American Voice: Doctors and Playwrights

January 21, 2020

By **Ashley Chang,** Dramaturg

January 21, 2020

Paule Giliberto and Andre Khoury-Yacoub at the Eiffel Tower in January 1985, photo courtesy of Sylvia Khoury.

I. Dr. Giliberto and Dr. Khoury-Yacoub

Paule Giliberto and Andre Khoury-Yacoub met in Paris, not under the Eiffel Tower, nor along the banks of the Seine, but as medical students at the Faculté de Médecine Saint-Antoine at Sorbonne University.

Paule was among the first children in her family to be born in France. Her father was born to a Sicilian family in Tunisia, 500 miles southwest of Italy, while her Sephardic Jewish mother was born in neighboring Algeria and later emigrated from North Africa during the Algerian War of Independence, a bloody revolution against French imperial rule that raged from 1954 to 1962.

Andre, meanwhile, was among the first children in his family to be born in Beirut. His parents, members of the Syriac Orthodox Church, had fled from Turkey to Lebanon during the Armenian Genocide, a holocaust carried out by the Ottoman government during and after World War I. In 1943, Lebanon achieved independence from the French colonial empire, and for the next thirty years, the country saw a period of peace. It was during this time that Andre started medical school in Beirut. But when the Lebanese Civil War erupted in 1975, he decided to finish his studies in Paris. That's where he met Paule.

During the 1980s, the young couple moved to Westchester County, following Andre's parents and siblings, who had already made a home of Pleasantville. There, Paule and Andre completed their medical residencies, hers in oncology and his in radiology. They also married, and, three years after leaving Paris, Paule gave birth to a daughter, Sylvia, who was among the first children in her family to be born in the United States.

II. Sylvia the Doctor

A child of immigrants who themselves were the children of immigrants, Sylvia Khoury grew up in a household marked by the various diasporas that have scattered her family like seeds across the globe. Having variously endured the might of French imperialism, the Khoury-Yacoubs spoke French at home; Sylvia didn't learn English until the age of six. As a child, she paid visits to Beirut and spent summers in Paris – though "not in a glamorous way," Sylvia tells me over a cup of tea, "in a real person way." Indeed, the cosmopolitan gleam of her European adventures is much softened by the reality of her parents' and grandparents' separation from their homelands: they each had known the disquietude of arriving in America as foreigners and, before that, of fleeing instability and unrest. So, with a sense of solidarity common among families who have migrated by choice or by force, the Khoury-Yacoubs stuck near to one another in America. All of them – grandparents and cousins, aunts and uncles – still live within a five mile radius. According to Sylvia, this commitment to togetherness had to do with survival, and it's possible, she thinks, that she inherited this instinct for preservation, a pragmatism passed down through generations of learning, as she puts it, that "everything could be gone in a moment."

Sylvia is nothing if not pragmatic, which explains why she's always wanted to become a doctor. "It's a transferable skill," she tells me matter-of-factly, and she's not the only person in her family to think so. "It was just what you did when you grew up," she says. Hospital affairs were discussed at dinner, x-rays sometimes lined the walls, and one Halloween, Sylvia didn't just go as a Jedi – she was a doctor as well. What did she wear? "A white coat with a lightsaber."

> "If her studies in medicine have been, at the same time, studies in theater, so, too, have the transcontinental movements and migrations of her family deepened her sense of global citizenship."

Little surprise, then, that Sylvia completed all her prerequisites for medical school as an undergraduate at Columbia University (she wanted to stay close to home). But her college years weren't just titrations and molecules – she made

room for Virginia Woolf as well. A longtime lover of the arts, Sylvia had spent her childhood filming sci-fi movies and penning short stories. Later on, she had edited her high school's literary magazine, even as she served as captain of the math and debate teams. Today, Sylvia still remembers how the books are shelved at her local library: "I know where *The Boxcar Children* are, I know where *Nancy Drew* is." It made sense, then, that when Sylvia graduated from Columbia, she was accepted to Mount Sinai's Humanities and Medicine program. It was a perfect match (and still close to home).

III. Sylvia the Playwright

Though drama had been her favorite subject in kindergarten, it wasn't until college that Sylvia gave it a real go. After seeing a production of Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* during her freshman year at Columbia, her boyfriend showed her that theater was the kind of thing that could be discussed. When the show ended that evening, the two of them talked about it over a couple of coffees. This was new to her – the notion that plays could be critiqued, not only by critics but by her.

Three years later, as a senior, Sylvia took a playwriting class with writer Ellen McLaughlin, who showed her that theater was the kind of thing that could be pursued in earnest. Over the course of a semester, she wrote a full-length play, one that earned her admittance to The New School. The faculty there hoped she'd start a Master of Fine Arts in Playwriting with them the coming fall.

Yet even with this acceptance in hand, Sylvia admits, "It's hard to be convinced you'll have a career in the arts." At the time, going to graduate school for theater didn't feel like a "practical" move, especially when she already had plans to attend Mount Sinai. "But," she continues, she "just had this feeling" she would regret not giving playwriting a proper try. To better describe that pang, she recalls a scene from one of her favorite novels, Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, in which Clarissa Dalloway and her long-ago suitor Peter Walsh – both of them a little old, a little embarrassed, and more than a little disappointed – unexpectedly find themselves together on Clarissa's couch. There's a "space" between the former lovers, Sylvia says, an unbridgeable and unbearable distance. A moment passes between them that, though written with Woolf's usual lightness, heaves with longing. Likewise for Sylvia: "I didn't want to look back and wonder what might've happened."

Fortunately, Sylvia didn't have to choose theater over medicine. Mount Sinai granted her a generous deferral, allowing her to pursue playwriting before she began her medical studies.

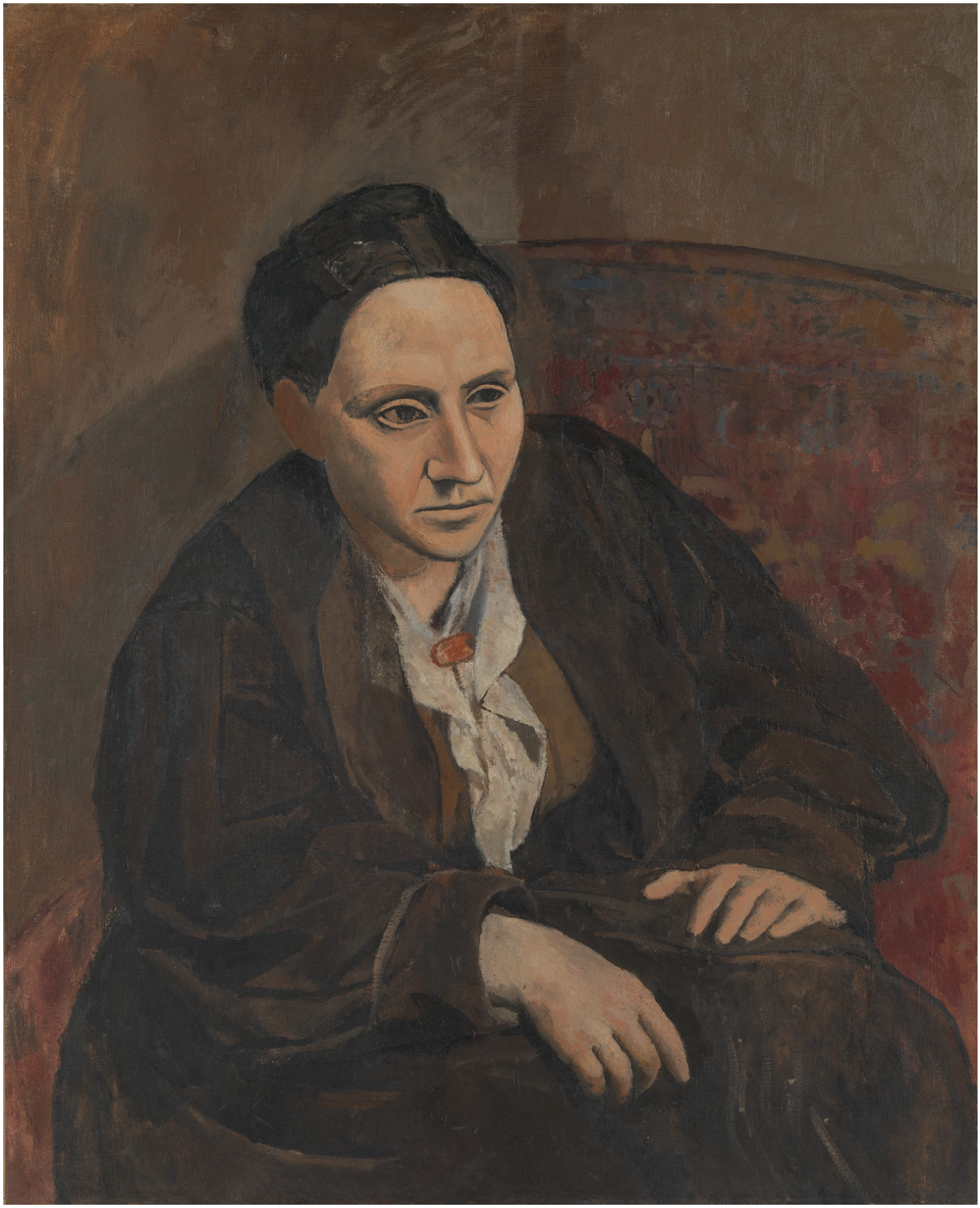
> "I feel more confident and more satisfied with myself when I reflect that I have two professions and not one. Medicine is my lawful wife and literature is my mistress. When I get tired of one I spend the night with the other."

At The New School, Sylvia studied with artist Nicole Burdette, who showed her that theater was the kind of thing that could be crafted with rigor. According to Sylvia, Nicole was "the kind of person you feel comes around once in your life." With Nicole's support, Sylvia wrote *Against the Hillside*, which won recognition from the Kennedy Center in 2015 and premiered at Ensemble Studio Theater three years later. Sylvia still has the notes from Nicole's class.

After graduating from The New School in the spring of 2015, Sylvia wasted no time resuming her career as a medical student that fall. Now in her fourth year, Sylvia has satisfied nearly all her requirements at Mount Sinai and managed to emerge as a significant voice in the landscape of new plays: *Power Strip* premiered at LCT3 in 2019, and *Selling Kabul* comes to Playwrights Horizons after a summer at Williamstown Theatre Festival.

IV. Doctor-Playwright

Sylvia's commitment to theater and medicine is an extraordinary accomplishment, as both professions require deep reservoirs of time and energy. Yet Sylvia is not alone in her endeavors. The archives of theater history contain record of a small coterie of playwrights with training in the medical sciences. Among the most notable is Fridrich von Schiller (1759–1805), who founded the Weimar Theatre alongside close friend Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The son of an army doctor, Schiller wrote his first play – *The Robbers* – as a 19-year-old medical student at an elite military academy. During his first job as a regimental doctor at a military camp in Stuttgart, word came to him in the midst of a dysentery epidemic that a theater in Mannheim – "one of the most influential stages in Germany," according to novelist Thomas Mann – wished to produce his melodrama. Schiller promptly deserted his post to attend the premiere, earning him a two-week prison stay and – even more damning – a sentence forbidding him from publishing his work ever again. *The Robbers*, an overnight success and today heralded as a *Sturm und Drang* masterpiece of the Romantic age, fared much better than its playwright, who fled Stuttgart for Weimar. Early in his career, it seems, Schiller found he could not be both doctor and playwright in equal measure.



Pablo Picasso, “Portrait of Gertrude Stein,” 1905–6, Courtesy of the 2019 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Other doctor-playwrights include Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) and Gertrude Stein (1874–1946). Chekhov practiced medicine throughout his career as a playwright, writing in an 1888 letter, “I feel more confident and more satisfied with myself when I reflect that I have two professions and not one. Medicine is my lawful wife and literature is my mistress. When I get tired of one I spend the night with the other.” While Chekhov relished the variety of his dual careers, Stein was only somewhat given to medicine. Upon graduating from Radcliffe College, Stein enrolled at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in 1897. Though she completed most of her work, she grew listless. “You don’t know how little I like

pathological psychology and how all medicine bores me," she wrote to one of her professors before dropping out and moving to Europe, where she would host salons for Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, Henri Matisse, and other luminaries of the modernist era.

While Schiller, Chekhov, and Stein tended to hold theater and medicine apart, Sylvia prefers to find their points of resonance. Ever since she was young, she tells me, writing always felt like a "sacred space" she got to visit, a place where she was most clearly herself. But, she says, "I also find that when I'm working with patients." For Sylvia, audiences and patients are quite alike. As a playwright, she looks closely at what's happening in the world. As a doctor, she looks closely at what's happening in the world of a single person. In both cases, her work is to hold up a mirror to difficult realities, not with contempt and condemnation but with patience, reverence, and a responsibility to truth.

This is the reason why, across Sylvia's plays, there are no villains. There are only people trying to live – often unsure how – in circumstances foreign to us for their distance from American soil but otherwise awfully familiar. She shows us brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, friends and neighbors, many of them devastated by war. They are "people that I love," she says, "people that we can all love." Through them, her plays reveal the flesh-and-blood consequences of international affairs played out in courtrooms, newsrooms, and voting booths. If her studies in medicine have been, at the same time, studies in theater, so, too, have the transcontinental movements and migrations of her family deepened her sense of global citizenship. Her whole body of work speaks to her keen attunement to a humanity shared in common, across borders and deserts and seas. "How do we live," she wants to know, "all of us?"

Related: