

Q&A: PLAYWRIGHT AUDREY CEFALY



What inspired you to write *Maytag Virgin*? Is it a personal story?

Maytag Virgin first appeared on the stage at Atlas Performing Arts Center's annual Intersections Festival back in

2012, in the form of a 10-minute monologue. Gwydion Suilebhan had asked me to join a group of playwrights to collectively answer a prompt for pieces "exploring a collision of people of different ages, races, cultures, classes, or sexual identities." The adaptation to full-length happened a few years later for the inaugural Women's Voices Theatre Festival. *The play does feel very personal to me.* My husband passed away just a few weeks before we started rehearsals for the world premiere. He had been sick for a long time. Losing him while launching this play helped me to heal. It gave me something to occupy my time. It also helped me to find a vocabulary for what I was experiencing.

The play moves deftly back and forth between themes of loss and romance. Do you see these themes playing against each other?

Despair is perhaps the closest we ever come to self-love. Through grief ritual, we take up arms against our very own ideas of wholeness, of family, of self. But on the other side, we emerge, finally, and we are – however haunted and gaunt – free. So, the first act of the play is designed to allow Lizzy and Jack to heal, to become good friends. It spans an entire year. Like *shear stress* on converging tectonic plates, they move slowly, they flirt, they fight, they retreat, but the tension is relentless. Real romance doesn't really enter the picture until Act II, which

spans only 24 hours. But all that emotional investment, the trust they've built already, allows them to do and say some very hard things, so they can experience release. The final payoff feels at once necessary, earned, and deeply satisfying.

Jack seems so grounded, and Lizzie seems less so, a little more lost and wounded. Can you talk about how you created the characters? How they came to be the people they are today?

So, thematically, the play has always felt a bit autobiographical, but I don't think I realized until recently just how deeply my emotions and experiences are encoded in the play. I think Lizzy feels like me. She's exuberant and creative, very loving, but she's also stubborn and full of anxiety and fear. She's afraid she'll never find love again, so she's just decided to quit trying. Jack is also "of" me. He represents my ideals of what a good, decent friend really is. That's not to say there's only one kind. It's just my taste. And I think he's the kind of man Lizzy really needs. Intelligent, challenging, entertaining. Grounded, yes. But also, honorable and patient, a man of integrity. We learn this in the way he grieves for his late wife, Amy, his private moments of torment, how he characterizes a recent blind date, and in all the little ways he looks after Lizzy, even when she's not looking. As an audience member, we are privy to more of these reassurances than Lizzy is. And when he finally wins Lizzy's heart, though it may not be crystal clear to her, we, as the watcher, know all we need to know.

When you look back at the world you created in *Maytag Virgin* and the time you wrote it, is it a painful place or a hopeful

place or just a moment in time?

It was a beautiful journey, start to finish. I remember crying for Jack and Lizzy when I went to bed each night. I felt like they were a part of me, and I wanted them so desperately to have a breakthrough. Sometimes they would ask me to leave them alone for a while, so I'd walk away for a few weeks or a month and then revisit them. Then there was a moment where I experimented with other characters, and those two months were hell. I kept hitting the wall. So I went back to just me and Lizzy and Jack, and it felt right again.

Maybe in some ways, I conjured them to help me work through my own grief, the loss of a job, and the difficulties in my own marriage. My own disillusionment. But I do remember when it all came together right as my world was falling apart, the cast came on board, and we moved rehearsals to my house, so I could be closer to my son during that dark time. We clung to each other every night. We walked each other through it. I look back now and realize it was one of my best moments as a human being. As an artist. That the play has taken on a life of its own is so affirming. I still ache for Jack and Lizzy. I always will.

Read more about Audrey and *Maytag Virgin* at www.audreycefaly.com.

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