Finding One's Medium: Claire Braz Valentine on Becoming a Playwright

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An internationally known poet and playwright with many awards, Claire's play *Women Behind the Walls,* about incarcerated women, is a regular in theater classes. Her plays opened in Santa Cruz before going to Off Broadway in New York and overseas. Sponsored by the William James Association, which promotes work service in community service, education, and the environment, she was awarded their first Lifetime Achievement Award for 30 years of working with inmates in the California prison system. In 2018, she lost all her manuscripts and her home in the Paradise, California wildfire. Luckily, she escaped with her son, sister, and dog.

When Claire Braz Valentine received a call from theater director Michael Griggs asking her to help work out the problems with an ensemble group of actors in downtown Santa Cruz, she thought there must be some mistake.

"Sorry you have me mixed up with someone else," she told him. "I'm Claire Braz Valentine, the poet."

He knew who she was, and they talked on the phone while she busily prepared her sons' school lunches for the next day. Michael explained that he was asking six playwrights to come down for interviews to help with the play. Claire didn't mention that she didn't know what an ensemble or improv was, but she had promised herself long before not to turn down opportunities. She could only come down after five because she had a full-time job. That was fine with Michael, and they agreed on a date.

When Claire arrived at the theater, she found five male playwrights who looked like she imagined playwrights should look distinguished. One even smoked a pipe and had elbow patches on his jacket. The actors appeared mysterious, and the whole scene struck Claire as exotic. But she wondered what she could do to help them with their play. The actors performed a scene, and each playwright commented. When it came her turn, Claire asked each actor what they wanted to see onstage. What motivated their characters? What did their characters want?

"It turned out to be one of the most interesting evenings I've ever spent," contends Claire. "Because I was a fiction writer and worked with character, I thought I could give them insights into their characters. I could make some comments, which was a nice way to bow out gracefully.

The cast left the room for ten minutes, and when they came back, they said, 'Congratulations, you're our new playwright.' I don't know what hit me first: joy or panic. Both emotions of joy and panic drive a playwright because playwriting is the most dangerous of all the writing arts. At any minute, all hell can break loose on stage."

Although Claire had written poetry for years and published articles in local papers such as the *Good Times*, The *Phoenix*, the *Express*, the *Independent,* and *Taste*, as well as national papers like SF Chronicle, LA Times, and SJ Mercury, she had never written a play. Terror struck on opening night, and she feared the play would be so bad that she couldn't show her face in town. A complex story with references to Mt. Shasta and filled with magic, rain and thunder, and trap doors, the play ushered people on and off stage in a flurry of movement and lighting quick changes. Although Claire admits she didn't understand what the play was about, but it became a hit when critics discovered lofty ideas hidden in the plot. Each critic provided their own interpretation; several called the play brilliant, and Claire was on her way to a new career she'd never even dreamed of.

"I loved the actors, the stage managers, the dressers, the costumes, the lighting designers, the sound designers, and everything about the theater," Claire explains. "I wanted to do more plays."

She asked Michael Griggs to give her advice as she wrote her play, and he consented, which resulted in *This One Thing I Do*, a play about the 50-year struggle of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton to win the women's right to vote. Although Claire had read poetry before plays at the Bear Republic Theater, now it was her play appearing on stage. *This One Thing I Do* opened on July 22, 1982, and after the play closed, Claire decided to start at the top and work her way down the list of publishers until she found someone to publish the play. She sent it to Samuel French, the largest publisher of plays in the world. After almost a year, a letter arrived containing what Claire describes as the finest sentence in the English language, "Congratulations, we're going to publish your play." The letter changed her life; she suddenly became "Claire Braz Valentine, the playwright," and decided to devote her life to playwriting.

Writing wasn't new to Claire; she'd been writing her whole life. Born into a working-class family in San Francisco, with an older brother and two younger sisters, Claire grew up in a one-bedroom Victorian flat at 17th and Vermont in a neighborhood that hasn't changed since her earliest memories. Her father was a Portuguese longshoreman who won respect as a left-wing

militant and raised his family to believe that the worst violation in the world was to cross a picket line. Claire remembers her father spending half his time on strike while she was growing up, and he would disappear for days at a time, leaving the family without money to buy food. When he was home, his violent temper ruled the house, leading Claire to describe her childhood as "treacherous." Her mother was an orphan whose mother died of TB after immigrating from Ireland, and her grandfather abandoned the family. In 1890 her grandmother and her three sisters became indentured servants, sailed to America, and came through Ellis Island.

Claire attended elementary school at the Immaculate Conception Academy, a Catholic school at 24th and Guerrero. In elementary school, Claire wrote poetry and read voraciously, often coming home from the library with armloads of books. Shy around boys, she didn't mix well, and switched to a public junior high school, and withdrew into a world of books. Claire was overjoyed when her mother relented and let her return to Catholic school.

"I walked into class to find 30 girls and felt like I'd come home," Claire recalls. "Within a year, I was in every club. I became the journalism editor, the scientific newsletter editor, the class clown, and the head of the drama club. I loved it and didn't have to worry about my shyness because, you see, I wasn't shy around girls. I learned to bond with girls and to trust myself and my art. I learned the joy of writing, and the nuns convinced me my mind was powerful. Many people like to put down Catholic School, but I have no negative feelings towards the nuns or my education; they did nothing but good for me."

"The same girl who wanted to go to a girl's school ended up working the majority of her time in a room full of male felons," she said. "I learned so much from them. I was a mother teaching other mother's sons, and my students gave me so much joy, respect, and trust."

Claire wrote her first play in high school when the drama club was asked to present a Shakespeare play. The girls didn't look forward to gluing beards on their faces to play men's roles, nor twisting their tongues around the Old English pronunciation. The girls hated the play and told Claire to tell Sister Mary Edward they did not want to do it. Sister Mary Edward would have to find a different play for them. The sister refused. If the girls wanted another play, Claire would have to write it for them. Claire protested that she couldn't do it, but the sister insisted. Despite her youth, Claire wrote and performed in her first play at age 16.

Claire had a rich social life in what many describe as a restrictive Catholic School. Because every Catholic Girl's school is paired with a Catholic Boy's school, students attend each

other's social events, such as dances and football games. That event occurred every weekend, and San Francisco presented Claire and her friends with the whole city as a playground. One friend's father owned an ice cream store, and the girls would recklessly race the father's pickup truck up and down the steep hills, winding up at the ice cream fountain at midnight, where they would eat ice cream and play the jukebox until all hours of the morning. Their escapades recall the innocence of youth before drugs and birth control pills were available. Back then, if a girl became pregnant, she married or went to a home for unwed mothers. Such consequences kept Claire on a straight and narrow path compared to the rebelliousness of later generations.

A bright student, she can't remember a time when she wasn't writing during elementary and high school. Claire wanted to go to college, but her father absolutely refused to assist her. A violent scene with her father drove the point home, and she turned to her high school boyfriend for solace. He came from a nice family, and they married a year after high school.

"I was going to be Betty Crocker and make the type of home that I had always wanted to grow up in," Claire said. "I gave it a good run. I had three sons, who are the mainstays of my life. They are, for me, my finest accomplishment, and it still feels strange—they are now 36, 38, and 40—not to have them living with me. My life was so intense with my boys and their friends who hung out at our house. It wasn't uncommon to wake up in the morning and find their friends in sleeping bags on my living room floor. I still see many of them; they're still part of the family. It's very difficult to let go of that period of my life."

After getting married, Claire helped put her husband through school, and once he received his engineering degree, they moved to Sunnyvale, where he opened his own business. Between raising her boys, Claire continued writing stories, chiefly for them, and published them in boy's magazines. She joined a writing group at the Stanford Free University, taught by Ed McClannan, an associate of Ken Kesey's, and discovered a whole new world. The first night she attended a class, she found an unfamiliar scene: a bathtub lined with foam rubber filled one room and a house full of young hippies. She felt like little Mrs. Homemaker in her housedress, girdle, nylons, and high heels. In contrast to her tight, convoluted, and cryptic poems, the other participants wrote what Claire describes as "raw, open, emotional, narrative poetry, powerful stuff that I'd never even dreamed about." Claire soon abandoned the nylons, girdles, and bra and her poetry became less inhibited.

Because her husband spent so much time at his new business, Claire spent most of her time alone. She began to feel like she was Betty Crocker abandoned without Mr. Crocker. Social changes contributed to her feelings, for this was a time of social ferment; Vietnam War protests wracked the country, and the women's movement was spreading. She began to feel trapped as a housewife and feared spending the rest of her life living in the suburbs, hosting cocktail parties for her husband and his business cronies. Claire recalls meeting an impressive woman artist, and when Claire told her that she felt like a square peg trying to bash herself into a round hole, the woman told her to take pride in herself; there were enough round pegs already and too few square pegs.

"I felt an enormous gaping horrible lack and emptiness in my life," Claire recalls. "After 13 years of marriage, I realized that my husband and I were no longer good for each other. I'd long since stopped loving him, although he was a fine man. He raised not only our children but me, too, but I'd grown into a very different person than the one he married. I wanted a different life."

With the divorce, her life changed radically; she had to get a job and became the primary support for her three sons. Not to be stymied, she continued to freelance articles to magazines and to write poetry and humor. Despite focusing on her sons and writing, her life expanded. She joined psychodrama and encounter groups, attended anti-war marches, and began inviting interesting people over for dinner. She removed everything from her house's walls and redecorated it with seashells, rocks, and candles. She gave a party and wound up standing on the couch in the living room reading from Richard Brautigan. She published poetry, and her picture appeared on the front page of the Sunday *Pictorial Living* section in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, identifying her as a poet and short story writer.

"It's important to remember that I never had training to be a writer," Claire cautions. "I wasn't inhibited about my field, and I didn't know that people identified as poets, journalists, or short story writers. I thought I'd just be a writer."

Although she tried to work part-time and attend college, there were no grants for young mothers, and she had to return to work full-time. She purchased a house in San Jose from her share of the divorce proceeds and made a commercial advertising Cascade dishwashing soap for national TV, for which she received $9,000, a considerable sum at the time and enough to help

make ends meet. She fell in love with a man who was ten years younger, and after 18 months, they decided to live together.

"All hell broke loose," Claire explains. "My father refused to see me, my ex-husband took me to court to take the kids away, and one of my sisters stopped talking to me. We decided to get married and move to Memphis, Tennessee."

Claire describes herself as "a one-woman man" and remained monogamous, despite an agreement with her husband that they would get married for the world, but wouldn't "feel married." She felt freer in spirit and had what she describes as a short, wondrous adventure. In Memphis, Claire discovered that her Betty Crocker days were indeed over; she didn't fit in with the Southern belles. She became a department manager at the University of Tennessee, joined a women's consciousness-raising group, and became active in the National Organization for Women. But she missed California.

"I longed for the ocean," she recounts. "One day, I parked on the banks of the Mississippi and begged the river to fill the hollow aching in my soul for the seashore. The river couldn't do it. I decided I never wanted to live outside California again; I never wanted to be away from the coast for the rest of my life."

Claire moved to Boulder Creek, where she lived for eight years because she knew there were many writers in the area. She took a job at the university, eventually becoming an office manager for the Board of Studies and Literature, and immediately made contact with other women writers. She bought a house in the early 1970s, where she began her playwriting career. The house became a nesting place where she could raise her sons, write, and put a log on the fire in the wintertime. She felt at home. A few years later, she came to the breakfast table on Christmas morning and told her sons they wouldn't be in the house the following Christmas. She couldn't explain why, but despite her sons' protest—one of them had to commute to San Lorenzo High to graduate—they moved. The following winter, a tree crushed the house, destroying her son's bedrooms but sparing the new owners sleeping in the master bedroom. Feeling fortunate that her sons' lives were spared, she settled into her house on the West Side of Santa Cruz and continued to work at UCSC.

After her initial success in playwriting, Claire stopped writing as much poetry as she had formerly done and, for an extended period, devoted herself to writing plays and working. Her years of writing produced *Blue Skies Forever*, a story of Amelia Earhart that went straight to

New York City after playing in Santa Cruz. In researching the play, she interviewed people who knew George Putnam, Amelia Earhart's manager, only to discover that he wasn't likable. Because her plays focus on women, she wrestled with how to write the role for Putnam and solved the dilemma by collaborating with her male friends. "Does this sound like a man?" she would ask. In the long run, she decided that her men sounded like men because she got help unwittingly from the actors. Because men played men's roles, they had the same motivation as her male characters and brought their interpretation to the roles.

Claire considers her next play, *When Will I Dance*, a play about Frida Kahlo, her favorite because it doesn't follow the typical play structure. The play ran for a year in Helsinki and played in other major cities worldwide. She considers *When Will I Dance* her masterpiece.

"One review called *Frida* a poetic masterpiece because it's like a long prose poem," she says. "It's very unusual because it uses theater in a new way. There are two people in the play, and they are both Frida Kahlo. I'm not interested in writing standard storytelling drama. I just don't have the desire. I like to bend time and space and create magic on the stage. Not magic in a hokey sense, but in a way that respects the audience and challenges me to be better than I can be by writing up to them. Of course, it helps only to tackle projects I'm 100 percent behind."

That challenge is brought home when a play contains a weak line. A strong poem can carry a few weak poems in a book of poetry, but that doesn't happen in a play performed before a live audience. A weak line can begin to lose the audience, and if they start thinking about something else, they're gone. That's why Claire views playwriting as "the most dangerous art."

During those years of writing, working, and raising her sons, when she wrote *Blue Skies Forever* and *When Will I Dance*, her work became the background of her family life. Two incidents brought this home to her. One night, while she completed a short story, one of her son's friends picked up the manuscript and found her name on it.

"You wrote this?" he wondered. "I didn't know you were a writer."

"What did you think I was doing sitting here at the typewriter every night?" she asked.

"Typing," he responded.

Another time, her son had trouble sleeping, and she asked if a warm glass of milk would help. He said no, it wouldn't, but if she could type for half an hour, he could go to sleep.

Despite her success at playwriting, her plays didn't bring financial independence. Claire continued working at UCSC, although when they lowered the retirement age to 50, she decided

to fulfill her life's dream and devote herself to writing. She would support herself with her small retirement package by teaching in the Spectra Program in public schools and giving her workshops.

"I retired from the university because I didn't have to support my kids anymore," she says. "It was just me, and if I went belly up, I'd be the only one floating in the bowl. I felt like a fish; I would place myself next to the edge of the water and wait for the tide to come in, and when it did, I'd jump in. The tide came in, I jumped, and I've been swimming ever since."

The first year after quitting her full-time job presented a real challenge. Finding it difficult to organize her various projects, Claire got five different briefcases. She wouldn't have to empty the work and keep track of it by keeping all the work pertaining to one project in each briefcase. Slowly, she got a handle on her new career. The Spectra project included teaching elementary and high school classes, and after judging writing contests in the California State Prisons, the men's prison at Soledad prison asked her to teach. Several years later, she began teaching at Chowchilla State Prison, a women's prison, where she wrote and produced the play *Women Behind the Walls* with the inmates. Since then, she has conducted workshops in most of the state prisons, and when Salinas Valley State Prison, a new maximum security facility, couldn't find a teacher, she took the job where she taught two classes a week.

"I love working in the prisons," she said. "I like working with inmates who are making art against all odds. I became a writer against all odds; with no training, no support, no mentors, and out of desperation, I broke into the field on my own. I can walk into the prison and say, 'If I can do it, you can do it. I'll give you something I never had. I'll show you step-by-step how to do it.' I can bring blessings to their lives. We make a holy place to write together out of the chaos and hell of prison. It brings peace to their lives. That's what it takes to succeed. People in touch with the artist in themselves are less likely to return to prison. It's an enormous job. Some of the men I work with will never get out of prison, but writing helps them find solace and gives them a way to cope with the dreary existence of prison."

In addition to working with adult prisoners, Claire has taught at Redwood Treatment Center, a juvenile hall facility and residential drug treatment center for teens who commit felonies. Her work there produced a play, *Listen to Our Voices*, which toured the alternative high schools in Santa Cruz County. Claire feels she can relate to the teenagers due to her own experiences growing up when she wore hand-me-downs and often went hungry. She finds that

many teenagers come from homes like the one she grew up in, except she didn't have the drugs that kids have now. If she had, she might very well have been in the same situation, except the nuns and her mother helped keep her together, and she can provide a role for troubled teenagers.

Claire found the support, feedback, and encouragement from the community of women writers in Santa Cruz made her realize she was no longer a square peg trying to fit into a round hole. She feels fortunate that she could grow and fulfill her dream of becoming a writer, a goal she pursues even in retirement. In addition to her teaching, she worked on a new play, *Hope*, about her grandmother and other immigrants coming through Ellis Island on their way to a new life in America. Despite her love for puttering around the house, playing with her dog, Barkley, and her addiction to rewriting—she calls herself "a rewriting junkie"—Claire organizes her days around writing.

"The thought of not working terrifies me," Claire said. "I can't imagine it. Finally, I have enough time to write—the one thing I really want to do. Some days, I wake up with a pencil in my hand and papers strewn around me on the bed. At night, I fall asleep in the middle of writing a sentence."

"Mary Holmes, gifted artist. told me once that the reason she didn't exhibit her later work was that she painted 'for the grace of God.' Since the fire, I write for the grace of God."