



## Entertainment :: Theatre

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### Truth Values

by Kilian Melloy  
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Gioia De Cari stars in her one-woman show 'Truth Values,' playing through Sept. 20 at the Central Square Theatre (Source:John Olson)

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Math and science are still predominantly male domains. Is this the result, as former Harvard President Lawrence Summers notoriously wondered aloud, of innate, biologically rooted, and gender-determined capacities for spatial relationships and numerical ability? Or have deeply embedded cultural assumptions and gender role assignments blinded us to the possibility that women might actually, you know, be good at stuff like math and logic?

With her damning, and yet hilarious, one-woman show *Truth Values: One Girl's Romp Through M.I.T.'s Male Math Maze*, monologist Gioia De Cari recounts her stint as a mathematics major at one of the country's most daunting (and most male) institutions of higher learning, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

De Cari starts off by recounting her own reaction to Summers' words: she's so upset that she starts stalking around her flat, upsetting her cats by giving out the vibe of "a tiger hungry for blood."

Even pronouncing Summers' name with distaste, De Cari lays it out plainly: "You hate women, you old... fart!"

That feline energy recurs, with De Cari dropping to all fours to scurry around the performance

space, recounting how she was relegated to a stifling, subterranean study space. You can practically see her back arching as she details the physical environment: the long, dark passageway; the three "Danger" placards on the walls.

But it's not long before De Cari leaves Summers behind, leaps to her feet, and stands proud as a member of a disrespected gender among a disrespected demographic: she's a woman among "nerds," which means that De Cari is pursued by passionate graduate students, relegated to cookie duty by a seminar instructor, and criticized (by the other women at M.I.T., no less) for daring to dress up in a bright red dirndl (a German dress) or a pink angora sweater.

De Cari balances her experiences at M.I.T. with personal details: wanting to make her father proud, "to be the son he'd always wanted, but never let on." Adds De Cari, who was adopted, "I wanted to apologize for being a daughter--for being adopted."



In that one line one might find the aggravating crux of De Cari's woes. Surely, if her father wanted a son that badly, he'd have chosen to adopt a boy instead of a girl? And yet, there is a deeply pervasive cultural expectation that fathers want sons, or ought to want them, rather than daughters. What if that's not always true? Indeed, what if the male expectation that girls aren't good at math (or at reasoning in general) is the result not of observation, but of blindness? Shouldn't rational people be among the first to abandon ideas that plainly don't work, or don't jibe with observed reality?

But reality is not so easy to discern, let alone respect. It's much easier to pick up on, and internalize, socially transmitted messages about one's role and one's worth; any gay or lesbian person could probably tell you that. The question thus arises: even after decades of feminism, of women seeking a balance between "traditional" gender roles and a more modern determination to contribute in all the ways men do, are we much closer, culturally, to offering women the respect they deserve for their abilities, their choices, and their accomplishments?

De Cari doesn't seem to think so: even when she tells her rapt listeners about the triumphant day she took a major test, after a personal tragedy and a long delay, she reveals that her fashion choice was not a dirndl or an angora sweater, but more masculine attire: "I walked over to ace my exam in drag." Indeed, even after solving an "open problem" (a longstanding unsolved theorem), turning it into her thesis, and successfully defending her work, De Cari toasts herself with, "To me! Now I'm a real man!"

This is all potent stuff, but De Cari delivers it without scald. A little scorn, maybe, but who can blame her? No: with an array of characters to draw upon (De Cari nails not only accents and postures, but the presence of each of her impersonations), the monologist opts instead for the more refreshing delights of humor, even compassion, and creates a rich and wry *reductio ad absurdum*, sharpening both wit and reason to a needle point and then skewering the hot-air balloons of male prejudices.

"Wouldn't you rather be home raising children?" one professor asks... okay, make that a number of professors who ask... upon learning that De Cari is married; finally, De Cari explodes with, "I felt like I was being castrated... emasculated... but in a feminine sense. There's really no word for that--isn't that interesting?"

It's no wonder that De Cari turned to theater for the little things that make life worth living: affirmation, for example, and fun. (At M.I.T., De Cari tells us, the "party office" is the one where they indulge in wild excesses like timed chess.) Not to mention, er, the chance not to be surrounded by science drones (or, alternatively, borderline psychos who dream a little dream of big mushroom clouds wiping out all living creatures on Earth).

In the end, though De Carli may have solved a mathematics problem with a thesis that "only six people in the world can understand," she takes the advice of a female professor who tells her to head for any other career, and that is a gain for the modern stage.

"Truth values" turns out to be more than a short-hand term for a political screed. It's an actual expression in logic that started out assuming that a statement could be either true or false; since then, the concept of uncertainty has entered the picture (the truth of a statement may be unknowable, or there may be degrees of truth).



This allows rational inquiry to take into account a deeply strange and even unsettling suggestion, in equations of the sort that those six elite minds puzzle over, that reality is not very clear-cut. Human prejudice prefers hard edges and clear distinctions; those things simply may not exist in nature, and what we like to assert as truth (and cling to in our varieties of existential terror) may be nothing more than a wisp of static in our collective mental process.

That still leaves us, however, with our stories: the more layered and nuanced, the better. De Cari understands this, embraces it, and nudges us toward the concept that maybe, one day, the culture of science will grow out of its self-imposed restraints just enough to allow certain outrageous things into its realm: ambiguity, say, or poetry--or women.

Kilian Melloy reviews media, conducts interviews, and writes commentary for EDGEBoston, where he also serves as Assistant Arts Editor.

*"Truth Values" plays Thursday, September 10 through Sunday, September 20 at the Central Square Theater, 450 Massachusetts Avenue in Cambridge.*

*Performance schedule: Thursdays at 7:30 p.m., Fridays and Saturdays at 8:00 p.m., and Sundays at 2:00 p.m. Tickets are priced at \$35 for general admission; \$25 for seniors; and \$20 for students with a valid ID. Student rush tickets can be purchased the day of the show for \$15 in person at the box office or by calling (617) 576-9278 x213. Tickets can be purchased by calling (866) 811-4111. Tickets also available online at [www.centralsquaretheater.org](http://www.centralsquaretheater.org) or at the Central Square Theater box office. For box office hours, group discounts, and more info call (617) 576-9278 x213.*

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