

# ARTSCAPE

David Lemberg, Executive Producer and Host  
www.artscapemedia.com info@artscapemedia.com

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- David Lemberg: Our next guest is Jenny Lyn Bader, playwright and author. Ms. Bader's plays include "Manhattan Casanova," which just received its world premier at Hudson's Stage, and "None Of The Above," produced in New York and published in the collection "Under 30 Plays For A New Generation."
- Ms. Bader has developed her plays at the Lincoln Center Director's Lab, the Women's Project Directors' Forum, where she workshopped "Memory Play," starring Eli Wallach, and at the O'Neill Playwrights Conference, where she won the Edith Oliver Award. Ms. Bader co-authored the book, "He Meant, She Meant," the definitive female/male dictionary, published by Warner in December.
- Her one-act cycle, "Out Of Mind – Seven Short Plays With Some Of The People Missing," will be produced at NYU/Strasberg. Let's welcome Jenny Lyn Bader.
- Jenny Lyn Bader: Thank you, hi.
- Lemberg: Jenny Lyn, good morning. Thanks for being with us today on Artscape.
- Jenny Lyn: Good morning to you.
- Lemberg: Well, Jenny, congratulations on your wonderful production and I love your play titles. Could we start by talking about "Out Of Mind"?
- Jenny Lyn: Absolutely. It's a play cycle. I also informally call "Out Of Mind" the invisible plays because in each play, there's a character who's invisible or missing, for a different reason. So, in the first play, which is called "The Third First Blind Double-Date," in which a girl goes on a series of blind dates, which also happen to be double dates, but also happen to come in succession, they land up on the third first blind double date. The girl finds herself in a quandary that her dates are invisible to her. She physically can't see them. They are visible to the couple that she's on the date with, but they are invisible to her, and also, to the audience.

So, I think that a lot of people find themselves in this quandary when they're dating that their dates, they can't really see their dates on some level. So, that play just literalizes that. And that was the first one of this series that I wrote.

And then, in the next one, not at all intending to refer back to the first play, I wrote it completely separately for an invitational 10-minute play festival at Primary Stages called, "The Moment of Bliss Festival." I was trying to write a play about a moment of bliss. And I found myself writing about a child who's invisible and a babysitter who has to baby-sit this invisible child, who has to first find the child and then, baby-sit her.

And the child is in such a state of the euphoria of childhood, runs so quickly and moves so fast that adults can't see her. And so, it wasn't until after I wrote that play that I realized I had two of them and that maybe I was subconsciously exploring the theme, which, of course, relates back to the whole project, itself, because the whole idea of the invisible has to do with the subconscious and you know, the subconscious is a terrible thing to waste.

And in a way, all these seven pieces, they're traditional short comedies, they have quirky characters and funny situations and little plot twists. But, underneath, there's this catch, which is you can't actually see all of the characters. And the pieces, they're light. The tone is celebratory, the people in them are eccentric. But, at bottom, there's a serious dynamic. They are all exploring new depths in their emotional lives, all participating in some way in moments of relation, of poetic, spiritual, romantic, personal transformation.

And all the plays look at these kinds of moments of passion, moments of insight, moments of romance, the kinds of moments that totally change your life. And in these moments, people you could never see suddenly become visible to you.

Lemberg: So, how long is the run, and when does, "Out Of Mind," open?

Jenny Lyn: Out of mind runs, this play becomes visible for a limited engagement December 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> at NYU Strasberg.

Lemberg: So, if we're not able to get to them, what can we do?

Jenny Lyn: Well, you'll have to, I don't know, look for them to become visible on my website.

Lemberg: At a theatre near you, right?

Jenny Lyn: Yeah, some of these plays have been performed separately. One of them is published in a Best 10-Minute Play Anthology. Some of them become visible in forms of various festivals. What's interesting about this piece is a theater's always looking for what they call "flexible casting." There are about 20 roles in the piece, and in the past, I've seen it done. I saw a workshop done at the Stamford FringeFestival where six actors played the 20 roles. I saw it done in Delaware, where seven actors played the 20 roles. I've seen it done in a reading with four actors playing the 20 roles.

And of course, because this is a school, they're going to have 12 people in it. So, that's a really, it's really fun for me to be part of that rehearsal process and to see each person really, really struggling with the dilemma of just one role or maybe two, and not having to switch back and forth, which becomes a kind of challenge of a piece, normally with the grown-up virtuosic actors.

Lemberg: So invisibility, that's a pretty interesting dialectic and also, a pretty powerful metaphor.

Jenny Lynn: Yeah, actually, as a radio person, you might find it interesting that one of the things — you know, even though I wrote the plays separately, I went back for when they're performed together to try to find connections between them. And one of the links is that in each play, there's a radio station that the character is listening to. It's the same radio station. And although one play is set in a suburban living room and another is in a New York coffee shop, they're each kind of all over the place. They're all in the same world.

And I chose a radio station because the plays exploring visibility are really exploring voice, in a way. And you know, the idea of the disembodied voice. And the idea of having faith in the absent. So, you know, whether absence does make the heart grow fonder or whether it's really out of sight, out of mind, which is why it's called, "Out Of Mind – Seven Short Plays With Some Of The People Missing."

Lemberg: Jenny Lyn, I'm getting that this cycle of plays is rich and deep and that the audience is just in for an extraordinary experience.

Jenny Lyn:

Well, I hope so.

Lemberg:

So, let's talk about your "Manhattan Casanova" world premier at Hudson's Stage. Congratulations!

Jenny Lyn:

Thank you. Well, "Manhattan Casanova" is a comedy about compulsive seduction. And it's really a comedy about two commitment-phobic people who meet because we often see comedies where one person is the commitment-phobe and the other one is trying to have a relationship. And I think that's funny, but I think there are so many commitment-phob's in the world today that it's even funnier to explore what happens when both are. And in a way, necessity is the mother of invention and part of why I even first began thinking in my first invisible play, "The Third First Blind Double Date" about creating invisible characters, I was thinking how can I have all these suitors in this one play, with the restrictions of theaters looking for small cast vehicles.

And I realized that I could have some of the suitors be invisible because aren't they usually, anyway? And similarly, in Manhattan Casanova, I was trying to think of ways to create roles for a lot of strong women because that's something we don't see a lot. And I was trying to redress a bit the history of unfair gender ratios in drama. And I thought of this concept where what if all the women in the play are dating this one guy. So, in the play, the main character is Charlotte Kaplan. She's a psychiatrist. And she's a very strong woman and she's smart and she knows to be skeptical of kind of impulsive infatuation and bad romantic choices. And she has a tendency to discourage her friends and patients from falling in love too quickly. And she considers herself a scientist, and like a scientist, she notices trends and patterns.

And at the beginning of the play, she starts to notice that there are a lot of people in New York City who are falling in love even more quickly than usual, in a way that is rather alarming. And she notices it among her friends, she notices it among her patients. And then, she realizes that they're all falling for the same guy. And then, she meets him. And that's the sort of the beginning of the story. And the seduction, which would occur in most plays sort of over time happens actually very quickly, but then, the twist is that we discover that Charlotte is also a compulsive seducer, in a way and also, as commitment-phobic as John Casey or modern Giacomo Casanova is.

And the play kind of asks the question of can the Casanova reform, which I think is a question everyone has asked who's ever dated a commitment-phob or been one. And what's funny about the play

is that every guy I know thinks it's about him. They all want to know, you know, when I wrote it, did I write it before I met them? Did I write it — even men that I had never dated, had nothing to do with, there's one guy who's a friend of a friend who told our mutual friend he's convinced the play is about him so he won't see the production of it.

Lemberg: Well, we're men, of course.

Jenny Lyn: That's right.

Lemberg: I'm thinking it's about me! So, Jenny Lyn, I'm thinking that this Manhattan Casanova would make the perfect film.

Jenny Lyn: Thank you!

Lemberg: You're welcome. And earlier, you were talking about "Out Of Mind," you mentioned again here, plot twists. And again, this makes me think of film. So, jumping off the wagon for a moment, I'm wondering if you are doing any screenwriting.

Jenny Lyn: I am doing some screenwriting. I'm actually working on a screenplay with my ex-boyfriend, which it's an idea that we thought of while we were breaking up. And we realized we didn't have a very good relationship, but we had a really good idea for a movie.

So, we've started working on that. And yeah, I've certainly been approached about some of my plays turning into movies and I've always tried to make sure that they were first produced as plays — so the choices that I make and the words that I write will be fully realized before they get twisted and edited and changed and I lose the rights to them and all that stuff.

I haven't ruled out adaptations of the plays as features, but I have always separately done screenwriting. It's interesting. It comes back to the whole question of voice that we were talking about before with the invisible plays. So often, playwrights are approached and they're told, "Well, we're not looking for this kind of play now, but we really like your voice." Or, "Well, we don't do plays, but we love your voice, so can you write for television or movies?"

I got for a while, kind of suspicious of the idea of voice because it seemed to be a way of telling playwrights to write a different play or to not write a play or something. But, the truth is that voice is a

very, very powerful force. And when you're sitting in the theater, in a dark theater listening to the voice of, you know, Tom Stoppard, or somebody like that, it's like being plunged into a warm bath of consciousness. And you just exist there with this voice, and the voice becomes palpable in a way and visible in a way.

So, voice is one of those invisible things that people always talk about in the theater, people in the corporate world talk about, thinking outside the box. It's just one of those metaphors that people always throw about. But, when you really start to think about it, I think there's something very deep there.

Lemberg: Jenny, thank you. I'd like to talk about one more play and then, I'd like to look a little bit, although we've been talking about this under the surface about your process. Could we talk about "None Of The Above"?

Jenny Lyn: "None Of The Above," is the world's first comedy about the SAT. It's a play in which an upper east side private school girl who we kind of think we know answers the door to discover a guy there who she thinks is going to be her drug dealer. And he turns out to be, much to her disappointment, her SAT tutor. And, then, we start to discover that this guy isn't going away. She says that she'll just not study and not tell her parents that he didn't show up and he'll get paid anyway. And please, to go away.

And she has absolutely no interest in studying for the SAT. And he refuses to go away, which she finds suspicious because she believes the world to be ruled by money. And the next thing you know, he turns out to have a very unusual deal with her parents, or with her father, actually, where he's going to be paid nothing unless she gets a perfect score. And then, he's going to be paid \$100,000 plus his graduate school tuition.

Lemberg: Good deal!

Jenny Lyn: So, he's in it for about a quarter of a million. And he's discovered that she doesn't really do word problems or like math or anything, except when it comes to drug dealing, which she actually has kind of a head for figures. So, he realizes she has practical business skills and, indeed, she asks him for a cut of the money. And that's when we actually start to watch her change on the stage. And we see the resources she really has. Both those characters, I think, are characters that really surprise where we have a stereotype of what this person is and they're not like that at all.

Lemberg: What a great high concept. And this was produced at the new George?

Jenny Lyn: It's produced by New Georges and they did it at a theater called the Ohio Theater in Soho.

Lemberg: And "None Of The Above" is in the collection Under 30, Plays for a New Generation. Congratulations!

Jenny Lyn: Thank you. Yes, it's a wonderful book. It's a book of strong roles for young actors because so many times, you go to these school shows and you see people who are 17 or 25 playing 60 or 70-year-olds in these old-fashioned plays. So, I think it's really great vintage to produce a book like this where there's so many roles, all for younger people.

Lemberg: Jenny, thank you so much. Let's talk about your own process. And I know that writers write, and I'm wondering when you started.

Jenny Lyn: When I started writing?

Lemberg: Yes.

Jenny Lyn: Oh gosh, I have no idea. That's a good question. Really, when I was very young, I started writing, you know, what one writes in school and you know, poems and songs and stories. And it never occurred to me that I would do it professionally. I always thought I would get some kind of practical job in the writing world. I thought I would be a book editor or something.

Lemberg: Work at Vogue?

Jenny Lyn: Exactly. Not that, but I really did imagine myself at a publishing house or something, which I guess is a kind of a New York thing. But, I guess I suddenly after college, found myself doing a million part-time jobs. Some of them involved reading plays and some of them involved evaluating plays, assistant directing, those kinds of theater jobs. And then, I had some sort of jobs writing for little magazines.

And at a certain point, I said to myself what's wrong with this picture? You read nothing but plays, you write everything but plays. And you are looking for a play to direct and can't find it. And that's when I wrote my first play. And I put it in a drawer for

a while and then, I showed it to a friend of mine who had so many critical questions that I put it in a drawer for about another year.

And then, I sent it in to a competition and it was performed in that and that was the beginning of my playwriting life. And I found, actually, that as a young woman, it was sort of much easier to get my plays out there in a written form than it was to promote myself as a director because I looked like a young woman. And so, in a way, it was to my advantage to be invisible.

Lemberg:

Right. So, I'm wondering if you could say a bit to people who are writing and who have yet to break out. What is your counsel here?

Jenny Lyn:

Well, I guess one thing I would counsel them is to work really hard because that seems to me to be the thing that characterizes those who ultimately, are published and produced. A really strong work ethic. And also, I think, you know, I wouldn't counsel young writers to get in a situation where they're being exploited. For example, to be entering contests that have high entry fees or to be paying a lot. There's a lot of kind of unscrupulous things where they charge young writers, they're splitting the box office with them, but they're also making them pay for a lot of the costs of putting a show up.

But, I would advise young writers to try not to turn assignments down because my first two book contracts came because I wrote for a magazine, which was not paying. And I was recommended by a friend of mine who said to me, "I was asked to write for this magazine with 20-something writers, a Generation X magazine. And I was asked to write for this Generation X magazine, but they don't pay anything and I'm about to sell my screenplay for a million dollars, I'm sure. But, I gave them your name."

And so, I wrote a piece for this magazine called "The Everlasting Yes, No, Maybe," about my theory that when women say, "Yes," they also mean, "No." And when men say, "No," they also mean "Maybe." And that magazine piece, although I wasn't paid for it, ultimately led to first, me being invited to write an essay for this Anthology that was published by Norton.

And then, that also was the sample that led to my book contract with Warner. "The Definitive Male/Female Dictionary." And that essay is reprinted in that book. So, I wouldn't encourage people to take terrible assignments, but I do believe that things can happen, things that pay little or nothing can lead to other things and not to be disdainful of small assignments.

Lemberg: Right, Jenny Lyn, thank you that powerful story that you just shared.

Jenny Lyn: Thank you.

Lemberg: You're welcome. Well, we've got a little time left. I'd like to at least touch on your new historical drama. And then, I'm wondering about sources of inspiration.

Jenny Lyn: Well, my new historical drama is called "Petticoat Government." It's about Edith Wilson, a figure who I was always fascinated by because I had this understanding that she ran the White House during her husband, Woodrow's, stroke. And when I was approached by someone from Lincoln Center Director's Lab, they were doing something called the 20<sup>th</sup> Century project. And they were looking for plays about the different decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

And obviously, I wasn't top of their list because they only had the teen's, the 70's and 80's left when they called me. I said I would like to take the teens because I envisioned writing a piece about Edith Wilson and what a great heroic figure she was. But then, when I started to do some research, I discovered that she was not a heroic figure at all, she was actually a terrible policymaker and made lots of terrible decisions. And really, was much more concerned with her husband's health than about the health of the United States. And was a really much more complex figure than I had thought. And indeed, I assume because, you know, the suffragists were around at that time, she was a feminist, interested in the right to vote. And actually, she hated the suffragists because they were always tormenting her husband. And she was quite anti-feminist, quite traditional Southern woman.

And so, I then thought of now I need to write a piece about Edith Wilson, the villainess, but then, the more I got into it, the more I realized she was really neither a hero, nor a villainess, but really, a woman very much of her time who lived vicariously through the men she was with and then, literally turned into them. And that's what the play is about. She was widowed. She was married to Norman Galt, a jeweler in Washington, D.C. And when he died, she became a jeweler and she managed his store and was the first woman in Washington, D.C. to own and operate an electric car, and was a thriving businesswoman.

When she met the President, who, himself, had been widowed in the White House, people will be surprised to know that it was not Michael Douglas, but it was Woodrow Wilson, who was the first President to date and marry while in office. So, there are a lot of really uncanny parallels between their time and now with extra fascinating things to look at. But, mostly, I'm just interested in this woman. And when you talk about sources of inspiration, I think that I'm interested in the way that she is not what we think. I'm interested in characters who defy our preconceptions, who are not easily stereotyped or pigeonholed. I am fascinated by different kinds of intelligence, conscious vs. unconscious intelligence, intellectual vs. instinctively intelligent people. And I think in plays, one often finds a divide between, you know, the smart character and the dumb character, whereas, I'm interested in the character that's really dumb and really smart at the same time.

And I also have repeatedly found myself drawn, and I say "found myself," because this is not a thing that I decide in advance. It's just something I've noticed looking at my work after I've written it. I'm really drawn to the conflict between science and art. And I think in all of my plays, there's a question about that conflict, about the logical vs. the creative, the quantitative vs. the qualitative, the consciously intellectual vs. the instinctively. And there's no preference, there's no answer. I'm interested in that struggle.

Lemberg: Jenny Lyn, thank you for a brilliant conversation today.

Jenny Lyn: Thank you. This is really much more fun than most radio.

Lemberg: Thank you! Our guest is Jenny Lyn Bader, playwright and author. Jenny Lyn's latest play, "Out Of Mind – 7 Short Plays With Some Of The People Missing," will be produced this month, December in New York City at NYU–Strasberg.