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Award-Wining Playwright Bess Welden Amplifies Marginalized Voices

Laura Meader
Colby College

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**AWARD-WINNING
PLAYWRIGHT
BESS WELDEN
AMPLIFIES
MARGINALIZED
VOICES**

**A teaching artist at Colby
sees her recent work
receive national acclaim**

By Laura Meader

As playwright Bess Welden followed stories filed by her sister-in-law, a photojournalist covering the 2015 migrant crisis in Greece, she was captivated by a photo of an unaccompanied minor. She wondered how anyone could keep an emotional distance from a child like this.

Then she wondered: what would happen if you didn't?

Welden, a teaching artist at Colby since 2010, pondered this question, developed it into a script, and birthed the play *Refuge Malja* (إملا), named a finalist for the 2020 National Jewish Playwriting Contest and Tour. The play explores a relationship between a Jewish-American photojournalist and a Syrian refugee, played by a middle schooler who speaks Arabic on stage.

"I'm determined to be part of a movement amplifying not just the voices of women but also other people, people of color, new immigrants," Welden said. "Voices that we don't normally hear."

A play with an Arabic speaker had never before been produced at Portland Stage Company, where *Refuge Malja* (إملا) had its world premiere in 2018 as part of a Maine statewide initiative called Making Migration Visible, co-organized by Catherine Besteman, Colby's Francis F. Bartlett and Ruth K. Bartlett Professor of Anthropology. The play meshed perfectly with the initiative because of what Besteman called Welden's nuanced approach to playwrighting.

"She's telling a story about refugees, but also about the complicated lives of those people who are either trying to help or document," Besteman said of *Refuge Malja* (إملا). "To an anthropologist, those stories are really interesting."

They're also interesting to Welden, who thrives on bringing such thought-provoking stories to the stage.

"Bess is not afraid to tackle difficult subject matters. She's willing to try different forms, to experiment," said Anita Stewart, executive and artistic

director at Portland Stage, Northern New England's preeminent professional theater and a member of the League of Residence Theaters (LORT).

Stewart's willingness to stage *Refuge Malja* (إملا) was gold for Welden. "If you get a LORT premiere of your play, for most playwrights that's like a dream," Welden said. "People think the dream is Broadway—but it's not."



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—Bess Welden
teaching artist

That's because nonprofit, regional theater explores big ideas and connects strongly with communities, said Welden. It's theater she'll remain tethered to even as her national reputation grows. Another of her plays, *Death Wings*, chronicling the final one hundred minutes of a grandmother's life, was named a Eugene O'Neill Theater Center 2020 New Play Conference semi-finalist.

For 30 years, Welden has been immersed in the theater world, fascinated by it since childhood, when she was Lori Weinblatt from Youngstown, Ohio. She adopted her stage name between undergraduate work at Oberlin College and graduate school at the National Theater Conservatory in Denver. Bess, after her grandmother Beatrice, nicknamed

Bess. Welden, after a great uncle, Ben Welden, who played gangsters in Hollywood movies and TV for nearly four decades.

Creating a new identity rooted in her ancestry exemplifies Welden's interest in family histories, which feature prominently in her work. Mothers, for example, are a dominant motif in *Refuge Malja* (إملا). In one scene a mother appears in a dream that mystically connects all the characters in the play. This mother is mute. Another mother is absent. Another is ill. Through these characters, Welden explores deep questions like, "Who chooses to be a mother? What does it mean to mother someone?"

As a dramaturge and a feminist, Welden is committed to exploring "women who have a lot of flaws and women who feel complicated and real on stage," she said. She creates complex characters to be embodied primarily by middle-aged and older women actors, but also younger ones.

As a young woman herself, Welden dreamt of becoming an actor, "an interpretive artist," she said, "who was going to create characters and bring to life other people's work." In graduate school, however, she was introduced to solo performance, and the "doors of imagination were flung open, ... sparking something big inside of me." She created her first solo piece in lieu of a thesis and became intrigued with the process. She persisted, continuing to write and perform her own solo plays, first in New York and then in Maine.

"I was constantly playing around with moments that were more narrative and then moments that were still grounded in dialogue," Welden said. "And what does it mean, as a performer, to be able to in those moments change characters in front of the audience and take on different physicalities and voices and all that kind of stuff."

Over the years, Welden's scripts have expanded to include multiple characters, a growth Stewart has watched unfold during Welden's 16-year tenure as an



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affiliated artist at Portland Stage. Stewart is struck by Welden’s use of symbolism, mythology, and animal energy and by her abilities as a storyteller. “She’s really a maker of work,” Stewart said.

Welden’s tricks of the trade? An insatiable curiosity and rich imagination.

To her, playwriting is “an imaginative playground, when you’re the person

who’s dreaming up the story and dreaming up the world.”

In her worlds, characters embody complex emotions. Big questions of love, family, and memory are voiced. Poetry and song and dialogue coalesce. Feminism, multiculturalism, and Judaism inform plots. Generations intermingle.

Throughout the playwriting, Welden remains cognizant of the role other professionals play in bringing her script to life. How much stage direction does she write? How does she avoid being entirely prescriptive?

“Because the whole exciting thing is then when a director or designers or actors start to investigate it,” she said, “they’re bringing in all kinds of other way-more-brilliant, interesting ideas than I can even imagine.”

This community-based, creative process is a juicy reward after the quiet, solitary work of playwriting. Theater, Welden said, is grounded in collaboration, and the extrovert in her craves the fellowship and community she finds in workshops, readings, and production.

It’s also why she’s an educator. Welden mentors young professionals, and she’s taught performance and voice at the college level since the mid-’90s at Vassar College, the University of California, Santa Cruz, New York’s School for Film and Television, and Colby, where she’s a visiting assistant professor of theater and dance.

Last fall Welden taught Colby’s introduction to playwriting course for the first time, offering students a process-oriented experience that involved writing exercises and opportunities to critique fellow students’ work. Welden also teaches combined writing and performing classes, including the *Passion Project*, in which students explore a personal issue, write their own material, and translate it into a solo performance.

“Bess brings a dynamic passion to working with young people,” said Besteman, who saw the *Passion Project* when it came to Portland Stage. “She brings out the best of people on the stage ... with a deeply intuitive, interpersonal awareness.”

Welden’s nurturing approach is essential for students, especially those new to the form. “So much of what we’re doing in Theater and Dance is creating an atmosphere where there’s that level of trust and understanding, where the students are able to take these big creative risks,” she said. “That alone can be a life-changing opportunity.”

Creating opportunities for students, early-career artists, and even for herself brings Welden immense satisfaction. With each new project, with every collaboration, Welden emerges reborn. “Practicing theater, being a theater artist, I believe does save my life,” she said. “Again and again and again.”

“Art gives us the opportunity to really ask the big questions, to ponder the imponderable, to get at the core of what I think it means to be a human on the planet at this time.”