

# Artist of the Year Lojo Simon shares her life on the page and stage

By MARRIE STONE

Several years ago, when asked for her advice to beginning playwrights, Lauren (Lojo) Simon told her interviewer: “Write with imagination. Write every day. Write to inspire. Write big. Write what matters. Write like your life depends on it.”

Simon lives this advice. Her work grapples with our most fundamental fears and flaws. Race, class, sexual identity, religious identity, end of life issues, beginning of life issues and everything in between. She explores family secrets and surprising discoveries. Her characters are damaged and tender, funny and tragic. Her plays often address Judaism and homosexuality (Simon’s brother is gay and believes every play is about him). She doesn’t skirt away from controversial topics – instead she celebrates them.



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Photo by Jeff Rovner

***Lojo Simon, Laguna Beach Arts Alliance 2020 Artist of the Year***

When the Laguna Beach Arts Alliance announced the 2020 “Artist of the Year” winner on Sunday, April 24, Simon appeared stunned by the news. She accepted the award with an improvised speech, saying the honor was so unexpected, she hadn’t prepared any remarks.

Given her long list of literary contributions to our community – and her award-winning talent both on the page and the stage – Simon shouldn’t have been surprised. Laguna has benefited from her creative insights as a dramaturg, poet, social activist and educator for a decade. As founder and curator of Bare Bones Theatre, she’s brought dozens of thought-provoking readings and facilitated discussions to our town. As Laguna’s inaugural Literary Laureate (alongside co-Laureate Suzanne Redfearn), Simon facilitated several community events including “Word and Image in Dialogue” at the Laguna Art Museum, as well as writing classes at the Boys & Girls Club and Susi Q.

Outside Laguna, Simon serves as a commissioned playwright for the Creede Repertory Theatre Young Audience Outreach Tour. The theatre reaches more than 35,000 underprivileged youth. Simon calls it one of the most rewarding projects she’s ever done.



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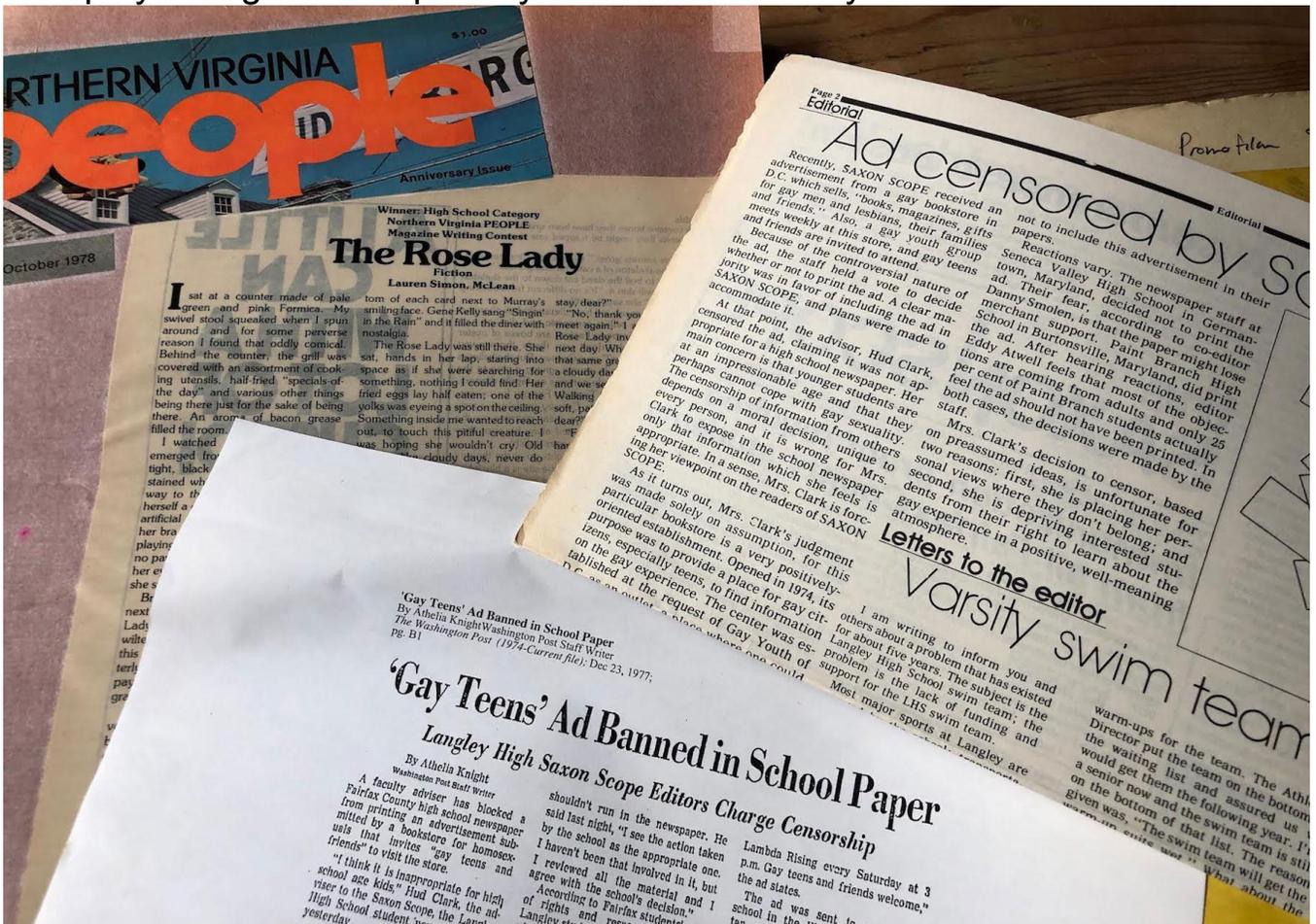
### ***Lojo Simon plays with a headpiece at the Creede Repertory Theatre***

I caught up with Simon just as she left town last week on a trip. “Honestly, I hate flying,” she told me. “So answering your questions gave me something to focus on during the turbulent ride.”

I'm grateful she made the time because, even knowing some of Simon's work, I learned so much more.

**Stu News:** Talk about your road into theater, poetry and the arts. When did that emerge as the chosen path?

**Lojo Simon:** I've always been a writer, making up poems and stories from a very young age. My first professional publication of a short story dates to 1975 when I won the high school division of a short story contest held by a local magazine. The published story was titled "The Rose Lady" and it featured a retired actress who invited a young girl up to her apartment to share stories about her theatrical career. I wrote it while sitting at an old-fashioned soda counter, waiting for my brother to get his weekly allergy shots. I also did some acting, singing, ballet and directing when I was young, but it wasn't until I was an adult when I began to combine my passion for writing and dramatic arts at a weekend short-form playwriting workshop at Idyllwild Arts Academy.



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### Some of Simon's early publications from the 1970s

**SN:** You hold a bachelor's degree in politics. Your work addresses many important political and social issues of current concern, so I can see some intersections here. Has that background in political science influenced your work? How did your education in politics inform your creativity?

**LS:** I grew up in Washington D.C. at the time Woodward and Bernstein were writing about the Watergate break-in and cover up. They inspired a passion for investigative journalism, and I served as editor of my high school newspaper. My father worked for the government, so I also considered a career as a diplomat or a spy. Then I wanted to do

social work with the Peace Corps. All of those ambitions – plus the fact that I didn't like my freshman English professor – led me to major in politics, with an emphasis in U.S. foreign policy.

Because of my long career in journalism, you won't be surprised that as a playwright, I approach my writing with a journalist's eye and experience. I am an immersive researcher. I read a lot for background. I have an ear for dialogue that is rooted in interviewing and storytelling techniques that I learned writing for magazines.

It's true that many of my plays address political and social issues. My plays for children, in particular, encourage them to behave humanely and respectfully and to open their eyes and hearts to a diversity of people, animals, places and world views. I am engaged in social justice issues off the page as well. Currently, I work with a team from Home for Refugees supporting the transition of a family of seven refugees who were evacuated last August from Afghanistan to Orange County. I am a teaching artist with Laguna Playhouse in their Our Stories program, using writing and performing arts to help at-risk young adults. As you can see, I truly believe in the value of storytelling as a healing modality. Art can be a catalyst for change.

**SN:** You went back for your MFA later in life. What motivated that decision?

**LS:** After my first foray into playwriting in 2002 and my first production in 2008, I decided that I needed more education in the foundations of theatre and playwriting. At the time, I had one daughter in college at Northwestern in Chicago, another on the way to Middlebury College in Vermont, and my partner, John, was in a Ph.D. program at Pacifica. I had FOMO ["fear of missing out"].

**SN:** What brought you to Laguna Beach?

**LS:** I relocated to Laguna Beach after I earned my MFA in 2012 to accept a job as Literary Manager working for Annie Wareham at Laguna Playhouse.



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Photo by Jeff Rovner

***Lojo Simon accepts her “Louie” from LBAA awards committee member and President of Third Street Writers, Amy Francis-Dechary***

**SN:** Talk about that original idea to start Bare Bones.

**LS:** Fiscal restraints during my time working for Annie and then Executive Director Karen Wood demanded that Laguna Playhouse program mainstream shows. After I resigned from the Literary Manager position in 2015, I was bemoaning the dearth of more cutting edge and new theatrical work in Laguna. Annie connected me with Sandra Jones

Campbell, whose studio was then in the canyon. Sandra and I collaborated on the first Bare Bones' readings. We've since produced more than 35 playreadings in the canyon, in the Playhouse Brick Room and now at Laguna Beach Cultural Arts Center.

**SN:** The tagline "theatre to chew on" and the theatrical feast is such a compelling metaphor (along with "feeding the hungry"). Is there a backstory associated with coming up with that image?

**LS:** The name Bare Bones reflects our lack of funds! We're a ragtag group of writers, directors and actors who put on script-in-hand playreadings with only music stands, clip lights and three hours of rehearsal. Our tagline "theatre to chew on" reflects my intention to program nourishing plays that provoke thought, arouse emotion and encourage conversation. I love that our audiences are engaged in deep and meaningful conversations about the art they've experienced on stage, both with a facilitator, as well as informally after the performance. I hope that they continue to chew on these ideas well after the evenings are over.

**SN:** Can you call out any favorite Bare Bones productions over the years? Particularly ones that might have been personal to you or caused a shift in your perspectives or thinking.

**LS:** Rather than chose a favorite, I prefer to highlight the breadth of plays and talkbacks that we've hosted. Former Laguna Museum Executive Director Malcolm Warner led a post-play conversation about art fraud and forgery. Debi Purcell talked about her career as a female MMA fighter. Biomedical entrepreneur Hans Keirstead helped us understand DNA editing technology. I'm really looking forward to the May 31st reading of Lucas Hnath's play *The Christians* and the post-play talk with Pastor Rod Echols about heaven and hell. I try to offer a variety of "meaty" topics that we can chew on.



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Photo by Jeff Rovner

***Lojo Simon appears with the other 2020 Art Star Awards recipients at [seven-degrees] on Sunday, April 24***

**SN:** Making a living as an artist always strikes me as interesting tension. On the one hand (unlike a commercial career), you really need to open a vein and make yourself extremely vulnerable to be successful. But then you have to attach a price tag to it. This idea of marrying personal exposure to public judgement and attaching it to money is so...UGH...for every artist. I wonder if you feel any of that in your work? Maybe theater is a little more insulated from this, but maybe not?

**LS:** Finding an audience for one's art is indeed very challenging, and in my experience, doesn't always correlate with talent. Much of one's longevity can be attributed to doing the work, promoting the work and luck. For example, I happened to meet the Literary Manager from Queens Theatre at a conference, and years later, I pitched him some of my most "Jew-y" plays that I thought would appeal to New York/New Jersey audiences. He ended up producing *Relic, or I was Bubbie's Favorite* by Joel Feinman and, during lockdown, a reading of *J'oy Vey*. My play *Seeds of Change*, written for Creede Rep in Colorado, appealed to a theatre in Nova Scotia because they wanted to program a

musical with an environmental theme, and mine fit the bill. *Mi Corazon* appears in an anthology of plays for young Latinx actors. Each of these so-called success stories was as much about hard work, perseverance and being in the right place at the right time as it was about the quality of the material.

I'm very fortunate in that I have not had to rely on my arts career to pay my bills. For many years, my partner John and I ran a small publishing company that, along with freelance writing and an occasional commission, made a modest income on which we could live and raise our kids. Most playwrights also work as educators, arts administrators or in completely different fields altogether. Fortunately, today I manage several local properties for my family, a job that affords me the resources to continue living and making theatre in Laguna.

**SN:** Were there any standout moments from your time as Literary Laureate?

**LS:** Serving as the city's Literary Laureate was a great honor. It gave me a platform to help elevate and promote literary writing as part of the local arts community. The collaboration with Laguna Art Museum was very special. I taught ekphrastic writing there on family days, and the Word & Image in Dialogue event showed the community how visual and literary artists serve to inspire one another. This year's Art Star awards gala in which both of us participated and in which Third Street Writers also was honored proves that writers finally have assumed our rightful place in the Laguna arts community.

**SN:** Are there any books or plays you recommend our community experience?

**LS:** When I was going through a difficult personal time, I found inspiration, encouragement, wisdom and practical help in Julia Cameron's book *The Artists' Way* and its companion materials. As I said at our last Bare Bones event, everyone has the power and ability to tell their story. Everyone can use storytelling to make sense of their lives, to heal and to help them come to terms with their successes and their stumbles. Julia's book is a great way to jumpstart the process. A teaser: I'm working on a new curriculum about writing as a spiritual practice. More to come later this year.

**SN:** Do you think there's a unique artistic lens through which you view the world that informs how you live your life? Do you absorb daily situations with an eye towards potentially turning things into art or using them as material? If so, are there any examples?

**LS:** Haha! My brother thinks every play I write is about him! Of course, I use personal experiences as inspiration, though rarely literally. When I think about my "artistic lens" and its impact on my life, I have to say that regardless of the art form, something inside me compels me to create. When I complete a play or a poem, I can't wait to start the next one (with sufficient reading and TV binge-watching during my brief recovery time). I'm always making things – crafts, paintings, soups, projects, budgets, lists, plans. All of this creative activity and the counterbalancing quiet/veg times are part of a larger and lifelong commitment to making art.



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Submitted photo

***A recent photo of Simon with Jason Feddy and Ava Burton. Feddy was named Artist of the Year in 2019.***

**SN:** Finally, do you have any reflections on being named Artist of the Year and the role the LBAA plays in our town?

**LS:** Kudos to the city, the Arts Commission and LBAA for casting a wide net around the arts, be they visual, performing, or literary. Artmaking enriches lives from childhood through very old age. How great it is that Laguna honors that!