

New Stages

Suzanne Richard can't stop worrying. As the painfully neurotic Woman of Christopher Durang's *Laughing Wild*, the veteran local actress alternates between perching birdlike on a metal stool, mismatched socks on display, and wheeling frantically on her crutches around the small stage at the 1409 Playbill Cafe.

What's Woman so worried about?

Every damn thing, it turns out:

There's the Reagan-era nuke program, the cosmic rays burning cancers into her skin, her troubling dreams about killing Sally Jessy Raphael, and her chronic unemployment (a product, she admits, of her crippling anxiety).

When she graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Richard helped create the Open Circle Ensemble, which staged several children's plays in Maryland in the mid-'90s. Soon enough, though, the group's founders landed professional acting jobs and dropped the project. *Laughing Wild*, directed by Richard's collaborator and housemate Arianna Ross, marks the rebirth of the company, which has acquired both an updated name—Open Circle Theatre—and a new mission statement promising that its productions will draw on the talents of theater-makers with disabilities.

"It's kind of weird there [hasn't been] anything like this in D. C.," says Richard, noting the existence of similar companies in San Francisco and Los Angeles. But she's quick to stress that, inclusive mission or no, Open Circle is first and foremost theater ensemble: "[W]e're not casting people because they have disabilities—we're casting people because they're professional artists."

Indeed, the *Laughing Wild* ensemble is composed mainly of local theater vets, including costume designer Kathleen Geldard, Helen Hayes Award-winning sound designer Mark Anduss, and technical director Scot McKenzie, who welded the set's Eye of Ra-ish sculptural centerpiece. For future projects, Richard plans to pull in other professional actors and crew members who have disabilities. "There's several around that I know of, which to me means there's a lot more," she says.

Man, another *Laughing Wild* character, spends as much energy as Woman worrying about '80s scourges—acid rain, religious fundamentalism, AIDS—and his answer is to repress his emotions, seeking catharsis in ineffectual meditative exercises. Richard admits to having had her own problems with repression while acting in the early '90s. "Because I worked so hard to get in college, I found that I was trying to pass as nondisabled, and so the last thing I wanted was to be around people with disabilities," she says.

When she wasn't in a theater, however, Richard worked at the Osteogenesis Imperfecta Foundation. And after she got her current job as an accessibility specialist at the National Endowment for the Arts, she says, "I began to realize I needed to start acknowledging that disability is part of where I am in theater as well."

The fact that *Laughing Wild* features mentally disturbed characters struggling to comprehend their roles in society is just happenstance or "happystance," in Richard's estimation. "We're not necessarily looking to pick shows that say something about disabled people."

On the other hand, she says, almost every theater piece can be said to have something to do with disability—it's just that people often do not catch the connections. "I think disability is the human condition," says Richard. "Disability is the only minority group you can join at any time.... And you will join it if you live long enough."

