

# Even Comedy Is Bigger in Texas

Vicki Shaw left an 18-year marriage for comedy and lesbians, not necessarily in that order. By Edie Stull

Vicki Shaw, mother of three and grandmother of one, was the poster girl for the traditional family—until she came out as a lesbian, ended her marriage and began performing as a stand-up comic. Shaw, who grew up in a conservative Southern Baptist family, first tried stand-up at an open mic night after 18 years of marriage and was hooked. Since then, she's taken her humor to TV, stand-up venues, women's festivals and Olivia cruises, usually performing to sold-out shows. She's been featured on Logo's *Wisecrack* comedy series, Comedy Central's *Premium Blend*, WE Network's *The Secret Lives of Women: Late in Life Lesbians* and in the film *Laughing Matters...More*. Shaw and her partner of eight years, former police officer Lori Patch (who fans know as "Sergeant Patch"), recently moved from Illinois to Houston.



## Was there anything in your childhood that led you to comedy?

I was adopted at birth and had a happy childhood, but my parents have absolutely no sense of humor. It's odd that I'd end up being a stand-up comedian!

## Has your family accepted that you are a comic and a lesbian?

It certainly was not overnight. I came out 13 or 14 years ago and we've had our issues, but now my mom and dad are in their 80s. My mother says, "I'm proud of you," and she loves Lori. A couple of months ago, my brother apologized and said that he had no right to judge anybody. Unbelievable. I think Armageddon is soon at hand!

## How did you get started in stand-up?

I started in Houston. It was not about a career. It was simply so I could tell my children that I did it. I didn't want to look back and say, "I wish I had just tried it." The very first time on stage I completely froze and to this day I don't know

why I went back. But it was my creativity, my voice, it was just me—I wasn't someone's mom. I wasn't someone's wife. I wasn't anything but me on stage. The comedy was a catalyst in my coming out because comedy is really about getting in touch with your emotions, and you can't pick and choose what emotions you get in touch with.

## Was that scary?

Dear Lord, yes! I was in Texas and at the time you could lose your children in a divorce because you're gay. I lost all of

my friends. I didn't know any gay people. It was a horribly frightening time. **You talk a lot about your three kids, Sergeant Patch and your granddaughter. How do they feel about being in your routine?**

It just goes with the territory. The kids didn't really have a choice. It just happened. [With] Lori...I said, "This is my life, this is what I do and if we start seeing each other, you will be in the act. If you don't think you can handle that, we can't see each other."

## Has anyone been an inspiration to you?

My big inspirations were Totie Fields, Joan Rivers, Richard Pryor, George Carlin, Bill Cosby...I'd listen to their albums really, really low in my room, so my mom couldn't hear it. I didn't know at the time I was actually studying stand-up...I thought everybody did that.

## Do you think of yourself as a gay activist?

Yes, because I'm not only talking to gay people, I'm talking to straight people. There is nothing to be ashamed of. We are just fine the way we are and we can laugh and have a good time. I think we need to keep doing what we're doing. If someone is not out, they need to be out. It becomes personal—they know someone and then all of a sudden, it's not the same anymore. ■



## Queen of Qomedy

Poppy Champlin's comedic origins are pretty fishy. Her first gig was as a stand-up fish in the cabaret *Oceanics* while in college at the University of Rhode Island. "I did a fish shtick, 135 puns about the ocean: I was hooked. Kelp, kelp is there a sturgeon in the house? Ooh, that one really smelt," she says. "The audience was going nuts and I loved the feeling I was getting and decided, if I can get paid to make people laugh and feel good, and it makes me feel good too—that is the job for me."

From there Champlin went on the road, hitting several major comedy clubs before breaking into TV specials during the '90s. Her résumé boasts such gems as Rosie's VH1 *Stand-Up Spotlight*, A&E's *Evening at the Improv*, Oprah and Comedy Central's *Stand Up Stand Up*. She was also voted America's Funniest Real Woman on the *Joan Rivers Show* and was featured on *Entertainment Tonight*.

She talks about everything from broken relationships to alcoholism, and is the ringleader of the *Queer Queens of*

*Qomedy*, a tour that hits cities from Chicago to D.C., working with fabulous lesbian comics like Marga Gomez, Julie Goldman, Karen Williams, Mimi Gonzalez and Sandra Valls, among others. She also runs the Comedy and Cocktails night and an evening for indie lesbian films called Show Us Your Shorts at GirlBar in West Hollywood.

Champlin didn't always work the gay circuit—she started her career trying to make the straights roll with laughter. "It was a big change and decision," she says about moving from Chicago to Los Angeles in 1996 and coming out on stage. "I was afraid to be out and judged."

But she asserts that she made the right choice by coming out and overlooks the generic signs of comedic success—such as getting a late-night talk show. Champlin looks on the gay side.

"I book all my own stuff," she says about controlling her career. "And being gay, I don't have to deal with the straight guys trying to compete for time." — *Leslie Seacrist and Katie Peoples*