

Carolyn Gage - Playwright

Overview

Carolyn Gage shares her experiences in the theater community, discussing past roles, challenges, and how her past experiences, including her childhood and her journey as a Lesbian, influenced her writing. She documents her journey, from being a young, angry woman to finding her place in the Lesbian feminist theater movement in the mid-1980s. She reminisces about her time in Southern Oregon and Northern California, recalls her experiences with addiction in the community, speaks on the impact of chronic illness and trauma, and shares current writing projects.

Summary

In this interview, playwright Carolyn Gage speaks about her early experiences in theater that were marred by discomfort with traditional roles as well as harassment. These experiences led to her eventually dropping out to later pursue a feminist education in her late 20s. Gage's doctoral program was unfortunately rife with systemic fraud leading her to withdraw and pursue a lawsuit against the university. Reflecting on this event, Gage remembers how intense the internal investigation was and describes major pushbacks from those around her, some of them going so far as to use tactics such as gaslighting and intimidation. Having been in the past few years with neurodiversity, she now believes that, in hindsight, she would have handled things much differently than she did back then. She believes many of her actions stemmed from intense anger, and traumatic past which spurred her to act without forethought.

It was Gage's experiences, however, that fueled her passion for radical feminist theater. She wanted to create stories that resonated with the stories of marginalized women and survivors. She founded a theater in a small rural town and called it No to Men. Many memories from her time in Northern California come to the surface, particularly regarding addiction and recovery in lesbian circles. Gage describes how her childhood experiences negatively affected her ability to set proper boundaries. Her deep involvement in the recovery movement would later become the catalyst for her making positive change.

Gage also recalls the early experiences of being chronically disabled by an unknown viral infection. Prone to self-blame for her illness, she experienced an epiphany after meeting activist, playwright and songwriter Z-Budapest who writes about feminist spirituality. Gage talks about how her chronic disability has informed both her writing and experiences in theater. Additionally, Gage speaks about her motivation to keep going despite her disability, which included important feedback she received from women who credit Gage's work with changing their lives for the better.

When asked what her favorite piece of work is, Gage remarks that it is always the one she has just finished. She goes on to speak about several new plays she has written in the past couple of years--ones that draw from historical women figures, like the play she has written about Joan of Arc. Among the historical figures are Rita Star Pattern, a courageous figure from the mass shooting at a university in Austin, Texas, in the late 1960s, as well as famous 19th-century abortionist Madam Restell.

Video Quotes from Interview

Creating a Culture (:36)

...because we were in separatist community. It was like, Well, we are starting from zero. We can have it any way we want. There won't be any money, but we can create our own culture, our own organizations, our own art, our own body of literature, and get it right and have it express what we want to express. And for me as a playwright was an explosion of archetypes and paradigms that is, models of reality and models of characters that I had never even known existed because of the roles for women in straight theater.



Golden Age of Lesbians (1:12)

And I remember when the first read Julia Penelope and Mary Daly and, oh so many of them, I'm thinking mostly writers, but one right after the other. And at Michigan, I would always try and do some kind of a ceremony for these women, because their writing had changed my life. Had saved my life completely. Julia Penelope, especially, she was just an amazing role model for me. But all of them, and I'm Joanna Russ, I was trying to make a collaboration with her happen, and she died. And, yeah, what that generation, Monique Wittig said it was the golden age of Lesbians, and I



feel like I came on the just on the downside of it, you know, that it had crested maybe in the 70s, you know, and that coming out in '85 I was just catching the afterglow of it. But it was an astonishing time of freedom of thought and expression and permission to do anything. And I caught that permission with having a theater company.

Theater Saves Lives / Passion Gives Voice (1:05)



I feel like that theater saves lives. Books save lives, but theater is especially powerful, and every single one of my plays I feel like would have saved me decades of struggle or amnesia or confusion or low self-esteem. ...You know, what is wrong with me? Yeah, I feel really passionate. And then when I got disabled, and the temptation to not be here was very, very strong because I was so sick, but I thought I can still write, and I can still write really well, and I can give a voice to women who don't have a formal education to be able to write these kinds of plays, and I can give voice to people who've been denied a voice. I can still do damage. I think I can do a lot of damage. And there were a few years I stayed alive because I felt like my ability to do damage to the system that hurt me was substantial, and that I had an obligation to stay here and do that sabotage as much as I could. It gave grace.

Related Items in Wanderground Collection

Publications

- *Like There's No Tomorrow: Meditations for Women Leaving Patriarchy*, Common Courage Press, 1997
- *Monologues And Scenes for Lesbian Actors*, Odd Girls Press, 1999
- *The Second Coming of Joan of Arc and Other Plays*, HerBooks, 1994
- *The Second Coming of Joan of Arc and Selected Plays*, Outskirts Press, 2008

Details

- Interview with: Carolyn Gage
- Topic(s): Abortion Rights, Addiction, Chronic Illness & Trauma, Feminist Activism, Joan of Arc, Madame Restell, Theater, Performance
- Date & How Recorded: Feb. 6, 2025 via Zoom
- Interviewed by: Sean-Heather McGraw
- Transcript prepared by: Jules Cuomo
- Summary Prepared by: Jules Cuomo / Edited by Martha Young