Schtick of Dynamite

Joy Golden's riotous radio routines explode onto the airwaves

BY CATHRYN JAKOBSON

A WARM, NASAL voice, possibly of Chicago origin, is issuing from the speakers in Joy Golden's gleaming red, black, and chrome office. Golden and two emissaries from Chiat/Day listen intently. They are reviewing tapes of radio spots they made for Pizza Hut the day before. They've heard this particular spot ten times, but all three giggle when it's over. They like it when the character, on his way to lunch at Pizza Hut, forgets to open his office door. Clunk-thunk. It's hard not to laugh at the sound effect: the two-hundred-pound studio owner created it himself by walking headlong into a door. Ten times, until he got it right. Anything for Joy Golden.

Writing the Laughing Cow ads: "I was the cow. The characters are all me"

In spite of their smiles, the guys from Chiat/Day look worn out. And it's no wonder – since they flew in from L.A. a couple days ago, Golden has kept them moving at a mad dash. Not that she hasn't taken good care of them; Golden's a prime contender for the title of World Heavyweight Jewish Mother. "Listen to the Mom," she'll say to a nervous client, "the Mom knows." At nine in the morning, she's force-feeding everybody in the room. There are piles of fist-size muffins, as well as fruit compote, orange juice, and coffee. "Please eat," says Golden, who's so concerned about her own avoirdupois that she weighs herself fifteen times a day ("before a wee-wee, after a wee-wee"). "Please eat. It's so good to have someone around here who's thin enough to feed."

"You'll tell Mother, won't you?" she says to the fellows as they pack up their briefcases and prepare to leave. "You'll tell me that they love it like life?" The guys promise to call her before the day is out.

At fifty-six, Golden writes, directs, and produces some of the most amusing radio commercials on the air. She's quick and smart—and desperately, almost constantly, funny. Even her clothes have a sense of humor. At the fanciest meetings, she'll turn up in her trademark stirrup stretch pants (white, red, or black), spike heels (black patent leather), red lipstick, and oversize plastic jewelry she buys at a newsstand. You feel like you ought to pay admission for a session with her. "Comedy," she says, "is what gets me through. If you're lucky enough to have a comic streak, a sense of the bizarre, it's easier to deal with your days and your woes. For me, humor is an escape from the other stuff that's lurking—the depression and the melancholia."

Golden may be funny to stave off the blues, but the results are professionally fabulous. After less than two years in the radio business, she has names on her client list like Laughing Cow, Eagle Snacks, Maxwell House, Pizza Hut, Goldstar Electronics, Carlsberg Elephant malt liquor, *La Cage aux folles*, Evian spring water, and Bluestar Foods. Some of her business comes through ad-agency recommendation, but a surprising number of requests for her work come straight from chief executives who have heard her spots.

For Pizza Hut she's just taped, among other spots, the lunch break of "the League for a new library lawn," where a new member, Mrs. Fondulac (Golden's characters tend to have names that tickle: Enid, Sheina, Merva, Martin Fleisig, Mrs. Warmflash, Dr. Noodleman, Mrs. Adele Shiminsky), protests the idea of a fast lunch. "Can't do it so

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fast: Can't drive. Can't order. Can't eat. Can't be back in forty-five." She's taped a department-store manager and a clerk doing inventory: "I'll count the bolts with the buckles, and you count the jackets, with the plackets." And, of course, she's taped harried Harry, whose lunge into the door cracked up the Chiat/Day guys.

The Pizza Hut spots represent two weeks of work. Golden wrote for two straight days; she claims that she goes into a trance in front of her typewriter and the words somehow materialize. "It's intuitive," she says. "It's not a conscious process. At any time it could cut out on me and I'd be living in front of Tiffany's in a box." After the copy is approved by both the agency she's working for and the client, she casts the roles. Then she goes into the studio, where the real grind begins. There's no time to waste; if she runs over the allotted time in the studio, the cost of the spot increases exponentially.

In the case of the Pizza Hut taping, everything was going as planned until 6:45 p.m., when the client decided he needed yet another script, something with a more rural, down-home flavor. "You really need a new script?" Golden demanded. "Okay, you want a new script, we'll do a new script." Between 6:45 and 7:15, she wrote a new thirty-second spot, had it approved, called Ralph Byers's agent and had him snare the actor after his matinee of *Big River*, and taped. "That's radio," she says. "It's damned fast. There aren't a lot of meetings. There isn't a lot of screwing around. It's instant gratification."

Not only is it fast, it's effective—and for the first time since Jack Benny days, advertisers are starting to respect it. Total revenues from sales of airtime have increased over 90 percent since 1980, from $3.5 billion to $6.6 billion in 1985. The new interest in radio as an advertising medium can be attributed to, more than anything else, the sky-high cost of television time. "You need at least $20 million to do anything serious on television," says Bill Tragos, chairman of TBWA, the agency that originally put Golden in business. "If you've only got $3 million to spend, radio is a good place to spend it."

Airtime is cheap, and, in comparison to television, so are production costs. There's no need to do a lot of research or testing, it wouldn't be worth the cash expended. "You can do a perfectly terrific sixty-second radio spot for $7,500," says Allen Sherman, vice president of brand management for Anheuser-Busch's Eagle Snacks. (Anheuser-Busch spends more than any other American company on radio advertising: over $40 million in 1985.) "You can't get near producing a thirty-second TV spot for less than $125,000." Because radio is so low-priced, there's next to nothing in it in the way of commissions for media buyers. For that reason, most agencies have shied away from it, but that's starting to change. "Radio is again being considered as a part of the total media plan," says Tragos. Golden doesn't mind taking a backseat to television and print ads. "Agencies don't tamper too much with the product," says Golden. "That's why some really good stuff makes it on the air; the account side can't be bothered with hassling the creative people."

Golden has landed feet first in the middle of a burgeoning market, but she didn't plan it that way. Before she started Joy Radio a year and a half ago, she'd put in thirty years writing copy for everything from gum to girdles at BBDO; Kenyon & Eckhardt; Norman, Craig & Kummel; Scali, McCabe, Sloves; and Wells, Rich, Greene. None of it was funny. After three decades, there wasn't even thirty seconds of comedy on her reels. "My humor was heresy," she says. "Clients wanted good, solid, conservative work. Or at least that's what their agencies thought they wanted." Occasionally, she'd try to lighten things up. While she was at Scali, she wrote copy for a moist toilet paper commercial: "I wanted to have Mel Brooks's 2,000-Year-Old Man voice saying, 'You don't clean your cave with a dry raccoon.' It didn't fly."

She left her full-time job—at Wells, Rich, Greene, where she was chief writer on Max Factor—in 1980. She was fired two days before Christmas, after a political fracas broke out. "I was making $110,000 a year," says Golden. "I was a pretty fancy lady. And then I was gone." The timing couldn't have been worse. She was getting over her second divorce

and suffered a series of severe health problems. "There was absolutely nothing funny in my life," she says. "I didn't know if—or how—I'd come out of it." One thing she knew: she would never go back on staff. "I'd had it with the agency life," she says. "I wasn't any good anymore at meetings, review boards, endless structure, the nervous tension from the management end. I just wanted to present my point of view, objectively, with no ax to grind."

It took her almost four years to find a new direction, and she found it by accident. In 1983, she went to work for TBWA as a freelance copywriter developing TV ads for Anheuser-Busch's Eagle Snacks. Anheuser-Busch wanted some radio advertising to fill in its media plan. That in itself was a departure. "The standard media for food advertising is TV or print," says Golden. "And even there, comedy is rarely used. Clients want beautiful pictures, smiles, and label registration, which you can't get on radio." Nevertheless, Anheuser-Busch was adamant. They'd done plenty of beer advertising on the radio, and they figured that the medium could sell snack foods just as well.

The plan was to come up with a series of spots: first a jingle with an announcer, then some warm, regional dialect, then—and this was tentative—some comedy. Golden was in charge. She phoned in the warm, regional dialect to Allen Sherman. "I figured on something solid and a little boring," says Golden. "I mean, after all, this was middle America we were talking about." Sherman said it put him to sleep. "He said to me, 'Joy, why don't you do a little schtick?'" says Golden. "I was astonished. I told him that August Busch would hate a little schtick; and Bill Tragos wouldn't go for it either. He told me to try—just to have something interesting to present at the meeting."

As Golden predicted, Tragos was very doubtful. "He heard what I wrote," says Golden, "and he said, 'God, that's not funny. I don't want to hear it. I don't like it.' " At Sherman's request, she presented some of the comedy to Eagle Snacks anyway. The people in the marketing department liked it, and on the air it went. Some months later, August Busch took Tragos aside and told him what he thought. "He said he loved it, he wanted more of it, and he wanted it racier," says Golden.

Joy Radio grew from those seven words: "Why don't you do a little schtick?" Golden marvels at the improbability of it all. "It could so easily not have happened," she says. Sherman is delighted that he pressed her. "I guess I gave her permission to be who she wanted to be all along," he says. "Her spots are right on target. They address the marketing of the product. A lot of people can write funny stuff, but it's not about the product. What she does is create a strong product sell wrapped up in a nice package of humor."

Golden has carved out a lucrative niche for herself. For a fee—which varies considerably, depending on the number of markets in which a commercial will run—the client buys the use of a spot for a year. "If they use it a hundred or a thousand times, they pay the same amount," she says. "And if they want to use it even once the following year, they pay again." Even if a client decides not to run a spot, Golden is paid in full for the first year's use. This year, she'll pull in $300,000, more than enough to keep her in stirrup pants, but most of the cash goes right back into the business. "Everybody thinks I'm making millions," she says. "I'm not making millions. My biggest luxury is having the dog groomed every two weeks with a pink bow." Golden's not smug about her success. "If I don't get a new account or a new assignment every forty-eight hours, I'm sure I'll never get one again," she says. "I'll be selling pencils from a container."

She's had plenty of industry recognition for her work. All over her office are statuettes, crystal balls, and silver bowls. In fact, it's getting out of hand: she's won forty-four awards in the last seventeen months. In 1985, her Laughing Cow commercials picked up two Clios, two silver awards at the One Show, and three Andy distinction awards. This year, the same campaign won an Effie, which takes sales increases into account. Initially, Fromageries Bel, which manufactures and distributes Laughing Cow, spent $375,000 for two thousand spots in five markets. After thirteen weeks, sales had increased over 60 percent in each region. Frank Schnieders, president of Fromageries Bel, still can't get over what Golden's spots did for his company. "What's remarkable," he says, "is that wherever we went—no matter what market—Joy's commercials had the same effect. Sales increased 50 percent to 70 percent."

Schnieders had been concerned that Golden's spots wouldn't fly in cities like Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Boston. He—and Tragos—were worried that they were too ethnic. "He means matzoh-ball ethnic," clarifies Golden, "not, shall we say, Canadian ethnic." But there were no problems. "All over the country," says Schnieders, "people love them. We get letters and requests for tapes from everywhere." (It is worth noting that in recent months, Golden has started to expand her repertoire; on occasion she is beginning to leave the matzoh balls behind. "Not so New

York," she tells an actor who is taping a Pizza Hut spot. "Let's do the same guy, only living in Columbus, Ohio. Southeast Columbus, Ohio.")

The awards are fine, but the honor that means the most to Golden may never catch the attention of the advertising community. Her reel of radio commercials has just been made a part of the Museum of Broadcasting's permanent collection—not as an example of good advertising but as an example of fine comedy. "It's in there, right next to Jack Benny's stuff," says Golden. "I used to go to bed with Jack Benny when I was a kid—that was the only thing good about Sunday night—and I give him credit for everything: my sense of humor, my comic timing. I just can't believe I'm lying there right next to him again, in my lifetime."

What makes Golden's comedy worthy of such kudos? For one thing, it's very personal. No matter who she writes about, there's a lot of herself in it. When Tragos asked her to develop a radio campaign for Laughing Cow, "I saw a live cow dressed in a red net bag," says Golden. "Then, right after, I saw myself dolled up in red netting. I was the cow, even. The characters are all me. Every single one of them."

There's the housewife, Enid, who rushes out to buy her husband a bedtime snack. "He ate all ten mini cheeses and said it was the best treat he'd ever had in bed. So I smacked him." There's the Valley Girl who tries to pick up a highway patrolman who stops her to give her a ticket. "So like I was driving down the freeway, okay. And this totally gorgeous highway patrolman stops me. So I said, 'Like WOW, there's wheels on your motorcycle and wheels on my car.' " And there's Doris, at another couple's anniversary party: "This is some unusual anniversary party, Fred. Jack even mowed the grass in the shape of Marlene's face. I wish you'd do things like that." There's Enid again, preparing for her daughter's Sweet Sixteen party: "I said, Tiffany, your girlfriends have so many birds on their antennae, they wouldn't be impressed with a dancing bear on a bagel." There's Mrs. Adele Shiminisky, who writes to Van Johnson to tell him how much she enjoyed his performance in *La Cage aux folles:* "Dear Van Johnson. In 1943, I sent to you a letter to Hollywood requesting a photo to which you acquiesced with your signature. At that time, Vanny, I wanted to tell you that June Allyson was not right for you, and that I perhaps was. But fate was to step upon my path. And frankly, since seeing you and George Hearn together in *La Cage aux folles*, I'd rather give you up for George than June, because I have never seen a love more upon the stage of the Palace Theatre. If my husband, Sol, would look at me the way you look at George…need I say more?... Anyhow, in any event, Vanny, thank you for bringing a tear and a lilt to my eyes. Sincerely, Mrs. Adele Shiminsky, née Berger."

What's so funny about her spots isn't the writing alone. "They can be as boring as iceberg lettuce, on paper," Golden acknowledges. It's the writing plus the casting. She casts carefully, then she works long and hard with each actor. "Feel him," she demands of an actor. "This is a script in search of a character."

It may take ten or fifteen or thirty takes to get a spot right, to get the phrasing and the rhythm the way she wants it. "Hear him," she'll insist, "he's in your nose." Sometimes she tries a dozen different voices and speech patterns before she gets the one she wants. To aid in character development, she explains, "Harry is a *schmegegge*. He's the kind of guy who drops pencils down the toilet." And time is always of the essence: the actors never have more than a couple of hours to get it right.

Golden works repeatedly with the small group of professionals; there are just thirty in New York she uses all the time. She knows what makes each one of them tick. "Some need constant ego support," she says. "But others like to hear, 'You're lousy, you're terrible, you're fired.' Most comics work better with a certain sense of anxiety. They're basically depressive personalities, and the anxiety seems to make them funnier."

That sounds tough, but Golden's actors worship her. "She's one hell of a director," says Bill Fiore, who works with her frequently. "I develop more characters in a year of working for Joy than I could in ten years with anybody else. She really asks you to stretch, and her writing is so good that you can do it. And when you pull it off, she's lavish with the compliments."

While other women get flowers, Golden's actors bring her ideas. Fiore brought her the voice for Martin Fleisig, the salami authority. "I'd been invited to a producer's apartment, overlooking Central Park West," he says, "and I couldn't get over how he spoke. He'd obviously taken speech lessons to learn to control his accent, and he came out sounding funny and pedantic." Fiore suddenly gets nasal and starts speaking very slowly, intently trying to combat the dentalized *t*: "He said, 'And I think you'll be very interested in this; let me show you my wife's window treatments, let me show you our collection of Rosenthal china.' " Fiore regaled Golden with

wrote the Martin Fleisig spot with him in mind: "Hello to you and yours. This is Martin Fleisig, food authority and author of the biography *The Forgotten Salami*. I'm sure you will be very interested in this. On a scale of one to ten, concerning what is top of mind today, salami rates at a four. Mmm hmm...."

She makes sure her actors know they are people to her, not just voices. They deserve it: as radio talent, they are paid about one-third of what they make on TV. "So Shamele," she says to Sam Schact, who has just finished taping a spot where he repeated the line "No time"—with concentration—at least a hundred times in twenty-five takes, "I'm writing now a whole new ting I'm going to cast on you." To Simon Jones, who stops in to tape before his evening performance of *Benefactors*, she says, "Hey, the major talent is here. We're not talking two cents a dance." Later, when Jones is despairing because he's tripped over words and called Pizza Hut's calizza turnover a "calitzer," she offers calming words. "You're not depressed," she tells him, "you're just frustrated. Now, just read it."

Golden is careful and quiet when she is working with actors. Except for a few enlivening bursts of humor, she's very serious when she's taping. I have to be calm," she says. "You can't get the talent excited." And, not surprisingly, she plays Mom to the actors, at least several of whom are her age. "Trust Mother," she says, "I've been doing this for a long time. Six months at least." When Jerry Soroka is finished and in a hurry to leave, Golden insists, "Jerry, kiss Mother. Did you miss a booking? What is it, national television?"

People often ask Golden about her next step. Will she expand like crazy and open a full-scale radio production house, like Dick Orkin's Radio Ranch on the West Coast? "I doubt it," she says. "My accountant doesn't like the idea. He screams at me, 'Keep the overhead low, Golden, keep it low.' " Golden doesn't plan to restrict her talent for comedy to radio. ICM has asked her to try a screenplay, and she will—when she has time. Right now she's trying, with friend Jim Campodonico, to get her name in lights. They're writing what she hopes will be a Broadway musical comedy about middle-aged people and their relationships. She expects to finish it before the end of the year. "It's an attempt to find something funny about this time of life," says Golden. One of the songs is called "Those Wild, Wonderful Sanka Years." If it hits big, maybe Sanka will lease it from her and put it on the radio.

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