



Margaret Lobenstine, author of *The Renaissance Soul: Life Design for People with Too Many Passions to Pick Just One*, coach and patron saint of Renaissance souls everywhere, interviews actress and recovering mathematician Gioia De Cari about her new one-woman show, *Truth Values: One Girl's Romp Through M.I.T.'s Male Math Maze*.

**What do you mean “recovering mathematician?”**

I gave up my math career long ago, but somehow it's still chasing after me!

**You felt attacked by it?**

Yes, when I was really in the midst of that world, in the late 80's, in the Ph.D. program at M.I.T., and teaching at Harvard . . . yes, I did feel attacked by it.

**M.I.T., Harvard? You were a Ph.D.?!**

I had passed my qualifying exam, published research, written about a third of a thesis, but I chose not to finish.

**You were this close at such a premium school and you chose not to finish? Why?**

Thinking that through is what prompted me to write the play. Well, that and Lawrence Summers.

**Lawrence Summers?**

Do you remember a couple years ago when he gave a speech about how women were quite possibly inherently less able than men to do math and science and that discrimination may not play a part?

**Oh yes, of course.**

I read that M.I.T. professor Nancy Hopkins had to leave the room because she felt his comments would make her throw up.

**And your reaction?**

I had tried to forget my whole math experience, put it behind me, but when he said that outrageous thing, I just couldn't. I mean when have we ever heard a personal account from a woman in elite mathematics? I have that to offer.

**Sounds like you were abused . . .**

Well I don't know—pawed by nerds, asked to serve cookies every week at a seminar—

**They asked you to serve cookies?**

Yes. And, being so by nature dramatic, I reacted not by fading into the background, but by . . . well, I fought back with fashion.

***Fashion?***

Some people seem to picture a woman mathematician as all in gray with her hair pulled back in a bun. That wasn't my style.

**So you met them on their own terms?**

What do you mean?

**You refused to disappear.**

I guess. There were only a few women, and for the most part it seemed they endeavored to look exactly like the men.

**Why did they do that?**

Maybe the reason women did that was because otherwise they'd get bothered so much they couldn't do their work.

**What do you mean?**

Well when I started there as a student where there were so few women, there didn't seem to be anywhere I could go to study without being interrupted by nerds wanting to talk to me. My assigned office was a dungeon-like place with all men and one really weird guy in particular that creeped me out, so I couldn't work there. The only safe place I found to work was the Margaret Cheney room, a place for women only, that had a combination lock.

**It needed a *combination lock*?**

I guess so.

**What about the other women? Did you band together?**

Well for a long time the other women in my program seemed to shun me. I don't know - because of how I looked?

**You looked like—**

At first appropriate, certainly. I mean I wore dresses, was very sweet-looking, dressed kind of Lady Di because I was young, was 21, and didn't know any better.

**Wow—what happens to a Princess Di wannabe when she goes to math grad school at M.I.T.?**

That's my show . . .

**So you were very alone?**

Eventually I did make friends with the other women, but before that, I decided to go talk to the dean of women to ask her what to do.

**That seems like a good idea.**

I guess so. But she just told me I was lucky.

***Lucky?!***

Yes, she said most women who came to her had at least a dozen creepy guys bothering them on a regular basis, so all in all, I was doing well.

**This is rocking my world, I mean my picture of a mathematician is someone mature, intelligent, scholarly—**

Well some are of course, but in mathematics there is tremendous eccentricity, and the grad students tended to be very young, young guys mostly, we were all so young dealing with this.

**And the women?**

Young too. There was one who entered grad school at age 16, I believe.

**What was your relationship with her?**

When she came to visit M.I.T. to see if she'd choose it, one of the faculty was insistent I not speak to her.

**Divide and conquer.**

I guess? And then I remember three different faculty members asking me why I was in grad school doing math if I was married. Didn't I want to stay home and have kids?

**You were married young. Were any of the men married?**

Yes, I knew some who were.

**Were they asked why they didn't want to stay home and have kids?**

I don't think so.

**This is an unfortunate side to M.I.T.—**

M.I.T. is an extraordinary, multifaceted place filled with brilliant and extraordinary people, and even at the time I was there, as a whole, it was a tremendous positive thing to part of it. It's just that there was an unfortunate side to some people I dealt with in math at that time. And I must add that M.I.T. of late has made a big effort to ameliorate all this nonsense; they are really trying to become exemplary in a positive direction.

**Fortunately the pain of people like you must have lit a light bulb.**

Yes. But my point is that when we see fewer prominent women than men at the top of their field in math today, we must look to what was happening back when I was a student to really fully assess the reason for that.

**So it sounds like you're a ferocious feminist with something to say.**

Well I was inspired by a column the truly ferocious Maureen Dowd wrote about the whole Lawrence Summers thing, entitled, "Dish it out, Ladies." But my style is more soft spoken—I'm someone who sees everyone's side of the story. I pride myself on that, actually, as an actor, being able to put myself in everyone else's shoes. And in this show I literally do. I tell the story of my life as a mathematician, and in doing so play everyone I met along the way—it's a one-woman show, and I play about 30 different characters. And you certainly don't have to be either a mathematician or a "ferocious feminist" to have an intriguing and satisfying theater experience.