



“The Shot” Reveals Historic Washington Post CEO Katharine Graham's Harrowing History

Transcript

Story by Maddie Orton

[MUSIC: “A Little Wiggle”]

MADDIE ORTON, HOST (00:02):

I'm Maddie Orton, and you're listening to “The Jersey Arts Podcast.”

During her tenure as President of The Washington Post, Katherine Graham published the Pentagon Papers, ran the Watergate story and served as the first female CEO of a Fortune 500 company—but her journey to career success was a traumatic one.

Robin Gerber’s play “The Shot”, coming to New Jersey Repertory Company April 6th through 23rd, reveals the events that led to Katherine taking the helm. The Post was passed down from her father to her husband, Philip Graham, who abused and belittled her, and at the age of 48, Philip committed suicide. Katherine found herself in the position of trying to save her family’s legacy—and in Gerber’s play, wondering how life led her to this moment.

It was my pleasure to speak with playwright Robin Gerber, director slash dramaturg Michelle Joyner, and the play’s star, Sharon Lawrence (who you may know from “Joe Pickett,” “On Becoming a God in Central Florida,” “NYPD Blue,” “Grey’s Anatomy,” and many other film, TV and theater credits.) Please note, this conversation includes discussion of partner abuse and suicide, so please listen with care. Here’s our discussion on NJ Rep’s production of “The Shot.”

[MUSIC: “A Little Wiggle”]

Thank you so much for joining me, everybody. I'm really looking forward to talking more about the show.

Robin, let's start with you. You've had such an interesting career with a strong feminist lens, it seems, as an activist and then a lawyer on Capitol Hill, and then a union lobbyist, and eventually writing books about Eleanor Roosevelt, Ruth Handler, the founder of Mattel, and of course, Katharine Graham, who we'll be talking about today. You've also spoken live and on TV about great women leaders. So where did the idea for “The Shot” in particular come from out of all of these amazing women?

PRESENTED BY ArtPride
NEW JERSEY

Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
for the **ARTS**
arts.gov



ROBIN GERBER, PLAYWRIGHT (01:47):

Yes, I have devoted myself to women in my writing and in my life, our empowerment, and it's Women's History Month, which is such a perfect time to be talking about this. It came from the book—I did write this book about Katharine Graham and her leadership. It's a leadership focused biography. And after I wrote it, I thought I just felt I hadn't truly explored that transformational moment in her life when her husband shoots himself and then she takes over The Washington Post newspaper. And knowing that there had been abuse in her life with him, I thought, 'Well, I just didn't delve into it deeply enough.'

I didn't know very much, myself, about what suffering from abuse would be like. So I set out to do it in a different form, a form I'd never done before, which is a play. And that was how I came to "The Shot." And it allowed me to, first of all, learn more about the issue, learn more about her in the context of being a woman who suffered from abuse. And then luckily, I found two wonderful partners who also understood and wanted to explore that with me.

MADDIE ORTON (03:01):

And without giving too much away. Can you sort of walk us through what the idea of "The Shot" is, what you're covering in the show?

ROBIN GERBER, PLAYWRIGHT (03:09):

Yes, well, I would call it a memory play. It's a one-woman show. And Sharon Lawrence, of course, the wonderful Sharon Lawrence plays Katharine Graham, and she is exploring her life and that question of—that we all have – 'How did I get here? How did this happen? And who am I after everything changed?'

MADDIE ORTON (3:33):

Sharon, you play the role of Katherine. What drew you to the story?

SHARON LAWRENCE, "KATHERINE GRAHAM" (3:38):

Robin approached me at a Women In Film event that we were both volunteering for. I had run Women and Film's Foundation for years, and Robin's first question to me was the question, 'Did I know who Katharine Graham was?' And my degree was in journalism. And yes, I did. And she told me not that many people that I'd be surprised how many people didn't.

And what I also recognized from her is, I may know who Katharine Graham is, but I didn't know this aspect of her life. And by 'this', I mean the subject that "The Shot" covers—the abuse and the resurrection from that, the resilience in spite of such challenging circumstances in a woman that had such power and privilege.

She asked if I'd read it. I said, 'Yes, I would,' because that's the yesterday that I always want to give and do. And it was so good. And being part of a play that's in its nascent stages, the beginning is is, is a real thrill. It's a challenge. But I have great respect for the importance of a true care and development. And

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).





then we were partnered with Michelle Joyner, who is not only somebody who has been an actor, and is a writer, but is also a wonderful dramaturge. And that's what what we needed for that next step is to pull it apart. I love, of course, playing the role, but it's it's everything about it. It is the exploration. It is the people that we have brought into this circle throughout these five years that we've been working on it. And that has been such a great reward because we're also taking it to communities that we can help support, domestic violence organizations, and just opening up a conversation about this topic, which is ancient and ongoing.

MADDIE ORTON (5:40):

Yeah. And I mean, Sharon, you're bringing up the dramaturgical piece, which I was also wondering about. Michelle, this seems to me like a great example of a play where a dramaturg would be hugely helpful. Can you tell me a little bit about, well, first of all, what a dramaturgical role is in general, and what was your focus for this?

MICHELLE JOYNER, DIRECTOR & DRAMATURG (06:01):

I would say that with any new play, the play is really in the process of finding itself. The writer is in the process of finding the story, finding the play. They have, in this case, a wonderful subject, and a really, really good play. Robin's first draft that she—probably was her first draft, but the first draft that we saw—was in very good shape.

However, we really were starting to pull it apart to try to determine what we wanted to focus on, because you can't tell a whole life in 2 hours. And in the original and the original play, there was a lot of time jumping between Katharine Graham as the publisher that we all know and kind of visualize when we think of her and her decision to publish the Pentagon Papers and how how trepidatious she was about pulling the trigger because it could cost the paper, you know, it could cost them the paper if it didn't go right. And then flashing back to her life with Phil in her domestic life. And we ultimately decided just to scuttle the whole more contemporary story of the politics and the paper and concentrate on the domestic story. And we found that when we did that, her story became extremely universal.

I mean, not everyone can relate to someone who runs one of the most important papers in the country, if not the world, but everyone can relate to marriage. Everyone can relate to being a mother. Everyone can relate to being a daughter, and everything that is fraught and with within those relationships. And Katharine had—there was so much of a story there to tell that we just decided to focus on that. And I feel like that was part of my job is to just trying to focus Robin on and on zeroing in on the story that we wanted to tell.

MADDIE ORTON (7:54):

And from a historical perspective, what exactly was happening in Katherine's marriage early on and then

PRESENTED BY  ArtPride
NEW JERSEY

Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
for the **ARTS**
arts.gov



later when her husband did commit suicide, and then the transition into her running The Post. What was sort of the interior experience that you go through in the show?

SHARON LAWRENCE, "KATHERINE GRAHAM" (08:14):

Michelle, do you want to take that?

MICHELLE JOYNER, DIRECTOR & DRAMATURG (8:15):

Sure. So I think we really examine a lot about her childhood. And her childhood really, like all of us, really informed many of the decisions that she made later in life. And to try to get the approval of people that she loved is a really strong theme in her life, including with her husband. And, of course, as you know, as Sharon said, Phil Graham was very seductive. And the fact that, you know, he chose her, as it were, to marry, was very seductive as well.

I think there was a lot of masking of his mental illness. And he was a functioning—he was a functioning person in society. Obviously, he had a very important job, and he moved in very high ranking circles, and highly educated. And I think like a lot of mental illness, is able to mask quite a bit of it when he when she first falls in love with him. But slowly those walls are broken down.

So that's really the piece of the play of the story that the play covers is Phil kind of falling apart, that facade crumbling, and Katherine not understanding what is happening, and ultimately ends up with her having him committed, which of course is a horribly painful experience for her.

And I won't give away too much for the people who are going to see the play because it is a major twist in the story, what happens after that. But I think that her inability, like so many people with people that they love, whether it's denial, delusion, inexperience, naiveté, whatever it is, she she wasn't able—she knew something was wrong, she just didn't know what. And she wasn't getting help from anybody. Nobody talked about domestic violence. Nobody talked about mental illness. Nobody questioned people in power, especially white men in power, and neither did she.

ROBIN GERBER, PLAYWRIGHT (10:19):

She did not talk about the abuse either. And I know someone who regularly had dinner with her and who tried to speak to her about it, and she just didn't want to speak about it. So what we know about it mostly is what other people saw with their friends, saw, seeing bruises on her, seeing his behavior toward her, seeing him say nasty, very nasty things to her, you know, calling her a fat Jewish cow in front of people, that kind of thing. Really, really awful things. And also in her own autobiography, Personal History, which won the Pulitzer Prize, she does talk about it. She doesn't talk about a lot, but she does talk about him being ill, she talks about him getting increasingly violent, so we have some snippets of it in there as well.

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).





MADDIE ORTON (11:14):

Katharine Graham's story is especially interesting because it is the story of a woman who to the outside world seemingly has everything and yet is suffering day to day. Why was that particular story so important for all of you to tell?

ROBIN GERBER, PLAYWRIGHT (11:30):

Well, I'll start by saying that really, although the story is about Katharine Graham, she is a stand-in for every woman and the fact that she has had an exceptional life, and that she was born into a very wealthy family, into exceptional circumstances and very privileged circumstances, makes it even more universal it seems to me. That if this could happen to her, who had many reasons to to be protected, and yet she wasn't, then clearly this can and, of course does, happen to anybody. So in that way, I felt she was the perfect character for it.

SHARON LAWRENCE, "KATHERINE GRAHAM" (12:14):

And I'll follow that with the way that the play unfolds is to lay the groundwork of her emotional landscape from a child whose mother was very, very domineering and critical, to a loving but distant sort of put on a pedestal father, and to her falling in love with a deliciously charismatic man. Her husband was, by all accounts, a very potent and appealing individual who suffered mental illness. And the love at the core of this woman's life and her marriage, that Robin has written so beautifully, one of the key questions is, 'Why didn't she leave?' So that keeps me, as an actor, so intrigued and playing, as I call it, the ski run, because it's like a slalom in and out, and everybody's life is a slalom, but hers just happens to have really deep turns.

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

MADDIE ORTON (13:34):

Robin, you've said that you want this play to provide insight into the world of domestic violence. How have you been able to do that through the piece?

ROBIN GERBER, PLAYWRIGHT (13:45):

Well, as I said before, I spoke to quite a number of people who had been abused, and I still hear from people literally driving to the plane, and coming back from the plane, when I went to New York for the United solo performance, both my drivers, when they asked why I was going, I told them what the play was about, told me stories of abuse, how it's pretty universal out there.

But I think one thing that was very gratifying was during COVID, we agreed to videotape and give the play away to domestic violence organizations to use to raise funds, and then we did talkbacks afterward. And it was through those talkbacks that I really did feel very gratified because so many of the directors of these organizations, and people who work there, and people who had been abused themselves, said

PRESENTED BY  ArtPride
NEW JERSEY

Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
for the ARTS
arts.gov



they saw themselves in this play. I remember one director saying, 'You've really hit on every aspect of what happens.'

MADDIE ORTON (14:09):

Wow.

ROBIN GERBER, PLAYWRIGHT (14:10):

Which is what I was trying to do, and so I think it is happening. And people who don't have knowledge have said to me this was so, you know, this opened their minds so much and hearts about this issue.

MADDIE ORTON (15:01):

When you were researching the piece, all of you, what in particular stood out to you that you might not have been aware of about either the history or Katherine's history in particular?

SHARON LAWRENCE, "KATHERINE GRAHAM" (15:12):

I'll chime in. I was so excited by the fact that in 19, you know, in the thirties, when her father wrote the paper, that she, as a little girl at a very high level, all-girls school, was already so fascinated with journalism. This was and it wasn't just because she loved her father. She had such a strong intellect. She was an introverted woman, but she—young person—but she she was tuned in to current events. She was someone who was an observer, and that is—it's encouraging to know that people who have that kind of exalted status that Katharine Graham reached, it wasn't because she was a show pony.

You know, I came up during the television era, right. And there was so much about presentation. That's not how she was wired. And she got really good in front of the camera. I mean, if you see any interviews with her, she was always so eloquent, but she was never flashy.

She also was bold in ways that I didn't know. That she had had had actually been a reporter in the forties for labor unions, putting herself in a very male-dominated and rough sort of world, the union workers and during those big clashes when they were fighting for rights. I just didn't picture her in that capacity. But I love that I learned that about her. That kind of scrappy independence is sort of at the core, it's sort of one of the things that makes me feel more attached to her.

MADDIE ORTON (17:14):

Hmm. I love that.

MICHELLE JOYNER, DIRECTOR & DRAMATURG (17:15):

I came into the project knowing very little about Katharine Graham, only for the events that she was ultimately famous for, which, as I said, are not necessarily the events that we're focusing on. But I knew very little about her, about her upbringing, or her family, or her marriage, or any of that stuff. And it was all extremely, strangely—well, first of all, she's so genuine and kind of heartbreaking in a lot of ways,

PRESENTED BY  ArtPride
NEW JERSEY

Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
for the **ARTS**
arts.gov



Katharine, that you just can't help but fall in love with her. And I—it's hard to separate. How much of that is Sharon and how much of that is Katharine because her in the role, you just fall in love with her, and she's heartbreaking, and she's powerful, and you really believe her. You really believe this journey. And it is a true story, so you know, we're not really asking people to suspend disbelief, but still, you have to want to go on the journey. If you're going to sit in a theater for a period of time.

And and I don't know, I just, I think I just found the kind of character and the moral fiber of the woman was probably very surprising because, you know, look, journalism is full of people that maybe don't have the highest ideals all the time. I mean, I think certainly now back in the day, maybe more. But no, so I think it was a pleasant surprise just to see, for someone who was damaged, that she could be so self-possessed that she could reinvent herself and and pivot in a time where there really wasn't room for that for a woman, especially a woman with a famous father and a famous husband, to take the stage herself. I really feel like that's a potent thing to examine, and that's really what we're exploring.

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

MADDIE ORTON (19:18):

How do you think "The Shot", as it were, and the abusive marriage, and all that came out of that, shaped her as a person?

ROBIN GERBER, PLAYWRIGHT (19:32):

Well, that is the question. I think she suffered from PTSD, frankly. You know, people who were there at The Post said that she walked around like a ghost for years. It was really—the reason I initially tied it to the Pentagon Papers was because that happened, what, nine years later, eight years later, and that it was having to make that decision to publish the Pentagon Papers seemed to be the moment where she said, 'I'm ready. I can exert my authority.' And it seemed to pull her out of this funk or whatever you want to call it.

But there was definitely a period where she was getting over years of abuse, which obviously everyone deals with that differently. And of course, the tragedy of the death, and the horror of the death. She found him. They were alone in the house when he took the rifle and shot himself. So she had a lot to unpack, as we say today, between that and really coming into her own.

MICHELLE JOYNER, DIRECTOR & DRAMATURG (20:31):

Right. And during a time—this is Michelle chiming in here—this is also during a time where these things just simply were not spoken about. It was considered not polite, you know, social conversation to—I mean, there's obviously gossip, but I don't know. Robin, did you discover, was there any indication that she ever got any therapy of any kind? I don't know.

PRESENTED BY  ArtPride
NEW JERSEY

Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
for the **ARTS**
arts.gov



ROBIN GERBER, PLAYWRIGHT (20:54):

I don't think she so much a therapist after what Phil went through at the institution where he was treated.

SHARON LAWRENCE, "KATHERINE GRAHAM" (21:08):

And I will add to this, this is Sharon speaking, that she she took over the paper only three days after the suicide, but not because she was craving power or leadership. She was preserving that paper for her children, for the legacy. It was her father's paper. And that that was an identity for her. And it's written into the play as an identity for this family. This was a legacy.

So she was holding the space for this at a time where it would have been so much easier to just with retreat, withdraw, disappear and never have to face the demands, the responsibilities, the pressures, the public, the all-male board, the lawyers, everyone who was convinced that she did not have what it takes to run this, not just the paper, but the company, because it was a company.

And not only did she hold it together, grow into the role, but grew that company to a major force.... It stayed in her family for generations afterwards because she—I think that was her North Star was this paper, and the service that the paper provided for our society.

MADDIE ORTON (22:39):

Robin, you've written and spoke quite a bit about women in leadership and the legacy of famous women. What do you hope the takeaway is about Katharine Graham from this play? And that's for all of you.

ROBIN GERBER, PLAYWRIGHT (22:56):

Well, I would say it's really the same takeaway I've hope to create with all the all the women I've written about, which is that we put famous people on a pedestal, and we think that we can't be like them, that we're not like them, that we don't have the potential for, in her case, reinvention—recovery, and reinvention, and and then greatness.

In Eleanor Roosevelt's case, trust me when I tell you, no one had an unhappier childhood than Eleanor. And yet she became this amazing person. I wrote about Ruth Handler, who founded Mattel Corporation invented Barbie dolls. Similarly, had a terrible trauma of her own of her own making, but came back from that in a spectacular way. So my message overall in my writing has always been about we're all women, we all suffer, we all have moments where we have to reinvent ourselves and rethink ourselves, and we should take more inspiration from these famous women who are really no different than us.

MICHELLE JOYNER, DIRECTOR & DRAMATURG (24:07):

And I would say I would think, well, partially the takeaway that I would like to impart to people is that this is kind of, you know, backing up on what Robin said, that famous or not, every woman has a story



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).





and every woman has to overcome something, you know, innately because of the virtue of our of our gender in our society at the time that we live in the last, you know, couple of thousand years.

And so I guess my the takeaway that I would, again, like Robin said, is the ability for women to recognize themselves in the play, in whatever aspect they can relate to, and feel like they too may be able to triumph in whatever small or large way that they need to lean into at this time in their life. And I find that extremely inspiring. And I hope that people can take that with them.

MADDIE ORTON (25:10):
Absolutely. And Sharon?

SHARON LAWRENCE, "KATHERINE GRAHAM" (25:12):
What doesn't destroy you makes you stronger.

MADDIE ORTON (25:15):
It's a good message. Robin, Sharon, Michelle, thank you so much for joining me and I look forward to seeing "The Shot" at NJ Rep.

ROBIN GERBER, PLAYWRIGHT (25:22):
Wonderful, Maddie

SHARON LAWRENCE, "KATHERINE GRAHAM" (25:23):
Thank you, Maddie. We look forward to being there.

MICHELLE JOYNER, DIRECTOR & DRAMATURG (25:26):
We've really enjoyed being on your program. Thank you.

MADDIE ORTON (25:30):
"The Shot" runs from April 6th through April 23rd at New Jersey Repertory Company. For more information, visit NJRep.org.

If you'd liked this episode, be sure to give us a review, subscribe, and tell your friends. A transcript of this podcast, as well as links to related content and more about the arts in New Jersey can be found on JerseyArts.com.

The Jersey Arts Podcast is presented by ArtPride New Jersey, advancing a state of creativity since 1986. The show is co-founded by, and currently supported by funds from, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

This episode was hosted, produced and edited by yours truly, Maddie Orton. Executive producers are Jim Atkinson and Cie Stroud. Special thanks to Robin Gerber, Sharon Lawrence, and Michelle Joyner.



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.





I'm Maddie Orton for "The Jersey Arts Podcast." Thanks for listening.



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).

