



The First and Last Meeting of the Anti Anti-Social Social Club: The Robey Reader interviews Robey playwright, Sharon Stockard Martin (SM)

RR: Sharon, thanks a million for agreeing to an interview for The Robey Reader. I'd like to focus this interview on your provocative new play, The First and Last Meeting of the Anti Anti-Social Social Club. But first let's chat about your background. Are you a native of Los Angeles?

SM: No. I grew up in the segregated south. My parents were educators. We moved following my father's appointments. First in Nashville, Tennessee. Though Nashville was in the south, it was a city of colleges and universities. Later we moved to Tallahassee, Florida. Finally in Baton Rouge and New Orleans, Louisiana. Each one of those places instilled in me a sense of community or lack of one, inclusion or exclusion, of danger and purpose.

RR: What spawned your interest in writing?

SM: My interest in writing began while I was a member of a children's theater at Tennessee A&I University. A professional production of Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" took me to a place beyond the familiar and restrictive to a place of possibility and hope—the place of stories and creativity. During my adolescence in New Orleans I became part of The Free Southern Theater. It successfully wedded social awareness and entertainment. Combining those two elements was evident in the faces of an audience that had never witnessed live theater before. My earliest plays – *Proper and Fine: Fanny Lou Hamer's Entourage*, *Edifying Further Elaborations on the Mentality of a Chore* and *Entertaining Innumerable Reflections on the Subject at Hand* – were part of the FST touring repertoire.

RR: Did you study playwriting in school?

SM: I left the south to attend Howard University for two years. I graduated from Bennington College in Vermont. As only one of ten black students there, I learned about isolation and difference. I continued writing plays. Accepted into the Yale School of Drama playwriting program, I wrote *Canned Soul*, *Deep Heat* and *SOS*, *Baby Death* and *Anxiety Pieces* for the Contemporary American Stage.

RR: Have any of your plays been produced?

SM: Several of my plays have been produced by small companies and colleges. Three of my plays have been published as part of anthologies. I received a J. F. Kennedy Center Black Playwright Award for *The Moving Violation*.

RR: *Your journey has planted you in many U. S. cities. Did writing bring you to Los Angeles?*

SM: I moved to Los Angeles, California soon after my time at Yale. I became a teacher to provide a living for my three daughters. Now that I've survived work and parenthood, I have time for writing.

RR: *That brings us back to The First and Last Meeting of the Anti Anti-Social Social Club. What's your play about?*

SM: It's about people who push up against their own tendencies to push away others. Here's the blurb Yale Cabaret Hollywood created to describe it:

If you hate support groups, this is the comedy for you! Talk about heinous anti-social behavior! This crowd has it in spades.

Anticipation of and preparation for the visit of a renowned life coach brings out a mismatch of phobias, obsessions and downright nastiness in our characters. Place your bets on who will make it to the other side when their social skills morph into survival skills.

This show puts the "fun" into dysfunctional.

RR: *By the way, I enjoyed the recent reading of the play by Yale Cabaret Hollywood directed by Fred Sanders.*

SM: Thank you.



RR: “...Puts the fun into dysfunctional.” Is that something you strive for in your plays?

SM: My work has dealt with the absurdity of life and the necessity of maintaining hope. I choose fairy tales over horror, love over hate and hang onto a stubborn belief that things *do* get better.

RR: What motivated you to write this play?

SM: I was walking to the Grove (i.e., a major West Los Angeles shopping center) when I saw a guy with a sweat shirt with the words *THE ANTI ANTI-SOCIAL SOCIAL CLUB* on the back. It must have been hot so he took it off. His t-shirt had the same words. I imagined that if he'd taken that off, his back would have been tattooed with the same words. What struck me as ironic was the idea that you can negate a negation then ask yourself where does that leave you?

RR: Can you share with us one of your favorite lines?

SM: I have a long monologue by Ethel, a grouchy octogenarian describing all of her physical maladies. You're left wondering why she isn't dead already. My humor comes from exchanges, as in a rare moment of honesty.

Dakota: I'm terrified.

Chip: We're all terrified of ourselves and everyone else.

Dakota: I'd abandon myself if I knew where to go.

Chip: And when you get there, there'd you be.

Ethel: That's called a mirror, knucklehead.

Chip: There's an app for that.

RR: “I'd abandon myself if I knew where to go.” Nice line. Thought-provoking.

SM: Indeed.

RR: How did you learn of the Robey Theatre Company Playwrights Lab?

SM: I attended Robey's Paul Robeson Theatre Festival last summer. I'd recently retired from teaching and thought it would be a good way to jumpstart my writing again.

RR: How long have you been writing plays?

SM: I went to a college where I could fashion my own major. I majored in anything that started with a P: philosophy, psychology, playwriting and pottery. I wrote from adolescence until I got an MFA from the Yale School of Drama. I became a teacher and didn't write again until I retired three decades later. Besides not having time – being a single parent and full-time employee – I went through an identity crisis as a

writer. What does it mean to be a black writer who doesn't speak or identify with Ebonics? I had to free myself from the limitations.

RR: Some famous Black writers have been temporarily paralyzed by linguistic shackles, including August Wilson. James Baldwin once revealed that “When I realized that music rather than American literature was really my language, I was no longer afraid. And then I could write.” How did you resolve your linguistic identity crisis?

SM: I stopped trying to make my characters conform to stereotypes. I give them words they'd utter if they weren't shackled by a poor education or lowered expectations for expression. I sometimes just liberate them from the construct of race.

RR: Who are your greatest writing inspirations?

SM: I identify with the Theatre of the Absurd. Ionesco, Camus. My favorite play of all time is *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. I once attended a performance a while back and laughed so hard that everyone in my section of the theater moved to the other side at intermission.

RR: What does the future look like?

SM: Resume where I left off. Figure out what I want to say and find a way to express it. Get productions. Sell scripts. Get rich.