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GREAT READ THIS PSYCHOLOGIST HELPS COMEDIANS KEEP LAUGHING

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Idiko Tabori has never professionally tried to make strangers laugh. But she understands comics' pain

The Laugh Factory's in-house psychologist helps keep comedians laughing

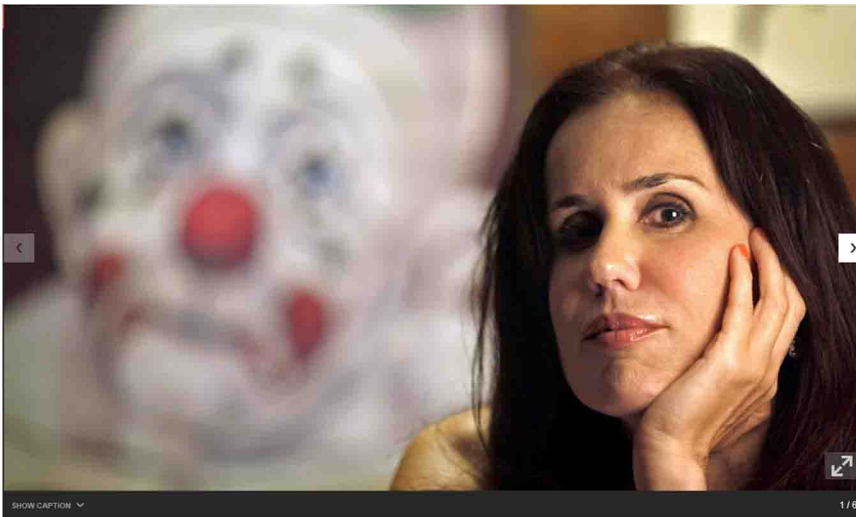
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Ildiko Tabori has never stood on a stage trying to make strangers laugh, doesn't write jokes and admits that she's not great at telling them. Trying to recount something clever she heard, she makes advance apologies: "I'm not going to do it justice."

But if you make a living being funny, Tabori understands the particulars of your pain better than most: For the last 3 1/2 years, she's been an in-house psychologist at the Laugh Factory in Hollywood.

"Being a comedian is truly the hardest job in the entertainment industry," Tabori says.

"You have a lot of late nights. You have good sets, you have bad sets. It is kind of a lonely existence at times."



She knows about the constant pressure of finding gigs. The uncertainty of whether the routine that worked yesterday will work tonight. The front-row drunk, ruining your set. The allure of drugs and alcohol. The hard-to-describe emptiness that attends interactions with fans, who mistakenly believe they know you because they related to a joke.

And the strain of watching fellow comics shoot to stratospheric success, sometimes as fresh arrivals on the scene. "I do hear that a lot," Tabori says. "Why is this person successful, and why am I not?"

Robin Williams' suicide this month was a reminder of why she's there. Club owner Jamie Masada hired Tabori after he became alarmed by the number of premature deaths in the comic world, including Richard Jeni's suicide in 2007 and Greg Giraldo's fatal overdose three years later.

"He felt the comedians needed some support from a professional," she says. "He's not trained to recognize someone who's going to go kill themselves, and I am."

During the day, she sees patients at her West Los Angeles office. Two or three nights a week, she drives to the Sunset Strip club around the time comedians start taking the stage.

Clients follow her up a narrow staircase, past the bar and VIP lounge, to a third-floor office where they sit on an old-fashioned red couch that used to belong to Groucho Marx. Clowns gape from the walls. Through the floorboards rise the muffled sounds of jokes living and dying on the stage below.


"Initially people were skeptical of Dr. Tabori because, A, she's a female; B, they didn't think they needed any help; and C, how could this doctor who never did stand-up comedy understand them?" says veteran comic Sunda Croonquist, who has been seeing her for three years.

She says Tabori helped her get through "a horrible, dark time in my life" precipitated by a lawsuit by her in-laws, who were angry at her depiction of them in her act.

"She's hard-core," Croonquist says. "You're not gonna get a fluffy pillow. It's like, 'Sunda, you have to deal with this.'"

**“
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”**

- Ildiko Tabori, psychologist for comics

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A Los Angeles native and daughter of a former runner from the Hungarian Olympic team, Tabori grew up absorbing what she calls "an Eastern European work ethic."

As a girl, she fell in love with Johnny Carson and had pet cockatiels named Mork and Mindy. She originally wanted to be an ethnographer, "to see the world and study customs," and now "I guess I am kind of an ethnographer. I study this culture." Often, she stands in the back of the club watching her clients perform. It can provide clues as to what's hurting them.

For years she counseled inmates at L.A. County jails and sex offenders for the state parole board, which is one thing she tells people when they ask how a non-comic could possibly understand a comic's pain.

"I don't have to live that experience to understand what's going on with them," says Tabori, 43, who is divorced with an 8-year-old daughter. "I'm not bipolar, but I can work with someone who has bipolar disorder. Emotions are universal."

Masada, the club owner, says he interviewed dozens of psychologists before he found Tabori. "She understands comics," he says.

He pays for comics' first few sessions with Tabori or another therapist who comes on alternate days; after that, they pay on a sliding scale. Tabori, who calls the gig "the coolest job any psychologist can have," has seen scores of comics since Masada hired her.

In casual conversation Tabori exudes easy cheerfulness, but she describes her approach with patients this way: "I'm not a touchy-feely Earth Mother. I'm the type of therapist who is going to call you on your crap. I'm going to hold you accountable."

Research shows that depression and bipolar disorder are more pervasive in comics than in the general population, she says, and the lifestyle can exacerbate it.



A message after the loss of comic Robin Williams adorns the outside of the Laugh Factory in Hollywood before a show. Club owner Jamie Masada hired Ildiko Tabori as an in-house psychologist after he became alarmed by the number of premature deaths in the comic world. (Rick Loomis / Los Angeles Times)

Show business is brutalizing, competition is cutthroat and the road — where many comics make their money shuttling between stages in nowhere towns — is a lonely place.

"They're sitting alone in an icky, dark hotel room, and that loneliness creeps in," she says. "I get a lot of calls from hotel rooms."

Tabori's clientele is supposed to be a secret, of course, though it's a joke at the Laugh Factory that everyone knows who she counsels.

One of them is Rajiv Satyal, 38, who's been doing comedy full time for eight years. He says comics often speak of the microphone as an arrow, pointing right at them.

"The rejection is public," he says. "I'll never know how good my friends are at their jobs — they're doctors or lawyers — whereas you know how good of a stand-up I am. You can see me."

When he worked in the marketing department at Procter & Gamble, he says, a co-worker might inch up a rung on the corporate ladder. In comedy, your peers' success means they are rich and famous. "The feeling of inadequacy is fed by the industry."

Brett Riley, a 15-year comedy veteran, says he began seeing Tabori because he didn't want his infant daughter to be harmed by his free-floating anxieties about his job.

"This is one of those professions that is not a good career choice," says Riley, 35. "You're not guaranteed anything. You're a trapeze artist without a net."

For all their onstage vulnerability, comics work in a macho culture, and there's still a stigma attached to seeing a psychologist, he says. "We're intellectual jocks. We're our own boss. So seeking help is not really conducive to our conquer-the-world, stand-alone attitude."

On a recent night, Riley was three jokes from finishing his 20-minute set when a woman in the audience began heckling him, loudly and brazenly. His comeback included an unflattering description of the circumstances of her conception.

But it gave him little satisfaction, and he spent the rest of the night apologizing to other performers and club staff, though everyone agreed she had had it coming.

"It's a pressure cooker," he says. "It's like riding a bull. You have no idea if some crazy lady is going to come out one night and start screaming at you. I don't think there's too many jobs where others can yell at you."

Sometimes, Tabori says, hecklers can lead to breakthroughs in therapy. She recalls a veteran comic who called to say he'd had a terrible set. A heckler had interrupted him. Normally, he ignored them, but this time he had seen red.



Comedian Paul Rodriguez talks with psychologist Ildiko Tabori on the red "therapy couch," which used to belong to Groucho Marx, at the Laugh Factory in February 2011. (Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times)



"He said, 'She looked like my mother,'" she says. "He thought he'd worked through issues with his mom."

Recently, as Tabori's clients try to make sense of Williams' death, she's seen the initial shock giving way to something else.

"The anger is starting to hit," she says, recalling a comic who noted that Williams left children behind, and who also felt guilty for his anger.

Tabori's assistant, James Harris, 39, who is both a psychologist-in-training and a comic, says the suicide unnerved comics in part because Williams represented the pinnacle of talent and success in their field.

"It's scary because so many people think the answer to their happiness is going to be that kind of accomplishment," he says. "On some level you have to ask, 'What if those things don't make me happy?'"

Tabori had been waiting for a patient at her day job when she saw the news on Facebook of Williams' death. She sent Masada an email saying, "Please remind the comedians I'm here."

The next morning, she says, one of her comedian clients sent her an email that said, "Thanks for keeping me and my friends alive."

"I have it saved and flagged," she says. "That one I'll keep forever."