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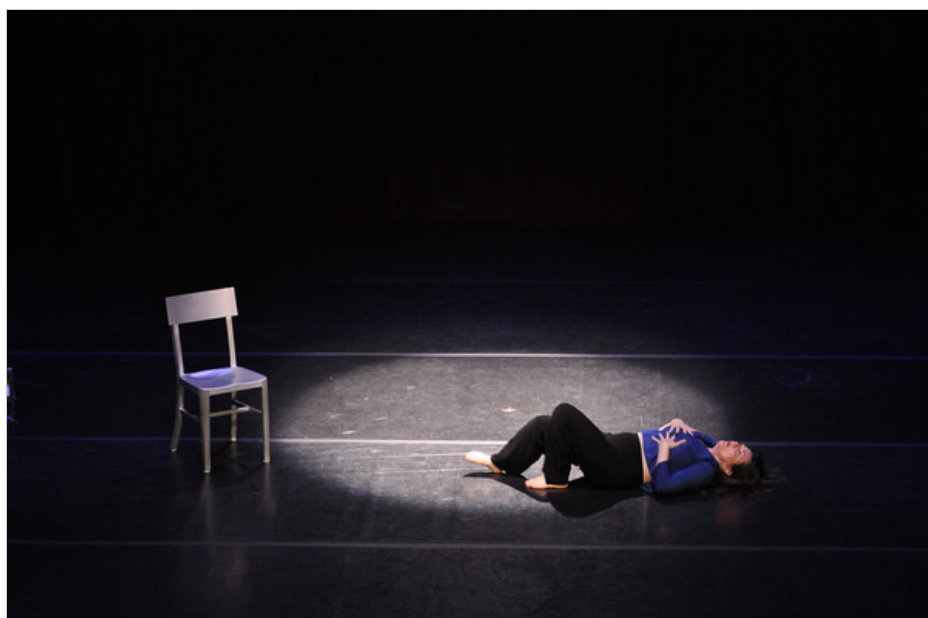


## Autobiographical 'Truth Values' bites back at sexist academia

by STANISLAS MONFRONT, ARTS EDITOR

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On March 13, 2005, *The New York Times* published an opinion piece by regular columnist and best-selling author Maureen Dowd.



Gioia De Cari lay herself bare in an enthralling, introspective piece aimed at proving former Harvard President Lawrence H. Summers' sexist comments wrong.

It was an infuriated response to the scandalous, inflammatory comments Lawrence H. Summers, then president of Harvard, had made about the academic aptitude of women, specifically their presence – or lack thereof – in the sciences. She submitted an impassioned plea to women as a whole, charging them to showcase their successes as bright beacons of excellence and empowerment and named her piece “Dish it Out, Ladies.” Gioia De Cari, who wrote and performed *Truth Values*, very explicitly accepted the challenge: “This is me, dishing it out,” she announced emphatically. Her show, presented on Saturday night in the Adams Memorial Theatre of the '62 Center for Theatre and Dance, stood as a bold rebuttal to Summers' slander.

De Cari's autobiographical voyage begins on the sunny streets of California during her first foray into the realms of academia. After earning her Masters degree from UC Berkeley, she nervously awaited acceptance letters from graduate institutions who would sponsor her further Ph.D. research in mathematical logic. Understandably, she was overjoyed to find out that she had been admitted to a competitive Ph.D. program at MIT. However, her arrival in Cambridge was not the academic, intellectual epiphany she was expecting: A far cry from

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the liberal, progressive attitude of her previous West Coast institution, MIT welcomed her with an unexpected cold shoulder. She was constantly singled out and relegated to the periphery simply for being a woman; even the significance of her work was lessened because of her sex.

Without a doubt, De Cari's piece was extremely humorous and entertaining. Where she could easily have presented an angry, monotonous list of faults, she instead constructed an enticing story that kept readers mesmerized. Oscillating between a stand-up comedy routine and a harrowing account, the performance was peppered with a multitude of hilariously impersonated characters. However, this did not detract from the more serious content of the play: It lended a voice to silenced female professionals and warned of a dangerous, sexist trend in higher education. We sadly cannot dispel this as an external phenomenon; through seemingly small acts such as the ones De Cari depicts, we at the College are at risk of perpetuating both the tradition of male bias and the larger culture of silence that can so easily pervade college and university campuses.

In addition, *Truth Values* goes on to grow into an altogether more complex and interesting piece that incorporates unpredictable aspects. After her father, the role model to whom she had always looked up, committed suicide, De Cari was thrown into a downward spiral of anxiety and self-doubt. As she struggled to get past this tragedy, it became apparent that her priorities were shifting; mathematics were no longer enough to satisfy her academic hunger, and she found herself auditioning for plays and musicals with increasing frequency. As this new world opened up to her, she remained reluctant about abandoning her career in mathematical research, struggling to make a definitive choice.

Eventually, acting became more to her than a vehicle for voicing her call to action; to students who often feel pressured into continually striving for a measure of absolute and often elusive academic success, this is a welcome reminder that there are other, perhaps less orthodox options. From atop the bare stage, using only sparse furniture and a simple lighting program, De Cari demonstrated the extent of her talents; she let her crystalline voice burst out in sumptuous song and truly occupied the room with her enthralling dance. No matter how incongruous these artistic displays might have seemed juxtaposed to a story about life in advanced academia, they gave texture to her vibrant, fascinating life and encouraged us to question the expectations handed down by our institutions.

What could have come across as an exercise in self-indulgence instead revealed itself as a valuable, rich autobiographical account. In casting the shroud off many difficult topics, De Cari addressed issues of mental health, sexuality and academic standards of success fearlessly. As these are often the primary concerns of students at the College, it was a pleasure to see them dealt with by a strong, confident artist who managed to pour all of herself into the performance. The display was a potent, genuine one; despite her occasionally overpowering voice, it struck a chord with the audience and proved particularly relevant to not only campus life, but to many of the themes addressed during Claiming Williams Day as well. Luckily, the College is home to many multi-talented students like De Cari, and we can only hope that her performance will encourage them to boldly and confidently broadcast their gifts.

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