

Recovering mathematician's MIT 'Truth' a calculated move

By Jenna Scherer / Theater | Sunday, September 12, 2010 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | Arts & Culture

Don't get mad, write a play. That's the principle behind Gioia De Cari's "Truth Values: One Girl's Romp Through MIT's Male Math Maze."

More than a decade after De Cari extricated herself from a graduate program in MIT's math department, she began to pen her one-woman show about the experience. She was egged on by then-Harvard president Lawrence Summers' 2005 remark about how women are biologically ill-suited to excel in math and science.

"Truth Values" tracks De Cari's travails as a female grad student at male-dominated MIT in the late 1980s. It was a surprise hit when it played the Central Square Theater last fall, just down Massachusetts Avenue from MIT itself. After performing the show across the country, De Cari is back for another sprint down her personal Infinite Corridor. The actress, singer and self-styled "recovering mathematician" talked math, inspiration and Summers by phone during a rehearsal break.



Herald: What first made you want to write "Truth Values?"

De Cari: When I left math, I swore to myself I wouldn't ever speak about it again. But then when I created my first solo show, I weaved a few math snippets into it. What surprised me was that those were the parts that captivated people the most. So I started working on another show all about my time at MIT, but it was not easy to do. I told myself I would never finish. But then Lawrence Summers came along. I said to myself, I'm an artist, I'm a woman, I'm a recovering mathematician - I've gotta speak out. I felt that it was sort of my duty. If it hadn't been for him, I don't think I would have ever finished it. He was my muse.

What do you think draws people to your story?

There's a lot of symposia about women in science and math and why women continue to be underrepresented. But in the world of storytelling and art and entertainment, I've never seen anyone talking about that. Maybe "Truth Values" is another way to look at this question. Maybe it serves a purpose a seminar can't.

Has the situation for women in math and science improved since you left MIT?

It seems a matter of extreme debate. Often where I'm doing this show there'll be a panel discussion afterward. It seems that there are of vastly different opinions about it. Some people think the situation is much better, some people think it's hardly changed. I'm not in it anymore, but I think it's just a matter of numbers: How many women versus how many men? When it gets to be more equal, then we've really changed. But in math, that's not nearly happening.

Is there a message you hope people take away from "Truth Values?"

It's really a snapshot of a particular time in my life, with all its messiness. It's not meant to have an agenda. I hope that people have the vicarious experience of what it might've been like for someone like me, a woman in math at that time. Storytelling gives us the chance to have an experience, even though we haven't lived it. I think that can be helpful because if you have an opinion like Larry Summers', maybe you need to walk in one woman's shoes for a little while to open your perspective. If you're just looking at numbers and figures, it might never reach your emotions, or stir you up.

"Truth Values: One Woman's Romp Through MIT'S Male Math Maze" at the Central Square Theater, through Sept. 27. Tickets: \$25-\$35; 866-811-4111.

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