

Leslie Aileen Ross is a playwright and poet who supports her writing habit by working, as a technical writer, business analyst or instructional designer for the computer/telecommunications, financial, and insurance industries. Although Ross graduated from Western Illinois University with an English degree (and minors in education, music, and philosophy), she didn't get into playwrighting until, after her BA, a friend dared her to "write a play; and, while you're at it, make some challenging parts for women." This was when Ross was working on her Master of Arts at University of Illinois (Chicago Circle), after being accepted into the Program for Writers. After searching for playwrighting courses in English and/or Theater departments in the Chicago area (and not finding any), Ross has been fortunate enough to study playwrighting with real playwrights (through Victory Gardens, Women in Theater, A.E. Playworks, Chicago Dramatists, The Playwrights' Center, and by being a "groupie" of certain special playwrights). Ross has taken playwrighting classes from Edward Albee, Steve Carter, and some Chicago playwrights. She is especially indebted to Steve Carter, Kathleen Thompson, and Anne McGravie for their support over these past decades.

Ross' writing education has been mostly through non-academic circles. She has grown through many experiences such as The Playwrights' Center, Chicago Dramatists, Feminist Women Writer's Workshops, Feminist Writer's Guild-Chicago, Feminist Writer's of the Western Suburbs, and writing programs at Elgin Community College and College of DuPage.

Ross was a member of the Dramatists Guild and the Feminist Writers' Guild, and has been involved with The International Society of Dramatists, was the founder of the Feminist Writers' Guild of the Western Suburbs, was one of the co-founders of Writer's Workshop, a member of the Illinois Theater Association, a playwright member of Chicago Dramatists Guild, the American Community Theatre Association, and Illinois Writers Inc.

"Survivors" was first produced by The Playwrights' Center (in Sept./Oct. 1992). "Survivors" was listed by "New City" as one of the top five plays of 1992 and was noted by L. Boomer as a "Critic's Choice" for "The Reader" (see attached articles). "Survivors" was also a semi-finalist in the Siena College Playwrights' Competition and a finalist in The Ann White Theatre's New Playwrights' Competition (1992), and performed at College of DuPage (March 1993), and Cafe Voltaire (July/Aug. 1993). Her first play, "A Little Bit of Both" was produced by The Canterbury Players and The Women's Theatre Project. Many of Ross' plays have been done as workshop productions in Chicago, LA, and New York.

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9 August 1996

Ms. Leslie Blanchard
Bearlife
190 North Carmino Road
Kyle, Texas 78640

Dear Ms. Blanchard:

Ms. Carla Schanstra, an old friend, has asked me to write this letter and I couldn't be happier to comply, I think that much of her talent and ability as a playwright.

I met Carla for the first time in 1981 when I was asked by the Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago to conduct a workshop made up of writers who'd submitted first drafts of plays they'd written. I could choose any writer whose work showed promise and the decisions would be completely mine. A writer whose work leaped off the page at me was Carla Schanstra. We became and remain friends.

As you know, she is the author of a most wonderful and heart-wrenching play, "Survivors". I saw this play some years ago in Chicago. I've wondered ever since, "Why isn't this play being done more?" Certainly it's timely and relevant. That it's well-written, goes without saying. It had to take a great deal of pain to write it because it took a great deal of pain to live it.

I understand there is a chance that it is to be done again. I do hope so and that this letter is instrumental toward that end. I love this play and think that it goes well beyond survivors surviving. It's a play about coming out of darkness into the full light. It's a play about not just existing, but getting over.

Anything, within my limited power, that I can do to have people see this play, I will do. If writing recommendations is all I can do, consider it done.

Most respectfully yours,

Steve Carter,
Playwright-in-Residence
Victory Gardens Theatre
2257 North Lincoln Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60614



L.A. Ross is Carla Schanstra's pen name.

Review:
NEW CITY
September 10, 1992

SURVIVORS

Playwrights' Center

A compelling new one-act by talented local scribe L. A. Ross, "Survivors" is a carefully researched and powerfully written drama detailing one woman's attempt to make personal sense of a childhood dominated by an abusive father. With the play's central character seated in an easy chair and addressing an unseen therapist, Ross collapses numerous counseling sessions and allows her audience to share the incest survivor's journey through the various stages of dealing with her background. Seated on stools behind the client, two other performers (Melissa Reeves and Kimberly Furst) articulate the woman's subconscious thoughts and offer visions of how she behaved in the past. This intriguing device works surprisingly well.

The play's wonderful sense of intimate immediacy is matched by strong work from the strangely named Dado in the central role – the audience becomes increasingly involved in her unusual performance as the play progresses. There is still some tripping over lines and inconsistencies of style, especially surrounding how and when the women interact and theatricalize the dialogue. But George Tafelski's intelligent production is well worth seeing, and this important, forthright and un sentimental piece deserves wider exposure. *(Chris Jones)*

Sept. 23, 1992

Nightlines: Theatre

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Survivors

reviewed by M.J. Hochberg

Survivors, a new play by L.A. Ross currently running at the Playwright's Center, is a tour de force. It's hard to explain exactly how stunning a piece of work it is, because I was completely unable to speak when it ended—I was so thoroughly moved and blown away by the lyrical force of its words and the painful poetry of its emotional intensity and depth.

Survivors is a one-woman show with three actors, the story of a woman's journey through devastating memories of sexual abuse to her beginning steps toward healing and reintegration.

The play follows Billie (Dado), in an easy chair whose swiveling and squeaking mirrors the psychic contortions she twists through in her sessions, as she engages in an ongoing dialogue with an unseen therapist. A few feet behind Billie sit two more Billies (Melissa Reeves and Kimberly Furst), in taller director's chairs—observing, assessing, and offering their perspectives on her (their) pain, recollections

and process.

The use of three players presents the audience with a unique view of Billie's world; whether these other presences are fragmented aspects of her fractured personality, or representations of her at very different points in her life, or both, is not important. What is engrossing is watching the visually separate, differing voices gradually shift in the course of the play from one-as-three to three-as-one.

Dado, as the central personality, is brilliant. Her intensity and her edge present Billie's pain and struggle with every simple gesture, from the haunted look in her eyes to the desperate need you feel emanating from every part of her body.

Melissa Reeves brings the young girl part of Billie to life in all her innocence with grace and beauty. From the way she clutches a small stuffed dog to the wide-eyed expressions that cross her face as her body withdraws in fetal position, she conveys the fear and lack of understanding that Billie still confronts.

Kimberly Furst embodies the sexual long-

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ing, hope, and dreams of the young woman coming of age, her thoughts imagining the glory of love in direct contrast to where her body and actions will allow her to go. The rich desire that spills out in her voice as she envisions the male or female lover who will bring her to new heights of openness and joy is deeply compelling.

Sustaining these striking performances, Long's words reach right to the core, capturing the confusion, the anger, the hunger and the agony of Billie's torment, and her need for, and terror of, healing. They say art imitates life—in *Survivors*, theater informs life with striking insight and power. It's an extraordinary experience.

Playwright's Center, 334-9981, thru Oct. 10.
(Wed. & Thurs., the playwright and cast engage in a post-show discussion with the audience.)

SURVIVORS

Playwright Center

By Lawrence Hamner

A blocked memory of a childhood wrong festers; the congested pain works to a hurtful heal or grow. Survival is not endurance, uncluttered by hope and unquashed by love. But sometimes a therapeutic breakthrough snags the spell, the kind of purging confession that, not incidentally, makes powerful drama.

The one-act *Survivors*, a Playwright Center premiere by local writer L.A. Ross, works almost as well as therapy as it does as theater. Indeed, given his sensitivity to the ugly subject of child sexual abuse, it seems fudgier to make a distinction.

The setting is a therapist's office in 1986; the real locale is the mind of Billie, a victim of incest. Terrified of what she can't face ("It's all my fault"), Billie suffers from headaches, insomnia, and suppressed anger. Not knowing why, the alienated but friendly, restraining their easy happiness. She hates being loved, loathes men and sex ("They get angry and fuck"). The thought of marriage repels her ("I can't make it capital-y"). Bitterly she convinces her life to be the movie, where no one ever suffers alone and no pain is ever painful. Her job, as an editor of a national sanitation engineering, seems irrelevant. She vividly describes going to a sex-primate house, seeing the drooping, sac-like legs of the female monkeys, the waddlers, who make large to detroy did than to them—and to her?

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In active denial, Billie writes in her essay chair and table as an unseen therapist, to his anger first enough—she must get beyond it to its source. Hesitantly, then compulsively, she begins to talk about her father, a pillar of the church who managed to become a seducer of Billie's friends, of body-sitters of maids, of boys—or to Billie says, leaving us unsure whether to believe her or not. (To both daughter and father the mother seems irrelevant.)

To poetry Billie's fractured psyche, Ross splits it into two personas who suggest the being she was before the incest. They feel aloud what the patient wants to say. As ugly memories return, the two personae seek shelter in sexual, unthreatening recollections of nature and the seasons, in music (Billie imagines her body as an instrument only she can play), and in fantasies of renewal, female bonding and bisexual love). She pleads, "Hold me—together."

In these comic-restrained, cumulative, by decline sessions, a scared Billie gradually approaches the abuse she's never mentioned. The heretofore final revelation is still fairly impressive; Billie wasn't ready for it, but we are, sensing the good it will do her as well as her agony in remembering.

The description of the revelation is



Survivors

writing and specific, down to the moment of Billie's mercurial uncertainties. But now Billie can begin to think once more of playing her viola, a sign of recovery.

Like Brian Kint's 1991 *Twisted* (a more poetically abstract treatment of the same subject), *Survivors* does beyond story telling to let other survivors know they're not alone. (I had uncertainty exclude the occasional repetition, stock defensiveness, and over-writhing.) Raw and rewarding, George Tatchell's staging is as compassionate as it is painful.

An LA actress who recently moved

to Chicago (and who bears a rather LA-like name), Dado is stunning at shaping Billie's pain into healing. The incest memory, described as it hits every sense, is so distant event—extricatingly immediate, it happens all over, though it can never hurt as much again.

Melissa Reeves' persona (Billie's younger, innocent voice) is difficult to watch, because she shows who Billie was and will never be again—a funny-burner, Kimberly Furell's Billie is the trapped artist within, the part we hope will transform the pain. Both offer a whole new kind of theatrical

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therapeutic support. Like Billie herself, *Survivors* might have succumbed to usage and revealed an insidious, instead of being in intimacy to embrace, not attack—a form of therapy itself.

THEATER

Critic's Choice
 "The Reader"
 July 9, 1993



JACOBSON
 THEATER



Survivors

Unconquering like a theatrical Richter scale, *Survivors* measures the damage done to a woman named Billie by her abusive, socially respected father. Refusing ever-handedness, playwright L.A. Ross's uncompromising one-act details the damage wrought by incest with as much compassion as a survivor can supply. To deal with Billie's trauma, Ross gives her two personas, played by two actors, who serve as agents of healing, reminding her of the life beneath the hurt and her capacity to love and holding out the hope that nature, music, and new love will heal the pain. Billie faces the facts of her childhood violation in the final searing scene, and the playwright doesn't spare us the details of her still burning memory: this play is not about denial, nor is it a clinical case history. Performed last fall at the Playwright's Center in a workshop production, Ross's raw and veridical work is here revived in a new staging by Andrea Chambers. Cafe Voltaire, 3231 N. Clark, 704-353-7910. Through August 25 Wednesdays, 8 PM. \$6-\$10 (bring cash to use your resources allow!).

—Lawrence Sumner

'Nightlines'

Review by Martina Clarke

August 4, 1993

Survivors

by **Martina Clarke**

Survivors, at Cafe Voltaire thru Aug. 25, is L.A. Ross' powerful one-act investigation of incest, fragmentation, memory, denial, anger and pain. It is also a portrait of intense courage and an overwhelming will to endure.

While the central character Billie (played by Dado) rocks in an easy chair center stage, engaging an unseen therapist in painful dialogue, the audience becomes privy to Billie's emotions via the memories and observations of her other personae: Billie as child, portrayed by Debbie Wittenberg, and Billie as the promise of the artist she might be, performed by Kimberly Furst. It is their recollections of innocence, their sustained faith in nature, art, and, yes, even the sexual expression of love, which allow Billie her anger, her transition.

As the therapeutic process becomes more intensely focused, dark images are projected onto the wall behind them. Unclear at first, these gradually take on horri-

fying shape and meaning as the survivor finally allows herself to remember and reveal the secret she has carried with her through life.

The lyrical force of this work is presented undiluted by the extraordinary performance of Dado as adult Billie. When she described "the first time," we, too, experience the horror of a father's betrayal; the silence of the audience is echoed in one collectively held breath. We believe her when she relived his "open first, closed hand." The rapid alternation of images behind Billie reflect the intensity of Billie's spoken word, the slides punctuate her mental process.

While we cannot look away from this moment, we are grateful to have the spell broken as first the child, then the artist reapproach Billie, who merely asks to be held together.

This is an important story, told with urgent intimacy. It is unflinching and yet very compassionate. Directed by Andrea Chambers, this production is well worth seeing. You might leave speechless, but certainly not disappointed.

“New City” 1992’s Top 5 Plays

December 31, 1992

plays

1. **Shogun of a Man**
Lynn Hunt/Theatre Works
2. **The Song of Jacob Zola**
Suzanne Farrell
3. **Groundwork**
Kathleen Marshall
4. **Jackie Malone**
Sharon Frazier
5. **Jazz Family**
Michael Fried

(Full Production)

1. **The Arabian Nights**
Landscape Theatre
2. **The Good Person of Szechwan**
The Garage Theatre
3. **Backus of Backus**
The Garage Theatre
4. **Samson the Fireman**
The New Lot
5. **The Drawing Experience**
His Pillow
Accidental Acts Theatre

(Book Reading)

1. **The Arabian Nights**
Landscape Theatre Company
2. **Walden**
Walden Theatre
3. **BT the Machine**
4. **Sightless**
Chicago Performance Center

Draw Lane/Other Theatre

Chicago Theatre

1. **The Arabian Nights**
Landscape Theatre
2. **Light in Love**
Chicago
3. **Walden**
The Goodhouse Theatre
4. **Summer Stillborn**
Chicago
5. **Birth of a Franchise**
Theatre for the Age of Love

Other Level

1. **Avant-Garde**
Landscape Theatre
2. **Hellish-Dog Chairman**
Chicago Theatre Company
3. **Estimate the Subject**
Chicago Theatre
4. **Twelve Angry Men**
Chicago and Chicago Theatre
Chicago
5. **The Grubler**
Chicago Theatre

(Book Reading)

1. **Repeat or It Be Home**
for Christmas
Chicago Theatre Company
2. **The Black Madonna**
Chicago Theatre
3. **Ma Rainey's Black Bottom**
Chicago Theatre Company
4. **The Red Inspector Hirsch**
Chicago Theatre
5. **Jack in the Sack**
Chicago Theatre

Chicago Theatre