

# Roe Review – A “Hyper-staged” Reading at the Outdoor Fountain Theatre

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Elaine Mura



The Roe Ensemble Cast - Photo by Jenny Graham

Originally commissioned through the Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s American Revolution program, ROE was first presented in Ashland, Oregon, in 2016. Prolific award-winning playwright Lisa Loomer, a nominee for the Pulitzer Prize, was awarded the Jane Chambers Playwriting Award for ROE. The current U.S. Supreme Court decision to overturn Roe v. Wade led to ROE’s current revival at the Fountain Theatre. Fountain artistic director Stephen Sachs emphasized the timeliness of the play: “We’re acting quickly and urgently in answer to the...Supreme Court ruling ... overturn(ing) Roe v. Wade...we intend to use theater as a vehicle for social and political action...Guerilla-stage theater.”



Aleisha Force, Rob Nagle, and Kate Middleton – Photo by Jenny Graham

A powerful and poignant production, *ROE* recounts the story of the historical Supreme Court decision through the experiences of key players in the drama surrounding the landmark 1973 decision legalizing abortion, including Norma McCorvey (Kate Middleton) who was perhaps better known by pseudonym Jane Roe, and Sarah Weddington (Christina Hall) and Linda Coffee (Susan Lynskey), the attorneys who prepared and presented the case to the Supreme Court. Skillfully directed by Vanessa Stalling, *ROE* turns a possibly dry legal brief into a probing and intimate story of the people who lived it.



Christina Hall, Kate Middleton, and Susan Lynskey – Photo by Jenny Graham

Attorneys Weddington and Coffee are looking for a pregnant woman who has unsuccessfully sought an abortion in order to develop a case for the legalization of abortion. They subsequently discover Norma McCorvey, who is pregnant with her third unwanted child, reportedly the result of a rape. Even though Norma is far from the perfect plaintiff – given her history of criminal behaviors, emotional instability, and substance abuse – the attorneys commit to her case and begin the long legal journey to the U.S. Supreme Court. But it is not until 1973 – long after McCorvey has delivered her third child – that the decision to legalize abortion emerges. What happens before, during, and after the long legal battle constitute the facts of the tale (which is, by the way, also highly educational for the uninformed). ROE has a new ending, in light of the recent Supreme Court ruling, and in no uncertain terms calls for action by the citizenry. Sach’s “guerilla-style theater” is awake and thriving.





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Kate Middleton and Liv Yuli Shechter – Photo by Jenny Graham

The talented cast does an excellent job of presenting rounded and often intensely emotional characters who cannot fail to draw the audience into their various plights – with the occasional humorous lines interjected into the serious stuff. Kudos to the principals – but also congratulations to the entire acting team who make ROE come alive. Special thanks to Rob Nagle, who plays Flip Benham, the clever and manipulative Evangelical minister and national director of the anti-abortion organization Operation Rescue. Here is a man the audience can love to hate! Natural boundaries between actors and audience often blur: the audience is encouraged to participate with cheers or boos as the action moves forward. The set is simple, with actors holding scripts and moving the few furniture props as needed. Several microphones stand before the actors, and the audience members wear headsets to hear the lines. The net result is both formidable and entertaining and seems to bode well for the power of the theater to encourage and even incite change.



Kenya Alexander and Christina Hall – Photo by Jenny Graham

ROE runs through July 10, 2022, with performances on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays at 8 p.m. The Fountain Theatre is located at 5060 Fountain Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90029. Tickets are \$20. For information and reservations, call 323-663-1525 or go [online](#).