

VENUS THEATRE

ROCK *the* LINE

September 15, 2016

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Venus Theatre presents Rock the Line by Kathleen Warnock

Directed by Deborah Randall

Featuring: Rebecca Herron, Myrrh Cauthen, Amy Rhodes, Tamioka Chavis, Lida Benson,
Deborah Randall and Patrick Gorirossi

September 15 - October 9, 2016

Thursday, Fridays, and Saturdays at 8PM and Sunday at 3PM

Dear Member of the Press:

Thanks so much for coming out to Venus. I hope you enjoy Rock the Line by Kathleen Warnock.

This show is for everyone who never fit it in and has dreamed of finding a tribe of their own. For the introvert and the oddball and the kid who isn't like her peers.

We celebrate blue collar women and men through a big love for Rock-n-Roll.

Kathleen has followed Joan Jett around the globe for a decade and is a self-proclaimed Jetthead.

I'm so glad to welcome you into the house-that-love-built for this, our 57th woman-empowering play.

ENJOY!

All Best,
Deborah Randall
Venus Theatre

ACTORS

REBECCA HERRON (Nancy) Past Venus shows include several readings at the Kennedy Center's Page-to-Stage (including this show) and some favorite Play Shack productions were *Looking for the Pony* and *Helen of Sparta*. Around the DC area she's done industrial, voiceover, TV and plenty of other theatre work, garnering a Helen Hayes nomination and several Best Acting and Best Ensemble awards at various film festivals. She holds a BFA in Theatre Performance from the University of Miami.

MYRRH CAUTHEN (Lucy) is an actress, songwriter/singer, producer, director, artistic director, music programmer (WPFW), and educator. I don't know what I want to be when I grow up. Delighted to be working with Venus!

AMY RHODES (Candy File) has most recently been seen on the Venus stage as The Woman (and Interviewers) in *Garbage Kids*, a silent Samurai in *We are Samurai*, Boomer in *Ding!*, and in various roles in *731 DeGraw Street Brooklyn*. Additionally, she played the roles of The Girl in *The Stenographer* and Findabair in *Daughters of Molly Maguire* (also with Venus). Amy trained in Theatre at UMBC.

TAMIEKA CHAVIS (Joanne) A DC area actor, Tamiaka Chavis is honored and excited to be rockin' out with an amazing ensemble of talented actors! Some of Tamiaka's favorite credits include Timon in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* (Off the Quill), Second Witch/et al in *Macbeth* (Chesapeake Shakespeare Company), Mother Earth in *Mother Earth & Me* (Smithsonian's Discovery Theater), Mary Swanson in *Middletown* (NextStop Theatre), Rosie/Pam/Annie/Amanda in *Love, Loss, and What I Wore* (NextStop Theatre), Conner in *Bones In Whispers* (Longacre Lea), Lizzy in *The Word and The Wasteland* (Source Festival), Mother Courage in *Mother Courage and Her Children* (dog & pony dc). Tamiaka has appeared on television for HBO, Investigation Discovery, and DCTV, as well as in commercials, industrials, and independent films. She is also a teaching artist with Discovery Theater's Tools of Discovery and Arts on the Horizon. Tamiaka is a proud graduate of the National Conservatory of Dramatic Arts. www.youtube.com/user/tamiekachavis/videos

LIDA MARIA BENSON (Kelly) credits include, *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp* (upcoming, Adventure Theatre MTC), *Shelter* (staged reading, Arena Stage), *Tribes* (Vermont Stage Company), *Seminar* (Middlebury Actors Workshop), *The Three Musketeers* (Chesapeake Shakespeare Company), Raver n00b in *The Rave Scenes* (Capital Fringe). *Sketch Comedy: Draw Me Like One of Your French Girls* (The PIT), *Chittenango* (Off-Center), *Rest in Peace*, *Norma Jean* (Off-Center). DC native, University of Vermont alumna. www.lidabenson.com

DEBORAH RANDALL (Leslie) is thrilled to be on the boards three times in a row this year. It's unheard of. This show closes the night before her 50th birthday and she thought that after producing for 16 years she would give herself the gift of shows 55, 56, and 57. Deb thanks the amazing artists that fill the house-that-love-built for making this all appear. She sends out love to her husband Alan and to her best girl Jasmine.

PATRICK GORIOSSI (Mickey) This is Patrick's third show with Venus Theatre, his previous shows were *We are Samurai* (Rocky) and *Raw* (Chuck). He also recently directed *An Act of the Imagination* with Bowie Community Theatre, and Assistant Directed *The 39 Steps* with The Collaborative Theatre. Patrick also serves on the Board of Directors for Parlor Room Theater Company.

PLAYWRIGHT & DIRECTOR

KATHLEEN WARNOCK (Playwright) is delighted to return to Venus, which previously produced her *Grieving for Genevieve*, and gave *Rock the Line* a reading last fall at the Kennedy Center. A UMBC graduate, Kathleen is a NYC-based playwright, whose work has been seen in New York, London, Ireland (Dublin and Georgia), and regionally. Recent work: *Strivers*, *Astoria Stories*, *APAC*, NYC; *The Further Adventures of...* (TOSOS, NYC and International Dublin Gay Theatre Festival); *Julie Andrews is the Devil*, Women's International Theater Festival, Provincetown. Hostess of the *Drunken! Careening! Writers!* reading series (since 2004). Ambassador of Love for North America for the International Dublin Gay Theatre Festival. Member of the Dramatists Guild.

DEBORAH RANDALL (Producer/Director) is the founder and visionary behind Venus Theatre. Born in Washington, DC, and raised in Prince George's County, she began directing as a student and president of the Drama Club at Prince Georges Community College. Her first paid acting gig was at Wild World Theme Park in 1986. She later went on to graduate cum laude from UMBC under the guidance of Xerxes Mehta, Wendy Salkind, Sam McCready, Alan Kriezenbeck, and Alice Robinson. She was in Mehta's Marat/Sade at UMBC with the Maryland Stage Company and in McCready's Merry Wives of Windsor with Shakespeare on Wheels. After college, Randall worked as an actor regularly in Washington, DC, and then began performing her own monologues. She has performed four solo shows, written two, and had one published. She has also written and staged works for multiple casts. She began doing public staged readings of other living playwrights in 2002, which led to cultivating strong relationships with many writers. The works of Randall and Venus have been seen up and down the Eastern seaboard. Venus Theatre began in 1995 as an all female improv troupe called Venus Envy. Venus led Take Back the Night Marches and did improvisational games at the House of Ruth as well as other empowerment projects. In 2000, Randall founded Venus Theatre, known for immersion staging and award-winning world premiere work. In 2006 Venus dropped roots in the county where the founder grew up. Venus hopes to bring culture to the community that has given her so much.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

It is the mission of Venus Theatre to set flight to the voices of women. After producing and directing Grieving for Genevieve, I'm so proud to produce this second script by Kathleen. She is the David Rabe of feminist theatre. She gives voice to blue collar working women and men in ways we hardly see on the American stage. I find this baffling as so many of us are living paycheck to paycheck. It's an incredible opportunity to consider the Goddess of Rock and the impact of fierce and unapologetic leather clad voices of rebellion. Some people work to get in touch with our inner child while others find it useful to make contact with our inner rock star. This journey has been an affirmation of the power of art, of the courage needed to land fearless expression, and of the most essential element - trust, that allows us all to move forward. In this electronic reactive world we have taken on a play that listens, that has time, that celebrates the tribe of love. May you have yours and may we all rock the fuck on!

* Production photos and an electronic program can be located on our website
<http://www.venustheatre.org/press2016>

MISSION

It is the mission of Venus Theatre to set flight to the voices of women and children with theatre for a lifetime. We try to never produce the same play twice and have a deep belief that our adventurous audiences, who are always ready for a daring journey, will keep coming back to see what we're up to next. As of December 2014, Venus Theatre produced 50 plays that empowered women. Each year, Venus receives about 200 play submissions and chooses four to produce in the calendar year ahead. Each production gets 20 performances. Venus offers a summer camp for children for one week in June or July each year. Venus will continue to produce four new plays that empower women in the calendar years ahead as well as expanding our educational and community outreach.

OUR STORY

In 2000, Venus Theatre began her journey to become an incorporated 501c3. In the years prior exploration occurred under the title Venus Envy and the company led workshops at the House of Ruth and Take Back the Night marches on college campus' in the DC/Baltimore Region.

Founder, Deborah Randall, began as an actor performing four different solo shows: All She Cares About is the Yankees (John Ford Noonan, published by Samuel French. ISBN: 0573632065), How She Played the Game (Cynthia Cooper, published by Brooklyn Publishers, LLC. ISBN:1600031285), Til It Hurts (Deborah Randall, unpublished), Molly Daughter (Deborah Randall, published in Anthracite! An Anthology and distributed through Chicago University Press. ISBN: 9781589661172).

The desire to return to collaboration became important and Deb started exploring full-length plays and readings. Out of these staged readings, full productions began to arise. During this time, Deb was also a Theatre Educator through the Helen Hayes Legacy Project for several years.

After producing in various spaces throughout Washington, DC, Baltimore, MD, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, a new need arose. Inspired by Virginia Woolf's, A Room of One's Own, a new journey began to find a storefront space that could be transformed into a black box. In 2006, the company moved into an old Chinese Restaurant on C Street. During the first few years in residence, a lot of family programming was launched with hopes of integrating into the neighborhood on a developmental level. This period was a critical time of development for Venus. But, just like in the earlier journey, the solo work came back, readings began to take place in the space, and Venus was back to producing cutting edge new theatrical works that captured empowering and sometimes harrowing journeys of women.

Fifteen years later and we are still empowering women. Venus now has a very strong awareness of the importance of sustainable creativity. We recycle set pieces, borrow where we can avoid building, and overall want to keep a clean green footprint when it comes to women in theatre.



With Ding. Or Bye Bye Dad Venus is breaking boundaries once again with their edgy and evocative new work. A show like this will not be found anywhere else in the DC area. It's an emotionally inspiring piece of theatre at its finest.

— DC Metro Theatre Arts



ROCK
The
LINE

Venus is a 501c3 nonprofit organization committed to setting flight to the voices of women with theatre for a lifetime. Venus is the only woman run theatre company in the state of Maryland and among the longest running women's theatre's on the globe.



Venus Theatre

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ROVING
RETRIEVER!

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yourself with your copy
of UMBC Magazine,
and we'll share it on
our Facebook page!

Kathleen Warnock '80, interdisciplinary studies, has pursued a successful career as a playwright – including a production of one of her newest plays, *Grieving for Genevieve*, at Venus Theatre in Laurel this summer. She's taken many roads to get there – sports journalist, travel editor, game show contestant – and profited greatly from her passions for rock'n'roll, classical literature and lesbian erotica.

Warnock says there is a method to her mercurial ways: "I constantly re-evaluate my priorities by asking, 'Is it worth it to me to continue to do this?' and I am constantly shifting my load."

Take *Grieving for Genevieve*, which won the John Golden Award for Excellence in Playwriting in 2005 and was selected by **Deborah Randall '94, theatre**, artistic director at Venus Theatre and a 2012 recipient of UMBC's Alumna of the Year Award, for the theatre's 2013 season. The play grew out of a writing exercise given to the playwright by her mentor, American Academy of Arts and Letters Award-winning playwright Tina Howe, and Warnock produced the play herself at New York's Midtown International Theatre Festival with

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part of her \$50,000 winnings from the game show, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*. (Warnock has also appeared on *Jeopardy* and *Cash Cab*, and quips that game shows are “the new arts funding.”)

The play explores a reunion of three sisters (a guitar tech, a rock singer/seamstress, and a nun) with their mother, a chain-smoking, retired nurse, in Baltimore’s Hamilton neighborhood. It’s a situation Warnock dubs “loosely autobiographical,” observing that her mother is a chain smoker, her sister worked her way through nursing school making costumes for strippers, and her wife, Donna Bungo, is a former nun.

“There’s something incredibly ‘Baltimore’ about this play which drew me in,” says Randall, who also appears as an actor in the play. “It treats siblinghood and motherhood with voice that has an extreme sense of honesty and out of this sense comes something unapologetically funny.”

Warnock’s path as a writer began in high school, covering sports for the school newspaper. “When I arrived at UMBC,” she continues, “I went straight to the *The Retriever* to find out if they had any openings.” She ended up as *The Retriever*’s sports editor for two years and its editor-in-chief for a year, while also taking an internship on the sports copy desk at the now-defunct *Baltimore News American*. “I got the roots of what I do at UMBC,” she says.

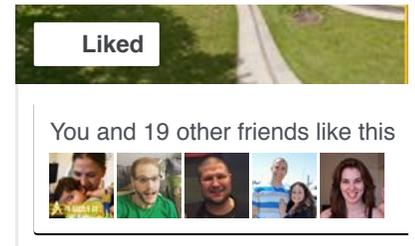
Warnock also studied ancient Greek for four years at UMBC as well, and she credits a trip to Europe with ancient studies professors **Jay Freyman** and **Walter K. Sherwin** for opening her eyes to the world and to words: “I had learned so much about structure and language from them and this was my first trip abroad. It whetted my appetite for more.”

Warnock also caught the theatre bug during her time in Baltimore. “Back in those days,” she reminisces, “CENTERSTAGE gave away tickets at a significant discount for anyone willing to watch the shows from the aisle steps... It was great. I saw F. Murray Abraham as Cyrano sitting on those steps!”

Warnock moved to New York City in 1984 and quickly found her way to acting classes and a job working for the off-Broadway Mirror Repertory Company. She also wrote her first play, *To The Top*, in New York, taking a scandal involving a women’s basketball team that erupted during her first post-graduation job as a sportswriter in South Carolina as inspiration.



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Warnock recalls that the hoops controversy she covered “contained the traditional arc of classic tragedy” and *To the Top* won South Carolina’s Trustus Theatre Annual Playwrights’ Festival – a national contest culminating in the professional world premiere of the winning play. (The play also eventually appeared under the imprint of theatrical publisher Samuel French.)

New York was also where Warnock met Tina Howe (who became a longtime friend and “guardian angel”) while working at the West Side YMCA Writer’s Voice writing programs, and it was during her time in Howe’s playwriting workshop at Hunter College that Warnock started the “En Avant” playwrights’ group.

With Howe’s assistance, En Avant secured funding and space at Hunter to produce three nights of one-act plays – and eventually morphed into the influential “En Avant Playwrights” online message board, which maintains a constantly updated listing of submission opportunities and has helped many playwrights find homes and awards for their work. Warnock adds that over the eleven years she has run En Avant, the list has prodded her to circulate her own work to the many festivals where it has appeared.

Warnock and Randall also have bonded over their love of rocker Joan Jett, and the playwright is a self-confessed “Jetthead” who’s followed the legendary rocker around the world. Another one of her plays, *Rock the Line*, was inspired by her fellow Joan Jett fans and produced by New York’s Emerging Artists Theatre in 2006 – and won the Robert Chesley Award for Lesbian and Gay Playwriting.

That “10 years of following Joan Jett” to various global locales also helped Warnock land her “day job” editing travel guides, first for IDG/Hungry Minds, then for John Wiley & Sons (publishers of Frommer’s travel guides) and now for web information giant Google, where she is a senior editor.

And when playwriting and the day job don’t have call on Warnock’s attention, she also hosts a monthly reading series, *Drunken! Careening! Writers!* at the New York literary bar KGB and edits the annual *Best Lesbian Erotica* series published by Cleis Press. It is no wonder she has titled her blog *Too Many Hats!*

– Sara Barker

Kathleen Warnock’s Grieving for Genevieve will play at Venus Theatre in Laurel from June 6 to 30. For more details, go to www.venustheatre.org

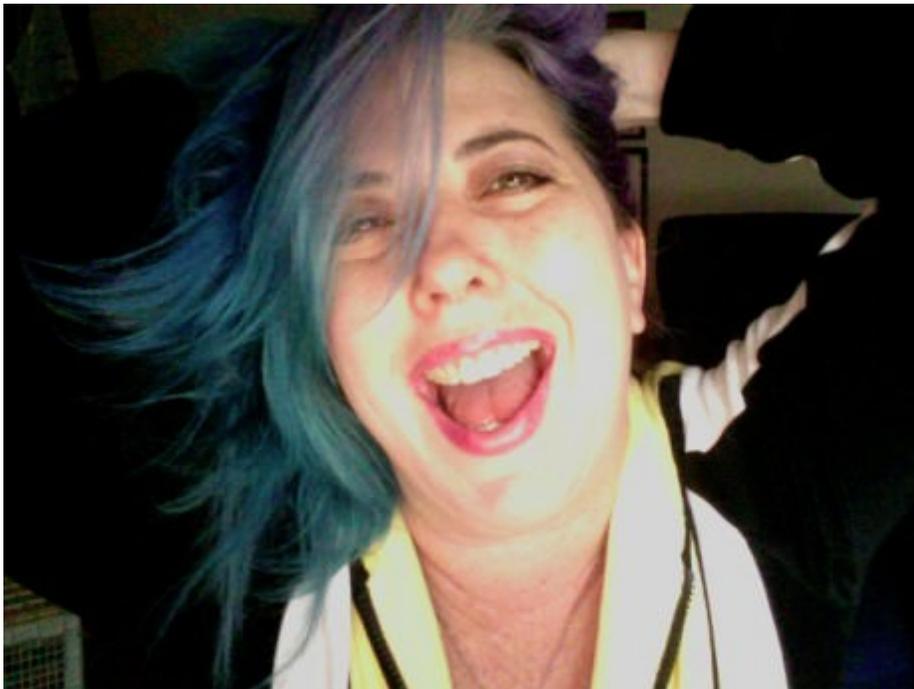
Artistically Speaking: Part One: An Interview with Venus Theatre's Deborah Randall by Cate Brewer

dcmetrotheaterarts.com/2013/12/17/artistically-speaking-part-one-an-interview-with-venus-theatres-deborah-randall/

Cate Brewer

12/17/2013

Deborah Randall is the founder of [Venus Theatre](#). Deb has been producing and performing around the DC area professionally since 1985. In 2012, Deb was the recipient of the Alumna of the Year Award for Visual and Performing Arts at UMBC, Director of the Year award for *Devil Dog Six*, and [Best Actress in a Play in 2012](#) for [Punk Rock Mom](#) on [DCMetroTheaterArts](#). Some of her directing credits include: Three *Bad Girl* New Play Festivals in the summers of 2002, 2003, and 2004. *Cigarettes and Moby Dick* in the Warehouse Theatre Attic (*Curve Magazine* Play of the Year Award 2005), *Ugly Ducklings* at the Warehouse Next Door (*Curve Magazine* Play of the Year Award 2004, nominated for an American Theatre Critics Award), *The Molly Project* (also written by Deb) at various venues and now published in an anthology entitled *Anthracite!*



Deborah Randall.

As a performer Deb has worked in film and television and been seen on various DC stages. She has performed four solo shows, and toured two of them on the East Coast. At the Play Shack Deb has produced 46 scripts in seven years on C Street in Laurel, MD. The mayor and city council rezoned the area as an arts district and construction across the street is underway for C Street Flats. This will include 140 loft-housing units and increase the foot traffic and visibility of Venus Theatre Companies storefront sometime in 2014/2015.

Cate: How has the culture changed for women in the Washington area theatre from 1985 to now? What has improved? What has gotten more difficult?

Deb: Over the years a lot has changed. Almost everything. In the 80s and 90s you could come upon independent work all over the city. Today, there's very little done that's not under some larger umbrella. There were a lot of spaces left "in transition" so access was fairly abundant. Ideas were kind of popping. The 90s into the 2000s we saw storefronts drop roots, especially on 14th Street. The Studio Theatre was a corner storefront with an office maze upstairs. The Source

Theatre was very similar; the stairway to get up to the administrative offices was a narrow and almost hidden thing. The entrance was through an alley. and Woolly was in the bowling alley basement with pillars in odd spaces. This cluster kind of represented what theatre can really do for me. It can break through the concrete floor, into the basement of a preexisting building and yield brave and risk taking work. As Douglas Development signs appeared more and more throughout the city the climate slowly changed.

I remember talking to HUD about that Wonderbread factory and taking polaroids all over the city of places I may land my company. I had no idea that performing in an upstairs corner of a bookstore in DuPont Circle, or in the back of 1409 Playbill, or for so long down the alley and into DCAC, or in every nook and cranny in the Warehouse would someday be something I looked back on with a kind of sentimentality. Then, these spaces that were affordable/accessible/incentivized were disappearing. So the back of bars became more popular. [MetroStage](#) was a great host. I remember hearing stories of baby monitors used as back stage warning speakers.

In 1999, I attended this forum at the National Museum for Women in the Arts. It was a panel of female directors speaking on their careers: [Joy Zinoman](#), [Molly Smith](#), [Catherine Flye](#), and others. It was interesting how intellectual and formalized the theatre world was becoming. That was a critical moment for me because I began Venus officially after my experience at that forum.

Each time we structure, you know, we both lose and gain something. When I look around now and see chasm between the campus and the world it's a bit jolting. Talking to Freeman Hrbrowski about it over dinner for the awards ceremony was really interesting. Seeing the place I trained now so heavily funded and speaking to the students has been a real gift. It's difficult to summarize. I'd just say there's value in being scrappy. But, that still needs to be funded. At that Forum Ms. Flye said, "Theatres are made of people, not bricks and mortar." And, I've been thinking about that a lot lately. It's essential to have the key to the 'Room of One's Own', but it's also essential to invest in the artistry over the ego. And, that's something that I've been observing over the decades.

We often hear the repeated rhetoric that theatre is dying as an art form in America. Do you believe that? If so, what do you think can or should be done to restructure the models currently used in most regional theatres?

Wow, Cate! That's a gigantic question. I wish I had the answer in terms of business model restructure. But in terms of art, no. I believe that there is a human need for it that goes back to the beginning of our collective experience. Because we need to connect, we need this vehicle of empathy; we need to process on a communal level. As artists we must create; as an audience, we must take the journey. I believe in the power of that immediacy and intimacy and I am certain that no other form can replicate it, much as they may try. Because what I do at Venus really does take much of my energy.

I've just had my first weekend off in five months and had the great pleasure to spend it sitting through the non-equity auditions. I really don't have the information to speak on how others should run their businesses. But, they are businesses, and they have to survive. So, as the culture and the world changes, theatre structure must (I think) find the pliability to shift with the times. For me, theatre lives in the soul of the artisans so it won't ever die in terms of that. But, I do think there is a missing language.

Looking at what Peter Brooks says in *A Empty Space: A Book About the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate* that one day there will be one theatre ticket worth millions of dollars and one person sitting in the audience to watch the show, I think he had his finger on the pulse of it. As commerce, it's really tricky, and that's not what I want to do. So, there's the missing language. I think that theatre is so many different things, and when it gets whittled down to one narrow definition then it may go extinct, but that's a matter of perception really. We are very politically correct. We don't want to insult or hurt anyone's feelings. And, that is not interesting theatrically. So, the safe stuff needs to die, in my opinion, because it's just too dull to live.

I miss the understanding we used to have about the importance of the black box and the storefront, the innovation that came with that. You had to be on board with a true visionary. Otherwise it went flat. Now, we have so much technology. Venus is run off of two laptops now and we have full light, sound, and video capability. This is great. But, not having it

forced me into see the work in terms of its own merit. I think we rush to fix things and sometimes they aren't broken, and sometimes they are. But, becoming fixers is different than taking risks and sometimes intentionally breaking a convention. If anything will kill us it will be the ego of kindness that prevents the talent of the boundary pushers from being known.

How has your vision for Venus changed since you founded it – both the positive and negative changes?

There has been a fairly consistent movement from idealistic to pragmatic to nurturing in terms of my own approach to the vision, which has remained the same.

On a positive note, we've grown close to a hundred scripts and put hundreds of actors on stage. Negatively speaking, learning to guide and manage artists is a long journey. The Venus experience reflects the spaces and climates I've been dwelling in over the years as much as it's simply a result of growing up. Growth is a choice, by the way. You know, you come out of the educational institution and you feel these tools are just waiting for you. For me, I expected without question a certain level of access and understanding, and it took about a decade to realize that some people simply didn't know what the hell I was talking about or doing. The established people really didn't care what I was doing because they were out to get theirs, and this sense of mentor apprentice only existed for me in educational institutions.

Then came the pragmatic phase. I remember having yard sales to pay rent and paying for space by the hour, \$20 per hour. I remember rehearsing for free in the stacks rooms of libraries. Because there was no slack you know, everything was measured for me. I quite literally had to pay for every minute so if someone were 5 minutes late more than once, without calling, I likely would cut him or her out for wasting my time. Overall, there was just a wide space for misunderstanding because I had not accessed the language to describe what I was building. Without knowing it, I was operating out of a place of entitlement, and that is always a miserable experience. I had to find my own empowerment if there was any chance of empowering anyone else.

I think reaching the nurturing stage has come with having our own storefront space, which was a result of integrating decades of lessons. It's a home base. And people feel that energy. Many artists say it feels like home. And visitors sort of claim it as their discovery. And that's been a really beautiful experience. I think I can track the shifts with the decades. Going into my 20s – in the 80s and 90s – I romanticized the vision. I wanted to change the whole world. And, that left me sometimes bullied, sometimes uplifted. I think in my 30s – in the 90s and 2000s – I started to grow a backbone and had to learn retrospectively how to temper that. I once fired an actor on the sidewalk and as she was crying asked for her script back. When an actor was trapped in a bathroom because of a broken door lock, I kicked the door in. When a director continued to go backstage and give notes as we were opening, I banned her not only from the theatre, but also from the street. So, 20s to 30s were quite a swing for me. Looking back I see how intense and inappropriate my actions were at times. At the time I was ruled by passion and that passion fueled everything. I mean, it was hard to form a sentence without getting worked up into a lather. And if you were going to compromise my work or my people, I was going to compromise you.

Once I got into a more permanent space and put lots more work under my belt, in my 40's something shifted. For the first time in my life, and this is the truth, I felt like I was home. The vision to be diligent about the work has never changed, but theatre has taught me a lot. I still cut an actor's stipend in half because she was late for call four shows in a row and then she threatened to sue me. I was willing to go the distance. I think I've found a balance and I think the big realization was that in order to fulfill the mission of empowering women I had to BE empowered myself. So the creative teams and every single person that touches the work is essential. The question now always goes to entitlement vs. empowerment. And the litmus test is



Deborah Randall (Jamie) in 'Punk Rock Mom.' Photo by Curtis Jordan.

that people who are entitled begin sentences with, “I have to...” and people who are empowered begin sentences with, “I get to.” It’s about the energy in the room and now that I have a room I’ve been able to invest in that.

You know, building a theatre company takes a lot. And, when you are constantly reinventing the wheel by shifting from one space to another you are backsliding to begin again. That builds muscles of endurance but the frustration also builds. The same goes for funding. When I see the small black boxes of a few decades ago now standing tall as the dominant structures, I feel happy for them and resentful that those incentives are not in place for my generation of theatre builders, men, and women.

If you could somehow change the current theatre community for women for the better – what would you do?

During the month of December I’m working on writing a piece that will put into terms what it is that I am building. We need to shift the language. Without that we are trying on age-old polyester bell-bottoms and wanting to talk about contemporary fashion. You know, it’s incompatible. It doesn’t work. As women in theatre we are essentially small minority business owners. And that’s very different than theatre corporations. Wrapping our brains around that is essential because it’s very much akin to living in a corporate world where there is an expectation of competing with the corporate car service, while trying to keep our old clunker on the road. They are quite different animals. We’re always hearing about small business being the backbone of America. That’s what independent theatre is to the corporate theatre model. And, they’d just as soon crush it and renovate their two-year-old structure as drop a dime in the small business vending machine of survival. I’d like that to be understood very clearly and without sexist interpretation painting women as being emotional over this.

Someone once told me that it was okay that I went without insurance and much of a living wage because I was “living my dream”.. I say, “Tell that to the mortgage company when the bill is due or my tires when they go flat or the Dr. bill dare I have any kind of ailment.” As women, we need to figure out how to stop paying our way with cell tissue. You know, we sacrifice too much. We need to talk numbers and ask for what we are worth. And we do, often times. The problem is it continues to fall on deaf ears. There’s nowhere to put what we are saying. No true receptacle. So we have to create our own models and build our own structure – build our own audiences and believe in our own knowledge rooted in our own experiences. Even critical analysis after a work is (miraculously) produced is sometimes rife with misunderstanding over what the show was supposed to be. Because the language is still largely absent.

I’ll add some advice too: I’ve spent years being annoyed by people who take an idea of mine and then create some derivative watered-down version while trying to push in front of me in some strange perceived line. Usually, it’s another woman doing this. I’ve had all kinds of reactions to this over the years. But, I would advise anyone in my position to engage in the race. I mean, SPRINT! I mean, give them something to steal, something really pure to imitate, and keep running like hell, because we cannot have enough women on stage. We can’t. It’s really not a contest. And, if these people who take on my model and then experience the lesson in reality that comes with this life can stay standing... more power to them! This perceived line of status is a red herring to keep us divided and powerless. And if we insist on putting strong women on stage long enough; if there are enough of us who can somehow find a way to remain standing; if we collectively add pressure the effing glass ceiling; if we evade the victim mentality while understanding the sacrifices must be made but cannot be permanent, then we will create a whole new industry. Creating that new industry is the absolutely only way to truly move forward – as far as I’m concerned.

At UMBC I was invited back to speak as an entrepreneur, and that felt really wonderful. I think that as opportunities have vanished, new ones have arisen, and I want to frame that based on 30 years of experience as a female theatre founder. We get to build whatever we want, you know? I want to put more diverse women on stage, and I want to not care if this personality validates it or that publication deems it real. I want to create on such a level that the walls shake and the earth moves and everybody starts to dance a little and they don’t care why. I want to believe that as my friend Carolyn Gage says the work IS the reward. I believe this will happen by opening up our respective channels of creativity to some connection to our own truth and then investing in technique and craft until it’s no longer detectable. I believe theatre is alchemy and for women, that it is here to tell us that we are beautiful, and powerful, and intelligent, and sexier with every year.

What are some advantages for female Artistic Directors who are working in Washington, and what are some disadvantages?

The advantages with the 'good old boys club' is if you show enough leg and cleavage they'll pay attention to you, which is also exactly the disadvantage because they aren't really listening. So, what's the point outside of an exercise in amping up an insecure ego? It is about as far away from being about the art as anything could possibly be. There are more and more of us, and we are supported by wonderful friends and family who love us and believe in us. And, I think there's power in that. For me, I've produced work that people sometimes remember decades later. And that's where the power lives. In DOING the work. How to bring it to the surface remains the battle. The only thing to do is change the paradigm. We are standing on the shoulders of giants. We need to honor them and their work. We need to lose the collective amnesia fueled by some engrained conditioned legacy of self-hatred and empower ourselves to get far far away from the entitlement mindset. It's a process and it takes time. We have to love ourselves unconditionally. We have to love our work collectively and grow into the women we were born to be because now we can. Many died so that we could have this opportunity, and it's nothing to take lightly.



Deborah Randall.

Are you proud to be a female Artistic Director? Do you think that fact strongly influences your season selection and mission statement?

Without a doubt. I don't know what else I would do, I mean if I were a male or a transgendered person I think I would still do the same work. I don't think we should focus so much on what's behind the zipper...said my 20 and 30 year-old self. But today, I think bringing the female perspective into a tangible language is absolutely critical. I had an incident during a show this year where I attempted to explain to a male actor that 80% of women are survivors, so, that if he were to overplay his role to amp up the anger, not only is it bad acting – but it actually will trigger people.

This was a difficult experience for me. I had to come out of my artistic role and really try to find a way to speak for the majority of women to a man who brought a rape energy onto my stage that he wasn't even aware of. There were a lot of emotions to sift through in doing this, the least of which was coming to terms with the fact that I had to have the conversation...AGAIN...after a lifetime of integrating. It brought up a lot of frustration, fury, feelings of inequity. Looking back, I think it was a gift, because people who haven't lived it usually don't know it. Those of us who are lucky enough to still be standing also have the ability to express. And what theatre does, unlike anything else in the world, is build the

empathy muscle. And, that's what I get to do with my career – build empathy muscles by doing everything in my power to create strong and compelling work.

If you could tell potential audiences anything about Venus, what would it be?

Well, by the summer of 2014 Venus Theatre will have produced more shows on C Street than I will have walked years on this planet. We will close 2014 with our 50th script, so this is not a startup, and it's not the idea of random groups of people. This company has a vision. We only seat 30 people and our lobby is called the Shacky Chic Boutique. It features 7 female artisans and their handmade upcycled one-of-a-kind wares. Venus has produced writers from all over the world. It's a place to visit if you are an adventurer, if you want to experience theatrical risk-taking, and if you believe that love wins. Always.

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