

Ex-Beauty Queens Say The Darnedest Things

By MAREK FUCHS

CLASSICALLY, the Miss America contest has not been a feeder system for stand-up comedy. But earlier this month, Dena Blizzard, a former Miss New Jersey who lives in Runnemede, beat out dozens of other women from the New York City region to win the amateur category in the Ladies of Laughter contest. The event is designed to discover and showcase those with two qualities: an X chromosome and the ability to tell a knee-slapper.

Started more than five years ago by Peggy Boyce, a former comedian, this year's incarnation pitted about 100 contestants, split between professionals and amateurs, against each other to vie for thousands of dollars in prizes and bookings and, more im-



Dena Blizzard, a former Miss New Jersey, is now a rising comedian.

portant, the exposure that comes from the contest, which has gained steam in terms of industry and public recognition. Though the early rounds took place in the separate regions of New Jersey, New York City and Long Island, the finals were held Aug. 14 at the Improv in Manhattan.

Contestants, especially the amateurs, have varying backgrounds, from stay-at-home mothers to ex-school psychologists. But Ms. Blizzard's career arc, from beauty queen to comedy contest winner, is particularly noticeable. And about that beauty contest career: Ms. Blizzard points out that it ended in a top-50 finish in the Miss America contest, but inadvertently set the stage for her afterlife as a comic.

She won the Miss New Jersey title in 1995 under her maiden name of Dena Querubin, and then came a victory lap in the form of a mind-numbing series of public appearances. A person who grew up with funny thoughts perched on the tip of her tongue, Ms. Blizzard began to cut loose. And after a master's degree in gerontology and two children, Ms. Blizzard, who recently had her third child, began to play comedy clubs in and around Philadelphia, billing herself as One Funny Mother.

"When I first started, the first reaction was always, 'Oh, you look so comfortable on-stage,'" said Ms. Blizzard, adding, "It was never, 'Really, you are funny.'" But she kept refining her act, which centers on faded beauty, faded passion in a marriage and the overwhelming nature of motherhood.

In the Ladies of Laughter finals, Ms. Blizzard did one routine about how her husband asked for help in understanding her moods, which led to the "moodcast." "Hi," she said. "This is your wife, live from the mood center. Today, we seem to have mostly bitchy conditions, with just some patchy niceness, mostly when you're not around. Going into the weekend, it doesn't look good."

In an interview, Ms. Blizzard joked that when she was doing beauty contests, she was defensive about the weighting of the talent parts of the contests, telling people time and again how the results weren't all based on raw beauty, but also on preparation and skill. Now, 10 years and 3 children later, Ms. Blizzard, who says she used to be outraged when whistled at, says she yells back, "Oh my God, thank you!"

Beauty pageants and comedy cattle calls do have things in common, Ms. Blizzard said, like the competitive nature of women backstage. But Ms. Blizzard, hoping to leverage her most recent victory into appearances at bigger clubs, said that beauty pageants engender a particularly pitched quality of "nuttness" because of the sole focus on beauty. "In comedy, what you look like doesn't matter," she said. "It's just you and the microphone."