



# PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

2023  
SEASON

PLAY

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*Melissa Leilani Larson (Photo by Nick Stone)*

**Melissa Leilani Larson** (she/her) is a mixed Grace Filipino American writer based in Salt Lake City. Her award-winning work has been seen on five continents. She is the youngest writer ever to be presented with the Smith-Pettit Foundation Award for Outstanding Contribution to Mormon Letters, which she received for her body of work in 2019. She is the only woman to receive more than one Association for Mormon Letters Drama Award and is one of only two playwrights to win four (the other is Tim Slover). She currently serves as AML president. Mel holds a BA in English from BYU and an MFA from the Iowa Playwrights Workshop. She is a proud member of the Dramatists Guild, serving Utah for several years as Ambassador and then as Regional Rep.

While the information above is a starting place, I have had the great pleasure of knowing Melissa for many years and working with her in many capacities: acting in plays she's written, directing and workshopping a world premiere, and even working alongside her at Salt Lake Community College. On the occasion of her debut at Hale Center Theatre Orem, I sat down with her for a short interview about being a Utah playwright, working with director Barta Heiner, what attracts her to Jane Austen, and more.

**I wanted to ask a bit about your Utah experience. Having a Utah Valley playwright on the Hale Center Theater Orem stage is unique. You moved**

**to Utah when you were young, right?**

I was born in Hawai'i and lived there until the summer before I turned 13. So junior high, high school and undergrad were in Utah. My parents built a house in Orem, and then several years later one in Provo. I went to Lakeridge Junior High, and then Mountain View High. I lived in Provo when I went to BYU.

**I know your BYU degree was in English, instead of theatre. Were you interested in being a playwright when you started?**

I pursued English with the intent to write fiction. In undergrad, I saw a flyer for a contest—the Lewis Playwriting Contest for Women. The prize was \$500 and a staged reading. I didn't know what a reading was, but I knew what \$500 was. I went home and I wrote a play. I think it took me two weeks? The play was *Lady in Waiting*, about Anne Boleyn and Henry VIII. I didn't win, and I didn't understand why. I thought my play was great! Fall of my senior year, I signed up for Playwriting 1. I took it from an adjunct instructor, Elizabeth Hansen. She gave me good, if stern, feedback. Somehow in that class I became a playwright. I rewrote that first play—I learned it was not as great as I thought—and I entered that contest again a few years later. This time I won, and that play would become my first produced play.

**Who were some of the other professors who influenced you at BYU?**

Liz encouraged me to apply for BYU's MA in Theatre History when I graduated with my BA in English. During that time, I kind of had a crash course in becoming a theatre person. Liz supported and mentored me, and we continue to collaborate on projects today; she is a great friend. I learned to stage manage from Loraine Edwards, who is still a dear friend—she just directed this version of *Pride & Prejudice* at Chichester College in the UK this past March. I stage managed a show directed by Barta Heiner, as well as a show she performed in. Even though I never took a class from her, she was incredibly supportive of my development as a playwright. It was also during this time that I first met and learned from Eric Samuelsen, who would also become a great friend and mentor.

**Among your plays, you have had two very successful Austen adaptations: *Persuasion* and *Pride & Prejudice*. How did that first project, *Persuasion*, come about?**

Barta, actually!

I think it was during the third year of my MFA at Iowa. I had called Barta just to say hi and chat, and she told me I would do a lovely job adapting Austen. She suggested *Persuasion*, which was funny, because I considered it my favorite Austen novel. So that was when the idea started to ruminate. Bryan Moore, a friend from my Iowa program who teaches and directs at Concordia University, Nebraska, reached out to me looking for a large cast show, and he directed the first production of *Persuasion* in Fall 2009 and then Barta directed it at BYU in Spring 2011. BYU had never done an Austen before then, which kind of blew my mind. The show sold out completely.

**Barta later directed the premiere of *Pride & Prejudice* at BYU in 2014, and you and Barta are collaborating again here. What is your relationship like when working on these plays? Is there a special magic between you, Barta, and Jane Austen?**

I like to think there is a bit of magic there. Barta is herself a wonderful stage actor. To see her perform is a gift. She has an innate sensibility for period pieces—she gets the language, and the rules, and the stakes. Working with Barta has helped me make these adaptations work: they are true to the books but they also exist completely as theatrical worlds. They are for people who read the books, and people who don't.

**I know that even outside these adaptations and your professional interest in Austen, you are a devotee. What is it about Jane Austen that appeals to you?**

Austen wrote real stories about real women, and at a time when that wasn't happening a lot. When I read her novels, I see and hear real people. She wrote about what she knew, and it's a very specific setting. Yet her novels and characters are very distinct. Her novels are time capsules: they give us a very complete picture of the time and place in which she lived. At the same time her prose, and her humor, are peerless.

**In 2018 you won the Smith-Pettit Award for Outstanding Contribution to Mormon Letters for your body of work and have received multiple**

**awards for specific plays from the Association for Mormon Letters Drama (including one for the debut of *Pride and Prejudice* in 2014). You are currently the President of Association for Mormon Letters. You often directly write about issues of faith in your plays, does it inform your work with Jane Austen as well?**

I think Austen epitomizes the idea of writing what you know. I used to fight against that a lot. I didn't want to write Mormon stories because I thought they were too small, that audiences wouldn't care. But as I've matured as a writer—and hopefully as a person—I've come to realize that supposedly "small" stories contain a great deal of humanity. I learned that from Austen, and it is something I look to do with my own work.

**Why do you think Austen has such a strong appeal in Utah?**

Austen is accessible. She has never gone out of print. You can make the argument that she gave us the formula for girl meets boy—the modern romantic comedy. The characters in Austen's novels live in a society with specific rules and expectations for behavior. Marriage and family are important goals. I think Utah audiences relate to those ideas.

**I know your Austen plays enjoy a continued life with *Persuasion*'s most recent production at Utah Valley University just last year, and a production of *Pride & Prejudice* at Texas Shakespeare Festival this coming summer. Any more Austen in your future?**

I have a goal to eventually adapt all her novels. I think they each hold distinct and interesting theatrical challenges. I also have an idea for a new play that takes place in an Austen-esque world, but with characters in their 40s. Jane Austen died tragically young, at 41, and I think sometimes about what she might have written had she lived longer. And now that I'm in my 40s, I want to see plays about people like me on stage.

**If people want to follow your work and career, where can they find you?**

My website is [melissaleilani-larson.com](http://melissaleilani-larson.com), and I try to update it regularly. I'm also on Instagram at [https://www.instagram.com/mel\\_leilani/](https://www.instagram.com/mel_leilani/), and my plays are listed on the New Play Exchange: <https://newplayexchange.org/users/452/melissa-leilani-larson>

—HCTO Guest Dramaturg Mark Fossen, MFA