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Heeb Issue #19 : Feature Interview

Spoonful of Sugar

Natasha Lyonne's Sweet Comeback



Photo by Noah Sheldon
Text by Shira Levine

I almost don't recognize Natasha Lyonne when she walks into SoHo's Circa Tabac. Fifteen minutes late, she zooms right past me and I have to guess, "Natasha?" before she turns. "Shira!" she replies, like we're old friends, or maybe new ones. It's the blown-out hair that threw me. "There's still a little curl to it. It's not straight. It's just not natural. Look, this is what happens to you when you get involved with drugs," she jokes. "Chloë [Sevigny] hates it when I wear it straight. She's always like, 'Where's those big beautiful curls?'" Sporting dark-rimmed Buddy Holly glasses, bundled in a gray pea coat, Lyonne looks like any pretty, thin New Yorker rushing to be somewhere.

But who is Natasha Lyonne? In 1999, she was Teen Angst. The voice of the awkward and intellectually sarcastic Jewish kid. *Beetlejuice/Heathers*-era Winona Ryder with an extra dose of self-deprecation. Everyone knew her as Jessica in *American Pie*, the girl who advised "virginal" Tara Reid to just get laid already ("It's not a space shuttle launch; it's sex."). But it was Vivian in *Slums of Beverly Hills* and poor, repressed Megan in *But I'm a Cheerleader* that made the cool kids love her. She was smarts, insecurity, alienation and sometimes tits, all wrapped in a 5 foot 3 inch package. And then came drugs, arrests, hospitals and that infamous mug shot. Now cleaned up, years later, is she still the same Natasha?

We're at one of the city's last remaining smoking bars because cigarettes are her last remaining vice (she brought two packs and shared), and this is pretty much her first interview since her publically chronicled downward spiral. *The New York Times* ran an interview that touched on her recovery, but now sober for almost three years, she's in an even better place. Unfortunately, Circa Tabac doesn't serve coffee, so it's bottled water and edamame for us. "Maybe we'll go on a bender together, Shira. Maybe it's time to have a few drinks again," she teases in her naturally husky voice, tempered by almost two decades of Marlboros. She has a tough girl Brooklyn accent. When she goes off on a comic riff, it's like she's channeling Joe Pesci mixed with Woody Allen, who incidentally directed her first "grown-up" role: the narrator part in *Everyone Says I Love You*.

"I was 16 years old. It was my rite of passage," she says, and I ask her if she'd work for the legend again. "I don't know, if he calls maybe. I was the biggest 16-year-old brat. I would slam

my trailer door and put a sign on the outside that said 'Do Not Enter.' It said 'Keep Out! And that means you, Woody!' And then I'd blare my Led Zeppelin really loud and smoke lots of cigarettes. And then I'd come to the set and scream 'Screw you, mom!' No, it wasn't exactly like that, but you get the picture. I'm just kidding."

A lot of Lyonne's stories end that way—with a clarification. 'I'm exaggerating. Just a joke.' And this is necessary. Past confusion has caused problems.

By the time she'd completed the commercially successful *American Pie*, she was running with the wrong crowd, partying hard in New York, and hooking up with bad boy Eddie Furlong of *Terminator* fame, her co-star in *Detroit Rock City*. Miami Beach police arrested her in 2001 after she hit a road sign and attempted to flee the scene. After nixing the Breathalyzer test, she sarcastically told an officer "I'm a movie star. Can I talk to my entertainment lawyer?" The media had a great time with that one. The Smoking Gun named it "The Most Entertaining Celebrity Arrest Report" of 2001.

"Listen, I'm not for everyone. Maybe those officers didn't understand that I was kidding," Lyonne explains. "Maybe a lot of those people who wrote up those police reports thought I was being serious. They probably don't have my same sense of humor. It's not like they have a Petri dish of highbrow comedy over at the precinct."

Now, in 2008, she's in the "Hallmark Hall of Fame" presentation of *Loving Leah with Six Feet Under's* Lauren Ambrose, a quirky love story revolving around the wedding and unconventional married life of a 26-year-old widow and her late husband's brother. Susie Essman of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Ricki Lake and Mercedes Ruehl round out the cast. As of November, she was filming *Thirteen* starring Mickey Rourke and 50 Cent. Plus, she's got those funky independents: comedies about janitors being experimented upon, with tag lines like "still wondering why your life didn't turn out like a John Hughes movie?" There's *Goyband* (think *Dirty Dancing* meets *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*) with super-bubbe Tovah Feldshuh. ("I guess it does get Jewier than me!" she says.) And there's one just titled *Heterosexuals*, in which she co-stars with . . .Tovah Feldshuh again! ("She's extraordinary," raves Feldshuh. "She is creative and she is free, and most importantly, you believe her.")

Sure, the new films could fizzle, but, hey, one could also become her next breakout. With the right dialogue, the right scene, Lyonne might recapture everyone's attention. Think of that scene in *Slums* when her father (played by Alan Arkin) coached her as she tried on her first "braziere." Yes, working with Ricki Lake isn't the same as working with acting royalty like Arkin, Alan Alda, Carl Reiner, or Goldie Hawn. But, the once indie darling has a plan: "I want a career like John Turturro!" Around 2000, she was almost there. Stranger things have happened.



Just consider where Lyonne was three years ago—reportedly homeless after actor Michael Rapaport evicted her from his East 18th St. building. In a scathing essay for *Jane* magazine, Rapaport publicly bitched her out for the way she treated the place: “It looked like a grenade had gone off.” When she was arrested in 2004, it got worse. This time, it came out that she threatened to sexually molest her neighbor’s dog.

No surprise reporters went nuts with that little sound bite. “They were missing the point a bit when I said I was going to molest a dog. Is it my problem in the first place for being fucked up and acting like a maniac? Clearly. But should you steer your puppy in the opposite direction on the street when you’re walking by me? No! I love puppies as much as the next guy.” Unable to resist, she adds, “The only difference is what I like to do to them.” This is one of those points where Lyonne’s laughter escalates and a coughing fit ensues. “I fucking love animals. They’re delicious! Just kidding.”

Lyonne might have lost herself with drugs, lost a roof over her head, lost her sanity, but she never lost her sense of humor. “I mean the idea that this has become part of my story is really absurd to me. As a rule people don’t think other people on drugs are funny. They think they are tragic. They have a point, but I still had the funny.”

She knows she’s being outrageous, and it has me laughing hard. Being with Lyonne is like finding yourself in an inappropriate commentary contest that she’s bound to win. Keeping the funny going strong, Lyonne teases our server when he hands us the check. “She’s not coming home with me,” she whines while he clears away plates. “I pulled out all the stops, you know? I did everything I could do. I did everything a girl could do,” she sighs. “I do appreciate your soft ear though. And I hate women. Actually, I don’t as much anymore. We should all just come together as John Lennon once said. Oh Shira, Shira the song. Is that what they call you? Shira the song? That’s what I want to call you if you let me. That’s what I’d call you every morning and every night. I’ll be like, ‘Shira, I’m naked. What are you doing?’”

“I can’t keep track of what is funny and what isn’t with you anymore,” I tell her between giggles.

“Welcome to my world. I thought heroin was hilarious,” she mumbles, squirming in her seat. Lyonne squirms and spins around in her seat a lot. Maybe it’s a post-drugs, lingering behavior, or maybe the topic is understandably uncomfortable to discuss with a perfect stranger. It sucks living your life on display, and Lyonne had to take the most difficult route to figure that one out.

“I tell them I was in the army intelligence division. What if that was where I was for the last two years? I was undercover in the fucking Israeli army! That’s the real story about me. The whole

drug thing was a front. How do you think we caught that Saddam Hussein? This guy!" she points to herself. "What do you have to say about that now about where my career went!? I say it's time to say thanks!"

We spend the early evening chatting and giggling like old friends. Bonding over our curly hair, talking about our breast sizes. She's masterful at stretching a joke so far it becomes funny again, and when she laughs, it's contagious. At the end of the three hours, I want to be Lyonne's new best friend. Unfortunately for me, actress Chloë Sevigny has already nabbed that spot. ("Chloë is a great fucking friend," she says, serious for just a moment.)

"I love how I have what is probably early-onset emphysema. I'll catch all the diseases out there! They're for free!" She's only partially kidding here. After those years of drugging and boozing, she ultimately ended up not only in the slammer, but also in Bellevue Hospital and later transferred, under a pseudonym, to Beth Israel Medical Center. Things are real bad when "citizen journalists" are blogging about your whereabouts and reporting (correctly) that you have a collapsed lung, heart infection and Hepatitis C. "I was 70 pounds," she reveals, and when she sees my shocked expression, she corrects herself. "OK, I was 75 pounds. I was exaggerating."

Now, three years sober, Lyonne's much healthier, but do not get her started on the word "comeback." "That is strictly comedy to me. Saying the word *comeback* is hilarious," she explains. Even though it's really why we're here, it isn't Lyonne's nature to "sell" herself; and she really doesn't like that c-word. "And then Natasha Lyonne set out on her comeback trail," she says in some old time movie voice, like a sassy Shelley Winters, over the hill. "'Yeah! I'm makin a comeback, kid! Stay outta my way! Now that I'm out of the pokey, I'm gonna make it big! Watch out gals, here I come!'" she booms. "That is total comedy to me. Like I'm fucking Gypsy Rose. That is not how I see my life."

"I love the image of me sitting by my vanity all day applying lipstick and chain smoking thin cigarettes like 120s, and reapplying my fucking Lee press-on nails and flat ironing my hair, listening to fucking Lena Horne singing the blues and exclaiming, 'We Can Make It!'" Her comeback fantasy actually sounds pretty fab, but to a woman with over 20 years in show business, it's clearly high camp. "Then when I like to take it down a notch I put on my jeans and a flannel and eat some brown rice and steamed veggies. Basically this is how it is, I'm a fucking actress and this is what we do."

Not quite. I've interviewed actresses before. They smile, struggle to charm, remember not to offend. They shamelessly self-promote and talk about what an honor it is to work with such-and-such, but Lyonne's a different breed. In the very nicest way possible, she tells me, "It's not my job to be an appealing famous person for you," as she takes out a cigarette. She takes her time, holding it unlit. It took her 20 minutes before she even smoked her first one, and I ask if she wants to just light it already.

"I will. Thank you. Shira, you are very loving. You're very attentive. Do you want to be a mom?" she asks, shifting the focus off of herself. Sure, I answer, and ask her the same. "I don't know if I ever want kids," she wistfully replies.

Lyonne is quite possibly thinking about her experience with her own parents. She took her French mother's last name and dropped the too Jew-y sounding last name of her father, a boxing promoter, entertainment manager and radio talk show host of *The Aaron Braunstein Show*. His website *Nyshockjock.com* has as its tag line: "Move over Howard Stern . . . There's a New Jew in town" and purports to feature "wise guys, black guys and rabbis."

"No. No. No. I didn't have the best parents. I don't think they are bad people. Even if they were ready to have children, it is kind of a wacky idea to put your child in business at six years old. I had to become coherent and a businesswoman at six. By 10, I was a jaded professional. By 16, my youth was over and my goose cooked. I don't think they knew better. It was a decision of my parents built on hopeful ignorance."

When asked to comment, her father cites Tolstoy: "There's no such thing as a functional family." Whatever their relationship, Braunstein undoubtedly believes in his daughter very, very much. "Natasha is a genius. She's always been a genius. . . She is the best actor in America! She really could be the Prime Minister of Israel." And he claims it was *her* choice to start acting so young: "She always wanted to be a movie star. She always said she wanted to be a movie star and that is why she started at four."

Either way, Natasha doesn't completely regret the choice to be a child actor, whoever made it. You can see her on *VBS.tv* with Gavin McInnes, smiling as she watches her 6-year-old self hanging in the playhouse with Pee-wee Herman (who she calls "a mensch"). "I am pretty grateful, I guess, that I got to have a job. I was taking a lot of things for granted because I was hell-bent on self-destruction. I had a death wish. I was missing how many perks I had and how much of a good life I had, and still do. I guess if I hadn't been put into this business by my

parents, who knows if I would have come close to getting those things?"



Will she capture the attention of her old fans again and return to indie darlingdom? Well, that "it" quality, like her big eyes, still shines. What has me so charmed, the more insightful critics spot too. It's the "crazy sincerity" *The New York Times*' Janet Maslin saw in *Slums*, why *The Onion*'s AV Club called her "excellent" and the reason Salon's Stephanie Zacharek described Natasha as "wonderful" and "terrific" (even when she didn't like the film itself).

"Her instincts are just like Meryl Streep's. Natasha Lyonne has that ability—that good, intuitive instinct for the creation of another being in front of the camera," declares Tovah Feldshuh. "That's the truth."

"The greatest actors never go too far away from their skins when they approach characters," says Broadway director/producer Scott Elliot, who directed Lyonne in the recent off-Broadway production *Two Thousand Years*. "Looking at her past films and even *American Pie*, you can see why she is a star. She brings elements of herself into all of the work she does. She doesn't look outside of herself for her roles, she looks inside of herself."

Elliot says he had no reservations casting Lyonne. "She isn't the first person to have a problem and looking back it was for such a short time. Some people are in it much longer. It really feels like a blip, just a very public blip. She just had to go through her crazy stuff in public and that's horrible. Other people get to do it in private."

Other people, yes. Not Lyonne. In 2004, a Page Six blind item asked: "Which actress who starred in a blockbuster movie trilogy has been spotted at grungy downtown nightspots smoking crack?" Perez Hilton, TMZ and, in particular, Gawker joyfully obsessed over her demise. In the "Gawker Stalker" section there are sightings of her all over Manhattan from 2001 to 2008—45 postings just on her. One example: "I just saw that girl from *Slums of Beverly Hills*, Natasha Lyonne. . . in the pharmacy section of the store. She walked right up to the cashier and she said 'Can you get me a pack of 1 CC syringes?' The cashier made her sign her name in a book, Lyonne paid for them, shoved them in her bag, and then left the store."

Looking at her now, I can't help but notice how adorable she looks. She's thin, but not too thin. (Although like any girl, she'd disagree.) Her skin looks great. No "meth mouth" or post drug acne. No pock marks or scars. She's wearing a kind of school-marmy, boxy, short-sleeved dress that might be vintage or maybe out of Chloë's closet. She looks awesome, and I tell her so.

"Well, you should see my pussy," she naturally throws back at me. I collect myself and tell her she looks great "pussy-up." She thanks me for the compliment. "I've got to have luck somewhere! I was really fucked up for a while. I really did take it pretty far, suffering and being in pain. I don't really find it fascinating or exciting anymore to make myself sick."

Amazingly, Lyonne is not bitter from all the vicious cruelty—and this stuff would have made Britney shave *other* people's heads. "Look, I'm not thrilled that perfect strangers get to have an opinion about me or feel like they know me, but I have enough perspective to know they don't know me, and I do have a life and I don't live it for other people." Now more focused, back straight, she continues, "My reality is very different from what everyone read. The

problem is because I did get myself in a lot of trouble, I didn't get to do the kind of work that maybe I should have been doing, so it became confusing who I really am and what I am really about. . .It's totally fucking strange to me that people took a lot of that fucking stuff seriously." Introspection aside, that she takes all this *schadenfreuden* in stride is, possibly, the most impressive thing yet. "It's not their fault that they don't know me personally. *Who's got the time?*"

As she said herself, Lyonne isn't for everyone, but she doesn't realize how adored she is by so many people, myself included. "I don't know where all these fans are. Sometimes they come out and say something I guess. I guess some of them actually are very nice. I'm just saying a parade would be nice."

Musician Rufus Wainwright, also a recovering addict, wrote the song "Natasha" for his 2003 album *Want One*. Even while caught up in addiction, Natasha was still a muse.

I'm happy that you really care/But do you really know how scary/This is for you and is for me/Oh do you know/Do you really know/Oh Natasha, all I can do/Is write a song for you.

If she can inspire a song while drugging, imagine what she could achieve sober. But could she ever really put it all behind her? If only Lyonne could have water and edamame with every casting agent and critic for three hours. They'd all love her as much as me. Salon's Zacharek once wrote that Lyonne was an actress "who hasn't yet had the chance to prove all she's capable of." According to Elliot, "She has an incredible attitude and she pierces through, so people who know her, work with her, and see her work don't think about [the drug addiction] anymore."

So can Lyonne put it all behind her? The rumors and that fucking mugshot may fade but never go away; in cyberspace, such things live forever. Will she land riveting roles? Garner that indie, maybe even blockbuster respect again? Or is she the Hollywood cliché that we, her old fans, will catch on off-Broadway stages?

Natasha, oh Natasha for you/I sit alone on the cozy ground floor/On a bench by the garden waiting also/Waiting for long and thinking of all the catty remarks I also swallow/And as I've often asked before/Does anybody know how scary.

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natrebuck says,

01.24.09 at 10:01 am

I think she is great...everyone goes through shit

Puck says,

01.25.09 at 9:01 am

Yeah and not entirely untappable.

m1k4br3t0 says,

02.03.09 at 11:02 pm

Ogmihfugkingog, Sorry, let me wipe the drool from my chin...wow. It's the cheekbones. Definitely the cheekbones, and the cutting self-satire. Please please please be mine, I am not a heeby-chaser. I don't care if the hair is straight, curly, plaited or dyed, in fact, cut it all off now and send it to me. I will make a sweater out of it, and when people stop me on the street and ask me, "What the hell are you wearing, you sick fuck?!", I'll proudly say, "my sweetie, Natasha Lyonne. This is the only way I can keep her close to me". Now, as for the smoking thing, there's only so many cigarettes you can smoke before you have your last. Start counting down. When you can run up three flights of stairs again, call me. I'll be at the top landing.

Love, M

P.S. I'm getting a parade together now. Would you prefer poodles that have been dyed pink?

Wearing matching pink leather chaps and biker hats? Or perhaps, 100 kids on big wheels doing doughnuts...of course I defer to you. Just keep it in mind.

Also,

Thank you, Shira, for making those comic books ever so long ago, and for talking and writing and shining a light where it needed to be shone. Your journalism is funny and insightful and entertaining, without being a fawning suck-up. Like me.

Lola26 says,

02.06.09 at 4:02 am

personally, I wish that Hollywood could wake up and regain their writing and directing skills again. Because this talented chica is made to literally play the legendary "IT" girl Clara Bow. There has not really been a great bio on a silent film actor since the 1992 movie Chaplin. I really think they should make a film on this extronenary woman because she is someone to be look at.(when they get the right writer and director). Because the life she lead, the beauty she made for cinema history, and the presence she brought to the screen, that jumped out into the audience at the theater was brilliant. She is Hollywood's first sex symbol and is underrated in todays society. Before there was Marilyn Monroe, Rita and Harlow, There was Clara Bow. She highly need to be looked at.....

I really hope that they do not make this film an Edie Sedgwick type and/or a complete sad impression of the artists life. There are for certain negative things on one person life, but don't forget the beauty and romance of the life she lead. Yes stay true, but don't forget the beauty of life, never!!!!!! I hope its better then Ray Charles.

Natasha Lyonne is an amazing actress and I think she will make Clara Bow proud if she plays her. Give Clara the respect she needs after many many years.

P.S. WARNING TO FUTURE FILM MAKERS!

There are many Silent and classic film lovers and dear fans of Clara Bow, screw this film up anyooooonnnnee, and you are bankrupt!

There has been too many crappy movies lately in Hollywood and everyone is sick of it.

Terry says,

03.01.09 at 4:03 pm

Fantastic interview.

It's really great to see Natasha back on her feet and working again.

I loved her work in Trick Baby and Slums and hope to see her in more great roles soon.

She's a brilliant actress who fell foul of the Hollywood lifestyle.

She has shown great courage in overcoming her demons.

As a fellow addict, I can only say kudos to you, Natasha and please keep entertaining us with your brilliant acting.

Bradonash says,

05.01.09 at 2:05 pm

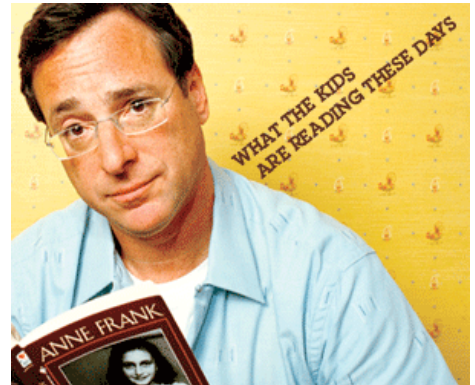
I was at Borders books reading a copy of the latest music issue and was reading the letters section. Someone had written that in the great film Slums of Beverly Hills Natasha Lyonne was felt up in the laundry room by David Krumholtz. He actually played her brother in the movie. The person in question was Kevin Corrigan. Just thought you should know.

Brad Oliver

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Britney Spears, Michael Jackson and Lindsay Lohan have given being bonkers a bad name. And this, friends, is why you need to appreciate Courtney Love. She may be a partied-out, namedropping big mouth, but thanks to her, it's still cool to be a screw up. (read more)

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Spoonful of Sugar

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Excessive Wear

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HIJINX

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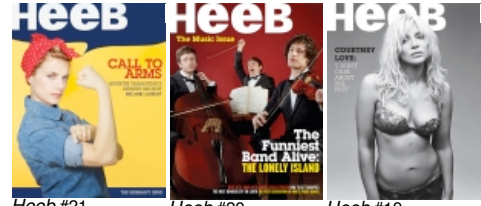
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