

Cambridge Chronicle

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Arts in the City

Assuming the role: Jessa Piaia recreates feminist history

By Susie Davidson
CORRESPONDENT

Most people merely try to emulate their favorite historical characters. Jessa Piaia becomes them.

Trailblazing women from the past, both famous and not-so-famous, are brought back to life in the dramatic portrayals of Piaia, a character actress and longtime Cambridge resident. This Saturday at the Brookline Center for the Arts at 1 p.m., she will recreate Susanna Haswell Rowson as part of its Community Authors Program.

Although Rowson's name may not be immediately recognizable, she was, according to Piaia, America's first female best-selling author and educator. Rowson founded the Academy for Young Ladies in downtown Boston in 1797, wrote many novels, poems and articles, and penned the official eulogy to George Washington in 1800. She also wrote many of the textbooks for her school, which was in existence until the

Civil War.

Milwaukee native Piaia studied performance at London's Oval House Theatre and graduated from the University of Massachusetts in Boston. An employee at the Anthropology Department at Harvard University, she began personifying historical women in the mid-1980s, following a Boston Arts Lottery grant for two performances of the Rowson program at The Bostonian Society. Piaia subsequently added other characters, including Mary Dyer, a 17th-century Quaker who dedicated her life to religious freedom and the passage of the First Amendment, Isabella Stewart Gardner and Amelia Earhart, the first woman to cross the Atlantic in the 1928 Friendship flight from East Boston. A 1994 11-site Massachusetts tour of Susan B. Anthony received a Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities grant; in 1997, another grant sponsored "From Suffragist to Citizen: A Conversation with Susan B. Anthony and

What: Recreation of author Susanna Haswell Rowson, as performed by Jessa Piaia, a longtime Cambridge resident.

When: 1 p.m. Saturday.

Where: The Brookline Arts Center, which is located at 86 Monmouth Street, Brookline, one block from the St. Mary's stop on the MBTA "C" line.

For more info: Call 617-566-5715

Eleanor Roosevelt," with Piaia as Anthony and Elena Dodd as Roosevelt. Piaia performs at museums, libraries, historical societies and educational institutions throughout New England.

"I do this because I believe it's the most direct way for an audience to gain insight and understanding into the vast contributions that women have made to American history," she said, adding that not all the women she portrays are wide-

ly known. "Yet they led full and meaningful lives." Each was connected to Boston and Massachusetts at some point during their lifetime. Piaia's performances reveal the accomplishments, struggles and contributions of her subjects; she is acclaimed for recreating history by incorporating solid research and compelling writing.

Piaia conducted research on Rowson at The Bostonian Society's Old State House Museum, the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe Institute and the Medford Public Library. "I consider her a Renaissance woman; she had her finger on the pulse of her era, the Federalist era, and she was a very forward thinker," she explained.

The performance will be set during the Federalist era in 1803, at the height of Rowson's literary and educational achievements. "Historians have drawn Federalist era parallels to current times," said Piaia. She added that 1803 was also

the year of the Louisiana Purchase and the invasion of the Barbary pirates in Tripoli, whom Rowson addressed in her 1794 play "Slaves in Algiers." Rowson also wrote the best-selling morality novel, "Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth."

The BAC program will include an art exhibit, with the artists present. (Rowson, who lived from 1762 to 1824, herself combined visual art with her classes.) The 45 minute-program, appropriate for ages 10 to adult, will include a question and answer session.

The Brookline Arts Center is at 86 Monmouth St., Brookline, one block from the St. Mary's stop on the MBTA "C" line and very close to Audubon Circle and Boston's Fenway neighborhood. For more information, call 617-566-5715, visit www.brooklineartscenter.com or write bac@brooklineartscenter.com. For information on Jessa Piaia, please visit www.gis.net/~mtj/jessa.html.