

AUGUST 2015 VOL 5:9

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Faith



AT THE FRINGE

Each August, small theatrical venues scattered across lower Manhattan transform to become the stages of the New York International Fringe Festival, featuring an array of plays and performances—all selected by jury. This year, one of Astoria's very own artists—playwright and actress Dina Laura—will be premiering her play, “Elephants and Other Worldly Dilemmas,” which is described as a comedy about faith and how it impacts the decisions we make. BORO sat down with the playwright and star of the show to find out just what it took to bring this creative idea to the New York stage.

BORO: *When did you start writing this piece?*

DINA LAURA: I began writing in January of 2011. Originally it was a one-act, but I soon discovered there was a bigger story to tell. So I expanded it to a full-length play in 2012, and have been developing it through various informal readings ever since. The Fringe Festival marks the official debut of my play, and I am absolutely thrilled and honored to have the opportunity to premiere my show at a festival that is dedicated to promoting indie theater.

BORO: *How much of your own life is in this play?*

DL: All of it, some of it ... Ha. It's so hard to say where real life ends and imagination begins. The play is certainly my real life in the sense that faith is something I wonder about on a daily basis. I think most of us do. But the story was initially inspired by two coworkers who were talking about faith and water cleanses in the same sentence. It literally felt like a light bulb went off in my head. I knew there was a story to be told. And from there, it just went to places I never expected—from superheroes and psychics to yellow sparrows and hoarders. I would be sitting at the keyboard and sometimes it felt like I had no control over what I was typing. Wacky ideas would just end up on the page, and I had to stop myself from hitting the delete button and give myself a chance to live with what

I was writing and see if it actually was any good. Ultimately, I think on some level, the play feels like it could be anyone's life including my own, since we all question faith and what it means to us.

BORO: *Playing the roles of Martha and Crystal has to be both challenging and fun. What traits in each of them resonate the most with you?*

DL: It has been quite a ride to play such completely different characters! Martha leads with her mind. She analyzes her decisions—not always in a traditional way—but she definitely weighs things out, which is totally me. Crystal leads with her heart. She loves fiercely and passionately and isn't afraid to show it. I have certainly been accused of wearing my heart on my sleeve, but I wish I did it as gracefully as Crystal does. She is just so comfortable in her own skin, and that's a place I would love to get to within myself.

BORO: *How has being an actor informed your process as a playwright?*

DL: Well, I think it's helped me immensely with writing dialogue that is conversational. As an actor, I want to say lines that not only make sense, but also sound natural. An actor once told me I'm the actor's writer because I write the way people actually talk. Whether that's always true or not, it's what I strive to do. I think it also helps me build characters that people would actually want to play.

BORO: *How has being the playwright informed you as an actor?*

DL: That's a tough one, because even though I wrote something, it doesn't necessarily mean I know how to bring my character (or in this case characters) to life immediately. They are two different things. I may understand the writer's intention, because I am the writer, but taking those intentions and then embodying them in human form can be a great challenge. However, having a wonderful director like Peter Zachari and two awesome actors, John Olson and Matt Stapleton, to work off of helps a great deal in figuring out my characters' intentions and objectives.

BORO: *Who are some of the actors who have inspired you?*

DL: Judy Garland for her charisma, Lucille Ball for her impeccable comedic timing and Carol Burnett for all of the above. As for male actors, Gary Oldman continues to blow me away. Sometimes I don't even know he's in the movie until the credits roll. He is so able to morph into the character he's playing that I don't even recognize him. And I can't leave out Sandra Bullock or Meg Ryan. They are both so charming and gifted at physical comedy.

BORO: *Who are some of the playwrights who most inspire you?*

DL: John Patrick Shanley and Tennessee Williams. John Patrick Shanley can write dialogue that is witty, gritty and heartfelt. This is a man who wrote "Moonstruck" with Nicholas Cage and Cher, and also wrote "Danny and the Deep Blue Sea" as well as "Doubt." He is a genius. I wish he and I could have coffee so I could ask who inspires him. And Tennessee Williams was probably the first playwright I ever read. I remember taking his plays out of the library as a teenager and reading the parts out loud with a southern accent. He made me want to be an actor. His writing felt like poetry to me; I just loved saying his words and how they made me feel. There's a musical quality to his writing combined with the characters he creates that touches me and, at times, breaks my heart.

BORO: *Where in Astoria do you like to go to be creative?*

DL: Astoria Bake Shop on Astoria Boulevard. They have amazing food and a wonderful ambiance. I wrote some of the play there. And they have photos of dogs hanging on the walls. I love dogs and own a dog walking company, so I feel right at home. I also love New York City Bagel & Coffee House on 23rd Avenue.

BORO: *What is your earliest memory of theater?*

DL: My parents took me to see "Fiddler on the Roof" at some dinner theater and I was just blown away. It was magical. My first memory of theater as a performer was when I was in a Christmas play in elementary school and I had one of the leads. One of the other actors had a stack of presents he was carrying and he tripped and went flying across the stage. There was something about that moment that was exciting to me, in a way. I knew that anything could happen in live theater—and I had to be a part of that excitement and unpredictability.

BORO: *If your audience could walk away saying one thing, what would it be?*

DL: "That play made me think!" I'd also love to hear "I had a blast!" Here's to hoping...

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PERFORMANCE DATES:

Saturday, Aug. 15, 4:30 p.m.
Thursday, Aug. 20, 8:45 p.m.
Saturday, Aug. 22, noon
Wednesday, Aug. 26, 7 p.m.
Saturday, Aug. 29, 7 p.m.

PERFORMANCE LOCATION:

Steve & Marie Sgouros Theater
115 MacDougal St., 3rd Floor
(Between W 3rd and Bleecker streets)