

This One's For The Ladies

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Published on 9/13/2007 in [Home](#) » [Features](#) » [Features Main Photo](#)

The patented advice for writers is: write what you know. Louise Roche got even better advice: write what you'd like to see.

She has done that ever since, and one of the results is the stage show "Girls Night: The Musical," which opens the Garde Arts Center's season on Wednesday.

The British writer explained via email from England how this musical comedy, about friends who relive their past during one night at a karaoke club, evolved.

"'Girls Night: The Musical' was inspired by my experiences of growing up — luckily, it seems that a lot of the experiences I had were shared by most other women. I say luckily because I think that's one of the things that people like about the show — they see their own lives and characters that they recognize up on stage," she says.

"I like plays that are funny/sad/uplifting with content and characters that I can relate to. I also like plays with great music. 'Girls Night: The Musical' ticks all those boxes."

Roche's husband, Mark Randle, directs "Girls Night" and played another important role in the development of the show: he watched their three young kids, often taking them out to the park, while Roche wrote.

"I came to write comedy by accident," Roche says. "Our youngest child had bad eczema, and I had three at home all under 4. It was a bit of a stressful time so my husband said, 'Why don't we book you into a writers course, and that'll give you something to look forward to.' The only course with any places left on it was for writers of comedy. I discovered I was funny, and that was the start of all this.

"Mark used to take the kids out for two hours on a Saturday morning and I would write like a woman possessed."

In creating the characters and situations for "Girls Night," Roche took some ideas from her own life and some from people she knew. The cast of characters include the party animal, the younger sister who leads the perfect suburban life, and the rich wife who lunches at Pizza Express.

"Actually, all the characters started from bits of me/close friends and even a neighbor who I used to watch because she made me laugh," she says. "Party animal Carol, for example, was inspired by my best friend. But I stress the 'inspired by' bit. Once they had been created, they took on a life of their own."

The latter part of the title "Girls Night: The Musical" comes from the pop soundtrack that bubbles up throughout the show, all with familiar tunes such as "It's Raining Men" and "Girls Just Want to Have Fun."

"The songs I chose were the anthems that I grew up with. I remember listening to Janis Ian's 'At Seventeen' in my bedroom when I was 17 and thinking that she was singing to me. I was the unpopular/ugly girl who would never find love — we've all been her at some time or another, and if you haven't, you're very lucky," she says.

"'I Will Survive' was the song that I bought for my Mum when my dad left home — when she was feeling low, we'd put it on and dance round the living room, singing at the top of our voices."

The productions of "Girls Night" — Roche's first stage work — started out small, with Roche using some pals who did community theater as performers. Roche's own mother created the costumes.

"Girls Night" proved a hit, and it expanded across England with national tours in 2003, 2004 and 2006. The stint at the Garde is part of its first U.S. tour, and Roche will be in the Garde's audience for a couple of shows.

"Girls Night" is part of a trend of stage shows aimed primarily at women, from "The Vagina Monologues" to "Menopause: The Musical," and Roche has a theory about that.

"Ask yourself — who is it that buys the tickets and organizes the social calendar? It's women, so it makes good sense to try and give them what they want," she says.