



AUDIENCE GUIDE



THE PLAYWRIGHT



Jen Silverman is a multi award winning New York-based playwright, novelist and screenwriter. Her plays include *Spain*, *Collective Rage: A Play in 5 Betties*, *The Moors*, *The Roommate*, *Witch*, and *Highway Patrol*. They have been produced off-Broadway, regionally across the US, and internationally in Australia, the UK, the Czech Republic, Switzerland and Spain. Silverman is the author of the debut novel 'We Play Ourselves' and the story collection 'The Island Dwellers'. She wrote *The Miranda Obsession* as a narrative podcast for Audible, starring Rachel Brosnahan.

A charming devil arrives in the quiet village of Edmonton to bargain for the souls of its residents in exchange for their darkest wishes. Elizabeth is completely without hope, and should be the Devil's easiest target. She has been labeled "a witch" and cast out by the villagers, but her soul is not so readily bought. As the Devil returns to further convince her – and then returns again – unexpected attractions flare, alliances are formed, and the village is forever changed. The play was inspired by a Jacobean drama, *The Witch of Edmonton*, by Rowley, Dekker and Ford. The tragicomedy was first performed by the King's Men at the Blackfriars Theatre. It is thought to have been written in 1621; It existed only in manuscript, until it was published by Isaac Reed in 1778.

The title page of the first edition attributes the play to "diverse well-esteemed Poets; William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, John Ford. " Scholars have generally assigned the play to the three named playwrights—though a few have noted that the three writers were working with John Webster at the time.

A SUMMARY



A SUMMARY (CON'T)

The play is widely considered the most sophisticated treatment of domestic tragedy in the whole period of Elizabethan-Jacobean drama, and is based on events that supposedly took place in the parish of Edmonton, just outside of London.

It is a sharp retelling of a subversive fable, debating how much our souls are worth when hope is hard to come by. The early play is based on the real-life story of Elizabeth Sawyer, who had been executed for practicing witchcraft on the 19th of April 1621. In the original play, the protagonist is depicted as an old woman shunned by her neighbors on the superstitious presumption that she is a witch. The Devil appears to her in the form of a black dog and tempts Elizabeth to sell her soul to him. A primary source for material on witches was the 'Discovery of Witchcraft' by Reginald Scot (1584), from which playwrights drew invocations, demons' names, and potion ingredients. Witchcraft was a topical subject in this era. Often a witch's magic adheres to the Classical standard of Seneca's Medea; she specializes in love and sex magic, giving one character a charm to cause impotence.

MORE ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT AND THE PLAY

Excerpts from "Jen Silverman: A Homecoming to the Theatre" by Bobby Kennedy, Director of New Work and Dramaturgy in The Brief Chronicle, The Official Newsmagazine of Writers Theatre. Note: Writers Theatre in Glencoe IL originally developed the play with Jen Silverman and produced the WITCH world premiere in September, 2018.

“I think of Witch as a dark comedy, even though the original play is a medley of tones: cautionary tale, slapstick comedy, morality play. It was important to me to reckon fully with the darkness of the original, while bringing to it a rich vein of character-driven comedy.” - Jen Silverman

MORE ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT AND THE PLAY

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Playwright Jen Silverman grew up all over the world. Her father was a physicist who taught and researched for several foreign universities. Though both trained as scientists, Silverman's parents loved to read and passed that love onto their daughter. “Growing up our house was full of books, so I was always reading,” she notes, several weeks before starting rehearsals for Witch. “I knew I wanted to write, and I knew that telling and reading stories was the most exciting thing to me. But it wasn’t until undergrad that I stumbled into theatre.” While at Brown University, Silverman was pursuing a Comparative Literature major and under the assumption she would try to be a novelist. But a randomly chosen playwriting class “brought [her] over to the dark side” and she knew what she wanted to do with her life.

But first, Silverman moved back to Japan, where she had moved with her parents when she was a child but hadn’t visited in a decade. She spent her time abroad writing plays and honing her craft. “At a certain point, I realized that I wanted to participate in the making of theatre, not just the crafting of texts,” she says. After moving back to America, Silverman attended the MFA Playwriting program at the University of Iowa. For the first time, she had access to true professional collaborators and theaters to see her work brought to life. “Put your work up, see if it fails, see if it works, learn from it,” she says as a summary of what the program at Iowa gave her the opportunity to do.



Isabel Quintero and Marti Gobel in THE ROOMMATE by Jen Silverman, RTW 2019
Photo by Ross Zentner

After a few years of living in New York, writing more plays and making important connections—including with director Mike Donahue, who would direct many of Silverman’s plays—the playwright’s big break came in 2015. Actors Theatre of Louisville had read a first draft of her unproduced play, *The Roommate* and decided to stage a full production of it as part of their Humana Festival of New American Plays. “I mean, they just took a huge risk on me. We had no prior relationship,” she confesses. The risk paid off and *The Roommate* was a big success, going on to receive several more major productions, including one at Steppenwolf Theatre Company.

MORE ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT AND THE PLAY

This opened more doors for the rising writer, and she had another two plays premiere within the next year and half: *The Moors* at Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven and *Collective Rage: A Play in Five Betties* at Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in D.C.—both of which were also well-received and enjoyed multiple productions.

One remarkable thing about Silverman's plays is that she writes about women—often women over the age of 40—with an appreciation and authenticity that is rarely seen on stage. “In those plays, there is such a conversation about women and visibility and intimacy,” explains Silverman. “Whether it's in *The Roommate* where this 55-year-old woman suddenly realizes that she has been rendered invisible in the world in a way that she's not comfortable with. Or in *The Moors*, all these characters are living in this super isolated place, and they are trying so hard to be seen clearly and correctly by each other. And it's the desire for visibility that leads to some of the drastic acts that end the play. And in *Collective Rage* it's about these five women who have all been seen in a very particular way, they've been told who they are. And their journey through the play is about both figuring out and deciding who they're going to be that isn't the thing that's been put on them.”

WITCHY INSPIRATION

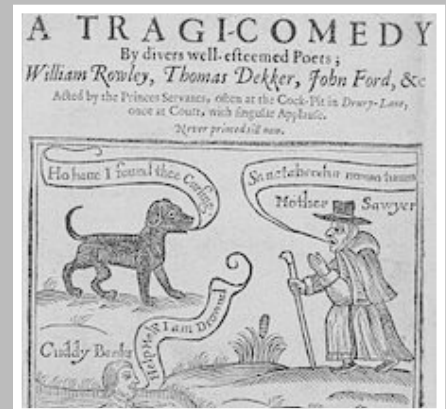
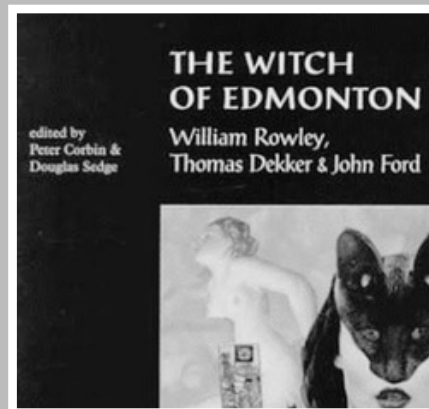
Several years ago, Silverman was reading Stacy Schiff's *The Witches: Suspicion, Betrayal and Hysteria in 1692 Salem*. She found that era of witch hunting enthralling because of “the powerful mix of mysticism and constant ambiguity, the unknown of living in that time period. People would just die and it'd be like, ‘why did they die, we don't know, Western medicine isn't advanced at all, so maybe Satan killed them.’ Anything could happen at any moment. And there'd be no explanation for it other than God. So the combination of an explosive and uncertain time plus the way these girls had been repressed, repressed, repressed to a breaking point—reading that history was a really powerful thing for me. It doesn't feel like we are so far removed from that combination of things.”

Soon afterwards, she ran across a play from 1621 called *The Witch of Edmonton* by Thomas Dekker, William Rowley and John Ford, and was equally captivated. “The original play is subversive because it pays constant lip service to the good people of this town - but then every action you see them take onstage is really shitty,” Silverman says. “And the 'witch' is not even a witch.”

WITCHY INSPIRATION (CON'T)

The play keeps being like, ‘she is an evil witch’ and people keep saying to her ‘you’re a witch’ but when finally she defends herself, she’s like ‘I wish I was a witch, if I was a witch I would never put up with this behavior from you.’ She becomes a witch because they make her that way. And you sympathize with her, and the play means you to. It tells you it’s doing one thing but actually dares to do the opposite thing.”

The Witch of Edmonton: a known true story / composed into a tragi-comedy by divers well esteemed poets, William Rowley, Thomas Dekker, John Ford, & c. Main author: Thomas Dekker. Printed in London by J. Cottrel, 1658. Houghton Library, Harvard University. Source via Wikipedia Commons.



The Witch of Edmonton stuck with her, and when Silverman started having conversations with Writers Theatre and learned about the Theatre’s affinity for classic works, she pitched a new version of the Jacobean classic. Witch maintains the old world setting and characters, but explores it all with 21st century language, emotional complexity and a generous dose of humor. “There’s a safety in using that kind of distance to talk about disempowerment and visibility and anger and despair,” admits the playwright. “And I think it’s a necessary safety because we are bombarded by so many stories right now in the news and in the media that are just emotionally draining and horrible and upsetting and I understand why an audience doesn’t want to sign up to go to a theatre and be bombarded by things that upset them. I can’t blame them. So it feels to me that, maybe this is my bent in general, but particularly in this country and in this moment, I think comedy is such a powerful weapon. Or, if you will, a powerful invitation to say ‘I will take good care of you, audience, you will have a good time, it will be okay, but we’re going to talk about some really tricky things, and we’re gonna look carefully at some really tricky things, but we’re gonna do it in a way that doesn’t damage you.’” ■

Reprinted with permission from the author. Kennedy is the Director of Artistic Development at Writers Theatre in Glencoe, Illinois. This article originally appeared in the September 2018 edition of The Brief Chronicle, a magazine published by Writers Theatre.

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INTRODUCING THE DEVIL, BY BOBBY KENNEDY

“Oh! Sorry, my apologies. Can’t believe it slipped my mind. I’m the devil.” -Witch

Every culture and religion has had to consider the nature and origin of evil. If some sort of intelligence created the universe, are they then also responsible for evil? Most societies conclude that the intelligence that created the universe is ambivalent, that it embodies both good and evil, causing both to happen in the world. Only four major religions have created what scholar Jeffrey Burton Russell calls “a single personification of evil[:] Mazdaism (Zoroastrianism), ancient Hebrew religion (but not modern Judaism), Christianity, and Islam.”

The attempt to understand evil’s place in the world occupied much of early Hebrew and Christian theology. As the Hebrews began to conceive of God as “all-powerful and all-good” (as opposed to ambivalent, like other religions), they began “to posit as the source of evil a spiritual being opposed to the Lord God,” Russell writes in his book, *The Prince of Darkness: Radical Evil and the Power of Good in History*. “The Hebrews’ insistence upon God’s omnipotence and sovereignty did not allow them to believe that this opposing principle was independent of God, yet their insistence on God’s goodness no longer permitted it to be part of God. It had therefore to be a spirit that was both opposed and subject to God.”

Satan is a Hebrew word that “derives from a root meaning ‘oppose,’ ‘obstruct,’ or ‘accuse,’” explains Russell. Early Old Testament books such as Numbers and 2 Samuel use the word as a common noun. It’s not until later books such as Job and Zechariah that Satan is used to refer to a specific personality. Still, even in these books, Satan is seen as a tool or partner of God’s, carrying out his will or at least under his instructions. Between 200 B.C.E. and 100 C.E., the pseudepigrapha (Jewish books that were never included in the Old Testament at any point) advanced Satan’s agency, trying to make him as fully responsible for evil as a monotheistic religion could. While Rabbinic Judaism would ultimately reject the pseudepigrapha understanding of Satan after 70 B.C.E., early Christian theology built off these advances.

INTRODUCING THE DEVIL, (CON'T)

The New Testament, written in a much shorter amount of time than the Old Testament, had a more consistent view of the Devil. “The Devil is a creature of God, fallen angel, but as chief of fallen angels and of all evil powers he often acts almost as an opposite principle to God,” writes Russell. “Satan is not only the Lord’s chief opponent; he is the prince of all opposition to the Lord. Anyone who does not follow the Lord is under Satan’s power.” Later, Christian theologians including St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, among others, would better explain the existence of evil in a divine universe, articulating that God gave humans free will so that we might choose good of our own volition. Without the freedom to choose, there could be no good for it would be compelled. It is only by being given the choice of evil that goodness can affirm itself and have value. Without vice there can be no virtue. This development of thought, which placed the blame for original sin more on Adam and Eve than ever before, marginalized Satan’s role in Christian theology.

At the same time, however, the Evil One was becoming a cultural fascination. Many of the characteristics and practices commonly associated with Satan come from folklore, not theology. His association with animals and his bestial appearance was due to the pagan gods’ fondness of other creatures. Folklore also propagated the idea that the devil could be outwitted in certain contests, such as wrestling, gambling and debate. The concept of a pact between the devil and a human would quickly transcend its populist origin and influence official church doctrine. As literacy among the general population grew, the presence of the Devil in literature and art flourished. While only briefly seen at the end of *Inferno*, Satan is a memorable presence in Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, which was completed in 1320. He also appeared in many plays of the later Middle Ages, where the chronology of the angel’s creation to his fall were explored to the fullest extent yet and established the figure’s backstory that we commonly know today.

Also fueling the cultural popularity of Satan was a growing belief in rampant diabolical witchcraft. People began to be accused by their neighbors, friends and family members of having been corrupted by the devil and were now bewitching the innocent, flying on broomsticks and causing other mischief. The witch-craze, peaking between the 15th century and the 17th century, was responsible for the execution of tens of thousands of people both in Europe and in North America. *The Witch of Edmonton* appeared in 1621, towards the end of the witch-craze in Europe but still seventy years before the events in Salem, Massachusetts. The play shows how some people in London were starting to doubt that the people being accused were actually witches and that perhaps a tragedy of injustice was being perpetrated.

INTRODUCING THE DEVIL, (CON'T)

The first literary depictions of the Devil with at least serious complexity if not sympathy emerged at the same time as the witch-craze. A German legend about a man named Faust first appeared in print in 1587. A successful man but dissatisfied with his life, Faust makes a pact with Mephistopheles (as the Devil is called here), selling his soul in exchange for knowledge and power. After 24 years, Mephistopheles comes to collect and carries Faust off to Hell. Unlike Medieval stories, where the Devil was in conflict with God or Christ, here it is a human facing off with the Devil, alone, with no support from the Church. The story's pessimistic ending was also groundbreaking, as are the glimpses of introspection and humanity in Mephistopheles. British playwright Christopher Marlowe would use the Faust legend to write his 1588 play *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, which follows the German story closely, preserving the dark ending. It wouldn't be until Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's version of the Faust story—Part One appearing in 1806, followed by Part Two in 1832—that the protagonist would be saved at the end.

John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, an epic poem first published in 1667, is the most famous depiction of Satan as protagonist and influenced all subsequent characterizations of the Devil. The poem tells the story of the Fall of Man, as a result of Satan's temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and includes references to how Satan was cast out of heaven. Whether or not Milton intended for it to be taken as such, *Paradise Lost* is cited as one of the first sympathetic portrayals of Satan, with some even calling his role in the epic that of an anti- or tragic hero. A subsequent poem, *Paradise Regained*, published in 1671, continues Satan's story, covering his effort to tempt Christ in the Judaeian desert.

As the 18th century ushered in the Enlightenment and science and reason pushed the world towards a more secular point of view, the presence of the Devil in serious art and literature diminished. Although he is called a "devil" and a "demon," the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was created by humans and taught evil by us (he also reads a copy of *Paradise Lost*). And in all the horror stories written by Edgar Allan Poe, the Devil is not a part of the darkest and most disturbing ones, only the ones with a more comedic and whimsical tone.

Although increasingly secular, writers of the 20th and 21st centuries continue to find creative inspiration in the idea of the Devil and a personification of evil. All of the historical representations and behaviors of Satan continue to be explored, whether it be demonic possession (*The Exorcist*), the creation of the Antichrist (*Rosemary's Baby*), corruption of souls (C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*), or general causation of mischief and despair ("*Sympathy for the Devil*" by The Rolling Stones). On stage, the Devil has enjoyed an equally rich life.

INTRODUCING THE DEVIL, (CON'T)

On the lighter end of the spectrum is the 1955 musical *Damn Yankees*, with its Devil-in-disguise character Mr. Applegate offering real estate agent Joe Boyd an opportunity to be a baseball star. A darker and more contemplative example is Irish playwright Conor McPherson's 2006 play, *The Seafarer*, which portrays a rematch between the Devil and a man he lost a poker game to twenty-five years ago.

With *WITCH*, Jen Silverman adds another interesting chapter to the life of the Devil in art. Here we see the Evil One depicted as a junior salesman, eager to collect souls on his trip through Edmonton. Already quite skilled at his job, Scratch (as he is called in the play) has an unexpected and life-changing encounter with Elizabeth, the so-called Witch of Edmonton. After revealing more of his inner life than ever before, it is remarkably the Devil who is left searching his soul in order to make an all-important decision. Thousands of years after his debut, this fascinating figure continues to capture the imagination of artists and audiences alike. ■

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THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE WITCH-HUNT, OR WITCH PURGE

...is a search for people who have been labeled witches, or a search for evidence of witchcraft. The classical period of witch-hunts in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America took place in the Early Modern period or about 1450 to 1750, spanning the upheavals of the Reformation and the Thirty Years' War, resulting in an estimated 35,000 to 50,000 executions. The last executions of people convicted as witches in Europe took place in the 18th century. In other regions, like Africa and Asia, contemporary witch-hunts have been reported from sub-Saharan Africa and Papua New Guinea, and official legislation against witchcraft is still found in Saudi Arabia and Cameroon today.

In current language, "witch-hunt" metaphorically means an investigation that is usually conducted with much publicity, supposedly to uncover subversive activity, disloyalty, and so on, but with the real purpose of harming opponents. It can also involve elements of moral panic or mass hysteria.

THE PURITANS

..also known as Separatists were members of a religious movement during the 17th and 18th century who sought to extricate Anglicanism from the influence of Catholicism. This break from the Church of England constituted dissent. Many Puritans migrated to America, (the New World) to escape persecution, the very first settlers being 'The Pilgrims' who sailed from Southampton, England on the Mayflower in 1620. The second much bigger wave of settlers were the Massachusetts Bay Colony 10 years later, where they founded the city of Boston. They built their own society where the Bible was central to their worship and a life of simplicity was paramount to their values. They believed everyone should have direct access to the word of God; in turn education and literacy were as much valued for women as for men. Still, as educated as they were, their basic view was that the world was divided into civilized people, and savage people, Christians and Pagans. If Christians worshiped God, Pagans worshiped the Devil.

WITCH TRIALS IN THE NEW WORLD

While witch trials had begun to fade out across much of Europe by the mid-17th century, they continued on the fringes of Europe and in the American Colonies. The events in 1692–1693 in Salem became a brief outburst of a sort of hysteria in the New World, while the practice was already waning in most of Europe.

The Salem witch trials were a series of hearings and prosecutions of people accused of witchcraft in colonial Massachusetts between February 1692 and May 1693. More than 200 people were accused. Thirty people were found guilty, 19 of whom were executed by hanging.

The episode is one of Colonial America's most notorious cases of mass hysteria. It was not unique, but a colonial manifestation of the much broader phenomenon of witch trials in the early modern period, which took the lives of tens of thousands in Europe. In America, Salem's events have been used in political rhetoric and popular literature as a vivid cautionary tale about the dangers of isolation, religious extremism, false accusations, and lapses in due process. Many historians consider the lasting effects of the trials to have been highly influential in the history of the United States. According to historian George Lincoln Burr, "the Salem witchcraft was the rock on which the theocracy shattered."

MORRIS DANCING

Morris dancing is a form of English folk dance. It is based on rhythmic stepping and the execution of choreographed figures by a group of dancers in costume, usually wearing bells on their shins and/or shoes. A band or musician, also costumed, accompanies the dancers. Sticks, swords, handkerchiefs, and a variety of other implements may be wielded by the dancers.

The earliest known and surviving English written mention of Morris dance is dated to 1448 and records the payment of seven shillings to Morris dancers by the Goldsmiths' Company in London. Further mentions of Morris dancing occur in the late 16th century, and there are also early records such as bishops' "Visitation Articles" mentioning sword dancing, guising and other dancing activities, as well as mumming plays

While the earliest records of "Morys" mention it in a court setting, and it appears a little later in the Lord Mayors' Processions in London, by the mid-17th century it had assumed the nature of a folk dance performed in the parishes.

Morris dancing continued in popularity until the industrial revolution and its accompanying social changes. Four teams claim a continuous lineage of tradition within their village or town: Abingdon, Bampton, Headington Quarry and Chipping Campden. Other villages have revived their own traditions, and hundreds of other teams across the globe have adopted (and adapted) these traditions, or have created their own styles from the basic building blocks of Morris stepping and figures.



The "Green Man" a Morris dancing traditional role which combines jester and announcer.



Morris Dancers with handkerchiefs By Tim Green from Bradford - Morris Dancers, York



English Elizabethan clown Will Kempe dancing a jig from Norwich to London in 1600



Morris dancing in the grounds of Wells Cathedral, Wells, England. (Exeter Morris Men) Photographed by Adrian Pingstone in July 2006 and placed in the public domain.

INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

Books and Movies about Witches

These are NYT's recommended books about Witches

1. *The Ruin of All Witches* by Malcolm Gaskill: Non-Fiction. History of Life in a 17th Century New England Frontier Town where the stresses of isolation, foul weather, disease and death led to accusations of witchcraft.
2. *The Witching Tide* by Margaret Meyer: Inspired by events in East Anglia, England in 1645, the novel evokes the climate of fear and accusations that grips a town with the arrival of a "Witch-Finder."
3. *All Souls Trilogy* by Deborah Harkness: "Harry Potter for Grownups" A Best-selling series brimming with magic, time travel and witches. The series has spawned an avid fan base and a splashy TV adaptation.
4. *The Practical Magic Series* by Alice Hoffman: This best-selling series includes *Practical Magic*, *The Rules of Magic*, *Magic Lessons* and *The Book of Magic*.

Interesting movies about Witches and Witchcraft

1. HAXAN 1922: A haunting Swedish silent film (HAXAN is Witch in Swedish). Part historical observation, part dramatic recreations, HAXAN is a chilling examination of witches and witch-hunts throughout European history.
2. BELL BOOK AND CANDLE 1958: Kim Novak and Jimmy Stewart's witchy Rom-Com. Worth watching for Novak's stunning costumes and Jack Lemmon's portrayal of a bongo playing warlock alone!
3. ROSEMARY'S BABY 1968: Roman Polanski's creepy modern witch tale. Notable for Ruth Gordon's Oscar-winning performance.
4. Eve's Bayou 1997: Gorgeous Southern gothic tale with an all African American cast.
5. THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT 1999: The foremother of the found footage genre follows three film-makers as they seek an entity that haunts the Black Hills Forest.
6. THE WITCH 2016: A24 gem, a slow burn with a heart-stopping ending. Set in 17th century New England.