



## “101 Humiliating Stories” Made Vivid Transcript

Story by Gina Marie Rodriguez

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([00:03](#)):

This is Gina Marie Rodriguez and you are listening to the “Jersey Arts Podcast.” Who in their life hasn't felt the sharp sting of embarrassment? I'd certainly like to meet them, if they exist; though this episode is probably not for them. This is for those of us who understand the haunting nature of humiliation and the humor that hindsight brings. Are you still stressing about something stupid you did 20 years ago? Don't worry, you're not alone. We promise. Today I spoke with Laura Ekstrand, the producing artistic director at Vivid Stage and star of the upcoming production of *101 Humiliating Stories* by Lisa Kron. Listen to learn more about Vivid Stage and how important it is that we all learn to laugh at ourselves.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([00:48](#)):

The title of the show that you're working on is what got me: 101 Humiliating Stories, <laugh>.

LAURA EKSTRAND ([00:55](#)):

<affirmative>. Mm-hmm.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([00:55](#)):

That's my life.

LAURA EKSTRAND ([00:57](#)):

<laugh>. I think we all feel that way, which is why I am hoping that people are gonna- feel like it's gonna, you know, be relevant to them.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([01:04](#)):

Absolutely. That's why we encourage people to see theater. Right? It - it should be relatable.

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LAURA EKSTRAND ([01:09](#)):

Right.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([01:10](#)):

You are the producing artistic director of Vivid Stage, right?

LAURA EKSTRAND ([01:14](#)):

Yeah.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([01:15](#)):

But you are also acting in *101 Humiliating Stories*. But before we jump into the show itself, can you tell me just a little bit about Vivid Stage?

LAURA EKSTRAND ([01:24](#)):

Sure. We focus on contemporary plays, contemporary stories. A lot of them are new plays. Um, but we're really looking for things that are relevant to the day-to-day lives of our audience. Um, and, and, and stories that focus on like the kind of the micro version of our lives, the interpersonal relationships and, uh, the, the tiny dramas and comedies that make up our everyday life. You know, rather than kind of the epic scope of, of plays. We're doing the, the mini scope.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([01:57](#)):

That leads me to ask, how, how do you come across these shows? How do you choose what a season will look like at Vivid?

LAURA EKSTRAND ([02:03](#)):

Yeah, and we're right in the middle of that right now, <laugh>. Um, it's a, it is a combination of things. So we usually do plays that are very recent or new. Um, the *101 Humiliating Stories* is an exception to that, but, um, usually we're doing things that were produced in the last five years or never produced. Um, and so I'm always on the lookout. I'm reading a lot about what's playing regionally and in New York I read a ton of plays, but then we also do a call for new plays every year. And, uh, it actually was becoming overwhelming last year. We had 500 submissions.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([02:40](#)):

Oh, wow.

LAURA EKSTRAND ([02:41](#)):

Yeah. And I'm, you know, the only full-time staff member, um, and the company, the ensemble does help, uh, with the reading process. But this year, um, we limited it to 300 and we got that many scripts in the first three weeks of the year.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([02:57](#)):

Oh my gosh!

LAURA EKSTRAND ([02:59](#)):

Yeah. I think, I think when playwrights realize that you actually produce new plays that you're sincerely looking to produce their plays, there's a lot more excitement around submissions.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([03:10](#)):

Sure, they're jumping at it.

LAURA EKSTRAND ([03:11](#)):

Right. And you know that, and that's really fun for us. And we actually have developed relationships with a number of, especially New Jersey playwrights, but a lot, a lot of different playwrights over the years. So, uh, so we do the open submissions. I also am in touch with a lot of the playwrights that we've done in the past. So that when they have something new that they think is right for us, they'll send it directly to me, which is so good because, you know, they know us and they've seen us do their work and, you know, it's a lovely vote of confidence, but also they know that the aesthetic will be right. So, one thing we do do, uh, and we did it once this year, we do it every now and then is we'll do a collection of short plays. And usually that's kind of more commission based where we have a theme and I'll go to maybe playwrights that we've worked with in the past, and I'll say, we're doing an the evening on this theme, what do you have? Or would you be willing to write something new for this evening? And we've done that a couple times.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([04:06](#)):

All right. Now I just wanna jump into *101 Humiliating Stories* because I'm super excited about it. If you don't mind, I'm going to read what I found on your website first.

LAURA EKSTRAND:

Yep.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

I think this is so cool. Your website states: in *101 Humiliating Stories*, we dive deep into the universal experience of humiliation. In this one woman show, the actor shares a series of humiliations- past, present and future, including exquisitely detailed anecdotes like 'Geeky Celebrity Encounters,' and 'How I Spent All The Petty Cash from My Office on Makeup.' An invitation to perform at her high school reunion in Lansing, Michigan triggers another series of anxiety filled fantasies. How will she, a Lesbian East Village performance artist cope with her Midwestern classmates? *101 Humiliating stories* is evocative, moving, and overall hilarious. - I am so excited. Just from that description. <Laura laughs>, Like I said before, I feel like, I mean, I can relate to this and I'm sure that many other people out there can. Um, but I <laugh> the 'Geeky Celebrity Encounters' is the one that gets me because that, not that I've met many, but, um, I can only imagine how much worse I get when I, when I meet my idols, <laugh>.

LAURA EKSTRAND ([05:14](#)):

Right. You kind of lose your bearings. It's like, I don't know how to behave anymore. I'm around somebody famous. It's, you know-

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([05:20](#)):

Exactly. Do I speak English anymore, <laugh>?

LAURA EKSTRAND ([05:23](#)):

<laugh> Yes. Yes. Yeah. And the funny thing about Lisa Kron is that she is a celebrity now, really. I mean, this was written when she was kind of a struggling East Village solo performer. And I actually saw her do this show, um, when she was in New York. And, and way before that I did a summer theater thing, um, the year before she did, she did the same theater at, at the same place after I did. So I met her that summer cause I had friends there still. And so I, I knew her a little bit. This was well before any of this stuff happened. So when she wrote this play, she was not a celebrity. She was, you know, not in the place where she is now. Um, so it's really fun to see her at this moment in her life where she was just,

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you know, kind of struggling and, and, and, um, really committed to her life in the theater, even though it was really hard.

LAURA EKSTRAND ([06:18](#)):

And look what happened. And, you know, it's such a lovely payoff for her. It doesn't happen for everybody, but, but she, one of the last stories she tells us how she's doing this community theater production of *You Can't Take it With You* and she's looking out onto the stage from the wings waiting to go on and thinking, you know, this is so magical. I, I, I'm so glad that I get to do this with my life, and that she gets rewarded as, you know, we know now she's rewarded with this fabulous career. It, it's just, it's kind of like beautiful.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([06:52](#)):

Absolutely. I mean, we're talking about a Tony winning- Tony Award-winning artist.

LAURA EKSTRAND ([06:56](#)):

<laugh>. Oh my God. Yeah.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([06:58](#)):

She wrote the book and lyrics for *Fun Home*. Yes. So I'm, I mean, I wasn't able to see that show, and I still regret that. Looking forward to seeing this one, because it sounds amazing. And I wanna know from your perspective as the actor, what's your favorite part?

LAURA EKSTRAND ([07:11](#)):

There are two really funny stories. Do you mean the piece itself, my favorite part within the piece or working on the piece?

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([07:18](#)):

Oh, both. Let's touch on both.

LAURA EKSTRAND ([07:20](#)):

Okay. They're two really hilarious stories. I think. Um, they're just fun to act out because, you know, as she's telling these stories, she really is like - she's narrating the story, so she's acting them out while narrating them. So it's not like now I'm portraying a little girl or something. She's saying, you know,

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when I was a little girl, this thing happened to me and she's acting it out at the same time. So one of the stories is the, 'how I spent all the petty cash on makeup' story, which is really fun. I, I don't, I don't wanna tell too much, but she, she goes to the Macy's makeup counter and just goes insane. There's another great one about how she, uh, is, she's a temp, you know, she's temping a lot and she almost cuts her finger off, um, doing this project while she's temping and she has to go to the emergency room and all this stuff happens. So I won't tell you more about that, but there are a couple stories that for an actor are just so much fun to do that I just like, kind of can't wait to get human beings in there so that I can do this with them.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([08:21](#)):

Absolutely. You know, vibing off of the audience's energy is really important too. Yeah. All right. So 101 Humiliating Stories. Can you tell me a little bit about who's directing this piece?

LAURA EKSTRAND ([08:33](#)):

Sure. Um, the director is actually a longtime friend of mine who runs another New Jersey theater. His name's Mark Spina, and he runs the Theater Project, which is in Maplewood. And, um, we've known each other for, Ooh, well, I'll tell you, we first met each other doing a show at Seton Hall one summer. It was *Side by Side* by Sondheim, and we were the ingenue couple. So that gives you some indication of how long ago it was. Um, and so both of us went on to run our own theaters. And now he directed me in the reading of this, it's about 10 years ago now. And so when I was considering producing it, I thought, well, we had such a good time doing the reading, I wanted to ask him to direct me on this production. And it's just, it's just been really nice to, to be with him. And he knows me really well and he gives me a lot of, um, I wouldn't say leeway cuz he, he does know what he wants, but he's very collaborative with me because I'm the one up there and he wants me to be comfortable. So he's taking good care of me, is what I would say. And we're having a lot of fun.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([09:38](#)):

Uh, I hope that after listening to this interview, you're gonna have just ticket sales flooding your inbox. That's what I'm hoping.

LAURA EKSTRAND ([09:46](#)):

I, me too. Me too.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([09:49](#)):

I think, not that I can speak for everyone, but I think that this show, never having seen it Right. But just judging by this description, I think that this is such a, a good idea to, to wet your feet a little bit. If you've never been to a show, everybody can relate to having been embarrassed at one point or another. Check this out as your first show. If you've never been to a theater before, you've never been to a live show.

LAURA EKSTRAND ([10:14](#)):

Yeah. You know, I, I listened to this interview with Lauren Gunderson recently, and she was saying how she thinks that theater is practice for life. And that's why people go, they wanna see someone do things that maybe they have done, maybe they have never done. Um, and this definitely seeing someone go through humiliation and then survive and share it with you has to be somehow, I hope, reassuring because I think we'll be laughing and saying like, oh my God. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Um, and I'm fine, you know, I'm still like standing there talking to you and we can all go through it and go, oh wow. Together, hopefully. Um, and people can feel like, well, first of all she's suffering and not me. But secondly, they could be like, you know, she she, she made it. She made it.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([11:02](#)):

Yes. I, I think that's really important. And that's what art is, right? That's why we, we take in the books that we read, the movies that we watch, the TV shows, the theater. It's so that we feel less alone.

LAURA EKSTRAND ([11:15](#)):

Yes.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([11:16](#)):

I know that, you know, I won't share them, my humiliating stories, but I know that they haunt me. <laugh>.

LAURA EKSTRAND ([11:22](#)):

Yeah. Oh my gosh. Like they were yesterday. Could be decades ago and they're, they, it cut is so fresh when you think about it.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([11:29](#)):

Moments ago, moments before we started this, I was remembering something that happened to me 20 years ago thinking, “oh my God, how did that happen? And why did it pop into my brain?” Why does it come back out of nowhere? So -

LAURA EKSTRAND ([11:40](#)):

It’s something about the way those things imprint themselves on your psyche, that they're, they're wounds that last forever.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([11:46](#)):

Exactly. They just kind of open themselves, you know, and pour a little bit more salt in every, every once in a while, just why not? But, but the point is, we're all here. And in the case of Lisa Kron, you know, she survived and did quite well for herself. So there is hope for all of us.

LAURA EKSTRAND ([12:01](#)):

Right. And I think that if you can laugh at yourself and invite other people- to the other people to laugh with you, it takes some of the sting out of that. It's like, wrong, you know, what a dumb thing to do. And everyone's like, yeah, hahaha. It was, you know, and, and it, it, it actually puts us all on the same team about it.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([12:20](#)):

Definitely. I, I agree with that wholeheartedly. But this is not the only show, this is part of a series, your solo series, correct?

LAURA EKSTRAND ([12:28](#)):

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Yeah. And to give you a little context, we for the last, I feel like it's 10 years or something. We really wanted to do something over the summer, cuz we're pretty quiet over the summer. But we felt like we wanted not to lose touch with people. So we started a solo reading series, which we do through the month of July. So for the last 10 years, we've done four solo show readings, um, once every week. And all of these three shows have appeared in the reading series. And they were things that like the actors felt really attached to, or the audience really responded to. And when we had this slot open in the spring, I thought, you know, might, maybe it's a fun idea to actually produce fully these things that were readings and that really connected with people. So that's, that's kind of what we're, what we're doing.

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LAURA EKSTRAND ([13:19](#)):

Um, so yes, after my weekend then we have a weekend, uh, with Scott McGowan, he's the actor and he's doing the *Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey*, which is just a sweet, lovely show. It's delightful. It's about a, a kid, a teen who goes missing and the whole town- it's set in a south jersey small town- and the whole town, um, kind of turns out for him and, and just, you know, tells stories about how lovely he is and, and what he taught them. And he's a gay kid who's really comfortable with himself. So he's, he's teaching others how to really be true to themselves and opening a lot of minds. And the actor gets to play all the townspeople. So it's kind of a great exercise for, for the actor as well.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([14:06](#)):

That's amazing. So it's told from multiple perspectives then?

LAURA EKSTRAND ([14:09](#)):

Yes, it begins to be narrated by the detective who's looking for him cuz he's missing. And then he interviews all the residents and so then we meet all of them as he goes through.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([14:21](#)):

Oh, that sounds wonderful. And like another uplifting show, you know?

LAURA EKSTRAND:

Yes.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

We need to understand how, how appreciated we are. It feels a little bit, George Bailey-esque,

LAURA EKSTRAND ([14:30](#)):

It, it does have that small town feel. Definitely. And it is uplifting and it's, it's, um, you know, I think it's extremely timely that, um, that's that, you know, especially for teenagers struggling to find their identity, you know, here's a, a story of a kid who really had, you know, had it, I don't know, had it all together. Sounds a little too pat, but who, who really had, had discovered who he was. Which is such a nice message. And then the last one is *Harry Clarke*, which was on Broadway, just a few right before the Pandemic, I think with Billy Crudup. And it is another kind of tour to force where the actor plays a little bunch of people, but it's a, a guy who is very mousey and he realizes that if he starts pretending to be

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this very kind of deb- debonair British guy, that doors open for him. So he kind of more and more takes on this persona full-time. And, uh, and so he kind of wiggles his way into this very wealthy family and all of the members of the family kind of fall in love with him. And so it's, it's a, a really like, um, interesting, funny, also, uh, wild story about something that could truly have happened. I'm sure it has happened. I'm sure it does happen in real life,

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([15:48](#)):

Probably all the time, more often than we like to think..

LAURA EKSTRAND ([15:51](#)):

I mean, look at Anna Delvey. That, that story of how she posed as a socialite and-

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

Yes.

LAURA EKSTRAND:

Um, so it's very much like that. And, uh, and Clark Carmichael is playing Harry Clark, uh, and he's wonderful. And he did the reading of it and he said to me when he did the reading, I just wanna tell you that I would like to do this show <laugh>. And I said, noted. And-

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([16:14](#)):

He manifested it for himself.

LAURA EKSTRAND ([16:15](#)):

That's right. Gotta speak up. So here we are. And one other kind of fun thing we're doing, um, is that on the 20th, which is opening night of Leonard Pelkey, um, we're gonna have a Pride Night Reception.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

Oh yay!

LAURA EKSTRAND:

So there's – yeah - little gathering beforehand. We have a local brewery in town that's gonna bring their drinks and we're gonna provide, you know, some appetizers and just a chance to hang out a little bit before the show. Everybody's welcome.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([16:44](#)):

Great. <laugh>. But there was something else on your website that I wanted to ask about as well, and it's Senior Sundays?

LAURA EKSTRAND:

<affirmative>

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ:

Do you always do Senior Sundays, or is that just for, for this series?

LAURA EKSTRAND ([16:55](#)):

We always do. It's usually the first Sunday of the run of any show and all tickets are \$25 for seniors. And then we have a talk back after. And for this one we have actually three Sundays, and they're all first Sundays <laugh>. So we decided every single Sunday was gonna be \$25 a ticket for seniors. And because the cast is one person, it's just way too much to make them sit up there and do a talk back. So instead of that, we're gonna just have a little reception with cake and coffee kind of informally. You can chat with the actor if you want to the director, you know, it's, it's much more casual. Um, you know, and, and people can just hang out for, for a bit before they go home.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([17:34](#)):

Is there anything that you want audiences to know about Vivid before they come see you?

LAURA EKSTRAND ([17:42](#)):

Well, <laugh> I sometimes need to tell people it looks like a church. It was a church. It's no longer a, um, there is a sign outside, but just driving by quickly, you know, you might miss it because it looks like some neighborhood church, but it's not. Um, inside it's, it's 120 seats approximately. So it is really intimate and we're very close to the audience just as you would be in a church. So it's actually a really great environment for a one-person show because you're so close to everybody. Um, and I know in my show, like I run up and down the aisle and talk to people. Now every show is not gonna have that, but mine in particular, does. So I, I just think it's, it's a, it's a relaxed experience. There's not a lot of the, you know, wear and tear of getting into the city. You can have a lovely meal very close by much more affordably; there's free parking. You know, I think that for a lot of people who have never gone to any New Jersey theater, much less our New Jersey theater, some of those things will be a refreshing surprise.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ ([18:44](#)):

You can see Laura Ekstrand in Vivid Stage's production of *101 Humiliating Stories* from April 13th through the 16th in Summit, New Jersey. If you like this episode, be sure to review, subscribe, and tell your friends. A transcript of this podcast, links relevant to the story, and more about the arts in New Jersey can be found at [jerseyarts.com](http://jerseyarts.com). The "Jersey Arts Podcast" is presented by Art Pride New Jersey, advancing a state of Creativity since 1986. This show was co-founded by and currently supported by funds from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts. This episode was hosted, edited, and produced by me, Gina Marie Rodriguez. Executive producers are Jim Atkinson and Cie Stroud. And a very special thanks to Laura Ekstrand. I'm Gina Marie Rodriguez for the "Jersey Arts Podcast." Thanks for listening.

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