

# Passions, pain displayed in Brooklynite's play 'Dreamless'

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by Denis Hamill

Native Brooklynite Cheryl Smallman's "Dreamless" is based on a nightmare that became a dream come true.

For her. For us.

**I can't recommend this one-woman show highly enough.**

Hilarious, poignant, tragic and triumphant, this brilliantly observed autobiographical play about a woman who sacrifices her artistic passions for the rigors of motherhood and winds up in a nut house takes place in [Park Slope](#) but echoes with agonizing universal themes.

"Dreamless" makes one instantly think of [William Butler Yeats](#)' line about "the things that hurt you into art."

What hurt Smallman into "Dreamless?"

"I think that's revealed in the scene where my character is leaving the mental hospital and the doctors tell her that she did so well in group therapy, helping other patients connect the dots of life," she says. "And I say to the guy, 'And if I can get a baby-sitter I might actually use those attributes and never be back here again.' Because I realized when I was in the hospital that I had caused my own crack-up by living the wrong life, for not having the courage to live the life I deep down knew I was supposed to, a life spent in pursuit of my passions."

In the show, Smallman says that after college she landed a lead in a play, got married, moved into an "\$800 a month [Brooklyn](#) apartment. A dollar a roach." And at age 20 took a pregnancy test in a bathroom stall and realized she would become a mother instead of an actress.

"I was too young to believe in myself as an artist," she said. "Then when I got pregnant I wasn't ready for that either. Don't get me wrong, it's immeasurable how much my children feed me on a daily basis. But there's more to me than being a mother. Would my kids be better off with who I really am or are they better off with the 'responsible' mother they visit on Sundays in an institution?"

Some scenes in "Dreamless" are about her encounters at the Ninth Street Playground in [Prospect Park](#) with a yuppie woman named Bunny, a corporate lawyer who "exchanged her law books for [Betty Crocker](#) cookbooks," raising a complete brat, only to find out that her lawyer husband is having an affair with his secretary.

"She is sick that he would cheat on her with a woman who thinks [Juicy Couture](#) is high fashion," Smallman observes. "But she's not doing anything about it."



Rather than easy yuppie bashing, she humanizes Bunny. "I'm 36, so I can remember when the yuppies first started moving into the Park Slope," she says. "I was an Irish-Italian working-class girl in eighth grade and I was curious about these women who wore sneakers on the train to work. I'd go to Bennies, the corner diner, and see them asking for everything bagels with low-fat vegetable cream cheese and asking for turkey bacon. I thought, 'Are they nuts? Who are these people?'"

But when she started spending her mommy life in a playground with them, instead of rehearsing in a theater, she realized they were no different than her. They were mothers who had sacrificed their life's passions for their kids.

"In the end Bunny is a victim, too," Smallman says. "She got screwed like my character. She succumbed to the guilt of motherhood, chucked in the law career, became a mother and wrecked her life. It doesn't matter if you're a working-class schlep like me or rich corporate alpha female yuppie, as long as you buy into the guilt we might as well be pushing vacuums in heels. The nut houses are filled with Bunnys, too. It's like [Betty Friedan's](#) 'The Feminine Mystique' was never written."

A few years back, Smallman started writing "Dreamless" and workshopping it at the People's Improv Theater under the tutelage of her teacher, [Jen Nails](#). "Your soul is a muscle," she writes, "when you don't use it, it atrophies."

And listen to Smallman's "Dreamless" character giving birth to a nervous breakdown: "I hate that the house is a disaster, but I have other interests. In between play dates, doctor visits, school trips, science projects, baths, sippy cups, potty training, stomach viruses, homework, parent/teacher conferences, diaper rash, teething, dinner, dishes, time outs, feeding the dog, waking the kids up, calming them down, cleaning vomit out of my hair and finding p--s all over my bed, I like to experience the world. I'm selfish. I like books and plays and films and art and fashion. I really want an exquisite home. A perfectly appointed feng shui affair. But that's for women who accomplish things. ..."

Anyone who's ever been a mother, or had one, will identify with "Dreamless."

Smallman will perform her play at 8 p.m., Oct. 26 at the [Manhattan](#) Theatre Source, 177 MacDougal St.

Tickets are \$15 and can be purchased at [www.cherylsmallman.com](http://www.cherylsmallman.com) or by calling (212) 501-4751.

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