



MIDDLEBURY  
PERFORMING ARTS SERIES

P R E S E N T S

*Rachel Mars*  
*Your Sexts Are Sh\*t: Older Better Letters*

THURSDAY-FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 29-MARCH 1, 2024

7:30 PM ET

WRIGHT MEMORIAL THEATRE

Large  
Print



# **Your Sexts are Shit: Older Better Letters**

Writer and Performer | **Rachel Mars**

Additional Letter Writer and Performer | **Lesley Ewen**

Dramaturgy | **Wendy Hubbard and nat tarrab**

Lighting Designer | **Alex Fernandes**

Sound Designer | **Dinah Mullen**

Producer | **Lucy Jackson**

Touring Production Manager | **Helen Mugridge**

With material from James Joyce, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Charles Bukowski, Marcel Proust, Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keeffe, Gertrude Stein, Radclyffe Hall, Eleanor Roosevelt, Brother Augustine, Anonymous

Please stay after the performance for a Q&A with the artist.





*Funded in part by the New England States Touring program  
of the New England Foundation for the Arts,  
made possible with funding from the National Endowment  
for the Arts Regional Touring Program, and the six New England state arts agencies.*

*The Middlebury performances are made possible with generous support  
from the Paul Nelson Performance Endowment, the Middlebury College  
Theatre Department, and the Rothrock Family Residency Fund.*

*Please turn off all electronic devices prior to the performance, and refrain from texting.  
Photography and the use of audio or video equipment are prohibited.*



## **Program Notes**

*From the Artist*

Your Sexts Are Shit: Older Better Letters is the new solo show from Rachel Mars. It is an intimate, funny, filthy and moving show that triangulates the sex and love letters of long dead artists, contemporary sexts and a meditation on the construction of the queer female body. What role does writing have in

creating our sexual identity? How do we write ourselves and for whom? How have newer, faster communication methods changed the way we write desire?

The show features an array of letters from dead writers, artists and a monk. They include James Joyce, Frida Kahlo, Georgia O’Keeffe, Eleanor Roosevelt, Mozart and Radclyffe Hall. I read them, and they are accompanied by slides of footnotes providing background information about the writers and the context they were writing in. The second element is a powerpoint of sexts sent to me by anonymous donation from platforms like whatsapp, Grindr and good old text message. The final element is a personal narrative about how I came to own and write my own female queer sexual desires.

Background:

In June 2016, immediately after the Brexit vote I was depressed and in upstate New York. In order to cheer me up, performer Scott Sheppard read me some of Joyce's sex letters to Nora Barnacle. They were extremely explicit and surprisingly beautiful. On my return I got in touch with two sexologists, Jana Funke and Lena Wanggren – who helped me to unearth sex letters dating back centuries. I also researched with friends and colleagues about how they were using short-form text communication to seek out - and maintain - sexual relationships. I did a call out for screenshots of sexts, and curated them to form one of the three elements of the work. I also knew I wanted to include some personal information, especially as queer female desire is often invisible and un-discussed. The result of all three elements is a

kind of queer live archiving of longing, communication and the writing of pleasure.

*Courtesy of our New England presenting partner, The '62 Center for Theatre and Dance, Williams College*

Queer survival is an isolating experience. Unlike racial and ethnic identities where one is likely to be (but not always) born and raised into a community of those with similar life experiences, many queer folx were the only people 'like them' they were aware of growing up. Western societal norms baptize us with homo- and transphobia, as well as heteronormative relationship structures, and suddenly isolation becomes a mode of survival. Rejecting queerness that materializes in yourself and in others becomes a path to inauthentic acceptance. But what is community without authentic acceptance?

Oddly (queerly?) enough, feeling isolated as a LGBTQIAA+ individual is an experience that many queer folx have in common, a shared life circumstance that can be a starting point for connection. Despite being plagued by loneliness and isolation, queer folx still find each other, refusing to believe that they are truly alone and instead finding, creating, and manipulating pathways for communication with one another. Queer love letters, zines, and sexts are among the countless examples of queers reaching out to one another, using channels of communication to build community in the face of existential violence...They say: if you are reading this, I am not alone and you

are not alone. And you reading this, holding this in your hands, your hand will now help push things FORWARD.”

—Hale Polebaum-Freeman '06.5 (they/ them)

*Librarian & Primary Instigator of Williams' Circulating Zine Collection*

### Works Consulted

Duncombe, Stephen. 2017. *Notes from Underground: zines and the politics of alternative culture*. Third Edition ed. Portland, OR: Microcosum Publishing.

Treleaven, Scott. 2014. “The Lowest of the Lowest of the Low: A New Cautionary Tract from the Salvation Army.” In A. Bronson and P. Aarons (Eds.), *Queer Zines 2* (pp. 240-241). New York, NY: Printed Matter, Inc.

Fake, Edie. 2014. “Fruity Zine Love Poem Essay.” In A. Bronson and P. Aarons (Eds.), *Queer Zines 2* (p. 244). New York, NY: Printed Matter, Inc.

Wilde, Chris. 2014. “From Ephemera to Eternity: The Queer Zine Continuum.” In A. Bronson and P. Aarons (Eds.), *Queer Zines 2* (pp. 246-247). New York, NY: Printed Matter, Inc.



## Biographies

**Rachel Mars** is an award-winning performance maker and writer. Her shows combine theatre, comedy, storytelling, and live art practices. She was on the first Writers Lab UK and Ireland in 2021, the Royal Court Playwriting Course in 2021, and a finalist on 4Stories 2022. She has won a Total Theatre Award, the Oxford Samuel Beckett Theatre Trust Award,



and is often funded by Arts Council England. She is currently co-writing her first musical for Home Theatre, Manchester. Her first TV comedy/drama was optioned by Hillbilly Films. In the past, her work has seen her inviting children to smash up her dad’s bad pottery with hammers, learning to play Roller Derby, and unearthing historical sex letters. She has performed all over the UK and internationally including at the Barbican, South Bank Centre, and festivals in New York, Austin, Seattle, Melbourne, and Brisbane. She is committed to representations and explorations of queer female identity, using theatre and comedy as tools for provoking new arenas of empathy and understanding. Rachel is an artist fellow of Birkbeck University’s Centre for Contemporary Theatre. Praise for Rachel’s work: “A triumphant show dripping with uninhibited desire”—*The Guardian* on YOUR SEXTS ARE

SH\*T. “Magnificent, angry, slyly funny, and necessary.”—Lyn Gardner, *The Guardian* on ROLLER. “Immensely charismatic, very funny and artfully crafted with the ear of a poet”—NPR, Boston on OUR CARNAL HEARTS.

**Helen Mugridge** is an experienced creative production manager. Her previous credits include: F\*ck Miss Saigon Play (Royal Exchange, Manchester and Young Vic (YV)); 40/40 (Two Destination Language, UK tour); A Dead Body in Taos (Rachel Bagshaw with Fuel, UK tour); Oh Mother (Rash Dash, UK tour); Cupids Revenge (New Arts Club, UK tour); FORGE (Rachel Mars, Transform Festival); Chasing Hares, Best of Enemies (YV); RED, Likely Story (Wales Millennium Centre); Gaping Hole (Rachel Mars and Greg Wohead, Ovalhouse, London); Little Wimmin, Figs in Wigs (UK tour inc., Southbank Centre); Class, Scottee (Edinburgh, Canada, and UK tours); Atomic 50, interactive installation for Waltham Forest Borough of Culture; Les Voyages, Company XY (Greenwich and Docklands International Festival); Idol (Jamal Gerald, Transform Festival and Theatre in the Mill Bradford); I’m a Phoenix, Bitch (Bryony Kimmings, Grand Hall, BAC, and International dates); Fat Blokes (Scottee, Edinburgh and UK tour); The Shape of the Pain (Rachel Bagshaw and Chris Thorpe with Chinaplate, Edinburgh, Germany, and BAC); Golem, 1927 (West End, The Space/BBC, UK, and International tour).



**Lucy Jackson** is a London-born, Brooklyn-based independent performing arts producer who supports playwrights and multidisciplinary artists to develop, produce, and tour new work. She is currently the Producing Director of The Bushwick Starr, and produces national and international touring work for Rachel Mars and Salty Brine's Living Record Collection. Work in the UK includes nine years at the Edinburgh Fringe, Latitude, and VAULT festivals, and new plays at the Finborough Theatre, Bush Theatre, and Theatre503. Previous roles include New York Producer for Los Angeles Performance Practice, Producing Director for The Assembly, Development Director for the New Ohio Theatre, and General Manager/Touring Producer for the TEAM. She co-teaches a class in Creative Producing at The New School and is a member of the Creative Independent Producer Alliance (CIPA).



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