

The Queen's Gambit, A play in San Francisco

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by Frisco Del Rosario



“The Queen’s Gambit” sold out three shows in its debut July 27 and 28 at The Exit Theatre in San Francisco. It was the first production by Faultline Theater Inc., a theater company comprised mostly of UC Berkeley students and graduates.

Written and produced by Iris Kokish, “The Queen’s Gambit” is a study in female empowerment, spanning the life of a rising young master and told within the length of her national championship match.

From childhood, Vera Levitan is enmeshed in a triangle with her father and her coach. Alexander Levitan calls her “son” for the chess mind almost exclusively found in boys, while Maya Gurevich seeks to mold Vera in her image, after her own femininity was subdued by the misogynistic chess community. While Vera blossoms over the chessboard — described in the script as “a separate space constructed entirely to house the mind” — she wrestles in the physical world with gender roles proscribed by societal, familial, and competitive convention.

Kokish unfolds the three-sided story in a “duologue” structure, inspired by the format in the police drama “A Steady Rain” by Keith Huff. “The duologue structure is a perfect device for a chess play,” said Kokish. “The actors talk to the audience (in monologue) and break into scenes with each other.”

Three chess sets on stage enable “The Queen’s Gambit” to progress visually — from Vera’s childhood in Alexander’s apartment, to her grueling study sessions in Gurevich’s studio, to the national championship pairing the women against each other. Gwen Kingston as Vera changes costume accordingly — she wears souvenir T-shirts from Alexander’s tournaments, a staid business outfit like Gurevich, and as she emerges from beneath her elders, Vera allures in a short gold tube dress. “If my figure throws a man so far off his game that he loses, then he’s an idiot, and I say let him lose”, she says, empowered by dress and appearance.



In contrast to the transforming Vera, the elder characters Maya (Dana Zook) and Alexander Levitan (Alex Bonte) do not change costume — symbolizing two opposing forces on the chessboard and in Vera’s life.

Alexander is a sturdy man in black whose declining chess ability and increasing dependence on Vera coincide with his failing eyesight. Bonte supplies Alexander with an overbearingness, and occasionally crushes his daughter (the balance of power is clear, but offstage, Kingston is two years older than Bonte, whom Kokish described as a powerhouse, and and director Cole Ferraiuolo's first choice to play Alexander).

Maya is a champion for — and of — women in chess. Her battles at — and away from — the board have been fought against the odds and at great cost. The reigning champion sits regally but rigidly in a severe hair bun and white suit, camouflaging herself inside the boys' club of grandmaster chess (out of character with her hair down, Zook is gorgeous and almost unrecognizable).

Grandmaster Gurevich is modeled after the Polgar sisters of Hungary, whose father sought to show that genius could be made as well as born. Laszlo Polgar taught them at home, concentrating on chess after eldest daughter Susan showed interest. Susan was a sensation in women's events, but it was youngest daughter Judit who rose to the world's top 20 overall, joining the grandmaster community as a teenager — with the media scrutiny and male abuse that entailed.

The sexual harassment endured by Gurevich in "The Queen's Gambit" is based in fact. "Every atrocious thing that happened to Maya in this play has happened to me or one of my friends in tournament settings," said Kokish, an experienced player. "Frankly, some chessplaying boys are immature people, and we're putting them opposite a girl for five hours."



Red is an in-between color where chess is concerned. Sometimes red squares on a chessboard are light, and occasionally red pieces are dark. At the center of "The Queen's Gambit", auburn-haired Gwen Kingston wields red pieces in the critical game, draping an impudent elbow over the back of her chair following her first move. Kingston was director Ferraiuolo's only choice to play Vera — "Gwen is an incredible actress who can play such a wide range of characters, and [Vera] ages from 17-to-27 over the course of a 75-minute show." said Kokish."

With Vera's third move, she steers the game toward quiet water, when it's revealed that in spite of her evolution as a bold woman, her chess has always been cautious and dull, according to Alexander. "Vera has built this wall around herself, and she likes being safe on the chessboard because she doesn't get that feeling anywhere else," said Kokish, who shielded herself at the board for many years with a fully-brimmed hat.

With a grandmaster title and the national women's championship at stake for Vera, the game goes on, while "The Queen's Gambit" duologue unfolds around it. "I don't need your permission to win," the student tells the teacher.

"Chess is an obsession that challenges you to be more than human, more than machine," says Vera. "It's more than just a game. It's a story, and everyone understands a story."

Producer Iris Kokish was a tournament veteran while she was in high school, a student of South Bay master Alexander Levitan (for whom she named the character). She plays at the Berkeley Chess Club when law school allows.

Actors Dana Zook and Gwen Kingston knew how to move the pieces, but as production began in June, Kokish coached them in the physical act of moving pieces. "We worked on that natural feel," she said. "[The actors] had to memorize games and positions, and pick up details like remembering to punch the clock with each move.

The Gurevich/Levitan championship game is a copy of Asztalos-Breyer, Debrecen 1913. "I had to find a Slav that was about 30 moves long with a nice finish," said Kokish. She shared the gamescore with annotations in the program, fretting a little because the result of the game is a spoiler for the play, if someone thinks about it.

Gurevich and Levitan both quote Leonore Gallet — a gifted violinist and chessplayer — from Lasker's Chess for Fun and Chess for Blood: "When a woman thinks of a beautiful move, she is liable to also think about how beautiful she looks in

making it". Kokish remembers from her tournament experience reaching for a piece, and suddenly being aware of how her nails looked. "The truth is that any insecurity a teenager can possibly have is heightened when they're sitting three feet across from someone for five hours," she said.

To impart the feeling of a chess tournament on the cast, Kokish staged a rehearsal at the Mechanics Institute Chess Room on Post St., which she described as "church-like, much more real than 'Chess: The Musical'."

"It was a helpful rehearsal," said actor Alex Bonte. "It adds to our seriousness, and [Kingston] and I bonded in the gravity of that room."

"The theater community and the chess community have been unbelievably encouraging," said Kokish. "The theater community had to embrace this play about chess, while the Mechanics Institute let us use their space for a rehearsal, and the Berkeley Chess School gave us a beautiful set to use."

Chessplayers might note some common threads in Kokish's play and Walter Tevis' novel with the same name. There's a prodigious female chessplayer in both, with one parent, and she drinks too much for a while. Kokish said she hasn't read *The Queen's Gambit*. On the other hand, Jennifer Shahade's *Chess Bitch: Women in the Ultimate Intellectual Sport* is quoted during the play, and "inspired much of the discourse throughout the production", Kokish said.

"The Queen's Gambit" opens again Aug. 30 at the Notre Dame de Namur University theater in Belmont. [Frisco Del Rosario \(@frdelrosario\)](#) is a programmer. He has written two chess books and hundreds of magazine and newspaper articles.