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RED ALERT

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FLORIDA'S 2023 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

METRO INCLUSIVE HEALTH CEO

ANNOUNCES RETIREMENT

DESANTIS MOVES FORWARD TO

REVOKE THE PLAZA LIVE'S LICENSE

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The LGBTQ+ community and their allies fought for years to be treated with fairness, dignity and respect and right now there's a push to take away those hard-won rights. ”

- FLORIDA REP. FENTRICE DRISKELL, HOUSE MINORITY LEADER



Preview

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Breaking Through

'In McClintock's Corn' makes its world debut in Tampa



Deborah Bostock-Kelley

ON STAGE AT POWERSTORIES Theatre Feb. 24-March 12, with global live streams on March 4 and 11, is the true story of the life of neurodivergent, gender-nonconforming Nobel-prize-winning geneticist Dr. Barbara McClintock.

A world debut written by Carolyn Gage, "In McClintock's Corn" is set entirely in a cornfield.

It examines Dr. McClintock's work in maize genetics and her relationship with her companion and partner Harriet Creighton. It tells the story of McClintock's revolutionary quest to understand diversity in nature and to reframe "deviance" as an expression of natural variance.

Gage is a neurodivergent playwright, performer, director and activist. The author of several collections of lesbian and feminist-themed plays, over 70 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.

"When our theatre was dark in 2021, we established the Voices of Women Theatre Festival, and Carolyn Gage's play 'In McClintock's Corn' was selected for the festival, then virtually, and now to brighten our main stage," says Powerstories Theatre founder Fran Powers. "Unfortunately, the themes in the 1920's are still so prevalent today.

"Using the playwright's words, 'this play is about the physical land that women and minorities are and are not allowed to occupy,'" she continues. "In addition to hearing the audience's responses, I am excited to see the magic of theatre as our technical design team turns our stage into a cornfield."

In 2022, "In McClintock's Corn" was a National Finalist for the Jane Chambers Award, sponsored by the Women in Theatre Program of the Association of Theatre in Higher Education. Nearly 100 years prior, McClintock received her BSC in botany at Cornell University's College of Agriculture, an MS two years later and a Ph.D. in 1927.

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After completing her Ph.D., she continued her work in cytology and genetics. She accomplished incredible advances in her field that have become molecular biology and genetics staples.

"She started her career in the 20s at Cornell, and women were not allowed to get research jobs or teaching jobs above the lowest level of associate or full professorships," Gage explains. "She faced discrimination throughout her life. She said at one point, 'I can't compete with the men. And so I don't try.' She just went her own way."

In her field, McClintock "didn't try to elbow her way to the table," she continues. "She realized she could spend massive amounts of time doing what she didn't do well: schmoozing, trying to go to conferences, figuring out who's got the power and how she can get them to like her. She knew she was no good at that because neurodivergents don't read social cues well."

Gage says that instead, McClintock focused on her work. She describes the geneticist's actions as simple and concise.

"There's a whole lot of loss and sadness in that, and it's not just women; it's people of color, people with disabilities, lesbians, etc," she explains. "I love that in the microcosm of one person's life, she's echoing the enormous macrocosm of these cosmic-sized studies that she was doing."

Gage discovered McClintock's story through a feminist biography by author Evelyn Fox Keller called "A Feeling for the Organism." She was captivated by the strength of the geneticist's triumphs in a male-dominated field.

"I think a part of her mission was a deep sense of 'I don't see anybody like me, but I believe that the way I am is not a mistake or something I need to fix or hide,'" Gage says. "She tracked life and how genetic mutations and diversity issues strengthen the gene pool and assure the species' survival. And now she is pretty universally accepted as having been on the autism spectrum."

Nicole Jeannine Smith plays McClintock and Taylor Elise Belew plays Harriet. Rounding out the play's cast are Newt Rametta as Margaret/Carl, Bianca Borge as Hannah/Hellen/Jim



POWER STORY: (L-R) "In McClintock's Corn" Director Ami Sallee with cast Newt Rametta, Taylor Elyse Belew, Nicole Jeannine Smith, Angelina Martinez, Bianca Borge and Stage Manager Allison Bica. PHOTOS BY DEBORAH BOSTOCK-KELLEY

and Angelina Martinez as Doris/Martha/Phyllis. The production is directed by Ami Sallee.

"When I read the play, I saw three storylines," she explains her vision for the piece. "There's the science, civil rights – women's lib fights she has to go through – and the love story. Because she lives on the spectrum, she and Harriet redefine what their relationship is and how to love."

Sallee says that "like the corn, Barbara does not have an arc." The director describes her as a constant within the piece, noting that society "has to have the arc to catch up to her."

"It's not that she comes around to what society wants. Society finally comes around to what she's always known and stood for," she says. "Harriet, costume-wise, will help us tell the passage and an era of time, as she tends to fit into society a little more than Barbara."

The team says the piece can resonate with LGBTQ audiences for a number of reasons.

"Barbara was trying to reframe the fact that when things deviate from the norm — homosexuals were what society called deviants — it's the natural variant and not the work of the devil," Sallee says. "The human experience is happening simultaneously as she's discovering what she's discovering with the corn. It was as though life was imitating art — if you replaced art with her science."

The director calls McClintock a scientific pioneer. "She had an idea beyond what man — human man and gender man

— could comprehend. She was unwavering in her understanding of the truth and sacrificed for it because she believed so strongly."

As for Gage, the playwright is excited to share McClintock's story.

"I want people to know about this woman, her work and her relationship with Harriet, one of the few people who understood her work," she says. "I want to lift up that friendship and lift up same-sex intimacy."

It was during the course of writing the play that Gage discovered she was on the autism spectrum herself, she notes.

"I finished the play before I understood she was autistic," she explains. "And the year I finished it, I also was diagnosed as autistic. And I'm like, 'well, that's no wonder: her life made so much sense to me.' So I wanted to put autism kind of front and center and show what it looks like to do intimacy when one partner is neurotypical, and the other partner is autistic. It's a different trajectory."

In other words, the two don't fall in love, resolve a conflict and live happily ever after in a house with a white picket fence.

Instead, Gage says, "When they realized their differences were so extreme, they didn't throw the friendship out. They said, 'OK, this template — the

picket fence thing isn't going to work for us — but I love you dearly, you love me dearly and I can track your work."

She says they found a way.

"They customized their intimacy to accommodate the fact that one was neurotypical and one was from the spectrum," Gage notes. "It's a remarkable love story that crosses five decades. I don't believe anything in Barbara's life would have been the same if it hadn't been for Harriet Creighton. Having just one

person who sees who you are and is always there is absolutely key."

According to Gage, McClintock beat the odds with her work. She was called outdated and old-fashioned, but "she just kept working — and then suddenly, the world came to its knees and gave her the Nobel Prize."

Sallee adds that "In McClintock's Corn" is a female story she's grateful is not told through another male gaze. She says "we are in such a post-truth place, I want the story of this play to help us understand that every single one of us has our own variation and no particular pattern is the right pattern."

As for Gage's hopes, it's that "people will start looking at us through a different lens, like that person might be incredibly valuable the way that person is. Maybe I need to change; maybe they don't. Maybe the culture needs to change." The play is one part of that. ▼▼

"In McClintock's Corn" plays Feb. 23-March 12 at Powerstories Theatre, located at 2105 W. Kennedy Blvd. It will also stream live March 4 and 11. Tickets are \$30 for adults and \$25 for students, seniors and the military. Showtimes are Thursdays-Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m.

For more information and to purchase tickets, visit Powerstories.com/In-McClintocks-corn.

