategy or serendipity?

Every 10 years, comedy style tends to change a bit. By the 1980s, comedy had become very joke-oriented, just getting up with a mic and telling jokes one after another. In the '90s with alternative comedy, you had more fleshed-out stories, with a slow build to getting to something a little funnier. Sometimes it wasn't even necessarily funny. Julia Sweeney talked about cancer, which on the surface doesn't sound that funny. Over 60 years, people always talk about women being self-deprecating. But the way Janeane Garofalo was self-deprecating was different from the way Phyllis Diller or Joan Rivers was self-deprecating.

Have you done comedy yourself, or consider it for the book?

I have thought about it, but I think my husband would kill me. I would be a stand-up, and I would have to tell stories about my personal life. But when it really gets down to it, I like racial and ethnic humor. I haven't spent much time thinking what it is specially I like about it, but those two subjects still have an element of "I can't believe you just said that!" I think my husband just worries that I would talk about him. Would I talk about him? I don't really know.

—For more of the interview with Yael Kohen, visit WSJ.com/NY.

A version of this article appeared October 13, 2012, on page A22 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: A Comedic Room of Their Own.



Why Hollywood Is Embracing the Bible

03:53



Election 2012: Why Comedians Are Taking a Larger Role on the Politic...

05:43



Film Clip: 'Seven Psychopaths' Starring Colin Farrell, Woody H...

00:51

Most Popular

[Read](#) [Emailed](#) [Video](#) [Commented](#)

1. [Opinion: The Bully vs. the Wonk](#)
2. [Understudies Give Viewers First-Rate Performance](#)
3. [EU Wins Nobel Peace Prize](#)
4. [Russia Says Syria Jet Held Radar Gear](#)
5. [Opinion: Strassel: Filibustering Joe](#)

[Most Read Articles Feed](#)

Real- York

Can't Sell? Some Home Owners Try Asking for More

It might sound counter-intuitive, but WSJ's Mansion reports that some high-end sellers are trying out a risky approach for attracting buyers: upping the price.



Beverage Leaders, Businesses File Suit Against 'Soda Ban'

A group of businesses and trade associations filed a lawsuit Friday challenging the New York City Board of Health's decision to prohibit the sale of large sugary drinks in restaurants and other venues.



A-Rod Benched for Decisive Yankees Game

Espada Pleads Guilty to Tax Fraud

N.J. Revenue Collection Lower Than Projected

[See All](#)

[RSS Feed](#)

More in New York-Culture

[Daring Tricks for the Eye](#)

Getting Around Greater New York

Starting Address

OR Intersection or Popular Restaurant/Place

Destination Address

OR Intersection or Popular Restaurant/Place

Related Topics

[Broadway Shows](#)
[Lincoln Center](#)
[Metropolitan Opera](#)

[NY Philharmonic](#)
[American Ballet Theater](#)
[Museum of Modern Art](#)