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"Truth Values: One Girl's Romp Through M.I.T.'s Male Math Maze" Presents Audiences With The Things That Really Count

by Marc Stern / IBIS Radio (Independent), Sep-21-09 **Theater**

CAMBRIDGE/Central Square - Fresh from her triumph at the New York International Fringe Festival where she won the award for Outstanding Solo Show (what would that be, a Fringe D'Or?) and extended by popular demand, Gioia (Joya) De Cari's new autobiographical play "Truth Values, One Girl's Romp Through M.I.T.'s Male Math Maze" continues through Sunday, September 27th at the **Central Square Theater** in Cambridge.

Her completion of this 10-year project was spurred on - as she mentioned recently on WMBR's "RADIO with a VIEW" - by former Harvard president and current Obama economic advisor Lawrence Summers' suggestion about a possible biological explanation of women's lack of promotion into the highest levels of the sciences. We are much the wiser and happier for her personal journey of exploration and even, sadly, its tragedies.

This wonderful show follows De Cari's trajectory from aspiring math whiz at Berkley to the actor/musician/playwright she has become. The play chronicles the daily indignities visited on women students and faculty at MIT in the 1980s but never descends to the level of a screed. Her fundamental humanity and love of the meaningful people in her life, both male and female, protects this show from becoming a caricature of political rectitude or modern-day socialist realist theater. Rather, it remains intimate, challenging, and playful.

During a recent post-performance conversation with the audience and renowned MIT biologist Nancy Hopkins, a key advocate for women in the sciences and the scholar who broke the story about Summers, and Michael Sipser, Chair of Course 18, (the Math Department) Di Cari nails the Institute and the discipline's culture with a vengeance, but does so without vengefulness.

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De Cari's journey is, by turns, full of humor, sadness, anger, intellectual stultification, and intellectual ecstasy. She is a prankster fortunate enough to have some mentors who appreciate her puckishness. She arrives at MIT to find mostly male faculty and students fundamentally incapable of understanding why a woman would want to be an academic mathematician.

'Why go through the grief, when you're just going to leave to become a mom?' And the grief is a part of the work for all, not just women, as graduate students and faculty subordinate their lives to obsessive disciplinary immersion 24/7. The few women students in the program are equally wary of an interloper who does not dress in grad-student drag until they come to understand the language of resistance embedded in her sartorial choices.

Still, she thrives over time, finding a caring advisor (not all are so lucky, of course) and an interesting question to work on for her PhD dissertation until dissatisfaction with the loneliness of the long-distance academician and a personal tragedy set in motion a reevaluation of her chosen career goals. Her courage in leaving academic life, (no, this is not a spoiler) is one of the play's most inspiring moments. The play considers why she leaves and what she's leaving in an honest and thoughtful manner.

Although gender and the issues of women in math and the sciences is a part of the question, the play makes clear that that is not the only issue.

"Truth Values" takes place on a bare stage save a chair and small table. Lighting changes announce and follow the action, but blocking left Ms. De Cari 'in the dark' or heavy shadows for moments. Similarly the sparseness of the stage produced a slight echo or tininess in the long theater and being seated stage left meant I sometimes had problems picking up sentences directed to the center stage audience.

But the play's the thing here, and I wonder whether the play really allows for 'translation' into a work performed by anyone other than De Cari. She charmingly morphs from individual-to-individual and gender-to-gender with seamless grace and ease. She shocks with her big and beautiful voice when it's least expected and crawls, capers, and strides about the stage with force and meaningful élan.

Surprisingly when we spoke on the radio show, she seemed unsure of whether this play was well suited to female adolescent math geeks, say 13-year olds or up. While most adolescents would not appreciate the journey through academia, I think it a fine entry for those members of the math and science clubs of the world who see themselves plotting their career paths now. The play isn't meant for them, of course, but it provides them with a look into the real world of academic work, issues of gender in this

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work, and the imperative to make decisions about one's future and career that genuinely reflect your intellect and your emotions. The elegance of the answer and the "eureka" moment's exquisite joy, she reminds us, may not be enough to carry us forward in the face of the real costs and disadvantages embedded in our professions.

Interestingly, she continues to work in the medium of the one-woman show in much the same way academics usually work independently; if not entirely alone.

"Truth Values, One Girl's Romp Through M.I.T.'s Male Math Maze " with Gioia De Cari's has been extended through September 27th, running on Thursday (7:30pm), Friday and Saturday (8:00pm) and Sunday (2:00pm) at the Central Square Theater in Cambridge.

Now in its second season as a venue for new and interesting work and subsidized in part by MIT itself, it is fair to say that the theater made a fine choice in hosting this insightful, emotional, and exciting show.

*Professor Marc Stern, Chair of the History Department at Bentley University in Waltham, MA, co-produces and hosts "RADIO with a VIEW," Sunday mornings 10am-12noon on **WMBR, Cambridge.***

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