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A woman with dark, curly hair is looking directly at the camera. She is holding three large, shiny, curved blades (knives or machetes) in front of her face, partially obscuring it. To her left is a bouquet of white roses. She is wearing a dark top and a plaid shirt. The background is a warm, reddish-orange color.

NOVEMBER 19, 1998

Sara Felder: Playing with Knives

UNIVERSAL JONATHAN... TRIPPING IN CINCY...
TRANSGENDERS SITED... INVITE TO MARION...

Out Comes



*Interview by Dan Avery
Photographs by Todd Transon*

In her hilarious and touching autobiographical one-woman show *June Bride*, now at Woolly Mammoth, actress/juggler Sara Felder recounts telling her mom she was marrying her musician girlfriend Dev. Mom's response was a little surprising:

"You know darling, I've never told you this, but I always hoped that when you settled down with someone, it would be with a doctor. Or a lawyer. Or, I don't know, a man."

Since her radical student days in Berkeley, Felder has made a career out of dodging expectations. In more recent years, she's written two successful plays and toured with the likes of the Klezmatics, Joel Grey, and Louis Jordan.

So welcome to the world Sara Felder—a true Renaissance lesbian with opinions on mothers, gay marriages, and being Jewish in America.

The Bride

METRO WEEKLY: *How did a nice Jewish girl from Brooklyn end up juggling swords on stage?*

SARA FELDER: You know, my mother asks the same question. I have no idea. I learned to juggle in college, where I was a history major. One day I was juggling in the park, and this guy came up to me and said he was looking for an accompanist for their circus, and asked if I wanted to audition. So I became an apprentice to a small West Coast troupe called the Pickle Family circus. I didn't plan it—it just happened. And it was way more fun then being a secretary, which is what I was doing at the time.

METRO: *So you didn't dream of being a performer when you were a kid?*

SARA: No, never thought about it—never thought about my future too much, which was probably part of the problem. When I learned to juggle in college, there was something that felt very "right." There's a Yiddish word, *bashert*—destiny—and I had a feeling

that this was good for me. I never thought I'd end up performing, but I knew juggling was very special to me.

METRO: *How did your mom take it when you told her you wanted to be a performer?*

SARA: Well, that was mundane compared to the other things I was doing, so she was okay with it.

METRO: *Sort of an afterthought?*

SARA: Yes. My juggling was very combined with the political work I was doing at the time, so relatively speaking, it was quite innocuous. She was worried about my future—she had hoped I would use my college degree in some way. But like I said, this was not a big deal compared to getting arrested in demonstrations and flying off to Cuba and Nicaragua. And coming out. So there were a lot of other things going on at the time.

METRO: *You mention Nicaragua, and I know you've been to Cuba as well. Is that the sort of political work you're referring to?*

SARA: Actually that came a bit later. I started

performing at political benefits at UC-Berkeley and San Francisco, where I lived. I was doing anti-nuke work because the university controlled Livermore Labs, which designed nuclear weapons. So we students felt that our registration fees were going towards giving this lab credibility. There was quite a lot of civil disobedience going on. I got involved in that, and the anti-nuke movement in general. I realized that as long as I was juggling, people would look at me and listen to what I had to say.

At first, I was just preaching to the choir, but I found I could get away with a lot so long as I was juggling. I was able to talk about these important causes to a very diverse crowd.

METRO: *How did you end up going to Cuba?*

SARA: Cir Cuba, an international circus festival, had heard about this group I was involved with, Jugglers for Peace, and invited us to come perform at a festival. So we got a special pass. We left at midnight from Florida, but on a plane

that wasn't listed on any charters. Here we are, a huge group of people in an isolated part of the airport getting on a plane that's not listed anywhere.

So there we were in Cuba, with the best circus acts from Bulgaria, Romania, The

Soviet Union, Korea, and China. It was extraordinary. Nobody could believe we were Americans, because Americans didn't come to Cuba to perform. Americans were the enemy. This was in 1988 or '89.

METRO: *So we're still talking Cold War era.*

SARA: Definitely. It's funny, because we're talking about juggling—which is such a silly thing, such a diversion. But I saw the effect it had on villagers in Nicaragua, who had just buried someone that morning. They would see that some Americans did support their cause, that not all Americans were allied with the government. It was so powerful, what this little Vaudeville show could do. It was like that in Cuba, as well. A little different because we were part of this big circus tour.

METRO: *You've also taught juggling to prisoners in San Quentin. What was that like?*

SARA: Well, again you had this "circus" art, but you put it in another context and you have a tool for social liberation. This was a revolutionary idea: creating beauty and art and happiness and rhythm in a place that tries to take away people's humanity. We were giving prisoners a way to interact positively, to communicate with the audience, and a way to be artists.

METRO: *Obviously, your gayness influences your material. What was your coming out experience like?*

SARA: I started dating another girl during my last year of high school. I was really in love with her, and it was an amazing time. I knew it was something that was going to stay with me. I haven't had many of those experiences—juggling and being gay are probably the only



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events are happening—even the negative ones—because it shows how scared the other side is. I haven't changed the show based on that, but it definitely has different resonance. Now the mainstream audiences that come see *June Bride* have been part of this national discussion. This isn't the first time they've thought about lesbians getting married.

METRO: *Do you see a day when a gay marriage is viewed just like any other? You know, getting registered at Crate and Barrel, fighting over seating arrangements, trying to find minister in June.*

SARA: Absolutely. And certainly in our lifetime. It's the right thing to do and it must prevail. It just has to. I think that's why there's this backlash, because the Right is so afraid.

METRO: *What about gays who say we shouldn't be getting married—that it's a patriarchal, hetero institution?*

SARA: I totally agree with them. I don't think getting married is the most important cause we have, certainly not as long as anyone is dying from AIDS. But it's a happy cause, and it's always wonderful to celebrate the love between two people. I think it's a great irony that someone like Bill Clinton can tell us what is or isn't a loving, committed relationship. Being able to get married gives us the choice to do it or not, and to participate in reevaluating marriage. We want to be part of that weird—and maybe imperfect—institution.

If it was legal, would I get married? I don't know, but I want that choice. Do I believe in the military enough to say that gays should be able to enlist? I don't know that I do. But as long as there's gay people who want that option, I'm willing to fight for it.

METRO: *Have you ever had any protests about your show—from the far left or the far right?*

SARA: I used to get scared my show would be picketed by Queer Nation or something. The Family Values coalition once called one of my funding sources

METRO: *I'd be depressed if they didn't.*

SARA: Yeah, right. "What am I, chopped liver, that you won't protest my show?" But it's really quite a sweet little show. A columnist in L.A. said she'd like to invite every member of Congress to see *June Bride*, so that they could see what a tribute to family values it was.

METRO: *I almost felt like I could bring my mom.*

SARA: It's certainly a very pro-Jewish piece. I performed in front of a group of progressive Orthodox once, and at the time I was terrified. Not because of the gay material—they knew about that ahead of time—but because of how traditions, like circumcision and marriage, are dealt with. I literally prepared myself for people walking out, or speaking up during the show. But afterwards I got a standing ovation. I had to remember Jews take great pride in questioning everything. There was one woman who came up to afterwards and said she enjoyed the show but had some problems with it. At the end, when I invite the audience to say *Mazel Tov* [congratulations], she said she didn't want to. But in the end, she ended up saying it anyway. I think that has to do with community: Even when you don't want to, the community can make you do the right thing. **MW**

Sara Felder's June Bride runs through December 6 at Woolly Mammoth Theatre, 1401 Church Street NW. Tickets range from \$15 to \$28. Call 703.218.6500.

two things that I never questioned would be in my life. It was also clear that I wouldn't be sharing this with my family anytime soon. In college, I dated men and women and had a nice, clean coming out experience. Once I came out, I did it a lot. I'd come out to strangers on a plane, anyone who asked me the time. I still think coming out is important, but I guess I find it more efficient to come out to a hundred strangers in a dark room.

METRO: What was it like coming out in a traditional Jewish family?

SARA: Like a lot of parents, my mother worried about me, that it was going to be a very difficult life for me.

METRO: And "what about the grandchildren?"

SARA: And "what about grandchildren"? That really did come up. This was twenty years ago—we didn't have that same gay baby boom that's going on today. My mom's also an older parent—she kept saying she was from the old world. I was sorry she felt that way, and that it was affecting our relationship, but for me, it was so right. I never had that internal conflict or desire to change. I knew it was right, and she could "come along for the ride" or not. In the end, she has come around. When Dev and I got married about five years ago, it was in California. A few months later, when we were visiting in New York, she threw us a wedding party so she could invite her New York friends. I thought that was an amazing gesture. She wasn't obliged to do it, and yet she wanted to. What's hard for the parents is that they have to come out also—as parents of a gay kid. I can come out to the person on the plane or a bus driver, but now I've done some-

thing that really affects her life.

METRO: Your show *June Bride* also deals with your relationship with your father. How are things between the two of you now?

SARA: Improved. We've found our way together. We did have trouble for a while, though.

METRO: Without stating the obvious, you're a woman, you're Jewish and you're gay. Some people would say that's a triple blessing and some would say a triple curse. How do you view it?

SARA: Coming out as a lesbian helped me understand more about what it meant to be a woman. So that consciousness-raising happened at the same time. I found it hardest to deal with my Jewish identity.

METRO: To some extent, being Jewish prepares you for being "other"—to not be like everyone else.

SARA: It's a very interesting balance, because you're "other," but at the same time, your part of the majority. I always think I can pass for Gentile, but my friends are like, "Are you kidding?!" It's also definitely a balance between assimilating and trying to define yourself as a Jew, when you don't keep Kosher or go to synagogue. When I was growing up in my little "shtetl" in Brooklyn, being Jewish meant walking down the

street. When I went away to college that changed, so I began to feel invisible. I've finally learned to embrace my heritage, and being Jewish is a big part of my life and my work.

METRO: Speaking of religion in general—and specifically Judaism—do you think we need to bend the rules and rituals to include gay people, or just scrap them and start over?

SARA: For a long time, many of us had to choose between one of those options. But I've decided—and this is the crux of *June Bride*—that I am in this heritage. I don't have to prove anything or show any ID. I am a legitimate heir to this line. Nothing I do will take me out of that, or take away my responsibility to pass it on to the next generation. And, just like everyone before me, I have responsibility to change things that are offensive or inappropriate. Changing traditions is very traditional in Judaism. If I left it to the fundamentalist Orthodox to decide what Judaism is, I wouldn't be doing my job as a Jew.

METRO: Part of establishing new traditions is sharing them with others. It's fine to create new customs by yourself, but it doesn't have the same meaning without a community.

SARA: That's really true. I never would have done this alone. My synagogue in San Francisco has about 600 adults, maybe 100 kids. It's maybe eighty-five to ninety percent queer, but a lot of straights have been joining because it's such a beautiful place. And there are lots of other groups out there as well, which is great. I can't allow the Orthodox to tell me I'm not Jewish, or that I'm not living a Jewish life. And I can't let them be the "Jewish ones" either. I can't just say, "Okay, you be religious and I'll be secular."

METRO: You started doing the show in 1995. The whole "gay marriage" thing has exploded since then, with DOMA and the recent defeats in Hawaii and Alaska. Have you changed this show at all in light of this?

SARA: It's been a nice surprise that all these

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