

Amplifying Her Voice: A Jen Silverman Profile

“I wrote the play that I wanted to see,” Jen Silverman declared at the New York premiere of *Collective Rage: A Play in Five Betties*. This mission of creating what she wants to see on stage has been a focal point in Silverman’s career. From South African lesbians and revenge-seeking cats to Jacobean adaptations and Japanese folklore, Silverman tells stories that excite, provoke, and are thoroughly unapologetic.

Silverman’s artistic perspective is aided by her worldly upbringing. By the time she entered high school, Silverman had called the United States, Canada, Finland, France, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, and Sweden home, some multiple times. This nomadic lifestyle influenced her way of interacting with the world. As she explained to Diep Tran of *American Theatre Magazine*, “it’s the feeling of constantly being a little bit outside of it and being a little bit new to it. I just ask questions a lot and nobody answers them for me, so I explore them in plays and still don’t have any answers.”

Discovering Her Passion

That search for answers led her to Brown University and studying comparative literature, assuming she would become a novelist. “I knew I wanted to write,” Silverman told Bobby Kennedy, Director of New Work and Dramaturgy at Writers Theater, “and I knew that telling and reading stories was the most exciting thing to me.” However, it was in her senior year of undergrad, after randomly selecting a playwriting class, that she shifted directions away from novels and towards plays. She delved into the craft by studying under playwright and Brown professor Paula Vogel and hungrily reading other contemporary female playwrights: Caryl Churchill, Naomi Iizuka, Naomi Wallace, Sarah Ruhl, and Sara Kane. This “table full of super-bold, outrageous, strong, political women” sparked Silverman’s interest and ignited her creativity. “I looked at them and I was like, ‘Oh! Yes, please! Me too! I want to talk!’”

After a gap year abroad in Japan, much of her post-graduate life was spent in New York City, writing at small theaters and participating in local festivals. Silverman explored transformation and love (*Akarui*), family and legacy (*The Hunters*), and war and revenge (*Phoebe in Winter*). Her play *Crane Story*, inspired by Japanese folklore and her time overseas, was produced off-Broadway at The Playwrights Realm at the Cherry Lane Theatre in 2011.

Finding Her Perspective

But it was her 2015 entry into the Actors Theatre of Louisville Humana Festival Playwrights of New American Plays, *The Roommate*, that elevated her career to new heights. Silverman’s touching story of friendship between two middle-aged women has been called *The Odd Couple meets Breaking Bad* by the *Los Angeles Times*. It quickly became a hit with critics and audiences alike and has been produced across the country since its premiere.



Playwright Jen Silverman. Photo: jensilverman.com.

With *The Roommate*, Silverman found a niche in dissecting how women are perceived within our culture and how they are socialized to behave within its rigid set of rules. She wrote *Collective Rage*, with its bold and unabashed queer women front and center, as a response to the limits put on women. As she explained to *American Theater Magazine*, “I really wanted to write a play in which the women were allowed to have an unapologetic conversation about, Who are we, versus who are we being told that we are, versus who do we want to be?”

In the Spotlight

Jen Silverman has continued writing women who push the envelope. In the past five years, she’s had ten world premieres. She’s collaborated with Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Yale Repertory Theater, Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, Williamstown Theatre Festival, Berkeley Repertory Theatre, San Francisco Playhouse, and Marin Theatre Company. She’s received a New York Foundation for the Arts grant, the Helen Merrill Award, a Lilly Award, and the Yale Drama Series Award.

However, for Silverman, the mark of success is not the amount of awards she receives or number of theaters that produce her work, but that she has remained true to her vision. “I want to write aggressive, highly-structured, darkly comedic plays, often involving women or queer characters, often exploring various facets of identity and legacy and home-coming and institutional violence,” she explained to the Playwright’s Center in 2015. “I’ve had people suggest that those aren’t the plays that theaters want to produce, and who knows, that may be generally true . . . But also, if I start writing the plays I think somebody wants to produce, as opposed to the work that is an unflinching expression of my lens on the world... then I’ve already failed.”