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Rock the Line Back to the '90s

By Winnie McCroy



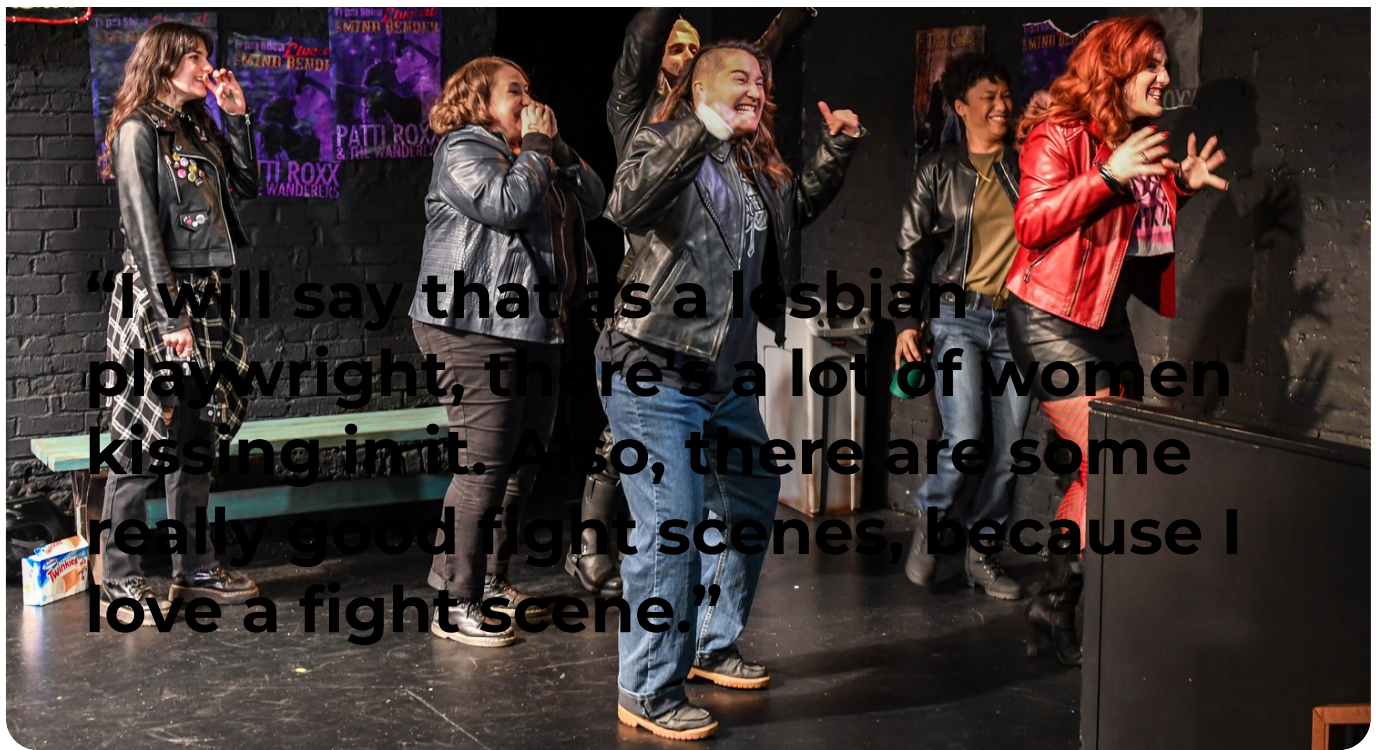
Playwright and editor Kathleen Warnock divides her time between penning original plays, stories for *Best Lesbian Erotica*, and curating the long-running Drunken! Careening! Writers! series at New York City's KGB Bar. This month, she stages her play *Rock the Line*, a project years in the making.

The play centers around the parking lot of a Rust Belt rock club mid-1990s, where fans jockey for a glimpse of their idol, rock icon Patti Roxx. Alliances shift and lives change by the time the doors open but together, they're part of a loyal band of outsiders that never question why you'd sell your soul for rock and roll.

Winnie McCroy: Congratulations on your play. What I remember from first meeting you in the late '90s is that you were always a really big Joan Jett fan. I can't help thinking this play must have been spawned partially out of that.

Kathleen Warnock: I had been following Joan, and that led me to doing a lot of writing for various women's music magazines, especially *ROCKRGRL*. It was just a real great time to figure out what was going on with me: to make good friends and take road trips so that you can step away from your life and look at it. I was studying at Hunter College and our teacher gave us a prompt for a ten-minute play... about an obsessive collector and how their hobby affects the people around them. I wrote "I'm Gonna Run Away" (the name of a Joan Jett song) about a confrontation between a security guard and two fans backstage. That play took off, I got it produced, and it won a prize at the Turnip Theatre Festival. I kept writing and writing and it ended up as a full-length play called *The Audience*. Then I met Doric Wilson, founder of TOSOS [The Other Side of Silence], and I brought him to read at my series Drunk! Careening! Writers!, which is still going strong 20 years later.





WM: Are you still doing that at the KGB bar?

KW: Yes! We've been doing it since 2004 and it's whatever I like, which is why I have kept doing this series so long—it's always fresh and there's always amazing writers to hear from. So Doric came and programmed that play as part of The Chesley Chambers Reading Series. He got an immediate offer from Emerging Artists theater to produce it. That's the fastest I've ever had somebody just walk up to me and say, "Hey, we want to do your play."

WM: It does seem really fast-tracked as far as how long it usually takes people to get their play from writing to the stage. How did that process unfold?

KW: Well, Doric was thrilled for me, but said we had to come up with another name. So, he's throwing out names and my wife, Donna, is giving suggestions and suddenly one of them shouted out, "Rock the Line" and I said, "That's it!" We renamed the play, and it was staged by Emerging Artists Theater, and it was a nice production. Then a few years ago, the Venus Theater in Maryland—a theater that gives flight to women's voices—did a very good production of it, and later a theater in Colorado produced it. This year, our artistic director Mark Finley said, "It's time for one of Kathleen's plays." I have newer plays, but I said, "I think we need to produce *Rock the Line* because until

the end of his life, Doric always said to me, 'I'm so sorry. We never got a chance to produce your play.' So, now we do."

WM: Tell folks a little bit about what the high points you hit over the course of this play, and the scenes that move the action along.

KW: I will say that as a lesbian playwright, there's a lot of women kissing in it. Also, there are some really good fight scenes, because I love a fight scene. And there's rock and roll music. For Patti Roxx, the fictional rock icon, we're using the music of Karyn Kuhl, who you may remember from bands like Sexpod.





WM: How did she agree to let you use her music?

KW: Well, I've known Karyn since back in the days of Sexpōd, when they just blew me away with their sound. And as a fresh-out-of-Hoboken trio. The music drives me. I talked with the director, who had met Karyn as well, because I wrote another play called *Summer of '69*, that was in some ways inspired by one of her songs. And he said, 'Yeah, let's ask Karyn.' So we licensed her music—because we're TOSOS and we pay our artists. Our sound designer puts it together so you feel like you get to know who the rock star is when you hear this music throughout, and I've even written dialogue for the actual rock star. And I was thrilled beyond measure. Then Penny Arcade said she would be the rock star, and she's a legend, an American treasure. And she totally fits the part of Patti Roxx, which is the name of the rock star.

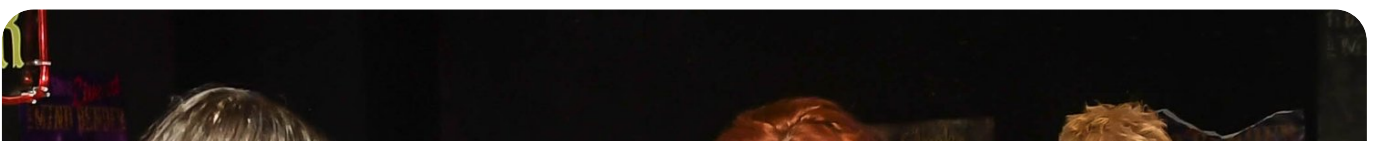
WM: That's so great. I saw your notes say, 'voice of Penny Arcade.' Do we ever actually see Patti Roxx?

KW: Nope. You only ever see the audience. You hear Patti Roxx's from a recorded interview and when she's going to and from her car, fans yell to her. At one point, she actually does something very nice for them. It's almost like, you know, the goddess in the machine.

WM: So this finds all the fans waiting for the show to start in the parking lot. Is that right?

KW: Yeah, you get there early so you can get your spot to be right up at the stage, closer than close to the idol as you can.

WM: And in this current-day scenario, where kids are suing Ticketmaster because they didn't get their Taylor Swift tickets, can you imagine a time back in the day when this could be the reality, as opposed to you being a big fan who got there early and camped out for those tickets, or to be at the front of the audience in the show.





KW: Yeah, it's not like that anymore. This is a period piece, even though it wasn't when I started writing it. Maybe they got their tickets through Ticketmaster for like 20 bucks or at those ticket machines they used to have at department stores. So for them, it's not a matter of getting in, it's a matter of getting there early enough so that they can get the best spot.

WM: And in a way, this kind of ritual of passage really showed how much you were dedicated to that music that you were willing to put your body on the line and stand out in the elements for who knows how long. But you did this, too, and it was your quest.

KW: Oh heck yes! I mean I was sitting out there some days huddling in my leather jacket with my mittens on with people taking turns doing runs to the gas station to get hot coffee or hot chocolate. Or in the summer, when it was blazing hot, you'd try and wait in the shade. Sometimes people would even make fun of me because I wore shorts and they said Jett Headz don't wear shorts.

WM: Yeah, some of the action of the play is those tensions that not all these fans are getting along 100% of the time.

KW: Yes, but they are still the core crowd. They are there because it's a safe space for them to be who they are. They've traveled miles to see Patti, but also to be with people who aren't going to give them a hard time for who they are or attack them. There's a point in the play where a couple of assholes drive by in a car and throw a bottle at them. And that reminds you that, oh yeah, as soon as they step away from this, there could be trouble for them because most are queer women.

WM: That must create a really interesting tension and dynamic there.

KW: Yeah, they like each other, and share experiences like, "So and so lost her job when they found out she was queer." And someone else saying, "I can't tell them at my work, because it would be held against me." Even back in the '90s, people were

talking about not having their spouse's health insurance because they weren't eligible.



Jeanette Villafane, Ellie Frances

“You have to be able to embrace the moment and be in it, because moments of grace don't last—they're moments.”

WM: And I think that speaks to your show note: Would you sell your soul for rock and roll? It used to be back in the day, you really did have to put your body on the line,

your livelihood on the line and be out there and fully present for what you loved. So I wanted to ask you: Would you sell your soul for rock and roll?

KW: I think that maybe I *found* my soul through rock and roll. You find those moments of grace—when everything is as it should be—whether you're religious or not. You have to be able to embrace the moment and be in it, because moments of grace don't last—they're moments. But also, you know that maybe a moment of grace will come along again, and you can also inhabit it. That's important for me in a lot of what I write: when things go bad for people or it's hard for them to live. But all of a sudden, they get to a place where they can breathe and be and experience and love and even if it ends, they had that moment.

WM: That's heavy.

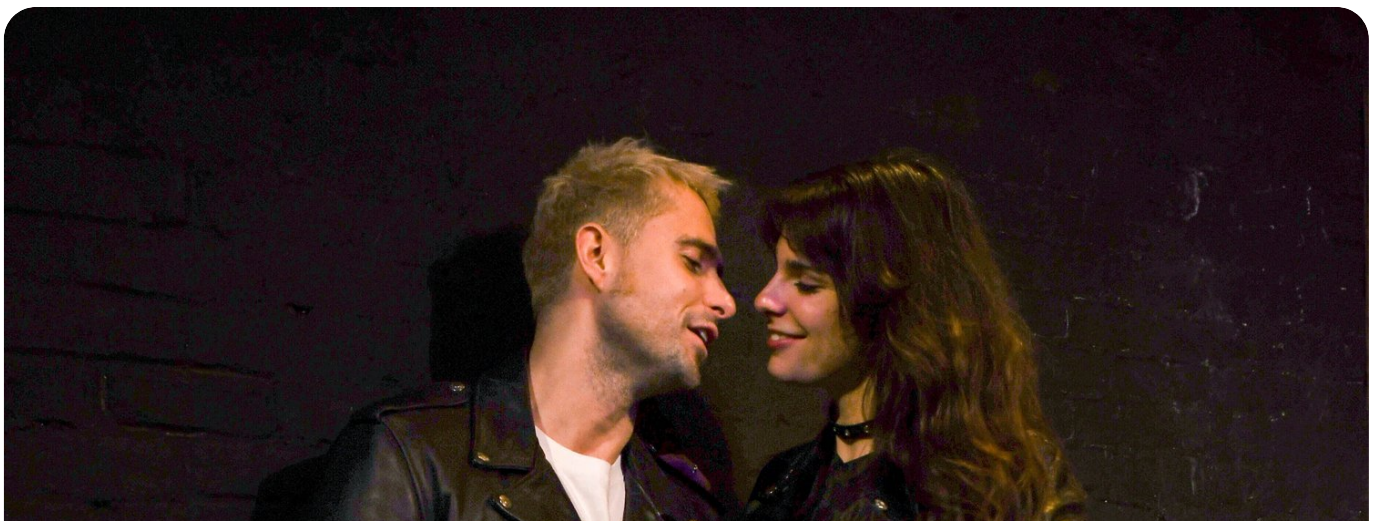
KW: Well, it makes you feel good when you see it. You can say, “Yes, I realized there are times like this and when I find them, I must be there. Completely.”

WM: So, folks have one more week to see *Rock the Line*. Is that right?

KW: They have till this Saturday night so come and get the tickets, because it's a small theater. And one of the things that's really fun about a small theater is that you are right up on top of the cast. And they make their entrances from all around the theater. So suddenly someone can brush by you.

WM: It must be really exciting to see your work on the stage like this.

KW: It's about as gratifying as it gets.





WM: That's fantastic. So as we close this interview, what's next for you? How do you follow someone like this?

KW: Well, I'm going back into this play to do some finishing touches on it, then I'm probably gonna publish it. I don't wait around for people to publish my stuff anymore. You can do it yourself. And I want to continue to work with TOSOS as the associate artistic director, in getting other people's plays heard and getting queer voices out there with no apology and no punishment for being queer. So, that's part of my creative side. I'm back in a play that I was writing and just stopped for a long time. Between that and getting elected in the pandemic, I just really found it hard to get decent, reasonable writing done, because I wasn't sure what I was writing about anymore. But the new piece is also focused on life in the queer community and I think it's about ending it. I'm not sure yet because sometimes you don't exactly know what it is until you get there.

WM: Mmm. Well, love to you doing this work and helping the rest of the community, you know, love themselves.

KW: Another thing, I love Wilson for me.

WM: Just kind of passing forward, huh?

KW: Yeah.

WM: Thank you so much for sharing this journey with us, Kathleen.

KW: Well, thanks for asking, Winnie. It's good to see you again. And thank you for doing what you do. Hey, rock and roll!

WM: Alright. Keep rocking that line.

Rock the Line runs through February 4 at The Flea Theater, 20 Thomas St., NYC. Covid guidelines in effect; must show proof of vaccination. For tickets,

redeyetickets.com/rock-the-line/visit



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