

2015 ASTR/TLA Annual Conference

"Debating the Stakes in Theater and Performance Scholarship"

Portland Marriott Downtown Waterfront

November 5–8, 2015

Distinguished Scholar Award: Acceptance Speech from winner Gay Gibson Cima, Georgetown University

Thank you, David (Mayer), and thank you David (Savran) and the committee. Thank you all. It's really crowded up here: everyone who has helped me over the past four decades is standing right here!

Our questions start early, right? When I was eight years old--during my hometown's centennial celebration--my parents decked me out as that quintessential Nebraskan: Willa Cather. They marched me past the "Pioneer Re-enactments" on Main Street, to usher me into the basement of Mr. Falter's menswear store, where anti-slavery activists and refugees from slavery had hidden during the "Bloody Kansas" border wars of the 1850s. My folks routinely highlighted these sorts of "hidden, resistant histories" on the trips my Dad lovingly planned each year.

I think my Mom saw resistant performances as survival. Growing up in a Methodist orphanage during the Great Depression and armed, curiously, with private elocution lessons, my mother started fundraising for her orphanage at age five, entertaining potential donors with dramatic recitations in private homes, churches, town halls, and radio stations across the Carolinas. By age three, I was begging to perform her recitations: my favorite opened, "I don't care what people say; I'd rather be a boy!" By the time I donned sailor pants as Nellie Forbush in *South Pacific*, I was vaguely aware that gender was performative; that the staging of history, particularly the history of "race" and religion, required questioning; and that performance granted orphans, refugees, and activists a certain power.

But luck matters, too, and at the University of Nebraska in the restive late 1960s, I was fortunate enough to discover politics and protests: I shook Bobby Kennedy's hand, heard Eldridge Cleaver speak live, occupied the ROTC building, acted in Megan Terry's *Viet Rock*. Luckily, a mentor, Dr. Maxine Trauernicht, encouraged me to earn a master's in Northwestern's Interpretation (now Performance Studies) Department, where Frank Galati taught me to devise work and Wallace Bacon introduced me to a queer sort of inter-subjectivity. After graduating and teaching eleven repetitions of the same course at a junior college, I was ready to follow my brother into doctoral study. I knew nothing of the distinction between an MFA and a PhD, though, so when I arrived at Cornell for a PhD, I thought I could study acting. This scholarship thing was all a colossal mistake.

But it was a lucky mistake. At Cornell my dear friend Marvin Carlson gave me the tools to unearth feminist approaches to Ibsen & Strindberg, and Bert States taught me how phenomenology could unmoor Beckett and Pinter. David Savran, Paula Vogel, and I bonded with our other new friends over Marvin's arcane, multi-lingual bibliography assignments: they felt like scavenger hunts. Before long, my much-loved new husband Ron and I landed, fortuitously, at Blackburn College, where students graduate with union cards as well as academic degrees, and where we met our revolutionary best pals, here with us, today.

Washington, D.C., beckoned, and after two years as an adjunct, I snagged a job teaching at Georgetown—in an English Department, where, luckily, I could indulge my lifelong interest in protest poetry as well as plays. As Theatre and Performance Studies and African American Studies gained traction at Georgetown, I drew on the strengths of talented friends in those programs, as well as Maryland's doctoral program.

Early ASTR conferences introduced me to an incredibly generous community that helped me refine my theories of how feminist actors contested the modern canon. When Derrida, Foucault, Butler, and the amazing Women & Theatre cohort burst onto the scene in the 1980s, I decided to create a genealogy of feminist theatre critics—but as Performance Theory expanded and bell hooks issued her call to arms, that project morphed into two interconnected investigations of how African, African American, and European American women, from the 1720s to the present, functioned as performance critics, questioning race, religion, democracy. I've learned so much from close friends working on feminist acting and directing, critical race theory, Early American Studies, the history of emotion and activism. I've worked alongside extraordinary officers, editors, archivists, students—and so many of you, with no hope of a tangible reward, have given me your anonymous or confidential support. Thank you.

I'm especially grateful to my family: my daughter Anna, my son and ASTR colleague Gibson, and my husband Ron, this award is a tribute to you: your playfulness, your insights, your love.

Thank you all for this community, for a lifetime of debating the big, thorny, life-giving questions.