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Intricate Dialogue of the Everyday: Playwright Melissa Ross on "Of Good Stock"



THE STOCKTON SISTERS: Andrea Syglowski is Celia, Melanie Lora is Jess and Kat Foster is Amy.

Of Good Stock, an SCR commission now receiving its world premiere on the Segerstrom Stage, begins on a summer morning in the Stockton family's Cape Cod home. There, Jess Stockton and her husband, Fred, prepare for a weekend visit from Jess' younger sisters, Amy and Celia.

The Stockton sisters are the daughters of legendary novelist Mick Stockton, a man whose life was as infamous as his writing is famous. The Stockton sisters grew up relying on each other. As adults, however, the three women—with their distinctive and very different personalities—don't always see eye-to-eye.

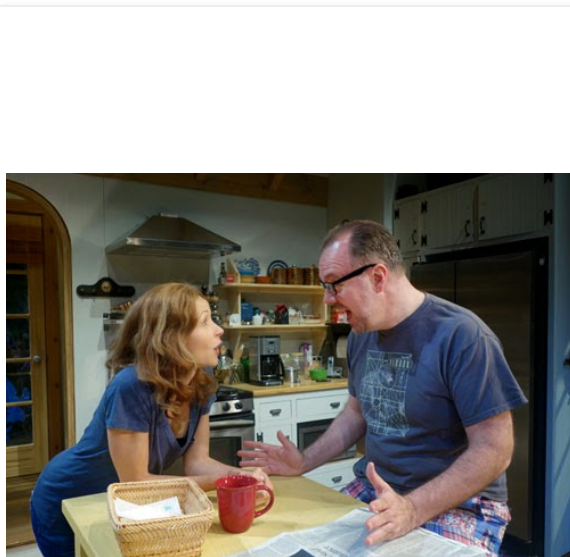
Celia, the youngest, is the first to arrive with a new man in tow.

Amy, the middle sister, arrives next, with her fiancé, Josh. She's in the midst of planning her wedding, an extravagant affair, and it's all that she can talk about—even when there are more important matters at hand.

Once the cast of characters is assembled, playwright Melissa Ross weaves together the comedy and drama of real life to tell a story full of surprises and revelations. With her compassionate writing and intricate dialogue that beautifully captures the rhythm and idiosyncrasies of everyday speech, *Of Good Stock* becomes a singular yet relatable and hilarious yet moving look at a family coming together to keep from falling apart.

Although Ross is making her South Coast Repertory debut with *Of Good Stock*, some SCR audiences may be familiar with her work from the 2012 Pacific Playwrights Festival (PPF) reading of *You Are Here*—or even last year's PPF reading of *Of Good Stock*. Her plays tell disparate stories, but are unified by their detailed and complex relationships—whether they're within a family, like those at the center of *Of Good Stock* and *Thinner Than Water* (which premiered at New York's Labyrinth Theater Company in 2011), or amongst a group of friends, like those found in *You Are Here*.

Her work has not only captured the attention of SCR, but also of theatres across the country—and her plays have been produced or developed by Labyrinth Theater Company, Chicago's Gift Theatre and New York Stage and Film, among many others. After its world premiere at SCR, *Of Good Stock* will receive a production at Manhattan Theatre Club.



Melanie Lora (Jess) and Rob Nagle (Fred).



Playwright Melissa Ross

Q&A with Ross

In the midst of her busy rehearsal schedule, Ross took some time to share a little bit about her style and writing process and her sources of inspiration.

What's the very first play you remember seeing—and why does it still stay with you?

Growing up in a small town, a lot of my very early theatre experiences were televised—aside from my Christmas visit to the Boston Ballet's *Nutcracker* and an occasional touring production of *Annie*. I used to love to watch the old musical films with my grandmother when I was little—like *West Side Story* and *My Fair Lady* and *The Sound of Music*. This segued to VHS tapes of the PBS Great Performances of the Sondheim musicals—*Sweeney Todd* and *Into the Woods* and *Sunday in the Park with George*. My grandma also took me to my first Broadway play on a special trip to NYC that we did together. I wish I could remember which of these was the actual first—but they are all kind of swirled together into a blur of wonderful memories of my grandmother and her infectious love of music and theater that she so graciously shared with me.

What drew you to playwriting?

I wrote my first play when I was about eight years old. It was a sort of riff on fairy tales. *Cinderella* got married to the prince—and ironically still ended up doing housework. So she decided to get a divorce. I performed it as a one woman show by the pool at my grandparents' rental condo in Boca Raton. I have no idea why I felt compelled to write it—but I think it was a combo of my parents divorcing, *Free to Be You and Me*-infused feminism—and a strange awareness that Disney fairy tales were not terribly realistic.

I love the music and rhythm of people talking. I love figuring out how people use language. I love eavesdropping on conversations. And trying to figure out the score of every day speech. Writing dialogue for me is a little like writing music.

What gets a play idea started for you?

Most of my plays start with characters talking. Sometimes I hear snippets of dialogue floating in the ether, and I'll scribble them down just to save them until I know what it is. Sometimes I ruminate on things—like a certain era or location or theme—but I still don't know what's what till I know who is talking.

How would you describe your writing style or "voice"?

Oh gosh—I wish I had an articulate answer for that! I don't actually know. I would definitely say I write character-driven more than plot-driven plays. If someone were to do a parody of my writing—it would probably have way too much overlapping dialogue. And an overabundance of punctuation. I love punctuation. Almost to the point of ridiculousness. I love the grammatical incorrectness of real speech.

There are amazing sister dynamics in *Of Good Stock*. How do you create characters?

I was an actress for many years—and so some of my character work as a writer is informed by that background. As I'm writing a play, I'm acting out all of the parts as I write it. And so I think that some of the characters start to be influenced by choices I'd make if I were acting that part. When I get stuck in a play, I often leap out of it and approach it as an actor and ask myself what sorts of questions I'd be asking the playwright if I were in rehearsal.

I also tend to think that as unique as we all are as individuals—there are also large-scale human conditions that make us all almost frustratingly and heartbreakingly alike. And so sometimes it's just about thinking. If I were this particular person—living this particular life—at this particular time—feeling scared about this thing that I sometimes feel scared about too—what would that be. How would it be the same as me—and how would it be different.

***Of Good Stock's* Dramaturg Jerry Patch on the Musicality of Ross' Writing**

It's become fashionable among playwrights to write characters who interrupt each other—this is an attempt to more closely resemble actual speech. Actors are asked to begin their line before the actor giving the previous speech has finished.

In my experience nobody uses this new tool better than Melissa. The overlapping dialogue she writes propels action in her characters and sets a quick pace for her audiences to follow—a good thing. It becomes musical: allegro, even presto, until it slows to andante or even holds—a fermata.

If you could have lunch with any woman from theatre history, living or past (playwright, director, actor, etc.), who would that be and what would your conversation be about?

Can I have more than one? I'd love to have Wendy Wasserstein and Madeline Kahn and Gilda Radner over for cocktails. A couple bottles of Malbec. Maybe a charcuterie plate. And then I'd just like to hang out with them and talk about anything and everything.

What advice have you been given that has been very useful to you as a writer? Why does it work for you?

Write about things that scare you or once scared you. Write not necessarily about "what you know"—since we should always write about things outside of ourselves—but write from a place of your own personal truth. There's a beautiful quote from John Patrick Shanley that I particularly love—and have seen often cited by others over the years: "Writing is acting is directing is living your life." It's exquisite and vast in its simplicity and truth—and I think is so resonant to anyone who makes any kind of art.