

This Sister of Perpetual Indulgence added playwriting to street improvisation: His next piece will be on the iconic sisterhood

Description

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I met 73-year-old Cass Brayton when our virtual group, Drama with Friends, had the pleasure of reading three of his short plays last month. Braytonâ??s plays have been performed by local amateur and professional theater groups around the city. His most recent, â??The Boy Who Didnâ??t Listen to His Mother,â• was included in the 2008 â??Best ofâ• series by PlayGround, an incubator for aspiring playwriters.



Cass Brayton started writing plays nearly 20 years after moving to San Francisco and joining The Sisters. (Photos courtesy of Cass Brayton)

â??Theatre feeds my optimism,â?• he said. â??It pulls people out of isolation and firms our connection to each other.â?•

Brayton didnâ??t start writing plays until 1998, 20 years after arriving in San Francisco. But he was already well known around town as one of the original Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, improvisational artists and community activists. Their name comes from the nunsâ?? robes they wear while interacting with people in the streets.

â??Our power comes from donning drag, thus foregoing the privilege our society gives white males,â?• Brayton said. â??When society no longer holds the ability to threaten you with loss of power and privilege, you are free to spread joy and humor.â?•

Although their outrÃ© antics have offended some segments of the community, their camp humor has earned them a large and raucous following. â??Weâ??re the sacred clowns of the community, here to foster hope, creativity and wellness.â?•

Comforting the afflicted

While their reputation stems from their performances, Brayton doesnâ??t want people to forget the Sistersâ?? community work. They have an annual grant program for under-served populations, particularly in the LGBTQ+ community. â??Like nuns, we educate, comfort the afflicted, raise money and try to spread some joy in the process.â?•

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The Sisters pose with Sister Honey Bear, the image thatâ??s been adopted and adapted by groups and individuals all over the city for various messaging.

Pre-pandemic, The Sisters collected donations at large events such as Pink Saturday in the Castro, which they produced, or the Folsom Street Fair, where they sought donations for the organizers and got a percentage of the proceeds. They held variety shows in bars, charging an entry fee and soliciting donations. They went into neighborhoods to raise money for specific causes, such as grooming kits and socks for the unhoused.

â??The pandemic greatly impacted our fundraising, but we were fortunate enough to have the artist fnnch help us by creating a â??Sister Honey Bear,â?• Brayton said. He sold 150 prints and 50 paintings, all signed and numbered, which raised over $30,000, replacing some of what we lost over the past year.

As the Mistress of Communications, or Sister Mary Media, Brayton coordinates outreach and, with another Sister, a woman (the Sisters are now about 50 percent female) is charged with digitizing their archives and putting them online, a task they hope to complete by this summer.

Then thereâ??s his playwriting. Different from what he does with The Sisters but related in requiring him to give voice to different elements of a personality. His first produced play, by PlayGround in 2003, was about drag queens. Unlike many such plays, â??Iâ??d Like to Buy a Vowelâ?• focused on the characterâ??s interior life rather than the sensational emotives of drag performance.

A first sense of belonging

It also landed among the production companyâ??s â??best ofâ?• series, itâ??s when Brayton began to see himself as a playwright. For so many years, he said, he considered legitimate â??theaterâ?• as separate from the zany, improvisational street theater he experienced as a Sister.

The third of five children, Brayton was born and raised in a working-class suburb outside Montreal. As an English Protestant in a French Catholic city, he said, â??you quickly learned your culture was not the be-all and end-allâ?• of the world;â?• there were other ways to live. Itâ??s a lesson deeply embedded in his soul.

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In a world of differences, community becomes even more important. Braytonâ??s experienced his first real sense of belonging, what he calls his â??first gang,â?• when he joined the high school paper as a reporter. That feeling of finding meaning and camaraderie intensified when he became editor-in-chief of the college paper at Montrealâ??s Concordia University. It was the late â??60s/ early â??70s, a time of cultural shift and anti-war organizing, in Canada as well as the U.S. Thrust into the middle of this disruption as a reporter and editor, Brayton thrived on the energy.



Brayton was a reporter in high school at editor of his university.â??s newspaper.

The anti-war movement wasnâ??t the only upheaval underway: gays were also organizing for their rights. After coming out in his early 20s, Brayton went on to manage the cityâ??s gay bookstore.

Activism in S.F. â??about spiritâ??

The gay movement in Canada differed from that in California, he said. It was focused on civil rights. Activism In California, particularly in San Francisco, was more multi-faceted. It was about â??the whole person, about spirit, empathy, and camp.â?• People were heading to San Francisco from all over to explore and give expression to their gay identity. In June 1978, Brayton joined the exodus.

The place felt right, like home, he said. When his money ran out, he found a job at a graphics shop. Six years later, when the shop folded, he and two of his co-workers started their own typesetting shop, which they ran for 22 years.

The year after Brayton landed in San Francisco was also the year three local Castro District drag queens founded the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a group treasured by many San Franciscans for its flamboyance and over-the-top street theater. By the fall of that year, Sister Mary Media was totally involved.

The Sisters is the subject of a full-length play heâ??s been working on for several years now. â??It will have music,â?• he said, â??but I donâ??t call it a musical because Iâ??m more of a playwright than a musician. I write lyrics.â?•



Clayton surrounded by friends and admirers. (Photo by Linda Simitz-Meckes.)

Today, heâ??s a lyricist, playwright, improvisational actor, costume creator and make-up artist. â??I usually have very high semi-circles of glittery blue eye shadow above my eyelids and I almost never use false eyelashes,â?• Brayton said of his own unique style within the sisterhood. â??I also have a bit of rouge on my cheeks.

â??I wear a big black and white feather boa that molts a lot, so you can usually find me by following the trail of feathers.â?•

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