

Megan Cohen, Playwright

Since she emerged on the Bay Area theatre scene in 2008, playwright Megan Cohen has been an artist of both quality and quantity. The self-described “most frequently produced female playwright in the San Francisco Bay Area” had more than 20 shows and readings in 2012 alone, working with companies like Hot Mess, PianoFight, San Francisco Theater Pub, Performers Under Stress, Playwrights Foundation and Bay One Acts. Her playwriting fecundity doesn’t just come from her “ravenousness to work a lot,” she says; it’s also part of her philosophy of self-education: “The audience is the teacher I trust the most. They’re not necessarily the easiest to understand, but they are going to tell you if what you’re doing is hearable.”

Cohen, who’s rejected pursuing an MFA, has long been an autodidact. “There’s a strong culture in my household of giving yourself permission to do big things,” she says. Growing up, she and her family were like “migratory birds,” she says, moving back and forth between the Bay Area and a small town in Long Island every six to nine months. As if that weren’t enough complication to her schooling, she also worked as a professional actor. At age 7, when she was at an elementary school with a touring Act!vated Story Theatre production, an adult asked her, “Do you have a bathroom pass?” to which she responded, “No, I work here.” After being in and out of schools her whole life, as a teenager she dropped out altogether in favor of World Schooling, an alternative approach to homeschooling, because, she says, her school “wouldn’t let me read enough hard books.”

As a drama major at Stanford, she more than made up for the lack of hard books, especially in a two-student class with Professor Carl Weber that desanctified the classics, treating them as if they were new plays. “We asked,

‘Is this a good play? Is this still a good play?’” she says. During college, she also got a grant to explore the work of the English group Forced Entertainment, who works by “a rapid generation of ideas, trying things, making mistakes, rethinking and throwing away all but the best, as opposed to crafting this perfect jewel”—a process that deeply influenced Cohen’s own. With Stuart Bousel, she’s created a free monthly workshop in this vein at the Exit Theatre called Saturday Write Fever, which



Megan Cohen.
Photo: Julia Heitner

consists of a 30-minute “writing sprint” followed by an “instant festival,” with actors cast from the crowd.

After a stint in New York after college, Cohen returned to the Bay Area for a dramaturgy internship at American Conservatory Theater. “My intellectual curiosity is what got me back out here,” she said. “Seeing the small theatre here is what kept me here. I realized that you can have the Geary, or you can just have one amazing actor with a light on a stage and have a really rich experience just with language.”

Cohen has been a fixture in the small-theatre scene ever since, but her work has been anything but fixed. Her artistic

concerns span the history of storytelling, from ancient myths to transmedia (which combines different platforms, live and digital, to tell a single story). *Megan Cohen’s Totally Epic Odyssey*, Cohen’s next project for the SF Olympians Festival, to which she’s a frequent contributor, will fuse these interests. She’s telling the epic poem partly online and partly as a solo show, which will star Cohen herself. The full version will last 12 hours. (The version at SF Olympians, by contrast, will be “a 90-minute highlight reel.”) “No one wants to see a 12-hour play,” says Cohen. “Part of my process in taking ownership of my work is to do something worse than any theatre would let me do. People ask me who’s producing it, and I say, ‘Well, I am, I guess.’”

A 12-hour play is huge step for a playwright who often writes works that are just one or 10 minutes long. In the past, Cohen said, “I desired to get in as many rooms with as many writers as possible, and it’s been such a beautiful hamster wheel of churning things out. Now, instead of being reactive to opportunities or obstacles, it’s ‘What would I do if I could do anything?’” The answer: “I’m hungry for bigger projects.”

Bigger companies are answering her call. Last spring, she got staged readings of her “neo-noir” play *Joe Ryan* and her generations-spanning play *The Actual Stuff* at Impact Theatre and SF Playhouse, respectively; at the latter, she worked with union actors for the first time. But if she’s rising in the theatre world, her aesthetics will remain rooted in the earthy philosophy honed at San Francisco Theater Pub, with its rowdy barroom audiences: “The way to get an audience open and vulnerable is to make them laugh first. But that’s not enough. You have to keep going deeper and deeper into the character and the situation, or you’ll lose them again.”

—Lily Janiak