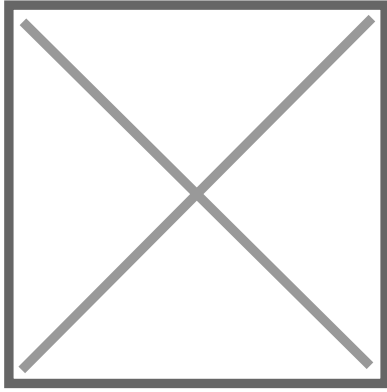




Who Gets to Speak? Melissa Leilani Larson on Writing and Representation

Description

Melissa Leilani Larson lost the first playwriting contest she ever entered. She was a BYU sophomore who wrote a play “for kicks and giggles,” and she was genuinely surprised not to win. “I wrote a play, what do you want?” she remembers thinking. “Turns out there’s a lot of people in the world who write plays and are good at it.”

Twenty-five years later, she is one of them. Her adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* has been produced more than 60 times. This fall it’s running at [The Ruth and Nathan Hale Theater](#) in Pleasant Grove, in a production directed by Kymberly Mellen that does something new with it. Mrs. Bennet, played by Deaf actor Anne Post Fife, speaks in ASL, and her daughters voice her words aloud.

It’s a striking choice, and it fits Larson’s work better than you might expect. Over a long video conversation, the same question kept surfacing in everything she talked about: her letters, her Mrs. Bennet, her casting notes, her plans for the rest of Austen. Who gets to speak, who speaks for whom, and who gets heard?

Quote card with a photo of Melissa Leilani Larson: “Turns out there’s a lot of people in the world who write plays and are good at it.”

A theatre person by accident

Larson grew up in Hau‘ula on O‘ahu and moved to Utah at twelve. She decided to be a writer in third grade, the kind of kid who spent recess in the library, and went to BYU to write fiction. After that lost contest, a playwriting class in her senior year “changed my life.” She stayed on for graduate work in theatre, learned to stage manage, and became, as she puts it, a theatre person. When she realized her master’s wasn’t a terminal degree, she transferred to the University of Iowa for an MFA in playwriting. Her first play was produced in 2001.

What she took from school was less a credential than a habit. Graduate school is precious, she said, because someone gives you time to write. After that, you have to take it. “If you write a paragraph, that’s a paragraph you didn’t have yesterday.” She drafts and revises by hand because “it just sticks in your brain better,” and she writes a lot so she has something to cut. Deadline adrenaline

is real, she admits, but “you can’t write the whole play in that two hours.”

Quote card: “If you write a paragraph, that’s a paragraph you didn’t have yesterday.” Me

Letters: words in someone else’s hands

Larson loves mail: letters, postcards, packages. In her *Pride and Prejudice*, letters do much of the storytelling, and they’re rarely read by the person who wrote them. “In the Regency, letters were so important, because that’s how people did communicate,” she said. “They were also very, very honest.”

Darcy’s letter to Lizzy is the clearest case. Lizzy begins reading it, Darcy takes over in his own voice, and the events he describes play out onstage as he tells them. The form also traps Lizzy into listening. “If that was a scene,” Larson laughed, “it’s very possible Lizzy would be like, I don’t care, you’re a jerk.”

Other letters pass words from hand to hand. In Lizzy’s letter to Jane about Pemberley, Jane voices Aunt Gardiner, a character Larson loves but cut for practical reasons. Jane and Bingley write to each other and never finish, because unengaged couples weren’t supposed to write at all. Even before *The Ruth*’s production, Larson’s play was full of people speaking each other’s words.

Aunt Gardiner does get her due elsewhere. Larson also wrote a longer, six-episode audio adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, with scenes she didn’t have room for onstage and a UK cast. It streams on [Dramafy](#), the audio drama platform run by Liz Hansen, Larson’s very first playwriting teacher.

Quote card: “In the Regency, letters were so important, because that’s how people did commu

Mrs. Bennet, heard differently

At *The Ruth*, that device becomes the heart of the family. Fife signs Mrs. Bennet’s lines, and Kitty, Mary, and Lydia voice them, sometimes adding their own reactions. “Kitty will translate something for her mom and be like, no, that’s not me, Mom said it,” Larson said. “Don’t kill the messenger.”

In [my review](#), I wrote that this Mrs. Bennet made me care about a character I usually find exasperating, and that it made her husband look colder. Larson’s script already has Mr. Bennet ignore his wife before he says a word. She doesn’t defend him. “A lot of the men in this story are difficult to like,” she said, and “there are times when the Bennets are not great parents.” Still, she sees warmth between them in other moments.

What she wanted most was for audiences to see the mother in Mrs. Bennet, not just the noise. Her daughters need to marry, and she knows it. Larson describes her as a mama bear with good intentions and not always the best methods. She also sees Lydia as a little Mrs. Bennet in the making, a mirror the production sharpens when Lydia speaks for her mother.

The Ruth adds one more voice Larson didn’t write. Sound designer Richie Trimble scores the show with the Vitamin String Quartet’s covers of pop songs, starting with “Single Ladies.” The music

isn't in her script, Larson said. It's part of Mellen's effort to reach younger audiences: a little bit of the *Bridgerton* effect.

Who gets to be in Austen?

The question of who speaks leads to a bigger one: who gets to be onstage at all. Larson's cast notes say the Bennet sisters can be played by actors of different races. As a mixed-race Filipino writer from Hawai'i, she knows what it's like not to see yourself. "As a Filipino person watching TV, I haven't seen myself on TV," she said, "and I haven't seen a mixed-race family."

She has seen her play at high schools in Australia and Taiwan, and in a pandemic-era Zoom production with a largely BIPOC cast and an Asian Mr. Darcy. Purists may object that it isn't historically accurate. Larson's answer is that Austen has outgrown that objection. "The thing about Austen is that she's been around long enough that these stories, they belong to all of us," she said. "Her stories are aspirational. It's the kind of thing that someone at home reads and wants to see themselves in."

She applies the same logic to *The Ruthless Mrs. Bennet*. "It doesn't have to be about her being Deaf," she said. "She is a person who happens to be Deaf. And she's glad young people are leading the way. If her play teaches them Austen and color-conscious casting at the same time, that's great. Let's do that sooner rather than later."

Quote card: "The thing about Austen is that she's been around long enough that these stories

Six Austens and a body

BYU commissioned Larson's *Pride and Prejudice* for the novel's 200th anniversary, after her *Persuasion* went well there in 2011. She was nervous. "It's so popular, a lot of people love it," she said. "But I also knew I would be mad at myself if I let someone else do it." It premiered in 2014 and became one of her most popular plays.

Now she wants the whole set. "I wanna do all six," she said, and *Emma* is next. "I hope Jane doesn't mind. Maybe she's gonna haunt me later. But I feel like I have a good sense of how her stories work."

Quote card: "I hope Jane doesn't mind. Maybe she's gonna haunt me later." Melissa Lei

There's more on her desk: [Hello, Universe](#), adapted from Erin Entrada Kelly's novel for Theater Mu at Stages Theatre Company near Minneapolis, with a Filipino boy and his lola at its center; *Anne of Green Gables*; a film; one-acts for high schools. And she's dreaming of a murder mystery, which means writing against her own grain. "I usually run on emotion," she said. "Mystery is much more about plot. I think I have to start at the end and work backwards."

For a writer who has spent 25 years figuring out who gets to speak, a story about a body that can't seems like a fitting next challenge. I can't wait to see who she lets tell it.

Find Larson at melissaleilani.com and @mel_leilani on Instagram.

About the playwright

Melissa Leilani Larson is a playwright and screenwriter based in Salt Lake City. Born in Hauē»ula, Hawaiē»i, she moved to Utah at twelve. She holds a BA in English from BYU and an MFA from the Iowa Playwrights Workshop. Her plays include *Pride and Prejudice*, *Persuasion*, *Little Happy Secrets*, *Pilot Program*, *Mestiza*, or *Mixed*, and an adaptation of Tagoreâ??s *The Post Office*. She wrote the book for *Little Piece of You*, which played the Theatre Royal Drury Lane in Londonâ??s West End in 2024. Her films include *Freetown* and *Jane and Emma*. She has won four Association for Mormon Letters drama awards, including one for *Pride and Prejudice*, which is licensed through Stage Partners.

Pride and Prejudice, adapted by Melissa Leilani Larson and directed by Kymberly Mellen, runs at The Ruth through November 14. Tickets at [TheRuth.org](#).

Watch the full interview here:

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