

A photograph of Julia Scotti, an older woman with short, wavy, light-colored hair and glasses, wearing a black jacket over a white top. She is holding a microphone and looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a dark, stylized cityscape at night with glowing windows. Overlaid on the background is the text 'GOTHAM COMEDY NEW YORK' in a large, bold, white font. The word 'GOTHAM' is at the top, 'COMEDY' is in the middle, and 'NEW YORK' is at the bottom. A four-pointed star is positioned between 'COMEDY' and 'NEW YORK'.

**JULIA
SCOTTI**
FUNNY THAT WAY

Julia Scotti calls herself a female “of transgender experience,” which is to say that the woman used to be a man. And even though that man—Rick Scotti—was a comedian successful enough to tour with Chris Rock and Jerry Seinfeld and open for acts including Lou Rawls and Chicago, it wasn’t until he became she that Julia felt complete. Today Julia Scotti is a goddamn star—a quarterfinalist on the 11th season of *America’s Got Talent*, a featured performer in Showtime’s *More Funny Women of a Certain Age* and the subject of a fascinating new documentary, *Julia Scotti: Funny That Way*. The doe-eyed Ms. Scotti recently joined HUSTLER for a midday sit-down at the Gotham Comedy Club in New York to talk about her journey toward transition, her return to the stage and how she finally hit her stride as the “crazy old lady of comedy.”

INTERVIEW BY T.S. FARLEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARIUS BUGGE

HUSTLER: Thanks for your time, Julia. I hope we can both entertain and educate our readers with this conversation.
JULIA SCOTTI: Educate? Will there be charts? Diagrams? Maybe a PowerPoint?

Of course.

Let us proceed then!

First question: Julia Scotti, are you now or have you ever been a reader of HUSTLER Magazine?

Senator, Senator, I can honestly say in this lifetime, as Julia Scotti, I have never read HUSTLER. Never!

How about your old friend Rick Scotti? Do you think he read HUSTLER?

I believe he did. When he died, he left behind some boxes I was going through, and I happened to come across a couple issues—yes, indeed, I did!

You say Rick “died.” So do you see him as a different person?

I see myself in *Funny That Way* as Rick Scotti, and I know it’s me. I know I was there. But I don’t feel connected to him. My authentic self is Julia. From the minute I realized what the issue was in my life, it was only then I felt complete.

Let’s go back to the beginning—

It was dark in the womb, lots of water...

Did you always want to be a comic?

I actually started as a drummer, but I harbored a secret desire to be a comedian. I was always funny, starting in grammar school. It was kind of a coping mechanism, the typical comic’s story, with a rotten childhood, lots of pain.

This was in New Jersey?

Jersey, yes, and my parents had issues. They divorced in the 1950s; my father liked to drink a little; my mother was a little crazy. A little of everything.

So comedy was a calling to young Rick Scotti or a way to deal with stuff?

A little of both. At some point you find out you have this ability to make people laugh, and it’s a way to a) keep from crying all the time, b) make friends and c) keep from getting beat up if you’re not a tough guy. I grew up right across the river from Manhattan, right up the street from North Bergen, and it was Italian kids doing the macho thing in the ’50s and ’60s.

Who did you dig in comedy when you were young?

As a kid I watched a lot of Abbott and Costello, and Lou Costello was a big influence for me. I was a really, really big fan of his. Of course Sunday nights was *The Ed Sullivan Show*, which I watched for the comics. People like Wayne and Shuster from Canada, whenever I saw they were going to be on, I’d go watch *Bonanza* instead, because I didn’t find them funny at all. But Alan King, Shelley Berman, Joan Rivers, Stiller and Meara, I’d watch those people and think, *How do you do that? How do you get to do that?* It looked like the greatest job ever.

Your favorites today?

Well, John Mulaney just puts me away. Puts me away! I think he’s one of the funniest people out there. And the woman from New Zealand whose name I can never remember. Her stuff is very dark. Very dark! Hannah Gadsby! Yes, Hannah Gadsby I love. There’s a bunch of female comics I love, like Carole Montgomery...

When was Rick Scotti’s comedy career?

I stood onstage the first time on May 30, 1980, and I quit on May 30, 2000. I’m a little, uh, OCD.

And was he successful?

Yeah, I did it for 20 years, made a living at it, but I had kids by that point, and I knew my marriage was sorta going on the skids, so I pulled back on working the road, which diminished things greatly.

How big was he?

I did the comedy clubs. They were A-minus rooms. And I did Canada. I stayed pretty much east of the Rockies, because the West Coast comics could fill those slots out there, but I made a nice living at it. There were a whole lot of us from that era who made a decent living.

About the same time Rick Scotti retired as a comic, you made the decision to transition?

Yes, I had been struggling with something for a long, long time, probably from the time I was 18, and about the only thing I could figure was that I was gay. I mean, I don’t know if that’s something you can “figure.” But I ventured into that world a couple of times with disastrous results, so I thought, *This can’t be what the issue is because I’m not enjoying this at all.*

In the film you mentioned that while you were Rick, you tried to date men?

“Man” we should say, not “men.” I dated one man, and it went horribly! Long story short, I prepared this lovely dinner, he brought two bottles of wine, and we drank one, and after that we repaired to the boudoir. He had his way; I did not. Then he got up and took his other bottle of wine and left! And that was the last I saw of him. I was devastated.

So you tried to be gay and discovered—

Nah! Just nah. [*Laughs.*]

But maybe you got to experience what millions of women have gone through, when some guy fucks and runs?

Exactly! That was my introduction to Women 101—to experience abandonment! And I already had abandonment issues from my father, so this was like, thanks a lot! But it was my friend Kate who got me through that night and made me realize what the issue was. Kate was a psychiatrist, and she’d said a couple times throughout our friendship that I was a woman. And I kept saying, “No, you’re wrong!” But after that one incident she said, “You want to be loved like a woman.” And there was something about the way she said it, I call it my Road to Damascus moment, the burning bush, the scales falling from my eyes. From that moment it just clicked that I’m a woman, and I never looked back.

Bit of a sidebar, but when you were Rick Scotti, did you enjoy sex with women?

Always, always. Here’s the thing, and you should know this—your readers should know this—but being transgender has nothing to do with your



sexuality. The two are completely different, so if I liked women before the transition, it stands to reason that I would like them after. Of course, I’m not saying that if Sam Elliott or George Clooney walked into the room right now, I *only* want women, because if they do, this interview is over! I got things to do! Overall, it’s still women for me, but to be honest, I don’t care much about sex anymore. I’m just too old to give a shit.

You say in the documentary that you had a hard time understanding your “maleness” when you were young.

My mother and father were divorced, so my father was not living at home. So I really had no male role model. I attributed my problems understanding maleness to that, there being nobody I could turn to. That didn’t consider the gender issues, but as I was trying to figure this all out on my own, the first explanation made more sense than the second one.

So why did you try out for the football team?

Why do you think? To prove my maleness. To prove I was a man. To prove I was macho—to myself, my family. The neighborhood I grew up in, you kinda had to be tough, walking around kicking people’s ass for no apparent reason, and that’s just not me. But I tried out for the football team—they had these sleds, and we had to push ’em. *Sleds*, is that what they’re called? That should be your clue that I maybe shouldn’t be out playing football, right?

Anyways, all my buddies are hitting the sled, they’re busting a shoulder, and it goes 30 feet. They’re hurting themselves, but it doesn’t matter; they shove their shoulder back into the socket and do it again and punch themselves in the face just to show how tough they are. And then it’s my turn, but I didn’t even know how to kneel, you know, squat down, so the coach keeps pushing my back down and calling me names. “What are you? A pussy?” I’m like, “No, coach, I’m not a pussy!” So then one, two, three, I hit the sled, and it moved, I don’t know, an inch or two? He

wasn’t happy. That happened a couple more times, and then he goes, “Okay, this is the last time. I’m gonna count to three, and you better move that fucking sled!” I’m like, “I’m gonna move the fucking sled, coach!” I get down in my crouch, and he goes one, two, and before he gets to three, he kicked me in the ass so hard that I must’ve moved the thing six feet. I landed in the mud, and I was so mad, I couldn’t look at him—I might’ve killed him. So I stood up and said, “You’re a fucking asshole” and threw the fucking helmet on the ground and walked off the field. And that was my football career. I’ve since heard from other men who were boys at the time that they kind of enjoyed the fact I told him to fuck off, because it’s tough being a man. For all the privileges of being a man, it’s tough growing up, as a young boy.

When you walked away from the field, how did you feel?

I was embarrassed. I was ashamed. I was humiliated. I was angry—man, was I angry.

At?

All of it. I was less than a man. I was never gonna be a macho guy. Some of my friends had been shaving since eighth grade. Full beards! But that kind of pressure gets to you after a while, and I just never forgave him for that.

Rick Scotti still grew up to be a husband and father and the provider for his family, but—

I didn’t have *me!*

In 2002 you got the surgery, and today you call yourself a “woman of transgender experience”? That phrase hasn’t exactly taken off though, has it?

A lot of things I say have never taken off! I’m trying to bring back *groovy*, so what does that tell you? >>

By the way, is there a term you prefer? *Tranny*, *transsexual*, *transvestite*, *transgender*?

I really dislike the term *tranny*. Some people don't, but it's a pejorative to me. I refer to myself as *transgender*. *Transvestite* is completely different, generally just cross-dressing, and more often than not the person doing it is heterosexual. One of the problems I had when coming out was, you want to get some hope, you want to go to a group meeting where you can talk, but in my experience most of those groups were just cross-dressers, and I thought, *Well, this is no help!*

I understand that your transition led to a 14-year separation from your children.

I had to tell them because time was running out. I knew the period of time was coming that I'd be living as Julia, and I had to tell them. That's when the separation happened. I kinda expected it, but I didn't expect it to be that long.

But even expecting that your transition might cost you your children, you still felt like you had to do it?

I would have ended my life had I not followed through on my transition. But there was a bigger point with my children. As a parent, you want to give your kids lessons, but you wouldn't give them a lesson that you wouldn't follow. So how could I tell my children to be honest and follow their heart and be honorable if I couldn't do that myself? Consequences be damned, I had to make that choice. I knew it would hurt them; I knew it would hurt me; it might drive a wedge between us for a long time. But in retrospect, 14 years later they're in my life, and they accept me as Julia, and I love them dearly. By the way, there is a 40% attempted suicide rate in the transgender community, 40%! The national average in all groups is below 1%, but a 40% rate in our community is obscene. It's obscene!

Do you think your tendency as a comedian to be honest and to tell hard truths made your transition easier?

That's a really great question! Not that the others haven't been good, but that's really insightful. Personally, I found that realizing what I was and admitting it and embracing it and loving myself for it was the most truthful thing I'd ever done, so I made a conscious decision to live the rest of my life that way. There's a lot of shame at the very beginning of all this, and especially 20 years ago, so I was really trying to hide myself from the world. But it occurred to me, by doing so, I was really trading one prison for another, the prison of being a man for the prison of being scared. Once I finally figured out who I was, I wasn't gonna let other people's prejudices keep me locked up. This is who I am, and if you don't like it, go away. If you do like it, stay with me.

Tell me about your return to comedy.

As Julia I worked as a teacher for seven years, but I left, because comedians don't do well with authority figures, and the education system is nothing but authority figures. I was getting good results—my class's test scores were up—but they wanted me to follow a particular program that they'd spent a whole lot of money on, and it was a complete bust. We were always butting heads, and I thought, *I don't need this*, and left.

**Were you teaching as a woman?**

A woman, yes. They hired me on October 1, 2001, just after 9/11, and it scared me because on my driver's license they wouldn't change the gender. They changed the name, but wouldn't change the gender, so I lived in fear that the school was gonna see it and find out who I was. I suspect that the administration suspected who I was, but nobody had the—excuse me—balls to ask.

After that job?

Then, after teaching, in 2007, 2008, I became a stockbroker [laughs]. I was flying home from my training, and the Dow was just plummeting. I had just graduated, so the next couple years were very difficult, but then in 2011 I had a chance luncheon with an old comedian friend named Chris Rich. She said, "When are you coming back to comedy?" and I said, "Well, never!" It happened she was performing at a club we had both worked many times called The Comedy Works in Bristol, Pennsylvania, and she said, "Why don't you come down and do a set?" I said, "Because I don't have anything? You know, I'm old. I haven't been onstage in ten years. Who's gonna want to listen to me?" But comics can't ever leave this business. The first time wasn't so good; they just sorta stared at me. But the second time I started to get a lot of laughs. I felt at home in ways that I hadn't in other jobs.

When you started working again, was being trans a big part of the act?

It's part of who I am, not all of who I am. I think I devote two or three minutes to it. I mean, it bugs me that I've become transgender comic Julia Scotti, like that's my name. It drives me nuts. You don't say black comic Eddie Murphy or lesbian comic so-and-so, but with a trans comic I can't escape it. I hate that they do it, but I guess eventually it won't be like that. I realize that being a trans comic is so new, it might be inevitable.

Is your second try at comedy different than the first?

Yes. I am much happier with my comedy now. It's a lot more honest and fearless. Coming back as an older person is weird too, because I didn't know how the public would accept an old lady, much less an old trans lady.

You do a funny bit onstage now: "Where my transgender people at?" The silence is deafening, and it's hilarious.

There's never any! There's a reason I do it, because I want to point out that even if there were transgender people in the audience, they're not gonna out themselves because living in America is dangerous for trans folks.

In the documentary we see Rick Scotti doing some ugly jokes about trans people.

Suffice it to say, I'm not doing that anymore. Everybody grows; everybody develops; everybody evolves. But I had forgotten that I did that until I saw the tape. I was going through issues at the time, and one of them was struggling with who I was gender-wise or sexuality-wise, so I basically did the whole macho thing, and now I feel horribly about it.

You had a star turn on the 11th season of *America's Got Talent*. How did that happen?

They found me because the *Philadelphia Gay News* had done a big spread on me, with my mug on the front page—the worst photo I've ever seen—but they found our website and asked if I wanted to audition. They were gonna give me an appointment audition, they call it. At the time my friend Kathy Caldwell was managing me, and I said, "I don't think I wanna do a reality competition." She said, "Uh, are you an asshole?" So I said, "When you put it that way, I'll do it!" So I went to Queens College, and all these people were lined up, eating fire and smacking babies around or whatever, and I just passed them all by and did my audition. Several months later they called to say I got it.

How did you get booted off there? Did you lose a head-to-head battle with someone?

I dunno. Maybe they voted?

Did Simon Cowell turn on you or something?

Did he turn on me? No, no, he was actually very nice to me. It was funny though. I made it to the quarterfinals, but the funniest thing about it was, when you get bounced from the show, they have a psychologist waiting in the wings when you come off. I guess they don't want you jumping off the roof of the hotel or something. So I come off, and there's this very proper British woman, and she says in a very proper British accent, "I'm Dr. so-and-so, the show's psychologist—" I said, "Stop right there and listen to me. I'm a New York comedian. Do you know the amount of people who have shit on me over the course of my career?" I said, "You think this bothers me? Hell, no! As far as I'm concerned, I won this fucker. Go take care of those two acts crying behind me."

You recently also had a big appearance on Showtime's *Funny Women of a Certain Age*.

That's the brainchild of Carole Montgomery. There's two: *Funny Women of a Certain Age* and then *More Funny Women of a Certain Age*, and that's the one I'm on.

Finally, tell us about your new documentary, *Julia Scotti: Funny That Way*.

One thing I want to mention about the movie is that Susan Sandler, the producer/director, is an amazing woman. She's done popular movies like *Crossing Delancey*—she wrote that—but this is her first in the documentary world, and I'm really honored that she chose me as her first subject. I'm even more thrilled about how well it came out. I was actually performing up there in Nantucket, and after the show I went out to drinks with Susan because she was gonna help me out with a one-woman show I was thinking of doing. Then, after talking to her, telling her all about my life, she reached out and said, "This really should be a documentary." I said, "Okay," never thinking it would happen. But now, five years later, here we are.

Great, Julia. Thank you for your time!

Thank you, HUSTLER! That was painless, right? Was it good for you too? 

Follow Julia Scotti on Twitter @JuliaScotti4, and watch Julia Scotti: Funny That Way, now available to rent or buy on digital platforms like Apple iTunes, Amazon, Google Play and more! A special thank-you to Gotham Comedy Club in New York City for the fabulous shoot location.