

# Courtney Meaker

## Playwright, Theatremaker, and Drinker of Whiskey



## That'swhatshesaid FAQ

[□ March 20, 2016](#)   [□ community, projects, response, shows](#)   [□ erin pike, feminism, HATLO, Seattle Theater, that'swhatshesaid](#)   [□ courtneymeaker](#)

It's been over a month since *That'swhatshesaid*, a four evening run at a 50 seat theatre, performed and caused a national conversation in theater around fair use and the roles available for women on American stages. Since then, Erin has moved to LA, HATLO is traveling abroad, and I've been interviewing at grad schools while continuing to write new plays and work full time. Now that some time has passed, I wanted to address a few questions. Let's dive in.



*Photo by Tim Summers*

## **So... I was not paying attention, what was *That's what she said?***

Erin Pike and I set out to create a piece examining what we're saying about women in American theater using the words written for and about them in the most-produced plays in the country. (For the iteration that everyone is currently discussing we used the TCG's most-produced plays from 2014-2015 (<http://www.americantheatre.org/2014/09/23/top-10-plays-2014-2015/>.) Erin is a performer, I'm a playwright. As a performer, Erin was frustrated with the number of roles available for women and the kind of roles available. It's disheartening to audition for a large ensemble show with 15 characters and realize that out of 15, only two or three are open for women and that those roles often are not necessarily substantial. The roles for women are often secondary characters, sexualized, or "mothered" (meaning "hell no" to sex), or, or, or, or. As a female playwright, it's disheartening to know the statistics about the likelihood of your work being produced as compared to male playwrights. Our frustrations manifested in this collaboration to show just how prevalent these issues are even in the most-produced (ie. most popular) plays in the country.

When we brought HATLO on board to direct this updated version, they suggested that we create more of a structure for the piece than previous iterations.

## What kind of structure?

Without boring you with too many details, I'll hit some highlights. Male playwrights had Act One (9 total) and female playwrights had Act Two (2 total). In a section called "Questions. Sorry," I used lines of dialogue from women which are questions or apologetic in some way. Another section was devoted to sexiness, sex talk, stripping, and anything that could be construed as sexual. Another section was called "Despair, the pit of" and contained women disparaging themselves and also had a number of lines where women were interrupted either by other characters or by themselves. And yet another section contained nothing but stage directions. There was also a section in Act One called "The Void," in which 72 pages flip while Erin searches for a place to be on stage, symbolizing the one play on the list that had no female characters and therefore nothing for Erin to do. These sections are strung together with a list of names of the female roles available. Erin ticks her arms with lipstick counting the roles available for women. In Act One, stage directions are read by a disembodied male voice. In Act Two, stage directions are read by a disembodied female voice. The total run time was a little over an hour with no intermission.

## Oh. So it wasn't just reciting from all the plays in order?

Absolutely not. Where's the fun in that? We also did not call out specific plays or playwrights from the stage as someone believed. We also did not add our own commentary via original words onto the script. The only original words that were added (all ten of them) were for clarity.

## Sure. But wasn't this project calling these plays bad just by using them as source material?

Not at all. These plays were picked because they were on the list that year. There is no other reason. We did not want to say, "Look at how horrible these successful playwrights are." Not in the slightest. These plays are popular. They have all been done around the country. People know these plays. The nature of this work meant it was going to be incredibly subjective. By taking a pre-made list of contemporary, popular plays we were trying to make it a little less subjective. In conversations with Erin before we had the list, we kept suggesting plays that would be fun to use because we knew they would unequivocally prove our point. But when we settled on using the list, the project fell into place. We didn't have control over who was on the list. But American

theatre had spoken. These plays were good. People wanted to see them and were going to see them. Right now. In a city near you. So we wanted to look at what they were saying about women using the words written for women.

## **Yeah. But wouldn't you hate it if this was done with your work?**

I thought about that a lot throughout this process. And every single time, I came back to one simple sentiment: "I'd want to know." I'd want to know what I was saying about women, good, bad, or neutral. I'd want to know what women will be fighting to play. I'd want to know rather than not. I completely understand the reaction of playwrights who are torn about how to feel or really really hate it. I get that and there's very little that I could say to them that would convince them otherwise, so I will only say that, I'd be conflicted, too. But ultimately, I'd want to know.



*Photo by Tim Summers*

## **So you wouldn't mind if someone took this idea and did their own version?**

PLEASE DO. There's already a new list for 2015-2016. There will be another one released for the 2016-2017 season soon. Our version of *That'swhatshesaid* is set in time and will (hopefully) become obsolete the farther away we move from that season. I think it would be great if people did their own versions. There's room for a version that tackles opportunities for actors of color, queer actors and stories, and roles available for older women specifically. There would be way more than 72 pages turning, I tell you what. This was just the beginning. If you have a yen to tackle the next list, DO IT. Make it your own. We don't own this idea. It's meant to evolve. And hopefully, over time, it will show improvement in the number and types of roles available. And hopefully too, it will include more female playwrights and more playwrights of color.

## **Did you set out with an agenda?**

We didn't know what the plays would show us. We know that there's a problem in how many roles are available for women, the nature of those roles, and how many female playwrights are produced. But aside from that, we didn't try to force these plays to say anything. When we first started working on the project in 2013, we didn't know if we'd even be able to make a complete, coherent show. It was going to be a fun 20 minute experiment for On the Boards NW New Works. But as it evolved, it became clear that there really is something interesting happening in American theater that deserves discussion and debate. So the play is molded in a way to spark that dialogue.

We stripped these characters of their context in the worlds they were created for and we put them in ours. Ours is a place where we can laugh at some of the ridiculous things we ask of female actors, while at the same time cringing, or thinking "Hey, that line's pretty good," and everything in between. We were not specifically calling any of the plays "bad" or "good." We were examining what women were saying and doing in these plays.

But yeah. This was a completely biased, subjective, unapologetic feminist piece created to make a strong statement about how women are treated on the page and stage. And we never tried to hide that.

## **Yeah. But these are living playwrights. That's not fair.**

Are we supposed to wait 30 years before we can discuss how American theater treats its female characters in 2016? What sense does that make?



## **You could have written an essay.**

We could have. Sure. But we're theater artists. We wanted to critique the system in the same medium.

## **But you didn't ask for permission.**

True. We didn't. For a number of reasons, but the most important being that we didn't have to. [Our lawyer's response is here if you're curious for the legal reasoning \(https://www.thestranger.com/blogs/slog/2016/02/12/23562675/thatswhatshesaid-didnt-ask-permission-because-they-didnt-have-to-says-attorney\)](https://www.thestranger.com/blogs/slog/2016/02/12/23562675/thatswhatshesaid-didnt-ask-permission-because-they-didnt-have-to-says-attorney). Fair use exists for this reason and Jeff Nelson explains it better than I will.

## **Okay. Legally. But like, wouldn't it have been polite to ask for permission?**

Maybe. I've thought about this a lot since we closed. And I go back and forth daily. We didn't have to ask for permission, but should we have? And there are just too many variables to predict that make me feel like politeness is a shitty, shitty justification in this situation.

If folks say, "No," for example, then it looks bad if you do it anyway (cause that's not polite), even if it's your right to do it. Or, they could say, "Please wait until we talk to our lawyers," essentially making you wait for a response from them for an indefinite period of time (because it's polite to wait for a response), which again looks bad if you do it anyway even if you're in the right.

Also, in my opinion, asking for permission to begin with looks like you think it's wrong. We don't. And it's not. So we didn't.

## **But you should have.**

If you believe this so vehemently, there's no amount of convincing I can do.

**If you didn't think you did anything wrong, why did you perform a redacted version after the first cease and desist? Wouldn't you just have gone on with the full version anyway?**

We did it to protect our venue, Gay City. They said they'd be fine with us performing it as long as we responded to the (only) C&D (we'd gotten at that time). The C&D we received that night threatened Gay City saying that they would also be sued even though we were only renters and they had no control over the content of the show. Gay City is a small, but very vital non-profit in Seattle that serves the queer community. We did not want to be responsible for them getting drawn into a legal battle. But they said that they would support us if we redacted as the C&D requested. So we did.

**Have you spoken to the playwrights now?**

No.

**Why not?**

We're open to it. It just hasn't happened. With legal things being what they are, it seems safer to wait for them to talk to us, if they even want to. They might not. And we respect that. Enthusiastic consent is super important to our group. Hopefully, in the future we will be able to do a sit down with everyone. Many of the playwrights on the list are people that I admire and want to work with in the future. So I personally hope that that road is not closed.

**Did you like the plays?**

I liked a lot of them, actually. I found some to be problematic, but even still I liked the story or sections of dialogue within it. Many of the plays were definitely not my aesthetic, but that doesn't mean I hated them or thought they were worthless or couldn't see the art behind them. You can google any of these plays and find reviewers calling out material for being problematic. It didn't stop theaters from producing them. They are still popular and for a reason (which also factors into this discussion). Honestly, I wanted to like them all. I didn't want to hate any of them because this

piece was already going to be highly subjective, so I didn't want to impose too much of my own personal feelings onto it. If dialogue or stage directions fit into a section, it would go into that section regardless of personal feeling, or if I remembered that that one line wasn't even sexual in context of their story. It was about creating something new out of the data.

## How did you make the play?

We all read the plays first. Then we extracted the data, the text. As the collagist, I thought of the source material as data. And aside from keeping the male and female playwrights' dialogue separate, I didn't really focus on who wrote what. I looked at the dialogue completely removed from its source. Devoid of context and character, what were these women saying and could that fit in one of the sections of our structure? After I had assembled a draft, I'd check to make sure that I had material from all the plays. I didn't try to sway usage of one over the other unless the data within one set was more interesting. Again, it wasn't objective. And of course, I tried to make an internal flow. I wanted it to make a kind of sense, even if it wasn't a straightforward narrative.



*Photo by Tim Summers*



## **So you think that all female characters have to be perfect representations of women?**

Ugh. No. Gag me. The goal of this piece was never to tell playwrights what to write, only to examine what we are writing. Women, like men, are not perfect. But men, unlike women, have more opportunity to play a range of characters who fit into every mold. Men get to be assholes, tyrants, complex, struggling, hard to like, really charming, heroes. Women more often than not get to be sex objects or mothers. Men get to be leads. Women get to be supporting characters. If artistically that's important to your story, more power to you. But considering that's the norm, I feel like there is more interesting terrain to discover.

Art being a subjective thing means it deserves scrutiny and that's especially true of popular art. Just as it's important to call out casual, hipster racism of our favorite icons and in our must-watch TV shows, it's important to call out casual sexism that might not be serving the plot of the story, but is there simply for the sake of a laugh at women's expense or even out of ignorance.

## **But sometimes women don't fit into the story. You're saying we should force them into every story?**

No. There are legitimate artistic reasons to exclude women from a story. I get that. But it's a rarity for a story that excludes men to make the most-produced list and that deserves discussion. On the list we used, one play featured no female characters. Two of the plays had one female character in a large ensemble of men. And almost all of the plays were focused on a male's journey. We can imagine a world where women take backseats, where women don't factor into the story. But worlds where men don't factor into the story are so incredibly rare. Even if there is one all female show on the list in the future or past, there are several more that feature all male or mostly male casts, because it continues to be easier and more palatable to imagine a world without women than men. (The previous year's list had two all male casts, by the way.) But again, playwrights should write whatever they're called to write. No one is dictating that. But that doesn't mean it doesn't deserve comment.

## **Isn't this just censorship on your part?**

No. No one is preventing these plays from being produced. The fact that they are on this list shows that. And no one is saying they shouldn't be produced in the future. We are calling for people to take note of the nature of the plays produced on a national level. What's the gender

breakdown? What's the racial breakdown? Are the female characters complex and interesting, or are they relegated to the sidelines? Are they technically a "lead role" while still not contributing much to the story? Are they stereotypes? Are they devices only? These questions are important and need to be discussed. I'm happy to say that I know they are being discussed at certain season planning meetings, but we still have a lot of male heavy seasons not just in terms of playwrights, but also subject matter. We can and should do better.

## **So what were your takeaways? What did you learn about your own writing from this?**

One thing that stuck out to me while assembling the stage directions section in particular, is how often we write women crying. Folks like to write women crying as if it's a switch one can easily flip, and one of the only actions women can easily access. The more crying that's written, the more you start to feel like crying is a substitute for creating a complex emotion or arc. That's fascinating to me and something that I've evaluated in my own writing now. There are many other things that I've taken with me as I look back on what I've done and what I'm currently writing. I'm not perfect by any stretch. And I'm not asking other writers for perfection.

## **So what happens next? I want to protest your next show.**

Bully for you. We are currently planning [a national and international tour.](http://www.arielglassman.com/1/post/2016/02/tour-and-media-inquiries-for-erin-pikes-thatswhatsheaid.html) (<http://www.arielglassman.com/1/post/2016/02/tour-and-media-inquiries-for-erin-pikes-thatswhatsheaid.html>) We'll keep you updated so you can come check it out, or you know picket, as some of you have written to me you want to do. Or, if you want to bring it to your city or town, you can click that little link above and reach out to us. We'd love to hear from you.

## **Can I see the show online somehow?**

Unfortunately, not. We had every intention of publishing our recordings of the show, but because we only have film of the redacted version, we've decided to wait until we have a new recording of the full version. That being said, the woman who filmed the show for archival purposes made this little mini documentary for us. You can check that out and feel like you might have been there.



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## One comment

1. **Al** says:

March 21, 2016 at 7:42 pm

Brava. I think this concept is terrific and the massive butthurt only served to highlight some of the issues in our theatre (a theatre that many think is the bastion of liberal thinking and equality, yet sometimes falls embarrassingly short of that mark).

