

**Inside the Artist -
Jeanne Beckwith
December 2016**



Jeanne Beckwith is a playwright and director whose work has been performed all around the U.S. and abroad. Her play, *Shot in Baghdad*, was chosen for the Walter Cerf award by the Chandler Arts Issues Play Contest, and was read this past April as part of their Issues Play Series. This past March, her play, *The Late Rosie Callaghan* was featured in Cape Cod Community College's Theater series, "Play with Your Food." Her Play, *A War Story at the Rialto*, is published by Playscripts, Inc. and was translated and produced by the State Theatre of Turkey in Ankara and Istanbul. She has been a regular participant in the annual Boston Playwrights Theater Marathon. Her play, *The Rhode Island Chapter*, was performed by the Overtime Theater Company in Chicago this past October as part of the Paragon Theater Festival. Selections from her work have been included in several "best of" collections, and her play, "Mission to Mars" is included in the 2015 anthology, *Geek Theatre*, published by Underwords Press. She is a member of the Dramatists' Guild and serves on the board of the New England Theatre Conference. She also is a member of the board of The Vermont Playwrights Circle and teaches English and theater at Norwich University in Northfield, Vermont. She lives in Roxbury, Vermont.

How did you get started writing for theater? What has been your journey? What brought you to the place where you thought you wanted to do this?

I've always wanted to write plays. I was even writing plays on the playground, but when I went to Eastern Illinois University I majored in English which was a more practical choice. I've always had a natural ability to write dialogue, and one of my professors told me I was a "natural born playwright." You can never underestimate the power of what a teacher says that they see in you. In one class I had, every quarter the students had to write a play in the style that was being taught. I think it started with Ibsen and Shaw, and through to Albee (it was the first time that I had ever read "Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf.") This assignment showed me that this was all I wanted to do, but it wasn't to be at that time, due to other life matters. But they did readings of our plays and it made me joyful.

Later, I got a Master's Degree in Creative Writing from Indiana University and took a playwriting course there. I couldn't major in theater because I was putting myself through college and had to work nights, which didn't fit the schedule of a theater major because I couldn't make any rehearsals. But I always loved theater and after writing a novel for my thesis, and while I shopped it around to publishers with my agent, I adapted it into a play which is called "*Broken Circle*" (just closed at the Valley Players Theater in November). And I kept adapting my stories. One of them was accepted into the Bloomington Playwrights Project, which has one of the longest running groups for play development in America and was founded by Jim Leonard (he's in Hollywood now). They accepted my play and workshopped it with actors, because that's what you do with plays, after all. And then more of my plays were accepted and workshopped and read and I also had plays produced in Indianapolis. Hell, I even got a Humanities Grant.

I was working in the Mental Health industry at that time, but really wanted to make a living in theater, so at 40 years old I applied to the best school in the country for writing: The University of Iowa. I was the first alternate, but of course, no one declines one of the three positions offered in the program. I didn't want any of the youngsters who made the top three slots to die on my account, so I wasn't destined to attend. What did happen, however, was just about as good as you can expect, even if you weren't going after that result. Stanley Longman from the University of Georgia called the head of the Theater Department at Iowa looking for recommendations for their MFA

fellowship in Playwriting, since the candidates they received were not of their standard. I was their recommendation from the University of Iowa Theater Department. I received a call at home at the end of my very long day, and once I realized I wasn't talking to a telemarketer trying to sell me something, I made Dr. Longman go through his spiel again. He was a wonderful man. I ended up applying. I went down to meet them all, and since my mother had recently died leaving me no more ties in the Midwest, I could go anywhere I wanted. I packed up my two youngest children, sent my two older ones off to college, and from then on, I've been focusing on writing plays.



With one semester left to finishing my MFA at University of Georgia, my daughter contracted a strep infection so bad that it disabled her kidneys. She fortunately had a wonderful doctor who saved her life, but I don't know how I finished my last semester at University of Georgia to receive my MFA in Playwriting. When it was usual for someone in my position to be looking for a job, I was going back and forth between the hospital and home, to tend to my two young girls.

Not only did I finish, but the University of Georgia suggested I stay. I had won some award for teaching and they wanted me to stay and teach. I got my PhD, which was good because it kept me in one place and I could tend to my daughter's strict steroid

treatments. Those professors supported my work and my crazy life by grounding me in my abilities. They were constantly encouraging me, encouraging what they called real talent.

Teaching is a good way to support what you love to do. And so I taught at the University of Georgia and Gordon College (where I also ran the theater), and met my current husband, Brett Cox. He later received an offer to run a Writing center in Alabama and I went with him and taught at Jefferson Davis Community College where I was paid the best I ever got paid. I ran the theater there as well. But eventually we had to leave Alabama. It was, well, Alabama, and we needed a change. Brett was offered a job in the English Department at Norwich University and we moved to Vermont where I teach English and Drama and run the Pegasus Players, their theater group.

What most inspires your work right now? What are the criteria, the guide to choosing your creative projects?

People inspire my work. Doing the work inspires my work. Nothing is like the doing to give life meaning and shape. Working with and watching people make things happen and being a part of that is a huge and constant inspiration. I also have a lot of ideas! I write them down and some of them don't mean anything at the time, but suddenly I'll go back to one and say "Oh, that can work this time!"

I have to write situations that intrigue me, something that strikes me, mysteries that need to be solved...For example: There was a call for a 10 minute play on the New York blog for plays with a "Noir" theme. I remembered a character in Raymond Chandler being and killed without reason or explanation and wondered about bringing Chandler and the murdered guy together to hash it out. It may be an old storytelling contrivance, but it still is an intriguing premise, to wonder what that may have been like. I have to have a situation, a mystery, or a secret to be explained. If I draw a blank at times, just taking two random characters and writing dialogue between them can help me keep my hand in the game.

Dialogue is a huge draw for me, even given a world where I won't be granted a Pulitzer. I love it. I could see myself happy in a bevy of Hollywood or Soap Opera writers, because dialogue is fun and easy for me. But that's not what life offered me, so I keep finding fun in what I can do.

What has been the biggest thing/event to influence your work? Do you have any artistic heroes, theatrical or otherwise?

I don't have one hero. My heroes are ordinary people who are doing the work (of a theater making) and not giving up. Because it's hard work. They are all around me and I want to hug them all.

I have to say that being introduced to the absurdist playwrights made me feel so liberated, to realize that drama can be done in lots of different ways. One of my biggest compliments was one time I was told that my play was Pinteresque. That made me feel like I achieved something special with that play. But then, I'm not crazy about Brecht, for example, but I loved that his work showed me that I can play around with genres and form.

Tell us about activities you enjoy outside of theater.

I used to cook, but not so much anymore. I like to relax because I am always on the go. I love to be in my garden. It's one of my favorite places to be. I love to read mysteries, and hang out with my friends. That's a nice thing about theater. Sometimes I even get paid to hang out with my friends.

What are you reading right now?

A collection of Sci-Fi stories. We (my husband and I) know Ted Chang. He wrote the story that is the basis for the movie *Arrival* that's out right now, His collection is "*Stories of Your Life, and Others*". We met him when he was a boy in the Sci-Fi circuit, now he's a man and he's got this great thing happening. So I am going back to read those stories....And papers. Always grading papers, God help us...

What's next for you?

I'm thinking right now about a play called *The End of the World As We Know It*. It's kind of a quirky Romantic Comedy—or something like that. In January, I'm directing a staged reading of a farce for the Pride Theater Group at the Chandler Music Hall called, "*A Perfect Arrangement*," by Topher Payne about sexual politics in the 1950s. Maybe another mounting of "*Broken Circle*" at the Off Center for the Dramatic Arts in Burlington. Maybe I will have a play accepted from the submissions I sent out. And maybe I'll go to the playwriting conference in Alaska again this year. MOXIE Productions is developing my cowboy play with music, called "*Rodeo Gals*," slated to be produced in 2017. And of course there's always next semester at Norwich where I love to teach theater and share what I love with wonderful kids.



RODEO GALS, a cowboy play with music, by Jeanne Beckwith