

Ambling Along the Aqueduct

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And then Larry Summers came along,
and he was my muse..."

by Timmi Duchamp, Editor



This weekend I had the pleasure of attending Truth Values: One Girl's Romp through MIT's Male Math Maze, a one-woman play written and performed by Gioia De Cari. (Wonderful name she has, isn't it? That's pronounced "Joy-ah," by the way.) I'd heard about this play earlier in the year, so I was thrilled when I heard it would be coming to Seattle. I'm happy to report that it fulfilled all my exalted expectations.

Truth Values is full of wonderful acting and excellent pacing and timing -- and full, too, of the pain of

humiliating experiences and disappointment and loss, even as it provokes paroxysms of laughter. (My abdominal muscles were sore the following morning.) Gioia de Cari has a gift for mimicry, which meant that her one-woman performance included many entertaining re-enactments of both sides of her conversations. I suspect that most women who have been graduate students will recognize many of the moments she conjures into visibility; that recognition, I suspect, serves to place those moments under the microscope for those who have been there -- though perhaps slides by those who have not, unless the issues that women face in male-dominated professions are ones the individual viewer are already aware of. Certainly it made me remember all sorts of little things from my life as a graduate student in history some thirty-five years ago.

The play traces Gioia's arrival, 20 years ago, at MIT as a new PhD student, her struggle to survive in an environment unfriendly to women, her father's suicide, her work on a thesis and its completion, her entry into acting, and her decision to leave mathematics. Interestingly, one of her responses to being treated differently for being female was to dress satirically in outrageously femme outfits -- something apparently only a couple of the women in that small world were able to pick up on. Running through the autobiographical chronology was a light thematic thread, at which the title gestures: as a graduate student, Gioia's passion was the complications of logic (hence the "truth values" of the title), which have of course become highly sophisticated since Godel. Although Gioia did not bring this out in her play, mathematicians who work in logic have become extremely rare -- probably because there are vanishingly few academic positions for them. In the play, her thesis advisor assigned her a problem he'd been working on for 10 years himself without success. (I was aghast, hearing that. In mathematics, a thesis director's quality is partially determined by their ability to come up with a significant but solvable problem for each doctoral student working with them -- which is apparently not that easy to do.) Gioia nevertheless solves the problem. Inexplicably, though, her advisor chose to have her awarded not a PhD for it, but a Masters degree.

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The audience, which probably had as many men as women in it, was brimming with math people (including a woman I knew 30 years ago who had had a very difficult time back then as a graduate student in the UW math dept: I was shocked when she came over to us and introduced her grown daughter, because it had been more than 20 years since I'd last seen her, and had never stopped thinking of her as a woman in her 20s) and people in the sciences. All the math jokes (and there were several, which delighted me, not surprising, I guess, since I've spent most of my life living with a mathematician) sent the audience into uproarious laughter. The MIT jokes did so as well (I think just about anyone could have gotten them -- only of course they were all the richer for those familiar with MIT, since apparently all the places described, including the overheated basement office to which many entering graduate students are assigned, were instantly recognizable to people who had studied or taught there themselves). And then there were the feminist jokes. Some of those had quite an edge to them. The laughter responding to them was a bit more high-pitched than the laughter responding to the other jokes.

A mixed-gender panel discussion followed the performance, featuring Gioia as well as a few members of the math department and a faculty member from UC San Diego. One of them said a colleague of hers had read Gioia's thesis and admired it. So the question arose, from the audience, about why she had been awarded a Masters rather than a PhD. Gioia did not offer an answer, and the question was left to hang. A panelist remarked that he had started his career with a similar trajectory -- graduate school at MIT (with, yes, that same overheated office in the basement) and a teaching fellowship at Harvard. But his experience, he said, had been completely different. (He had fit in comfortably at MIT in ways Gioia simply could not do.) In response to questions from the audience and panel about her shift in career, Gioia attributed her leaving mathematics (which she says she has never regretted) as due to (a) not really enjoying the hours and hours of unrelenting work it takes to solve problems, and (b) finding it easy to get work as an actor. (Interesting, isn't it?) And, of course, having acting and singing talent and finding the work pleasurable.

An audience member asked her why, after trying to write the play ten years earlier and then given it up, she'd made another attempt ten years later. In the course of her reply, she said "...and then Larry Summers came along, and he was my muse." This statement didn't come as a surprise, because she had done a marvelous riff on Larry Summers in the first few minutes of the play (which included reading from a newspaper clipping reporting Summers' remarks at a conference and the responses of various women scientists attending).

If this play comes your way, do try to see it. The subject matter may seem discouraging, but in fact it will light up your evening and lift your spirits. It will also make your brain work between moments of being doubled up with laughter.

Posted by [Timmi Duchamp](#) at 6:44 PM

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