

# CARRIE FISHER

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WISHFUL  
DRINKING



PHOTO BY EMMA JEFFREY

# UPSTAGE

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In *Wishful Drinking*, Carrie Fisher recounts the true and intoxicating tale of her life as a Hollywood legend, told with the same wry wit she poured into bestsellers like *Postcards from the Edge*. The daughter of Eddie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds, Carrie Fisher became a cultural icon when she starred as “Princess Leia” in the first *Star Wars* trilogy at 19 years old. Forever changed, Carrie’s life did not stay picture perfect. Fisher is the life of the party in this uproarious and sobering look at her Hollywood hangover. *Wishful Drinking* the book, based on the Broadway Play, was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 14 weeks, and will be available in paperback from Simon & Schuster in fall 2009. *Wishful Drinking* premiered in November 2006 at the Geffen Playhouse and enjoyed an extended engagement there through January 2007. Following that premiere, the show has completed successful runs at a number of not-for-profit theatre organizations around the country including Berkeley Repertory Theatre (February 2008), Arena Stage (September 2008), Huntington Theatre Company (October 2008) and Seattle Repertory Theatre (April 2009).

## Diary of a Mad Hollywood Woman

By Randy Gener\*

“You know, as Woody Allen says, ‘Tragedy plus time equals comedy’”

Carrie Fisher’s one-woman play, *Wishful Drinking*, is a raw, dishy, caustic memoir. She got the inspiration to write it after seeing the solo comic monologues of such actors as John Leguizamo, Julia Sweeney, and Spalding Gray. Fisher realized she had plenty of material to work with because she’d have to write some witty patter and perky anecdotes when asked (endlessly!) at award ceremonies to introduce *Star Wars* creator George Lucas, who directed her as Princess Leia, or actress Meryl Streep, who played her semi-autobiographical self in the film version of her novel, *Postcards from the Edge*.

“I was already speaking out a lot,” she says. “I was getting awards myself—for being mentally

ill. Over time, it evolved into delivering these little monologues, covering different areas.” So Fisher figured, why not mine her tipsy-turvy life as a Hollywood survivor, a drug addict, and a poster child for bipolar disorder? She’d already written four loopy, neurotic, and popular novels (*Postcards...*, *Surrender the Pink*, *Delusions of Grandma*, and *The Best Awful*), and knew how to cast a jaundiced, hyper-analytical, and amused eye on the exceptional circumstances of her life. “You know, as Woody Allen says, ‘Tragedy plus time equals comedy,’” she notes.

But this time, for a stage show, Fisher would not disguise her life under the veneer of fiction. “In fiction you can write anything you want. You can make up stuff. You don’t have to modify it in any way or buff it up. In nonfiction you’re staying close to the truth—and onstage you’re actually *doing* the truth. The audiences are different every night, so they become my scene partners in a way.” Recently, Simon & Schuster published her expanded tell-all based on *Wishful Drinking*’s material.

Fisher would like to inform those who know her only from her performance in the first *Star Wars*

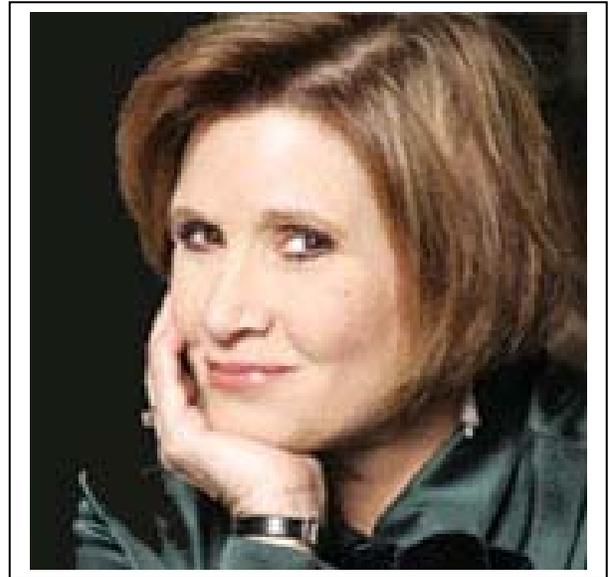
trilogy that *Wishful Drinking* will be more of an interactive experience. It will certainly be a more lively experience than visiting Madame Tussaud's Museum on Times Square where she's hideously immortalized as a life-sized wax-figure Princess Leia doll. Had Fisher known that *Star Wars* would become the monster pop-cultural phenom that is it today, she never would have signed on to do the film at age 19. Fisher identifies herself more as a Dorothy Parker kind of a writer than a megawatt celebrity icon fit to be turned into a PEZ dispenser.

Before she got hooked on various pharmaceuticals, Fisher says, "Reading was my first drug. I would just go into these books and never surface until it was over." Her family called her a "bookworm." As she recalls, "They didn't say it in a nice way."

Fisher would rather be seen and heard in person rather than be remembered as that faded holograph image beamed from the R2-D2 unit. In *Wishful Drinking*, which is directed by Berkeley Repertory Theatre artistic director Tony Taccone, she's worked really, really, really hard despite her attacks of mental illness. "Lots of people have helped shape the show," she says. "But really what is the shape? The shape is my life. You know I haven't worked with Tony for over a year, and I've had a lot of electroshock treatment since then, so I don't remember what it's like to work with him as a director."

*Wishful Drinking* premiered at the Geffen Playhouse in November 2006 and completed successful runs over the last two years at Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., Boston's Huntington Theatre Company, and Seattle Repertory Theatre (April 2009). "I do like going on the road," Fisher says. "Seattle was probably the most conservative place I went. The response depends on whether subscribers are going to go anyway or if audiences choose to go to this show. In that case, we get *Star Wars* fans, people who are mentally ill, people that are alcoholic, people that are science-fiction buffs,

and gay people." She likes it when audiences engage in some call-and-response. "The most moving encounters I had were basically when somebody from the audience tells me to 'go screw yourself,'" she remarks with a laugh. "It is inspiring, because it is in the show now."



Fisher proudly sings in *Wishful Drinking*, too. "I have never done anything like this before," she says. "When I was a teenager I was in my mother's musical. I went on the road with her a little bit." Fisher made her Broadway debut in *Irene* at age 15 just so she could be close to her mom, the actress Debbie Reynolds, whom you might recognize as that chirpy blonde with the twisting umbrella in *Singing in the Rain*. So the courage to sing onstage in *Wishful Drinking* is a kind of personal triumph if you consider that as the product of "Hollywood inbreeding" she was raised by her mother "to be in a nightclub."

Plus, she has been surrounded by performers and wackadoo celebrities all her life. She watched her father, the 1950s crooner Eddie Fisher, run off with the actress Elizabeth Taylor. Fisher and Reynolds were the "Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston of their day" and Taylor was "the Angelina Jolie of her day," Fisher quips. Her father was mostly absent from her childhood. Today he is in his 80s and smokes four joints a day—"not for medicinal reasons, so we call him 'Puff Daddy'"—and she is alarmed to realize that her father is an undiagnosed manic-depressive. She says, "He bought 200

suits in Hong Kong, was married six times, and bankrupt four times. It's crazy."

"They are not just stories but my reactions to them, how they impacted me and any of the knowledge I have gained from going through all this"

To 'get' *Wishful Drinking* it is necessary to understand the fragile act of sanity on which it is built. On the surface level, Fisher calls the play an "unauthorized autobiography"—an antic somersault through the misadventures of the kind of celebrity that leads to sex, drug, and late-night partying. She lets it all hang out, opening a small artery in her cool-funny-scrambled dissections of what happened.

"They are not just stories but my reactions to them, how they impacted me and any of the knowledge I have gained from going through all this," she says. There's the anecdote, for example, about her grandmother Maxine's refusal to use a vibrator because it might affect her pacemaker. Another story concerns her 11-month marriage to Paul Simon, who divorced her and left her with an acoustic guitar "and nine songs" written about her. Fisher calls Simon "the greatest love of my life." "I don't think I'm his," she says. "No, he hasn't seen the show."

*Wishful Drinking* is, moreover, a kind of dance of unhappiness in which she trounces and stomps on the circumstances of her life while dragging the skeletons from the closet. She could have been a corpse by now, had she not done something to take care of herself. This is why the play begins with the image of a friend of hers, a gay Republican drug addict, dead on her bed from an overdose in her Beverly Hills

mansion. "The one great thing I did, in terms of living out here, is that I never found a heroin dealer," Fisher says sardonically.

Another conceit in Fisher's play, at once ironic and distressing, gives this solo show its most lacerating edge. Thanks to her recent bouts of electroconvulsive treatment (as a relief from crippling depression and bipolar disorder), she's been having trouble remembering stuff. All of a sudden she finds that she's forgotten entire parts about who she was before. "I've lost so many words I don't even have the language to look for them," she relates. Her visual memory has been impaired, too. So *Wishful Drinking* assumes a deeply critical distance: imagine Carrie Fisher's diaries as told by an alien or a bystander in her own life. The show allows this stranger to get reacquainted with intimate parts of the original person. "A lot of people that are sober or have been in mental hospitals take some comfort in knowing that I made it through. Pretty much that means we can all make it through it. The afterlife of sanity is a kind of heaven—after the long march of hell."

Fisher's dream of happiness is "to be able to accept things as they are." Asked if she's ever known any spiritual bliss, she's dismissive: "Do I seem like the type of person who would know what that is?" her voice rising, tinged with anger. "I'm a drug addict. If I knew spiritual bliss, I probably would not have been a drug addict."

Has she been too hard on herself in *Wishful Drinking*? Fisher replies: "Yes. It's just that I've always been that way." But her script makes fun of a lot of people. Could her barbed humor be her way of getting revenge? "No, I don't want revenge on anybody," she says. "Laughter is more healing."

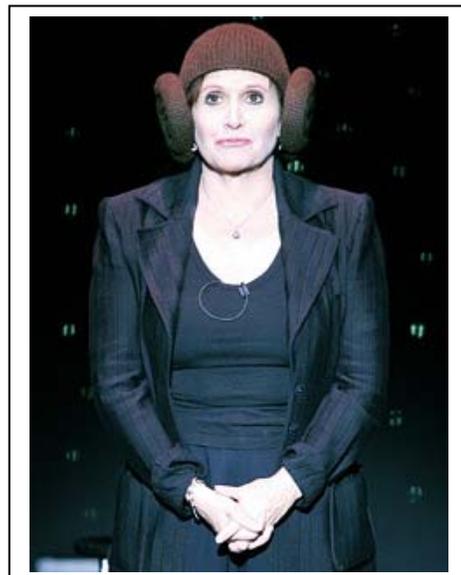
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**CARRIE FISHER** (Creator, Performer). Carrie Fisher has been a compelling force in the film industry since her feature film debut opposite Warren Beatty in the 1975 hit *Shampoo*. The daughter of Eddie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds, she became a cultural icon when she played Princess Leia in the original *Star Wars* trilogy. Her star-studded career includes roles in countless films such as *The Blues Brothers*, *The Burbs*, *Charlie's Angels*, *Garbo Talks*, *Hannah and her Sisters*, *The Man with One Red Shoe*, *This is My Life*, and *When Harry Met Sally*. In 1987, Fisher's book, *Postcards from the Edge*, leapt onto the *New York Times*' bestseller list and netted her the Los Angeles Pen Award for Best First Novel. Four more bestsellers have followed: *Delusions of Grandma*, *Surrender the Pink*, *The Best Awful* and *Wishful Drinking*. Fisher turned *Postcards* into a screenplay for the hit film starring Shirley MacLaine and Meryl Streep, and is currently adapting *The Best Awful* for Lifetime & Sony television with producers Bruce Cohen and Dan Jinks. Her writing has also appeared in *Details*, *Harper's Bazaar*, the *New York Times*, *Travel & Leisure*, *Vogue*, and many other major publications. Her television credits range all the way from *Laverne and Shirley* to *Sex in the City*, with a recent Emmy nomination for her appearance on the popular NBC program *30 Rock*. Her experiences with addiction and bipolar disorder—and her willingness to speak honestly and candid about them—have made her a sought-after speaker and respected advocate for these communities.

More on Carrie Fisher/An  
interview on WNYC's *The  
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# Interview with the Director: Tony Taccone



## **How did you get involved as the director of *Wishful Drinking*?**

Jonathan Reinis, who's the producer of the show, saw a very early incarnation of the show down in LA and he said, "You know, there isn't a director, and I think the show really needs some shape. Would you like to see it?" So, he gave me a DVD of it and a script and from watching that, I thought I could make a contribution. Then I met Carrie at her house maybe twice and we talked for a pretty long time, at which point we agreed to enter into a relationship.

## **Tell me how you started your work with Carrie on the piece. Was it text specific?**

Carrie was very, very clear and had very, very strong opinions about what works and what kind of relationship she wanted to have

with the audience. I thought there were certain parts of it that were compelling that could hold a stage without having a joke every eight seconds. And so, we talked about that a lot. There were certain stories that I encouraged her to tell, some of which she put in, some of which she didn't. It all came down to tact. Then we got into what it would look like. She knew she wanted a bunch of images in the show. She'd used some of the images in the first incarnation. My designer, Alex Nichols, got a pretty good idea about how to enhance that idea of Carrie's in a major way; so we went to her house and the entire set design is sort of built around the inside of her house.

## **The set design looks like a room in her house?**

No, no, it's just the elements of it. Her house is fantastic. It's brilliantly furnished. She's shopped all over the world and brought back the most wonderful, intriguing and eclectic group of objects you can imagine. And you know, we walked into her living room and there's this phrase in Latin that lines the whole inside arch of her living room, and we put that phrase around the set. The actual translation is, "She'll be coming around the mountain when she comes."

## **In Latin, I love that!**

In Latin. One of the other things that was instrumental to her self healing when she was in the hospital, she watched war documentaries. Her brother brought her war documentaries of soldiers. And from watching those docs, Carrie started feeling "God, what I've gone through is nothing compared to what these guys have had to go through". So the three slogans that are used to train in the military are in another part of her house. We put those slogans on the floor

of the set. Things like that the audience is not necessarily going to catch, but they just give a flavor for who she is, and what she's been through.

**Those sound like what the late acting teacher Uta Hagen calls “trigger points”.**

Exactly. And they're also meant to give Carrie a feeling of being in her own living room.

**I'm very curious about your role as dramaturge. Do you feel like you helped edit in any way, or was it being like the audience member who talks back?**

You're talking about a writer who knows her stuff, so I made sure not to get in the way a lot. Basically, my job has been to let Carrie do her work. It's really been more like that than, “get in there, and change the work”. It's just getting her comfortable, giving her space and encouraging her to be who she wants to be on stage. She needs a different relationship than other folks.

**I know that this is not the first solo show you've directed. You directed Sarah Jones' piece Bridge and Tunnel as well, right?**

I directed Sarah Jones' solo show and I've worked with Danny Hoch.

“You're talking about a writer who knows her stuff, so I made sure not to get in the way a lot. Basically, my job has been to let Carrie do her work.”

**So what is the major challenge of working with a solo artist as opposed to an ensemble?**

Well, it's a very different relationship. At times, it's a more personal relationship. I think at times it's almost too close. I think Sarah is really interested in “emotional art”. Danny really was interested in having his work taken to the next level in a technical way. He really wanted there to be an environment that he was working within. Carrie has really created an evening that is like sitting around with her in her living room.

**What about the audience participation. Is there audience participation in Carrie's show?**

There's a lot.

“I basically let her do what she's going to do. She loves being with the audience and I think it's one of the real strengths of the show.”

**How did you work on that? Because that's a wild card, right?**

Yeah, I basically let her do what she's going to do. She loves being with the audience and I think it's one of the real strengths of the show. She's very kind with the audience, and they sense that, you know. Years ago, there was a certain kind of terror when an actor goes into an audience. With Carrie, she's a classic comic. And there's a bit of clowning and I mean that in the best possible way. She really invites them into

her world, and like I said, she's very kind with them. And there's one great gimmick in the show, where we bring an audience member out, then we take their picture backstage during intermission, cause there's a lot of headlines in the show, we actually put up a bunch of headlines, and at the end of the show, we actually paint a picture of her and the audience member onto a headline. It's really funny. And it works every time.

**The show's been to a number of cities, correct? Did you go to every city with her?**

Oh no, no, no. There's no way. She's been going on tour a lot. I went to the first two I think. I went to San Jose and I went to Santa Fe, New Mexico, and then I read the performance reports for every show and made contact with the stage manager.

**I understand that. I read the Seattle version, which had some Seattle references.**

Yes. For every city, she'll have a reference to that city, you know, and make sure that the city is acknowledged in some way.

**Will you jump right into tech when you come to New York, or will you have some rehearsal here?**

No rehearsal. We regarded the run in Berkeley this summer as like a tune-up. We'll go into tech and we'll have a couple dress rehearsals obviously. I mean, she's done it for a long time. It's not like she's going to be rewriting entire sections of the play.

**So your tech will probably be a week or something like that?**

I get there on a Thursday. The first dress rehearsal is on a Saturday. And the first show is the following Tuesday I think.

**I'm excited to see the show, because I read it and I laughed out loud.**

It is drop dead funny. It's really entertaining. She really knows how to work the joke. When you think of that, there's a skill set to that. She comes out and she sings "Happy Days Are Here Again" while headlines about her horrible life are flashing on the screen. It tells the audience right away what the show is about.

**The idea of surviving through laughter is something I think we can all benefit from. Exactly.**



**TONY TACCONE** (Director) is completing his 12<sup>th</sup> year as artistic director of Berkeley Repertory Theatre, where he has staged more than 35 shows – including world premieres by Culture Clash, Rinde Eckert, David Edgar, Danny Hoch, Geoff Hoyle, Quincy Long, and Itamar Moses. Taccone made his Broadway debut with another solo show, *Bridge & Tunnel*, which was universally lauded by the critics and won a Tony Award for its star, Sarah Jones. He commissioned Tony Kushner’s legendary *Angels in America*, co-directed its world premiere at the Mark Taper Forum, and has collaborated with Kushner on seven projects. Their production of *Brundibar* featured designs by beloved children’s author Maurice Sendak; it debuted at Berkeley Rep and then traveled to Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven and the New Victory Theatre in New York, where it sold out its run and was nominated for two Drama Desk Awards. In 2004, his premiere of *Continental Divide* transferred to the Barbican in London after playing the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Berkeley Rep, La Jolla Playhouse, and England’s Birmingham Rep. Taccone frequently works in Ashland, where he has also directed *Coriolanus*, *Othello*, *Pentecost*, and the American premiere of Seamus Heaney’s *The Cure at Troy*. His other regional credits include Actors Theatre of Louisville, Arena Stage, Arizona Rep, Center Theatre Group, Hartford Stage, the Huntington Theatre, The Public Theatre, San Jose Rep, and Seattle Rep, as well as San Francisco’s Eureka Theatre where he served six years as artistic director before coming to Berkeley. Taccone has served on the faculty at UC Berkeley and the board of Theatre Communications Group, and acted as a regional representative for the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers.



Roundabout Theatre Company  
**WISHFUL DRINKING**, written & performed by **CARRIE FISHER** (pictured)  
Photo credit: Joan Marcus, 2009

# education

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