

INTERVIEW: NEXT VOICES FELLOWS LILA ROSE KAPLAN AND WALT MCGOUGH



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INTERVIEW: Next Voices Fellows Lila Rose Kaplan and Walt McGough **Lila Rose Kaplan and Walt McGough sat down one day when they were both very exhausted and had tea. Walt recorded it.**

Lila Rose Kaplan: Okay, here we go. Two Tired People Talk About Their Plays While Holding Tea.

Walt McGough: That is the title of this interview. Tea with Sleepy People. So, Lila Rose-

LRK: Yes Walt.

WM: Tell me about *Jesus Girls*, and how it started.

LRK: Sure. I was teaching at a small Christian college and a group of young women came out. Now this was a conservative Christian college where you sign a community statement upon arrival promising that you will never engage in "homosexual practice." So, basically, you aren't allowed to be gay on this campus. This was the time when a lot of "It Gets Better" videos were coming out, and this man who had gone to a Christian college somewhere in the Midwest sent an It Gets Better letter to his alma mater, and they refused to publish it, and he was pissed off, so he sent the letter to every single Christian college in the country. The college where I was teaching has this funny position of being a slightly more liberal conservative Christian college, and so the student editor published the letter. And that was what set everything in motion. And then this secret Facebook group of gay alumni and allies from the college surfaced, and they wrote a letter with 131 signatures. And they submitted this letter and the same awesome student editor tried to publish it, but by that time the University was paying more attention and they wouldn't let him publish the names, because they said he'd need a release for all of them. So, being a tech-savvy young person, he published a URL with the article that had the names up. The LA Times picked it up, and suddenly the national press was paying attention.

WM: And this was while you were there, or right before?

LRK: I actually had been there and then was away for a year and then came back, so I was not there for the heat of all of the action, but I definitely had a lot of students writing plays about it when I came back. I realized, "Oh, something happened while I was gone."

WM: They had some things to deal with.

LRK: Yes. And so the college decided to try to address it, and they had what they called a week for discussion, that the students called “The Homosexuality Week.” I don’t know what it was actually called. It was a week that’s usually reserved for seminars about mental health or anorexia, so it didn’t really match up to being gay. And the students were promised that they would actually get to have a discussion, but they got to the first event and it was a prominent Old Testament Scholar reading all six passages that condemn homosexuality as a sin, and there was very little room for discussion. The speakers that week were bible scholars and psychologists that help you get “better” from being gay, and that kind of thing.

And these girls were so brave, and they did things like put duct tape over their mouths, and basically put themselves out there and got up and argued theology with these professors, and were basically incredible. Now, I don’t know that very much changed in the administration during this time, but I do know that the student body definitely started to have a better understanding of what was happening, and that their fellow students were fellow students.

Then I came back for teaching, and realized “Whoa, a lot of kids are writing about sexuality.” I started asking some questions. And towards the end of that year we had a dinner, my husband Jarrett and I, for a student who was heading off to grad school. We wanted to send her off in style. And at eight o’clock in the evening I asked, “So what happened last year?” And at midnight they were still talking, and Jarrett and I were thinking, “Whoa. We should have had a tape recorder for this.” So I decided that I had to do interviews before I left, and the seed got planted for me that their story needs to be told. The Mama Bear in me wondered, “What university would do this to their students?” and the rest of me was just so interested because gay voices of faith are not something we hear very often. Or, if we do, it’s often people who have been outside their faith.

WM: Or have sort of “evolved” past their faith.

LRK: Right. And the thing that was really most important to a lot of these young women was that they still be Christian. Being Christian was central enough to their identity that they went to a Christian college, and so what harmed them the most was being told, “If you’re gay you’re not a Christian anymore.” That was the whole fight, was them saying “How can you say I’m not a person of faith?” I was expecting, y’know, angry, anti-religion, and really it was like, “No, this is my religion and let me tell you why.” And so I did all these interviews, and then I very diligently sat on them for a few years, kind of unsure of how to get at something that felt so raw and so personal. I wanted to do justice to these students.

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WM: Had you worked with interview texts before, in your writing?

LRK: Sort of. Interview-text-lite. I wrote *100 Planes*, which is a play about female pilots in the army, and I interviewed one woman and I read a lot of interviews, but I hadn’t really been there. It wasn’t, my girls, and their story. So I kept thinking that, to do it right, I had to write a docu-play, with nothing but the words that were spoken. And so I kept applying for grants to write, an Exonerated, or a Laramie Project, or even I am my Own Wife, which is a play-play but has a lot of that. And all of those applications got rejected and I found myself actually vastly relieved, which made me think “Oh, I think I actually want to write, like, a play.”

And so last year I was in the New Rep group, and I had a chance to really just sink into the interviews, and find a structure, and I realized that it could be an adaptation of *Our Town*, which was really great because it gave me a shape to work in and a way to pay homage to what I loved about this college, which was that these were some of the absolute best kids I’d ever gotten to work with. It became a way to say, this is our town, this is our world, and this is one of the things that’s happening in it. What finding that structure did was make me feel like I could tell the whole-hearted story of these young women who were gay and of faith, and not just get pulled into a more didactic or angry version of it.

WM: I find that really fascinating, to hear you talk about needing to have a structure, because I think that for both of us, as writers, our stuff tends to seem a little looser and freer theatrically. But I think both of us think a lot about structure, and there’s something sort of fun about that. The difference between where our plays end up, and how much thought we put into them in terms of the structure that underpins them. Do you always feel like you need a structure going in?

LRK: No, but once I find it it’s a good thing. How about you? How did you find the structure for *False Flag*? And what inspired it? Combo question!

WM: I had a similar experience to yours with this play, where I had the idea for a long time, and then I just didn’t know how to parse it. I’ve always been really fascinated by conspiracy theories, as sort of, not a hobby, but just something that you encounter when you’re a particular brand of nerd on the Internet. I always spent a lot of time on message boards, where people continuously reference conspiracy theories. There are all these ideas that have been around forever, especially on the Internet, and you can find a dark corner that addresses any theory that you want, including, like, “The Earth is actually flat,” or the JFK assassination being one of the biggest, classic ones. So I had always been sort of fascinated by conspiracy theories, and then the shooting at Sandy Hook happened, and I just remember that within hours of the news of Sandy Hook breaking, people on the Internet were claiming that

it was a staged operation by the government, and that no children had actually been killed, and that the parents who were grieving on the cameras were actually actors, and there was already this schematic in place for this horrible event. It was very much a wake-up call for me, about the real harm that these theories and ideas can do. They're not just a sort of harmless eccentric thing that's kind of funny and silly. It's something that people really sink a lot of their lives into, and it can do a lot of harm to the people who are involved in the events. But also, for a lot of people, these theories are a way of trying to make sense of senseless actions.

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LRK: That's very compassionate of you.

WM: Well I think it's usually people who feel marginalized in one way or another who are drawn to these ideas, and it's a way to take control or narrativize an event or situation. If it's a dastardly plot by the government then it means that somebody was planning it and therefore it's somehow safer, because you can figure it out. You can unravel the clues, and that means you're protected. And so it's a way to both feel more powerful in the face of these kinds of events, and also make them more understandable, and you don't have to face up to the fact that sometimes people just go into a kindergarten and start shooting kids. And so, that's when it first clicked into my brain that, "Oh, there's a play somewhere in this." There was a conversation I wanted to have about why people get wrapped up in these ideas.

LRK: What excites you about it?

WM: I'm really scared of it, honestly. There's a lot that's scary in this play, to me, and it's mostly about walking that line of, how do you empathize with someone who's going through something like this and has these thoughts, while also recognizing that those kinds of thoughts can do harm, to the person who is having them and also to the people around them. That's been the most exciting, and also the most scary, part of it.

LRK: Does it feel different from your other plays, to you?

WM: I write a lot of sort of mad-cap fun plays, and I write a lot of serious-minded dramas, and this is a play that is more of a mad-cap drama.

LRK: I love that about it. I feel like something really clicked in it, in your voice. I love all of your plays, but the pacing and the machine of it just fly.

WM: I'm having fun with how fast it moves, and how weird things that would be played for comedy in other plays can actually be really disturbing and distressing in this play, or vice versa. So that's been really exciting. What's the fun thing that's emerged for you in *Jesus Girls*?

LRK: So, there's this Christian Lesbian rock band...

WM: Say no more. Sold.

LRK: So what does *False Flag* mean?

WM: A False Flag operation, in conspiracy talk, is an operation undertaken by a government or other nefarious organization and made to look like a civilian event.

LRK: Got it.

WM: It comes from ships, where you attack under a false flag. So, if I'm from Spain I'm going to put a Portuguese flag up, and I'm gonna attack France and they're gonna get mad at Portugal. But in situations like Sandy Hook, saying that that was a false flag operation means that it was actually special forces people in there shooting up a school, instead of Adam Lanza.

LRK: Which is insane.

WM: Exactly! So that's the sort-of root of it. It's kind of a joke on the Internet that as soon as anything violent happens, the words "false flag" will start getting thrown around because it feels very dramatic and very weighty without actually meaning anything.

LRK: Do you have a last question to ask me?

WM: Oh God. I should. We need a closer. Okay. I can't think of a way to ask this and make it not sound dumb, so I'm just going to say it and make it sound dumb.

LRK: That's okay.

WM: What do you go into every play you watch hoping to see?

LRK: Every play.

WM: Or most plays, at least.

LRK: So many answers. Okay. Here's one.

WM: Gimme.

LRK: I go into plays hoping to use my imagination and consider viewpoints that I haven't before. My hope is to always have that child-like experience of being swept into the story. It's so hard, given what we do, to really get lost in a play. I can get lost in a movie, no problem, or a book, but to get lost in a play, is much harder for me. In the last few years, *Fun Home* and *Hamilton*, are the two where twelve-year-old me was there and professional theatre maker fell away. Those are both funny, entertaining and theatrical but also very powerful political pieces that make you consider experiences differently. Both of those pieces also take care of the audiences, which is something I'm realizing that I'm taking more and more seriously as I ask why theatre is still alive when we still have TV and movies. We have the opportunity to be really welcoming and to be a community and bring people into what we're doing together.

The Next Voices Festival

***False Flag* by Walt McGough** - Saturday June 4 at 3pm

***Jesus Girls* by Lila Rose Kaplan** - Saturday June 4 at 7pm

***When Herod Came to Georgia* by James McLindon** - Sunday June 5 at 3pm

***Dream House* by Cassie M. Seinuk** - Sunday June 5 at 7pm

New Rep's Next Voices readings are free and open to the public.
Call the Box Office at 617-923-8487 to reserve your complimentary spot.



Theatre Address

Moesian Center for the Arts
321 Arsenal Street
Watertown, MA 02472
617-923-8487
tickets@newrep.org

New Rep Offices

400 Talcott Avenue
Building 131, 2nd Floor
Watertown, MA 02472
617-923-7060
info@newrep.org

