

AN INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT
STEPHANIE BARBER BY
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AUGUST 16, 2021



Courtesy of Stephanie Barber

Baltimore based filmmaker, Stephanie Barber, whose career has spanned over 20 years, has embarked on a new creative journey that has produced the publication of her debut play, *Trial in the Woods* (*Plays Inverse*).

The play explores the complexity of the justice system. In the story, a trial commences due to a senseless act of violence that occurs in a dance class, causing the class's participants (who are diverse animals who live amongst each other in the woods) to become witnesses in a trial to decide whether to prosecute Ovella Otter for killing a young wolf.

Through the lens of Barber's own trauma and understanding of violence, she creates a fictional world where animals who live in a close-knit community must face the world of punitive justice and law in order to find an appropriate consequence for the otter who, unprovoked, killed another animal in cold blood.

Barber talks about her play and her experience of grappling with the complexity of ethics, justice and the senseless loss of people she loved.

TERSE.: *Talk about the anatomy of a play and key elements that make your work unique.*

Stephanie Barber: Because I've done more work writing screenplays for films, and I have an interest in formalism and structuralism, this play is pretty formulaic. There's the opening scene in the dance space and the courtroom procedure. And in between, what I see as the group chorus is the news announcer both serving as a moment of rest between action and also a bit of commentary on what's happening. So, in that way, it's pretty formal, but not a traditional formal five acts with the climax happening in the fourth act. It's not a Shakespearean arc.

One thing that I'm always trying to do is grapple with the complex, very profound, largest questions, but speaking to them not in the traditional tone of authority so that they are being handled with humor or off-handed comments or in different dialects so that it's not just an academic review of philosophy or ethics.

TERSE.: Do you decide that your plays are going to be comedy or drama before you begin to write or *does comedy and irony unfold as you move through the story?*

Barber: This is my first play, so I don't know if I have a space [in the genre] yet, and two feature films I made were screenplays, but I wasn't necessarily imagining them on the stage. I did go to a performing arts high school for playwriting, so I wrote some stuff many years ago.

But with all my work, I naturally entwine comedy and drama. I don't think of them as separate entities. I think the most profound drama has a lot of laughter and vice versa. Something being drama or tragedy doesn't feel profound without humor to me. I guess I need that complexity and recognition that things aren't only one tone.

TERSE.: *Did you outline this play or run through it with just an idea?*

Barber: I did not outline it, but I knew exactly what had to happen. I knew I didn't want to make a very clear definitive ending because I didn't want to write a didactic treatise of the justice system. I did want it to be critical of punitive justice because I don't believe that it's effective. So, I knew where I wanted [the play] to go and I knew while I was writing it that the newscaster would punctuate, so that was a built-in structure.

But I have to say that the courtroom is also a performative formulaic structure that I was able to rely on. It's a great way to bifurcate ethics so I can say one thing and say the opposite, and it makes perfect sense within this. It's also what I spiritually lean towards. It's just this is right and this is wrong.

TERSE.: *What was your attraction to law and justice when writing this play?*

Barber: There so much violence in the neighborhood that I've always lived in East Baltimore. There was incredible amounts of violence since Freddie Gray was murdered. We always had a rougher neighborhood, but there was a sense of balance or some kind of common sense respect but after Freddie Gray, along with the Gun Trace Task Force being very active [during that time] there was much violence. So, all these violent things happen to people who were close to me. People who were not in the game at all, including long-term residents who marched for Civil Rights, were killed.

Consequently, I was getting talked to by the police and I just couldn't ethically figure out what was right to share with them of what I knew or to stay out of it altogether. It was complicated ethically and it's very important for me to be a responsible citizen in my community, but I didn't have the right answer for what was the most responsible way to honor my neighbors.

TERSE.: *So, the murder of the wolf by the otter was senseless and you struggled to find a reason for what was going on.*

Barber: Yes, just senseless. And it was not knowing if prosecution, even separate from the reason [made sense], what does the community do? Do we put that otter in jail, put some young kid in jail? That's not going to cure anything. It doesn't help those who were murdered and the person who committed that crime. I just find all of it complicated.

While I was working on it, my research was kind of this fork space of Law and Order SVU, thinking about procedural shows and more political work about punitive justice like Jackie Wang's *Carceral Capitalism* which is about how we understand the justice system and who gets caught up in it, and how the community responds.

TERSE.: *Why did you choose animals as characters in the play and not people?*

Barber: People are animals. One reason is that I am an imaginative person. I'd rather spend my time thinking about non-human animals. I'm more attracted to them particularly after going through all of what I did. I think humans get so much play in the media, but I also wanted to remove age, race and gender as much as I could — which is an impossible, aspirational, and maybe naive goal — but I wanted to move the element less from the body of the speaker and more to the words that the speaker was creating, [which] felt like a more just way to get at the idea.

TERSE.: *Why did you decide to pursue publishing *Trial in the Woods*?*

Barber: The play was originally commissioned through Annex Theater Company, then Annex broke up, and Sarah Jacklin wanted to follow through with that goal. I was excited and was sort of ripe with all the stuff I went through, then I finished it and I really liked it. It felt like a whole, concise piece.

A friend of mine told me to check out this play publisher, *Plays Inverse*. They're a small publisher but they have a great catalog. I bought a couple of pieces of theirs and I queried them. It took a couple of years because of COVID, but they said they'd like to publish it.

***TERSE.:** How do you stay encouraged when you are creating? Do you feel restless when you're not presenting your work?*

Barber: I'm almost always presenting work because I have a practice of making short experimental films, and they are out there working on my behalf, showing a few times a month around the world. So, I have a feeling that there's a representative of my thoughts out in the world even if I am not performing or working on a big project that I feel present in.

But I do feel restless because, like a lot of artists, I want to do something to somebody. I want it to touch somebody, make them laugh or cry or have an idea. So, I feel very restless when I'm not in the middle of a project or able to share a project or talk about it with people and [hear] what they thought about it.

It's difficult to stay encouraged but as soon as I'm in a project I feel cradled by the labor. I feel like there's an enormous amount of strength [required] to keep going, and I recently realized that I'm constantly consoling myself and am encouraging myself. But once I'm in it, I feel like my existence has meaning.

Jordannah Elizabeth's writing, lectures and commentary has been featured in Hearst Magazines, on BBC 2, REELZ Channel, CBC syndicated radio, WYPR, Harvard University, Pratt Institute, Maryland Institute College of Art and Baltimore Book Festival. Jordannah's writing has been featured in NPR Music, Village Voice, LA Weekly, MTV World, O Magazine, Cosmopolitan, DownBeat Magazine and other publications. She has been a regular entertainment journalist for New York Amsterdam News since 2013 and is the founder of the literary organization Publik / Private.