CHARM by Kathleen Cahill

CHARM In the Room ~ Tuesday, March 2, 2010

Playwright Kathleen Cahill and Director Meg Gibson discuss Salt Lake Acting Company's upcoming production CHARM with SLAC's Cynthia Fleming, Daisy Blake, Andra Harbold, Shannon Musgrave, and Becky Santti.

SLAC *to Playwright KATHLEEN CAHILL.* Let's start at the beginning. What inspired you to write CHARM?

KATHLEEN CAHILL. It occurred to me in a moment – you get these moments when you believe impossible things (makes life more interesting). Margaret [Fuller] was treated unfairly in her life. What happened to her shouldn't have happened. The fact that I was able to write the play and that you're putting it on and that it's getting a strong response – I like to feel that somebody's guiding it – so that Margaret can –

Director MEG GIBSON. Get her due.

Ms. CAHILL. Yes, have her due –

Ms. GIBSON. Be heard fairly. Heard *well* –

Ms. CAHILL. Have her due and for people to know about her. Sort of cosmic justice.

Ms. GIBSON. Yeah, cosmic justice!

Ms. CAHILL. So there's that, and the other thing is (to be completely honest) I wrote the play by identifying with her. Because I'm one of those "heady" type women. I get turned on by ideas. When I was young and dating, I was constantly surprised that men were not –

Ms. GIBSON. In love with us because we were smart?

Ms. CAHILL. I was constantly running up against this – that it didn't matter – in fact, was sort of negative. I was "too intense" and this kind of thing.

Ms. GIBSON. *(Laughing)* Like when you got ecstatic over ideas?

Ms. CAHILL. Ecstatic over ideas or really moved by something – just "too intense". I think I identified in that way with her. That's what you have to do when you write a play: you identify with the people you're writing in some way. So I wrote it that way – with this feeling for her.

SLAC. How did you find Margaret Fuller?

Ms. CAHILL. First, I found Thoreau. I was very late to learn to swim. I didn't learn to swim as a child, I learned to swim when I was older.

Ms. GIBSON. You found Thoreau when you were a teenager –

Ms. CAHILL. I found Thoreau when I was a teenager, but when I was in my early thirties, I lived near Walden Pond, and I was learning how to swim in Walden Pond. *(Laughter)*

Thoreau's Cove, Concord, Mass.

Ms. GIBSON. It's like an American pastoral – to be able to say, "I learned to swim in Walden Pond".

Ms. CAHILL. I was reading *Walden*, which turned me on – it was one of those things that turned me on. And I would go tell the guy, whoever the guy was, and he would be like, "Yeah..." You know? Just didn't –

Ms. GIBSON. *(an impression of the non-ecstatic guy)* The guy would be like, "Yeah…" *(Laughter)* "It's nice to meet you."

Ms. CAHILL. "Who's that chick over there?" *(Laughter)* So I wrote this radio play called *The Cosmic Yankee*, and it wasn't a great play, but it was kind of interesting. It was on NPR. I was always just turned on by Thoreau and the spiritual exuberance that he felt by nature – that nature was emotional. I feel that nature is emotional, so that was where I started. I went from that to Emerson – to the book, *[Emerson:] The Mind on Fire*, which was/

Ms. GIBSON. Tremendous.

Ms. CAHILL. /about fifteen years later. Then I started reading about the Transcendentalists, and I kept hearing about "the Margaret Fuller problem" – "the Margaret Fuller problem…" It kept coming up! What's the Margaret Fuller problem*? (Laughter)* So I started finding out about Margaret Fuller. And I tried to read her writings, which I found difficult, frankly.

Ms. GIBSON. Not because of the ideas –

Ms. CAHILL. It's a style thing. I mean, people find Emerson difficult – *I* find Emerson difficult, but so worth it. And Margaret – her writing per say doesn't turn me on – what she's writing *about*, I like. Then I started reading what these people who knew her said about her. There's a book called *American Sympathy* –

Ms. GIBSON. The Caleb Crain book?

Ms. CAHILL. Yeah. Caleb Crain is a gay writer, and he's exploring sexuality in the 1820s to about 1898 – that there was homosexuality but it wasn't recognized. He's saying that Melville was homosexual and that Emerson was probably also homosexual… I don't know.

Ms. GIBSON. Well, he was in love with a guy named Martin Gay when he was at Harvard and wrote poems about him. And I thought, is that where the term "gay" came from? *(Laughter)* They are beautiful poems, but whether he ever physically acted on it…

Ms. CAHILL. I don't think so. He sublimated it/that's my interpretation.

Ms. GIBSON. /And married out of love and all of that kind of stuff. They weren't afraid of the reach – they were at a place in America where they were allowing themselves to poetically reach toward each other –

Ms. CAHILL. But it wasn't sexual. That's another thing to talk about. Like the way Margaret says [to Anna Barker in the play], "I love you. Let's get into bed together." Women did that. They wrote letters to each other: "I love you so much, and I can't wait to see you again and kiss you…" and all this kind of thing. We are so sexualized in this culture; that, to us, means carnal knowledge. I don't think that's what it meant to them. I think it meant affection. I think women could hug and kiss one another without being afraid they were lesbian. The world wasn't sexualized in the way it is now. …

Ms. GIBSON. Emerson said in the most perfect world, we would all be hermaphrodites. He felt like there should be a balance of the feminine and the masculine in each of us. I think that's where we're going.

SLAC. Did you ever see the miniseries *Rome*?

Ms. GIBSON. Yes!

SLAC. Back in that time the women were sleeping together and the men were sleeping together, and they weren't concerned about being gay. It's just the way it was. People were just sexual.

Ms. CAHILL. It's so interesting. I lived in Iran. I wrote my play, PERSIAN QUARTER, because I lived in Iran. They are totally homophobic – however – you would see soldiers walking down the street; they have guns, they have *roses*, and they're holding hands with each other, and they're talking, talking in each other's ear… and the women are – not cloistered – but they hang out with other [women]. They used to be cloistered in the harems. There's a fabulous book about life in the harem and how close the women were – emotionally close – and emotionally, so they were physical. So marriage is this other thing that you do that's practical. *(Laughing)* But your *emotional* life is with

someone of your own sex. They just look at it differently then we do. And we're so sexualized in this phony way now in our culture.
…
Ms. CAHILL. I read [*American Sympathy*], and there are letters between Margaret and Emerson that he quotes – these issues about the intense feelings he had for her, and I just started going from there. And then I started thinking, what if [Margaret] was the inspiration for *The Scarlet Letter*? What if? Because inspiration doesn't name itself. You can't look it up.

Ms. GIBSON. It's not indexed in journals. "Today, I was inspired by Margaret's actions…"

Ms. CAHILL. When you are writing something, you don't necessarily yourself know what you've been inspired by. Somebody could ask you and you go, "Oh geez, maybe I was…"
So I decided that [Hawthorne] was – and I subsequently found out that some academic has written a paper about that. That's how I started going. I was thinking about Margaret Fuller, and I really wanted to write a play about Margaret Fuller. And I'm living in New England. And I'm around all of these academic types, and you can't say anything unless you can put an ibid next to it. *(Laughter)*


Daguerreotype of Margaret Fuller
July 1846, by John Plumbe

Ms. GIBSON. Backed. By. Fact.

Ms. CAHILL. Yeah! You had to have a bibliography for everything you say. It's very inhibiting. And it's like, "Who are you to have an idea? You don't have a PhD in literature." Honestly, that kind of attitude is very inhibiting.

Ms. GIBSON. There's a real abyss between the academic world in that sense and creative rights.

Ms. CAHILL. There is. So. I'm in my house in the woods in Connecticut and my husband is away, and there's this snowstorm and the electricity goes out. *For four days. (Gasps and laughter)*
Day 1. I'm lighting my oil lamps and candles. *(Laughter)* I think it's beautiful. I'm thinking, "Oh, the nineteenth century was so beautiful. They lived in shadows of light, evenings are long, and the shadows of the flames are licking the ceiling, and it's so beautiful and mellow and slow and romantic." Night 1.
Night 2. It's kind of interesting. But lugging the logs into the fire to not freeze to death is getting a little tiresome, and gee, I wish I could wash my dishes, and I wish I could flush my toilet.
Day 3. If I don't get to wash my dishes and flush my toilet, I'm going to go mad.
Day 4. The mailman delivers Martha Stewart's magazine, and it says, "Crystallizing violets really isn't that hard." And that sent me over the edge. (Laughing/laughter.) It's just like, Fuck you! *(Laughter)*

Ms. GIBSON. *(Laughing)* Fuck the nineteenth century!

Ms. CAHILL. The nineteenth century was disgusting. Everything was so dirty. You know? I can't wash my clothes. I have this debris that I've tracked in to keep the fire going. The dishes are piling

up. The toilet? Don't even talk about it. And the candles are down to here, *(signaling only candle stubs remain)* and I can't go get anymore, and I'm thinking, "UGH!" And I got incredibly depressed about Margaret Fuller. What a life. She struggles so hard, she lives in this, she finally finds love – and she dies. Awful, awful, awful. So I got really depressed, and I couldn't do it. But then – I moved to Salt Lake City. I just felt differently… I felt liberated. I felt like I didn't have New England telling me I couldn't do this. And it wasn't even conscious – I started trying to take a nap one day, and I had this dialogue between Margaret and Thoreau just start coming to me – just like, OK, here we go. Then, I was supposed to go see my in-laws in Idaho with my husband, and I said, "Bob (who's my husband), I need to stay home; I can't go. Can you explain?"
So I stayed home and worked on my play.

SLAC. How many months between when you were depressed about Margaret and your move?

Ms. CAHILL. That was like four years…

SLAC. Oh my God.

Ms. GIBSON. Plays take a long time.

SLAC. Wow.

Ms. CAHILL. I remember I said I wanted to write a play about Margaret Fuller and so people would ask, "So, have you been working on Margaret Fuller?" And it was like *(quick, painful inhalation)*, "…No." *(Laughter)* So that's how it came. And Meg always says there's something in the air here – besides the particulates. *(Laughter)*

Ms. GIBSON. *(Laughing)* Besides the smog of Salt Lake City. I was always told that the reason people's brains change here is this combination of altitude and salt air – that's part of why they call it "Happy Valley" – not just because of the LDS factor, but the –

SLAC. Prozac –

Ms. GIBSON. – You can actually get kind of buzzy here, and I always feel it when I'm here for any length of time.

Ms. CAHILL. So maybe… The other thing is that I've always felt that here you are who you say you are. If you come from New England – in New England, you are not who you say you are, you have to prove it. "Who's your family? What school did you go to? What degrees do you have? …." So when I moved here, it was really liberating. You are who you say you are. It was like I took off so much weight…"

SLAC. It's so interesting that you move from the East coast to Salt Lake City and say it's liberating. *(Laughter)* It's really ironic.

Ms. CAHILL. A lot of people are surprised that I say that because in so many ways if you're here and have a Mormon background, I think a lot of people are always trying to fight that, and I think that's a different battle.

SLAC. But you were also in the country in New England, weren't you?

Ms. CAHILL. I was.

Ms. GIBSON. Out in the woods.

SLAC. Some people who come from New York to here say the quiet helps you think and breathe, and you were in the quiet.

Ms. CAHILL. I was.

Ms. GIBSON. But where you lived in New England is so pristine. You said because the air is so clear, there are birds there that you don't see anywhere else. It would be very similar to what Thoreau's experience was. It was a shock to me the first time I went to Walden Pond because of the highway now. It's not that far from civilization anymore. It wasn't that far from civilization even then.

Ms. CAHILL. That was the laugh –

Ms. GIBSON. – he was only two miles from town, but he did truly live on his own.

Ms. CAHILL. In that time, everybody's trying to get away from nature because it was dirty and yucky. He's saying no – wilderness is the preservation of the world. He was saying the opposite of what everybody was trying to do.

Ms. GIBSON. And so was Emerson.

Ms. CAHILL. Yes.

Ms. GIBSON. I'm not sure if Thoreau's ideas about things came first or – well, I think Emerson's came first, and Thoreau really paid attention to him and became a great writer in his own right as well.

SLAC. So from being in that nineteenth century world, did you add the contemporary references [to CHARM] just to crack yourself up? How did they come about?

Ms. CAHILL. I was trying to think of a way to write about someone who's ahead of her time in a dramatic way, a fun way. So I allowed myself to do that. It was like, how do you do that?

Ms. GIBSON. Well, the play isn't straightforward. We're talking about really incredibly great – I mean, for me, the initial source of great American writing is with Emerson, and Hawthorne, and Thoreau. What Kathleen has done that is so great is that it's not some bio play. It's looser than Tom Stoppard for crying out loud! And what she's done is created this surreal – I call it a Surreal Comedy of Manners from the 1840s. The idea that something can be surreal and American is just like – Wow! "Before the 20th century?!"

Ms. CAHILL. And it's not Dali. *(Laughing)*

Ms. GIBSON. No, it's not Dali. We're not murdering dreams – we're actually trying to figure out what each person's dreams are. So they're in this amazing place in the 1840s where they're pushing

against convention, they're pushing against the Puritan way of life, they're pushing against the rules of their culture and society, and they're pushing against Christianity. They're finding all this amazing writing and ecstasy in these ideas that are coming forth from them. And this natural inclination to have that overflow into how we're intimate with each other, they hit a wall. Margaret doesn't hit a wall, but the guys hit a wall. They're like, "WHAAAT?"

SLAC. I find it so fascinating that there are all these walls until she goes to Italy – and right away this guy falls head over heals with her, and I kept waiting for him to dump her or for her to encounter the same walls, the same problems, and he doesn't. What's that all about then?

Ms. CAHILL. That's simple. I am a playwright; I can do what the hell I want. *(Laughter)* In my experience in Italy they have a different attitude about love. *(Laughing)* The mother of a very good friend of mine – she was in her fifties, she had been divorced and was really unhappy, she went to Italy, and they say, *(in an Italian accent)* "I love your ham." It's like her bum, you know? *(Laughter)* Love is their language.

Ms. GIBSON. I always say whenever I'm in Italy is that they've been on top and on the bottom of the world so many times that they have their priorities in order: food, family, fun.

Ms. CAHILL. Yeah, fun.

Ms. GIBSON. You come across the Alps, and it's like *(with Italian accent),* "Hello! How are you?!" These sunny, amazing people who just know what matters to them.

Ms. CAHILL to SLAC. Have you ever gone to Italy?

SLAC. Yes.

Ms. CAHILL. Don't you feel that way?

SLAC. Yes.

Ms. CAHILL. That's Italy. That's what they're like.

SLAC. What's interesting, too, is that Margaret throws up a wall when she goes to Italy.

Ms. CAHILL. Yes.

SLAC. As open as she is with everyone when she can speak that language with and think with, when she doesn't have that language it's like, *(closing off)* "Here's my book, here's my resume."

Ms. GIBSON. What he teaches her is silent language. It's something that any musician will teach you as well. What is the language that is spoken beyond words? And that's where she really gets to fly and really experience a real intimacy. It's not necessary a carnal intimacy – which she totally gets to have finally – but also just how it is that you get to come together with someone in the most ecstatic way – on every level. And that's what she gets to have with Count O.

Ms. CAHILL. She gets to have it. But do you feel – I don't want it to be – in Q&As after readings – this came up in Orlando – it's like here's this really brainy woman and all she wants to do is have a guy and have a baby, and like that's what this play is saying.

SLAC. Did a man ask you that?

Ms. CAHILL. No.

SLAC. Because I can see how a man might see it like that.

Ms. CAHILL. No, women – because it's like if you're a feminist you're not supposed to want that or…?

SLAC. I get that she wants to share ideas.
If all she wanted was to get married and have a baby, then she would do it. She is smart enough to figure out what it took to get that.

Ms. GIBSON. She doesn't want to give it up.

SLAC. I feel like she just wants it all. And she can have it all.

Ms. CAHILL. That's the idea, that's exactly it. Ms. GIBSON. Experience it all –

Ms. CAHILL. She wants it all. Just because you're a woman who is interested in ideas and the world and wants to be a part of the world doesn't mean you don't want –

Ms. GIBSON. I also think that Count O – even though there is a language barrier – there's a way of reading someone else where you very clearly know what their passions are. He was *extremely* passionate about what was going on with the Italian Revolution. We think of Italy as this giant country, but it wasn't. It was a bunch of city states, and it took them how long to finally pull it together? Sixty, seventy years? It was a *long* war before Italy became a country and not just a bunch of little countries, and he had a lot to do with that. And I think that [Margaret] was completely ecstatic about his passion for that revolution because she loved revolution.

Ms. CAHILL. But that's not in the play, I mean...

Ms. GIBSON. Mmm, I think it is…

Ms. CAHILL. She says, "You're a soldier. You were a soldier."

SLAC. And what [Thoreau, Emerson, Hawthorne, Brownson] read of her writing back home. It has some echoes that are funny, but it's also this muscular, vivid account of what she's seeing and experiencing that doesn't feel like it's just about Count O.

Ms. CAHILL. You mean the stuff she wrote back?

SLAC. Yes.

Ms. CAHILL. Yeah, yeah, yeah. She's still doing her job, she's still… but I'm just not that interested in that. I'm interested in this pursuit of the personal, emotional life. She's still a journalist. She didn't stop.

Ms. GIBSON. To be quite frank – and this is personal for me, you can do all the great work you want in the world, but if you're not doing it *with* someone – it's just not as much fun. It's not as much fun.

Ms. CAHILL. *(Laughing) I* don't think so…

Ms. GIBSON. And it's so much fun to do it with someone that gets you, who gets your brain and wants you on every level at the same time. That's the great joy of being an artist – to have that repartee with someone. *[to Kathleen Cahill]* And that's what I think you're up to with Margaret. Because you're not happy with just the other. And if women can't admit that…

Ms. CAHILL. I'm interested to see if that comes up as an issue.

Ms. GIBSON. It's possible to take a lover just to have a sexual experience, but the other is a lot more work, and it's really asking for something that's richer and more fulfilling in the end.

SLAC. It feels that Margaret Fuller is an inspiration now [Margaret Fuller Bicentennial] but do you know if she inspired any women in her own time?

Ms. CAHILL. I think she did because she used to have these Conversations; she would have these meetings with women. She wanted them be interested in things beyond their little worlds. She was trying to expand their world, and I'm sure the ones who weren't afraid of that, I'm sure they were inspired. I don't know who they were. *[to Meg Gibson]* Do you know who they were?

Ms. GIBSON. Who did Nathaniel Hawthorne marry? Sophia Peabody. She came. Lydian [Emerson] came a little bit.

SLAC. Really?

Ms. GIBSON. [Margaret] held the Conversations in Boston and in New York, too.

Ms. CAHILL. So I'm sure there were women who were inspired by her. Everyday women that don't then go home and write a book about it, you know?

Ms. GIBSON. But it isn't about a movement – it's about one person – one woman saying –

Ms. CAHILL. One soul –

Ms. GIBSON. One soul saying, what the heck? How do we connect with each other? How do we have intimacy? How do we do it and have it be joyous. How do we not cut off parts of ourselves in order to be with somebody? Why do we have to accept less? For me, she's the first one who asked these questions. I mean, yeah, you can read the letters back and forth between John and Abigail Adams, and they are *incredible*. And I have the highest regard for Abigail Adams. They were apart for eighteen months at a time – sometimes they didn't even get a letter because, you know, they had to dump all the mail overboard because pirates attacked the ship. But their minds and their

connection to each other is just gorgeous – but Abigail became more conservative as she got older, so I never think of her in the way that I think of Margaret Fuller. So I think Margaret is really the one who said, "No. I don't want to accept less." And she also died young, so who knows what would have happened?

Ms. CAHILL. She also wasn't, you know, a married woman living –
Ms. GIBSON. – she wasn't married with a bunch of kids.

Ms. CAHILL. She led a very dangerous, hard, free, all those things life. She's much more of our time in a way then anybody.

Ms. GIBSON. I think she imagined the way we get to live now, then.

SLAC. She seems even more centered and enlightened in many ways then we are now. I was thinking this would be a great panel for CHARM – women in a man's world through history – how much we have changed and have not changed. The seventies is when I really became aware of feminism with Gloria Steinem, and all of sudden we're all dressing like men and acting like men. Margaret didn't do that.

Ms. CAHILL. It didn't seem like it.

Ms. GIBSON. Well, she couldn't. *(Laughing/laughter)* That dress.

SLAC. True, she didn't have the freedom to change her clothes.

Ms. CAHILL. That would be a great panel. I always felt that – we're supposed to be imitation men?

SLAC. We can be men, too.

Ms. CAHILL. We can be men, too. And now there's this thing where women are asserting that being a Mommy is the best thing in the world, and I think that it's the best thing in the world, but I think it's not the only thing. How do you just be the full package in the world? The women who can have babies, run a theatre company, write a symphony, be an astronaut, do it all… In a way I think we can do it all, and I think it makes men really nervous.

Ms. GIBSON. Well, some men. There are some men who are evolved in the world at this point that can handle it. But there aren't enough of them.

Ms. CAHILL. No. Also I think women are more complicated than men, frankly. Don't tell anyone. *(Laughing/laughter)*

SLAC. Well, the first man who realized the power of women and said we've got to cover them up, we've got to keep them down… I don't know when that started… *(Sigh. Laughter.)*
…
Ms. GIBSON. I remember an interview with the woman – do you know that show *Prime Suspect* that Helen Mirren did? That character is based on a real woman [Jackie Malton] in London. [Writer] Lynda La Plante interviewed her, and she said that as a sergeant, being a woman she had to constantly make this adjustment all the time for who it was she was talking to. Whereas men, they don't make that adjustment. The energy that it took for her and the number of adjustments she

made – hour by hour, daily – in order to get her job done as a woman was gigantic compared to what a man has to do.
…
SLAC. Regarding the magical aspects of the play, as I read I kept thinking, "*Wow*. How's that going to work? How's that going to happen?" I wondered while you were writing this if that is anything that you considered or do you just write what's in your imagination and if someone's going to produce it, they get to figure it out.

Ms. GIBSON. *(Laughing/laughter)* THAT'S WHAT SHE DOES! Whoa. That's eight months of laughter. It's really hard!

Ms. CAHILL. I just want to say one thing before Meg… *(Laughter)* Don't you get… I get extremely tired of seeing realism on the stage.
Ms. GIBSON. Ugh!

Ms. CAHILL. I'm so, so, so bored by it. That's where I start. I want to see something – the theatre is different from all of the representationalism –

Ms. GIBSON. There will not be cooking in this play.

Ms. CAHILL. When movies came out, they used to say, "Now we will be able to represent dreams." But what has happened is that movies have become reality, so the theatre is left to represent dreams. The oldest form is left to represent dreams. That's where I 'm coming from. I don't want it to look like everything else. There's no point. You have to get up and pay money and sit in there, why would you come? As Nancy always says, why would you get out of your pajamas to come? There has to be something to see that you can't see anywhere else. So that's where that started.

SLAC. Well, I love your quote that we have in our brochure. "I think the theatre should offer a world you've never seen before and can't experience anywhere else."

Ms. CAHILL. Yes. Ms. GIBSON. Yes.

Ms. GIBSON. The first time you read [CHARM] – when I read something, I instantly visualize it, so I was ecstatic. *"Wow, this is going to be a blast." (Laughter)* Then the reality of producing it and the reality of designing it, the reality of what you can accomplish in this space in this initial production here at SLAC, makes you work in a particular way to keep the essence of her intention – and I'm going to use the very first example of: "She literally cries a faucet of tears." Now I went through soooo many different ways – and I mean I could still do it a whole bunch of different ways, but essentially I had to come up with a context that would be able to achieve all this magic in a way that it was possible for us to produce here at Salt Lake Acting Company. So I just dramaturged the play inside myself over and over and over and over and over again until I came up with this way that I think is part of the impulse of this play, and that is this: these characters all want to talk to us now. Margaret talks to the audience, and so does Thoreau at one point. What I think is that there's this *urge* over this path of time – in the imaginative sense – from 1840 to 2010. Which, by the way, is the 200th anniversary of her birthday. I think that this impulse to talk to us now is part of how we achieve that magic, but I do believe that they are achieving the magic of how these things are happening to them through what technology they had *then*. So that's the core of we're producing this play, and that I think allows us to be in on the charm of living in the 1840s. Because of course

they had fun, of course they wanted to entertain each other, of course they cracked jokes with each other, of course they said, *"Oh, look how they did that!" (Laughter)* For us it's nostalgic, for them, it's, *"Oh, wasn't that clever?"* And I think that's part of the charm of how we produce this play now. There is an infinite number of possibilities of ways to produce it, and that's our choice here.

SLAC. Would you talk a little about the six week rehearsal process? We usually have four weeks and now you have the luxury of six weeks instead.

Ms. GIBSON. Well, I don't have to get actors up on their feet immediately and throwing them into scenes. Usually the process is so truncated these days – you have about 3 ½ weeks including tech, and then you're in preview. That's the way it is all around America these days – and frankly six weeks was always what it was when I was first starting out in the business – you just had six weeks. For me, the extra two weeks is about discovering the magic but also how we accomplish that, but it's also about giving these actors the time inside this period and this truly unique style that Kathleen has written. That takes time. That takes time, and so we will be in corsets, and petticoats, and shoes, and coats, and vests as soon as possible, as soon as they arrive in the mail. We will spend the first fifteen minutes of every five hour rehearsal period we have getting dressed. And we will rehearse, we will walk around this building in – *I* should put on a corset and petticoat. I should direct in a corset and petticoat; I should learn what the restriction is in order to get inside this world. Because the more you get inside this world, the more you understand – *(Laughing)* I always think of it as like they're so squeezed in these corsets and vests that it's like the energy that is squeezed in there, it POPS out of their heads. *(Laughter)* It's the ecstasy that's being constricted in this –

Ms. CAHILL. Physically constricted –

Ms. GIBSON. – physically constricted and culturally constricted – it pops out like this explosion of an orgiastic idea! *(Laughing*) And that's why we have the extra time.

Ms. CAHILL. And also because it's not realism, and realism is where everybody lives normally in American theatre, and so – it's going to take some time to get out of that groove.

SLAC. You touched on swimming a little bit before, but I just read your new play, THE PERSIAN QUARTER, and there it is again.

Ms. CAHILL. I know, I have this thing about swimming…

SLAC. So what is that?

Ms. CAHILL. Because I didn't learn to swim as a child, so it wasn't a natural thing. I have so many things about swimming. On the good side: you get to this other element. We don't live in water, but when you swim, you live in water. And your whole body is in the water… right? It's another element, and you have you put yourself there. And why would you do that…? *(Laughing/laughter)* And yet, it's such an experience – that's totally unlike the rest of your life. And then you could die. When I was first learning to swim, I'd go to the pool and – you know how they have those black lines? They were death.

SLAC. Wow…

Ms. CAHILL. I thought they were death. And I kept having to keep getting over that, that it wasn't death. I started by wearing a snorkel, and people asked me, and I would say, "I'm going to the Caribbean, so I need to get used to the snorkel." *(Laughing)* But it was really because I was scared. *(Laughter)*

Ms. GIBSON. It's perfect – because you're terrified of water, and I've been in water all my life. I raced year round from age 8 to age 18. So being under water for me – I'm like an amoeba – I'm just like *(makes amorphous amoeba sound)* – like it's in every cell of my body. And has been almost all of my life.

Ms. CAHILL. But I'm drawn to it –
Ms. GIBSON. – I know.
Ms. CAHILL. I was drawn to it.
Ms. GIBSON. Even Freud says it's/sexual --
Ms. CAHILL. /It's sexual. It's a sexual thing, isn't it?

SLAC. So do you swim now?

Ms. CAHILL. I went through this long period of swimming, and I took lessons up at the pool, but then I had brain surgery. That's another aspect of this. You get to not be afraid to have your thoughts that you have.

SLAC. You had brain surgery.

Ms. CAHILL. I did. My surgeon's name is Randy Jensen. I had to have it three times.

SLAC. What was wrong?

Ms. CAHILL. Well, I'll tell you the story, but first I want to say that Randy Jensen – Anne Decker knows him – he's an eminent brain surgeon up at the U. I e-mailed him yesterday, and I said, "You're going to be very surprised at what's in my skull." *(Laughing/laughter)* And he wrote back that Anne Decker's been telling him about [CHARM], and he can't wait to come. So he's going to come! He's so funny because he thinks when you open it up, it's like "What's in there? Where does that come from?" He's very curious.

SLAC. So you had it since you wrote the play?

Ms. CAHILL. No, I had it before.

SLAC. Before you wrote the play…

Ms. CAHILL. Oh, yes… in Utah. It all started in Utah.

SLAC. Wow.

Ms. GIBSON. You just let all of that New England tension out.

SLAC. So did you have headaches?

Ms. CAHILL. Yes. *(Laughing)* Here's what happened to me. It was June. I was in Connecticut. I was at a farm stand. There was a cooler. I opened the cooler, a cabbage fell on my head. A month later, I started getting excruciating headaches. I was here in Salt Lake City. It was July. I woke up one night and the pain was so bad I could see the pain. It was like this [drawing a jagged line in the air]. My husband said, "I think we need to go up to the U." So we go to the Emergency Room, and I'm sitting there, and there have been people injured in car accidents, and there's blood… and I'm thinking, "I just have a headache, what am I doing here?" They do an MRI or a CT Scan and they say, "You have a blood clot in your brain. We have to operate *now*."

Ms. GIBSON. From a cabbage.

Ms. CAHILL. From a cabbage.
[A blood clot in the brain] is what killed Natasha Richardson, so I was lucky. And then it came back and they had to do it again. I had to have a craniotomy. So I lost a year of my life. From '05 to '06, I was just out of it. Everything was too loud. I had to go to bed at 8:30. If you talked to me for too long, I got a headache, buh buh buh buh… So that happened. But then consequently – I don't know what I lost, but I found – I felt looser, more in touch with my subconscious, I don't know, but something like that happened.

SLAC/Ms. GIBSON. Wow…

Ms. GIBSON. Let's get some surgery.

SLAC. I know, I want it.

Ms. CAHILL. I know. *(Laughing/laughter)* People are signing up. Sort of cosmetic craniotomy. *(Laughter)*

Ms. GIBSON. That's the future. Sort of like *Cold Souls*, only different.

Ms. CAHILL. What's *Cold Souls*?

Ms. GIBSON. That movie that Paul Giamatti did where he gets his soul extracted, and it looks like a chickpea. *(Laughter)* But then it gets sold to a Russian soap opera actress, and he can't cut it.

SLAC. Was it good?

Ms. GIBSON. Yes. It was surreal. It was at Sundance last year.

SLAC. So I go to bed sometimes – like when I'm choreographing something, I'll go to bed thinking about it, hoping I'll wake up with the answer. Any question, I'll lay there thinking about it as I fell asleep. I know Daisy's going to want a quote for the press release, so I'm laying there, thinking about it, and I wanted to have this really profound, gorgeous thing about the play. So I wake up, and this is all I can think of. This is all I can say. "It's the perfect play." (*Kathleen laughs.)* Every word, every moment. It's perfect.

Ms. CAHILL. So we're going to take you with us everywhere we go, and you just say that. I wish everybody felt that way.

SLAC. Really. The whole experience.

Ms. GIBSON. I think it's just fantastic that we're doing this play in the springtime. There's this ecstasy. Like this morning we saw lesser goldfinches outside of our window. And we were like, "Oh there are the goldfinches! Ooh look there they are at the birdfeeder! Oh, spring is coming!" It's coming. Edna St. Vincent Millay said, "If spring came all at once, we wouldn't be able to handle it." I'm paraphrasing her, but it's coming. And the idea that this play, which is so much about ecstasy of nature and these characters who first wrote about this gorgeous, incredible American landscape that was so primaly different from Europe already in 1840 – and the ecstasy of that experience with nature – and how we leap off of that in the springtime in ourselves. And to have this play going on in the springtime at the same time that that's all happening outside… It's going to be – *divine*.

Ms. CAHILL. It's going to be great.

SLAC. Kathleen, what will be your role in rehearsals for the next six weeks? Are you going to be here?

Ms. CAHILL. Yes, I'll be here as much as it makes sense. Absolutely. I implicitly trust what Meg does. We have a good working relationship.

Ms. GIBSON. We do.

Ms. CAHILL. I just will respond to what's going on. That's what I'll do. And watch.

Ms. GIBSON. Kathleen is an unusual playwright in that she is very clear about what she wants visually, and so as we begin to hone in the way that we can produce it here, she's been very much a part of how the physical, visual production is accomplished. And she's also incredibly useful about keeping us on track with each one of the characters' intentions. When we did the workshop [of CHARM] in Orlando, Kathleen came like ten days into that. Where things were not defined in the way she wanted them, you very readily said, "No, it needs to be this. It needs to be this. No, you can just do this." And not every playwright has that ability. But because she does have that ability and it's also on the page as well, I feel very comfortable having her be a part of the process. She doesn't freak out. *(Laughter)* Some playwrights freak out and have nervous breakdowns.

Ms. CAHILL. You know in *Slings & Arrows*, the playwright? *(Laughter)* He's such a jerk.

Ms. GIBSON. Or how about the director of HAMLET? He was a riot. "Without my concept, darling, it's nothing."

Ms. CAHILL. Oh, I love him! No, but the playwright in this, they each have one exchange, and he goes, "Wait. Just a minute, just a minute. I want you to just put the play down and just speak to each other like the characters." So the actors start, and they say basically what he's written, and he says, "Stop, stop! I didn't say paraphrase what I said, just *be* the characters." And the two actors look at each. *(Laughter)* And he keeps saying that to them.

Ms. GIBSON. Thank God Kathleen doesn't do that. Or I wouldn't let her in the room. *(Laughter)* I would kick her out later. Like Bruce Norris. He gets kicked out of rehearsals all the time. He e-mails me and says, "Well, I got kicked out of rehearsal again..." *(Laughter)*

SLAC. Like, "You need to go now"?

Ms. GIBSON. You just say, "You can't be here."

Ms. CAHILL. *(Laughing)* You can have bad relationships with directors.

Ms. GIBSON. You can, you can. Like I always say, we are by definition a collaborative field, and I'm all about creating a company, so I want Kathleen to be a part of that.

SLAC. You're in good hands, Kathleen.

Ms. CAHILL to Ms. GIBSON. *(Laughing)* I notice that you've altered that. It used to be "We're in service to the playwright." Now it's, "We're in *collaboration* with the playwright." *(Laughing/laughter)*

Ms. GIBSON. I say it all the time. I do say it. Forgive me, I'll repeat myself. My job – look, we all have egos – but my job is to be in service to the play, and my job is to get everybody else on the production team in service to Kathleen's vision. Because, as [Daisy Blake's] brother said yesterday, "If you don't got the writing, you don't have a project." And we have the writing. We have the writing with this play.

Ms. CAHILL. And the thing that's so important to me is getting out of this naturalistic thing.

Ms. GIBSON. I hate it, too, so you're home-free there.

Ms. CAHILL. And this is not going to look like anything you've seen before. That's the goal.

Ms. GIBSON. The set is even slightly abstracted. It is. On purpose.

SLAC. How big a shift has it been for you going from TOO MUCH MEMORY to CHARM?

Ms. GIBSON. What I find amazing are the places where there is a correlation. I mean, Margaret is a revolutionary; TOO MUCH MEMORY is about looking for revolution…

Ms. CAHILL. She's an emotional revolutionary not a political one necessarily.

Ms. GIBSON. And I'm quite frank, I have *never* directed a naturalistic play. I never have. And I will someday, if someone asks me to… But even then, if someone said, "Hey Meg, I want you to direct O'Neill's LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT," I'd go, "Ooh great, I have this really good idea..." [Laughter] But it's not putting in the period, it's not – I mean, you have to *do* all that work – all that sensory work that Stanislavsky teaches us to do or says this is the core foundation of the work, but it doesn't become the magic of the work, and it doesn't become the only thing we see – and that's what interests me. I don't even enjoy acting in naturalism any more, I just don't. It bores me.

SLAC. It seems like ever since Meg was chosen to be the director for CHARM, she's been inside it. Hasn't CHARM just been in your mind and in your body and in your soul? She had to keep that there, and then she had to do TOO MUCH MEMORY, and then she was working on CHARM while she was doing TOO MUCH MEMORY…

Ms. GIBSON. All the time. There was a day when I came to the theatre, and I called my husband and my friends in New York and I said, "Alright, I did it. I was in rehearsal for one play and in a production meeting for another. All in the same day. I think I've finally arrived as a director – because that's what you have to do. I will talk to people – designers and directors – and they say, yeah, you have to work on three or four things at once. And as an actress you just don't have to do that. Acting is such a luxury; that's what I call it now. It's a *luxury* – and I love it, love it, love it.

Ms. CAHILL. Even when you're out of work?

Ms. GIBSON. *(Laughing)* It's a lifestyle, that's what it is.

Ms. CAHILL to CYNTHIA FLEMING. Do you find that with dancing versus choreographing?

Ms. FLEMING. Yes! Before I became a choreographer, I never wanted to become a choreographer. You think up the dance steps, you tell me to do a triple pirouette and I'll do it. How easy is that? You worry about your lines; you worry about yourself.

Ms. GIBSON. The subjective experience that you get to be as a performing artist is really, really yummy. I love it. I talked to Nicki Nixon the other night as she was leaving [TOO MUCH MEMORY], and she gave an amazing final performance. God bless her. Such lucidity in that final performance. I mean, who gets to have a full moon for a final performance? The energy in the theatre was tremendous. But I said to her boyfriend, Eric, I said, "Just be prepared at four o'clock tomorrow when she starts to internally prepare and the play's not going to be there tomorrow night. She may go into a fetal position on your bed." *(Laughter)* Because it's really hard to let it go – the subjective experience when you're performing is really lovely, and I dig it. But I also have say as I've grown into this other job of subjectively creating this work – I mean, it's not completely objective when you're directing – you're using yourself all of the time, but you develop a technique to do two different things at once, which I really struggled to do as an actress but I'm really getting off on doing as a director.

SLAC. Thank you Kathleen & Meg!

The magical, surreal, and transcendentally goofy CHARM begins its World Premiere on April 14th and runs through May 9th. For tickets, call 801.363.7522 or go online to Salt Lake Acting Company.