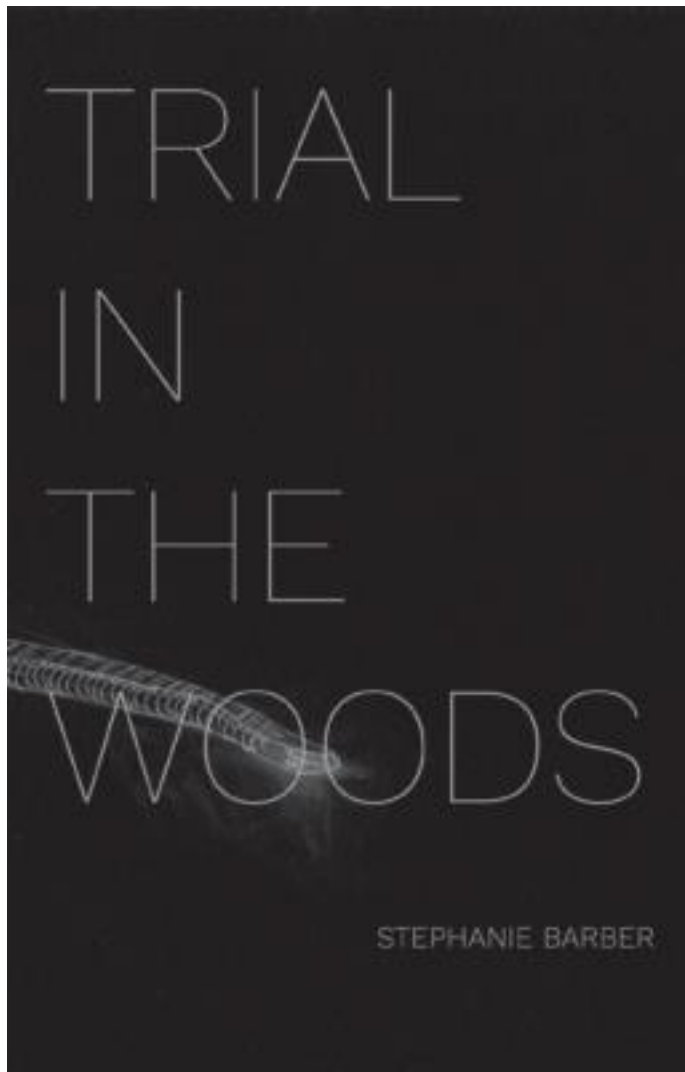


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**Baltimore Writers’ Club: Author Stephanie
Barber Responds to Local Violence with “Trial in
the Woods”** By Amy Eisner

-December 1, 2021



Baltimore writer-filmmaker-poet-artist Stephanie Barber's play *Trial in the Woods*, commissioned by the Baltimore Annex Theater, was written amid violence in Baltimore and nationwide calls to reform our justice system. In the play, as in our unending news cycle, inexplicable violence is followed by courtroom procedure. But in the woods, as poet-playwrights from Shakespeare to Sondheim have shown, events unfold differently. The possibilities for entanglement and play are expansive, and the most intractable problems are transformed—in this case, to joyful, gorgeous, laugh-out-loud moments of lucidity.

In *Trial in the Woods*, the characters don't journey to the woods. They're already there. They're animals. One kills another—right in the middle of an exercise class. A trial ensues. Witnesses are called.

But what they say, and what they saw, is earthy and ethereal, assured and destabilizing. No surprise to anyone who's been following Barber's work (from haiku to films) or her teaching in the interdisciplinary Mount Royal School of Art MFA program at MICA. Those new to Barber, or to reading plays, should have no trepidation, though. This play performs itself.

We caught up with Stephanie Barber to discuss *Trial in the Woods*, just published by Plays Inverse, and already being taught at the University of Iowa.



BFB: As a poet I really appreciated the surprising, strange, yet completely accessible language of the play, especially from characters like Elijah Wolf and Zinnia Snake. How did these characters develop? Why are they animals?

SB: I really love the play (or screenplay) form for this ability to shape a character through their words. Side-step description. There's an organic unfolding of the characters' ways of being in the world.

Though the play is very funny and fantastical, I'm serious about the working out of every ethical angle presented by this trial. I'm usually more interested in ideas than 'personalities' though the extent to which a personality is constructed by its carrier's engagement with particular ideas is a compelling idea.

I also just had a lot of fun developing different voices, different linguistic quirks and word choices. I'm interested in delighting people and hope that a reader will laugh out loud or shed a tear or two. The distinctive ways the characters speak all support the philosophical premise of the text, as well as my pleasure and your delight.

BFB: The defense asks Ms. Harwood Owl “can you be certain that what you took as true, what you saw that day at the wishing well was in fact the truth of the occurrence as every animal would recognize it?” And she says no. Do you think we can agree on truth these days or only on perspectives?

SB: I don't know. Along with this relativism I'm tossing over the forest, there is also a willful desire to not give a fixed answer to any of these pivotal questions. Willful characters, willful playwright.

I'm interested in recognizing the limits of my own information gathering systems, my unreliable senses, my lifelong reading list, my family's sense of humor, my American experience.... Certainly I have a different perspective on life than a Syrian refugee, a Russian oligarch, a child soldier or Stephen Hawking or on and on. There are such very different experiences we have as humans and the more humans there are (we are at 8 billion) the more complicated a fixed ethics becomes. A lot of the play is thinking about the importance, and deep generosity of, recognizing our limits.

Recognizing, as Ms. Harwood Owl does, that one cannot be sure of the truth as every animal would recognize it. Sometimes simply releasing the onus to be an expert, to be sure in our understanding of a moment or person or situation or anything is the most intelligent choice. This is a deeply uncomfortable space for many people, this recognizing that we do not know, that we could not possibly

know, in a world full of interconnected, tentacular relations and constant temporal shifts. To know suggests a fixed place, a fixed continuing, which is physically preposterous.



4 / 6

The play is about staying with the questions, echoing Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*, an incredible book about the relationship between humans and animals. I feel strongly that a retributive (or punitive) justice system is childish, ineffective and cruel but maybe cruel and ineffective and childish is the human animal nature and so, perhaps it is the very most right path?

BFB: I understand from a mention in the acknowledgements that your own wood/hood in Baltimore was disrupted by sudden, inexplicable, familial murder. *Trial in the Woods* responds to that, tries to fathom it. When you think about the real events, are they still unfathomable? Are you able to imagine alternatives for your neighborhood, or for Baltimore, that you couldn't before?

SB: The violence in my Baltimore neighborhood was (and is) extreme. And yes, it is still unfathomable to me. Deeply sad, deeply disturbing and my closest friends in the neighborhood who consistently helped me think through the ethics, efficacy and dangers of speaking with either police or the practitioners of the violence and whose insights and questions helped to make this play so nuanced were then murdered themselves.

There is so much more I can, and should, say about this but it's hard for me to speak about it without sliding into a flustered and inarticulate rant. Every thought I've had about these acts is in the play, transposed through a lens of poetry and imagination which have been my constant companions and guides through absorbing traumas.

BFB: What are you working on now?

I'm currently working on a short 16mm film called *The Enlightenment*, making ceramic snake sculptures and continuing to write my daily haiku. I'm also really interested in making *Trial in the Woods* into my third feature film which, at this point, means trying to secure funding...my worst.

- *Trial in the Woods* is available from [Plays Inverse](#). A longer version of this interview is posted [on their site](#).

- [Stephanie Barber's website](#)