



The Woman Behind Winter Harbor

By DAPHNE HOWLAND

Let's just say Caitlin Shetterly is down with the lemons-into-lemonade thing. When her parents, artist Robert Shetterly and writer Susan Hand Shetterly, divorced while she was an undergraduate at Brown University, she found solace in books—something she did as a child. That led to her discovery of an entire American literary genre: divorce lit. Which led to her thesis, which landed her a job as editor of a book of short stories, *Fault Lines: Stories of Divorce*. Yes, Shetterly's parents rocked her world, but then contributors like Ann Beattie and John Updike were leaving her voice mail as she compiled and edited their work.

Shetterly, now 32, went to New York ten years ago, where she began attracting attention as a writer, actress, editor, and contributor to National Public Radio and *This American Life*. But the terrorist attack in September 2001 interfered. It left her stressed out and afraid. She didn't know it then, but the poisoned air was getting to her, too, causing debilitating physical symptoms that are only now surfacing as 9/11-related. She found it increasingly difficult to work. "I felt like my insides had been turned inside out," she says. "I had some form of post-traumatic stress disorder, and I was sick."

Shetterly contemplated a move back to Rome, or Paris, where she'd spent her first year after high school. But the Downeast-born-and-bred Shetterly decided to come home, and she settled into Portland's Munjoy Hill neighborhood.

Here, her work is as varied as ever. Shetterly writes features and a weekly column, "Bramhall Square," for the *Portland Phoenix*. She continues to contribute to public radio. She offers acting

classes to adults and children. And, convinced that acting in general and Shakespeare in particular are suited to kids who are struggling, she began a Shakespeare program at the Long Creek Youth Development Center in South Portland.


"I want to get these kids up and running," she says. "When you act, you get to show all your fragile, angry, soft, breakable places—in the guise of being someone else."

But Shetterly's most ambitious project is her stewardship of the Winter Harbor Theatre Company. It's the closest Portland has to off-Broadway.

"Winter Harbor is home to the most interesting theater happening in Portland by far," says Tim Collins, a Chicago-based actor who has worked with Shetterly at Long Creek. His multi-character solo performances are regular features of the company's productions. "It's like 'the best theater company you've never heard of.'"

In recent years, Shetterly's productions have been a series of "Letters to." *Letters to Ohio*, *Letters to Katrina*, *Letters to Baghdad*, and this past summer, *Letters to the N.R.A.* The works are a compendium of short plays, scenes, and songs, staged at the St. Lawrence Arts and Community Center. The performances are plaintive, politically charged, and personal—sometimes edgy and sometimes earnest.

In each "Letters" production, Shetterly allows for different points of view, but a left-of-center atmosphere prevails. Sometimes humor reigns, sometimes poignancy. Her casts are diverse and multi-generational, and include local as well as Los Angeles- and New York-based Equity talent.



"Theater is, of course, a reflection of life," wrote W. R. Inge, nineteenth century British prelate and author. "Maybe we have to improve life before we can hope to improve theater." Caitlin Shetterly, with the Winter Harbor Theatre Company she founded, is aiming for both.

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Shetterly founded this theater company, named for a spot Downeast where the harbor doesn't freeze in winter. She also serves as its artistic director, casting director, play director, and girl Friday. One of her online calls for submissions reads, "All contributors will be paid something. Travel will be paid. Housing will be found." She also provides meals, paid for or donated, and is known to pour tea for cast and crew.

"She reads the submissions and gives a lot of dramaturgical feedback. She never seems to stop," says Craig Pospisil, a New York City-based playwright who serves on Winter Harbor's board of directors and whose plays have been produced by the company. "I think Winter Harbor is a terrific venue for new work, and I hope it continues to grow. Running a theater company is a lot of work, and right now Caitlin is doing everything, really."

Her father tries to explain what drives his daughter. "It seems to me that Caitlin's achievements are the product of two longstanding, intertwined passions: to be as highly skilled as she can be in the work she loves, and to be as compassionate as she can be in the service of that work."

Now, for the first time in a while, Shetterly is contemplating change without the dark lens of a setback or a tragedy; she is about to marry filmmaker and photographer Daniel E. Davis (whom *Phoenix* readers may know as "Cowboy.") She and Davis are thinking about what comes next for them as artists as well as in their personal lives. But her Maine-born and inspired Winter Harbor Theater Company is something she would be hard pressed to give up.

"I think people from Maine feel like Maine is a relative, a really annoying relative who really loves you," she says, speaking of the limits and possibilities here, "and also breaks your heart all the time." *

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