

Artists reviving ‘ROE’ before impending Supreme Court decision call the production a ‘political rally’

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By Steven Vargas June 21, 2022 4:49 PM PT

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“ROE” director Vanessa Stalling pauses during rehearsals at the Fountain Theatre.

(Jason Armond / Los Angeles Times)

When the Supreme Court’s initial draft opinion to overturn Roe vs. Wade leaked, Fountain Theatre Artistic Director Stephen Sachs says he reacted immediately to “give voice to what’s happening right now.”

“As a theater maker, I wanted to find a way to use our art form as a vehicle for social action,” he says.

Sachs sought to put up staged readings of Lisa Loomer’s play “ROE,” which dives deep into the people behind the landmark abortion rights case. To accelerate the process, he reached out to people who’d worked on previous productions of the play, pulling artists from

Chicago's Goodman Theatre's 2020 production of "ROE" in addition to local actors.

The "guerrilla-style, hyper-staged" reading, set to run from June 25 to July 10 at Hollywood's Fountain Theatre, started rehearsals on June 16, bringing back some familiar faces from previous productions of "ROE" who, like Sachs, were stirred by the impending decision. During the evening performance on July 1, Emmy--winning actors Tyne Daly and Sharon Gless will lend their support to the timely production as co-hosts. Their presence adds more weight to Sachs' notion that the run is more than theater, it is "a political rally."

"The abortion issue is one of the most divisive, controversial issues facing our country," Sachs says. "A lot of us already have strong opinions — one way or another — about it, but I think many of us aren't really aware or remember how we got here."



Director Vanessa Stalling walks among the cast and crew of the play as they kick off rehearsals at the Fountain Theatre on Friday, June 17, 2022.

(Jason Armond / Los Angeles Times)

Sachs believes "ROE" will help educate and enlighten people on the case. The play tells the stories of attorney Sarah Weddington, who argued Roe vs. Wade before the Supreme Court, and Norma McCorvey (known in the case as "Jane Roe"), a woman with a complex

background seeking to end an unwanted pregnancy. It follows the two women past the historic 1973 decision and reflects on the divisive debate on legalized abortion in the U.S.

Loomer's play had its world premiere at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2016. She says it was in response to the presidential nominees in 2016, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump.

"It started out at this moment in time where it looked like Hillary was going to become president," Loomer says, "and now I am addressing a moment in time which may be the end of Roe vs. Wade."

In each iteration of "ROE," Loomer rewrites the beginning and end of the play to reflect the present day and connect to current events. Over the six years of the play taking stages across the U.S., she says, the cultural divide on abortion has deepened.

"I can't think of a play that looks at current history in which the time period of its staging has reflected such radical change in our country," she says.



Kate Middleton, left, and Christina Hall rehearse "ROE."

(Jason Armond / Los Angeles Times)

When the opinion leaked, Christina Hall, who is set to portray Weddington in the reading, says she was in a “stunned silence.”

“I couldn’t even really talk about it,” Hall says, adding that it felt like “a step backward.”

She says she joined the reading to highlight the story of Roe vs. Wade again after performing in the Goodman Theatre’s 2020 production. She hopes the reading can “remind everybody this matters.”

“This is about honoring the legacy of our foremothers,” she says. “This is about honoring the legacy for our daughters. This is about how we steer the way ahead as much as it is about learning where we have come from.”

Kate Middleton, who plays McCorvey, sees education as central to “ROE.” For her, “Information is key.

“The play was written to show both sides of the argument, and it was done well,” says Middleton, adding, “The information needs to be provided about this very important story and [its] history, and then people can make their decision based on that.”

Exploring the complex story of how McCorvey got involved in the case and her attitudes afterward allows audiences to see the varying opinions in the abortion debate. Middleton says she wants the reading to move people into action, especially after spending more than two years in a pandemic.

“The fact that this issue has been again brought to the table at this point in time is appalling to me after everything that everyone’s been through,” she says.



Kate Middleton will play Norma McCorvey, a.k.a. plaintiff “Jane Roe,” in “ROE.”

(Jason Armond / Los Angeles Times)

Sachs turns to theater to address critical issues such as abortion rights. He says that he aims to create a “gathering place for the people of Los Angeles” through the series of readings.

“It’s one thing to read about something in a newspaper or watch it on the news, but to see human beings engaged in these real-life issues in person in front of you humanizes these large social challenges in a way that is unique to theater,” he explains.

To make the bitter reality easier to swallow, Loomer uses comedy in the play to humanize the characters and portray the issue of abortion rights on a personal level. Director Vanessa Stalling says comedy provides a unifying moment for the audience to think.

“When you have space in your brain to laugh, you’ve got space in your brain to think,” Stalling says.

After the first day of rehearsal, Stalling says the looming Supreme Court opinion adds a new lens to the play.

“The play just resonates in a different way,” she says. “You’re hearing lines a little differently now knowing that Roe [vs. Wade] might be gone.”



Director Vanessa Stalling works with seated actors Kate Middleton, left, Christina Hall and Susan Lynskey on “ROE” at the Fountain Theatre on Friday, June 17, 2022.

(Jason Armond / Los Angeles Times)

As the cast takes over the outdoor space of Fountain Theatre to revitalize the characters of “ROE” and the monumental case in U.S. history, Sachs seeks to create a safe space for Angelenos to reflect on the drastic changes to abortion rights.

“I’m really a believer in catching lightning in a bottle and creating theater of the moment,” Sachs says.

The series of readings were created by a fast-tracked process that could only be achieved with passion for the cause.

“Artists are angry and afraid, and don’t want to feel hopeless or helpless,” he says. “And this is a way to do what we do, artistically, to give voice to this critical issue for women.”

Steven Vargas

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