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ALESSANDRA MELIO

UP CLOSE Family history and women's reproductive health come together in "Nan and the Lower Body."

SMEAR JOB

TheatreWorks brings the history of the Pap smear to life at an eerily appropriate time **BY ADDIE MAHMASSANI**

ON THE MORNING that news broke of the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, award-winning playwright Jessica Dickey stood in a quiet circle with the cast of Theatreworks Silicon Valley's production of her play *Nan and the Lower Body*.

"On that terrible, emotional day," she recalls, "we all came in [for rehearsal] and tried to really look ourselves and the play in the eye, both to just grieve and be angry and lost, but also to feel very lucky, like,

this is the moment we were really supposed to do this play."

An audience favorite at TheatreWorks Silicon Valley's 2019 New Works Festival, *Nan and the Lower Body* tells an unexpected story surrounding the invention of the Pap smear and subsequent progress in women's health in the 1950s. Dickey brings the historical figure Dr. George Papanicolaou to life, tracing the process that led to his discovery of the now-routine technique that allows gynecologists to detect precancerous cells in the cervix.

Dr. Papanicolaou's assistant, a young woman named Nan Day, meanwhile, is on a high-stakes

journey of her own, balancing career and personal concerns in an era when women were expected to lead rigidly domestic lives.

"It meets this moment in our country's narrative around care, autonomy, women's bodies, civil rights," Dickey says, "but you know it's fascinating, because of course the play came from a very personal impulse."

Nan Day is, in fact, the name of Dickey's late maternal grandmother, who lived with the playwright's family growing up in rural Pennsylvania. Her character is inspired by a family story: that the real-life Day worked for a brief time for Dr. Papanicolaou himself. Though Dickey cannot confirm those exact details, she knows that Day studied vaginal cancer at a time when it was rare for women to work in science.

To research the story, the playwright spent time at New York's Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, the successor of the kinds of 1950s labs her grandmother worked in. With Dr. Marcia Edelweiss, a breast pathologist and cytopathologist, Dickey got to

examine a slide from a Pap smear, one of thousands doctors at the center look at each day.

"It was a shocking moment," she says, "because you realize, and this line is in the play, but it really was literally like looking for a needle in a haystack. It was so dense and layered."

The experience, alongside historical research, gave Dickey a deeper understanding of how important and complex Dr. Papanicolaou's work was.

"Something I learned is that cancer of the reproductive system—the ovaries, the uterus, the lower body—was a crisis in the medical community. It was the number one killer of women at the time."

She describes Dr. Papanicolaou's discovery: "from a simple smear of vaginal fluid, you can actually see the cells changing; you can see dysplastic cells; you can see the cancer far earlier, and this revolutionized women's health."

As a New York City-based playwright, writer for television and actor herself, Dickey has forged a thriving career telling stories like *Nan's*, both warm and powerful, always infused with her subtly mischievous sense of humor and ear for the poetic. *The Amish Project*, about the 2006 Nickel Mines school shooting, is a stand-out play, and Apple TV's comedy *Physical* included her in the writer's room. Yet *Nan and the Lower Body* seems poised to be her most significant story yet. And with American women's reproductive rights currently under threat, Dickey, director Giovanna Sardelli and the cast could not have timed the premiere more perfectly.

"It feels like in our current moment, a political response to a political moment isn't always effective," she says. "I feel that the play meets this political crisis that we are having in the country with an open embrace and certainly with all of the intent and heart and urgency that the moment demands. Every time period has people who just see bigger and farther ahead than the rest of us and are pushing us forward, usually at great cost."

THRU AUG 7	NAN AND THE LOWER BODY
Various Times	Lucie Stern Theatre
\$30+	Palo Alto