

VIRGINIA PLAYWRIGHT PATRICIA CORBETT

Merril Mushroom

Patricia Corbett is an award-winning playwright, advocate, artist, educator, published author, and feminist entrepreneur whose passions are community service, social justice, and education. Patricia encourages marginalized populations to seek their truth, claim their power, and tell their stories. Her father, Linwood Corbett, Sr., was a community organizer, civil rights activist, and minister who greatly influenced her life and her work. He sent his entire family to college working as a baggage foreman for Greyhound bus line and custodian at Virginia Union University where she earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in English. At some point in his early life, her father shared with her that he had wanted to be an actor. Patricia's mother, Mary V. Corbett, is a poet and artist as well as a retired educational professional and the first Black professional clown in the state of Virginia. The combination of these two extraordinary parents supported Patricia's passion for community service, social justice, radical disorientation, writing, and humor.

Patricia always considered herself a writer of poetry and short fiction until, on a whim, she turned one of her short stories, "Fall of the House of Snow," into a play. As a result, she received a Maryland State Arts Council Individual Artist Award for Playwriting. The play tells the story of how a group of men and a devoted woman become family as a result of their rejection from their families, communities, and churches. Set in the late 1980s against the backdrop of the rapid rise of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, "it was a story that had to be told,"¹ Corbett goes on: "Nothing had been written about the psychological and emotional impact this had on families in the black community. I thought a creative

approach would bring some humor and lighten some of the heavy issues in *Fall of the House of Snow*, such as discussions about HIV/AIDS, the church, homophobia, violence within the Black community toward gay people, particularly transgender people, and how to reconcile with internalized homophobia." *Fall of the House of Snow* is one of three major projects currently in progress.

Aunt Maggie's Mojo or The Devil in Angel Brown is a novel that Patricia is immersed in as well. This historical fiction tells the story of three generations of Black women who are clairvoyant. The story starts in Virginia during the late 1800s, moves to North and South Carolina in the early 1900s, and ends in the 1980s back in Virginia. One of the main characters is a lesbian detective who has a strange affinity and connection to the case. The novel explores familial ties, secrets, and the metaphysical.

Patricia's one-woman show, tentatively titled *Nobody's Darling*, is based on a poem of the same title by Alice Walker. The spirit of Audre Lorde is the inspiration for the six characters in the play:

a seventeen-year-old Black woman who was the first to be executed in the state of Virginia; Black Transgender Warrior Barbie, an FTM transgender doll fictionally created by Mattel, who engages the audience to vote on whether this transgender doll should exist. Then there's an African warrior, a blues singer, a washed up 60s poet, and Harriet Jacobs, a slave who ran away and hid in the attic space of a house for seven years. All of these are truly powerful stories. I'm very much interested in using art to elevate all kinds of causes and all the issues we tackle from a feminist perspective.

A small experimental theater in Richmond is interested in working with her on *Nobody's Darling*, and she hopes to get started next year.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, Patricia started JUSTaSISTA Productions, providing writing, editing, and personal historian services. JUSTaSISTA's mission is ". . . to educate,

¹ All quotations are from Rose Norman's phone interview with Patricia Corbett, December 2, 2015.

enlighten, as well as provide a space for the storytelling of marginalized populations . . . to shift paradigms in business, education, and the community." She also founded Sisters Rising Mentoring Organization for girls: "We started by just providing a space for them to talk about what was happening in their lives. That evolved to helping them set up bank accounts, applying for college, all kinds of interventions in terms of social services they needed and other kinds of guidance." Unfortunately, Sisters Rising folded once Patricia left Virginia twelve years ago, but she has returned to Virginia, and she hopes to expand this programming into Sisters Rising Academy, "a boarding school for inner city girls, with the hope of developing an entire community dedicated to supporting young women . . . in self-actualization and independence."



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Virginia playwright Patricia Corbett.

"As an artist," concludes Patricia, "one of the most difficult things in being a Black lesbian, and a mother, and all the other things I am, is not the creation of my work. It is creating it through the process of living everyday life in a society that constantly devalues women and Black people. As we look at what's happened in our past and in our current society, none of us have room to suppress our stories anymore."

FEMINISM DANCES OVER WALLS OF TRADITION

Kathleen "Corky" Culver

With fun-filled fervor, second-wave feminists dived right in and evolved every aspect of dancing, turning rigidly heterosexist models that privileged men into dances that empowered and freed women.

Dancing Both Lead and Follow

Social and ballroom dance classes were a virtual barricade where patriarchal custom gave women a mandatory subservient role. They would begin, "Okay, men line up over here to learn lead parts. Women, you will learn follow." The theory was that women need men's leadership. (This in an actual world when back leading was about the only way to get anything moving.) In the St. Petersburg/Gulfport, FL, area, Phyllis Plotnick, a dance teacher, led a ballroom dance revolution. She gave classes in which women could learn both the lead and follow parts so they could dance together and experience both parts. Phyllis' classes in the 1990s created a large dance community. The first dances they held were brave events in a time when being seen in same-sex dance couples could result in lost jobs, families broken apart, and violence. At first they put black paper over the windows, so they could have a sense of safety and privacy for their, of course, "gay" waltzes and swings and salsas. The black paper over the windows has long since come down. In fact the Sonia Plotnick Health Fund rented the St. Petersburg Coliseum or the elegant Casino dance hall for the annual Valentines Ladies in Red dances, well advertised and attended by thousands.

Lesbian dances provided women opportunities to court, to see how two could negotiate precision and playfulness, find good fits and good times, wondrous energizing of connection. On the grand scale, the gatherings developed communities with social cohesiveness, pride, and physical and mental health. Not that