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[Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow!](http://theatrenow.wordpress.com) – Interview with Laura Maria Censabella, Playwright.  
(Season Two, Episode Two, February, 2011)

Anne Hamilton: Welcome to [TheatreNow!](http://theatrenow.wordpress.com), a production of [Hamilton Dramaturgy](http://theatrenow.wordpress.com). This is a podcast series featuring some of the most exciting women artists working in the theatre today. I'm your host Anne Hamilton. Today, we are speaking with Laura Maria Censabella. Laura Maria is a playwright, screenwriter and television writer. Most recently, she became the recipient of an Ensemble Studio Theatre Sloan Project Commission for a full length science-based play. Welcome, Laura Maria.

Laura Maria Censabella: Thank you.

AH: Well, I always like to start off the interviews by asking what kind of early artistic influences the subject has had. Can you tell me a little bit about what kind of activities you took part in when you were young?

LC: When I was younger, I believed that a woman in the theatre could only be an actress, because first of all, I came from a working class community where nobody became a writer, and secondly, the only women theatre writers we read when I was growing up were Lorraine Hansberry and Lillian Hellman and they seemed so out of reach. And so the only thing I felt I could be was an actress.

But in terms of early influences, my father, who grew up in poverty, was offered a Broadway theatre ticket in lieu of having to do a book report when he was in high school. This was in the late 40's and he wound up falling in love with the theatre. He had worked since he was twelve, and now he would spend his pocket money going to Broadway shows. When I was growing up, he would actually enact parts of the great Broadway plays he had seen as a teenager or in his 20's. So I think my dad was my Broadway conduit to the golden age of the theatre.

AH: What a wonderful legacy in your family.

LC: And he only had a vocational high school degree, which is why I always feel that audiences are smart. He didn't have much education and he could understand stories with great subtlety.

AH: That's wonderful. I think back when he was coming up as well, Broadway theatre was more entrenched in people's minds. They would do parodies, or little comic reenactments on television shows and people would know more in general about opera and current plays than the general population knows now.

LC: I think that's true, but my dad, he was an Italian-American down in the Village, and he would say to his buddies, "Come on, do you want to go to this particular show?" And they would

say, "Are you kidding?" So, I think still that was a rarity for him to step out of his community.

AH: Yeah, he was very brave. And you're very brave to start something with the new generation. So did you do a lot of writing when you were young?

LC: No. I went to a Catholic school that didn't encourage creativity at all. I think I started writing seriously in college where I had a first year theatre class. It was at Yale and you couldn't do a major in theatre. So, I did a minor in theatre and I did a major in philosophy.

But the first year theatre course that everyone had to take was called Collaboration. And you had to do it all--write, act and direct. And I quickly felt that even though I could experience the internal life of a character as an actor, there was a wall between the audience and me when I wanted to express that internal life in front of them. And besides, at Yale they didn't believe in craft courses, so we never learned how to externalize the interior life of a character. I started writing because we had to for that course, and when I wrote, all of a sudden, that wall that seemed between me and other people was gone, and I felt I could say anything. I would just pretend that no one was going to see it. And I suddenly felt this incredible freedom.

AH: That's a marvelous feeling, I bet. A whole new world coming to life.

LC: It was. And I think Yale is different now, but when I was there, it was still very WASP. And again, being Catholic coming from a working class community, suddenly having people interested in my experience and having that be an asset, it was incredibly profound to have that. I like to write characters who have no voice. And I think maybe when I first got to college, I felt like I had no voice. So, to discover that you have a voice that people actually want to hear is so profound. And I think that's what I do in my teaching. I could die happy if nothing further were to happen to me, but to know that I've helped other people find their voices.

AH: And how does being a woman play into this awakening, this finding of something that you wanted to do seriously?

LC: Well, being a woman at that time, as I said, I had no role models. And then even when I discovered at Yale that I could write, I also took fiction courses. I didn't have enough confidence in myself. And I remember a fiction teacher sitting me down and saying, "You have to become a writer". And I would say, "Well, I'm actually thinking of this or that," and he said, "No, no, no. You have to become a writer". And I think without that incredible support, I might not have dared it. And I don't know that women have that same kind of lack of confidence these days. I find that confidence—or lack of it—is pretty evenly spread through the genders at this point.

AH: Yeah, it's a different theatrical landscape than even twenty years ago.

LC: It is, particularly financially.

AH: Yes. Do you feel like making any comments about that?

LC: I think I was very lucky to start out when I did. My first two plays went to the O'Neill National Playwrights Conference in 1985 and 1986. And it was still a time where the resident theatre movement was blossoming and there was money for play development. And it was a very heady time. You felt that people really couldn't wait to nurture your voice. And then in 1987, we had that stock market crash and after that, things changed. And I didn't feel the same sense of excitement, and slots began to diminish for development, and if you were a young person coming up at that time, you really felt it.

AH: And now, here we are in February 2011, with the crash of 2009 just a couple years behind us, but we're still in the middle of a very bad time in our economy. What do you think is happening right now in new play development, and how are we going to get out of it?

LC: I think we're in the same period of retrenchment. I'm thinking about young artists right now. And I think there are some very beautiful opportunities though for them in terms of writer's groups around the city [New York City]. In terms of the professional theatre and where it's going to go for mid-career writers, I really don't know about that. But I do know that there are ways for young people to still plug in to the community.

I also think what's different than before is that attending grad school is much more important than it was when I started out. Because Off-Off Broadway was pretty healthy back then, too. So if you didn't go to grad school, you would get your education through places like the O'Neill, which were developmental. But also through just doing productions around New York, and you can still do that, but I think it's more exhausting and do-it-yourself, so you have to give a lot more energy.

AH: Do you write about a particular kind of person or a character in your plays?

LC: Yes, I like to give voice to people who have no voice and so that can mean someone who is very talkative but nobody listens to them, or someone who is inarticulate, or someone who hasn't been represented on stage. The new science-based play I'm writing is in its very early stages, but I'm trying to write about a girl who is facing an arranged marriage. She's from Kosovo and she lived through the war there. And I don't think we've represented many Albanian Muslim Kosovo girls on stage. So, that interests me.

And my last full-length was about my grandmother, who worked with the partisans during World War II. And I don't think Italian-American women have been represented in a very broad way. We have the mafia wife, we have the woman in the kitchen, and we have the sex goddess. Also in this new science-based play, there's a scientist and he's disabled. My mother's sister was disabled, so I grew up with that. Because my grandparents didn't speak English and my mother and father didn't have a lot of education, a lot of times we were cheated. And I guess I'm interested in people who maybe are cheated, but overcome that.

AH: It's a beautiful story. Those are beautiful stories. So this new science-based play - again, I'll just mention, it's the Ensemble Studio Theatre Sloan Project Commission - Can you tell us how that came about for you? Was there an application? Did you make a proposal or something?

LC: I've been affiliated with Ensemble Studio Theatre. I became a member in 1991, but I started working there in 1987. The Sloan Foundation has been working in conjunction with Ensemble Studio Theatre for years now. And every year, I would be asked to apply, or I would hear about the application process because it's posted online, or they send out flyers and I would think, "I hate science. And I don't think I particularly want to see a play about science, so I'm not going to apply to that."

And I would send out other proposals for plays that I was interested in – like, I have a play I want to write about Anna Akhmatova, the Russian poet who was really oppressed during Stalin's era. And people were not finding money for that. So, I looked at the Sloan again and I thought, "Okay let me think about science". And my way into it was: "Why do I hate science so much?"

And so I started imagining a girl who really hated science, who was somewhat like me. And then I started researching some particular science. Every year EST has scientists come and they do a panel on what's new in science now. And I remember I went to my first panel, and it was a year I didn't apply, but I came out of there so excited by what was happening in the field. And I also have always loved the science section of the New York Times the best. Every week, that's what I look forward to.

But I sort of didn't put that together with the fact that I'm interested in really big ideas in science. I mean, I couldn't bear counting fruit flies when I was in high school and chloroforming them. That's unbearable to me. And how precise with the data you have to be. I'm just not a precise person. I just love big ideas. So when you hear scientists talk, they're generally talking about the big ideas, so as I started to do my reading that's when I became engaged with the philosophy behind the science.

So, I came up with a proposal. This sounds really boring actually, but I started looking at neural growth factor because it can cause disease and if you reverse it, it can heal disease. But the Sloan doesn't fund disease plays. So in my research, I started looking at neural growth factor and what it has to do with romantic love. And I thought, "Wow, I'm really interested in romantic love. And there's actual science behind it? There's something quantitative behind it?" And so, I just started reading and reading and reading. And I had to propose a story related to my reading. I sent in a three-page proposal with a bit of a story and the science and how it related to me personally.

And then EST responded to it. The scientists responded to it, but they had concerns, so they would bring me in and they would say, "We need this modified in terms of... ", or, "How are you thinking about that?" They would ask me more questions, basically, and I would have to go back and do more research or think about the story a little bit more. The irony is that now when I tell people I'm looking at the science of romantic love, they say to me, "Oh, but doesn't that flatten it? I would hate to know all that. What about the poetry behind it?" And now I can't even remember when I didn't like science. In fact, in lieu of going to the theatre, I go to all these science seminars. To me it makes the world more romantic.

AH: That's wonderful.

LC: I've changed. The Sloan Foundation grant is given to get people excited about science, and it

certainly helped me, so they've achieved their goal even on a small level!

AH: Well, we all have to live in the body and we all live on the earth, and all those things are physical in nature so I think there's great, great chance for enlightenment through your work.

LC: Well, and also with romantic love we've always looked at the psychological aspect instead of the biological. And I'm not saying knowing about the science behind love suddenly solves everything and makes everything clear. In fact, I think it makes it more poetic and open and resonant. But it also absolves you in some way. If you fall out of love it's no longer this moral failure. It might also have something to do with how we are arranged biologically.

AH: And you've just returned from a playwright's retreat, right? A writer's retreat?

LC: Yes.

AH: Can you tell us about that?

LC: Yes, I went to the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. It's an arts colony. I've been to it about eight times now over my career, and I was able to work on the play there. It's in the country, it's on a farm actually. There are cows. There are horses. The studios are in a converted barn, and it's just run by incredibly loving people who understand that artists need space and time. You mostly need time to throw out choices. The choices that seem inevitable are the ones that are the result of maybe a thousand choices you made that were wrong.

AH: It needs time to work through the body, right? The story needs time to work through the body and mind and soul.

LC: I think so, yes. And I think that's a little bit tricky with this commission, or any commission, in that you do need time to live with it.

AH: Yes, people think that writers are just automatons and that they can write this wonderful stuff and just spit it out, but you can't. It has to come at its own time and every writer has a different process.

LC: Yeah, it was hilarious when screenplay computer programs first came out because they would say, "Well we have all the questions here now that will help you write your screenplay." Things like "Who's the protagonist?" and "Who's the antagonist?" And there are even more subtle questions of course, but I always found that approach really hilarious because I think that is part of the craft - you learn the questions to ask yourself. But the authentic answers take a long time. They come in their own time. Sometimes a piece comes out in three weeks. Others take a year, five years or ten years.

AH: Yes, there's a biochemistry to writing, isn't there?

LC: Yes, yes. It is a very mysterious and complex process.

AH: Yes. Could you name for us some of your plays, just so that our listeners can look you up?

LC: Yes. ABANDONED IN QUEENS, CARLA COOKS THE WAR (also known as THREE ITALIAN WOMEN), and SOME GIRLS. This newest play is called DASHURIA, which is the Albanian word for love. Other plays are POSING, and WHAT EVERY GIRL SHOULD KNOW, INTERVIEWING MISS DAVIS and a children's musical O'SULLIVAN STEW written with the composer Frank Cuthbert. I have a short film called LAST CALL.

AH: Yes, that one was shown quite a lot, wasn't it?

LC: Yes, it went to a lot of festivals, and it was really wonderful going to film festivals, because when you go to theatre festivals, you either bring your group of actors or you cast there at the festival. But when you go to a film festival, your piece is on a DVD, and it's been realized already, so the anxiety level is much lower. And the range of people you meet is extraordinary. Just really interesting minds.

AH: What is LAST CALL about?

LC: LAST CALL has a lot of secrets in it, but it is basically about two extraordinarily lonely people in Queens, one an older man and one a teenage girl. And it's about the young girl's dreams of escaping her life by posing for PLAYBOY.

It's based on a play. The play was called POSING, which was one-act which then got commissioned by the Belmont Italian American Playhouse to become a full-length, which became SOME GIRLS. That was produced in NY, and then it was workshopped out in Los Angeles at the Pacific Resident Theatre. And then after the workshop, the collaborators wanted it to continue, and so they raised the money for the director, Robert Bailey, and Jude Ciccolella and Dana Dewes, the actors, to make the film. And then we all formed a production company together to finish the work on the film.

AH: That's wonderful, and you've had quite a lot of success in television writing as well.

LC: Yes. I have two team Emmy awards for writing for AS THE WORLD TURNS, and I had also done some other soap work and short film work for HBO.

AH: It sounds to me like you are always learning and trying new things.

LC: Yes, I think that most writers who write for the theatre consider themselves storytellers. When a story is ready to be born, you just gauge - is it for film, is it for prose, is it for a play?

AH: It keeps you versatile. And you're also a professor. You've been a professor for a long time. Actually, we first met when I was a student at Columbia School of the Arts and you were teaching playwriting. And we were both influenced a great deal by Romulus Linney, the playwright and novelist. Unfortunately, we lost him this year, but I wonder if you could talk about what it was like to be a colleague of Romulus Linney?

LC: I knew him for twenty-four years, so that's a big question. He was extremely generous, but he was also vulnerable. We met working at the Philadelphia Festival Theatre For New Plays. We both were having plays produced. We became friends out of that experience. And I think observing him over twenty-four years, what I take with me the most, is -- when you write, how vulnerable you have to let yourself be. Vulnerable both in what you reveal, because you're revealing your point of view about the world and if you're honest about it, it's going to piss people off.

And also when you write, you're vulnerable because your first drafts are so inadequate compared to what you hope to express. It's like being an athlete. You face your inadequacies every single day. And the courage with which he did that was an incredible inspiration for me.

AH: I always say that I learned everything I know about being a dramaturg from Romulus Linney, because he was so protective of the playwright when he was in charge of the program there [at Columbia University]. And he taught us, and made sure that we understood that the playwright's words are the playwright's words, and they are not to be taken lightly, or arbitrarily changed. Also, that we're to treat the playwright with respect, and his or her work with respect. So that's the legacy that I take from Romulus.

The other thing is that the three of us also were colleagues a little later at the Actor's Studio Drama School at the New School University in New York. He was the head of the Playwriting program there and you were also a professor there. And I was the academic advisor to the faculty and students. It was a really nice few years to be together in that form as well.

LC: Yes, it was. It was also a really good time for him. He loved the students there. But also, in terms of his professional life, he was having a lot of productions in New York. I remember him saying to me with glee, "People are wondering how I'm having play after play produced". And he said, "Laura, the way I'm doing it is I'm just taking all these plays out of my drawer that I could never solve when I was younger. And now, twenty-five years later, I look at these plays and I know how to solve them." So, again, there were so many lessons in how to be a professional writer: you're in it for the long haul.

AH: Yes and you never stop. I mean I've never heard a writer saying, "Well, I'm retired".

LC: Yes. And also, you were asking about the future of the theatre? I think that people will always have to write, and I think people will always feel that they have to write theatre - that is, the writers that feel suited for it. And I think the wonderful thing about theatre is that you can do poor theatre. You can do it with almost no money, and it can be exhilarating. So I don't know what's going to happen to the institutional theatre, but I know there will always be theatre.

AH: Yes, yes. And it occurs to me as I'm thinking about your career, that you've been working for thirty years as a playwright and a writer in other forms. It must be quite an evolutionary process. Do you find that your process has changed since you began? Has it gone into new stages?

LC: You know, I didn't go to grad school so I just basically wrote. I didn't have any conscious

process. I just worked on instinct and luckily, I think I had decent instincts. And then also, I don't think I fooled myself when things weren't working. I was willing to do the rewrites that I had to do, and I would depend on people - dramaturgs and directors - to ask me the kinds of questions that would help me do rewrites. Now, I think I kind of know the questions to ask myself, so that's great although I still seek out sounding boards, in particular, my fellow writers in Ensemble Studio Theatre's Playwrights Unit.

I think my best process though is actually a process that I did when I was first starting out and continue to do, which is to write a story in prose first. For example, my play ABANDONED IN QUEENS started as a short story. My screenplay TRULY MARY started as a short story. INTERVIEWING MISS DAVIS, which was produced at Ensemble Studio Theatre last year in their Marathon, started as a personal essay. It's not that the play version gets told in the prose version, because they're two different beasts, but the backstory and the thematic material come out, so that I know what the piece is about. And then I can concentrate in the play version on the present action, and I've already explored the characters. That isn't always possible, but that is a really wonderful method for me. And, you know, Romulus Linney also used to write novels and short stories and then turn them into plays.

AH: And you used to read his first drafts. You would dramaturg for Rom.

LC: Yes, he would send me some of his first drafts and I would give him feedback and vice versa. And I was always struck by how vulnerable we are in our first drafts, you know, how raw the material is. And I felt very privileged that he would let me see that and that he cared to hear what I had to say. And that he would do rewrites over and over and over again.

AH: There was a lot of trust between the two of you.

LC: There was.

AH: And I know he respected you with a full heart because he took you to Columbia to teach with him, and then he took you to the Actors Studio Drama School. He definitely, obviously, wanted you on his team - not that you had nothing to do with it, not to say that - but he respected you a great deal.

LC: My play ABANDONED IN QUEENS is written in a very, sort of, working class patois, let me say. And we were at the Sewanee Writers' Conference together co-teaching and you had to make a presentation of your work but there were no actors. So he read a part in ABANDONED IN QUEENS, and I read another part, and we acted it together, the two of us. And he said afterwards, "You know, I think I know why I respond to your work so much." He said, "The cadences and the people, they're very similar to the people I write about in Appalachia." So I think that was a big connection for us.

AH: I think that's marvelous. Two people from different regions finding a commonality at such a high level, teaching at an Ivy League graduate school, and also at very, very well respected writers' conferences like Sewanee. I think that's wonderful.



Well, I know that you've been in charge of the Playwright's Unit at Ensemble Studio Theatre for quite a long time - since 1991, correct?

LC: Yes.

AH: Can you tell us about the Playwrights Unit?

LC: Yes. We formed it because at that time there weren't a lot of units in the city - playwright's groups. Now there are more. EST had had various incarnations - very successful incarnations - of playwriting units with some very well-known people. Their work was developed there. And then they had a period where there wasn't a Playwrights Unit. So, I thought, "I want a group of peers for the support, and I want to give support, and I want it to be fun. I don't want anything that feels like school." So I gathered a large town hall meeting of playwrights that were affiliated with EST, and I asked them what they wanted, and the dominant cry that I heard was, "We want a group of writers commenting on writers. We don't want a place where we're auditioning for a slot at a theatre. So we don't want the staff there, we want the rules to be created by the writers. We want it to be for the writers, and have it really be about the process, not about the hustling."

And I think that's why the group has lasted so long, because it's really about the artistry. And of course, we help each other. We find out about opportunities, and we do have a voice at EST. I mean, they look at our work, they give it a very careful reading, and we have certain public readings that we do for the literary staff, etc. But mostly it has remained process-oriented and it's the place where we go for nourishment.

And especially as a teacher, it's really wonderful for me to be able to go to a group where I don't have to be the smartest person in the room, and also where I am as vulnerable as my students are when they're in my classroom, so that I can say, "It's my tune-up place, it's my workshop."

AH: It sounds like an athlete cross-training.

LC: Yes, I think artists are so similar to athletes in that they need to keep going. And although we often don't have one coach, I think all of us dream of having that one person who's going to be our champion. You get that at various times in your life, I think. But even with August Wilson and Lloyd Richards, at a certain point, they had to break from one another. And I think that most of us don't have a one-on-one coach but it's so important to find a community to keep going because, particularly as Americans, America doesn't value artists. So how do you continue to value what you're doing? You do that with peers.

AH: I'd like to continue the athlete analogy. How do you keep your stamina?

LC: That's a very good question. I think you need to recharge your batteries. So of course, if you get a production, that recharges your battery, but you aren't always in control of that, so it's about going to retreats like the Virginia Center, or Yaddo, or whatever, or Sewanee, or reading. Sometimes just reading other artists, or knowing about the challenges that they faced, or again, just sitting with your peers, does it.

I was sitting with some playwrights last night, and one had just gone out of town for a reading, and there were some excruciatingly embarrassing things that happened in that experience. When I've gone out of town and sometimes haven't had the best actors or whatever, I sometimes think that only happens to me. So it's about constantly checking in and drawing strength from the fact that it happens to all of us, and you just keep going anyway.

AH: Yes. What do you feel is your most important contribution to the professional theatre?

LC: I think that has to do with my teaching. I think I have helped people. I've been teaching now in grad school. I used to teach in the public schools. I used to teach playwriting and poetry, so I used to teach little kids, and I really felt that I helped them find their voice, and sometimes it's just a sense of worth. But teaching on the graduate level, I've been doing that since 1991, and I was younger than a lot of my students when I started. I think I give an emphasis to authenticity and fearlessness, and I hope that has helped the theatre community, because a lot of those students now are working professionally.

I teach a way of trying to put something charismatic on stage, so you don't bore an audience. I think when I die I'm going to ask St. Peter for all the hours I spent at really boring inauthentic theatre to be returned to me. [Laughter] And so, I don't want my students to perpetrate that on an audience. Of course, we all are experimenting when we write, so sometimes we do perpetrate that on an audience. So I'm sure St. Peter will say, "Well Laura, what about that particular reading where everybody was looking at their watches?" So, you know, I'll have to give up some time for that. [Laughter]

AH: That scenario would make a great play. Do you have any words of advice for women in the professional theatre today?

LC: I think that it's hard for anybody to get a production. I was talking to somebody who has a Pulitzer, and he was saying that on average now it takes ten years for him to get a production in New York when he finishes a play. So even though the statistics show us that women have a very hard time and we are less represented, I think it's hard for everybody. And I think that people always are telling you what is wrong with your work: it's too gay; it's not gay enough; who's interested in people from Appalachia, or from Queens?; women write plays differently from men; you're a white male, no one's interested in that right now; we're interested in diversity. So I think, first of all, ignore those voices.

And then I recently heard secondhand something that Romare Bearden said to August Wilson. So I would say this to women playwrights, which is what he said to August. He said that your belief in yourself must be greater than the disbelief that most people will have in you.

AH: That's marvelous. It's a great place to end. Thank you so much, Laura Maria. It's been a wonderful, stunning interview.

LC: Thank you so much, Anne, as well.

AH: You have been listening to [TheatreNow!](#), a production of [Hamilton Dramaturgy](#). We have

been speaking today with Laura Maria Censabella. You may follow her career through the Ensemble Studio Theatre's Playwrights Unit website at [ensemblestudiotheatre.org](http://ensemblestudiotheatre.org). Thank you for listening to TheatreNow! You can download these podcasts at my blog which is <http://hamiltondramaturgy.wordpress.com>. You may also listen at <http://theatrenow.wordpress.com>. TheatreNow!'s theme was composed by Nancy Ford. This is Anne Hamilton. Thank you for listening.

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