

REVIEWS



Rob Nagle and Aleisha Force in Lisa Loomer's *Roe* at the Fountain Theatre (Photo by Jenny Graham)

Reviewed by Taylor Kass

The Fountain Theatre

Through July 10

RECOMMENDED

Roe at The Fountain Theatre is an obituary. Like any good funeral, it is passionately felt and imbued with the appropriate gravity. It has moments of humor and levity. One may laugh, one may cry. Hearing “Roe was here,” freshly past tense, is devastating. The Fountain’s

“hyper-staged reading” of Lisa Loomer’s play chronicling the *Roe v. Wade* case and its aftermath, under the direction of Vanessa Stallings, was commissioned as a call to action after a draft of the Supreme Court’s decision was leaked in early May. Premiering the day after the fall of *Roe*, this production has become a memorial marking all we have lost. But that doesn’t mean it’s not still one of the most vitally important pieces of theater in Los Angeles.

There is no such thing as an objective historical account, so *Roe* doesn’t try to be one. Instead, it embraces the nuanced and often-contradictory stories of Norma McCorvey (Kate Middleton), better known as the anonymous plaintiff Jane Roe, and Sarah Weddington (Christina Hall), the lawyer who successfully argued the case in the Supreme Court. They narrate the case’s journey to the Supreme Court and beyond as they bicker, their tense relationship underscoring the complicated gray areas in the building of the case and its fallout. It’s a colorful and character-driven journey, entertaining and emotional throughout. The Fountain’s outdoor stage is light on props and set pieces, but includes more elevated sound and lighting design than is typical for a staged reading, complete with headphones to ensure each audience member can hear the actors.

Norma McCorvey herself is a bewildering character, who went from working in abortion clinics post-*Roe* to converting to anti-choice evangelism. Middleton as McCorvey is endlessly likable, with a whip-smart sense of humor and a warm laugh, even as her behavior is maddeningly confusing. But just as McCorvey struggled to hold onto a sense of identity as the idea of Jane Roe started to eclipse her, Weddington saw Jane Roe as a representative for all American women. Hall as Weddington is fiercely determined, pulling from a deep reservoir of strength and intelligence. The rest of the excellent ensemble fill in the other characters in *Roe*’s history including lawyers and family members and prominent anti-abortion figures; standouts include Susan Lynskey, with cheeky asides galore, and Kenya Alexander, whose stunning final monologue is gut-wrenching and unforgettable.

In her opening speech, Christina Hall as Sarah Weddington asked audience members to raise their hands if they had known an America before the protection of *Roe v. Wade*. Many did. They remembered the illegal back-alley operations, the fear of prosecution, the crushing shame. They did not dream we would ever go back.

The Fountain Theatre Outdoor Stage, 5060 Fountain Ave., Hollywood; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m.; through July 10. Running time: 2 hours with one 15-minute intermission. (323) 663-1525 or <https://FountainTheatre.com>.