

people to come to my music without any preconceived ideas about what the music was going to be.” At some point, he stopped worrying about how to manage audience perceptions. Soon after this realization, he completed a 2003 commission for the De-

troit Symphony Orchestra, influenced by Motown, R&B, soul, and other popular music genres he’d always listened to. It was, he thinks, the first time he consciously decided to let that side of him come out clearly in his music. He wrote what felt true.

Today, Holland tries to convey the same message to his composition students: “If I’m not telling you who I am in a genuine way, I’m not sure why you’d want to listen to what I have to say,” he reasons. Without that, he says, “Who cares what I’m writing?”

## Sketch Artist

Colin Jost writes jokes for page, stage, and camera.

by OSET BABÜR

**A** WRITER’S STYLE isn’t always neatly captured in a single piece of work, but with Colin Jost ’04, his “Mocktails,” a collection of cartoons scribbled on cocktail napkins, are especially telling. A JetBlue plane feels blue, lamenting that it misses its friends; a piece of jerk chicken rattles off some uncouth remarks. This brand of droll wordplay is Jost’s bread and butter. It comes through in his stand-up performances (“I went to Party City the other day, and it was totally dead,” he joked during a show in Boston this fall) as well as in his contributions to *The*

*New Yorker’s* humor section, Shouts and Murmurs—“Oh, *droit moral*? It means ‘droid morals.’ Like it’s such an obvious moral question that even a robot would know the answer.”

Jost has been writing comedy since his first year with the Harvard Lampoon, and performing stand-up comedy for more than a decade. But transitioning between writing comedy and performing comedy isn’t simple—and what’s more, he says, writing for stage, screen, and print all require different techniques. “With stand-up, the rhythm really differs,” he explains. “I’ll try a sketch during a stand-up show, and it’ll work on

stage, and I’ll think, ‘Oh, this will be great to do on *SNL*,’ and I’ll try it at dress rehearsal and it will just not work at all. There’s this special rhythm to being either at a club or theater.”

When developing a sketch for *SNL*, Jost often starts by thinking of a voice, and then deciding which actor could most naturally embody it. He created the character Drunk Uncle, for example—meant to “sound like an uncle pretty much everyone has”—by working with cast member Bobby Moynihan. Drunk Uncle makes comments ranging from cringe-worthy to downright racist, almost always circling back to how America just isn’t the country it used to be. While dreaming him up, Jost and Moynihan thought about the character’s family, his pleasures, and his grievances, and slowly, his personality began to develop: sloppy, brash, old-fashioned.

This technique is key to creating strong *SNL* characters, but Jost has found that it actually hampers his ability to write the kind of humor that appears only on the page. Early in his career, he had been keen to contribute Shouts and Murmurs because the columns struck him as similar to what he’d done for the *Lampoon*. But after years of working on the show, he found it difficult to switch back to magazines. “If I had someone’s voice in mind for a character that I was writing, other people didn’t necessarily hear the same voice,” he says.

These days, Jost is best known for co-anchoring *SNL’s* Weekend Update, a segment that parodies a traditional news desk. It’s a big seat to fill: previous hosts have included Chevy



**Colin Jost (left) with his co-host, Michael Che, at the Weekend Update desk for *Saturday Night Live***

Chase, Seth Meyers, and Amy Poehler. But after years behind the scenes, Jost itched to put his stand-up skills to use. The Update desk turned out to be the perfect fit, despite his initial anxieties. “I didn’t feel the self-confidence I had on stage as a stand-up at SNL, and that was a hard, hard transition,” he says. “I knew that I either had to try and make Weekend Update work, or I would have to go somewhere else to perform.” His signature deadpan and smirk, along with his palpable chemistry with co-anchor Michael Che, have helped shape some of the segment’s most successful recent moments, from roasting then-candidate Don-

ald Trump’s leaked *Access Hollywood* tape to interviewing memorable characters like Kate McKinnon’s Angela Merkel.

Another screen comedy challenge that Jost regularly grapples with is specific to *SNL*, which, true to its name and trademark line, airs live. This means Jost and Che have to be strategic when joking about news items that are breaking or still raw, because there isn’t a chance for do-overs. There’s no shortage of hot topics, from the Harvey Weinstein sexual-abuse scandal to the Trump administration’s response to Hurricane Maria’s devastation of Puerto Rico. In cases like these, Jost says the trick is to pinpoint who’s at

fault, either for hypocrisy or abuse of power. “Those are the subjects you’re trying to deal with,” he explains. “You don’t want to collaterally damage victims.” He also says it’s important to refrain from becoming pedantic or turning the segment into a moral lesson; this means considering whether a joke will land with the audience or only make it appear the show is taking a serious topic lightly. Such comic license can be a burden, Jost says, given how much material there is to choose from, “but it’s also really lucky,” because it’s an opportunity to elevate topics that really matter. It’s all about picking and choosing the right jokes for the right issues.

## A Novel Take on Eternal Life

*Dara Horn breathes life into classical Jewish sources.*

by MARINA BOLOTNIKOVA

**D**ARA HORN ’99, Ph.D. ’06, would never choose to be immortal. In her new novel, *Eternal Life*, this is the problem facing Rachel, a 2,000-year-old Jewish woman who made a bargain with the high priest at the Second Holy Temple: in exchange for the survival of her sick son, she gives up her own death. “What reasons are there for being alive?” Rachel asks herself over the centuries. None of them—to love God; to serve others; to feel joy, to build for the future—has any meaning without the constraints of a normal human lifespan. As she watches her dozens of husbands and children die before she does, her relationship with God comes to feel “sodomasochistic.”

*Eternal Life* might be the most fantastical of Horn’s books, but it also emerges most directly from her daily life. “Something I’ve noticed was that friends of mine with smaller families become very nostalgic as their children grow up and pass milestones,” she says. “This is not at all my experience. I’m a mother of four young children, and when you have that many children, you keep going to preschool graduations over and over again. You just keep resetting the clock: ‘Oh, it’s the first day of kindergarten again!’”

Immortality is not a particularly

original subject in literature, but stories of eternal life, she says, “are almost never about fertile women.” In her novel, Hannah, a gifted biologist who is researching life extension, discovers that her grandmother Rachel has the telomeres of a teenager. While reading about advances in anti-aging for the book, Horn, who spent her childhood

in suburban New Jersey and is now raising her family there, thought back to her own, repetitive domestic experience: “Who in their right mind would want to go through this again and again and again?”

With Rachel’s life spanning Jewish societies—continually dying yet reborn after each disaster—from the Roman Empire to modern Israel, *Eternal Life* reads as a metaphor for Jewish history. The novel also reflects the contrast between the Judaic and American relationships to time, says Horn. “In the United States we have this mythology that your past doesn’t matter—that’s the premise of the American experiment. The premise of Judaism is exactly the opposite, because the founding mythology of Judaism is that when God gave the Torah to the Israelites at Mount Sinai, it wasn’t just that generation of Israelites that was present, but all their future descendants were present. The most important thing in your life happened thousands of years before you were born.”

Horn moonlights as a professor of Jewish literature (she has held the Weinstock visiting professorship in Jewish studies at Harvard), and her novels, five in all, have been recognized for their engagement with the texts she has worked on academically,



Dara Horn