

Performance Review: *Roe* by Arena Stage, a co-production with Oregon Shakespeare Festival and Berkeley Repertory Theatre

January 12 through February 19, 2017

Director: Bill Rauch

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Following its run at Oregon Shakespeare Theatre Festival (April-November, 2016), Lisa Loomer's *Roe* hit Arena Stage's waterfront complex and the nation's capitol just in time for Donald Trump's inauguration and the frenzy of executive orders that followed, giving the play's D.C. premiere a distinctively tense, but engaging energy. *Roe* focuses on the two women at the center of *Roe v. Wade*, plaintiff Norma McCorvey and her attorney Sarah Weddington, charting their lives and diverging political paths following the landmark Supreme Court case. Having read an early draft of the play prior to the Oregon premiere, I was prepared for a slightly ponderous proliferation of locations, landscapes, and minor characters, but the updated text and Bill Rauch's astute direction kept the sprawling story moving. Most notably the set and costume changes, which included multiple wigs and prosthetics, happened in full view of the audience. Stage hands openly transformed the space from pizza parlor, to doctor's office, to supreme court, and helped the actors move deftly between multiple characters and multiple time periods. This well-staged and well-acted production effectively underscored Loomer's interrogation of history and personal narrative, particularly as it relates to the complexity of McCorvey and Weddington's relationship and McCorvey's shifting perspectives on abortion rights. Both the play and this production do so by presenting characters from both sides of the divisive abortion rights debate with "full intelligence and respect."¹

Sarah Jane Agnew as Sarah Weddington and Sara Bruner as Norma McCorvey anchored a stellar ensemble, many of whom continued in their roles from the original Oregon production to the D.C. run. Agnew captured Weddington's practiced grace and polished political persona, while Bruner's McCorvey was all loose limbs, casual crudeness, with an impish, Texan drawl. The actress' striking distinctions in physicality, ably supported by Raquel Barreto's period costumes, convincing wigs, as well as padding and prosthetics, accentuated the cultural and personality clash that lies at the heart of

McCorvey's frustration and disillusionment with the cause her court case cemented as law.

We first meet McCorvey and Weddington in the prologue, set in the present day. The actors entered from either side of the stage via two gangplanks that connected the wings to the mainstage. Rachel Hauck's clean and crisp scenic design served as a "neutral", almost empty space upon which the two women present their "side" of the story/history. Eight members of the ensemble, clad in black robes sat in high back stools on an elevated platform upstage from the two leads. The placement and costuming, as well as the presence of nine stools—one empty—served as a visual nod to the Supreme Court.

Weddington addresses the audience first, but McCorvey quickly interrupts, delighting in disrupting Weddington's rehearsed narrative. McCorvey and Weddington both attempt to frame the subsequent historical events of play. Their voices overlap, with Agnew's Weddington becoming increasingly frustrated by the interruptions of Bruner's McCorvey. It is clear from the outset that these two women have very different takes on the events the audience is about to witness, and perhaps even on the notion of history itself. In fact, this prologue establishes a running concern within the play about the reliability of historical or personal narratives. As McCorvey tells Weddington, "How 'bout this? How 'bout you just tell your story, I tell mine,"² we are instantly transported to the Red Devil Lounge by shifts in the projections, music, lighting, as well as McCorvey's on stage costume change.

The tension between differing and conflicting historical and personal narratives, the desire to contextualize events *as* they are enacted on stage, or to correct the historical narrative that other characters present, reappears at several points in the play and is underscored by Rauch's decision to stage the costume changes. When Linda Coffey (played by Susan Lynksey) and Sarah Weddington first meet McCorvey over pizza and beer to discuss the possibility of taking on McCorvey's case, they ask her questions about her life and pregnancy. McCorvey/Bruner strokes an enlarged prosthetic baby bump, and answers "only two and a half months." Weddington/Agnew and Coffey/Lynskey exchanged knowing looks, eliciting a hearty laugh from the audience. As an audience, we witnessed Bruner's on stage costume change, including the obvious addition of a

prosthetic baby bump sizeable enough to indicate that McCorvey's pregnancy is further along. This incongruity between what we observed on stage, and what the character says about her condition led to a knowing laugh, and pointed to a larger issue within the text that is heightened at different moments in the production. While this moment made the audience laugh, as did the moment that Coffey reminded us "we didn't know about fetal alcohol syndrome back then," it also raised a serious question for the audience. How could we know what story or history is true, or even whose story we are watching? Was the baby bump a reflection of Weddington and Coffey's accurate recollection of the events? Is McCorvey's statement about being two and half months along accurate? Was McCorvey lying then or is she lying now? Coffey gets closest to the point when she interrupts the scene and takes the historiographical argument directly to us as the audience. She stood, reciting passages focused on the physical descriptions of the three women from Marion Faux's book *Roe v. Wade: The Untold Story*. She recounts Faux's description of McCorvey's "stingy mouth" and "pug nose" and Weddington's bouffant blonde hair as her "crowning glory." Ultimately, Coffey uses the historian's language to make a broader point about the inability to be sure about the details of Norma's pregnancy and the difficulty of getting the exact details right. Linda concludes, "My point is that it's really hard to talk about history, about the *truth*, which is why I never wrote a book."³

Arena Stage's coproduction of *Roe* clearly tried to avoid this trap as well, with the strong ensemble playing richly drawn characters as opposed to broad caricatures. Jim Abele's portrayal of evangelical preacher Flip Benham was particularly noteworthy, both for its surprising depth and his ability to respond in stride to what was a rather feisty matinee crowd. When we returned from intermission, we were greeted with a fire and brimstone sermon. Abele as Benham crossed down into the house, moving through the center aisle to speak directly to audience members, effectively transforming us into his congregation. A few moments in to the sermon, a woman from the balcony called down to him, "I don't like what you say."⁴ The audience laughed, catching Mr. Abele momentarily off guard, but he responded quickly and in character, telling her, "I'll get you on my side." This unscripted moment seemed to mirror Loomer's desire for the play

to “be like a Rorschach,” in which an “audience member should be able to see that “their side” is right.”⁵

When reading the early draft, I found myself disappointed that Loomer did not seem to stake a clear point of view about the issue of abortion access given the historical significance of the ruling’s anniversary, but in performance I found the play to be my own Rorschach. Watching McCorvey’s transformation from pro-choice symbol and activist to pro-life activist on stage, was at times frustrating, but Bruner’s deft ability to move between McCorvey’s extremes and to demonstrate McCorvey’s vulnerability contextualized the shift. Bruner’s performance ultimately couched McCorvey’s religious awakening and repudiation of abortion as a painful reaction to a series of Weddington’s real or perceived personal slights, as well as the experience of maternal abuse and rejection that left her wounded. McCorvey’s shift seemed tied to her need for love and seeking love and acceptance. The scene in which McCorvey rejects her longtime lover and perennial support system, Connie Gonzalez (played by Catherine Castellanos), in order to be baptized is particularly affecting for this reason. When the middle aged McCorvey tells Gonzalez “we’re more like roommates now” Castellanos physical reaction makes it clear that even this gently worded rejection is a deeply cutting one.

While I think Arena Stage’s coproduction successfully presented fully realized characters who feel passionately about either side of the debate, the audience at the performance I attended seemed to find Sarah Weddington more persuasive than Norma McCorvey. Perhaps the audience, which seemed to consist primarily of women, many old enough to remember a time before Roe made access to safe, legal abortion the law, simply saw the same “Rorschach” that I did, or perhaps the post-election climate has raised the real specter that the rights gained in Roe could be lost. For me, and for my fellow women in the audience, this eerie new political climate made the scene in which Weddington argues before the Supreme Court feel less like the past and more like a potential dystopian future. Watching a trembling Agnew as Weddington stand at a lectern while the disembodied voices of former Supreme Court Justices, which were pulled from actual recordings of the proceedings, created the effect of a modern woman fighting old battles. It was a stark reminder about the very real possibility that under the new administration, a transformed Supreme Court may reverse *Roe v. Wade*. This new

political reality was incorporated into the text at other points, most notably towards the end of the play.



(L to R) Sarah Bruner (as Norma McCorvey) and Sarah Jane Agnew (as Sarah Weddington) in *Roe* at Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theatre, running January 12-February 19, 2017. Photo by C. Stanley Photography.

As the end of the play drew near, we re-entered the present, Agnew and Bruner, appropriately padded out in more matronly silhouettes (see photo), sat on opposite ends of the stage as Weddington and McCorvey in front of the projection “A Conversation on *Roe v. Wade*.” As Weddington and McCorvey discussed their historical case, a voice from the audience interrupts them, and Roxanne, a pregnant college student, moves to the front of the stage. The monologue, which was well-acted by Kenya Alexander, lays out Roxanne’s complicated backstory. Her desperate interjection offers both sides of the abortion debate something to hold on to, although it is not the play’s most successful moment dramaturgically speaking. Roxanne lists all the reasons she can’t have a baby, but she remains unsure about whether or not she should have an abortion. Ultimately, she asks McCorvey and Weddington to “tell” her what to do. McCorvey obliges, but Weddington demures, “We can give you the choice, but *you* still have to choose.”⁶

For all of Loomer's concerns about history and the inability to pin it down, the play and Arena Stage's coproduction certainly makes one thing very clear, the possibility that *Roe v. Wade* may be overturned is real. Bill Rauch's staging effectively reminded the audience that a new Supreme Court justice could disrupt the balance of the court, and could end a woman's right to make her own choice about whether or not have an abortion. In the final moments of the play, the entire ensemble reentered the stage, and after they update the audience on what has happened to their characters in the intervening years they moved upstage, putting on their original black robes and mirroring their opening positions. The actor playing Roxanne joined the other actors on the platform, draping herself in a black robe. In this moment she became the missing ninth justice, visually underscoring the new reality that *Roe* is at risk of becoming *unsettled* law. When Weddington looked out on the audience and said, "As of *this* moment, *Roe* still stands," the crowd cheered, but Agnew's pointed stress on the word *this* coupled with the imagery made it very clear that in our current political climate, *this* moment could end as soon as Donald Trump and the Republican led Congress fill that ninth empty seat.⁷

¹ Lisa Loomer, *Roe* (unpublished manuscript, October 2016), 2.

² *Roe*, by Lisa Loomer, directed by Bill Rauch, Arena Stage, Washington, DC. February 11, 2017.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Lisa Loomer, *Roe* (unpublished manuscript, October 2016), 2.

⁶ *Roe*, by Lisa Loomer, directed by Bill Rauch, Arena Stage, Washington, DC. February 11, 2017.

⁷ In the month prior to Arena Stage's performance and the writing of this review, Donald Trump nominated Judge Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court. In the intervening months, the GOP controlled senate voted to execute the so-called "nuclear option" in order to eliminate the 60 vote requirement for a Supreme Court Justice. This rule-change, while controversial, created a filibuster proof majority and eased Gorsuch's confirmation process considerably. Despite the fact that the media widely reported on several instances in which Gorsuch blatantly plagiarized direct passages and arguments in his scholarly writing, the senate voted to confirm him, with all but three Democrats voting against his confirmation. Neil Gorsuch, whose book *The Future of Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia* (2006) is considered by many abortion rights activists and organizations such as NARAL to be a

preview of his legal rationale to terminate the right to an abortion granted by *Roe v. Wade*, is now a Supreme Court Justice.