

# We Are Proud to Present: Jackie Sibblies Drury



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Recently, Company One Theatre dramaturg Ramona Ostrowski spoke with playwright Jackie Sibblies Drury about the native challenges of creating and developing a piece with charged subject matter, and the translations it requires across history, time and space.

**Ramona Ostrowski: Where did the inspiration for *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation...* come from? Was it the subject matter or the unusual form that first interested you?**

**Jackie Sibblies Drury:** It was definitely the subject matter, which I came across randomly. I was trying to research a different play, and I googled “black people” and “Germany.” I found out that there was a genocide, and I had never heard of it before. So I did a bunch more research, and in trying to write a play sort of more directly about that, I think that I didn’t write a very good play— I sort of failed at writing a play—it was an impossible task. But that failure, and the struggle to articulate it, became the inspiration for the form of the piece as it exists now.

**RO: What’s notable about its development and production history?**

**JSD:** I started researching when I was living in Chicago, right before I started graduate school, and I wrote the first draft as my graduate thesis at Brown. We had a workshop production that I was really proud of. I submitted it to the Ignition Festival at Victory Gardens in Chicago, which is for emerging playwrights of color under 40. At that time, the festival would accept six plays and do a weekend of readings. It was fun and festive. They would then choose two of those six plays for further workshops, and one would then proceed to the main stage, which is really rare. There aren’t a lot of open submission processes these days where you might actually get a production out of it. Out of the six festival plays, **We Are Proud to Present a Presentation...** was chosen for production, and that was also where I met director Eric Ting, who is now a friend and a

close collaborator. Shortly after that, I was part of the SOHO Rep writers group, and they became interested in the play as well. Eric and I were able to do a very, very different production of it there. And now it gets to go to Boston for another entirely different production, which I’m excited about!

**RO: After you were so intimately involved in the first several productions, the play is now having its own life out in the world. What’s that like for you as a playwright, especially for a work that in some ways is quite personal?**

**JSD:** To be totally honest it’s super weird, and exciting. I’m thrilled that people are going to see it, and there’s always something a little bit disconcerting in it for playwrights, isn’t there? I mean, to put on a play is a beautiful thing, but it’s also a time-intensive, emotionally-intensive, labor-intensive thing to do. And so thinking about all these people working on something...that I’m not there in the room to support them at all is strange, but it’s also remarkable to see different theater artists’ interpretation—different direction, design and also a different interpretation by performers. And to know that two organizations like Company One and ArtsEmerson have come together for the first time to collaborate on this project—it’s really the highest compliment you can get as a playwright, to have people create a successful production out of something that you have worked on so intensively.

**RO: The play’s structure is experimental and places performers and audience in an unusual relationship. What did you learn about the piece as it met its audiences for the first time? Were there surprises in there for you?**

**JSD:** I was surprised by how nervous I was. At the first few previews in Chicago—about a year and a half ago—the responses were pretty polarized, but that wasn’t so surprising to me. I learned a lot. Sometimes people didn’t know what to do with the script’s inherent openness; they didn’t know how it aligned with more traditional dramatic works. These points of discomfort are really fruitful for the storytelling. I found it interesting and exciting to think about getting the chance to expose people to a different way of constructing narrative, a different way of interacting with the idea of “theatre.”

**RO: In the script, the end of the play marks a dramatic tonal shift that you’ve provided guideposts for, but which is largely entrusted to the**

**director and cast to figure out through rehearsal, as well as night-to-night with an audience. Can you talk to me a little bit about the end of the play? What's the inspiration for placing so much in the hands of your script's collaborators?**

**JSD:** There's so much about live performance that I respond to that's not necessarily about the words that are being spoken. It's about the stage picture or the mood in the room. As a playwright, it's pretty frustrating because all I get are the words. I think that when I see something that I find particularly moving or powerful, it's often not something I associate with a particular line, but rather an image, or feeling, or series of movements. I wanted to find a way, I hope, that a production or a group of people creating together—if they're excited enough about the play and intrigued and challenged by that openness of an ending—will issue an invitation to the audience. That we might sort of see this person on stage, and empathize together in a room. If that happens, even for a few people, I think that's pretty amazing. The subject matter is so dark, and the treatment of it is so ironic ...and then unironic. I was wary of trying to have a button at the end, like "and that's why genocide is bad." The fact is: there's nothing really to say in the face of the most awful thing that we can imagine human beings doing to other human beings. Every neat, clean "ending" just feels like moralizing, and it's my hope that instead, **We Are Proud to Present a Presentation...** will feel as open and complicated as thinking about the big idea can be.

**RO: This piece refuses categorization. It even positions itself as non-theatre—rather, it's a "presentation" about a historical subject that spins wildly out of control. The characters are Actors, played by actual actors, who themselves have had to wrestle with the difficult political and social subject matter on a personal level throughout the rehearsal process. What excites you about this structure?**

**JSD:** This piece doesn't work very well when we attempt to explain all the connections and tie up all of the messiness—to fix it. The play is broken a little bit on purpose, just like the historical (and contemporary) events it describes. I think that the most fertile space in it is where people can enter it and have an empathetic creative response, and also a critical, rational, creative response.

**RO: What do you mean by "broken?"**

**JSD:** The play *tries* to combine two different events, or two different forms of discrimination. It can't equate them, but it puts them next to each other on the same plate, and the characters of the Actors get confused about it. I hope that everyone in that room gets confused about it too, because I certainly feel confused about it! There's slippage of one sort of racial relation into another, there is a build-up, but there's no cause and effect. Because of the subject matter, the equation of the play is not an equation that works. That's what I mean by it being broken. Of course, this is all very cryptic and vague and may actually be slightly pretentious.

**RO: This play often puts me in mind of Sarah Kane's 1995 play *Blasted*, which connected individual sexual violence in a hotel room in Leeds, UK, with the same impulse that led to the ethnic cleansing of the Bosnian war. You, too, are making connections across otherwise disconnected cultural and historical moments.**

**JSD:** When I was doing research, I discovered that there are various pictures of Herero people from that time. Very traumatic pictures. There's one image of an execution: black men hanging in a tree. I saw it, and it was just so difficult for me to not associate that with lynchings in the South, even though it's obviously a very, very different image. It's sort of like a palimpsest (which traditionally was a manuscript page that was washed and re-used, but the ghosting of its original text always shines through). I feel like American racial dynamics are so drummed into me that I see them in places where they actually aren't, but I also feel like that means that they are kind of everywhere. The violence done one place has resonances in another.

**RO: What excites you about the future of theatre right now?**

**JSD:** I think that people crave—people go to theater because they want to learn something new, and they want to think, and they want to empathize with something that is inconceivable to them. Or that's why I go, and I feel like that's why a lot of different kinds of people go. The American Theatre needs to trust that more, but that's where I put my hope.