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Math whiz: Play recalls tough days at male-dominated MIT

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When you hear the name Larry Summers, assorted descriptions may come to mind. Economist. Former Harvard University president. United States Treasury Secretary under Bill Clinton and economic adviser to Barack Obama. Outspoken. Controversial.

Artistic muse? Not so likely.

But for Gioia de Cari, a one-time doctoral student in math, Summer's controversial remarks in 2005, when he questioned whether women had the aptitude for advanced math and science, became the spark that led her to create her one-woman play, "Truth Values: One Girl's Romp Through MIT's Math Maze." The play has been playing to widespread acclaim since it debuted in 2009.

An actor, playwright and singer based in New York City, de Cari brings her 75-minute autobiographical work to Rooke Theater at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley Feb. 6 at 7:30 p.m. It's a varied presentation that, as one reviewer wrote, "blasts through our often unconscious misconceptions of gender and academia with honesty, wit and energetic exploration of life's variables."

For this "recovering mathematician," as de Cari calls herself, "Truth Values," a technical math term for the notion of true vs. false, is an attempt to come to terms with her stint at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the late 1980s, when she was one of just a relative handful of women pursuing a higher degree in math at the prestigious Cambridge school.

She ran into a wave of sexism, she says, with incidents ranging from the comical to the insulting - like the male professor who expected her to serve cookies at a seminar.

"I wasn't expecting it," de Cari said during a recent phone call from New York. She'd received her bachelor's degree in math at the University of California Berkeley without experiencing any condescension as an aspiring mathematician, "or at least any that I was aware of," she added. "I

thought that the road was wide open for me - you know, women's liberation has triumphed and the world is my oyster."

Life at MIT didn't quite match that vision. It was a more austere scene than at Berkeley, and some of the other female graduate students in mathematics attempted to cope with their low numbers by "trying to disappear," de Cari recalls, making themselves inconspicuous by wearing bland clothes, like blue jeans and big plaid shirts.

Sometimes de Cari took the opposite tack. After facing down overt sexism - on several occasions, some professors and students suggested she'd be happier being at home raising children - she began wearing "very feminine outfits," clothing that made her stand out. "I called it my fashion experiment period," she said. "It was kind of a way of responding to the frustrations I had."

She recreates many of those incidents in her play, in which she takes on 30 characters - fellow students, professors, even a few "inanimate objects," she said with a laugh, though she didn't want to reveal details about those objects before the show. Another character is her husband, John Olson, at that time an MIT graduate student in science who later earned a doctorate in biochemistry from the school. "He understood what I was going through," she said.

Time to leave

During four years at MIT, de Cari earned a master's degree, wrote part of her doctoral dissertation and worked as a math researcher and teaching fellow. It wasn't sexism per se that made her drop her studies, but rather a dawning realization that she wasn't really interested in a career in mathematics.

"I didn't know at the time why I left," she said. "I just knew it was time to leave, and I didn't know exactly what I was going to do."

In fact, she'd been involved in theater for years, including at MIT, and she'd also done some acting in the Boston area when she was a student. Eventually she became a full-time actor, and in the late 1990s she began recording some of her MIT experiences - what she called her "math stories" - in a journal. She incorporated a few of those pieces in an earlier one-woman play, "The Ninth Envelope," that debuted off-Broadway, and when that drew a good response she began working on an entire play based on math.

After a while, though, she began second-guessing her plan, wondering if her experiences were passé and imagining that the atmosphere had improved for female students at MIT and other schools. "I didn't think what I was doing was relevant," she said.

But at an academic conference at Harvard in January 2005, Summers, then president of the university, suggested that innate differences between men and women, rather than discrimination, could be one reason fewer women succeeded at math and science. The remarks prompted an uproar, with many women attending the event saying they were offended. Nancy Hopkins, an MIT professor, walked out of the conference and was quoted in *The Boston Globe* saying that if she'd stayed she "would've either blacked out or thrown up."

As irritated as she was by Summers' remarks, de Cari said she was "appalled" at the media backlash that developed, directed at Hopkins in particular - contending essentially that she represented a case of political correctness and "victimhood" run amok. "She got hate mail for over a year," said de Cari, who got to know Hopkins a few years ago after first performing "Truth Values."

As an artist, de Cari says, she felt an obligation to address these issues by finishing her play - and when she did, in 2009, some of the first performances took place in the Central Square Theater in Cambridge, just down the road from MIT. Though de Cari was nervous about the reception she'd get in her old stomping grounds, "Truth Values" played to sold-out crowds for three weeks, and several MIT math professors and students, male and female, said at the time that they greatly enjoyed the play.

"I was expecting 90 minutes of complaints and instead I enjoyed a fantastic monologue with moments of pure humor, sadness, intelligence and struggle," said MIT math professor Gigliola Staffilani.

Strangely enough, de Cari says, she'd lost touch with the math world, including most of her old colleagues, for years until she began working on "Truth Values." She's since heard from a new generation of female students trying to build careers in math and science.

The verdict seems mixed, she notes, with some success stories and others in which women are still battling sexism. At a panel discussion after one performance, a woman working on a book about the issue told de Cari that practically every woman she'd spoken to on the subject had a cookie story similar to de Cari's.

If there's one message de Cari wants to send about the play, it's that it's written for everyone. "You don't need a higher degree, and you don't have to know anything about math. It's a personal story, but one with some universal themes that I think a lot of people can appreciate."

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"Truth Values: One Girl's Romp Through MIT's Math Maze" will be performed Feb. 6 at 7:30 p.m. in the Rooke Theater at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley. Admission is free; reservations are recommended. To reserve, send an email to Laurie Kamins at lkamins@mtholyoke.edu ^[2] or call the college's Mathematics and Statistics Department at 538-2162.

The performance is jointly sponsored by several departments at Mount Holyoke and Amherst colleges and the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and by Five Colleges Inc.

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