

THE BOARDS

# BETSY AIDEM, WORKING WOMAN



*The actress stars in “Liberation,” a play about feminist consciousness-raising, set in 1970. At the New York Historical, she zeroes in on the roots of the show’s nude scene.*

**By Rachel Syme**

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Illustration by João Fazenda

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The sixty-eight-year-old theatre actress Betsy Aidem is a self-described “research junkie.” When she starred as Lady Bird Johnson in the 2014 Broadway play “All the Way,” about Lyndon B. Johnson’s efforts to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, she read all four of Robert Caro’s Johnson biographies, each as dense as a poundcake. To prepare for her recent Tony-nominated role as a French Jewish matriarch in Joshua Harmon’s “A Prayer for the French Republic,” she flew to Paris just to see the building where Harmon’s grandparents had hidden during the Nazi occupation.

“Sometimes I get so into the research that someone literally has to stage an intervention,” she said the other day, standing in the New York Historical, where she’d gone to get her latest fix—fuel for her role in Bess Wohl’s “Liberation,” on Broadway. The play, a bighearted ensemble piece, set predominantly in small-town Ohio in 1970, centers on a feminist “consciousness raising” group that meets in a rec-center gymnasium. Aidem plays Margie, an empty-nester housewife with a wry sense of humor and a talent for making cheese balls, whose oafish husband never helps with chores. To prepare, she read Clara Bingham’s 2024 oral history, “The Movement,” about feminist crusaders of the sixties and seventies, but she wanted to get her hands on some primary materials.

She made her way to the museum's second-floor library, where she joined Anna Danziger Halperin, the director of the Historical's Center for Women's History. Aidem, who has the eclectic style of a woman who knows her way around a craft fair (paisley blouse, shaggy Mongolian-lamb coat, a tangle of beaded necklaces), was led to a table covered with women's-lib ephemera. "Second-wave-feminist history is my main academic focus," Halperin said. "So a lot of these things I already had sitting around my office." Aidem loved a set of "working women" paper dolls from 1974, which included a postal employee, a doctor, and a construction worker. Her eyes lit on a 1978 issue of *Working Mother* magazine, with the cover line "Time for Yourself: How to Save, Buy It, and Make It (Without Feeling Guilty)."

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"Oof," she said, with a sigh. "I feel that." Aidem has a thirty-three-year-old son, Sam. "From the time Sam was about a year and a half, I was a single parent," she said. "I had to take a break from theatre, because being gone at night so much wasn't viable. But at some point I just began schlepping him with me to tech rehearsals."

Halperin showed Aidem a photograph of a protest at the 1968 Miss America pageant, where activists placed a "Freedom Trash Can" on the Atlantic City boardwalk and filled it with various feminine trappings, from corsets to high heels. "This is where the phrase 'bra burning' comes from," Halperin said. "Though they didn't actually burn any bras, because they didn't have a permit."

“I remember that!” Aidem said, and told a story about being the first girl at her temple to be bat mitzvahed, in 1970. “I gave a speech about how I was so happy that I was able to have an opportunity that was not afforded to girls, and, when I finished, a couple colleagues of my dad’s came up to me and were, like, ‘What are you going to do next? Burn your bra?’ I was thirteen, and thinking, Why is this creepy guy asking me about my underwear?”

Aidem grew up in Phoenix, the daughter of a surgeon and a homemaker, both Republicans. When she was fifteen, a friend took her to a march supporting Cesar Chavez’s hunger strike for farmworkers. “Joan Baez sang,” she said. “I learned to chant ‘*Sí se puede*,’ and I’ve been a Democrat ever since.” She moved to Manhattan in 1976, to study acting at N.Y.U. “Back then, there was no criteria for getting in,” she said. “If you had a needle sticking out of your right arm and a check in your left hand, they took the check.” Aidem has appeared in ninety plays, but Hollywood has never tempted her. “I suppose I have a latent fear of ubiquity,” she said.

She looked at a pamphlet produced by the radical New York women’s group Redstockings. “They sometimes met in the nude, you know,” she said. “Liberation” draws on this; it includes a fifteen-minute naked scene. Initially, Aidem felt nervous about being so exposed. “First, we all went around and talked about our insecurities,” she said. “Then we did it semi-clothed, then we did it with the curtains drawn. Now, for all of us, it feels like the easiest scene in the play.”

“Liberation” deals with the way that the movement fragmented over time. Aidem had a thought about that topic: “I always say, Why are you drawing lines in the sand? They’re bombing the beach!” She attended a recent No Kings protest and noted that most of her fellow-marchers were her age. “That was the tradition of my generation,” she said. “You got out in the street.” Gloria Steinem saw “Liberation” and went backstage afterward. Aidem said, “Somebody asked her, ‘Do

you think it's still worth it to protest?' She just said, 'Hell yeah! And, besides, it's fun.' ” ♦

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