

The actress who's a real-life Hamlet

Brenda Adelman's father killed her mother and married her aunt, but acting saved her.

By Jessica Elgot, May 13, 2010



Brenda Adelman: "I've had a lot of support from the Jewish community"

Brenda Adelman never had the typical Jewish Brooklyn family. Her mother was, she says, a "kooky and wild" bohemian photographer who dressed like Marilyn Monroe and smoked a pipe. Her father kept his 35-calibre handgun under his pillow when he slept, carried it with him wherever he went. Father and daughter bonded when he taught her how to shoot.

But her childhood was happy and the family was close-knit. "I was really close to both my parents. My mother was my best friend and I was daddy's little girl," says the 45-year-old New Yorker.

No-one could have predicted the tragic twist in this family's story. Adelman, an actress, left home and set up life in Los Angeles. On October 1, 1995, when Adelman was 30, her father shot her mother at point-blank range in the head. Eight hours later, his lawyer called the police to alert them about the body in their Brooklyn home.

"I think there was a cover-up," Adelman says, "In Brooklyn at the time, there were a lot of mobsters. My dad's gun, the same one he taught me to shoot with when I was a kid, the one which he always carried on him, was gone. No one ever found it."

Pleading guilty to involuntary manslaughter, Adelman's father was out of prison in two-and-a-half years. Shortly after leaving jail, her father moved in with Adelman's aunt, his dead wife's sister. They were married within a year.

Sliding into a pit of depression and hate, Adelman sought a way to exorcise her demons, which she describes as "moving out of being a victim and realising why this happened to me".

The result, three years later, was *My Brooklyn Hamlet*, her one-woman show, half family comedy and half desperate tragedy. The play, which Adelman has performed for a decade, will be staged at the Leeds International Jewish Performing Arts Festival in June.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Adelman found a kindred spirit. "I felt so alone, but because I was familiar with Shakespeare, I realised that someone went through something like this, like I did."

Judaism too, she says, took on a new meaning almost immediately after her mother's death. She says: "I realised I believed in God. My mother died during the High Holy Days so I was immediately confronted with lessons of repentance and forgiveness. I've had a lot of support from the Jewish community. I feel spiritual, I know now that I believe in God and I think he's supporting me."

Adelman admits it has taken a lot of courage to bare her soul to an audience of strangers every time she performs. But that, she says, is part of the healing, for her and for the audience too.

"The show is about the power of forgiveness. By acting out the characters of my father, my mother and my aunt on stage, I began to realise that they were real people, real rounded people. I started to realise what might have been going on with my parents, discovering their flaws, asking why they were not healthy people."

Brenda Adelman performs 'My Brooklyn Hamlet' at the Leeds International Jewish Performing Arts Festival, June 6-10. Full details at www.leedsjewishfestival.co.uk