

# A star is reborn

**D**EBBIE Saloman has been a Judy Garland fan since the age of four when she watched Easter Parade at her grandmother's house. Now a performer herself, Saloman loves Garland as much as ever.

Her one-woman show *Get Happy!* – based on the life of Judy Garland, opens on July 31 at the King's Head Theatre in Islington.

The photographs on the *Get Happy!* MySpace page are all of Saloman as Garland, in make-up, wig and glamorous costume. The songs she has uploaded to the music and social networking site reveal a voice that is identical to the star's. This web-based introduction to Saloman made it difficult to imagine anyone other than Garland herself turning up to talk to me.

Saloman is smallish, with dark, shoulder-length hair, and a pretty, expressive face – prettier in fact, than photos of Garland at the same age.

Throughout our interview she talks animatedly, often laughing and at several points breaking into song. She slips easily between accents to bring to life the characters she mentions: Denny Turner, the retired East End musician who accompanied Garland in the 1960s; an over-excited Northern fan heckling during the show; and, of course, Garland herself, effortlessly sexual and nonchalantly funny.

At the end of her bachelor's degree in Performing Arts at Salford University, Saloman was given the option of writing a thesis or doing a final performance of her own choosing.

"Tough decision," says Saloman, her voice thick with irony. "I'm not going to be doing a thesis." A performance it was. She asked herself: "What would I most like to do ever?" It didn't take her long to come up with something: a show about Judy Garland. But with a twist – none of the usual doom-and-gloom, tragic-figure Judy. This show would focus on the positive.

"I wanted to write something that showed what she was like... really witty, funny and very sharp," says Debbie. And so *Get Happy!* was born.



**DEBBIE Saloman: idolised Garland**



**Saloman performing in *Get Happy!***

The actor/director Adam Zane was working as a visiting director at Salford University while Saloman was studying there. He saw her final performance and was struck by Saloman's "God-given talent". At this point *Get Happy!* was only 20 minutes long and had three characters. Zane says: "It was obvious the show should be worked on but I knew it should be a one-woman show."

He offered her the chance to develop it with his theatre company, Hope, and it took off from there. First at Taurus, a theatre-bar in Manchester's Gay Village, next at The Lowry Studio, then a week at the King's Head, Islington, in March. Such was the response that the King's Head has given her the month of August for a return visit.

*Get Happy!* is set during the rehearsal and after-show party of Garland's 1960 London Palladium comeback gig. Having been told by doctors that she would never sing again after an attack of acute hepatitis almost killed her, Garland proved everyone wrong and made a full recovery.

**Jo Caird** talks to actress and singer **DEBBIE SALOMAN** (left) about playing the legendary Judy Garland in her own one-woman show in Islington, the challenges of performing your own work, and the novelty of having a gay fanbase.

Saloman talks excitedly about Garland's return to form, littering her account of this period with quotations and dropping names of people involved. She has clearly done her homework and stresses that *Get Happy!* is more than just an excuse to sing her favourite Garland songs.

"I'm really proud of the play because it is a piece of work, it's not just some dialogue around some songs," she said. "I worked very hard at it."

Before going to university Saloman was a singer and throughout her degree the emphasis was very much on performance. With *Get Happy!* however, she has had to put her hand to other things, devising and writing the show herself.

She says: "I think I surprised myself because I hadn't written a play before".

I ask how she balances the roles, whether there are ever discrepancies between Saloman the writer and Saloman the performer.

She is honest about the challenges this juggling creates: "Because it's my baby, I find it very difficult to say 'that's rubbish', because obviously I don't think any of it's rubbish, because I've written it."

Zane's objective feedback helps her make the most of her ideas: "It's good that he's a Garland fan, someone that knows what he's talking about. He suggests stuff and I go off on one. He's very helpful because he's got more of an outside opinion."

Since the success of *Get Happy!* in Manchester, Saloman, like Garland before her, has become something of a gay icon. She performed for two consecutive years at Manchester's Gay Pride celebrations and this year sang at the Leicester Square Cabaret Stage at London's Pride.

The Manbears, a gay men's social network and events organiser, have had Saloman sing at their Great British Bear Bashes – "500 Bears and me the only woman. It was brilliant" – and she recently filmed a video with the Bears for the 10th Anniversary Bash.

The Bears, all of them heavy, hairy men, are in glittery hard hats and jockstraps. Saloman was relieved to find that she would be wearing a cocktail dress and had a great time with them. "They're lovely guys. They come to all my shows."

Who her fanbase is though matters not the slightest bit to Saloman. She has taken the opportunity to sing what she loves and portray a different side to a woman she feels has been misaligned.

In September, *Get Happy!* will be at The Point, Eastleigh, for two nights, but there is nothing in the pipeline for the show after that. Saloman is overly sad about this fact. After two years of playing Garland, she is looking forward to just being herself for a change.

What is for certain is that whatever she chooses to do when *Get Happy!* finishes its run, Saloman's energy and talent will take her far. Who knows, maybe even over the rainbow...

*Get Happy!* is at the King's Head, Upper Street, Islington, N1, from 31 July 31-August 26.  
[www.kingsheadtheatre.org](http://www.kingsheadtheatre.org)



A STAR in her eyes:  
Debbie Saloman as  
Judy Garland

