

Sandra Bernhard: Mensch, Mystic, Firebrand

Forward December 30, 2011

By Karen Iris Tucker

Her followers on Twitter know that Sandra Bernhard shares a dizzying number of missives. “I mix it up, honey, tomorrow night is a vegan potato kale enchilada. That’s how we roll,” said a recent tweet. Another said simply: “7:20 is the new 10:30.” To some, the domesticity might seem surprising. After all, Bernhard is a performer beloved for her withering and sometimes lewd comedic attacks on cultural icons and politicians. Onstage, she can be downright intimidating, eviscerating her subjects in her trademark blasé delivery.

Lately however, Bernhard, 56, has been ceding more and more room in her shows to softer fare, melding in thoughts on the bat mitzvah of her teenage daughter, Cicely, spirituality and her long-term girlfriend, Sara Switzer. “She’s cold and WASP-y, and I love it!” she exclaimed recently during a Planned Parenthood charity event. Such talk is a sharp contrast to Bernhard’s storied bad-girl persona: her now-mythic association as Madonna’s love interest in the ’80s, the brouhahas she’s inspired over the years with incendiary jokes.

The comedic provocateur, who first began performing standup in the late ’70s in Los Angeles, is now quite the devoted mom, living in a Chelsea loft in Manhattan with Cicely and Switzer. The fabled nightlife has been at least partially supplanted by other obligations. For example, Bernhard says you can find her most every Saturday morning at the New York University Chabad center in Greenwich Village.

“The world I’ve created has meaning for me and incorporates all the elements of who I am: the feminist, the social commentator, the Jewess,” said Bernhard during a recent conversation, before heading out on tour dates to support her latest show, “I Love Being Me, Don’t You?” Bernhard phoned exactly at the appointed time, 7 p.m., later tweeting excitedly that “Siri,” the personal assistant application in her new iPhone, reminded her to make the call. Her voice was downright gentle, devoid of the ironic cool from her stage act.

Explaining how she ultimately found herself in New York, happily ensconced in a decade-long relationship and frequenting an Orthodox shul, Bernhard said: “My trip has swung wildly and in a very diverse manner over the past 15 to 20 years — spiritual studies, places I’ve gone, things I’ve done.”



EVA TUERBL

Nontraditional: Though Bernhard identifies as spiritual, she attends Orthodox services.

That journey has included immersing herself in Jewish mysticism at the Kabbalah Centre in Los Angeles. Bernhard embarked on her studies back in 1995, years before it became a mainstream interest, and later introduced Madonna and Roseanne Barr to the center. “I was seeking something spiritual within the confines of being a Jew,” she said. “It was an acceptable place to go that was not exclusionary toward women.”

She no longer attends such centers regularly, contending, “The way they approach people is very punishing: ‘You could do better. You should be doing this.’ It’s like, you don’t need to beat me up.”

Bernhard’s formative experiences with religion were traditional. She was raised in a Conservative household and went to Hebrew school in the tiny Jewish community of Flint, Mich. Later, she moved to Scottsdale, Ariz., had a bat mitzvah and became a member of United Synagogue Youth.

She even lived on a kibbutz in Israel for eight months after high school, which she credits for instilling in her a strong work ethic.

Bernhard now largely identifies as “spiritual.” She loves to hear the reading of the Torah and says she attends Orthodox synagogues because they feel more authentic than Conservative ones — though she is quick to cite her ambivalence regarding certain tenets of Orthodox Judaism, particularly what she perceives as gender inequity. “The whole thing needs an overhaul that’s so deep and so wide that nobody can even begin to understand,” she said.

Switzer, who isn’t Jewish, has joined her for services. Bernhard doesn’t see it as a conflict that the two don’t share the same religion. “She’s an instinctually spiritual person. A solid, great person,” said Bernhard, adding: “I don’t think it’s necessary to do the same thing.”

Beyond religion, Bernhard has proven a nontraditional thinker in other areas of her life. A lesbian who came of age before the LGBT movement made substantial headway, she doesn’t dwell on the past’s tough struggles. “Honey, I’m post-feminist; I’m post-gay. I’m beyond all those things. At a certain point, you’ve got to just transcend it.” She’s been ribbing her largely gay audiences across the country: “The poor gays? The poor straights! Enough with the gays. You’re fine.”

What she loves most about her act is “I get to say exactly what’s on my mind whenever I walk onstage.” Her kitchen-sink approach to performance includes long stream-of-consciousness riffs punctuated by Bernhard belting pop and rock classics with a backup band. What inspires her? “New York — there is everything here. And I am like a vacuum cleaner.”

Local fans run into Bernhard at the Whole Foods near her home, and she obligingly poses for smartphone pictures. She responds to their tweets as fast as they come. Bernhard seems to have a driving desire to connect with people, virtually and face to face. It certainly belies the disdainful attitude she projects onstage.

That’s a ruse, she acknowledges. “I try to stay on my path, connect to what is meaningful to me and be compassionate,” Bernhard said. “I want to do things for people — I have great empathy. I want to reach out.”

Karen Iris Tucker is a Brooklyn-based freelancer who writes about health, culture and entertainment.