

Hey, Hey Paula

A season after her Pulitzer for *How I Learned to Drive*, Paula Vogel brings *The Mineola Twins* to New York.

By Gerard Raymond

Leave it to Paula Vogel to continue surprising us in the theater. The intrepid playwright, who won a Pulitzer Prize last year for her coming of age/pedophile love story, *How I Learned to Drive*, keeps her audience off-balance by refracting her clear-eyed view of current political issues through a humane and off-beat sensibility. In *The Oldest Profession* (soon to be a movie with Olympia Dukakis), five aging prostitutes — the youngest is 72 — struggle to ply their trade in the wake of the Reagan revolution's economic fallout; in *Hot 'n' Throbbing* (yet to be produced in New York), a mother of two makes a living by writing pornography at home. "In every play, I communicate the way I see the world," Vogel explains. Now comes *The Mineola Twins*, an allegorical comedy featuring a pair of sisters, poles apart politically and sexually. Opening Feb. 18 at the Roundabout Theatre, the new play is a farcical tour of the allegedly innocent 1950s, the revolutionary '60s, and the morally righteous '80s. The production is directed by Joe Mantello and stars Swoosie Kurtz as the twins Myra and Myrna.

On a roll since the Pulitzer, Vogel is simultaneously working on a film version of *How I Learned to Drive*, a TV project for Showtime co-scripted

by Terrence McNally and Harvey Fierstein, and *A Civil War Christmas*, an elaborate pageant for D.C.'s Arena Stage, where Vogel is currently playwright in residence. Talking about *The Mineola Twins*, the playwright reveals the darker aspects of her playful new comedy.



The Mineola Twins and *How I Learned to Drive* both feature heroines you describe as "stacked"; the plays are published together as "The Mammary Plays." What's with the big bosoms, and what's the connection between the two plays?

Who makes the breast jokes in this country? I love burlesque and vaudeville comedy, and I wanted to see what

happens when a woman uses that kind of material. When I got a Pew grant back in 1995, I decided to write two plays that would take place over many decades. I wanted both plays to have certain common themes, one of which was going to be women with large breasts — a cultural way of looking at the female body. The other theme was about family and what that notion meant to each generation. I think both plays portray a history of cultural femaleness from the '50s all the way to the '80s, so they really are walks down mammary lane in different ways. I was also thinking of how Greek playwrights do satyr plays — first there's a serious play and then one which is almost parodistic. *The Mineola Twins* is kind of the satyr play to *How I Learned to Drive*.

Is there a reason for specifying that the play takes place during the Eisenhower, Nixon, and Bush administrations?

I wanted to see what the collision of these different eras was like. Look, there's no way that I can hide my own orientation going into this play. I'm a Democratic lesbian. Actually, my problem with the Democrats is that they are too goddamn much like the Republicans.

You've said somewhere that *The Mineola Twins* is about the "political schizophrenia" of this country.

I wrote the play at a time when I was getting increasingly upset about how polarized we've become. Because, quite frankly, the stridency only gets worse. I've come to a point where I can't watch television; my blood pressure goes up too much. The twin metaphor came to me as a way of examining that polarization.

How do you feel personally about Myrna, the right-wing twin?

The surprise for me, in my journey as a writer, is that I identify with Myrna. I don't think one can say the play's world is evenly balanced, but I think you can say it is empathic in terms of this woman who represents a good girl — the Republican in each of these decades. It was my way of working through what I disliked and what I feared — the people that made me feel like the outsider, like the alien. I think all my plays deal with things that disturb me. It's like my trying to empathize with a pedophile in *How I Learned to Drive*. I think I do have a point of view and an emotional leaning, but I'm willing to take the journey as far as I can.

Audiences may have differing opinions about the twins, but did you originally set out to make one sister good and the other bad?

I thought a lot about Caryl Churchill's plays. One of the things I love about her is that she's always thumbing her nose at this notion of psychological continuity. Take for example, the first and the second acts of *Cloud Nine*. Look at where a character starts and where the heck they end up — it's worlds apart.

So, is *The Mineola Twins* a tribute to Caryl Churchill?

There are three writers that I sound moronic about: Caryl Churchill, John Guare, and Maria Irene Fornes. They thrill me. They have immense soul and never repeat the same play twice. I'd say with *The Mineola Twins* my inspiration was Caryl Churchill, but at times I think, "Oh my God, I stole from John Guare." They have that facility of making you laugh at one

moment and then suddenly turning. I think it's a homage to both of them.

Why do you use 1950s horror movie techniques in the play?

When I was five, my brothers — who were older — were being taken to a horror matinee. Young feminist that I was, whatever my brothers did, I could do. The moment I saw that horror movie, I knew my brothers were going to be waiting for me behind the doors or jump out of a closet and terrify me. So I hid behind the door and scared them first. I also went into such ecstasies describing the movie that my



mum said, 'If you like it so much, we'll let you go next week.' I saw horror movie after horror movie — *The Screaming Skull*, *Geronimo* — and I was scared to death. But I had to assume this [brave] persona; only years later did I finally confess to my mother [that I was scared]. But it did sort of teach me that when I'm scared by something, I go all the way. I had read the complete works of Edgar Allan Poe by the time I was in fourth grade.

You also mix the horror genre with comedy...

Part of that is from an absolute admiration of Hitchcock and what I learned from Roman Polanski's *The Fearless Vampire Killers*. The way [in which] comedy and fear works goes all the way back to Aristotle. With comedy, you disarm people — you relax, you laugh, and then you are naked for the terror. The fear and the pity, the terror and the empathy are really compan-

ions, always glancing off each other.

Did your partner of 10 years [developmental geneticist Anne Fausto Sterling] influence this play?

Anne questions whether identity is a neat result of either environment or genetics. As a member of the gay community, I would like to have a nice, easy answer where I can forge my identity and a sense of solidarity, but her work has made me question this. I see more and more that sexual identity is in constant flux — which is why I'm so attached to Caryl Churchill's work. [Like Anne,] Churchill has the same way of looking at individuals as very complicated facets that exist in a social and economic climate, more so than in a psychological climate. I personally don't think I have a fixed sexual identity. I know what I feel now as a "lesbian" at age 47 has nothing to do with the "lesbian" that I thought I was when I was 27. Still, for political reasons, I think it's important to put myself in the box and call myself a lesbian.

I feel Anne is opening sexual windows. But I'm not a scientist; my play is a lay person's response. At the time I started writing the play, Anne was working on her second book. She was reading about the Minnesota twins, [a long-term study] that's trying to find the basis for homosexuality. I thought, I can't call my play *The Minnesota Twins* — that's a baseball team. Then I thought Mineola: [Long Island Railroad killer] Colin Ferguson trial...suburbs...great!

You have also dedicated *The Mineola Twins* to your partner.

I have to speak very personally here. I started writing *The Baltimore Waltz* only after I got involved with her, and if I stop and look at the plays that I've written since — *Hot 'n' Throbbing*, *The Mineola Twins*, and *How I Learned to Drive* — I'd say the impact of loving this person has been immense. ■

GERARD RAYMOND most recently profiled Athol Fugard for *InTheater*.