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Playing mantis

'The Notorious B.U.G.' explores human gender norms from an insect's perspective

by Karla Kane / Palo Alto Weekly

"Being the mantis is very liberating," playwright Marjorie Hazeltine said. "I have a lot of friends who have such complex relationships with their bodies, and so much shame and self-loathing. The mantis would never do that. She would be, like, 'My arm works? Great! If my legs work, great.'"

The particular praying mantis in question is of the species *Ilomantis ginsburgae*, named after Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. When Hazeltine read about the 2016 entomological discovery, she was fascinated -- and inspired. She'll debut her new one-woman show, "The Notorious B.U.G.," at the Dragon Theatre Aug. 14.

"The show, in a nutshell, is about a nonhuman, non-gendered creature being thrust into a human-gendered world," Hazeltine said. "It's trying to be this convergence of real science and my actual interest in the insect itself and then this other completely fictional made-up narrative that's exploring human social interactions."

Yes, the play is written from the point of view of the praying mantis, a year after she's named in honor of Bader Ginsburg, a beloved hero to many feminists. Being in the spotlight leads the mantis to try and make sense of -- and fit into -- human society.

Hazeltine first learned about the mantis from her then-roommate.

"She and I just started joking about how this praying mantis' life would have changed from a life of anonymity to now being linked to this really powerful woman," she said. "And for some reason we were thinking she'd have a really hard time with clothing and meeting gender norms; we were joking about if she would go to a nudist colony, and if she would get fan mail and people would mistake her for Ruth Bader Ginsburg." The ideas stuck with her. "I started thinking about myself, and my own gender construction through the lens of this mantis," she said.

The real *Ilomantis ginsburgae*, native to Madagascar, was plucked from obscurity by Case Western Reserve University graduate student Sydney Brannoch, who studied a specimen of the species at a museum in Paris. Brannoch and her supervisor, Gavin Svenson, found that the species could be identified solely by examining the female genitalia. This goes against the practice throughout much of the history of science,



"The Notorious B.U.G." looks at human gender norms from the perspective of an insect. Photo courtesy of playwright Marjorie Hazeltine.



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in which only male specimens were considered useful. They named the newly discovered species in honor of Bader Ginsburg in part because of her reputation of fighting for gender equality (they also saw a resemblance between the neck of the insect and the lacy jabot collar Bader Ginsburg wears over her robe).

Hazeltine said she's very interested in the history of science. She also has a lifelong appreciation for insects, thanks to her entomologist grandfather.

"There have been a lot of theories about why (female) mantises eat their mates. That seems to be a big fixation," she said of what is probably the most widely known mantis fact. "I think a lot of scientists have gotten trapped in thinking of it in really human terms, because that would be so horrible or so barbaric. And I just think those narratives don't work at all in the scientific world." Mantises, she pointed out, have a very short life cycle and, interestingly, males can keep on mating even without their heads.

"One of the great theories that just cracks me up is that scientists thought the males couldn't mate when they have their heads on, that there was something inhibiting them in their brain," she said, laughing. "And, just, the parallels with (human) narratives around sex, I think are so funny."

In the play, the mantis struggles with this very issue.

"She keeps getting these letters from Ruth Bader Ginsburg's office asking her to try to better represent the name, and she's really trying," she said. "And that's one of the things that Ruth Bader Ginsburg keeps asking, 'Please stop ripping men's heads off. Please stop eating them.'"

In her efforts at fitting in with human gender norms, the mantis tries to understand fashion, and even gets a breast augmentation. "She keeps butting up against a lot of frustration and rules that seem really rigid and yet are elusive and keep slipping past her," she said. She takes pleasure in experimental jazz music, and also enjoys the songs of the late rapper the Notorious B.I.G. -- a reference from which the play takes its name (Fans of Bader Ginsburg have taken to cheekily calling her the Notorious R.B.G.). "She is bigger than most males," Hazeltine pointed out about her mantis, and understands the hip-hop star's desire to brag about his size. Hazeltine said that from researching the play, she's come away from the project with even more admiration for Bader Ginsburg than she had previously. And the insect, she added, is pleased by her name's connections to both justice and rapper.

Hazeltine may be most familiar to audiences as an actor, performing with many local theater companies (next up is "The Crucible" in Los Altos). By day, she's an English teacher, with a degree in performance studies. She's written about Iraqi refugee narratives, and a show called "My Femininity the Musical," about her own struggles with meeting gender expectations.

For "The Notorious B.U.G.," Hazeltine is utilizing Dragon Theatre's "Monday Night Play Space" option, which allows artists to use the theater to debut new work (admission is donation based).

A one-person show comes with challenges, she said, such as making sure to keep the tone active, not like that of a stagnant lecture.

She's been experimenting with costume elements (green foam pool noodles are involved) to capture a bit of the mantis' unique movements and look, and plans to solicit audience feedback after the Aug. 14 performance for future revision, with hopes to perhaps submit it to a Fringe Festival in the future.

"I don't know what the grand takeaway will be for the audience but it's been really helpful for me, just as a gendered person, to try and navigate some of the things I've been concerned with," she said. "I just want gender to seem weird to people. Just make it strange."

What: "The Notorious B.U.G."

Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway St., Redwood City

When: Monday, Aug. 14, 7:30 p.m.

Cost: \$5-\$10 donation suggested

Info: Go to [Dragon Theatre](#).

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