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Mother and child reunion

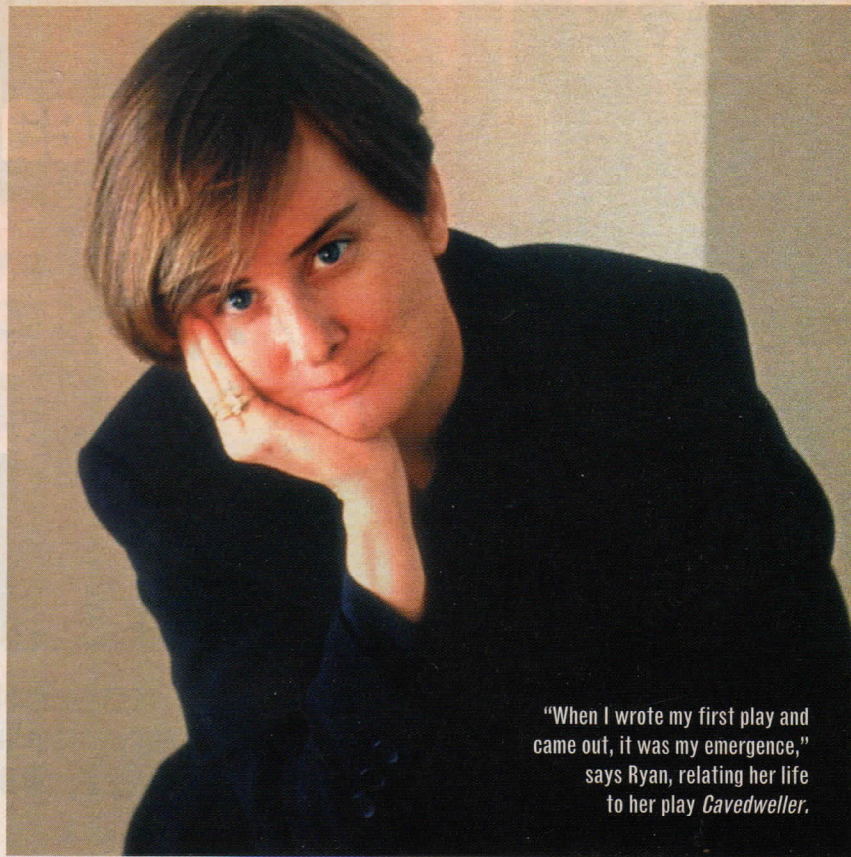
Lesbian mom and playwright Kate Moira Ryan talks about transforming Dorothy Allison's *Cavedweller* from page to stage **By Gerard Raymond**

When Kate Moira Ryan was 18, she came out to her parents and announced her arrival as a talented new dramatist in a single stroke.

The occasion was the premiere of *Windhover*, her play about two girls falling in love, at New York City's Young Playwrights Festival. That night her father, a strict Irish Catholic, drove home without a word after the performance—stranding the young playwright and her mother, who had to take the train home to suburban Yonkers on their own.

"It was a terrible, horrible night," recalls Ryan, 37. Over time, though, Dad came around, and Ryan and her girlfriend of nine years, Laurie Liss, even named their now-3-year-old son after him. Her career has blossomed as well, with awards and critical praise for works such as *The Autobiography of Aiken Fiction*, *Damage and Desire*, and *Hadley's Mistake*. Now Ryan is gearing up for her most high-profile production yet: her adaptation of *Cavedweller*, the novel by National Book Award-winning lesbian author Dorothy Allison, opening May 8 at the New York Theatre Workshop. (Previews began April 18.)

"The book is about a woman's redemption," says Ryan. She chose the Allison story after receiving a commission to adapt an American novel for the stage from director Michael Greif (*Rent*), who at the time was artistic director of the La Jolla Playhouse near San Diego.



"When I wrote my first play and came out, it was my emergence," says Ryan, relating her life to her play *Cavedweller*.

Cavedweller chronicles the life of Delia, a Janis Joplin-like former rock star who decides to go with her 12-year-old daughter back to her hometown in the South to reclaim the two other daughters she abandoned. Adapting the story, Ryan says, "coincided with my own journey becoming a mother. When I started, it was like, *How could his woman leave her children?* Now I understand the choices you would have to make if you were in that situation. If she had stayed, she would have been killed." Also, she adds, back in Yonkers "it was not too uncommon to find women who had to make terrible choices in their lives—women with restraining orders against men."

Cavedweller strikes deeper chords for Ryan as well—Delia's youngest daughter, Cissy, is the same age Ryan was when she first started to write. Cissy gives the work its title: She's able to overcome her displacement trauma and adolescent rage only when exploring the caves near her Georgia home. "The cave is a metaphor for emerging into the light, finding your strength, which is what each of the girls does," Ryan says. "When I wrote my first play and came out, it was my emergence."

Now Ryan is the parent rather than the child—as are some of her chief collaborators. *Cavedweller* director Greif is a gay dad, raising two children, and Ryan's collaborator on another project is lesbian comedian Judy Gold, whose experiences as a working Jewish mother form the basis of her recent one-person show, *G-d Doesn't Pay Rent Here*, which Ryan cowrote. "We are always exchanging these endless stories about our children," Ryan says with a laugh.

Ryan will work with Greif again on *Otma*, a play about the final days of the four daughters of the last czar of Russia slated for the New York Theatre Workshop next season. She's also adapting, with Linda Chapman, three novels from the Beebo Brinker series by 1950s lesbian pop novelist Ann Bannon.

Then there's her lifetime project: son Timothy. "I think I am going to take him to a rehearsal just so he can see the stage," she says. "All he wants to do is play with Rescue Heroes and fire trucks, and I am like, 'We can listen to *Gypsy* now!' It's really fun to see him grow up." ■

Raymond writes on theater and film and lives in New York City.