

Elza ZAGREDA

THE GENIUS OF COMEDY



BY: DR. **ERMIRA** BABAMUSTA

Elza Zagreda was born and raised in New York City. Elza graduated from Fordham University where she studied theatre and political science and continued her graduate studies at NYU in Dramatic Writing and Film. Elza has appeared in several acclaimed TV shows, including Law and Order, 30 Rock, One Life to Live and The Resistible Rise of Fatlinda Paloka. She has written and starred in numerous Broadway plays and worked in both theatre and television productions. She has established herself as a successful actress, writer and comedienne. Elza's career took off as writer and performer of her three solo comedies, Corn Bread & Feta Cheese: Growing up Fat & Albanian (2005), DIVORCE! Albanian Style!!! (2008), and THE BEST of ELZA: Growing up FAT, Albanian &... Happily Divorced?!?!?(2010). The latter is a combination of her first two works, and it is the buzz of New York City as

her shows were sold out. Her performance is outstanding and she makes you laugh with passion. Elza is a talented actress and her live performances leave the audience laughing hysterically, leaving them with the best experience and something to talk about for weeks later. Elza Zagreda is truly the funniest comedian you have ever seen. Elza is currently working on a new project, called Divorce, Depression & Dirtbags: A Love Story. It is expected to open in NYC in the Fall of 2011. Fans can learn about the performance dates on www.ELZAZAGREDA.com.



When was your first breakthrough role?

Elza Zagreda: I've been professionally acting for about 10 years with my first breakthrough TV role on Law & Order: SVU playing a Slevtlana, Slavic mail order bride. Before that I had gotten my undergraduate degree in theatre/political science at Fordham University and then I went on to obtain my Masters in Dramatic Writing/Film at NYU. Other TV appearance include 30 Rock, One Life to Live, The Unusuals and the SAG feature film Grand St, coming out in 2012.

Tells us about your work as a writer?

Elza Zagreda: I've written three solo comedies -In 2005 I wrote Corn Bread & Feta Cheese: Growing up Fat & Albanian. In 2008 I wrote DIVORCE! Albanian Style!!!, and then in 2010 I combined the first two shows to create THE BEST of ELZA: Growing up FAT, Albanian &... Happily Divorced?!?!?? since so many people wanted to see both shows. I also starred in last year's production of The Resistible Rise of Fatlinda Paloka written by Anne Giordano and directed by Joan Kane. It was the first American production featuring 6 Albanian-American actors ever gracing a NYC stage.

You have managed to connect with the audience and bring out through humor the best of the American and Albanian culture. How do the viewers identify with the characters you play?

Elza Zagreda: I've performed my solo shows to sold out audiences in New York City, Los Angeles, Detroit and Boston University. I've always been THRILLED at how well they have been received! I talk about topics closest to my heart—being a woman, my family, my upbringing, and how the two worlds of being Albanian and American often clash and collide and can cause a lot of heartache for females. I think my plays are so popular because so many people can identify with these struggles of being on the cusp of two different worlds. And more importantly, I think I manage to navigate this culture clash with laughter and humor. People appreciate truth but laughter as well.

What can the audience expect from your live performance?

Elza Zagreda: People should expect A LOT from my shows!! For starters, They should expect to laugh A LOT J. But they should also ex-

pect quieter, poignant moments of reflection and self doubt. I pose questions about what it means to be a daughter, loyalty, love and what it feels like to be an outsider. These are issues that no matter who you are—you can somehow relate—because all of us have somehow felt we don't always belong. My inspiration comes from my family and the struggles my parents endured trying to give us the best here in America. It wasn't always easy but they instilled in me the importance of a great work ethic, honesty and the power of unspoken love. I really try to make that come through in all my work.

What was your experience during the first show?

Elza Zagreda: I wrote my first show Corn Bread & Feta Cheese: Growing up FAT & Albanian in 2004. I wrote, starred and produced it. Vincent Marano, a wonderful playwright and director, directed the piece at The Blue Heron Arts Center here in NYC. I really took a huge leap of faith with that project having NO IDEA how it would be received. I started doing stand up and talking a lot about my family and Albanian upbringing and before you know, I had written a one woman show. With the encouragement of my good friend Luan Bexheti, I decided I wanted to perform it. I remember during my first performance my leg was shaking so bad I couldn't get it to stop! I was terrified at how it would be received since I was talking about controversial topics like The Kanun and the treatment of women in Albanian history and the present. Much to my surprise and delight—people LOVED it—including HBO, Comedy Central and Showtime. And after the first week, I started selling out

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What are you currently working on?

Elza Zagreda: I'm currently working on a new project: *Divorce, Depression & Dirtbags: A Love Story*. It focuses more on love, dysfunctional relationships and dating—from a single woman's perspective in New York City, with of course, an Albanian twist. It will open in NYC in the Fall of 2011. I have a film project lined up for the Fall 2011 and I'll also be performing new stand up material in NYC this Summer and Fall 2011. You can follow me on facebook or twitter or go to my website for the latest updates. My website with all my reviews and info is www.ELZAZAGREDA.com. I'm also on [Twitter.com/elzazagreda](https://twitter.com/elzazagreda).

When you are not busy working and performing, where do you go to get away from it all?

Elza Zagreda: I have three sisters that I'm very close to and generally we travel together on vacation. We have a family home in Ulcin. But this year we are aiming for the South of France—I was at the Cannes Film Festival last year supporting Dhimiter Ismailaj's film *Requiem for Kosova* and I had a fabulous time—so I'd like to go back again.

You have accomplished a lot in your career. Are you happy with where you are at in life?

Elza Zagreda: Am I satisfied with where I'm at?!?!? I'm NEVER satisfied! In this industry you can NEVER get too comfortable. One of my favorite quotes is from Helen Hayes said... 'You rest, you rust'... I really believe that. I'd love to one day have my own production company

and produce projects that are important to me. No matter what I look like today, I will always feel like that little fat girl who never thought she could make it. I hope my work inspires others to believe in themselves and take risks—no matter WHAT they want to do in life because as long as you stick with it, it will pay off in the end. My father is the living testimony to this. He is my inspiration.

Let's talk about theatre vs. film experience. What differences have you experienced during your work in both worlds?



Elza Zagreda: I think both theatre and film function in the same capacity—both captivate and capture an audience's emotions but in different ways. Film does it in a more private, intimate moment. You, as an actor are on a closed set with only you, director and film crew. You do many takes hoping and trusting the director picks the best one to capture the essence of the scene. Theatre is more collective—the audience becomes part of the action. You can't anticipate the audience's reactions. The beauty of theatre is that the energy is always going to be different every night you perform. You feed off the audience. It's actually very thrilling.

You are an outstanding writer. What inspires you to write?

Elza Zagreda: I feel many different things when I write my scripts because I try to bring out the truth in my writing. I feel a certain sense of sadness and catharsis about the struggles of the immigrant experience my parents went through. I also feel so much love and pride for everything they did for me and my sisters. I am so grateful. And then I mostly laugh a lot recalling all the wacky memories we made growing up! THANK YOU for the opportunity to express my thoughts and aspirations!!!!