



Vogel, Paula (b. 1951)

by Linda Rapp

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In her work, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paula Vogel has tackled difficult topics, including AIDS, incest, and prostitution.

Born November 16, 1951 in Washington, D. C., Paula Vogel grew up in the Maryland suburbs of the city. Her parents divorced when she was eleven, and the break-up of the family led to "a very painful adjustment," as she stated in a 1999 interview. Vogel and her older brother Carl remained with their mother while the eldest sibling, Mark, lived with their father, who remarried.

Vogel said that her stepmother "didn't want [her] around" and that, in any event, her mother discouraged her from communicating with her father.

It was Vogel's brother Carl who became her protector and guide after their parents' divorce. Only thirteen years old at the time, he declared, "I'm her father," and proceeded to encourage her to do well in school so that she could attend college.

Vogel later commented, "In a working-class family, college is extremely alien. It's almost as if you are leaving your class and repudiating your family." Nevertheless, with her brother's support, she won a scholarship to Bryn Mawr. She left after two years, however, because the college ruled her concentration in dramatic literature "not academically valid" and consequently reduced her scholarship so much that she could not continue there.

She transferred to Catholic University, earning her bachelor's degree in 1974. She pursued graduate studies at Cornell for the next three years.

Vogel's brother Carl also went to college and graduate school. During his student days he became a gay activist, for which he paid a heavy price: he was beaten up; some faculty members shunned him; and his apartment was broken into and ransacked.

Carl Vogel fell ill with AIDS in the late 1980s, and the family rallied around him. Paula Vogel was impressed with the "incredible generosity" of their brother Mark, who was accepting of the homosexuality of both of his siblings. Their father also showed a positive attitude. For their mother it was more difficult to come to terms with her children's sexual orientation, but eventually, said Vogel, she "came to a point where she was personally proud."

Carl Vogel died in 1988. In his memory, his father founded an HIV/AIDS counseling and treatment facility, the Carl Vogel Center, in Washington, D. C.

Paula Vogel commemorated her brother with a play, *The Baltimore Waltz* (written in 1989, first produced in 1992). In the play, Anna, a young woman in Baltimore, thinks that she has contracted a fatal disease that, because it generally afflicts a largely marginalized group, is receiving little attention and research. Her



Paula Vogel with actor Alan Safier in 2010. Wikimedia Commons reports that Alan Safier has released this image into the public domain.

brother Carl takes her on an imaginary trip to Europe to try to save her. It is he, however, who is actually dying of AIDS. Upon his death, Anna dances the Baltimore Waltz with him.

The off-Broadway production, which starred Cherry Jones, won an Obie Award for Best New American Play.

The Baltimore Waltz was the first play to bring Vogel to public attention but far from the first that she had authored. She had been writing plays since she was twenty, although, she said, "the first ten I wouldn't confess to anybody!"

Despite the quip, she did enjoy some successes with her early works. *Meg* (her eleventh play), about Sir Thomas More's daughter Margaret, staged at Cornell in 1976, earned her an American College Theater Festival Award for Best New Play. The play later had a production at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D. C. and brought Vogel several more awards.

Vogel received a playwriting fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1979 and another from the MacDowell Colony in 1981. During this time she authored a number of plays, including *The Oldest Profession* (1981), which concerns four prostitutes rather well up in years and their madam, who plied her trade in New Orleans's Storyville before transplanting herself to New York City. Critic David Rooney of *Variety* called a 2004 production "an absorbing, compassionate vignette from Reagan-Era America" that "comment[ed] on the depreciating currency of women's bodies" and also "acknowledge[d] the increase in poverty and homelessness during a political period that created as many down-and-outs as it did billionaires."

Vogel is no stranger to controversial themes. It was a play about incest, *How I Learned to Drive* (1997), that won her the Pulitzer Prize.

In the play, which was inspired by Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), a middle-aged woman known as Li'l Bit relives the days when she was learning to drive as a teenager. Since her father is gone, her alcoholic Uncle Peck becomes her teacher. The man is obsessed with his beautiful young niece and uses the driving lessons as a strategy for being alone with her. Though the play in no way condones Peck's pedophile behavior, he is seen more as a tragic figure than simply a villainous one.

The teenaged Li'l Bit finds the situation confusing--the more so, no doubt, because of a secret that she reveals to the audience. When she asks Peck why he refers to the car as "she," he says, "It doesn't have to be a 'she'--but when you close your eyes and think of someone who responds to your touch--someone who performs just for you and gives you just what you ask for--I guess I always see a 'she.' You can call it what you like." Given the choice, she informs the spectators, "I closed my eyes--and decided not to change the gender."

Critic Steven Winn stated that *How I Learned to Drive* "is not so much about sexual molestation as it is about the resolution of the feelings that come afterward," a sentiment echoed by reviewer Dick Scanlan, who wrote, "Li'l Bit's homosexuality has nothing to do with Uncle Peck at all; it's who she was originally and who she will become later."

There were more than fifty productions of *How I Learned to Drive* in the year that Vogel received the Pulitzer Prize. She also won Obie, Drama Desk, New York Drama Critics' Circle, and Outer Critics' Circle Awards for the play.

Vogel's road to success was not without its bumps. Her 1986 play *And Baby Makes Seven* (first produced in San Francisco) was a box-office failure off-Broadway in 1993. Vogel called the piece--about a household consisting of a lesbian couple and their gay male friend who have three imaginary children and are expecting a real one--"a very sweet little play." She praised the New York cast, which included Jones, and suggested that the audience might not have been ready to accept lesbian partners kissing and planning to

become parents. Although the production was in a Christopher Street theater, the audience it attracted "was not a Christopher Street crowd," commented Jones.

The experience was a low point for Vogel, who said that she was glad that her brother Carl was not there to see one of her plays "flop."

Subsequently, however, she has enjoyed a string of successes. After the highly acclaimed *How I Learned to Drive* came *The Mineola Twins* (first performed in Juneau, Alaska in 1998, then in New York in 1999).

The twins are Myra and Myrna, whose appearance may be identical but whose lives certainly are not. The play traces their development at points during three Republican administrations--Eisenhower, Nixon, and Reagan. Myra winds up as a lesbian mother working for Planned Parenthood, while Myrna becomes a conservative radio host.

Both twins are played by the same actress, and, in a gender-bending twist, a single actress plays both Myra's partner and Myrna's husband.

Critic Charles Isherwood commented that through *The Mineola Twins* Vogel showed that "it's human lives that are fractured and real people's psyches that are torn apart by the good-and-evil poles that remain such a mysteriously powerful part of American culture."

In 2000, Vogel contributed a segment to the anthology movie, directed by Donna Deitch for Showtime, *Common Ground*, which examines attitudes toward homosexuality in a fictitious small town in three different decades. Vogel's segment, "A Friend of Dorothy's," is set in the 1950s, and explores the predicament of a woman who has been dishonorably discharged from the U. S. Navy after her lesbianism is discovered. When the reason for her discharge is learned, she faces ostracism from everyone except the owner of a local diner, a woman who has her own reasons for becoming a friend of Dorothy's.

Vogel's most recently produced play, *The Long Christmas Ride Home* (2003), uses a flash-forward technique to look into the futures of three young siblings who are in the backseat of the family car when it spins out of control on Christmas day.

Actors played the adult siblings, while the children were represented by puppets made by talented gay puppet artist Basil Twist.

Gerard Raymond of *The Advocate* stated that the play "bears all the Vogel hallmarks: humor, compassion, unflinching honesty, and a political voice filtered through family drama."

Vogel herself commented that in the play she was "revisiting one of [her] primary concerns, which is that it's homophobia, not so much as AIDS, which kills in this country."

In addition to writing her own plays Vogel has taught playwriting for many years. With a three-year fellowship from the Pew Charitable Trust she served as writer-in-residence at the University of Alaska and the Perseverance Theater in Juneau beginning in 1981. She joined the faculty of Brown University as director of the graduate playwriting program in 1985 and has been named the Adele Kellenberg Seaver Professor of Creative Writing.

Since 1990 she has been the artistic director of the Theatre Eleanor Roosevelt in Providence, Rhode Island. She is also playwright-in-residence at New York's Signature Theater Company, which put on three of her plays in 2004.

On September 26, 2004 Vogel married her long-time partner, Anne Fausto-Sterling, in Truro, Massachusetts. Fausto-Sterling, the author of *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (2000), is

a Professor of biology and gender studies at Brown.

In an interview a month after the wedding Vogel stated, "What is surprising is the emotion of it being legal--to realize that marriage is not just a personal commitment. It's a commitment from a larger community to embrace a couple."

With characteristic humor, she said that she would miss having Fausto-Sterling's mother refer to herself as her "mother-in-love or mother-out-law," but, on a more serious note, she added that Fausto-Sterling "is a very remarkable person, and I have been happy every day of my life living with her."

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