

WENDY WASSERSTEIN

By Mark Hall Amitin

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As part of the Bay Street Theatre season, the author of the Broadway hit play *The Sisters Rosensweig* gives a talk on being a writer. Wasserstein was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1989 for her play *The Heidi Chronicles* and a Tony Award for best play.

Hamptons Magazine: When you write do you hear the voices or see the personages of particular actors as you write a specific character?

Wendy Wasserstein: Usually I'll hear the voices, and at the first reading, like with *The Sisters Rosensweig* having Madeline Kahn helped because I always thought of her voice as Dr. Gorgeous.

HM: So did the rhythms change?

WW: That's how they merge; the character who you have in your head; today we had a first read-through with the new (Broadway) cast and Hal Linden came in replacing Robert Klein and it was interesting hearing someone else be Merv; but he was Merv the Furrier.

HM: Dan Sullivan has directed a number of your plays and would you say that for you he's the primary exemplar or interpreter of your voice.

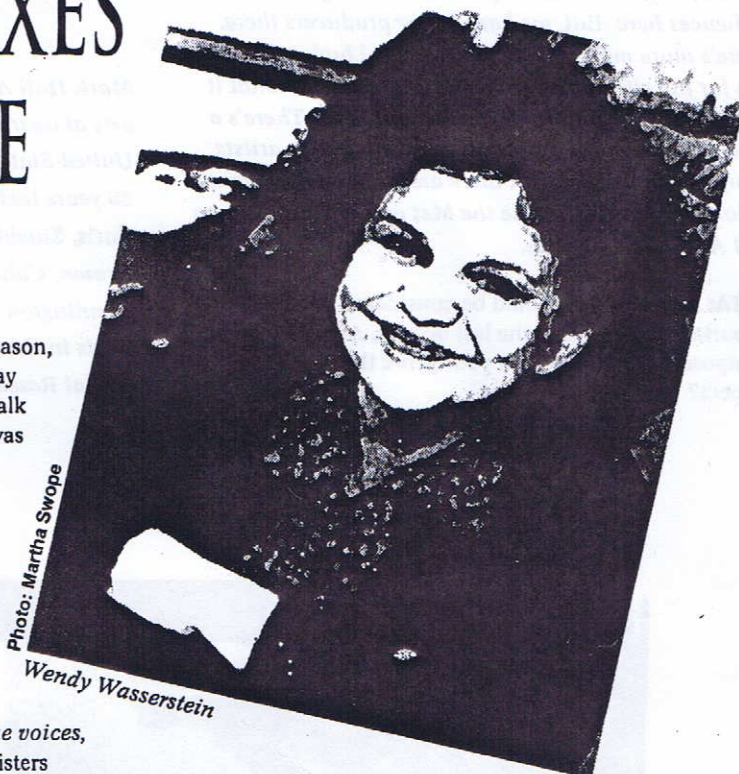
WW: Very much so. I think the luckiest thing that happened to me was meeting Dan. I've worked with other wonderful directors, Gerry Guitierrez, Steve Rothman, but the partnership with Dan is a very strong one and I see the end result as a collaboration from both of us and the working process with him. Its really trust and who you think will get the best work from you and who asks the right questions and who, when they say this doesn't work for me, knows where you're trying to get with something.

HM: Do you feel the theatre has a particular role in the American culture?

WW: I do because theatre as opposed to film or television isn't an industry. The way it's conceived is at the home of an individual voice for a writer. In that way, it's still an art form. What always amazes me about plays is that someone sits alone in a room and makes this thing up. It's not as if you take six meetings in order to write a play; you make it up. Then suddenly it comes into the world and it has a life with actors and directors and there it is two years later in Tokyo.

HM: You refer a lot to your Jewish heritage, is that centrifugal to your work?

WW: *The Sisters Rosensweig* is a play about Jewish Heritage. But the *Heidi Chronicles* is not. So, it depends on the play, but in many ways it informs the humor of these plays.



Wendy Wasserstein

HM: Do you feel that as a woman there is something special or different you can contribute than a man or that you can contribute to the cause of women?

WW: There was a luncheon for the Tony Awards and I was standing there with both Jane Alexander and Madeline Kahn who were both nominated this year [for *The Sisters Rosensweig*] and in this moment I was very proud that here are two women over forty with two good parts in which they play women of some dignity each in their own way. If this play didn't exist those characters wouldn't exist. To me, it's still important to populate theatre literature with parts for women that are funny and bright and substantial.

HM: You do other writing as well; you have a book out, *Bachelor Girls*, and you write a column in *New York Woman*. Are these other forms of writing equally fulfilling for you?

WW: My favorite is the stage but it takes a long time to get a play together, so I've enjoyed writing the columns because it keeps you going. The day before they're due you certainly don't enjoy it, but it does keep that muscle going and there are thoughts that are interesting but not enough for a play but are good for a column.

HM: Do you think about novels or moving the plays towards screenplays?

WW: I have written some screenplays of my plays. I actually have high regard for people who write for television. Actually sit-coms, because they seem like little plays to me. But for myself, my interest is in the theatre and essay writing. I certainly wouldn't try to be a novelist. I like that when you finish a play that actors come into the room and they read it out loud. Then it's interesting and you can fix it that way. There are great screen writers but I'm more interested in character and in language and in the sense of moving a story along. If one really wants to express one self in film, you become a director. I think that its great Nora Ephron is directing now, for example. In the theatre when you write you have a lot of control, when you write for film you don't.

HM: What other writers inspire you?

WW: There are always the worlds greatest heads; Chekhov and Ibsen. I've liked Edna Ferber and Clare Boothe Luce and Betty Comden and I'm very fond of the writers of my own generation like Christopher Durang and Terrance McNally, Paula Vogel who is very wise and passionate, and Lanford Wilson and Marsha Norman, August Wilson and Tony Kushner. There is wonderful American writing going on.

HM: Who are your heroines or heroes not in terms of writers?

WW: I always think of heroes as unsung. Its not the ones you hear about in the papers so much. I once met this woman who was a single mother who was also going to law school at the same time as she was dealing with an autistic child. I thought this lady's day to day life is very hard and no one is going to write articles about her but she'll get up and do it every day.

HM: Do you have a new play in the works?

WW: I have one that I'm thinking about that's just beginning to sprout. I'm not going to say more, I'm going to protect the innocent.

HM: When you graduated and before you went off to Mt. Holyoke what did you think you'd be besides 'incredible'?

WW: I thought I'd be a lawyer.

HM: When and how did that change?

WW: Oh, God, I think I'd have been an awful lawyer. I would have been just terrible. Maybe when I got to school and didn't do too well in political science. It was when I took playwriting at Smith College. I was supposed to become a Congressional intern and I kept falling asleep reading the Congressional Digest in the library. My friend Ruth said let's go to Smith and take playwriting and then we'll go shopping. The shopping was better there too! I studied with Len Berkman who was my first playwriting teacher.

HM: Did you learn a lot from him?

WW: I learned that basically anybody could be a playwright. It was the late 60's and there were all these girls with pre-Raphaelite hair and shawls and sandals and I figured we all had stories to tell that were valid. When I was at Amherst College we did *Morning, Noon and Night*, the McNally-Malfi-Horowitz plays in the basement and I remember being in Terrance's play *Noon* playing Martha in a black leather vest. It was wanting to break the rules a little of well crafted plays but what stuck more in my mind was the Feminist ideology.

HM: Do you still feel that's a guide for you?

WW: In the sense that I wanted to put those women on stage who I knew and who were not reflected. I went to a girls' high school and a women's college and I thought it peculiar that they aren't on stage.

HM: How did you feel when you were awarded the Pulitzer Prize?

WW: I was delighted. Being this kind of person who has this tendency towards irony as I do, I can only say it was a wonderful thing. It certainly made it easier to turn 40. ▲

Mark Hall Amitin holds a Ph.D. in theatre from the University of Paris and has lectured at nearly 200 universities from Beijing and Moscow to Yale and San Diego. He now writes on theatre, film, books and the culture for several periodicals.