

Actors Reflect on Characters

I love the way Cesi brings inanimate objects to life in her plays and gives them emotional understanding. As Toy, although I was a customer service bot at a financial company, I had human characteristics. Towards the end of the play when Doreen, a human female, announced she was “done” with me and proclaimed freedom from her debt as she attempted to pay her last installment and would be solvent, I expressed a certain loss. It was a loss of a relationship. Albeit I was limited in what I could express as a bot, I expressed sadness with ending my relationship with her. I was a robot with feelings! Only Cesi can create that kind of magical experience, it is her trademark as her characters complement my wild imagination. For that I am grateful.

Carolyn Kitay, Toy—“We are Thru”

Preparing for the role of James Brown in Cesi Davidson’s Brown Plays remains one of the most challenging and rewarding roles I have ever done in my 25-year acting career. I devoured archived videos of Mr. Brown in everyday life, and when he was performing. I read what his friends and enemies in the press wrote about him during his life and how he responded. In “The Brown Family Delivers,” Cesi wrote the character considering the initial rise of Mr. Brown’s music career through the lens of magical realism. I believe this slice of time best afforded the audience to see and hear the true grit, hustle, and creativity that Mr. Brown embodied. James Brown cared so much about every detail. He never let adversity stop him. In life, humans should employ this practice to fulfill the potential of themselves and others.

Isreal McKinney Scott,
James Brown—“The Brown Family Delivers”

Observation is key. I thought of deer when I was cast as Dotty Doe in Cesi Davidson's play "Dinner for Two." Fortunately, I'm an observer of deer. I see them fairly often wandering in the backyard and in the woods near my house. I've observed the way deer listen when they hear a sound coming from my house or sounds from the driveway. They stop and become super alert, their heads bolt right up, and they become almost robotic as they move their eyes and heads in the direction of the new sound. Deer also have a way of staring out when they see a human being or a sound they perceive to be danger. Many of us are familiar with the deer in the headlights syndrome. That stunned, wide-eyed, alert look, and robotic movement were physical adjustments I used to portray Dotty.

Ingrid Griffith, Dotty Doe,
Female Antelope—"Dinner for Two"

As an actor there are several questions I asked myself when given a bagel...I mean roll...I mean role to portray. Physically...externally...I ask myself, "Where is my center?" Even though bagels are famous for having a hole in their own center, they are also famous for making us fat! As a heavy-set actor I decided my bagel's center would be my gut! I would lead by my gut. Internally, I asked myself:

What's the story?

How do I fit in?

What do I want?

Have I gotten what I want?

We don't always get what we want.

What am I doing?

What's my beginning, middle and end?

What's my journey?

What are the obstacles?
How am I like this bagel?
How are we different?

The more specific I make my answers to these questions the truer I am to the character.

In this play, I sit in a glass enclosed case next to a Scone. Both waiting, longing to be purchased and consumed. On this morning neither of us gets purchased. I guess that's a good thing. While I am desperate to find a home outside these glass casements, there's something sobering and safe here. Is that what my bagel wants? To stay safe?

Cesi Davidson presents these topics, these ideas, these relationships, situations, and encounters in a colorful and flavorful way. She offers us a bountiful array of questions within the settings. Underneath the bakery items, on display, lies our humanness. Our destinies? Our prejudices? Our yearnings? Where we come from? How we were made? What we are made of? How do we behave? How we see the world, others, our fears, our hopes? Her messages are always strong and filled with love. On the display case we can see a reflection of ourselves. Do we notice? What do we see?

Paul Bolger, Bagel—“B...S”

Conversation Pieces



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About the Aqueduct Press Conversation Pieces Series

The feminist engaged with sf is passionately interested in challenging the way things are, passionately determined to understand how everything works. It is my constant sense of our feminist-sf present as a grand conversation that enables me to trace its existence into the past and from there see its trajectory extending into our future. A genealogy for feminist sf would not constitute a chart depicting direct lineages but would offer us an ever-shifting, fluid mosaic, the individual tiles of which we will probably only ever partially access. What could be more in the spirit of feminist sf than to conceptualize a genealogy that explicitly manifests our own communities across not only space but also time?

Aqueduct's small paperback series, *Conversation Pieces*, aims to both document and facilitate the "grand conversation." The *Conversation Pieces* series presents a wide variety of texts, including short fiction (which may not always be sf and may not necessarily even be feminist), essays, speeches, manifestoes, poetry, interviews, correspondence, and group discussions. Many of the texts are reprinted material, but some are new. The grand conversation reaches at least as far back as Mary Shelley and extends, in our speculations and visions, into the continually created future. In Jonathan Goldberg's words, "To look forward to the history that will be, one must look at and retell the history that has been told." And that is what *Conversation Pieces* is all about.

L. Timmel Duchamp

Jonathan Goldberg, "The History That Will Be" in Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996)

Conversation Pieces
Volume 94

Stop Plosive

Short Plays to Nourish
the Mind & Soul

by
Cesi Davidson





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*For my brothers Stan and Jon Patrick.
May the souls of the departed rest in peace.*

Stop Plosive

build energy—stop—hold—release

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Why not?

In this collection of plays, I play. Why not? I explore how we can become more human with perspective-taking by giving an object, food, or animal human characteristics. I place humans in unusual circumstances with time and space, and with mixed intentions. What can we discover? Come play with me. Let's laugh and have fun together. Let's acknowledge our sadness. And let's cry together. Let's admit that we don't know all the answers but still know the importance of asking questions. Why not?

Readers familiar with my work will notice my continued dedication to an eclectic mix of stories. A few of the plays here are my salute to old New York City, particularly Harlem. I give a shout out to lovers of Rhythm and Blues music and Hip Hop with the Brown plays. These "Brown" plays introduce mystical realism into contemporary plots. Why not?

For new readers of my work: "Welcome." I encourage you to read plays for entertainment, and to use your imagination to visualize how the scenes might look on stage or feel in real life. For theatre artists, here you'll find basic blueprints for stage productions with enough liberty that directors, designers, and performing artists can do what theatre does best: create imaginary worlds for an audience to experience.

I met a woman who couldn't depart with a beautiful dress she frequently wore before her divorce. After seeing a staging of "Retirement from Public Service," she recog-

nized her attachment to the dress. She then viewed the dress as part of her unhealthy connection to the past. She formed a brief sisterhood with the main character of the play. Lily's agony, was perplexing but provided her with some comfort. My dear readers, I invite you to use my work as brief rehearsals for life. Why not?

Therefore, HEE HEE HO HO! Come to the Show Show. Any time, any place. Read a play and let your imagination fly.

Cesi

June 2024



Retirement from Public Service

Characters

Bess: Humanized white silk dress, woman

Lily: Bess's owner, woman

Setting

Living space of an upscale urban studio apartment

Closet, love seat, chair

(Lights Rise)

(Enter Bess followed by Lily through the apartment door. They stand in a spoon position, front to back. Lily removes her shoes. Bess and Lily walk to the closet and then turn away.)

Bess: Let's relax on the loveseat. I don't need to return to the closet now.

Lily: (Sitting on the loveseat) You don't need a wash.

Bess: As much as I enjoy your gentle touch and the cold water from the kitchen faucet, I can wait at least until you have a manicure.

Lily: Excuse you?

Bess: Your nail extensions...prickly...and they interfere with the warm embrace of your fingertips. (Looking in the closet) My end of the closet is a little musty. (Pushing hangers around) And I'm feeling cramped. If you need

to keep your outerwear in the same closet with your daywear, not that I care about the other dresses, there should be a clear division. There is always a risk of city soot rubbing against...

Lily: Any other demands, Bess?

Bess: Actually, Lily, last year you promised me and the other girls a customized cedar closet. Remember, we looked in *International Urban Dwelling* and saw that beautiful studio apartment in Milan. Small is the new big Lily. If you have a small space, three hundred square feet...

Lily: Six hundred square feet.

Bess: As I said, a small space, you can still organize the closet into sections with dividers. Dresses, slacks, blouses, shorts, blazers, and priceless one-of-a-kind couture, me.

Lily: I've never cared for segregation of clothing.

Bess: Not that I care about the others, but segregation has its purpose. Like likes like.

Lily: You know some women have integrated closets with all the items organized by outfits.

Bess: Where were these women raised, in a rain forest? An Amish farm? Two outfits, one for work and one for church.

Lily: Your harsh opinions have never matched your beauty.

Bess: Nothing matches my beauty.

Lily: It's good that you're out of the closet now. We have, I have... There is something I want to talk to you about. Not closet real estate.

Bess: Thank you for bringing it up first. You've become "Lazy Lily."

Lily: What?

Bess: With your footwear.

Lily: There's nothing wrong with my footwear.

Bess: I'm bored. Every day we go to work you put on those ballet flats.

Lily: What's the problem, Bess?

Bess: It doesn't matter that your flats are European born, comfortable, and in decent condition. Your footwear reflects on me.

Lily: I saved a little out of my paychecks for weeks so I could afford to buy those Magellan flats, cash.

Bess: We need to go shopping. I don't want to look the same every time we go out in public. Mind you, I'm not trying to draw attention from the body to the feet, Lily.

Lily: Well, that's what will happen. Everyone knows it's all about the shoes and the handbag. That's what people notice.

Bess: People whom? Do you want to get noticed by men or women?

Lily: You know the answer to that question.

Bess: If you can't afford to buy new shoes, you have some options right here (Pointing to the closet).

Lily: I'm not interested in changing my flats, Bess. They're part of my work uniform. Besides, Magellan flats are always respected, and they're fashion timeless.

Bess: So you're wearing footwear to satisfy some fashion standard imposed by colonizer stylists?

Lily: Don't be ridiculous.

Bess: (Takes out shoe boxes from the closet) Here are some perfectly lovely kitten heels. You wore these when you went to the opening of the spring season at the Uptown Philharmonic. Yes, that was with Joseph or Baby Soft Joe, as I used to call him.

Lily: He had a thing for shoes. Second date, he invited me to his apartment to see his shoe collection in his walk-in closet.

Bess: Yes, that was back in the day when I was a day-to-evening dress. You'd work all day in the office and then go directly on a date. No running home to change an outfit. Just me, and a change of accessories.

Lily: A lesson from Aunt Stacey.

Bess: And she never mentioned shoes?

Lily: Aunt Stacey only had two pairs of shoes, work shoes and church shoes.

Bess: Did Mother Theresa do her shopping?

Lily: Is that supposed to be funny?

Bess: Yes, I remember Aunt Stacey. How could a dress forget her creator?

Lily: I'm not interested in wearing those shoes again. The heels are too narrow. They bother my ankles. And I have a bunion that isn't too happy with open toe shoes.

Bess: (Holding another box) These are gorgeous!

Lily: (Lifting one shoe out of the box) I haven't worn stilettos since I was an undergraduate.

Bess: Maybe some traditions are meant to be revisited.

Lily: I'm not trying to look half my age.

Bess: And since when is having beautiful calves restricted by age? (Handing the other shoe to Lily) Come on, I'll prove it to you.

Lily: I don't want to play games, Bess.

Bess: I dare you. (Pause) Backing down from a dress challenge? (Lily puts on the shoes)

(Lily and Bess walk spooning in front of a full-length mirror. Lily follows Bess's instructions.)

Bess: Now twirl. (Pause) Runway. (Pause) Now Diva. (Pause) See what I mean?

Lily: Yes, I do.

Bess: It's not about the shoes. It's about the body. Shoes help a woman's body move with grace, elegance, and beauty. Twirl again slowly.

Lily: (Twirling) Still got it.

Bess: A man looks at me and then imagines the body underneath.

Lily: Workplace rudeness.

Bess: You're a fundamentalist extremist.

Lily: In the workplace, the men shouldn't be thinking about my body.

Bess: I'm taking about looking, not touching. That's where the Me-Me Movement has got it wrong. There's

nothing wrong with being noticed and admired as long as the work gets done. In a respectful way of course.

(Lily sits to take off the shoes. Bess stops her.)

Bess: A few more minutes.

(Bess leads Lily over to the music area of the apartment. Lily puts on a tune.)

Bess: Nice.

(Bess and Lily dance together.)

Lily: (Turning off music) Last dance. (Takes all of the closed shoe boxes out of the closet)

Bess: What are you doing?

Lily: These shoes are for donation to the Renew Refurbish Paradise.

Bess: You're making room! Don't worry. I'll find some way to make your remaining shoe choices work.

Lily: Bess, we've been together...

Bess: Our anniversary isn't for a few months.

Lily: September, just after Labor Day.

Bess: September ninth after you graduated from college was our unification day. Your Aunt Stacey created me over a whole year. My birth was amazing. I can remember my life on a bolt in the fabric store. All of the fabrics in the silk aisle knew your Aunt Stacy. She visited Century Fabrics for weeks before the purchase. Every time I saw her I hoped it would be a selection from my bolt family. I was a little fearful of being severed from my mother bolt but I pushed past the fear every time I saw her. She wore white kidskin gloves that she removed whenever she touched fabric.

Lily: Fabric doesn't really live until it's fashioned into a garment.

Bess: I know. Mother Bolt told us, that's what we should desire. To be useful in an artistic way. To be purchased by a talented seamstress who would make a garment that would be valued and admired.

Lily: Hand-woven washable antique white silk. How many little Vietnamese girls wove you for pennies instead of attending school?

Bess: Your Aunt Stacy didn't know anything about international fair trade in those days.

Lily: Nevertheless, you are what you are. Probably the result of some bondage nightmare.

Bess: Don't speak to me that way. (Removes garments from the closet and throws them on the loveseat) Was this fair trade? Was this? Definitely not this one!

Lily: Stop this madness.

Bess: Your Aunt Stacy saved me. How many yards of my sister fabrics were sold to manufacturers for mass-produced off-the-rack dresses? How many of my sister fabrics were handed over to undocumented workers locked in factory cages with quotas. No break for pee or to change a sanitary napkin. I've heard of stories of women having a leg chained to a factory sewing machine for fourteen hours of sewing.

Lily: Stop it, Bess. You're making my needs about other people, and other things. I want to talk about me... about you and me...about us.