

## At the Crossroads

By Advisory Company member Mike Fischer

*Who was she really, this woman? She was my mum, of course, but that was only one part, and I want to know all the parts . . . She stares out of the window, but what she is looking at I cannot see.*

– Chris Power, “Summer 1976,” from *Mothers* (2018)

*Two women together is a work/nothing in civilization has made simple,/two people together is a work/heroic in its ordinariness*

– Adrienne Rich, “Twenty-One Love Poems,” from *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978)

Diana is a self-described “square,” imagining her neighbor Alice as a “free spirit,” a “sleepy-eyed little hippie.” Alice describes Diana as “kind of uptight” and admits “I sort of immediately hated her.”

Living in Columbus, Ohio, Diana is a single mother; Alice is a married mother. Diana is punctilious and neat; Alice is carefree and messy. Diana has family money; Alice and her husband are scraping by on his untenured faculty salary. Diana loves to cook; Alice treats cooking as a duty. Diana can be an overbearing snob; Alice is emphatically middlebrow.

Like the eponymously named Roman goddess, Diana initially projects as self-sufficient, aloof, competent, and a bit intimidating. Like Lewis Carroll’s eponymously named fictional character, Alice initially projects as bored, innocent, naive, and a bit lost.

They’d never have become friends if their respective five-year-old girls hadn’t bonded during the summer of 1976, as the nation celebrated the bicentennial of America’s “Declaration of Independence.” Because they become friends, they learn, alongside us, that “people aren’t just one thing.”

“This is obvious now,” Alice reflects, more than a quarter century later. But “I was young,” coming of age along with her country in a decade when the freedoms and discoveries promised by second-wave feminism reached high tide and began to recede.

### The Ambivalent Seventies

Standing just past the midpoint between Woodstock and Reagan’s recession, 1976 was a year caught betwixt and between; even as it basked in the afterglow of the Sixties, it also foreshadowed the grimmer and meaner decade to come.

*Roe v. Wade* was just three years old (and three years too late to give Diana and Alice the freedom to choose). It had only been two years since Congress gave married women the right to open bank accounts and apply for credit cards. It had been just one year since the U.S. Supreme

Court banned state laws prohibiting women from serving on juries. And it had been in January of 1976 itself that *Time* magazine named “the American women” as what it then still called the Man of the Year.

But women in 1976 still earned just 60 cents for every dollar earned by men in comparable jobs. Proposed state Equal Rights Amendments had been trounced by voters in New York and New Jersey the prior November; the once seemingly surefire passage of the national ERA had become uncertain. Opposition to *Roe* was growing exponentially. And for all the apparent freedom it offered, newly available no-fault divorce was impoverishing women breaking free from unhappy marriages.

“Great things were promised me,” Diana says, in a rueful confession that’s as much about her generation as herself. “I promised them to myself.” Buoyed by all that had recently changed, how could those promises remain unfulfilled, for women like Alice and Diana and for a nation seemingly ready at long last to make good on what Jefferson’s “Declaration” had once promised?

Reflecting on what prompted him to write “Summer, 1976” two decades into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, playwright David Auburn – himself a young child living in Columbus that year – remembers the world of 1976 as one of “possibility, hope, and expectation.”

### **A Fresh Start**

Auburn’s play poignantly channels the disconnect between such dreams and the disappointments besetting the women of his parents’ generation. But as is continually true in Auburn’s work – think of his Pulitzer-winning, similarly female-centric play *Proof* – disappointment never curdles into outright despair.

As “Summer, 1976” makes clear, things don’t transpire for Alice and Diana quite as either had imagined. Life isn’t a blueprint – what Diana memorably refers to as an “over-embroidered shroud” one might “drape” over a “lifeless life.” And neither marriage nor kids are an insurance plan or an escape from the journeys of self-discovery each of us must take.

Instead, Auburn’s play highlights what inevitably happens during moments of change and transition – when, to paraphrase Alice, we discover that people, our lives, and our histories are multiple and open-ended.

It’s no accident that in addition to 1776 and 1976, Auburn’s script obliquely references two other historically significant crossroads moments in the fraught history of democracy and the right to choose: England during the debate culminating in the landmark 1832 Reform Act expanding voter rights and Germany during the tumultuous final years of the Weimar Republic.

When Alice admits at one point that “I don’t know who I am” and when Diana in turn admits “I’m not entirely myself,” both women are simultaneously opening themselves to the prospect of “leav[ing] behind everything that’s caused you to squander yourself” – and, as one of them puts it, “becom[ing] something completely *new*.”

Will they? Can they?

I'll let the two magnificent actors you're about to see – Heidi Armbruster and Colleen Madden – answer that question.

Suffice it to say for now that there's nothing gratuitous in the fact that depending on what night you see Forward's production, either of these actors could be performing either role; they'll switch off, throughout the run.

Content dictates form: By embodying both characters, Armbruster and Madden underscore Auburn's suggestion that each of us contains multitudes.

When we genuinely engage with those around us, we don't just serve as lucid reflectors allowing them to better see themselves. We also discover all we ourselves could be –so that we might make good on this nation's promise by pursuing life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as equals, together.

*In memory of Grace Paley and Adrienne Rich*

*– Milwaukee and Chicago, December 2024*