

Portland playwright takes a page from her own script to help others work through grief

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By Eric Russell

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Bess Welden in front of The Theater Project in Brunswick before a rehearsal for her play "Death Wings."
Derek Davis/Staff Photographer

Veteran playwright and theater director Bess Welden started writing her latest play in the fall of 2014.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Death Wings," an original play and interactive art installation by Portland-based theater maker Bess Welden

WHEN/WHERE: The production will run Thursday through Saturday, March 30 to April 8 (with an additional matinee on Sunday, April 2) at The Theater Project in Brunswick (14 School St.) and also Thursday through Saturday, April 20-29 at Meetinghouse Arts in Freeport (40 Main St.).

TICKETS: Both theaters are adopting a “pay what you decide” model for all shows and suggesting donations between \$5-\$25. Tickets are available to reserve [online](#).

The story’s central character, Grand, has created a ritual she uses to cope each time someone in her life is dying. First, she asks them to tell their life story in five sentences (it’s harder than you think). Then, she goes throughout their home, gathering items – papers, photos, pieces of fabric – that she cuts up into small pieces and uses to make what she calls “death wings” that help the person pass from this life to the next.

Welden was still working on the play a year later when her father was dying.

“So, I decided to try this practice I had conceived; I made him a set of wings,” she said.

She gathered old neckties and handkerchiefs, maps and photocopies of family photos. She didn’t finish it until after he had died.

“But I found that it became a really important grieving practice for me,” Welden said. “It transformed memories into something I could visualize. So, I had this human-size set of wings that I had made for him, but in many ways, I was making them for myself.”

What started as a play has turned into something larger, and it’s finally ready for audiences.

Welden’s play, “Death Wings,” premieres Thursday at the Theater Project in Brunswick, where it will run through April 8 before moving to Meetinghouse Arts in Freeport for a series of shows from April 20-29.

In addition to the play, which deals with themes of loss and grief and borrows from the Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus, Welden has created a massive art installation that serves as the play’s set. Some of the set pieces are death wings created by people who attended a series of workshops she’s hosted since the fall. Audience members will have a chance to interact with the installation before each performance.



Death wings made by Bess Welden for the production of her play. *Photo by Molly Haley*

As her project grew, Welden kept coming back to the idea that if it could provide comfort for her, why not for others, too? She credits her sister for the idea to make death wings a more collaborative endeavor.

“I continued to develop the play as I did other things, but she said, ‘This is something you could share with others,’ ” Welden said. “I didn’t really think about it in those terms.”

Once she started hosting workshops, though, the project changed.

“I felt like the experience kept cracking my heart open and making more space for compassion,” she said. “Everything we did together drove home the truth that loss and grief are universal, and that if we allow ourselves the space to share our stories and ritualize it in a community practice, it can be powerful.”

A SAFE SPACE

Jean Mattimore, who lives in Portland, attended one of the first death wings workshops, in November. She had met Welden through a mutual friend and the project came up. Mattimore recently lost a close friend and was intrigued.

“The workshop presented an opportunity to just absorb that death and work with it in a very different way,” she said. “I’m not a creative person in that way, but the process that Bess has set up is welcoming to everyone.”

Mattimore plans to attend the play as well.



Erica Murphy of Portland during a rehearsal for “Death Wings” at The Theater Project in Brunswick. *Derek Davis/Staff Photographer*

One of the things she appreciated about the workshop was how Welden broadened the concept of loss. Coming out of the pandemic, Mattimore thought a lot about things that were lost during the past couple years.

“There are many types of losses that have a grieving process,” she said.

Sarah Jorgensen learned about Welden’s project after a friend chose to end their life under Maine’s death with dignity law.

“I was just intrigued and wanted to learn more,” she said.

Jorgensen attended a workshop in Freeport with five others, one of whom was a friend.

“The beauty of this whole thing was the way they facilitated it. They made you feel like wherever you were was OK,” she said. “Obviously, you are sitting in a circle with people, but it’s not a therapy session. Everyone is working on their individual stuff, just in this safe container they provide.”

Jorgensen said the most meaningful part of the experience for her was the metaphor of “letting your grief fly away.” She plans to attend the show on opening weekend.

COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

Welden, who lives in Portland, has been writing and directing plays, and acting, too, for decades. She co-wrote and starred in a one-woman play about motherhood called “The Passion of the Hausfrau” in 2009 and wrote a play called “Refuge/Malja” that premiered at Portland Stage in 2018. But she says “Death Wings” is her most ambitious work to date.

As she continued writing the play and watching it grow, she knew she’d need partners to bring it to the stage.

“I didn’t know if there would be interest in the broader community, but all these people started to say yes,” Welden said. “I guess that’s the value of being an artist who has lived in a community for 20-plus years.”



A rehearsal for “Death Wings” at The Theater Project in Brunswick, where the play premieres next week.
Derek Davis/Staff Photographer

She worked with three different organizations – The Theater Project in Brunswick, Meetinghouse Arts in Freeport and the Portland-based Dramatic Repertory Company – as producing partners, and with actor and musician Janice O’Rourke on original songs.

Rene Goddess and Dana Legawiec, who both have numerous local directing credits, are co-directing “Death Wings” with Welden.

Wendy Poole of The Theater Project said she was excited to partner with Welden and others. The collaboration, she said, “pools resources and centers the artists, that allows for more rehearsal time and more compensation for the creators of the work.”

Nancy Salmon, president of the board of directors for Meetinghouse Arts, calls the project a “deep dive into real-life issues and big questions that we each deal with.”

“It’s exactly the kind of theater that expands our minds and hearts, and engages our full humanity,” she said.

The project has gotten funding from the New England Foundation for the Arts and the Puffin Foundation, among others.

Welden doesn't know where the theatrical part will go after next month or how it will be received.

"I feel like no matter who comes or what size the audience is, in a way it doesn't matter. The people who do come will find something to take away," she said.

Regardless, she plans to keep the death wings project alive with workshops and other collaborations.

"Grief doesn't need to be private," she said. "Everyone we love is going to die. So rather than avoid it, why don't we embrace the idea that we're all dealing with it in some fashion?"

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