

## STAGES

# For Gioia De Cari, Larry Summers Made Her Play

By Joel Brown, *Globe* Correspondent | September 4, 2009

To put it mildly, former Harvard University president Lawrence H. Summers seems an unlikely muse for a one-woman show.

But without his controversial 2005 remarks about women in science, Gioia De Cari might never have finished "Truth Values: One Girl's Romp Through MIT's Male Math Maze," an acclaimed comedy that kicks off Thursday at the Central Square Theater.

An honors graduate of the University of California-Berkeley, De Cari got her master's in mathematics from MIT in 1988 but quit while working toward her doctorate. Years later, as an accomplished actress and singer, she began writing a play to help her untangle the reasons why.

"It was sort of the juicy question for me as a writer: What the heck happened there?" she says.

She kept putting it away unfinished, though. "I kind of got cold feet," De Cari explains. "I was reading things about MIT being so wonderful about making these gestures to have more equality for women, and then I got all embarrassed about the aspect of my story that has to do with women's issues. I thought, that's passé, I'm embarrassed now, I don't know if I even want to talk about this. But then Larry Summers opened his mouth."

In January 2005, Summers told an academic conference at Harvard that innate differences between men and women might be one reason fewer women succeed in science and math careers. Summers, who is now director of the National Economic Council and assistant to President Obama for economic policy, offended many of the women in attendance. Nancy Hopkins, an MIT biology professor, walked out on Summers's talk and later said that if she hadn't left, "I would've either blacked out or thrown up."

"I read some terribly nasty stuff in the press about [Hopkins], really attacking her. That was it for me," De Cari says by phone from New York, where she now lives. "Then I decided, I'm an artist, I'm a woman, I'm a recovering mathematician, and I have something to say. It's time I spoke up. And that got me to finish the play."

In the 75-minute show, De Cari transforms herself into more than 30 characters as she looks back at some predictable comic ordeals - being "pawed by nerds," for example - as well as myriad forms of sexism she encountered at MIT.

"It was one little thing after another," De Cari explains. "People said more than once, 'Well, why are you here? Because you're married, wouldn't you rather be home having children?' It was so, so difficult at that time . . . being so young and having all this come at me and not really knowing how to take it or how to deal with it.

"It's not like I think there were terrible things going on at MIT," she continues. "I feel like everyone was doing their best . . . and it just wasn't good enough as far as the women-equality thing. People were really trying, I think, but they hadn't worked it out yet."

"Truth Matters" was named an outstanding solo show at the New York International Fringe Festival after performances last week. Among the audience members was Hopkins.

"When she experienced it, 20 years ago, people might have thought a girl can't do math, and even if you were that good, people didn't take you seriously," Hopkins says. "But to discover . . . 20 years later that they still don't take [women] seriously and then realize how important your personal story is and go ahead and write it? More power to this woman! I thought it was just really very moving that she'd done it."

FEATURE ARTICLE, *The Boston Globe*, September 4, 2009

'For Gioia De Cari, Larry Summers Made Her Play'

Page Two, continued...

## The Boston Globe

Hopkins says she did not enjoy the tumult surrounding the Summers controversy, "but if it had the effect of bringing this issue forward and inspiring this young woman to write this fabulous play . . . I'd say it was worth it, because this an important play."

De Cari's husband, John Olson, is a research scientist with a PhD from MIT and president of the New York City Classical Guitar Society. They perform and record together in the New York area and beyond as the Olson/De Cari Duo.

De Cari isn't quite sure how to feel about returning to Cambridge. "On the one hand, it could be really fun because of the response I've gotten from MIT people who've seen the show," she says, laughing. "On the other hand, it does kind of make me nervous."

Hopkins is one of several area academics lined up to lead post-show discussions at selected performances. And she says she will try to get MIT's dean of science and members of the math faculty to come to the show "because we need to really ask: Hey, listen, is this really still the way it really is? Because this is totally unacceptable."

*"Truth Values"* is presented by the *Underground Railway Theater* Thursday through Sept. 20. Tickets: \$35 (discounts available). 866-811-4111, [www.centernalsquaretheater.org](http://www.centernalsquaretheater.org).

© Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company