

# Get To Know Playwright Liz Duffy Adams

By Lily Wolff and Luke Evans

Before taking the Guthrie stage, *Born With Teeth* had its world premiere at the award-winning Alley Theatre in Houston, Texas. The Alley's Literary Manager Lily Wolff and Research Dramaturg Luke Evans caught up with Playwright Liz Duffy Adams to chat about writing and history, writing about history and writing about writing.

**LILY WOLFF:** I'd love to talk about your journey to this production. It's finally happening! You and [Director] Rob [Melrose] waited a long time for this moment.

**LIZ DUFFY ADAMS:** First of all, I go far back with Rob. We went to grad school together, and he directed my second-year production. I had a ball working with him, and after that, he directed and dramaturged several of my plays. When I wrote *Born With Teeth*, I thought, "This feels like it might be a Rob play." I had a private reading in the back room of a theater with a handful of people because I wanted to hear it with actors. Rob was in New York, so I invited him. This was pre-Alley Theatre for him; he was a freelance director. He said, "I think this is ready. Can I take this out into the world and pitch it?" I said, "Absolutely. That would be a dream." Then he got the fabulous job at the Alley, and he invited me to Houston to do a reading in 2019. We had [Scenic Designer] Michael Locher's sketch of a set design on a big screen upstage and the

actors with music stands in front of it. The audience was so there for it.

**LW:** At the Alley reading, what were you curious to hear land with the audience?

**LDA:** The historical context. I've done all this research, but have I put in too much? Part of the challenge of writing this kind of play was finding a way to keep the story in the present and have the historical context be something the audience doesn't have to worry about.

**LW:** There is so much fun research behind this story. I don't know how you practiced the self-restraint to not just put it all in there! How did you approach the research?

**LDA:** I've been researching this play my entire life. I went into theater because I fell in love with Shakespeare. I was a teenager in small-town Massachusetts where there was no theater. Then I saw *Twelfth Night* on a field trip when I was 15. It was a real lightning-bolt moment. After it was over, I waited

until the theater was empty, and I went down to the stage. There was a painted line to demarcate the stage, and I stepped over that line and stood there. I thought, "I don't know what the hell just happened, but this is where I want to live — in this world."

So I went to New York to study acting. Much later, I'd been reading and seeing Shakespeare and Marlowe for so long, and I thought, "Oh, I'll write a play about Marlowe! Marlowe was a spy. So cool!" But how do you balance the information? My feeling is you pick one moment. You don't try to tell a big, broad story — that's a biopic. You pick one moment and you keep it in the moment.

One of my great guides was Shakespeare's History Plays and how he worked with his research. If the information isn't dramatic or theatrical or it doesn't work for the story he's telling, he takes all the liberties he wants — changing decades, throwing people in that didn't belong there, changing



events. I make an effort to not write anything that wouldn't have been possible. There's a lot that's real. But it's theater, not history class.

**LUKE EVANS: I like the idea of picking one moment in the history — in this case, Marlowe and Shakespeare working together to write the Henry VI plays. Why did you choose that moment?**

**LDA:** Actually, that moment chose me. The seed was stumbling across an article about these Shakespearean scholars who believe they have proven that Shakespeare and Marlowe collaborated on the Henry VI cycle. I knew that Elizabethan playwrights collaborated all the time. Having read about Marlowe and Shakespeare and already having gut feelings about what their works told me about who they were as people, I was like, "Oh my God! These two? In a room together? Collaborating on a play? On a series of plays?" Instantly, I felt that thrill, and I knew I could write it.

**LW: You told us about your background up through acting school, and then we fast-forwarded to you becoming a playwright. Can you fill in the blanks?**

**LDA:** I went to NYU and was studying at the Stella Adler Studio of Acting, which included a classical acting class, Shakespeare and the Restoration. That was my favorite part. I loved it. Then I transferred to the Experimental Theatre Wing for two years. Making experimental theater often involves writing text for the work you're making, so I was writing while still thinking of myself as a performer. After college, I was self-producing experimental theater in little

venues in the East Village while still studying Shakespearean acting and performing in hole-in-the-wall classical productions. All of this was my training to be a playwright.

I tried to be a mainstream actor, but I was terrible at auditioning and everything made me miserable. I was burned out on self-producing, so I thought, "I'm going to write a play." I was part of a weekly actor support group, and every week, I brought pages in and they read them out loud. In a few months, I had written a play. I didn't know what to do with it, and one of them told me to send it to a theater in Tribeca that did new plays (One Dream Theater, long gone now). A company member picked it up off somebody's desk, read it and said, "I want to do this." That company member was Edie Falco [from "The Sopranos"]. It was before she was famous; she was doing indie films and theater and waitressing. It was instantly produced. After yearning for a place in the theater, a door I knocked on once suddenly flew open, and someone said, "Come on in." That was it.

I think because I had all that training and life experience as a performer, I could write a part that Edie Falco wanted to play. Because I was writing a part that I would want to play.

**LW: What was it like to be a writer writing about other writers? How did you approach that?**

**LDA:** I've often heard people opining, "Don't write about writers. Nobody wants to hear about that. It's very solipsistic, very meta. Boring!" Okay, but people who go to theater, which is quite a small subset of humanity, love the

theater. I think they are interested in the backstage drama and comedy. I didn't do it on purpose, but these are the people I wrote about because this is something I'm interested in. I'm a great believer in following your bliss when it comes to writing.

**LW: Espionage is an important part of the world of your play. Without spoiling anything, how did Shakespeare and Marlowe relate to that world?**

**LDA:** Shakespeare made a deliberate choice to stay out of that. It was not uncommon for poets to be involved in espionage — not many to the degree that Marlowe was, but it was an obvious side hustle in the circumstances of the day. A big part of this play is how dangerous it could be even if you weren't a spy and were just a writer. There were more spies than crimes to find. But there was also justified paranoia. The Queen had active enemies and could have been assassinated at any moment.

**LW: What would you say to an audience member who's waiting for your play to begin?**

**LDA:** Before I was an actor and a playwright, I was an audience member — and I still am. We all have that experience where you've just sat down and you're a bit distracted and suddenly you realize, "I'm in the theater. Any moment now, the lights are going to come up onstage and anything could happen." It's a moment of suspense, thrill and hope. I swear to God, I have tried my best to give you an experience that will make you feel awake, alive, surprised, happy and interested — and give you all the good, yummy things you want. **G**