Lauren Gunderson is America’s most produced playwright but she has never staged a play on Broadway. She tells Howard Sherman why Shakespeare’s work remains so important and what draws her to the West Coast.
no matter what it is, and the brotherhood and sisterhood and the collectivism that is responsible for every great thing, really.”

Shakespeare is always relevant, Gunderson says. “He wrote about such universal themes, such great human experiences, that I’m never at a loss for something to riff on when you look at his work.” She reveals that a play about Gertrude and Ophelia from Hamlet is in the works.

Gunderson began writing plays in high school, with one picked up by the prestigious Young Playwrights Festival in New York and her first full-length play produced by Essential Theatre in Atlanta. She acted in college – “I was actually not a bad mime, hilariously” – and took a graduate degree at the NYU Tisch School of the Arts. Even with several productions of community – this supportive and this robust, with different kinds of theatres. I didn’t expect that I was making a big statement or doing something provocative. It just felt right. You’ve got to go with what feels right, and it’s art, go where you can write, go where you can make, go where you can be yourself.”

As Gunderson’s star has risen, it is regularly noted that her ‘most-produced’ status has been achieved without many New York-productions, and none on Broadway, as if that somehow puts an asterisk on her success. Rather, that qualifier, tinged at times with condescension, merely reveals the New York-centric thinking that pervades too much of the theatre industry.

Gunderson regularly finds herself having the same conversations about her work. “A lot of people in a cocktail situation ask: ‘Oh, what do you do?’ ‘I’m a playwright.’ ‘Have you written anything I would know?’ And my first question is always: ‘Do you go see theatre?’ If they say: ‘Not really,’ I’ll say: ‘Well, probably not. But if you do go to theatre, if you especially like new plays, then you probably will have seen something of mine, or a poster of mine. It might be on the season of your local theatre company.’ But new plays are still not the same things as new novels and new films. There’s still a bit of a boutique quality to this profession.”

Given the range of her work, is there a ‘Lauren Gunderson-type’ play? “You can probably count on my plays not ending in a terribly negative, dark, hopeless space,” she observes. “I don’t have that kind of edge to my writing. And by edge, the way they break you down, and say, ‘I know you’ve got your thing, and you’re funny, or you’re serious, or you write poetically. But can you tell me what your play is about? What do they want and how do they get it? Can you tell me a simple, simple story of this thing?’”

After completing her graduate degree, in contrast to conventional thinking, Gunderson left New York. Thanks to a summer at the O’Neill Playwrights Conference, and several residencies and workshops, she found herself in San Francisco and decided to stay. Making it clear she loves New York, she also professes a passion for the Bay Area – and opportunities on the West Coast. One year, soon after moving, five major productions of her work were staged there over 12 months, including the premieres of Exit, Pursued by a Bear and I and You.

She remembers thinking “Playwrights would kill for this kind of community – this supportive and this robust, with different kinds of theatres. I didn’t expect that I was making a big statement or doing something provocative. It just felt right. You’ve got to go with what feels right, and it’s art, go where you can write, go where you can make, go where you can be yourself.”

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Gunderson say she likes theatricality, spectacle and twists at the end. But now she’s pondering what her next works will involve. “I had a point a couple years ago of thinking: ‘What is something you haven’t done? What is something that will scare me and challenge me to write? I know I can write a play now, but it’s not as daunting as it used to be. I like daunting. I like finding that challenge. I want to go to places I haven’t been.”

The Half-Life of Marie Curie runs at the Minetta Lane Theatre in New York until December 22 and Peter Pan and Wendy runs at Sidney Harman Hall in Washington DC until January 12. Details: thehalflifeofmariecure.com and shakespearetheatre.org

G&A

What was your first non-theatre job? Scooping ice cream probably.

What was your first professional theatre job? Actor in Tina Howe’s Approaching Zanzibar at Actors Express in Atlanta.

What do you wish someone had told you when you were starting out? Write what you want to see. Write what matters to you. Life’s too short, only read the good reviews.

Who or what was your biggest influence? My colleagues. I am never more inspired than when I see a new play that shakes and thrills me.


If you hadn’t been a playwright, what would you have been? An under-employed actor.

Do you have any theatrical superstitions or rituals? Like everyone in the theatre, I despair when we are in tech and am convinced the show is terrible and that no one should ever come to see it. Then I’m wrong. Usually.