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True to Her Orthodox Beliefs, if Not to Her Roots February 15, 2005

by Sarah Bronson

In many ways, Rachel Factor's show is typical of one-woman performances: there's the microphone, the bar stool, the empty stage; several original songs; autobiographical monologues full of humor, pathos, bittersweet memories.

And if the title, "J.A.P.," might be offensive to Asians or to Jews, who may recognize the shorthand for "Jewish American Princess," then that is not so unusual either. Performers often lampoon their own heritage, and that is precisely what Ms. Factor, a Japanese-American and unreligious Christian who converted to Orthodox Judaism, is doing.

"If you break down the words of the title, it represents where I've come in my life, in terms of my self-image," she explained in a telephone interview recently. "The meaning of the words are very beautiful. I'm Japanese. And Jewish. And American, just as American as anyone else who was born here. I don't consider myself a princess, but I consider myself worthy for the first time in my life."

In the show, Ms. Factor, who was born Christine Horii in Hawaii, relates her journey from a high-kicking Rockette at Radio City Music Hall to Israel, where she now lives with her husband and two children. She is currently on a 41-city American tour, performing to sold-out auditoriums at synagogues, community centers and Jewish high schools, all the audiences filled exclusively with women, as her strict faith demands.

Interestingly, despite her adherence to a religion that prohibits her from performing on Saturdays or singing in front of men outside her family, and requires her to forgo leotards for long skirts and modest hair coverings, she said she was more successful as an entertainer now than ever before. Since converting, Ms. Factor has become something of a celebrity, albeit within the small Orthodox subculture.

"I thought I was closing a door" to creativity, Ms. Factor, 36, said. "I found out that I was not only not closing the door, I was opening a door that had remained closed to me." As she croons in "Eyes Wide Open," the first song of her show, "Things don't turn out just how you think."

The mostly Orthodox women who come to the show by the hundreds are lured by Ms. Factor's story, the all-female religious environment and the chance to peer into the MTV and Hollywood dance worlds otherwise closed to them.

Among people who grew up Orthodox, many have come to take their beliefs for granted, one audience member, Michelle Luwish, said, explaining Ms. Factor's allure. "For someone who had been on Broadway to give up singing in front of men, to give up the seemingly glamorous aspects of life to take on a seemingly restrictive lifestyle in such a joyous way," she said, "it's inspiring to anyone who is on a spiritual path."

Before seeing the show, Ms. Luwish invited Ms. Factor to speak at an Orthodox girls' school in Monsey, N.Y., where she works: "It was good for my students to hear, and also for myself."

Growing up in Honolulu, Ms. Factor had all the advantages of a prestigious prep-school education, she says in the production, but felt ashamed of her Asian looks. She opens her show by re-enacting her childhood efforts to create creases in her eyelids with tape and eyelash glue.

At 18, she left for Los Angeles to pursue a dance career and quickly found professional gigs, including work as a backup dancer for Jody Watley and Belinda Carlisle, a stint as a Rockette, and jobs in the choruses of the Broadway productions of "Shogun" and "Miss Saigon." Highlights of her show are the moments she demonstrates, in a long skirt, the moves from her music videos and concert tours.

Despite the ignorant comments she often encountered, like "What country are you from? No, where are you really from?" she embraced her culture and set out to date Asian men. But she met and fell in love with Todd Factor, a television commercial producer, who told her it was important that his wife be Jewish. Her reaction, as she recalls in her show: "Well, it makes a lot of sense then that you would be dating me!"

At first, Ms. Factor balked at the idea of converting but decided to explore the option after a phone call to her mother, who said, "Jewish men make great husbands," despite not knowing any Jews. ("What? You always wanted me to date a Jewish guy? Jewish or Chinese?" Ms. Factor relates in her show. Still hoping her mother will provide a reason to drop the idea, she continues, "I can't be Jewish, because you named me Christine!")

Soon, Ms. Factor discovered that she not only agreed with Jewish beliefs, she also enjoyed the rituals. She inspired Mr. Factor to study more for himself.

"Maybe magic is always there in our lives and we just need to give ourselves the time and space to realize it," Ms. Factor muses in the show about her first Sabbath dinner. "To feel it, drink it in, bathe in it; that is what Shabbos is. A day when we let life and God and magic wash over us and take us on its journey

instead of trying to shape, conquer and achieve our destiny. After all, what is destiny?"

Ms. Factor converted to Conservative Judaism, but after a prominent Orthodox rabbi performed the circumcision on their first son, Ariel Jun, in 2002, and introduced them to other Orthodox families, the Factors decided that Orthodoxy was most compatible with their spiritual goals. Ms. Factor decided to convert again, this time according to Orthodox precepts. She changed her name to Rachel.

"It was a difficult choice," she said about abandoning public performances in favor of Orthodoxy. "Not only was it my career and my livelihood, it was my artistic outlet and my identity. I thought I couldn't reconcile Orthodox Judaism with my desire to express myself in the manner I had been doing." Soon after her conversion, the family moved to Israel, where Mr. Factor could study at a yeshiva for the newly Orthodox.

In Jerusalem, Ms. Factor performed the show, which she had initially written before her second conversion, for a friend, who urged her to repeat it for neighbors. She added a monologue about her Orthodox conversion, and soon women and girls were coming in groups of 40 to hear her speak and sing. Living rooms gave way to local theaters, and tickets sold quickly, particularly to American expatriate Orthodox women who felt validated by the story of a glamorous dancer who had chosen to join their community.

Ms. Factor's American tour included recent performances in Manhattan and Queens. The tour proceeds will go toward opening a nonprofit by-women for-women theater arts center in Jerusalem. There Ms. Factor plans to arrange performance opportunities for women "who long to sing and dance and act, who see no way to do that without leaving their religious communities," she said. Though she reports that some ultra-Orthodox believers have criticized her show as "inappropriate," audiences are mostly enthusiastic about the production. Shayna Goldsmith, 25, who organizes women's programming for Aish Hatorah, an Orthodox outreach organization, saw the show last month near her Upper West Side home and said it sent a potent message to women who are, or are thinking of becoming, Orthodox: "It's important for people to see that you can be Orthodox and still use your talents in a powerful way."