
An American Daughter The Construction of Lyssa's Character in

Wendy Wasserstein was a highly influential playwright and person in general. She was a pioneer of feminism within the theatre as well as non-aggressive feminism outside of it. Her female characters are unlike any seen in theatre previously, and have a life that Wasserstein breathes into them through their dialogue, their descriptions, their actions and their lives. She presents characters that deal with serious issues, and has them respond in ways that are undeniably human, and draw the audience in. This lifelike female archetype is particularly visible in Wasserstein's *An American Daughter*. Lyssa, a "...Forty-two-year-old in a cotton shirt and jeans..." (Wasserstein 7) is a sharp, career-focused woman. She is working to become the Surgeon-General, and she faces much to get there. She is not only smart and capable, but she deals with regret, bitterness, and the lack of a filter; flaws which make her life leap from the pages of Wasserstein's script.

Even within the description of the character lies an important break of stereotype. Lyssa is a career-driven woman, but she is not presented in a pantsuit and tie, nor does she wear heels and pearls every day. She is a woman. She wears jeans and a t-shirt, and she faces family issues just like real women do. By starting, at the most basic level, with a fight against diminutive and unrealistic standards, the precedent for honesty is set before anything else.

Wendy Wasserstein's *An American Daughter* is a prime example of Wasserstein's presentation of women : smart, strong, capable, and well rounded. Lyssa, as well as her friend Judith and acquaintance Quincy, is presented not as the theatre-standard quiet, demure housewife, but as an independent woman seeking professional achievement. She works very hard, and obviously has a sharp mind and quick wit. What sets Lyssa apart from other female characters like her is not the blatant image of her, but rather the subtext and underlying character traits. In many other stories, there is a strong, witty female character who 'goes against the grain,' but Wasserstein's protagonist (unlike so many others in the same strain) lacks the softer, alluring need for a man.

This is the most significant difference between Lyssa and other female leads. Even Jane Austen's Lizzy in *Pride and Prejudice* has the wit and the strength, but she boils down to a woman who craves a love interest. Lyssa does not. She has love, she has a husband and kids, but this is not her end goal. She loves her family and her job. She works hard to make her way in the world, and does so without leaning on her father the senator, and without using femininity, meekness, or sexual allure. She is not reduced to a sum of her womanly charm and a tube of

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lipstick, and this is Wasserstein's genius. Not only is Lyssa a role model for career-seeking girls, she is also a role model for authors and playwrights alike. She is more than an archetype of the 'capable woman,' she seems to be a living, breathing person, someone who could walk out of her Georgetown home and into the lives of any and all of the readers. This is Wasserstein's biggest influence on the world of theatre. She pioneered real, plausible female characters in theatre, and opened doors for equality and feminism within and outside of the theatre.

Even when Lyssa catches her husband Walter kissing another woman, she doesn't melt into the scene we know all too well: woman exits the room with a strong face, finds a place to be alone, sobs, finds her resolve again, and kicks the man out saying something along the lines of "I have too much potential to waste time on you." Instead, Lyssa just walks away. She harbors some deep resentment toward her husband, which becomes obvious in the following interactions, but she doesn't dust herself off and move on with her life. This is why Wasserstein's characters are so important: they are beautifully, humanly, imperfect. Lyssa handles her husband's infidelity in a way that isn't healthy- and that's important. This is one of the first instances of a character that the women in the audience can look at and say, "Oh, that's me. I do that, too."

Much of the validity of Wasserstein's characters comes from their start in reality. Once again, the truth of her characters stems from the truth in her life. She said what she felt needed to be heard, whether people would like it or hate it (and most of the time they hated- or at least some did.) She never presented her ideas as all-encompassing or perfect, instead she celebrated the flaws in all that she commented on: life, women, parents, children, feminism, and society; she commented on them in honesty, rather than trying to brush over issues. Wasserstein devoted most of her adult life to promoting better media presence for women, whether this was through her plays or through her own presentation of herself, her affect was widely experienced.

Wasserstein poured (at least) a little bit of herself into each of her characters, and this is what changed the history of American Theatre. Wasserstein's own life; her difficult childhood; the secrecy in her home; and the intense rivalry between her and her brother ensnared her audience with the fact that - at long last- they were watching real women living real lives.

One of the major influences on Wasserstein's writing and, in fact, her life, was her mother Lola Schleifer. Lola was an eccentric woman to say the least. She ran her home and looked after her children, and all the while centered her life around her passion - dance. She taught Wendy many important lessons about life, but was also the source of serious strife within the Wasserstein home. Lola demanded perfection from her children and would accept nothing less. This led to her sending her mentally disabled son Abner to a mental care facility and ceasing all contact. The family never visited him, and soon ceased to acknowledge his existence

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whatsoever. He did not fit into Lola's perfect suburban-mold family, so he wasn't included. This was the type of behavior that put immense pressure of Wendy as she grew up. Wendy was constantly being compared to her brother Bruce, a well-to-do investment banker. Wendy's accomplishments, however impressive, were held up to the mold of her brother's victories, and always seemed to fall short.

This search for validity was present in all of Wasserstein's life, and so it trickled into her writing. It is present in Lyssa specifically. Lyssa seeks her own career and advancement opportunities, and is constantly being compared to her father, which is endlessly frustrating to her. This is a clear link to Wasserstein's own life, and one of the many reasons Lyssa seems to jump right off the page.

Wasserstein also manages to capture a very real vulnerability in her characters. This likely stems from her mother's influence. Her mother was particularly hard on Wendy as she was growing up and searching for what she wanted to do as an adult. Her mother even said at one point, "Wendy, you make me want to blechhh," (Salmon 62). Wendy wanted to win her mother's favor and approval, but didn't have a direction for her life, and so was a disappointment to Lola. This type of apathy shows through in the powerful vulnerability of her characters, and gives some insight into the basis of their strife.

Aside from just her written works, Wendy Wasserstein was a powerful public figure, and an invaluable voice for women in society. One of the most significant facets of her public persona was the fact that she refused to be the aggressive, hot-tempered stereotype of the feminist. Instead, she lived her life in a way that didn't allow for misogyny towards herself or her career. In so doing, she led a quiet, well-adjusted opposition to the predominantly-male Broadway of the time. The fact that she managed to accomplish so much had everything to do with her public persona. Wasserstein is credited as having one of the first intimate public personas, at a time before Facebook statuses opened a window into people's lives. Wasserstein published a series of newspaper columns that presented a manicured version of her life to the public eye. She wrote casually, as if she was talking to friends, but still kept the more personal or untidy portions of her life just that - personal.

This is not to say that Wasserstein shied away from discussing more personal subject matter in her works. In fact, it was just the opposite. She wrote in her plays frank discussions of love, intimacy, sex, and infidelity. Once again, however, she had a distinguishing factor: none of these was used gratuitously. Her female characters didn't sit around gossiping about boys because what else do women do?. Wives had sex with their husbands not because that was a wifely duty, but because they wanted to. Once again, Wasserstein presented real life, and part of that was real discussion and real relationships.

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An interesting dynamic is created within *An American Daughter* when Lyssa brings up the idea that she wouldn't have lost her nomination had she not been a woman. If a man had done the exact same things (skipping jury duty, making an offhand joke about homemakers), it would have been dismissed as a mistake, but because she was a woman, there was a shift in the power dynamic, and so the public jumped at the chance to have a reason to scorn her. This moment is almost certainly a commentary on our society. Wasserstein is using the reaction to Lyssa as a method of commenting on the ever-present distinction of reactions to men's failures versus women's. This is amplified by the fact that Lyssa is running for a position of power which had a long tradition of being male, and is taking the place of a man. Wasserstein is drawing attention to the fact that men have just as many shortcomings as women, and yet only with women in power roles are those shortcomings thrust into the spotlight.

This is another area of feminism in which Wasserstein for many years led the charge: true equality. She did not fight for women to be seen as better than men, she didn't want to take men down, she simply quietly and reasonably persisted towards her goal of equality. She was a mouthpiece for women across America, and lent a voice to women who wanted to see themselves being accurately represented without forcing a major debate.

All of this innovation in the world of feminism in the theatre did not come without debate. Because Wasserstein was unafraid to push the envelope when it came to serious topics, her work tended to chafe nearly as many people as it encouraged. Wasserstein herself commented on the fact that her plays were breaking through a societal barrier and, in doing so, causing some strife. She mentioned the idea that she was the only woman writing plays for women about women, and so they were expected to be all-inclusive -- providing representation for all women everywhere. Of course, realistically, this is impossible to achieve. The plays offer much more representation for actual women, but they cannot possibly include characters that everyone identifies with, and so some people will feel that there is still inaccurate and unrealistic representation.

This disagreement towards Wasserstein's works is particularly present against her major success *The Heidi Chronicles*. This is a work which manages to portray (and sometimes outrightly state) feminist views, but it does so in such a way that seems to undermine the very point she tries to make. The characters in this play may present feminism, but they do not do so without critique. Wasserstein pointed out that feminism isn't flawless by any means, but that, just like the women it is seeking to further, it is worth it despite the shortcomings. (Barnett 14 - 15).

It is important to note that Wasserstein's legacy is not only in her feminism, but in her realism as a whole. Wasserstein had a way of writing characters and situations that made her audience believe that the character could live right next door to them. Her characters had real

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conversations with each other, and rather than trying to force in subtext, Wasserstein seemed to just allow subtext to happen as it would. Characters faced their adversities and responded in ways that people would, rather than grotesque caricatures. This is one of the qualities that created her lifelike characters.

One difficulty that Wasserstein faced because of her subtextual messages was being taken seriously. Because much of her agenda was hidden beneath layers of other meaning, many people saw her work as simple comedy, a glimpse at silly interactions. This perception is one that deeply frustrated her. Wasserstein fought to have her work recognized for what it was: a scathing review of societal norms. She is quoted as having said in response to her work being seen as lightweight, "...No, you don't understand, this is a political act," (Wasserstein quoted in Dolan 444). Much of this aversion to being underestimated was again attributed to her dedication to honesty. Her characters were created in way that would comment on issues that she felt needed discussion, and so by allowing those conversations to go without being communicated, She was being dishonest to them. By demanding that her work be understood for all of its subtext and hidden meaning, she was once again affirming her stance in truth and honesty, and her position as a mouthpiece for these ideas.

From many people, this demand for her works to be wholly understood would come off as haughty and even possibly offensive, but Wasserstein's calm demeanor and unassuming lifestyle kept this feeling at bay. She lived out the ideas that she wrote in a very genuine way. Because she lived out her ideals, she earned the respect she asked for. Her honesty lived in her characters, their dialogue, their interactions, and their back stories; as well as though her speech, life, family, and work.

Another major influence in Wasserstein's life was her daughter, Lucy Jane. Wendy had Lucy at age 48, and because of the lateness of the pregnancy, she faced severe health problems. Wasserstein was ill almost constantly through the entire pregnancy, and Lucy was born three months premature. She struggled for a time, but ended up surviving, and became a light in Wasserstein's life. The pregnancy, however, left Wasserstein ill, and she suffered illness based on the complications of birth until her death in 2005. The pregnancy (and the father) were kept secret from the public, and in fact many of Wasserstein's friends and family as well. Only the people closest to her, the ones she interacted with on a daily basis, were aware of the pregnancy, and knew better than to share the news with anyone.

Only after Lucy was born and spent time in the NICU was her birth announced. It was a short article, keeping details about the complications to an absolute minimum and keeping up Wasserstein's persona. Wasserstein then proceeded to raise Lucy by herself, once again shunning society's idea of a perfect family in favor of her own version of perfect.

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The once-solitary woman now travelled with an entourage, including herself and Lucy and usually a nanny and a personal assistant. She spent less time writing and more time doing lectures and answering questions. She gave her effort to her daughter rather than playwriting, feeling that she could now give to her daughter the effort she had given her plays. She worked with many people as she oversaw productions of her shows, as well as the group of people who formed her support system. She referred to the men around her as her 'husbands,' and actually had two of them at the hospital when she was giving birth to Lucy. These people became her family, overcoming the image Wasserstein's mother had left with her of the (so-called) perfect suburban family, in order to create her own little family unit.

Six years later, Wasserstein passed away due to lymphoma. This would come as yet another shock to the audience, as the always-private Wasserstein had kept the news of her diagnosis a secret since she had received it. She had continued to appear in the public eye despite her physical ailments, including facial swelling and near-constant discomfort. To the unaware observer, Wasserstein seemed just as put-together as always, even in her last few months. She held lectures and interacted with fans until she was hospitalised in December of 2005. To those who knew her, however, it was clear that she was physically deteriorating. She had been sick since she gave birth to her daughter, and had gone through a string of misdiagnoses and referrals, before finally being diagnosed with lymphoma. Upon her passing, legions of people were shocked and grieving. The lights of Broadway were dimmed in her honor on January 31, 2006, the night after she passed.

Wasserstein's legacy started with her characters and her voice, and will carry on and resonate with her audience for years to come. Despite the social changes that have occurred since her writings, her message remains as relevant as ever. She was a pioneer in the theatrical world for women and their portrayal. Her comments on feminism, relationships, women, and life still hold meaning in our society. Her calm and ordered response to the lack of realistic women in media stands applicable even today, and her heroines are still admirable role models. Wasserstein's work commented not only on women in theatre, but in the reality of people being depicted in any case. She presented real, vivid characters dealing with real life events, holding a mirror to and commenting on realism in the theatre.

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