



MERRIMACK REPERTORY THEATRE

PLAYGUIDE

A WOMAN OF THE WORLD

**BY REBECCA GILMAN
DIRECTED BY COURTNEY SALE
FEATURING DENISE CORMIER**

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A WOMAN OF THE WORLD

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Denise Cormier in *A Woman of the World* at MRT. Photo: Kathy Wittman

A WOMAN OF THE WORLD

DENISE CORMIER (Mabel Loomis Todd) A Massachusetts native, Denise is delighted to return to MRT, after a long absence, for her seventh show here. Her credits include, Broadway: *The Minutes*, *Linda Vista*, *The Graduate* (National Tour). Regional Theatre: Asolo Repertory Theatre, Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Indiana Repertory Theatre, Pioneer Theatre Company, Palm Beach Dramaworks, Cleveland Play House, Virginia Stage Company, Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival. TV/Film: "The Affair," "Law & Order: CI," "Six Degrees." She is a 2017 Lunt-Fontanne Fellow.



REBECCA GILMAN (Playwright) plays include *Luna Gale*; *Spinning Into Butter*; *Boy Gets Girl*; *The Crowd You're in With*; *Dollhouse*; *Twilight Bowl*; *Blue Surge*; *Soups, Stews, and Casseroles: 1976* and *The Glory of Living*. Her plays have been produced by (among others) the Goodman Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre, the Royal Court Theatre, Lincoln Center Theater, the Public Theater, Manhattan Theatre Club, New York Theatre Workshop and MCC Theater. Gilman is the recipient

of a Guggenheim Fellowship, the George Devine Award, the Harper Lee Award and the Harold and Mimi Steinberg/American Theatre Critics Association New Play Award. She is an inductee in the Alabama Writers Hall of Fame, and she was named a finalist for the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for her play *The Glory of Living*. Gilman is an artistic associate at the Goodman Theatre. She is also the director of the MFA playwriting program at Texas Tech University.



COURTNEY SALE (Director, Nancy L. Donahue Artistic Director) joined MRT as the Nancy L. Donahue Artistic Director in March of 2020. At MRT she has directed readings of *Gaslight* by Steven Dietz and *The Pill* by Tom Horan, in collaboration with UMass Lowell, as well as *A Woman of the World* by Rebecca Gilman. MRT commissions under her leadership include Vichet Chum and Trista Baldwin. Prior to MRT, she served as the Artistic Director of Seattle Children's Theatre (SCT), the nation's leading generator of new work



for young audiences. At SCT, she directed *Black Beauty*, *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*, and *The Little Prince*. Commissioned writers under her tenure include Idris Goodwin, Cheryl L. West, Allison Gregory, Karen Hartman, Trista Baldwin, Ramon Esquivel, and James Still. Recent directing projects: *Tiny Beautiful Things* at Seattle Rep, the world premiere of Steven Dietz's *The Ghost of Splinter Cove* at Children's Theatre of Charlotte, and Ellen Fairey's *Support Group for Men* at Contemporary American Theatre Festival (CATF). Other credits include *The Cake*; *Wild Horses*; *Not Medea* (CATF); *Mr. Burns, A Post Electric Play*; *On Clover Road* (The Phoenix Theater); *Twelfth Night* and *The Tempest* (Indy Shakes); and *Zen Prayers & Songs* (Fusebox), written and performed by Kirk Lynn. She spent three years as Associate Artistic Director at Indiana Repertory Theatre, where directing credits include the world premiere of *April 4, 1968: Before We Forgot How to Dream*, *The Mountaintop*, *The Mousetrap*, *Jackie & Me*, and *And Then They Came for Me*, *The Giver*, and two iterations of *A Christmas Carol*. With the Duplicates, she co-created *The Fictional Life of Historical Oddities*, *September Play*, *The Man with the Dancing Eyes*, and *The Poison Squad* (Austin Critics Award). She has developed new work at Denver Center Theatre Company's Summit New Play Festival, The New Harmony Project, Write Now, Dorset Theatre Festival, TheatreWorks (Palo Alto), New Plays for Young Audiences at NYU/Provincetown Playhouse, and The Orchard Project. Other distinctions included Indianapolis Business Journal's Forty Under Forty designation, Cornish College of the Arts Distinguished Alumni Award, and the keynote speaker at the 2017 International Council of Fine Arts Deans. She has taught at Summer at Cornish College of the Arts, Seattle Children's Museum, Temple College, and The University of Texas at Austin. Ms. Sale is a proud member of the National Theatre Conference and the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society. She is represented by A3 Artists Agency in NYC. BFA, Cornish College of the Arts. MFA, The University of Texas at Austin.



A MESSAGE FROM COURTNEY SALE

NANCY L. DONAHUE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, MERRIMACK REPERTORY THEATRE

Dear MRT Community,

Welcome to our second show of the 42nd season; Rebecca Gilman's moving and thought provoking *A Woman of the World*. Artists have been responding to great works by other artists for eons. In *Woman*, Gilman has crafted a fresh approach with a tertiary focus on Emily Dickinson and a more deliberate one on Mabel Loomis Todd, who brought Emily's poetry to the masses. The play reminds us the championing of great writing can come from surprising energies.



Mabel Loomis Todd lived life out loud. As I've learned more about her throughout this process; I can imagine the way small town life in Amherst, MA, impacted her giant personality. One of the greatest delights of my job is being astonished—in reading *Woman*, I found a native daughter, who was as complex and layered as the natural New England landscape she cherished. The heart of the play is the 13-year romantic relationship between Mabel and Austin Dickinson, Emily's brother. Dramatized with clarity and deep passion, Mabel sheds social expectation of her time to follow heart, art, and beauty. I hope she astonishes you as much as she did me.

We are thrilled to welcome back to MRT Denise Cormier in the title role. We are honored to work with this fabulous design team, including filmmaker Kathy Wittman, who has beautifully captured the essence of being in Liberty Hall through film. We extend enormous gratitude to the MRT Board and the entire MRT staff. Producing during Covid has required an "all hands on deck" from every area of the theatre. We are consistently moved by the mission focus of our team. And finally, thanks to all you—for showing up, for streaming, for carrying us through to the other side of the pandemic. While we can't wait to be in person together again, we are grateful to be invited into your classrooms with this piece.

In service,
Courtney

Stage Manager
Becca Freifeld conducting
a rehearsal.
Photo: Kathy Wittman



Q&A WITH PLAYWRIGHT REBECCA GILMAN

*We talked about Mabel Loomis Todd with playwright Rebecca Gilman during a break from her busy schedule as the MFA Playwright Program Director at Texas Tech University. A Pulitzer Prize finalist for *The Glory of Living*, her other plays include the critically acclaimed *Spinning into Butter* and *Boy Gets Girl*.*

MRT: What inspired you to write about Mabel?

Rebecca Gilman: The connection was birds (which are their own poetry, I think!). I'm a birdwatcher, and I went to the Hog Island Audubon Camp several years ago. While I was there, the camp's director, Steve Kress (also a professor at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Vice-President of the National Audubon Society, and the person responsible for re-introducing the Atlantic Puffin to the U.S.) mentioned that they were developing a play about Mabel. Somebody pointed to me and said, "She's a playwright." Long story short, I was the first artist-in-residence on Hog Island. I lived in Mabel's cabin, and I wrote the play at her desk. It was a remarkable experience – one I'll always treasure.



MRT: People seem to have very different opinions – some positive, some negative - about Mabel and her influence over Emily's body of work. How do you see her place in the history of this great poet?

RG: Mabel seems to be somebody you either love or hate. Personally, I love her dedication to Dickinson's poems and her fierce determination to see them published. She worked incredibly hard to make that happen. Of course, the difficulty is in trying to determine the motivations behind that goal. You could argue that she understood and appreciated Dickinson's genius and wanted to share it with the world. Or, you could argue that she was a narcissist, who saw the poems as a way to garner fame and attention for herself. I think the answer lies somewhere between those two interpretations, and I don't think they contradict each other. But whatever your take on Mabel, you could never say she was boring!

MRT: Mabel seems to have been such an intriguing character all on her own. She also seemed to be way ahead of her time. What do you find most fascinating about her?

RG: I see her as the ultimate explorer. She explored the world alongside her astronomer husband, David Todd. (She climbed Mount Fuji with a concussion!) She explored and reveled in her sexuality. Basically, when she saw something she wanted (including Austin Dickinson, Emily's brother) she went after it, without hesitation or apology. She was frank about her ambitions and her desires, which was revolutionary for a woman at that time. Like I said, she was never boring. If she were alive today, she'd have her own reality TV show.

VIDEO/CLICK Courtney Sale interviews actor Denise Cormier about her return to MRT. "There's nothing like the Boston theatre community. To come back, here, in my artistic home, just feels right."

MABEL LOOMIS TODD (1856-1932)

"She writes the strangest poems, and very remarkable ones. She is in many respects a genius." Mabel Loomis Todd speaking of Emily Dickinson

A descendant of the Plymouth Colony, Mabel was the only child of nationally esteemed astronomer, poet, and naturalist Eben Jenks Loomis; he was a close friend of Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman. She was educated at private schools in Cambridge and Georgetown and studied at the New England Conservatory of Music. She later married another astronomer, David Todd. When he accepted a post at Amherst College in 1881, they moved to Massachusetts, where she became the paramour of Austin Dickinson and a friend to Emily Dickinson.



She was deeply entranced by Emily Dickinson's poetry. Because Emily was a

recluse, the two women never met in person, but they spent much time on opposite sides of a door at the Dickinson home and corresponded until the poet's death in 1886. A short time later, Emily's sister, Lavinia, discovered more than 1,800 poems and asked Mabel to organize them. After two years of painstaking work, Mabel enlisted the help of publisher Thomas Higginson, who was also a longtime correspondent of Emily. He and Todd "polished" and "corrected" several of the poems for publication. The first volume of Poems by Emily Dickinson appeared in 1890 to great acclaim. They published two more volumes of poetry, and Mabel published two volumes of Letters of Emily Dickinson.



Upon retirement in 1917, Mabel and David moved to Florida, where she fostered the movement to establish the Everglades National Park. They summered on Hog Island in Maine, where she fought to conserve the land, which was later donated to the National Audu-

bon Society by her only child, Millicent Todd Bingham.

Millicent said of her indomitable mother that Mabel "fused every experience, however spectacular, however obscure, into vitality . . . an abounding joie de vivre, which no slings or arrows of outrageous fortune could quench or dim. She had as much fresh enthusiasm for chaperoning each promenade, each cotillion, as for a new expedition to an unknown country. She loved to use her powers and to see results, of course. But she had besides a tireless zest for just living."

Mabel Loomis Todd died of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1932 on Hog Island. She and David are buried in Wildwood Cemetery in Amherst near the grave of Austin Dickinson.

EMILY DICKINSON (1830-1886)

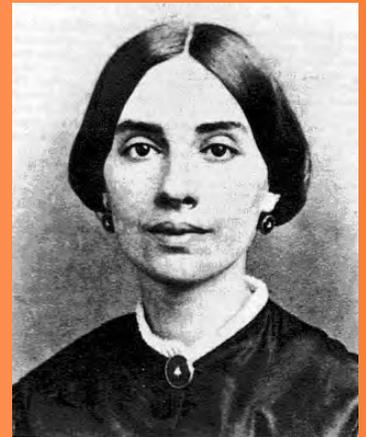
A lifelong resident of Amherst, Massachusetts, Emily Dickinson is considered one of the two premier voices in American poetry. While she was extremely prolific as a poet and regularly shared writings with friends, Dickinson was not publicly recognized during her lifetime. The first volume of her work was published posthumously in 1890 and the last in 1955.

A recluse for most of her life, Emily Dickinson did not meet in-person with anyone outside of her family — even Mabel Loomis Todd, who would later introduce Emily’s poems to the world. She would talk to Mabel through a cracked door, and she even enjoyed listening – from a different room - as the younger woman played the piano. Emily lived her entire life in her family’s home with her father, Edward Dickinson, a state and national politician, who served one term in the U.S. Congress; her brother, attorney Austin and his wife, Susan Gilbert; and her younger sister and closest confidante, Lavinia.

According to the New England Historical Society, Dickinson’s poetry was “heavily influenced by the Metaphysical poets of seventeenth-century England, as well as her reading of the Book of Revelation and her upbringing in a Puritan New England town, which encouraged a Calvinist, orthodox, and conservative approach to Christianity.”

Emily never read the poetry of the other great American voice in poetry, Walt Whitman, because she believed he had a reputation for being amoral, it’s reported. However, she was an admirer of the poetry of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning and John Keats.

After Emily’s death in 1886, Lavinia discovered 40 hand-bound volumes of nearly 1,800 poems. These volumes, or “fascicles,” were booklets assembled by hand by the poet. Lavinia invited Mabel to edit some of the poems for publication. Emily’s unusual style was controversial to traditional scholars but immediately loved by the public.



PREVIOUS PAGE Photos of Mabel Loomis Todd courtesy of Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University. The photo at the top is Mabel around the time of the play; lower photo, Mabel during the period she was friends with Emily. Sources: Britannica, New England Historical Society, and Amherst Historical Society and Museum.

ABOVE Emily Dickinson. Sources: Emily Dickinson Museum and the New England Historical Society

ADJACENT Hog Island Audubon Research Center on Hog Island today.

TIPS FOR READING EMILY DICKINSON

Emily Dickinson once defined poetry this way: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?”

Reading Dickinson’s poetry often leaves readers feeling exactly this way, because she names so incisively many of our most troubling emotions and perceptions. But often, too, her poetry can make readers feel this way because it baffles and challenges expectations of what a poem should be. “All men say ‘What’ to me,” she complained, and many of her readers still cry – “What?” – in their first encounters with this dense and elusive poetry.

TIPS FOR DISCOVERY IN HER WORK (Choose any of her poems to examine.)

- **Stay open to linguistic surprise.** The characteristics that help to make Dickinson’s poetry so intriguing—the absence of titles, her dense syntax, unusual vocabulary, imperfect rhyme schemes, approaches to abstract ideas—can at first seem to obscure rather than illuminate her meaning.
- **Read the poem aloud.** Poetry is an ancient, oral tradition. Often reading a poem aloud can help to elucidate its meaning. One of Dickinson’s early editors, **Mabel Loomis Todd**, convinced **Thomas Wentworth Higginson** (her future co-editor) of the power of Dickinson’s poetry by reading selections aloud to him.
- **Read the poem again.** Dickinson begins one well-known poem, “Tell all the truth but tell it slant—.” The power of Dickinson’s poetry often comes from her playful but potent sense of indirection. Trying to understand her poetry doesn’t mean solving it like a riddle, but rather coming to recognize its slippery strategies.
- **Review Major Characteristics of Dickinson’s Poetry.** How does the poem exemplify or confound these characteristics?
- **Set aside the expectation that a poem has to “mean” one thing.** A Dickinson poem is often not the expression of any single idea but the movement between ideas or images. It offers that rare privilege of watching a mind at work.
- **Try “filling in the blanks.”** Sometimes Dickinson’s syntax is problematic—the poems are so compressed! In lines where a verb or another critical word seems to be missing, what words might create meaning? Don’t feel that there is only one possibility. The variorum editions of her poetry reveal that she often thought of many alternative ways of expressing an idea. Looking at her variant wordings for a poem can help illuminate its possibilities.
- **Look for recurring themes, images, and strategies in Dickinson’s poetry.**



POETRY!

I'm Nobody! Who are you?

Are you - Nobody - too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! they'd advertise - you know!
How dreary - to be - Somebody!
How public - like a Frog -
To tell one's name - the livelong June -
To an admiring Bog!
(in the play)

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -

The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air -
Between the Heaves of Storm -

The Eyes around - had wrung them dry -
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset - when the King
Be witnessed - in the Room -

I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable - and then it was
There interposed a Fly -

With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -
Between the light - and me -
And then the Windows failed - and then
I could not see to see -

This is my letter to the world,

That never wrote to me,-
The simple news that Nature told,
With tender majesty.
Her message is committed
To hands I cannot see;
For love of her, sweet countrymen,
Judge tenderly of me!

(in the play)

Success is counted sweetest

By those who ne'er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the Purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory

As he defeated - dying -
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear.

APOTHEOSIS.

Come slowly, Eden!
Lips unused to thee,
Bashful, sip thy jasmines,
As the fainting bee,
Reaching late his flower,
Round her chamber hums,
Counts his nectars — enters,
And is lost in balms!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

STUDENT VIDEO | "I'M NOBODY, WHO ARE YOU?" | HISTORICAL APPROACH

Overview | Why and how do literature and the arts promote personal connections? What writers' and artists' lives and works have spoken to us and helped shape us?

Poetry Exercise | As soon as students are settled in, play them the [Favorite Poem Project video](#) of the high school student Yina Liang reading and talking about Emily Dickinson's poem No. 288 ("I'm Nobody! Who are You?").

Ask students to talk briefly about Yina Liang and her life. Why might she feel a strong connection to this poem? How is it that a 21st-century high school student can feel so connected to a poem written in the 19th century?



Have you ever felt this kind of connection to a poem, book, author, or literary character? Why does literature sometimes speak to us on a very personal level? Why do you think this is? Reflect in writing on a writer, actor, painter, filmmaker, musician or other kind of artist – or artist's creation, like a literary or film character – who you feel speaks to or for you.

History/Comprehension Exercise | In "My Hero, the Outlaw of Amherst," The New York Times (with photos of Emily's home and clothing) reflects on his relationship with Emily Dickinson, her life and her poetry and remembers a visit he took to the house where she spent most of her life:

"Growing up in New England, I'd known about her life, or the romantic version of it — how she was a recluse, how she dressed in white — for years. And I'd read many of her nearly 1,800 poems. I was a bookish, verse-writing odd-fit kid with authority issues, looking for a hero. By a hero I mean some-

one you admire but, more than that, identify with and somehow want to be. In Dickinson I found what I was after. So it was a big experience for me to go to that house that day, and be where she had been . . .

"She spoke as a woman, a man, a little girl, a little boy, a lover active and passive. Suddenly she was throwing out a power-of-example lifeline. Not only was she an outsider, she was also, so it seemed, an outlaw, on the margins, where I felt I was too. [...]

"I love to think of kids, especially contrarian, odd-fit kids, coming across Dickinson's Twitter-size poems for the first time, then learning about her life, a life that years ago, for at least one other kid, made being different not just O.K., but something to want to be."

[Read the entire article](#), using the questions below.

Questions | For discussion and reading comprehension:

1. What is the "romantic version" of Dickinson's life, as outlined in the article?
2. What myths about Dickinson does The New York Times dispel?
3. Why does the author characterize Emily Dickinson as an "outlaw"?
4. Why is Emily Dickson a hero to many people?
5. Why is she a hero to the writer?

“MABEL LOOMIS TODD: THE CIVIC IMPULSES AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF AN ACCIDENTAL ACTIVIST.”

MABEL LOOMIS TODD – THE ACTIVIST

Mabel Loomis Todd was a respected visual artist, writer, editor, and activist. She was considered the greatest female public speaker and master fundraiser in New England at a time when woman had few rights and were often denied time in the public spotlight.

WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION: Mabel was a co-founder of the Amherst Women's Benevolent Association. Under her leadership, the Association fought vigorously for Native American and women's rights, better immigrant conditions, poverty struggles, and education and literacy.

DAUGHTERS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION (DAR): Mabel was a founder and regent of the Mary Mattoon chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution in Amherst.

AMHERST HISTORICAL SOCIETY: Mabel was a longtime president of the Amherst Historical Society. She convinced wealthy residents to fund the purchase of an elegant home to house both the historical society and the DAR.

BOSTON AUTHORS CLUB: Mabel was a co-founder and longtime chair of the Boston Authors Club, which contributed immensely to her reputation as a distinguished public speaker, writer, and editor.

FLORIDA EVERGLADES: Mabel and her husband divided their time between wintering in Florida and summering in Maine. She served on the executive committee of the National Forestry Association. She was a co-founder of the Everglades National Park, preserving hundreds of miles of Florida waterways for its survival against commercialization.

PELHAM KNOB: Mabel spearheaded and raised funds to protect an 88-acre tract of land in Pelham, MA, just outside of Amherst. Her daughter later gifted the property to Amherst College, which today still owns the thriving forest.

HOG ISLAND: Almost as famous historically as her work with Emily Dickinson's poetry, Mabel worked diligently as a speaker and fundraiser to preserve her beloved Hog Island, ME, and spare the islet deforestation and commercialization. She initially purchased half of the island and later bought the entire property. A few years after Mabel's death in 1932, her daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham, deeded Hog Island to the National Audubon Society in perpetuity.

Bingham said, “My mother, Mabel Loomis Todd, was a woman of wide interests and talents artistic, literary, civic and social – but most of all she was interested in the world of nature and in the preservation of forests and their wild inhabitants. As it happened, a short time before their visit . . . one of the strips of forest on Hog Island was cut. . . . There were threats that the entire island might be similarly cut over. My mother was shocked. ‘Oh,’ she exclaimed, ‘they must not destroy any more of it! This island is too wonderful, it must be preserved, what CAN we do about it?’”

This is an excerpt from writings by Julie Dobrow.

Source: Historical Journal of Massachusetts, Volume 45, No. 2, Summer 2017, pp. 62-79.

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(above) Actor Denise Cormier, Photo by Kathy Wittman





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Denise Cormier in *A Woman of the World*. Photo: Kathy Wittman



VIDEO/CLICK Take a tour of Hog Island, Maine, the summer home of Mabel Loomis Todd. Courtesy of Audubon Camp.

VIDEO/CLICK “Before I Got My Eye Put Out - The Poetry of Emily Dickinson.” A beginner’s guide to the great poet, courtesy of Crash Course.

PROGRAM/CLICK View the Playbill (program), biographies, and other videos.

PHOTOS/CLICK View all of the production and rehearsal photos.