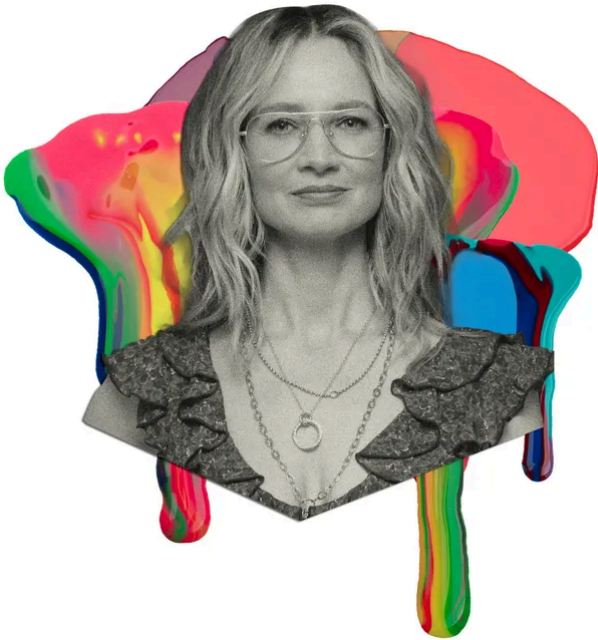


# How Playwright Bess Wohl Gets It Done

By Juan A. Ramírez, a freelance writer and critic who covers pop culture and theater

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*On the final day of rehearsals for her play Liberation, the writer Bess Wohl was reminiscing about the days her mom would take her to work at Ms. magazine. “I remember sitting on the floor of her office and playing while I was listening to the keys of her typewriter,” she says. “Seeing her work environment, it was really formative for me.” Liberation is Wohl’s second play to make it to Broadway — her first, Grand Horizons, earned her a Tony nomination in 2020 — and it pays loving tribute to her mother’s era of bold feminism.*

*The ensemble piece follows the poignant, funny, and often jarring diversity of thought at a women’s consciousness-raising group in 1970s Ohio. Wohl interviewed her mom and several others involved in those profoundly radical circles to build the foundation for the script. “It helped me feel this sense of authenticity about the story and a sense of responsibility in the making of the piece,” Wohl says. “I did not want them to come and feel that what they had lived through had been misrepresented in some way.” Liberation opens on*

*October 28 at the James Earl Jones Theatre. Wohl lives in Brooklyn with her husband and three children; here's how she gets it done.*

***On the excitement of failure:***

*Liberation is almost as much about how to make a play as it is about anything else. It's this character trying to tell a story and failing and changing course and losing control of the narrative. That's kind of my experience at the computer: I'm often trying to keep the story about the thing I want it to be about, but it's taking me somewhere else. That's sort of what you witness onstage during the show. In a sense, I was interested in representing the experience of failure that you feel as an artist because you have this vision of this perfect thing that you're going to make. The character in the play is constantly failing in different ways, and it was exciting to me to be honest about that. And that aligns with the complexities of the actual women's liberation movement.*

***On seizing time to write:***

*I used to be the kind of writer who was like, I'm gonna go to my desk as the sun is rising and have this beautiful moment with my cup of tea, totally uninterrupted, and get everything down on the page before I even start to interact with the world. As soon as I had kids, that completely fell apart. Now I try to get up before they all wake up to have a little uninterrupted brain space. I read this quote from Anne Lamott that was like, "Before I had kids, I couldn't write if there were dishes in the sink, and now I could write if there were a corpse in the sink." You have to grab your time however you can. If there's a scene I'm working on, or some notes I'm doing on something, I try to give myself a little prompt before I go to sleep. When I wake up, I generally have it solved, and I try to go right to my desk before talking to anyone and do whatever I just dreamed.*

**On journaling:**

*I'm an obsessive journaler. I wrote every single day in my diary from when I was 8 until I was about 25. I had a superstition, actually, that if I didn't write in my journal every single day, I don't know what I thought would happen, but something bad. Then I put all the journals in a basement in New Haven when I was at Yale Drama. I forgot about them, and I lost them all. I tried to call the building to say, Do you still have all my life's journals? And they were like, We've renovated that basement six times since you were here.*

*Sometimes, I've wondered if my whole playwriting project is just trying to, in some weird coded manner, re-create those 20 years of journals in a new way.*

**On never feeling like she's "made it":**

*I don't know if I'm the kind of person who is ever going to feel, Wooo, I made it! I enjoy being in the flow of things. I don't think I would want to be done. I don't think I'm a person who ever feels satisfied, but I don't think that's a bad thing. It's kind of what keeps me going. I love the process, and I love being in it.*

**On the people who help her get it done:**

*I have an incredible caregiver who has helped with our kids since my first child was 5 days old, and now my child is 13. I have grandparents, aunts, uncles around to help with the kids, especially when I'm in rehearsal and production like I am now. It's really late nights, and I need a lot of help during that time. Since two-ish years ago, I've had a part-time work and personal assistant who helps with scheduling and will help with proofreading a draft. The hardest thing for me is email; I cannot keep up with email. I am not good at being in a creative space and tending to all of the more business-y sides of life, like calling people back, paying your bills,*

*doing your taxes. She helps me reconnect with that stuff and actually get through it.*

***On sharing parenting duties:***

*I'm lucky because my husband is a really engaged parent and believes in equal parenting. We share responsibilities and when he's really busy, I take more, and when I'm really busy, he takes more. There's no version of whose work is more important. We have little segments that are his and that are mine. The girls do sports, he organizes that. But I'm in charge of Halloween costumes and the Tooth Fairy. With three kids, it's a lot of teeth, so we have a busy fairy.*

***On balancing motherhood and art:***

*It was very hard after my first child was born. The transition from not having motherhood responsibilities to suddenly being a mom I felt very unprepared for psychologically, which is strange because I'd read a lot and had educated myself. I made a whole film about new motherhood called *Baby Ruby* that talks about how difficult that transition can be. It affected my artistic life completely. Being an artist and being a mom are two things that really don't go together. You can try to make them go together, and tons of people do, but it is really not an organic fit. You have to divide yourself into two people and constantly be wearing different hats.*

***On the worst career advice she's ever received ...***

*It was from someone who was my screenwriting agent at the time. I told him that I liked writing stories about women and he said, "Don't ever tell anyone that you like women's stories because you'll get pigeonholed as only writing women's stuff." I guess at the time, I understand why he was saying that. But I remember thinking, Gosh, what I'm interested in is small and niche and*

*going to be a problem in my career. And actually, the opposite turned out to be true. Being in this moment with Liberation couldn't be more opposite from what this agent suggested.*

***And the best advice she's ever been given:***

*One thing my dad used to say to me is, "If you talk, you know what you know. But if you listen, you know what you know and what they know." He also used to quote Lou Holtz, who said, "You're never as good as everyone tells you when you win, and you're never as bad as they say when you lose." And then my mom had one that's probably not printable, but she used to say: "Fuck 'em, fuck 'em, fuck 'em," which I think is really good advice.*