

Fury, Forgiveness, and Love: A Conversation with Lydia Stryk

by Jayne Benjulian



Part I

Lydia Stryk grew up in Dekalb Illinois, where her father, an accomplished poet, taught literature. Lucien Stryk is not just any poet: His translations of Chinese and Japanese Zen poems are considered groundbreaking.

Lydia's mother is British; and the family left the Midwest and lived for years at a time in London, where Lydia studied acting. Back in the U.S., her acting career was short-lived. At 22, she went to college to study philosophy, history and education at Hunter and thereafter journalism at NYU. She earned a Ph.D. in theater at the Graduate Center at City College in New York.

While interning at *The Nation*, she began writing plays. Loretta Greco directed a reading of her play *Monte Carlo* at the McCarter Theater in Princeton; last spring, nearly 20 years later, Lydia wrote Loretta asking if she'd be interested in reading the play she had just completed. That play was *An Accident*.

Jayne Benjulian: What is it like to grow up as the daughter of a poet? Do you think that has everything to do with the ear you developed for language?

Lydia Stryk: If I have one, probably.

JB I think good playwrights have to have one.

LS Words and language are everything.

JB Were you interested in his poetry?

LS I'd mimic it and write my own poems.

JB Your father wrote a poem called "Cherries," inspired by a Chekhov short story, "Gooseberries." There are cherries in your play. Did the cherries of his poem find their way into your play?

LS Those things are really subconscious... In spite of being a poet's daughter, my mother was at least as much—or more—of an influence. Her life was never easy, but she always knew how to make me laugh. No matter how mad I was at her, she could have me laughing within two minutes. I think that has probably something to do with why at all possible moments, I want to make people laugh, and humor is part of my world no matter how dark the worlds are. I love comedians. Lucille Ball is one of my heroines... Libby in the play is in a very dark situation, but she finds ways to get through it, also with humor, and that was fun for me to write.

Another influence is Moliere. I was in *Tartuffe* as a kid and played Doreen. I love characters that rail against the world. Spirited, bossy people—I'm attracted to that. It's not who I am—I mean I'll rail—but that's what interests me.

Finding lightness and darkness and humor in the most painful and difficult situations is a way to live in the world and create art. To balance the lightness and the darkness. The clown figure is an important one for me. A clown is a character who allows people to laugh at her plight—in my case they're mostly women characters. The clown never gives up, picks herself back up and keeps trying against all odds.

JB You nail the end of scenes. I can think of many examples from your plays. "I take comfort in that," Anton says, echoing Libby. The comment hangs in the air, resonates and buttons the entire scene. Where did you learn to do that?

LS I don't know. I never trained to be a playwright. That's just instinct. I trained to be an actress.

JB You were young when you went to drama school—18, 19, 20?

LS I was seventeen. I had the luck that my mother was British, and we would go and stay with her family in London. I went to the theater all the time. I saw John Gielgud, Ralph Richardson, Ian McKellen, Derek Jacobi, Judy Dench, Eileen Atkins, Janet Suzman, Glenda Jackson, Vanessa Redgrave.

JB When you're not seeing theater or reading plays, what do you read?

LS In the age of the Internet? Articles, mostly non-fiction. News, editorials.

JB Are you that “news junkie,” as Libby, the protagonist of *An Accident*, says?

LS Yes. I have that degree in journalism. You want to know what I love? Documentary films.

JB Is there a novelist that you love?

LS Hans Fallada, a German novelist—who along with Thomas Mann is read by every high school student in Germany. His aesthetic is very spare. The novel in the English translation is *Every Man Dies Alone*. It is about a working-class married couple who after the death of their only son in the war defy the Nazis by spreading anti-Nazi postcards. They are pursued by a detective, become his obsession. This is the greatest piece of writing I may have ever read.

JB Does that lean aesthetic also hold true for the plays you love?

LS I like spare, mysterious work: Caryl Churchill, Pinter, Chekhov. I like humor. I like something in there that’s left mysterious; not everything is explained. If I had a theater, people would be very bored: I’d do the same kind of plays all the time!

JB Tell me about your love for Pinter’s work. You saw Michael Gambon play the homeless tramp, Davies in *The Caretaker*.

LS What I love about Pinter is the playfulness and delight in language. Of course, the language menacing, but it makes you laugh because it’s so delightful. I love the humor in it and the mystery.

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JB Can you define what you mean by Pinter’s mystery?

LS Mystery in opposition to what we understand as psychologically motivated realism. We don’t need to know everything about a situation or the characters. For example, in *The Birthday*

Party, there's no conclusion that spells things out for you, and it doesn't matter. And I know that Pinter, like most dramatists of this century, was influenced by Beckett, and *Godot* is the quintessential play where people can draw all kinds of meanings from the work.

JB On the other hand, you don't like what you've called "poetic theatricality."

LS For me, the poetry is in the real, not in the theatrical. It's the intense human dynamic that is fascinating. It's about what goes on between people rather than stage magic.

JB For example, *An Accident*: two people in a room, extraordinary circumstances, and an intense relationship develops between the characters.

LS In most of my plays, that's the case. In *Glamour House*, an elegant German immigrant runs the dress shop and there's a young German woman who comes to work for her. It's this thing between these two people, what they're doing to each other.

JB Is this a Lydia Stryk play—sparse, tight, confined physical space, people who dive down deeply into each other? Who tell the bitter truth? And the truth first hurts then heals?

LS Well I don't like the work "healing" because it implies somewhat of a happy ending. Things are left open. Nothing is resolved completely. I don't believe "all is well" despite the joy of physical healing.

JB What was going on in the world when you were writing *An Accident*? What might have influenced you, other than your personal history?

LS I was writing in the late summer, fall of 2008 through spring of 2009. I was sitting with bombs going off everywhere... in Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan. Body parts.

JB *An Accident* is dedicated to the stage and film actor and director Austin Pendleton. How did you meet him?

LS When I first came to New York, I was an actress, and I was working on *Shenandoah*, a funny little play by the poet, Delmore Schwartz, about a young Jewish wife, whom I played. She wants to name her child "Shenandoah" and the whole family is up in arms. It was directed by the actress, Florence Stanley, and she knew Austin, they worked together in *Fiddler on the Roof*. She gave him my first play, *Monte Carlo*...He wrote me this beautiful letter in response. When I wrote *Glamour House* and *The House of Lily*, he gave them to Steppenwolf—I didn't know he was a member of Steppenwolf—and they decided to do *The House of Lily*. It can be very dark out there for every playwright. When I was fed up with rejection and didn't think I could write another play, he made me feel like it was possible to go on. I said, "I don't know, Austin, I have this one idea of something I could write for you." He said, "Write it. Write that play for me." This play represents our relationship on some level because he really did save my life. Like Anton saves Libby's life.

JB And *An Accident* is the next play you wrote?

LS Yes.

JB I am interested in the transformation of your personal experience into art. Six years went by after your own accident before you began this play. You created a character who is a patient but not you and a man who visits her but never really existed. Every artist aspires to create something that transcends the personal and achieves something bigger and metaphorical. How did you start this process of transformation?

LS I'd been doing some essay writing, writing stuff for the *Brooklyn Rail*, this journal in New York... and I was thinking of doing a book or a riff on accidents, and I thought it would be something I would definitely want to write about, but I didn't think about it as a play... I thought philosophically about the accident all the time: bad luck, fate, the way a simple decision can alter the course of your life. Noting and wondering if there are accident-prone people. The famous singer Edith Piaf had all kinds of terrible accidents.

JB When did you understand you were writing a play?

LS It was dormant for five years. And then two years ago, I became very interested in the role of the driver, who had a huge influence on my life. Not just my driver, but *the* driver—because we're all potential drivers. When I was in the hospital, there were two other beds, and in the third bed was another woman, and the driver who hit her came in to visit. And that's when I came to the idea that this could be transformed into drama when I began to think about those two people.

JB What scene did you write first?

LS Libby's monologue, alone in the room. Then it progressed in time start-to-finish. I don't usually write that way. It had its own dynamic, and it was moving somewhere. And I was surprised by where it went.

JB What surprised you?

LS What she wanted from him.

JB Specifically?

LS Everything. She wants him to save her life.

JB How do you imagine time unrolling in this play?

LS In a hospital room, there's a lot of silence and time filled with things that aren't spoken. There are moments when people are trying to figure out what to say. No one's going anywhere.

Rob Melrose and I both have a favorite director, Christoph Marthaler [a Swiss director], who makes his audience confront time and their own discomfort with nothing happening. Our culture is so speedy that we're less and less used to being asked to just sit with something. You do get a sense when you're asked to sit with something, of time's expansiveness. Directors or filmmakers who give you time offer a kind of a gift. It might make you uncomfortable to stay for a while, but stay, and something might happen to you; it might open up something in you, and there's so little of that in our culture.

JB What has been the effect of living and writing in Berlin and not in your own country?

LS I have something of an outsider status. I write about my own country with an outsider's point of view. And I've observed how people can get passionate and emotional about ideas. *On Clarion* is a play about someone obsessed with an idea.

JB That the earth will be destroyed and a select group will be transformed and transported to another planet by aliens.

LS Yes. It's based on a true story. There were a number of UFO cults in the fifties. A woman founded one of these end-of-time groups...

JB What makes you feel at home now in Berlin?

LS There's a culture of so-called *Schreber* gardens or garden colonies all over cities and small towns, including Berlin. They're strips of land you can rent. So I've become a gardener. I'm starting to grow things.

JB How far is it from your house?

LS About 10 or 20 minutes on a bike. This garden is very un-German, unordered. It's a witch's garden: seven apple trees, a plum tree and old rose bushes like trees. I thought I was going to write there, but when I get there, I garden. And it makes me happy. There's always something to do in a garden.

JB The bed and the garden are two vivid parts of your world. In *An Accident*, which you've said is loosely based on an accident of your own that kept you on your back for two months, a woman spends much of the play in various states of immobility on her hospital bed. Some people might consider that experience impossible to re-imagine in a play.

LS The bed, the stage of her literal recovery, is also the site of fury, forgiveness, and love. I have noticed that the bed is often the site of drama in my work. And for those whose dramatic aesthetic demands action and movement, a play set on a bed may seem wanting. But there are actions and movement of the imagination that can also claim the name of drama. These have been and continue to be of greater interest to me as a playwright. You might say that there are

those who favor the story of a rocket taking off and exploring space, while I am drawn to the bed—from where other forms of exploration and mental flight become possible.

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