

Cabaret Is a Life

Ester Goldberg Lightens Up Dark Times

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Let's say you're the girlie type. Pink fingernails. High heels. A walk that's a bit twisty in the hips.

It's Oscar night and you've come out for the Ester Goldberg "Big Swanky Glamorous Hollywood Awards Party" at the Washington Plaza Hotel, and you're watching Goldberg, the diva, get ready. Truth be told, you're plenty diva yourself, but the sudden flash of purple sequins from Goldberg's floor-length gown fixes you in its pale, flickering light. You're dazzled by her electric-blue eye shadow and velvet noir lashes and the dame's sheer showiness.

Her bright reddish hair, teased nearly horizontal, flips like a 1950s starlet's, and as Goldberg rifles through her suitcase, a shapely turn of calf peeks from behind a long split. "Here are my pantyhose," says Ester, smiling coquettishly.

Suddenly you find yourself feeling curiously underdone. Perhaps you need a light holding spritz for a bit more volume to the hair, you think. A little color on the cheeks to bring out some inner radiance?

Sure, they're fighting in the Middle East, but

See ESTER, C4, Col. 1



BY MICHAEL TEMCHINE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

"People want to be able to turn off the television and think of something else" than war, says Michael "Ester Goldberg" Airington, with Screamin' Yentas Catherine Pulley and Erica Hoffman.

Ester Goldberg's Latest Act: Cabaret

ESTER, From C1

that doesn't mean a showgirl can't look good, Goldberg maintains. She purses her lips in the mirror. Are you getting me without the lips? she frets to a nearby photographer. "The lips are what make Ester," she says, suddenly putting hand to hips and giving kiss-lips to the mirror.

Man, the ovaries on that broad.

Maybe you've had one or two or even three babies in a log cabin without any pain medication. Ester Goldberg is still *waaaay* more woman than you are.

Michael Airington, 43, who has been playing Ester for nearly nine years, laughs riotously at this. It's an infectious sound. A balm.

Airington brought Ester, a bawdy, outspoken Jewish-aunt character with a weakness for baubles and big production numbers, to Washington four years ago after a radio stint in Nashville. She became a mainstay hostess of the Washington gay-bar scene with her wicked game show "The Feud" (based on the popular game show "Family Feud"). Then she crossed over, so to speak, to the more mainstream Westin last fall in a show that lasted six weeks and was extended for two more. "The Big Show" was a cabaret-style performance featuring an orchestral ensemble and backup performers the Screamin' Yentas (nice little shiksas Ester is trying to convert). Her move to the Washington Plaza is another six-week run.

The Oscar party is a kickoff for "The Big Swanky After Dinner Show," which opened last Friday. It features the improvisational "Stump the Jew," where audience members supply words Ester must turn into song. "Scud missile" is a first-week-of-war offering. "Sounds like a balad," she says. A few piano notes play, and she turns in some impossible ditty about Saddam Hussein breakfasting at a Baghdad Waffle House that's hit by a Scud.

With the house lights dim and the stage lit up, Ester and the Yentas sing from the musical "Chicago":

*There ain't no gentleman
that's fit for any use
And any girl who'd touch
your privates for a deuce
And even kids'll kick your
shins and give you sass.
Nobody's got no class*

These are dark times. They stink of war and bombs and weirdo illnesses. They cast a pall over the country and the city and maybe the hotel audience, but that's why you've got to give it up onstage, Airington says. "People want to be able to turn off the television and think of something else."

Ester's is a cozy, intimate, supper-club kind of show. It is star energy without the arm's length. Entertainment you can touch. And while Ai-



Ester Goldberg, aka Michael Airington, hosting her gay-bar game show "The Feud." Now she also hosts "The Big Swanky After Dinner Show."

rington is a man and Goldberg is all woman, please don't call either a drag queen.

"She's a character, she's an actor, she's Mrs. Doubtfire," says Airington. "She's fun." And, like Airington, she's had such a wild ride so far.

Airington was born in Annapolis, where his father abandoned him as a 5-year-old after his mother died. He was then raised by his grandmother, dirt poor in Virginia Beach.

"Growing up, I was the weaking," he says. "I found out I had this uncanny ability to do the voice of dead TV stars and it made people laugh." He used the voices to keep from getting beaten up, he says. And he used the voices because "I always said I was going to be famous," Airington recalls. There was just something about all that love.

When he was a teenager, a chance call to a local radio station looking for singers led to an audition as a comedian. This was a stretch since he actually just did impressions—Zsa Zsa Gabor, Mr. Haney from "Green Acres," and Paul Lynde. But he combined those with jokes culled from library books and landed a spot as the opening act for country singer Mel Tillis in 1975. This led to gigs for singers Della Reese and Rosemary Clooney. He landed in Hollywood at age 19.

Out of costume, Airington is a lean, youngish-looking man, his cornflower-blue eyes still very clear though they've seen a lot. At his apartment in Northwest Washington, Airington flips through a scrapbook from his Hollywood years as a favorite sitcom guest star on shows such as "Archie Bunker's Place" and "The Jeffersons." Here's a 1980

head shot with long feathery hair. Here are Polaroids with Soupy Sales at a March of Dimes telethon. Here's a napkin from Elizabeth Taylor's 60th birthday party.

He was able to buy his grandmother a nice home before she died in 1982. But by that time, "I had discovered cocaine," he says.

He was young and gay, druggy and needy, and flush with cash, minor production deals and B-list fame. His was a 1980s L.A.-flameout kind of story that ended in a nervous breakdown and a bottle of prescription pills in 1991. It didn't kill him. And when a friend persuaded him to go to Nashville to dry out, he began working for a radio station there. That's when Ester, a voice based on a woman at the Lancome counter at Bull-ock's department store in Los Angeles, asserted herself. And that's when Airington rediscovered the healing power of going on with the show.

Ester Goldberg was an entertainment reporter, she dispensed dating advice, she explained Hanukah to drive-time listeners. She got fan mail, propositions, requests for personal appearances. "The Jewish Community Center wanted Ester to come out and open their pool," Airington says, laughing. "I thought, 'Oh my gosh, they do not realize she's not real.'"

After four years in Nashville, Airington decided to flesh Goldberg out. Dame Edna, the Australian housewife played by actor Barry Humphries who declared herself royalty, was already on Broadway, so in 1999 Airington decided to come to Washington. "To get Ester into politics."

He immediately joined an upscale catering company because "Ester had to learn to work a room." Within

a month he was serving breakfast to Al Gore, and taking notes.

It's a Thursday night in March at Hamburger Mary's in Northwest Washington, and a team fielded by the gay advocacy group Human Rights Campaign—captained by Candace Gingrich, Newt's half sister—is playing "The Feud" (which used to be known as "Feytge Feud") against the team that's organizing the 2003 Gay Softball World Series. Goldberg's sidekick, "Dick Dawson," is queued up with questions. But first there is a moment of silence, "whatever your politics," for everyone in the theater of war.

Then they play on.

Name a movie-line quote a gay man would know.

The answers come fast. *No more wire hangers*, from "Mommie Dearest"; *If you don't have anything nice to say about someone, come sit by me*, from "Steel Magnolias"; and *Fasten your seat belts. It's going to be a bumpy night*, from "All About Eve." Goldberg works the crowd with a campy, naughty Bette Midler-style wit. One contestant's non-answer earns a "dumb-(expletive) blonde award."

"She's a local hostess *everybody* knows," says Gingrich. "A grande dame."

Now it's Oscar night at the Washington Plaza. Because of the war, the Academy Awards have dispensed with their red carpet, but Goldberg is working hers. Someone's wearing a tie from Sears ("You must be from Bowie"), but there's also leather (of course) and shag and sequins and fringe. The Washington Gay Men's Chorus has a table. There's Kip and Jeff, Ester's regulars, and all the other pretty, pretty boys she calls friends. About 150 folks in all—a number of them straight.

Packy McGaughan, a lawyer from Clarksburg, and Donnelly Gillen, a University of Maryland student, had just seen Goldberg the week before, when she made a personal appearance at the 50th birthday party for a Chevy Chase lawyer. Someone told Gillen's father: "You know she's kind of got a Dame Edna thing going on." He replied: "Yeah, but Dame Edna's really a man."

She reminds people of someone they know, someone in their family, McGaughan says. "She's a little forward, she always wants you to get married. She's not restricted to subculture. She'll play anywhere."

Onstage Ester, her purple sequins still flashing, with the Screamin' Yentas close behind, works her songs, "Big Noise From Winnetka" and "I Dreamed I Was Laura Bush Last Night."

It's show-must-go-on, intimate, cabaret-style performing. Entertainment just close-in enough that makes the rest of the world slip away.