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MONDAY, AUGUST 24, 2009

Truth Values: An interview with the artist

In anticipation of the opening of Truth Values: One Girl's Romp Through M.I.T.'s Male Math Maze, I interviewed Gioia De Cari about her autobiographical solo show. Here, she talks candidly about the impetus behind the piece, weaving higher mathematics into theater, and her feelings about bringing a play that looks critically at her years at M.I.T. to the school's neighborhood.

Alison Klejna: What inspired you to create this play?

Gioia De Cari: Interesting question – maybe the best question would be why I ended up finishing the play, given that it is a piece I had been alternatively working on and setting aside for quite some time. But the history of it is that after I left math, I worked and trained as an actor/singer for a long time before I started keeping a journal just for fun. I wrote all sorts of things - poems, stories, diary entries, and some math stories. As I kept the journal, I began thinking it might be fun to write a solo show. Lo and behold, not long after that I was offered an opportunity to create and perform my first solo in NYC - I was living on the West Coast at the time. Somehow a director appeared, a spot in a festival, an ingenious set, a beautiful costume, a nice place to stay, as if by magic. This first show was a wild episodic Alice-in-Wonderland style fantasy, and my director and I decided to weave in a few snippets of the math stories as interludes. I was very surprised by how captivated audiences were with the math stories, which got me thinking about writing a second show that was all and only true-life math stories, which eventually became "Truth Values."

This second show took me a long time to write, though, because I just had to keep putting it away. I swore when I left math I would never talk about it again. But it was inescapable - every interview, every party, every time I met someone, the subject of my education would come up, and I would feel forced mention math, and that would captivate whomever I was talking to, and then they wanted to know my life story, etc. etc. I figured I had better just get on with it and write a show all about math so I would never have to explain my background again! There came a point, though, when it seemed to me that the whole women in science issue was so passé that I felt

embarrassed to talk about my experiences - I was hearing about M.I.T., especially, being on the forefront of addressing these problems. Then as you may remember, Lawrence Summers made this outrageous remark about women perhaps being inherently inferior to men in math and science, and at that point I figured it was my duty as an artist and a woman and a "recovering mathematician" to speak up.

AK: Do you think that opportunities for and attitudes towards women in historically male-dominated academic fields have improved in the last 20 years?

GDC: As I mentioned, it has seemed to me, reading about M.I.T. from afar, that a great effort has been made to address the issue of equity for women in math and science. I don't have first hand experience to judge the effectiveness of this effort because I haven't been part of the math community for such a long time now. I do find, in talking to women scientists who have seen my show, that they say it reminds them of their own experiences. And I was very surprised to hear from one woman scientist who said it seemed to her that very little has changed at all with regard to the sexism she and her female colleagues face, that the sexism is perhaps more subtle now, but still relentless. All in all, I'm really looking forward to the post-performance discussions, because I expect there may be all sorts of differing opinions on this point.

AK: What is your approach to using mathematics in the play and making it relatable for diverse audiences?

GDC: I approached using mathematics in this play in couple of different ways. For example, I especially liked the idea of using the math research I was doing at the time as a central metaphor. The title, "Truth Values," is a technical term for the notion of true vs. false. My research examined the consequences of adding other values between true and false, sort of a formalization of the idea of nuanced choices. This resonated with the choices I was facing in my life at the time, as well as with the fact that it was very hard for me to know, when I was in the midst of those experiences, what was and wasn't an example of sexism. None of it was black and white, yes/no, easy to pin down.

Another way I incorporated math was the mathematical dialogue. I have characters speaking about math, and I don't try to explain it at all. In fact I wanted to give the audience a sense of being a fly on the wall, to give them an experience of how people rattle off this stuff that, to the outside observer who knows nothing, is incomprehensible, but to the people in that exotic world, is commonplace.

AK: What are the greatest challenges and rewards of performing a one-woman show?

GDC: The main challenge of this show is that it is very scary to reveal this much of myself. I mean, one of the sublime joys of being a character actor is to be able to transform yourself, body, mind, walk, talk, soul into a seemingly different person. In an autobiographical show like this, you're playing characters at the same time as revealing your own character as a human being. In a sense you offer not only your performance and craftsmanship, you also offer yourself and your life as a discussion topic, an example, good or bad, which I sometimes think takes the courage and presence of mind of a Zen master.

As to the rewards, in writing this show, I kept my goal very simple - to create theatrical art out of a personal history. But the show has also turned out to be something that people feel speaks to the issue of the continuing under-representation of women in science and math, a topic usually reserved for scholarly conferences. I would be tremendously gratified if my work as an artist can

contribute something meaningful and different to the ongoing discussion and debate over women in science.

AK: You'll be back in your old Cambridge stomping ground while you're at Central Square Theater. Do you look forward to performing in the MIT neighborhood? Does it make you at all nervous?

GDC: Are you kidding? Of course it makes me nervous! But actually I guess I am a bit prepared, because last year when I did my first workshop of the show, I decided to invite the New York M.I.T. women's alumni group (AMITA), thinking they might find it fun and make a good audience. They came and seemed to have a fabulous time; I think they saw their own experiences in it. They also seemed to revel in every little inside joke about M.I.T., which was delicious for them and for me too. Thus I have high hopes that this show will be a lot of fun and a great conversation starter for M.I.T. audiences.

By Alison Klejna, Artistic Administrator