

JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

Discovering What It Takes to Become Dr. Ruth

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Marissa Stern | JE Staff

Actress Jane Ridley in *Becoming Dr. Ruth* at the Walnut Street Theatre

Ruth Westheimer says that the day she stops talking about sex is the day you'll know she's bored.

Westheimer, more commonly known as “Dr. Ruth,” has been bringing sex culture into the mainstream since her radio program, “Sexually Speaking,” first went on the New York City airwaves in 1980.



Since then, Westheimer, 87, has become a one-woman media machine. In addition to her now nationally syndicated radio and TV shows and her appearances on everything from comics to *Late Night With David Letterman*, movies to PBS children's shows, she has authored 37 (!) books on topics spanning from the relationship between grandparents and their grandchildren to *Sex for Dummies*, as well as two new books — *The Doctor Is In: Dr. Ruth on Love, Life, and Joie de Vivre*, a memoir, and *Leopold*, a children's book — both of which came out this year.

Her life is the subject of the one-woman play, *Becoming Dr. Ruth*, which opened at the Walnut Street Theatre's Independence Studio on 3 Nov. 17 and will run until Dec. 27.

Westheimer led a very different life before becoming the sex icon she is today. She was born and raised in Frankfurt, Germany until she was 10 years old in 1939, at which point she was sent via Kindertransport to an orphanage in Switzerland to escape the Nazi regime. Her parents and grandparents perished in the concentration camps.

At 17, she left for Israel where she fought with the Haganah — the Jewish freedom fighters — as a sniper, including in the War for Independence, before eventually making her way to France. After studying psychology at the Sorbonne in Paris, she moved to New York and studied for her doctorate at Columbia where she pursued family studies. For her thesis, she did a study on 50 other children she was with in Switzerland, in which she discovered the importance of early socialization and how that affects relationships.

“Part of my talking about sex from morning and night has to do with this importance of relationships,” Westheimer said.

Westheimer still talks about sex from “day to night” today, including the patterns and changes to the subject from when she first started.

The questions have not changed, she said, such as inquiries about dealing with loneliness, communication between partners and specific questions about sex. But the vocabulary is much different than what it used to be.

“People don’t say someone ‘is with child,’ they say she is pregnant,” she elaborated. People also use the terms for reproductive parts more freely than they used to, she continued. The media has a big role with that, she said.

“What has yes changed, many women have heard the message — and I’m not the only one, there are many people who talk about sex now — but the message of the woman has to take the responsibility for her sexual satisfaction,” she said. “We have less women in this great country of ours who don’t have sexual satisfaction.”

Books like *50 Shades of Grey* — which she’s read, “of course!” — have shown that women benefit from erotic reading, too, in another example of media influence.

In her new book, she talks about the importance of finding positivity in life.

“I wanted to make sure people know how — what to do to be positive in life,” she said. “In the book, [I said] if you’re associating with people who comfortably complain, don’t do that. It says in the Talmud, ‘a lesson taught with humor is a lesson retained.’ ”

For her, humor has remained a way to move forward despite her beginnings.

“I wanted to show that despite the fact that I had such a difficult life of being an orphan, being in the Haganah, being wounded on both legs — but that’s not why I’m short — that you should learn a lesson of making the most out of your life,” she explained.

This stemmed from a lesson she learned from her grandmother when she was young. Her grandmother, who was Orthodox, instilled in Westheimer a dedication and love for tradition and positivity.

Everybody has some difficulty in life, she said, but she hopes she can help people say, “don’t ignore the difficulty, deal with it, but make sure you make the most out of your life.”

Though she has no regrets about it now, when Mark St. Germain first wrote the play, Westheimer was at first reluctant for it to be produced. She made him read the script to her, though he had suggested hiring an actress to read it for her.

However, there is one particular bit of irony with the play as the actresses who play her prepare for the role — first played by That 70s Show star Debra Jo Rupp when it ran off-Broadway in 2013, and now at the Walnut Street, where Dr. Ruth will be played by Jane Ridley — that made Westheimer chuckle.

“When I came to this country, they told me if I want to work here I have to take speech lessons to lose my German/French/Israeli accent,” she recalled, though she never had the money or time to do so. “Thank God I kept that accent because when I’m on radio, people know it’s me. Debra Jo Rupp had to take a speech coach to learn my accent! I love that irony of life.”

She saw the play on Tuesday night following another event Monday night at the National Museum of American Jewish History as part of its “Doers and Dreamers Speakers Series.”

Westheimer’s tenacity sticks out to Jere Lee Hodgkin, the director of the production at the Walnut Street.

“She’s a very fascinating and powerful figure,” Hodgkin said. “I did not know a great deal of the struggle behind the scenes in her life. It not only brings you the Dr. Ruth we’re all familiar with, but it also brings who she is as a person behind that, and I think the title of the play — Becoming Dr. Ruth — is so apt because it talks about how she became who she is.”

The play takes place in 1997, he said, two months and six days after the death of her husband and she is planning to move from the apartment they shared. She finds something as she’s packing — though he would not say what at risk of spoilers — and she encounters a lot of the memorabilia that “remind her of her life and the people in her life and the stories in her life.”

Hodgkin hopes the audience learns more about Westheimer and her life lessons, such as “that it’s not so much what happens to us, it’s how we deal with what happens to us that either breaks us or makes us who we are.”

Contact: mstern@jewishexponent.com; 215-832-0740