

## The Rules of the Playground, An Evening of Works by Carolyn Gage

Six of Gage's hardest hitting plays, daring, heartbreaking, principled, bitter and often very funny, exploring cultural norms, expectations and gender roles.

Carolyn Gage is an award-winning lesbian feminist playwright, performer, director, and activist. The author of nine books on lesbian theatre and sixty-five plays, musicals, and one-woman shows, she specializes in non-traditional roles for women, especially those reclaiming famous lesbians whose stories have been distorted or erased from history. She won the 2011 Maine Literary Award in Drama, and her collection of plays *The Second Coming of Joan of Arc and Selected Plays* won the Lambda Literary Award in Drama, the top LGBT book award in the US. Carolyn Gage is one of the most prolific feminist writers in the world.

### THE PLAYS

#### THE GAGE AND MR. COMSTOCK

##### *From the Playwright*

Formidable 19th century feminist activist and Suffragist Matilda Joslyn Gage, 67, lies in bed, demoralized and debilitated following the publication of a book that marks the culmination of her lifework: *Woman, Church, and State*. Her book, an impeccably-researched, comprehensive indictment of the historical misogyny of the Christian church, is intended to start a revolution, but, so far, all she is receiving are congratulatory notes from her supporters. Gage's exhaustion, however, changes to exhilaration when she comes across a letter from Anthony Comstock, the notorious, self-appointed censor who authored the infamous "Comstock Laws" banning birth control. Gage, delighted that Comstock is attempting to censor her book, gleefully anticipates the controversy of the coming campaign.

##### *From the Director*

In her 1893 book, *Woman, Church, and State*, Gage outlines a lengthy history of oppression of women by the Christian church, and that it is the primary impediment to the progress of women and of civilization. Anthony Comstock, the press censor of the United States Postal Service, immediately banned the book from public school libraries, threatening to arrest anyone who made the book available to children. Comstock was the driving force behind the original anti-birth control statutes. In 1873, the U.S. Congress passed what became known as the "Comstock" laws. The act made it illegal to import, mail, or transport in interstate commerce obscene materials, including contraceptive devices and information on birth control.

#### A LABOR PLAY

##### *From the Playwright*

A Labor Play is a satirical piece about what might happen if surrogate mothers become a commodity in the corporate world. The two chief executive officers are concerned about the bad publicity that might result from a worker's desire to gain control over the distribution of the goods. (The mother has decided to keep the baby) The collision of male dominance with the women's value system is violent, and the scenario might not be as far-fetched as it seems.

*From the Director*

Although this play was written in the 80's, the question of whether reproduction should be regulated or controlled by any one authority other than the woman herself, is ever present. Who decides whether a pregnancy will go to term, if it can go to term, was there access to prevention, was there consent in conception, what expectations are ever present in the validity of motherhood or childless by choice?

## **THE CLARITY OF PIZZA**

*From the Playwright*

Traditionally and historically, gender roles have played a defining role in heterosexual relationships, and in these roles, the onus of pleasing a mate has fallen largely on the woman. In *The Clarity of Pizza*, the heterosexual friend has never eaten pizza in front of her boyfriend, because the sloppiness of the activity might undermine the image she is striving to project. Her lesbian friend calls her out on this as manipulative, and the two compare notes about dating mores in their different communities.

*From the Director*

Despite progress that has been made, women are still being culturally conditioned to be pleasing in the eye of the male beholder. There are boundaries and limits spoken and unspoken. Whether or not we comply often determines our perceived worthiness as heterosexual women. While there are certainly expectation in the lesbian community, the perception of the male gaze does not pose the same burden.

## **BLACK EYE: A KNOCKOUT IN NINE MINUTES**

*From the Playwright*

The year is 1953 and the setting is a middle-school principal's office and the waiting area outside the door. Amanda, a thirteen-year-old tomboy, is waiting disconsolately on a bench. She sports a brand-new black eye and has apparently been fighting. Her P.E. teacher, Miss Marshall, has been summoned to a consultation about the incident with the principal. On the way to his office, she checks in with Amanda, and the audience understands that she has been coaching the girl on her fighting skills. The principal, Mr. Kent, is expelling Amanda and is hoping that Miss Marshall will be willing to convey the news to both Amanda and to her mother. Miss Marshall manages to trump his ace, however, and he agrees not to expel Amanda. Leaving the office, Miss Marshall has a final, triumphant and subversive interaction with her student.

*From the Director*

Set in a time where gender roles were more strictly defined than they are today, the relevancy of autonomy over one's body is still and always will be relevant. The #MeToo movement has brought the concept of consent into sharp relief. And now we know that "boys will be boys" will be met with "powerful girls will be powerful girls."

## THE RULES OF THE PLAYGROUND

### *From the Playwright*

Five women, all mothers, have gathered in a classroom of their children's middle school to take part in an experimental, new program designed to eliminate playground violence. Experts from international "think tanks" and peacekeeping forces are training the women on how to analyze playground dynamics in order to detect the class, ethnic, and racial inequalities among the children that are, in theory, the sources of conflict. The program's focus is emphatically on confronting social imbalances, not individual behaviors, and, to facilitate this focus, the women have been forbidden to look out the window at the playground. In fact, the blinds are shut.

An enthusiastic newcomer joins the group, but her enthusiasm changes to confusion as it is revealed that, a week earlier, one child was shot on the playground and another was raped. The newcomer reacts with disbelief and then alarm, as the sounds of gunfire and screaming are heard from the playground. This is a scathing social satire, along the lines of Shirley Jackson's electrifying short story "The Lottery." *The Rules of the Playground* demonstrates how the everyday social conditioning of women is exploited in order to perpetuate denial and compliance.

### *From the Director*

*The Rules of the Playground* is a play about the gendered nature of violence, and especially of war. More than that, it is a play about women's denial of this, and our subsequent complicity in the atrocities perpetrated in the name of national security or religious freedom. We are always told that "they" are the enemy and that we must accept the collateral damage that occurs when we try to keep ourselves safe from "them." We never acknowledge that these conflicts are distinct expressions of male violence at the expense of women and children. War is defined in terms of "human nature" never in terms of male "behavior." Now we are talking about guns in schools instead of addressing that the 37 school shootings in 2018 alone were perpetuated overwhelmingly by white male students. We are told, as women, our emotional reactions undermine our safety and security so we are often quick to concur with the strategists and peacemakers that focusing on the rules that need to be followed, rather than the behavior, will bring about a solution. But perhaps our compliance with those that make these decisions is our own gendered expression of violence.

## AT SEA

### *From the Playwright*

A fleeting (no pun intended) celebration of lesbian friendship, sailing, marijuana, and resistance as two old friends escape the nursing home for adventures beyond.

### *From the Director*

Women, as we age, come to recognize a fierceness that defies all boundaries. Women as friends whether heterosexual or as portrayed here, lesbian butch buddies, embrace that fierceness with radical abandonment and love that could change the world if we allowed it.