Interview Transcript

Carolyn Gage – Playwright

Details

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Sean-Heather McGraw [SH] 00:20
Well, hello, nice to meet you. I was sort of excited about this because I've read some of your work. I am sort of an amateur actor myself, and I was thinking about doing one of your monologs from Joan of Arc for an audition. So, I am excited to get to talk to you. So, I know she sent you an email of some of our topics, but I don't really have a complete agenda. We just sort of wanted to hear more about how you got into doing the kind of theater that you do and what you want. So, eventually, this project is going to be in an archive, right? But we hope that younger people will learn. So, you know what it was like, so that's sort of our aim, to record what it was like, and anything that you think that you know younger people might learn from it. So, why don't you just tell me a little bit about your first forays into deciding to write plays.

Carolyn Gage [CG]: Well, I love plays. As a child, my mother would take me to see the local children's theater where I lived in Virginia, and I just was always attracted to theater. And then I went to college when I was 19, and I was going to major in theater, so I checked out the department, and it was something uncomfortable. I think I was already feeling like, not a woman when I'm in an audition space with the high heels and the lipstick. And I had no words for it. I just was like, one of these is not like the others.

[SH]: I know the feeling, yeah.

[CG]: They were doing cabaret, so you can imagine who's there. It's the Kit Kat clubs. And I'm like, Hmm, you know. And I remember it was like, never mind. And then I was sexually harassed by the head of the department, and later on, like, 20 years later, I met theater conferences, and apparently, he was notorious. I heard this, you know. But I was a survivor of child sexual abuse, and I didn't have memories. All I knew was it was a really terrifying situation that and the audition thing, and also, it was 1970 and the world was in flames, and theater seemed incredibly irrelevant. Cabaret is not, but for the most part, I just felt like, what am I doing here? You know? So, I dropped out, and I didn't go back to school until I was 29 and by then, I was a feminist. I didn't, you know, like, feel like saying sir to people that were older than me, I was a fully formed adult, and I went back to theater, and it really was clear about who I was and what I wanted to do. And I got a bachelor's and a master's, and in all that time, I never studied any women playwrights, with the exception of Lillian Hellman, and I felt like she definitely follows

the tropes of heterosexual males. I mean, if you put her plays in a lineup with male playwrights, I wouldn't be able to pick them out, except I know them. But you know, you know. So, I really didn't have any foremothers that I really I couldn't find them. They certainly weren't being taught.

[CG]: And, you know, in the theater companies, the women were costumers, or they work in the children's theater, you know, the 70s, and they were just damn glad they had a job with tenure. So, it was a grim picture, but I was hanging in there, and I got a state fellowship into a state university doctoral program, and the first week, we were put in a room, all of us on State fellowship, and we were told that we had to commit fraud in order to keep our fellowships. Since we were being required to register for six hours every quarter, we would register for six hours of classes that didn't exist. We would sign up for reading and conference and we would, I guess, to make us feel less criminal. They're like, it'll be a pass-fail class. They didn't want to grade us on non-work. You know, it's like you get a pass, you failed it. But it was a massive inflation. I thought anybody who hires me after this is going to think I'm a workaholic, because, you know, it looked like I was carrying two, a pretty high course load, two classes over what usually you take, and it devise your whole, you know, I would never be proud of that degree. But I'm a survivor, so I sat through the thing and I'm just like, Oh my God. And, and I guess what it did was the state, when they allocated money, they looked at, they looked at credit hours that the graduate students were signed up for so it really inflated that, and that would give them, I understood, it generated a quarter of a million or something a year more.

[CG]: But anyway, so I'm sitting in the room, and all the professors were there, and that was a little bit weird and, and it just was like, I just numbed out, you know? I just was like, oh my God. And then I didn't go to class, I didn't do any work. I went to a few classes, and really didn't do any work for about 30 days. And so, my papers were coming due in the midterms, and it was kind of wow. I forgot to read anything or write anything. I realized, in true survivor fashion, somebody inside had made a decision that day. We're not we're not really here now anymore--

[SH] 06:51
You didn't want to do the programs?

[CG]: No, everybody was in the room. It's like they're all in on this, and I don't respect them, and I'm not going to learn from anybody I don't respect, and they're going to have something over me for the rest of my life. And it’s like, but again, I wasn't conscious of that. It just was midterms. It was like, well, I better write those papers. Like this weekend. It's like, nope. And so, I went to the Dean of Students, and I told her, I'm withdrawing, and I want the practice stopped. And she got really, really upset and agitated, and she kept saying, there's been a misunderstanding. And I was like, no, there's no misunderstanding. And about the fourth time she referred to it as a misunderstanding, I stood up and I said, stop using that word. You know, this is fraud, and we were taught how to do it. And these were classes that don't exist and work that we won't be doing, you know, we're going to get a pass or no pass on it and they, you know, I withdrew everything. And they did an internal investigation that determined I was mentally unstable.

[SH]: Oh, that's odd.

[CG] That's very “I'm female,” I'm female. That's, a no brainer. You know, no, seriously, I don't believe that would have happened had I not been female. But anyway, yeah, mental illness, historical. Just like, well, same with, you know, oh, oh, my god, harassment claim, whatever, you know, it's just a dumpster label that is frequently used. But I got pissed. I thought, you think I'm emotionally unstable. You have seen nothing yet. You really haven’t. Now I am unstable. So, I got a civil rights attorney. I got the best one in the state, and we filed a huge lawsuit, and then they actually, I went to my senator, and they audited the books, and it was very clear what I said was going on. Because of their pass-fail, taking all you could identify, the dummy credits across the board, for every student with fellowship, they were, every quarter, there were six hours of them, and they were the only thing they're taking pass-fail.

[CG]: And, you know, and the trial was going to be interesting, because they put these professors on trial, and they'd have to make up a course. And yeah, the amount of lying was going to become something a lot of people were going to be really uncomfortable with and yeah. So anyway, so for me my lawyer said, your classmates are all going to lie about you. And I said, no, they're not. They're not MBA people, they're theater people. I was wrong. That was not true. The state was deposing them, and they said what they needed to and the upshot of it was they came to the table to settle because of this. The legislature did the audit, and I was really, really angry by then, and I said, I'm not going to settle for what you're offering. I want more money than you were generating with the fraud, because otherwise it's still cost effective for you. They've been doing it for three years, and it was in all the departments of Arts and Sciences.

[CG]: So anyway, at that point they got really dangerous and scary and the whole because when you turn down settlement, it's like a witch hunt, you know? It's not like, oh, you caught me. Okay, how much do you want? And I'm like, no, we're all going to be in court. We're going to, you know, the state is going to hear from all of you about what you did to me. My lawyer kind of jumped ship when I did that. He was like, you do not go to court for justice. You go for money. And here it is, and everybody will know they were guilty because they're giving you a lot of money. And I just was, I don't know, well, I'm autistic, and I think it was classic autism. I'm like, no, you know, I want my day in court, and nobody could understand that. And I think really, it was autism. We are big on social justice and, you know, this was a negligible amount of money, what they were going to settle for, considering how much they were making off this practice and, and I knew it, and they knew, and that's what, you know, what rapists do. They'll offer you $10,000, which is a gold mine, to some poor--

[SH] 11:23
Your own experiences of being persecuted. It sounds like that informs some of your writing, like the--

[CG] That was a moment, that's what I went I went off the grid, and I became a separatist, and I moved down to Southern Oregon to the Lesbian collectives, and I, yeah, I opened my bar called… I opened my theater in a bar, and I named it 'No to Men', and I began to produce very radical feminist Lesbian work, mostly with actors who'd never been on stage before, because, again, they didn't look like Barbie. And I just, it was like, it was like, that lawsuit, which I spent a lot of time on, but I kind of wanted to walk you through it. It was revelation after revelation, and I felt dumb. I'd read so much women's history. It's like, what do you think is going to happen? Well, of course, they're going to say you're crazy. You know what you know. And so, yeah, and, and it did go, you know, to the state Supreme Court, and they said, here's the thing, it would have ruined a lot of people. If it had gone to court, it would have been in the papers. It would have been, I mean, hundreds of students had participated in this and they now had professional jobs with PhDs. And so, they would have lost the jobs they got from a bogus PhD, and they would have been a position to sue the socks off the university. I mean, what's the price of losing your doctorate and your career you know? I mean, it would have been catastrophic.

[SH]: I can see why people were mad, too.

[CG]: Yeah, and they're pretty much innocent. They've got wives, they've got kids, their houses, they've taken out loans to get in this program, and some bizarre woman turns down settlement and is like, no, I want to expose all of this. And again, autism, I'm in my own bubble. I'm not looking at how I was kind of like, good, well, good. They all made choices, which was very classist of me. You know, a lot of these people made much greater sacrifices than me to be in that program and were depending on it to support their family. Wouldn't do it today, but I was young. I was young and I was angry, and I just turned into Carolyn Gage, and I look back on it now a certain degree of remorse or shame, like, how did I miss the broader dimension, you know? Yeah, but anyway, so that was when I became Carolyn Gage, and I had just turned my back on everything in all hope of ever working in mainstream theater again. And I was all in. I mean, I was all in. And this would have been the mid 80s by then, and the Lesbian feminist culture was just hot. It was hot with women's rage and, you know, critique about the male gaze. And you know, I wouldn't have been able to get any degrees in theater if I'd had the consciousness going through school that I had later, all of it would have been too offensive and unbearable to participate in. So, I thought, well, I suppose it's a good thing. I went through young and dumb, but it made me sad. I thought of, you know, young Lesbians who are really, really conscious might have been interested in theater, but they would not have been able to bear the racism, classism, sexism, ageism, etc., etc. Of you know what they would be learning in a program. So

[SH] 15:18
When you say hot, can you talk a little bit more about what you mean by that? Do you just mean anger? Yeah. Is there something else along with that you mean?

[CG]: Well, I felt like just this sudden explosion of opening our eyes and this, like, this synapsing of like, oh, you know, they called me crazy. And suddenly all these other women in history that had that done to them, or, you know, just 1000s of synapses, and just looking at any movie, and

suddenly it's like, well, I can see what they're doing here, and I see what they're doing here, and there's a stereotype there, and all of it was just... And, because we were separate as 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 that 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. So, once you're over 35 they do--

[SH]: Yeah, they tend to be limited. Finding right now I'm over 35 and I'm trying to get back to theater and finding that it's hard for me too to find monologues or scenes that I really gravitate to, and that makes sense for me at my age and also, you know, not being, not being the normative, you know woman. So, I think there's still sort of the stereotypical role that women are often made to play in film and theater. I think there's still some of that.

[CG]: Well, it's like, in my day, it was called character roles. Character roles, yeah, and it's not something you studied for. You looked in the mirror and, you know, well, I'm going to be someone who does character roles. I'm not going to be Princess or the ingenue and coming into this Lesbian feminist community, women of size, women with facial hair, masculine butch women, it was like, and putting these women front and center, not character roles, usually humorous, because, of course, if you're not beautiful, you must be ridiculous. And I was so excited by that and it was like, for me, opening just this treasure trove of undiscovered theater stories that were so powerful and anti-patriarchal and everything else. And of course, at this point, because of the separatism, I just walked out, and I didn't really look back for a long, long time. It would have broken my heart. It just was like, well, this is where I am now, and this is the theater I'm doing in a bar for a community of about 200 and it was enough for me. That was it was more than enough for me. And I realized there's no women in theater in the history of the world that have had the freedom that I have, and the history that was being unearthed 100 miles an hour in the 80s, the hidden all the famous painters, you know, the whole victim is, yeah, yeah. History of Art had like two women and 5000 men. I mean, it was just, it was like just finding a lost city of Atlantis, it was like, I have a family, I have a people, I have a culture, I have a heritage. Who knew and so for me, I was profoundly satisfied, even though there were no resources. And as I say, I'm in a rural town and community of 200 but they were very supportive. And my theater was called No to Men. It was pretty controversial, I think.

[SH] 19:26
Did you have a core group of women that you banded together?

[CG]: And that's another thing you know, so many of these women well, most of us had passed for more or less in some phases of our life, we've been performing. Lesbians have been performing a lot. All Lesbians are usually relatively skilled in performing, because they had to be. And so much talent. And I knew they're not even going to make second string chorus in a community theater production because of, you know, they were butch or non-traditional. And it was such a waste of talent, not only that, but a waste of the stories as these women about their

lives. It's 10 times more interesting than these middle-class heterosexual marital problem dramas that go up all the time. It was like, these are, you know, anytime you talk to a Lesbian about her life, it's usually like, oh, my God. Why are you still alive? And then miraculous. I can't believe you survived that. And you know, do you realize how great you are? That there is greatness in you? And no, they didn't, you know, a lot of them, a lot of us, you know, we were just kind of so beaten around by stuff. But I wanted to tell the story of survivors of sexual abuse, and I wanted to tell them the story of the survivor who thrives and recruits other women and turns the tables. That was a narrative that was enormously healing for me, and that's very censored the movement too, I guess--

[SH]: [inaudible] help survivors or acknowledge, you know, how many people are harassed and raped? I think that in the 80s and 90s certainly intersected with the heterosexual community. Did you work with heterosexual women on that issue?

[CG]: No, and well, yeah, I mean, I was, I didn't know I was autistic. I actually didn't know that till about four years ago, but it's, like, kind of painfully obvious looking back. But I so I didn't have great coalition and people skills. I had the hyper focus in an area of special interest, and that was Lesbian feminist theater. That was my language of love. If you didn't speak that, I really hardly could communicate at all, and also I was just angry, and I was really a separatist. I wasn't much interested in hearing, oh, well, here's my story in theater. What's yours? It's like, I know yours, and I don't care about it. It treated me like shit. And then, you know, I had terrible, oh, I was just on a tear. I was angry. And my world was extremely black and white at that time. And I didn't really get in. I got into Al Anon recovery at 40, and I began to understand why my life wasn't working. The Autism would have been a great piece, but even without it, I learned respectful communication. I learned about how to be productive, and I being productive, I'm just going to say what I think, and then if you don't like it, the hell with you. Because I couldn't really figure out what made things work between people anyway. And I began to understand there's a way to say that, and it won't be the end of all interactions

[CG]: But I gotta say, in truth, I wasn't the only one. I felt like a lot of us in that movement got there the way I did, and we were angry, and we blurted a lot instead of parsing our words and really thinking about stuff. And I think when you've been lying and you've not known your own story, and you've been performing your whole life without knowing it, and you suddenly come into consciousness. I think the things that were going on in my head scared me. And so, everything I said I blurted, because if I didn't, and I thought about it too much, I'd never say it. So, I just yeah, just no filter.

[SH] 23:40
Do you think that anger was part of grief for the way you wanted it to have been as a child?

[CG]: I think that it was definitely a choice. I think that first off, I grew up in a family full of addicts, and I never saw anybody deal with loss. Loss, it sometimes brings up shame, whatever it was dangerous. Nobody ever taught me how to grieve. I never saw it modeled and anger. If you're afraid of grieving, or you feel like it's going to swamp you and just drown you or what if

I'm wrong. At this point, I put all my eggs in one basket, and the world thought I was sick, bad, crazy and wrong. So, for me to go forward it was like, no, I'm right all the time about everything. Got it, you know, I think maybe there was a sense if, if I made a small mistake, God knows what going to open the door to if I admit that. I mean, again, no recovery at all. But there were, I was not alone in that. I felt like it was tough community. And you, yeah, I know I'm not in a Lesbian community. I live on a small island now in Maine, and I don't know I'm Imagining it's very different now, because it's not separatist, and it does seem like feminism's kind of on the back burner, but in the mid-80s, I think I wasn't alone in my brace style.

[SH]: You feel like you gained some long-term friendships with certain women and at that period that you held for a very long time?

[CG]: Yeah, and interestingly, it's women that were in recovery when we speak the same, I've got, like, 33 years in Al Anon and I work a hard program. I go to meetings all the time. I have a sponsor I call, you know, I mean, I'm real active in the recovery movement. Have been for 33 years. And the women that I kind of salvaged from that period in my life, which was three years in with the No to Men theater, the ones that endured are women that got in recovery also, and we share a perspective on who we used to be and what we did and then we share the recovery language of accountability and boundaries, and so that, I think that's interesting, but yeah, and also, addiction was rampant in that community I just and I didn't, I didn't know how to deal with that, and I didn't deal with it well at all. So, because I was raised with it, so I would just go into--

[SH]: You're saying Lesbians were addicted to alcohol, drugs, yeah, and had coping mechanism as well?

[CG]: I really don't know. I know that there was maybe a half dozen active alcoholics in my theater company, and there was one woman who had a government job, and she was heroin addicted, and, oh, yeah, managing well, or whatever that means. But you know, it would be the last person in the room you would say that's the heroin addict. But yeah, and, you know, just a lot, and then a lot like me, who may not have been using but we had grown up around it and had all kinds of terrible boundaries and so on. From that, it was a very difficult time. By the late 80s, which is when I opened my theater, the recovery movement was kind of coming through the Lesbian community. It started in the 80s, and I can remember going to one of my first Lesbian potlucks and doing my usual straight girl thing of pick up a six pack on the way, because I don't cook very well. And I came to the front door, and this woman just met me, closed the door and looked at me, and she said, take that right back out to your car, and I'm like, well, this is new, but it was, you know a community at that time that was becoming very addiction literate and very sensitive. You know it's just not an understood thing that you can show up to an event with booze. Like, that's something you ask about ahead of time and be mindful of. So, that was but it was early days yet.

[SH]: Like, I remember some of that from the 90s. I led in the late 90s in San Francisco, and I remember the recovery community being really conscious of really trying to band together and support each other, the Lesbians in recovery in particular.

[CG] 28:36
Well, I think it was in response to especially the generation older than me. There was nothing but the bars. So even if you didn't drink, you'd have to order a drink and have it in front of you, and sooner or later, you're going to drink it. And I think they were just going to make it the norm that a Lesbian gathering is understood clean and sober, unless otherwise specified, in response to the fact that a Lesbian gathering was always the bar. But it was, yeah, it was a really particular moment in time, and I'm grateful because I was seeing people getting into recovery, and I started to feel like, I think I want what they want, right? And I did not at that time, but I moved, after three years, down to Northern California, and that is where I started my recovery,

[SH]: San Francisco?

[CG]: No, I was in Sebastopol and then Freeston. An hour north of the city, right?

[SH]: Yeah, yeah. in the late 90s?

[CG] yes, I think, I think I was not, I think it was 1992 is when I looked.

[SH]: Okay, so yeah, I think I got there as a college student in ‘95. My parents and my grandparents lived a little bit south of Santa Rosa.

[CG]: I was in Santa Rosa for a while too. Yeah, yeah, nice. Nice place. All built up now, but I'm sure also burned up. There were those hellacious fires not that long ago.

[SH]: Yeah. So, then how long were you in the Sebastopol area, and did you form another theater troupe there?

[CG]: I was there for five years, and I had gotten sick with something mysterious in ‘87 around the time of my lawsuit. I think, in retrospect, it might have been Lyme disease, but back then, if you didn't have the bullseye and joint pain, it wasn't Lyme. Now we know that's not true, but I had just a cascading, alarming-- I was developing seizures and rashes, devastating fatigue, like really, really overwhelming fatigue, and I couldn't get a diagnosis again, it's all in your head. I mean, you know, same with the incest, all in your head. That's been the story of my life. It's all in my head. And so, I was disabled, and I just soldiered on with my company in in Oregon, when I got to Northern California, I completely broke down. It was time to go to a cabin in the woods and figure it out. It was interesting because I did a Halloween performance down at Mama Bears my Joan of Arc play, and Z Budapest showed up for it.

[SH]: You know, Z Budapest the original?

[CG]: Yeah, and I'm dressed like Joan of Arc and after it was over, she came up and introduced herself, and she asked me if she could do anything for me. And I said, I would love to be in your coven. So, she shut down Mama Bears, and we had this very short initiation ritual, and I joined

her coven. And after she had initiated me, she turned to me and she said, no more enemies, just the usual ones. Ah, because I was so sick and thinking, I'm having a breakdown, I'm mentally ill. And that night, I went to bed and I woke up in the morning and I knew I either have chronic fatigue or Lyme disease. But this is a disease, you know, and at that I'd had it for about five years, it was like, this is not my oppression. This is not a breakdown. This is not incest. This is a viral infection that hasn't been identified yet. And that's when it was like everything stopped. It's like I have to go to the woods now. And because I knew those are both permanent conditions, it was like it will be like this for the rest of your life, so you're going to have to figure something else out.

[SH] 33:05
I think if they knew then what they do now about both of those--

[CG]: I was thinking if I had had a massive dose of doxycycline for a week or two, none of I mean, I've been disabled ever since then, 35 years. Really disabled. And when I think shit, if I just had that course of Doxy for two weeks, this wouldn't happen. But if you have the Lyme and it goes unchecked, you get cascading co-infections, right, right? Seizure started, and then this started and started it. So, I think, you know, eventually you're very far from the original infection.

[SH]: I know someone who has the same story, basically.

[CG]: But it was, it was interesting, because I felt like Z Budapest kind of broke a spell I had, five years been telling myself, you're just being lazy and you're thinking too much about yourself. You need to just work harder. You know, this hole which it was like digging the hole deeper and deeper. And when she said just, there's no more enemies, just the usual ones, I think that did it, it was like, I'm not special. This isn't magical oppression stuff. This is a fucking disease. This is a disease.

[SH]: Yeah, I can definitely imagine her doing something like that. That sounds like a very special experience.

[CG]: I think she saw something in me. I think she saw that she is making herself crazy over this. It's just not that complicated. And, I mean, I just didn't want to, I think obviously, on some level I knew, because I just woke up knowing it kind of like with retrieving memories from childhood, they'd always been there somewhere. I think I did not want to accept the permanent part, right? In the mental breakdown, I felt like I got this. Yes, right? It's a virus they can't treat. It's like, oh, my God, it's going to be like this for the rest of my life.

[SH]: Yeah, or so, did you stay in her coven?

[CG]: Yeah, but she was far away. She's in San Juan. And then shortly after that, I got a job in Maine where I was, and I still am. I'm on an island in Maine as we speak. Yeah, so I didn't really, but I would go down for solstice. Did you? Did you do her rituals? Did you go to her rituals?

[SH]: Yes, although, I mean, I was very, very junior and very, very young, so I basically was quiet and observed, but people didn't speak to me too much because I was just a tiny little baby butch dyke that age.

[CG]: I think it's so sweet. I love that you say that, by the way, I have the largest canon of butch centric plays in the universe, and I have some that you would freaking kill and I have a solo show for a woman who's 59 so you can grow into that one that's just wicked, wicked, strong work. But yeah, I'm sorry. I'm sorry that you were marginalized like that. It's an old story, and in theater, it's intense, and I'm sorry you had that experience.

[SH]: Yeah. I mean, you know, my experiences in the community in San Francisco of the 90s are actually some of my fonder experiences. So, I was just happy to be around all of these older women that could teach me so much, you know, for me that was, that was a good thing, you know?

[CG] 36:51
Yeah, I know that, because that's how I felt when I landed in Southern Oregon. There was T Corinne and Lee Lynch was there, and everybody came through, you know, like, Andrea Dworkin. I mean, I just, it was, like, there was a lot of, right now, I'm drawing a blank, but yeah, I was, I was the baby dyke. I was under 40, and these women knew so much, and they come up from the 30s and 40s, and then I went and would play at the retirement community in Florida on Carefree Boulevard. And those women had come up through the 40s. Yeah, their stories, you know, they call, they passed in their community as sisters and raise children together. Their stories were absolutely amazing. And I just kind of felt like we had magazines and, I mean, my God, you were in the Bay Area. I mean, there was a Lesbian chess club that you could live your whole life with a full social life of nothing but Lesbians if you wanted to. And these women, it was like meeting in someone's living room, and yeah, it was such a privilege to know those women.

[CG]: And one of the hard parts when you get to be my age, I'm 73, is they're dying, you know. And they're and more and more, you know. 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 Joanna Russ, I was trying to make a collaboration with her happen, and she died. And, yeah, what a 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.

[CG]: And I'll tell you something else, No to Men, was incredibly dynamic. We did 16 plays in about a year and a half, two years and a half, it was really dynamic for me. I wouldn't do it today with the internet, though, because you know that the stigma of a theater company called No to Men. Can you imagine the emails I would get daily? Oh yeah, yeah, pictures I would open up every morning in my email. I could never go to California and just put that in my past and reinvent myself in a slightly less radical in your face style. And that makes me sad, because there's something about the internet and that your past will never go away, that makes you conservative in your choices. I got to be young. And just like, you know, hell for leather, like I've been thrown out of all traditional theater. And, you know, the gloves are off now, and I'm going to just not filter anything. And, yeah, I would be stopped. Yeah, army of teenage boy hackers.

[SH] 40:43
Yeah, unfortunately. So, let's talk about your writing. When did you first feel like what you wanted to do was writing rather than acting?

[CG]: Well, I started out acting because I had some chops, and really quickly the roles didn't appeal to me because of the cabaret syndrome. And so, I thought, well, I'm going to go into directing, because I was a pretty decent director, too. And actually, the emphasis for my master's degree was in directing, and it enabled me to leave and just have my own theater company. But I was doing, you know, I did Zoo Story with all women instead of men, and, you know, so I was taking the cannon and warping it and rewriting this and that, and then I just wanted to write my own stories. I think, really, when I made the full break with the lawsuit, it was just like, I'm going to tell the stories of the most despised women on the planet. Poor--

[SH]: You know, I love the fact that you have so many historical women that you are. I mean, you focused on so many that I think even today, most people will not have heard of. I have been a history teacher. I've been a historian in college for many years. So, in fact, I have taught my students about all the women that you have, but I think a lot of people, they don't know who Artemisia is. They might have barely heard of Joan of Arc, but know almost nothing. So, I like the fact that you have focused on the stories of historical women. Tell me about why you think you have done that.

[CG]: Well, I mean, a part of it is tied to the fact I didn't remember my childhood till I was in my 30s. I mean, I left home at 18. I never went back. I mean, you know, it's like with autism. If you look backwards, it's obvious this was not a loving family where you would have stayed in touch with them. But I left home early, moved halfway across the country, didn't go home, you know. But it wasn't really, until I came out as a Lesbian that I think I was enabled. That opened the doors of memory. I think as long as I felt I had to be physical with men, these were not going to be helpful memories to have, you know, and suddenly, knowing I never have to do that ever again, it was like, okay, well, here's some of your story that you haven't been able to access. But like I say, the breadcrumbs were there, all over everything, all over, all the relationships I never had. I like to think now, maybe even in high school, or even earlier, somebody would have pegged me as being sexually abused at home. I can remember going out on the playground in fourth grade, and the boys were paying me to pull my skirts up, and a teacher looked out the

window and saw that and brought me in, and I'm just thinking that would have been a moment that might have been a helpful moment, you know? I mean, I just feel like there were so many things that I look back and I'm like I was obviously disembodied, dissociated and whatever. But because I didn't have my memories for so long, and I had read all these fairy tales, and I was always in books. I just wanted to write the plays that would have changed my life. If I had at 14, if I'd seen my Joan of Arc, I would have been like, oh my God. And I think I would have gotten the memories in the theater. It was so much vision, you know, like, or I would have said, this is me a couple of times before I got my memories. There were moments I saw an Agnes Varda film, Sans toit ni loi, which is kind of like with no roof. There's no law. It's called Vagabond in English, but it really is if you have no roof over your head.

[SH]: I've seen it.

CG 45:01
Yeah. Well, I had been hitchhiking for many years, and I hitchhiked cross country alone, and I did high risk behaviors that are pretty typical for a survivor that I didn't know. People were like, well, aren't you afraid of being raped? And I was like, yes, but I'm pretty smart, which I look back and I'm like, that should have been another moment where whoever was talking to me should have said, your default settings are way, way off, you know. But I saw that movie Sans toit ni loi [Vagabond], and I remember I kept standing up in the movie theater, like, that's my story. Like I just couldn't even stay in my seat. I just never saw anybody telling my story. And so I feel 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. Am I sick, crazy, bad or wrong? 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.

[SH]: That's great. I know it was amazing. Yeah.

[CG]: Well, you know, when you're sick like that and you hardly get out of bed, the quality of life is gone. But I was fortunate. I can build these little literary bombs in my bed, you know?

[SH]: So then, because I looked at your CV, I mean, it's truly amazing how many places you have been doing performances and workshops, what started you feeling that you could go, get out of your bed, so to speak, and do that kind of traveling.

[CG]: Oh, my God, it was all but I have to tell you, I retired, and I hardly leave my island anymore because the use of touring, I would go to motels and the chemicals in the room would make me sick. Traveling is very hard when you're that environmentally ill, and now I don't have to do

anymore. It's like, oh, good. But I really didn't scare that up. It just happened, like, I'd go to a conference, and if I did a show at a conference, women would come up to me and book me, and it was almost all word of mouth because I'm autistic. I don't cold call, I don't schmooze well, I don't drink, so I don't socialize in a lot of places where artists get work. I, you know, it just, I feel very blessed. I feel like people just passed me from hand to hand, like, here book this woman or book this woman and then I'd start to get endorsements. And then when I would apply for something, I had, you know, all these endorsements, and that opened doors. But I, I just think I was blessed, and I was on fire for the work I was again, there was a sense of my life is over, but I can still do this thing that can help other people. So, I was really driven by my disability. It gave it gave meaning to my life in a time when it just seemed like I didn't have, you know, any prospect of a decent life. I was really blessed. I and the touring, the women I met, the conferences, the festivals, and the I have, oh, my god, the letters I have, the emails.

[CG]: And I there was one woman when I had a little 15-minute interview on, I think it was NPR or something, and she told me she was driving in her car with her three-year-old daughter when it came on and she wanted to hear it. So, they got to her house, and she just turned the radio up and walked her daughter up and down the driveway, because her daughter was restless, but she didn't want to miss anything. And she said, and then when you were done speaking, I put her back in the car, and we drove to another state. She just she heard the Joan of Arc thing, and she took her daughter and left a bad relationship, came out as a Lesbian, and, wow, I know. And so, you, you know, it was not a huge financial windfall doing what I did, but I got so many things there. All kinds of paychecks, and that was one of my favorite stories. It's like, keep going. Yeah, going, you're doing good. Keep going. Because I thought being on national radio with millions of hearers, I thought that was gonna be a turning point in my career, and I would come home and see that I'd sold 1000s of books. I got that email, that's what I got. And I'm like, you know what, I'm good, yeah, not what I not what I expected or hoped for, but you know what, I'll take it, that's good.

[SH] 50:30
Yeah, sometimes even tangible is. There are, are, are more of value to us, I think. Yeah, lovely. So, what is your favorite play of yours that you've written?

[CG]: Honestly, it's usually what I just finished working on. But I will say there's one that's very special that'll probably never be done. And I did it at the height of the pandemic, and it holds a special place. The first mass shooting was in Austin, Texas, the Tower 1967 or 1968* you are probably born then or something, right?

*[*Editor Note: Univ. of Texas Tower Shooting, 1966]*

[SH]: I was born in ‘75, so I was not yet born.

[CG]: Well, he went up on his tower, and because they didn't even have SWAT teams or anything, long range rifles, he was there for 45 minutes, shooting everybody that was in his line of fire. This woman he shot was a woman who was nine months pregnant, I think she was 18, and her boyfriend, and the boyfriend died, and she was right under the tower, but she was still

alive, but nobody would come and get her. They could see she was still moving, but it was too dangerous. He was going to shoot you. And this 18-year-old Lesbian runs out and lies down next to her and talks to her and talk to her for about 45 minutes until they were able to get the shooter down. I wrote the play that kind of starts with that. And I wrote what they one of the women is still alive. This woman, Rita Star Pattern. Rita died of cancer before I wrote it. But the other woman, she lived. Her baby didn't, but she lived, and she remembers a lot of what they talked about. So, I took all of that. And I wrote a play about it. And then Rita goes to see her in the hospital when she was in an induced coma for a long time because her wounds. And so, I have that scene in it. But it was about a Lesbian that, I mean, of course, the woman who ran out was a Lesbian, of course. And I mean, there's like, 10 ambulances, and there's hundreds of people on the perimeter, and nobody will go near this, nobody will enter the line of fire. And this Lesbian runs out, lies down, and the pavement was 110 degrees, so your skin is blistering, and she's lying there talking to this woman, and the woman kept trying to die, and Rita was just like, so what classes are you taking? You know, like, Rita kept her going, and they talk about it was like they established a beach head of feminism in this absolute patriarchal Inferno. And then, of course, there's this visit in the hospital later, which was also incredibly beautiful. They love that play. It's hard to stage because you've got two women lying on the ground, one of them is nine months pregnant. It's difficult for people, but I found it powerful especially now that we have a government takeover. It was just an affirmation that Lesbian space, you know, she really established a beachhead of sisterhood solidarity. They weren't talking about the shooter; they were talking about the civil rights movement. They were like, it was like, they were amazing, little 18-year-olds. They were amazing. I really wanted to, and I felt like, Rita Star Pattern, every Lesbian needs to know the story of Rita Star Pattern. And she went on to found a women's art gallery that is still alive and well in us. And reading that, yeah, well, I would, I'd be happy to send it to you. It's called Star Pattern. And after that, she renamed herself and, and, yeah, but I just, I wanted to affirm, in the middle of the pandemic, we can do this. You need to just, need to run out on the tarmac when your sister's down. That's it. That's the whole deal.

[SH]: Yeah, that's powerful. Very powerful.

[CG]: 54:38
Yeah, I love that play. I guess it just meant something to me. Nobody came out when I needed it, when I was young. And so, for me, that moment when Rita runs out is like we just, I just, that is powerful, and I want to be that woman. I don't think I would have been that brave, but I would, to me, it's aspirational. I have no idea what went through her mind. She obviously wasn't doing a cost benefit analysis. It seemed like suicide.

[SH]: Wow. Yeah, amazing. That's amazing. So, what is next on your list to write?

[CG]: I just wrote it, and it's a reproductive rights play. Obviously, abortion is not a burning topic for most Lesbians, you know, I mean, we get raped and everything, but it's different for straight women, but because it's a front line of attack on women from this administration, and I'm writing about a woman named Madam Restell who performed 1000s of abortions in New York City.

[SH]: New York City, abortionist, yeah, yeah. And she was-- 1870 something?

[CG]: Yeah,1878 very, very, very, very wealthy, very wealthy, and at the same time, hugely socially shunned. So that's interesting. And in Comstock, yes, Comstock is for her, but, and I'd always known about her, because, you know, how could you not? You know, but it was said that she slit her throat in the bathtub the morning of her trial. And so, I was just like, I don't want to write about that, but recent scholarship is coming forward, and it's clear she didn't do that. She had a cadaver. She staged it. She got to Canada, and people kept saying they'd seen her in Paris, but it was so inconsistent with her attitude, her pride, her you know, she had 40 years of being an abortionist. She was a tough cookie, and she absolutely, the hill she would die on, was a woman's right to live by on her own terms. And I just also, she has a pharma, you know, she had all these drugs. Why would you slit your throat if you could take sleeping pills seriously? And her jewels and her dresses were never found. It's just so and also, Comstock didn't want to, I think he knew, I think he absolutely knew it wasn't her, but it would make him look bad, right? And he might not be able to catch her, because you could get over the Canadian border, and they didn't have extradition treaty and then international waters. I mean, I think he made a decision. We're going to run with this. We're going to declare a huge victory and a bloody end to a bloody life. And I wanted to write that play. So, it's kind of a melodrama with Snidely Whiplash and the woman trying to get out of his clutches, and bodies being brought in, bodies being brought out. You know, it's a real crowd pleaser, but I feel like it carries huge amounts of information about what abortion was, before contraception. You know, women's lives destroyed. And there's a scene with an undertaker, and he's talking about the number of young girls that come in, and he said, they're all pregnant, and they're pregnant five months they didn't want to kill themselves, but when they start to show they're out of options. And also, a lot of these suicides aren't drowned, teenagers with no water in their lungs, or someone who's cut down with a rope, but she's got handprints around her neck that, you know, and the family doesn't care problem solved. They don't ask for the police to look into it. I mean, just the horror of that.

[SH]: Yeah, that's horrible.

[CG] No, yeah, our history of abortion and the band against that and contraception. It's called Restell. And I feel like it's a game changer. I wrote it to be an amazing evening in the theater, highly entertaining, really Charles Dickens type characters and that people who come in squeamish about the subject, or on the fence about it, or even hardcore anti-abortion are going to get caught up in the play, because it's really, really well written. It's a 19th century play, and the, you know, it might just be a little movement in there, a little question mark, a little like, well, that was then. It's not that bad now, you know, but, but it is, you know, in a different way. I'm really excited about Restell, especially because it's an old-fashioned melodrama. It's got, it's so it's got a love story. It's got the perils of Pauline tied to the railroad tracks type of suspense. It's got, you know, it's, it's just a really old fashioned, really good time in the theater. But all about drowning in women's blood. There's miscarriage, botched abortion. There's, yeah, yeah. And women talking about missing periods and doing the math around that the subjects that are normally really men have been protected from. And partly, I was inspired by when Kamala

Harris in the debate and Trump is going on about states' rights and abortion, and she's just starts talking about a woman bleeding out in the parking lot. And I'm like, you go, that is, that is the game changer, and we have that we have spared them, that, like we tried to debate it on their terms, it's like, let's go right to the woman bleeding out in the parking lot, because that's what we're talking about. And my play does that, and it's also dedicated to Gisele Pelicot. Like I want you all to look at what was done to me. Don't look away, you know.

[SH]: 1:00:45
Oh yeah, the Giselle Pelicot, that was the case in France where her husband basically led every man in the area to rape her.

[CG]: She had 70 rapists and, and she had to fight. She had to fight to make it public, and they assumed she would not want the public to see the videos. And she's like, no, I do. And she really, and you're, you're thinking, she's the victim. She should have this call, but she had to fight very, very hard for those videos to be seen by the public. And that was what really changed. Like she said, shame changes sides, and like Madam Restell was very clear for way back in the day, shame. She was not ashamed of what she did. Everyone else should be ashamed of what they put women through. And I want to write a play that really did that. I mean, it doesn't have Lesbians in it, but I feel like Restell was she was like Rita Star Pattern, she runs out on that plaza where nobody else will go.

[SH]: Have you already had it performed?

[CG]: Never. I'm having it privately for the first time in two weeks in my living room, just to see what I got. But in anticipation this week, I bought a steamer trunk from 1910 which is how they move the bodies in and out. And I thought, I don't have it. I don't have a producer. I don't have any, but I just thought, I'm going to buy this steamer trunk, and it's huge, and I'm going to trip over it in my living room, and it's going to make me produce the play. It's an act of faith. It's like, that's my arc in the desert. I bought the goddamn steamer trunk.

[SH]: Well, it sounds fascinating. I would be interested in seeing that as well. I know it's been about an hour. I don't want to exhaust you. And I'm sure if you wanted to do this kind of thing again, Mev would be happy to host another one, but I'm conscious of if I don't want to tire you out.

[CG]: Or why don't you? Why don't you—now your name is Seth, right? Or Heather?

[SH]: Sean Heather. Sean Heather, yeah, so my first name is Sean Heather as a unit, and there's a really long story of my own weird journey to that name. But Sean Heather, my parents actually called me Heather, but everybody else calls me Sean Heather, so it is sort of me acknowledging both my feminine and my masculine halves. And it's a really long story, but anyway--

[CG]: Well, I'd love to hear it sometime, maybe our next interview, but I was going to say Sean Heather, why don't you put together a reading starring yourself in one of my plays, and we'll do it on Zoom, and I'll come on, and we'll do a Q and A after well,

[SH] That'd be lovely.

[CG] I did that with one of my plays three years ago, and I had 700 people. So again, with the theater thing, but yes, no, I'd love to do a further interview. I think you're fascinating, and I'm doing autism thing where I just start talking and can't stop, but I do want to hear your story, because the name story sounds amazing, but also your journey in theater. You know, I'd love to hear that.

SH 1:04:12
Excellent. Yeah, I'd love to tell more. I do understand chronic fatigue, because I have it too.

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Large section or transcript deleted here – general discussion between Caroline and Sean Heather about personal experiences, health journeys, future invitations to perform in plays, Sean Heather's dissertation, and possibility of future interactions and interviews.
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[SH]: Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate meeting you and talking to you.

[CG] Yeah, we'll talk to you later. All right, have a great day.