



Gioia De Cari's 1-woman play at Mount Holyoke College to explore the question 'Are women inherently inferior to men in math and science?'

Published: Wednesday, December 28, 2011, 7:49 AM Updated: Wednesday, December 28, 2011, 3:32 PM



Cori Urban

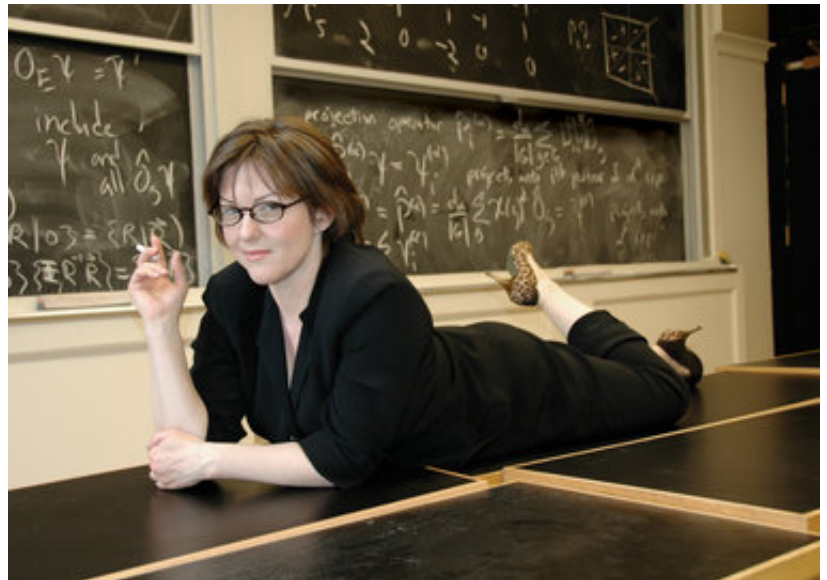
By

SOUTH HADLEY--Are women inherently inferior to men in math and science?

It's a question New York City-based actress and playwright Gioia De Cari presents in her autobiographical one-woman play, "Truth Values: One Girl's Romp Through MIT's Male Math Maze."

In it, De Cari shares with audiences her funny and touching experiences while studying for her doctorate in math at **Massachusetts Institute of Technology**.

The play will be presented Monday, Feb. 6, at **Mount Holyoke College's** Rooke Theatre at 7:30 p.m.



Submitted photo

Gioia De Cari will present her her autobiographical one-woman play, "Truth Values: One Girl's Romp Through MIT's Male Math Maze," at Mount Holyoke College's Rooke Theatre.

"Originally, I created 'Truth Values' purely as an artistic exercise," De Cari said. "I was interested in exploring how to write a straightforward memoir in an entertaining way."

It has been a "very nice surprise" that people have also found it educational, she continued. "It wasn't easy, though, to write about my experiences in math, and I was very torn about sharing these stories with anyone."

It took her 10 years to write the play, and at one point, although she had a promising draft written, she had nearly given up on finishing it.

"The topic is what graduate school in mathematics is like, in particular for women," said Margaret M. Robinson, a professor of mathematics at Mount Holyoke College. But those studying science, computer science, physics, chemistry and biology will also relate.

The performance is also "good theater," she said.

No math degree is required to enjoy "Truth Values." It is something De Cari created as an entertainment, and audiences in all walks of life tend to find it fun.

"Truth Values," was named Outstanding Solo Show at New York's International 2009 Fringe Festival. It is a cautionary tale about gender equality wrapped around mathematics.

De Cari was inspired to write the play by a former president of Harvard University, **Lawrence H. Summers**, whose 2005 inflammatory comments sparked an uproar at an academic conference; he said that innate differences between men and women might be one reason fewer women succeed in science and math careers.

One reason for her reticence to finish the play was that she had left mathematics and the academic life and thought that the sexism she experienced was something of the past too. "Then along came Larry Summers and his infamous comments suggesting that women continue to be under-represented in math and science because they are inherently less able than men in those fields," she said. "And here I had an unfinished play that happened to speak exactly to this issue. After that, I decided it was my duty as an artist and a woman and a 'recovering mathematician' to speak up by completing the play. So I suppose Summers was my muse!"

The show describes the problems she faced--as many women do--encountering bias in a male-dominated field. As one of MIT's few female students in the math department in the late 1980's, De Cari's play offers a comical, caustic, perceptive, yet eventually uplifting glimpse of what it takes to be a professional woman in a male-dominated arena.

"On the comic side, MIT has had a reputation for being a male-dominated place, and it certainly lived up to that in the late '80s when I was a grad student there," said De Cari, who always has been "rather feminine and curvy." She sometimes jokes that she should have titled the play, "Dolly Parton goes to Math School."

Out of desperation she found some rather ridiculous ways to cope with the situation. For example, the few women in the math program, in an effort to blend in, tended to dress as much like the men as possible, like in plaid shirts and jeans. "I did try to dress like that, but being endowed with so many dangerous curves, this led to all manner of experimentation on my part as far as what on earth to wear to both fit in and fit it all in, what I used to call 'fashion experiments,'" she said. "At some point I gave up and began wearing the most outrageous things and will leave it to the show to fill you in on the ensuing complications."

De Cari graduated with highest honors in math from the **University of California, Berkeley**, and was a doctoral student in math at MIT. She completed a master's degree in mathematics at MIT and wrote and published part of a dissertation before she left the program. While writing her dissertation, she worked as a teaching fellow at Harvard.

After leaving MIT, she never worked in mathematics or did any related work. She has been a full-time professional performing artist and writer for years.

Asked why she moved away from mathematics, she replied, "Oh dear! The only way I've ever been able to answer that question is to write a full-length play about it, i.e. 'Truth Values.'"

De Cari endeavored, as a dramatist, to craft a show that leaves the audience feeling uplifted, and she thinks she has achieved this. "I expect this has to do with the way the play illuminates many things women experience in male-dominated professions, as well as things both genders experience in academic life, things that audiences maybe haven't had such a good opportunity before to laugh or cry about," she said.

De Cari offers some catharsis in that area, "which of course is the very nature and purpose of good theater."

If you go

What: "Truth Values: One Girl's Romp Through MIT's Male Math Maze"

When: Monday, Feb. 6, at 7:30 p.m.

Where: Mount Holyoke College's Rooke Theatre, South Hadley

Cost: free

For more info and ticket reservations: e-mail Laurie Kamins at lkamins@mtholyoke.edu or call the Mount Holyoke Mathematics and Statistics Department at (413) 538-2162

reservations are recommended. To reserve tickets, e-mail Laurie Kamins at lkamins@mtholyoke.edu or call the Mount Holyoke Mathematics and Statistics Department at (413) 538-2162.

A discussion will follow her Mount Holyoke performance.

"After the formal discussions, private discussions with women students and faculty inevitably follow, and their comments suggest to me that these issues continue to be very current in academic settings," De Cari said.

Admission to the show is free, but to ensure a seat

© 2012 masslive.com. All rights reserved.