


BWW Interview: Rachel Parker on her World Premiere of THE WOLFE & THE BIRD

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by Shari Barrett

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The need for personal isolation during 2020 appears to have led to a plethora of solo shows being developed and performed online and in person in which performers create mostly autobiographical tales meant to unify their own experience with the rest of us. So when I heard about Rachel Parker's world premiere of her darkly funny, moving *The Wolfe & The Bird* premiering at the Matrix Theatre on September 18, I decided to ask her about its development as well as the many characters which play a part in her story via voiceover artists.



(Shari): Thank you for taking the time to answer a few questions about your show, as I expect you are very busy in final rehearsals this week.

(Rachel): I'm happy to be speaking with you, Shari.

(Shari): Please share a little about your theatrical background in the Los Angeles area.

(Rachel): My first theater community here was Westside Comedy Theater. I'm a huge fan of the improv principles "yes, and-ing," "there are no mistakes," and "following the fear." Eventually, I found my way into a LaBute play for one Fringe Festival, which led to my directing a play at Fringe the following year. Two of the actors from that play were Theatre of NOTE members and encouraged me to audition for the company. It was there that I aligned with actress/playwright Dagny Kerr to act in an early version of her poignant play "Deanna and Paul" being put up at another theatrical community of hers in NoHo. I've now

collaborated a few times with some of those artists. And through the magic of Actors Access, I was able to collaborate with multi-Ovation-nominated Stefan Marks in his artfully wackadoo play "Space."

(Shari): The play's description states, "No time to sleep. No room for error. No pleasing mom. A young girl struggles to find herself against the backdrop of 1980s small town America in the world premiere of *The Wolfe & The Bird*, a darkly funny and deeply moving solo play written and performed by Rachel Parker (Ovation-nominated *Space* at the Stella Adler Theatre)." I am right in assuming the play is autobiographical, told as an adult looking back on how she got to where she is today. Is that a correct assumption? And if not, please fill me in!



(Rachel): It is autobiographical, yes. It is not, however, presented as a reflection piece. The audience experiences Rachel receiving and perceiving her life and the people in it at ages 8, 12, 15, and so on. The play does begin with a *Timeless Rachel* but quickly moves to Rachel at 8.

(Shari): You share in program notes that the play exists because of Isadora O'Boto and Matt Hoverman. How did they influence its creation?

(Rachel): I met Matt Hoverman at Naked Angels' "Tuesdays@9" back in New York. Not only is Matt a talented playwright and Emmy award-winning TV writer, he's a deeply gifted doula of solo shows since 2001. Innately, Matt is able to meet a solo show artist where she is with her work - and with herself - and to gently tease loose and shed all the stuff that encumbers the telling of a story. Matt leads with loving kindness. He's simply the best kind of teacher. Isadora O'Boto is also a Go-Solo Workshop alum. She and I synced up and became accountability partners almost upon meeting. Isadora is an exceedingly deep listener. No matter how inchoate a scene of mine is, Isadora's able to detect my aim and question me in a fashion that nudges me toward reaching my destination. Ours has been the most validating collaboration I've had to date.

(Shari): Tell me more about the 1980s small town where you grew up and which of its residents we meet in the play.



(Rachel): My house was situated between an idyllic small lake and a dangerously busy road in a village between Flint and Pontiac. My blue collar father adored that lake, which he himself grew up on. Almost all family downtime was spent on the lake, and a lot of it with my mother's Flint modeling school coworkers and students. The audience will spend a bit of time with models Kim, Jett, and Rob with the Ken doll hair. Before Rachel starts interacting with her ballet instructor and a couple high school teachers, the audience will get to know Dana the babysitter, who hangs out nonstop with her boyfriend Matt in the basement... that is until they take Rachel and her sister on a road trip to a Pontiac hospital.

(Shari): No doubt most women grow up having issues with their mom, feeling as if there is no pleasing her. Do your observations about her outlook on life figure prominently in the play?

(Rachel): Yes.

(Shari): Does your relationship with her figure into the play's title *The Wolfe & The Bird*? Or if it doesn't, what does it reference?

(Rachel): My village boasts a number of dirt roads - Wolfe and Bird Roads are but two of them. A number of nights were spent dreading those two roads. For me, they induced terror. For my mother, they provided a place to let out some of the deathless pressure within her. I would also add that it suggests different parenting styles.

(Shari): Tell me a bit about working with so many other actors via voiceover, including James Heaney, Dagny Kerr, Ivory Tiffin, Madeleine Townsend, Phil Ward, Silvie Zamora on the creation of all the characters they portray in the play.



(Rachel): For about eight months, director Alina Phelan and I had been meeting up every few weeks or so over Zoom, fleshing out the script. I believe it was while Alina was cleaning one day that it occurred to her how nice it would be to simply see Rachel receive the words and actions of the surrounding characters. We asked Silvie Zamora and James Heaney to partake in a Zoom reading (Silvie reading all the female characters and James all the male ones). Immediately it became clear how necessary it was to have other energies supporting the storytelling. We were so fortunate to have Silvie take on the role of my mother *and* to get one socially distanced in-person rehearsal and conversation with her. Silvie's EQ is through the roof, and I simply can't imagine anyone else in the role. As my mother is a very complicated human being, having Silvie voice all the female roles would be a disservice to my mother and to this fine actress. Same for James Heaney, who voices my father.

Casting the other actors was a dream. I was familiar with everyone's work (save Silvie) and knew that, as they were all pros, one Zoom table read would suffice. A week later, we held individual recording sessions at The Matrix with our sound designer Stephen Epstein. It all felt pretty seamless. And safe.

(Shari): Which of these characters do you think figures most prominently in your story? Why?

(Rachel): Silvie and James as my parents, of course. But Phil Ward as my social studies teacher and Dagny Kerr as my ballet instructor are pivotal players. These teachers provided Rachel anchors for artistic expression and chances to have "wins" during a childhood ruled by chaos.

(Shari): Tell me about bringing Alina Phelan onboard as director. Have you two worked together before? Did you work together in person or remotely on *The Wolfe & The Bird*?

(Rachel): Alina is a veteran member of NOTE. I'd been admirer of her work as both actor and director for years. Once **WOLFE & BIRD** was in a pretty good place, I tapped-tapped her email inbox to see if directing a solo show would be of interest to her. Thankfully, she was receptive to reading it. Turns out Alina and I both hail from Michigan! And she instantly understood the people I was striving to bring to life. Most likely it's due to the sheltering in place that Alina's schedule was open enough to even consider this project.

(Shari): And you have quite a well-known technical team with Lighting Design by Matt Richter, Sound Design by Stephen Epstein, and your Stage Manager Kelly Egan. No doubt you have worked together before?

(Rachel): It's a tech-heavy show, and dang am I lucky to be surrounded by such talent! Stephen Epstein and I worked together on "Space" so enlisting him to design sound for this was a no-brainer. And Kelly Egan, well... I certainly knew her work at NOTE but this is my first opportunity to work with her, and I couldn't be more grateful. This show couldn't happen without her. I know she would demur at such a statement but it's true. And Kelly is the one who brought Matt Richter onto the team. Truly thanking my lucky stars for this gem of a man and lighting designer. His visceral understanding of story and how to technically support it is simply beyond me. To be profiting from his expertise is a dream. Matt's taken the production to another level.

(Shari): What is the message you hope audience members walk away with at the end?

(Rachel): Expression is vital. Perfection expression is not. Art heals. Good teachers make the world go round.

(Shari): As a former teacher, I love seeing my former students succeeding. So I really appreciate you expressing that belief in your play. Thanks so much for speaking with me!

The Wolfe & The Bird premieres September 18 through October 10, with performances on **Saturdays at 8 p.m.:** Sept. 18; Sept. 25; Oct. 2 (no evening performance on Oct. 9); **Saturday at 2 p.m.:** Oct. 9 ONLY; **Sundays at 2 p.m.:** Sept. 19; Sept. 26; Oct. 3; Oct. 10, **at the Matrix Theatre**, 7657 Melrose Ave. in L.A. 90046 (*west of Stanley Ave., between Fairfax and La Brea - arrive early and be mindful of street parking restrictions*). Tickets are \$18, available in advance at www.brownpapertickets.com/event/5219775 or at the box office prior to each performance, based on availability. Admittance is limited to ages 12+ with proof of vaccination required - no exceptions - and masks must be worn properly covering your nose and mouth throughout the performance as mandated by the County of L.A.

Photos by Joshua Stern