

How Showtime's 'I'm Dying Up Here' Recreates '70s Comedy Club Scene

By [TRIPP WHETSELL](#)



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Comedian Judy Gold appears in episode three of "I'm Dying Up Here," the Jim Carrey-produced [Showtime](#) ensemble series premiering Sunday that fictionalizes the infamous early 1970s Los Angeles comedy scene, where a slew of real-life icons like David Letterman, Jay Leno, Andy Kaufman, Richard Pryor, Robin Williams, Billy Crystal and Elayne Boosler first rose to prominence and thousands of other young hopefuls followed suit on the heels of Johnny Carson's decision to move "The Tonight Show" to the West Coast in 1972.

On the new show, Gold plays an aging comic named Judy Elder, who's vying for a second shot at stardom on the stage of her childhood friend Goldie Herschlag—the tough-as-nails owner of an L.A. comedy club that bears a striking resemblance to The Comedy Store and its real-life proprietor Mitzi Shore.

Yet "I'm Dying Up Here" co-creator and executive producer Dave Flebotti says "Goldie has an entirely different energy from Mitzi's."

Loosely adapted from journalist William Knoedelseder's non-fiction book of the same name, the series also stars Ari Graynor, Michael Angarano, Clarke Duke and Andrew Santino, as some of the fledgling young comics with big dreams and often equally large appetites for drugs, sex and alcohol.

"What was interesting to all of us when we were reading the book was the idea of a woman running a really hot nightclub on the Sunset Strip in the 1970s, but that's really where the similarities start and stop," says co-executive producer Michael Aguilar.

Gold, a Comedy Store alumnus who still performs there today, agrees but says that when it comes to her own character on the new show, it instantly reminded her of her struggles as a young performer in New York, more than a decade after the series takes place.

"Even though the role I play is much older than I was when I was starting out, I could easily relate to her," says Gold, who first began performing stand-up in the mid-'80s and won two Daytime Emmy Awards for her work as a writer and producer on "The Rosie O'Donnell Show." "I literally felt like I was transported back to another time, but my character could have just as easily been about somebody doing stand-up in 2017."

Others who took part in the Showtime series, like former "Daily Show" correspondent Al Madrigal, feel the same way. Madrigal's been doing stand-up for nearly two decades. On the show he plays loose cannon Latino comic Edgar Martinez, and says he was "right at home with his character."

"It doesn't matter what the generation is or when this series takes place because we're all bonded by the same war stories as comedians," he says. "I'm very proud of the bits I wrote from that era. It was all about having the premise be a little more basic, but the beats are all the same."

Whether or not it's art directly imitating their own lives, even the comedians who don't appear as comics on "I'm Dying Up Here" said they found themselves identifying with many of its universal themes.

"It was very surreal to be involved with this because of the hunger that's evident and the experiences that some of these comics go through on the show is all in my past," says comedian Cathy Ladman, who plays entertainment journalist Tish Norman in three episodes.

Though she admits she's glad that she doesn't play a comedian on the show, she says she still enjoyed her role, adding the way the lives and struggles of most young comedians are portrayed is accurate.

"It's not a comedy show," says Ladman. "It's about comedians, many of whom come from dark places, and 'I'm Dying Up Here' really gets to the heart of that."

Similarly, for veteran comedian, actor and screenwriter Rick Overton, who started performing stand-up in New York in the mid-'70s, it was as if no time had passed as he prepared for his role on the series playing "Tonight Show" talent coordinator Mitch Bombadier in six episodes.

"It was very exciting, bittersweet and nostalgic for me," he says. "The bittersweet part is that it isn't 1973 anymore, where the series begins. And it isn't all possibilities for a kid with kid-sized dreams. Now it's sort of the grown-up version where you know what limits to things are and there's a ceiling because you either ran into it or you built it for yourself."

By the same token, Paul Block, who served as a talent coordinator and segment producer on "The Tonight Show" from 1973 until 1978, approves of the verisimilitude of "I'm Dying Up Here." "From the ambiance of the 1970s right down to the feel of how comedy was being done back then, for the most part they got it right," he says.

Given that the show attempts to chronicle the era that gave birth to the rise of modern stand-up, Aguilar and Flebotte faced a delicate balancing act. "We see it as a drama, but it's definitely a dramedy," says Flebotte. "In other words, we want to infuse it with a lot of drama that also speaks to what's behind the comedy."

And while both agree about the importance of bringing real-life comedians into the mix, Aguilar says, "In terms of telling a story about what essentially becomes a family among this group of young comedians and the matriarch character Goldie, we wanted to create characters that could live on their own and give us license to explore different issues, but were still in the world of Johnny Carson and Richard Pryor."

Adds Flebotte: "It's a show about a family—a sort of dysfunctional family, but nevertheless a family—who has that desire to stand in a dark room with a microphone and make people laugh."

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